



**NATIONAL REPORT ON INTRA-ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES AND
COLLECTION OF PRACTICES AND CASE STUDIES (EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE)
ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-
AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE IN VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE**

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INTRODUCTION

The report aims to describe in detail experiences and empirical examples about the **relationship between visual impairment and theatre**, focusing first on the past experiences of the three Bulgarian partner organizations – FDCBPCS, School for visually impaired children “Louis Braille” and Association “Hope for all” - and then on collected empirical evidence - practices and case studies - on the **importance of theatre in helping the development of self-awareness and consciousness in visually impaired people.**

The purpose within the national reports is to reach a level of consciousness and awareness concerning the experiences that are already present within the partnership, in addition to good practices that are externally available. The comparative report, which will be developed on the basis of the national reports, will explore possibilities not previously considered or reached in the field of using performing arts for strengthening physical and vocal confidence and self-awareness awareness in visually impaired young people.

The national reports include several key sections, looking into past and present, and enabling the further elaboration of the transnational comparative report, which will look into the future nature of the work.

The presentation of the case studies follows a logical and analytic structure, which will allow for their evaluation, assessment and comparisons.



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1. Intra-organisational experiences of FDCBPCS, related to the use of theatre for development of self-consciousness and awareness

The Foundation for development of the cultural and business potential of civil society (FDCBPCS) was established in 2006 for the purpose of undertaking actions focused on achieving the following objectives:

- to support the educational, cultural and economic development of the civil society in Bulgaria and abroad;
- to stimulate intercultural and artistic exchange of experience, skills and ideas;
- to create opportunities for modern and effective professional training in different areas of key importance for the development of the cultural and business potential of civil society, such as: culture, cultural exchanges and bridges, art;
- to bring together artists from the different sectors of modern art and to create conditions for demonstration and popularization of the work of young artists;
- to support innovative ideas and new forms of art.

After several years of small projects and undertakings in the sphere of arts and youth training, during 2008 the experts from FDCBPCS got in contact with representatives of the two German organizations¹ that are at the foundation of the Kinder Kultur Karawane (Children's culture caravan) approach, which has been bringing cultural groups from the South (Africa, Latin America & Asia) to Western European countries for 15 years now. The core idea of this initiative is not only to create opportunities for raising funds for the young artists from the South, but to give them a chance to implement peer-learning through cultural activity. They have been working as emissaries of their cultures, addressing the issues that young people face in their countries and the solutions, which different art forms (theatre, circus, dance, acrobatics, music) have offered them for their development as strong, independent, confident, skilled and caring human beings.

The meeting with the Kinder Kultur Karawane founders triggered the development of a common project proposal, which was successful and implemented back in 2009-2011 – the title of the project was “Cultural



and peer-learning approaches to integrate socio-economically disadvantaged youth and young adults with an immigrant background” (project # LLP-2009-GRU-LP-14).

During the implementation of that project FDCBPCS got into contact with such cultural groups from the South as “Theatre of the oppressed” (Palestine), Baobab culture troupe (South Africa), Teatro Trono (Bolivia) and others.

Cultural approaches and peer-learning are becoming better and better accepted by pedagogical methods especially in informal education. The nature of the training approach to be used in V.I.S.I.ON relies on theatre as a cultural expression, within the context of an informal educational setting.

Following this initial project, the same consortium successfully applied for EuropeAid, supported by local authorities from all partner countries. The project was called “Strengthen Creative Cooperation” (SCC) - <http://www.strengthen-creative-cooperation.eu/> - and lasted for 3 years between 2011 and 2013. Thanks to this project, our team deepened the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of how cultural approaches, including theatre, develop the social, intellectual, talent and self-fulfillment capacities of a young person. We met more theatre, circus and dance groups, who worked with children from Bulgaria, Austria, Germany, Denmark and Slovenia and passed their messages via cultural expressions.

The SCC made it possible for Bulgarians to encounter Kenyan acrobats, South African actors and Brazilian capoeira dancers.

Parallel with that, FDCBPCS implemented together with the German partner from Cologne (Institute equalita) the „Innovative approaches for identifying and responding to vocational education and training needs of disadvantaged youth” project (contract number BG051PO001-7.0.01-0014-C001), supported by the Human Resources Development Operational Programme 2007-2013, co-financed by the European Social Fund of the European Union.

These three initiatives enriched the FDCBPCS practice through gaining understanding and conceptualization concerning the following main points:

- Institutions working with children and young people



Institutions undertaking a project focused on this specific target group should have sufficient experience in working with children and young people. This means that on the one hand the project target group is already a "core-group" of the organization and on the other hand - there are corresponding offers, already motivating the children and young people to visit the organisation's facilities. This also means that the management and staff of the institution are adequately familiar with the target group representatives and their environment (family, school, and leisure habits).

It is also important that those responsible for the target groups are able to assess and manage the dynamics of the groups in an appropriate way. Do the children and young people get on well together (gender, age, different backgrounds)? Does the educational background fit (type of school, grade level, and compatibility with training rhythm)? Does the dynamic of the group allow for continuous work in the school over a longer time or is a short time offer preferred, e.g. in the form of vacation programs and workshops?

Another important aspect is the institution's premises. Appropriate rooms and equipment (stage, amplification system, stage lighting, microphones, safety measures, etc.) should be available for the activities. Whenever possible ***the workshops should not mainly take place in participating schools or educational institutions, but in the premises of youth centers, theatres, arts centres; getting away from the school's everyday life and emphasising the cognitive character of the cultural activities.***

The opportunity for large groups to perform presentations is also very helpful. If necessary it could be placed in cooperation within larger facilities (**such as established theatres**). However, for certain types of target groups, the "in house" presentation is easier and more attractive.

- Target group

Important criteria for the organisation of groups are gender, age, type of background, school and grade level. Joint groups of girls and boys may promote discussions and experiences regarding their own gender role, but can also block activities, especially for children and young people at puberty. Also, although mixed-age groups are desirable, it is sometimes difficult to manage their implementation in everyday life. Large differences of interests, both in terms of artistic preferences (what kind of music, dance form, the form of theatrical staging), and in terms of issues treated, could arise. Also the coordination with the teaching rhythm in different classes (stages) can often be difficult to balance over a longer period.



Another key consideration is related to parental background. Barriers can exist, which are set for children and adolescents due to restrictions by parents and family, traditional cultural and religious attitudes and behavior. The latter could be handled in the artistic discourse context, but a less homogeneous group could also lead to failure.

It must also be considered whether to compile groups by schools and classes. The adjustment of the teaching rhythm of groups for a continuous and long-term collaboration for children and young people from many different schools and classes is often very difficult. These factors lead to a preference of short-term formats, such as holiday workshops.

Sometimes it makes sense, to compose groups mixed by age, gender, and artistic orientation etc., only after an introduction period with more homogeneous groups.

These shared considerations are not intended to intimidate, but to update and inform on the potential risks related to this type of initiative.

- Gender segregation

An important result of practical experiences is that a gender-mixed group can work successfully only under specific conditions. Although the participants could promote the direct examination of their own gender role, they could also block activities and exchange, especially if children and youth in the (pre-) adolescent phase are involved. They do not like to treat certain topics in the presence of or even together with the opposite sex. In the case of practicing or presenting music, dance or theatre, the shyness towards the opposite sex could be so great, that any development is hindered.

The issues at this age are not necessarily all that different, but the artistic realisation often requires a huge "self-opening" and "come out of one's shell". The pubertal inhibition towards to the opposite sex is so high that a presentation is often perceived as an exposure. This does not however mean that the initiators should not experiment with mixed groups, but that they need to be careful about these particularities and keep them in mind.

We should also keep in mind that mixed groups seem possible particularly in a school setting with fixed theatre plays or in cultural institutions where theatre enthusiastic young people participate.

- Artistic and educational management



Artistic and educational management plays a central role in the implementation of the concept. Such experts should have both artistic skills, as well as pedagogical competences, in order to be able to inspire children and young people through the activities and to motivate them to take part in long-term activities. In addition, they should have access to children and young people from the targeted group, and if possible have experience in collaborating with them. The specific knowledge of their behavior, attitudes and expectations is an important basis for appropriate design and implementation of workshops and courses. In addition to skills and competences, sufficient availability of the trainers should be ensured. Particularly good bases for the appropriate design of artistic and educational leadership are offers for cooperation with culture-related facilities such as music schools, Youth or Communal Centers with special cultural offers and theatre education centers.

- Design of services and activities

The appropriate design of the offer is also an important factor in the implementation of cultural concepts. There are many possible patterns of presentation, including one-time workshops for one or more days, running courses across half of a school-year or longer, regular weekly or monthly fixed days and time, weekend and vacation activities, etc.

However one-time and short-term offers are a first approach and provide good incentives for further engagement. For the sustainable implementation of the concept continuous courses for half of a school-year with fixed weekly schedule are recommended. The regularity and fixed structure usually makes it easier for children and young people to get used to and engage in the offers and setting after an introductory period.

A special appeal lies in the inclusion in the courses of final and interim public presentation events. There is usually a certain shyness and fear of public presentations, but with increasing security in the artistic activities during the course these become normal, and the challenge and interest in the presentation of the newly acquired skills are at the center. A performance in front of classmates, parents, teachers and administrators, in youth centers, theatres or communal rooms creates a sense of determination and motivation.

- Planning and time horizon



Long-term and detailed planning is a key prerequisite for the success of such projects and activities. For a more permanent type of event during a longer period, for example a whole school year, the planning of all essential details (funding, design details, and target groups) should be clarified well in advance.

The starting point of planning is to clarify the financial resources and funding. Only when this is secured, can the artistic and educational director be contracted and the contacting of potential participants begin.

- Continuation of the activities and cooperation

Culture-related activities for the integration of children and young people are more effective if the youth centers and cooperating schools or organisations continue to offer them over time. Individual short-term actions and events should only be used for creating an initial incentive, and so an appropriate long-term conceptual design of activities and offers is necessary. Furthermore, concepts should regularly be evaluated and the measures adjusted accordingly. For evaluation, the cooperating organisations, the artistic and educational coordinators and the children and young people should all be involved, through age-appropriate questionnaires and interviews.

Another important component of the concept is the artistic and educational coordination. It is not often easy to find suitable trainers for these offers, covering both the artistic side, and the specific needs of the target group. Cooperation with other cultural institutions, such as music schools, dance projects, theatre groups, and circus projects is recommended.

- Approaches for development of training programs and training methods

There are various approaches for development of training programs and various training methods. It is difficult to 'learn' to use training methods effectively simply by reading about them. Ultimately, one tutor has to try them out, and be prepared to make mistakes. One must not be surprised if things work out in different ways than expected. It is advisable to keep a record of the methods a trainer uses, and reflect on his/her own experience of using them, to help him adapt and improve them. ***It would be best if a trainer could ask colleagues to observe him using different methods in order to get feedback from them not only on his/her actions, but also on the actions/reactions of trainees.*** The participants in the trainings / workshops can also give feedback on the methods introduced; after all, they are the ones who should be benefiting from the activities directly.

The most appropriate methods for training and developing a training program should be chosen in relation to the content and learning materials, which are needed to bring about the achievement of the learning outcomes. Even if a trainer develops skills using a wide range of methods, he/she should not be tempted to use all the interesting methods in one session. The participants may enjoy them at first, but too much variety may cause confusion and frustration. Training methods are used to enable learning to take place, not to prove that the trainer is a good performer.



The general results show that people learn best by what they do and see, less by what they hear, smell or feel. The best methods of learning will try to involve several senses but with a focus on seeing and doing – ***in the V.I.S.I.ON case the focus will be certainly on “doing”, as well as on using all available senses.***

The training process is generally accepted to follow certain didactic principles:

- The **principle of the active and conscious appropriation of the knowledge and skills** – this principle expresses the necessity of manifesting an active and conscious attitude of the participants in the learning process; it also creates the necessary conditions of a profound and creative understanding of the notions under discussion, by avoiding the mechanic, formal learning. *Within V.I.S.I.ON we will start with a thorough presentation of our ideas and achievement goals in order for the participants – both children with visual impairment and theatre experts - the philosophy behind the actions and the engagement requirements in order for maximum results to be achieved. Starting from the inspired team V.I.S.I.ON will spread its notions in order to prepare the participants for the practical joint activities that are about to follow. Fostering and*



facilitating social integration, which is intended by the project, will start with the building of a large group of friends.

- The **intuition principle or the principle of the unity between real and abstract, between rational and sensorial**, expresses requirements related to the fact that it is necessary that the learning process starts from the real contact with the studied object or phenomena, from the specific reality and has the purpose to internalize perceptions gained through various senses in order for an intense mental activity for mapping solutions to complex situations to be enabled. *Within V.I.S.I.ON the touch with the practical world will be unavoidable – the participating children will be working with theatre experts and will be applying, together with their trainers, all they have learnt on stage. Since theatre will here be used as a tool for raising one's confidence and self-awareness, it is the intention of the partners to be as practical as possible in order for the experience to be as fulfilling and rewarding as possible.*

- The principle of connecting theory with practice is naturally connected to the intuition principle and supposes that the appropriation of knowledge happens through directly joining them with practical activities, thus one avoids the accumulation of formal pieces of knowledge. There are a lot of modalities for applying this principle:

- presentation of the domain of useful knowledge and the illustration with concrete examples – *the direct involvement of theatre experts and their usage of theatrical and artistic techniques are going to be quite concrete examples;*

- solving problems and exercises specific for every object – *exercising together is going to be an ongoing process; all techniques are about to be applied in practice by the participating children;*

- the usage of the appropriate methods in the training-learning process, such as case studies, games – *these again will be an inseparable part of the agenda for work with the visually impaired children;*

- visiting the practicing organisations – *going to theatrical performances, submerging into the world of theatre is about to be done as often as possible. It is a commitment of the partners to take the participants to theatrical performances in local partner theatres.*

Within the principle of connecting theory with practice an improvement of the students knowledge and life experience takes place. The pieces of knowledge gain an operational value, by forming abilities and skills. The students' spirit of absorption, thinking, imagination and attention are also developed; new attitudes, motivations and beliefs are formed.

- The principle of respecting the students' age and individual particularities implies that the organisation of the system of learning be realised taking into consideration the real possibilities of the students; it is



conditioned objectively by their age, their previous knowledge, their individual physical and intellectual potential. The accessibility does not suppose avoiding the intellectual effort from the students' part, but their training in a continuous and sustained effort in order to assimilate new pieces of knowledge, abilities and skills.

The specialists (Postelnicu C., 2001, p. 300) speak about a series of individual particularities, specific for every trainee:

- the psychological specifics, represented by the psychic features (temperament, character) and distinct affective-emotional particularities (interests, aspirations, needs, beliefs);
 - the neuron physiological specific, represented by the functional particularities of the nervous system and of the sense organs;
 - the intellectual capacity, represented by functional particularities of the nervous system and of the sense organs;
 - the volume of knowledge, abilities and skills of every trainee;
 - the life experience, familial environment and learning style of every student.
- The principle of knowledge systematization and continuity supposes that the content be delivered and learned in a specific scientific and pedagogical order, which has to assure that information is accessible and can be assimilated in its natural and logical sequence. *Regardless of the particularities of the V.I.S.I.ON project, the team will follow the logical sequence of delivering new information and knowledge to the participating visually impaired children and young people.*
 - The principle of the rigorous and durable assimilation of the knowledge, abilities and skills expresses the requirement of retaining the essential knowledge, abilities and skills for a long time, and used when necessary. If the other principles stress the knowledge assimilation, this one takes into account the knowledge fixation. *What V.I.S.I.ON is going to aspire to is the fixation of the sense and capacity of developing and maintaining self-confidence and awareness and the ability to use the skills accumulated through theatrical exercises for everyday interactions, whether social or professional.*
 - The principle of assuring the feedback within the system of learning refers to the continuous improvement of the results, depending on the previous achievements. During the training process, the feedback is an essential condition for the efficiency of the educative act. The trainer has to be sure that the knowledge he transmits to the participants in the training process is understood by them and that they can also operate with it. *V.I.S.I.ON will install and strictly follow the practice of constant communication between children and young people, theatre experts and managers from partner organisations.*



Questionnaires and interviewing – in advance, during and after – are going to be used in order for adequate adaptations to be introduced and maximum effects to be achieved.

These didactic principles should be followed regardless of the particular teaching method chosen: collaborative learning, explorative learning, game-based learning, experimentation, storytelling practices, project-based methodology or other.

Common collaborative learning is defined as a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. According to Smith and MacGregor (1992) “collaborative learning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational approaches involving joint intellectual effort by trainees and trainers together”. Collaborative learning is connected to approaches that present learning as an active, constructive, and social process where an individual actively constructs knowledge facilitated by peer interaction, evaluation, and cooperation. Collaborative learning describes situations in which the participants are becoming mutually aware of their shared goal and are working in a group collectively towards this goal, triggering learning mechanisms. There is a wide range of collaborative learning activities both in classrooms and online; collaborative learning activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, tasks that utilize web-tools and software, debates, or even study teams.

In educational practices collaborative learning is thought to be useful for reasons connected to pedagogical perspectives such as the formation of characters.

Collaborative learning is believed to contribute in the cultivation of habits of involvement and commitment to a community because it encourages the participants to acquire an “active voice” and a “sensitive ear”. Being able to recognize and resolve differences that trainees may encounter when collaborating with others is another valuable asset for the trainee, empowering him as a valuable and productive member of society.

Even if it is stated that groups can easily turn out to form a situation, in which the members are working individually and not necessarily collaboratively, in the case of V.I.S.I.ON, children and trainers are going to form a group and learn as one social unit.

It is also important for the trainees to have a sense of ownership and accountability. This is achieved by having the trainees fix their own ground rules - helped by trainers, who will be introducing different contexts and actions in the activities modules – enabling trainees to create their own ideas of what they want to learn. One important ground rule that the tutor can encourage is for the trainees to be placed in a different location during every session in order to enhance group cohesion. Other ground rules could include cell phone use, tardiness, attendance, side-talking, respect for others, etc. It is important to note



that the trainees are told that the trainers and the project managers have the final say in ground rules. Expectations might include learning more about the community, actively participating in civic engagement, and taking advantage of learning resources and programs. The students or in this case their parents/guardians are required to sign a copy of the grounds rules, which demonstrates their acceptance of them. At the end of every course session expectations are reviewed - (<http://www.mesacc.edu/other/engagement/ASSETSAbstracts/Y2Abstracts/Mesa.pdf>) - at least by asking the participants about their feeling of satisfaction and their level of enjoyment / sense of fulfillment.

In contemporary learning theories the learner is described as “an active knowledge acquirer”. The ideas underpinning explorative learning are well in line with such a notion. Discovery learning, exploratory learning, as well as inquiry-based learning are learning approaches that enclose the idea of exploration and knowledge acquisition, which underpins the widely used term “explorative learning”. Explorative/Inquiry-based learning is a strategy about student exploration of knowledge. Though researchers have proposed different definitions of inquiry and exploration they generally share the same opinion according to which there are at least four critical steps when conducting learning based on exploration/inquiry: Generating a hypothesis, Collecting additional data, Interpreting evidences, Drawing conclusions.

Papert (1993) has pointed out that ill-structured problems and semi-finished environments are more meaningful for the learner than well-structured ones due to the fact that they provide more opportunities for the learner to use different problem solving strategies and to take an active role in the learning process through exploring, developing, and constructing. The half-baked games espouse Papert's (1993) considerations. In fact, *half-baked games* appear as semi-finished environments, targeting at engaging the learners with changing their rules or forming and finishing the stories/environments. The idea of the half-baked approach is considered to be ideally suited to studies and educational projects, where there is a need to guarantee a frame in which students could construct and explore specific concepts with educational value and hold an active role. The semi-finished nature of this approach could also guarantee that a level of freedom is established for the learners to develop their own thinking and their own works. Leaving parts of the learning activity and design open constitutes a challenge for students; though this semi-finished nature can be seen as a good way to restrain trainees' cognitive load. In such an approach trainees are free to experiment with the different parts that create the learning experience or learning environment. Learners are encouraged in this way to actively engage in the educational process and they are not seen simply as consumers of the educational game but also as explorative producers, as



constructors of the rules underpinning the game. *With theatrical approaches put in practice the use of the half-baked games is going to be simple and extremely productive.*

In the last decade there has been a growing belief that more attention should be paid to the development of the creative learning capabilities that each of us carries. Storytelling can be placed among these capabilities. Significant learning outcomes can occur when storytelling techniques are applied in thoughtful and reflective ways. The use of “**story-telling**” as a learning and training tool develops the educational community's interest. The majority of debates focus on the feature of the narrative which is embodied in the storytelling technique. Mott et al (1999) referred to narrative as an “effective tool for exploring the structure and process of meaning making whether the object of analysis be everyday life, a novel, or a film”. Such a conception is not new. The potential to contextualize learning through story-telling and narrative practices has been also identified by Wells (1986). Wells (1986) states: “Constructing stories in the mind - or storying, as it has been called - is one of the most fundamental means of making meaning; as such it is an activity that pervades all aspects of learning [...]. Through the exchange of stories, teachers and trainees can share their understandings of a topic and bring their mental models of the world into closer alignment”.

The development of the artistic and cultural skills of each individual is at the core of the functioning of FDCBPCS. We believe that art calls for more art by a colorful compound of emotions that inevitably involve the audience for an enhanced experience of life that never halts. Above all, the primary belief of our team is the “renovation of our consciousness”: when we meet the Art or Culture, whatever the form is, whether we are passive or active members of the “performance”, we build a sense of trust in our “self”, which is continuously changing in accordance with the situation. That is because life depends on social interactions; and successful inter-personal relationships are at the core of raising our self-esteem. However to raise self-esteem, we need to know our skills and ourselves. We believe that Art and Culture are an essential step in life that, by our related emotions, makes us understand who we are and how we can “react” to each situation. The better we feel about ourselves as a person and the more positive relationships we have with friends, with other people in the environment, the more likely we are to take risks and continue to develop socially.

Therefore, at FDCBPCS, we foster the Art and Culture to reach a wide range of society and to share it as a fundamental aid to help our end users understand who they are. Thanks to the projects we managed, our



team deepened the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of how cultural approaches (including theatre) developing the social, intellectual, talent and self-fulfillment capacities of a young person.

With the contacts we have, we manage to achieve far reaching independent 'spaces' to learn for appropriate future development. Through a dialogue on equal terms, new perspectives are discovered and integrated knowledge is building. The young people can, on this basis, plan and act both together, and independently.

An honest exchange is not possible without the ability to have empathy for others. 'Justice' becomes the basis for decision making and taking action for the young people. This basis makes it possible for them, and others, to motivate themselves to become active.

2. Intra-organizational experiences of School for visually impaired children “Louis Braille”, related to the use of theatre for development of self- consciousness and awareness

The school for visually impaired children “Louis Braille” is a general specialization state high school. It hosts and teaches blind and visually impaired children from Sofia and the entire country at the age of 5 to 19 years. The school has recognized theatre as one of the best tools to build confidence and self-respect on the basis of improved sensory and motor skills, verbal and physical expressiveness.

The activities related to theatre and performing arts in general create the feeling of love towards art. They also create social skills and raise awareness about the need to work as a team and hence social communication skills are enhanced. Theatre activities also develop special conceptions and orientation in the small and larger areas. Good self-esteem and faith in one’s own abilities are also a part of the benefits. Harnessing the skill of confident speech is another asset of theatre activities, as well as establishing a sense of initiative and activation among young people. Theatre also helps them to overcome the psychological barrier of showing themselves before an audience.

During 2005, 15 students from the school “Louis Braille” recorded an audio dramatization of eight fairytales from world-famous authors. During the same year the school was visited by Blajo Nikolich, who worked in Zagreb where there was a theatre for the blind, which was participating at that time in a famous biannual global festival for blind actors. The children who dramatized the fairytales established a theatre group, which was managed by Velimir Velev, a professor at the National academy for theatre and film arts. The theatre focus is “performance” or „theatre of the shadows“. The worldwide premier of the “Shadow of my soul”, the only in its league “Unseen theatre”, took place on the 25th and 26th March 2010 in Zagreb and



Karlovats with the financial support by the “National fund Culture”. On 30th April 2009 Theatre VIA and the school for visually impaired children “Louis Braille”, celebrating 200 years since the birth of Louis Braille, presented an interactive sensory theatre “The colors of the dark”. Author and director was Velimir Velev again and the producer was Blajo Nikolich. During 2009 and 2010 the school participated in a project „Social kids’ center” as a partner of theatre “Flower” – described in this report as an example of best practice. The first performance was unique because two blind students performed an etude with puppet dolls. The same performance was presented several times in the Youth theatre and the students even had two events in Zagreb.

Between 2007 and today, the graduates have finished their secondary education with theatre performances. Three years ago the “Fellow-students theatre” was established, which involves present and past students of the school. During 2012 students from 3A class with form tutor Ivelina Vateva created a dramatization of the fairytale “The three piglets” in English.

One of the major successes in the theatrical arena was a project entitled “The face of the night”, supported by the “Culture” program of the Municipality of Sofia and implemented during October 2010. The project included students from the school “Louis Braille” and blind students from Germany. A video film was created within the project.

At school “Louis Braille”, the parents are engaged with the help of the Association of parents of children with impaired vision, which has 500 parents as members. The association supports the school projects in general and those in the sphere of theatre in particular, both organisationally as well as financially. The parents join the preparation of various theatrical events and accompany their children at the various theatre performances or rehearsals.

3. Intra-organizational experiences of Association “Hope for all”, related to the use of theatre for development of self-consciousness and awareness

The two leading experts from the “Hope for all” association, established and functioning in the city of Veliko Tarnovo, are Rositsa Todorova and Petya Marcheva. Their educational background and professional experiences focus the work of the association they have formed to benefit disadvantaged groups.



In 1998 Rositsa Todorova graduated as a bachelor in Primary school pedagogy with specialization “Physical culture and sports” at Veliko Tarnovo University “St. St. Kiril and Methodius”, Bulgaria. She starts her professional experience as a primary school teacher and later in 2006 she graduated as a master in “Pedagogy for children with special education needs” in the same university, specializing in speech therapy and physiotherapy. During the same year she started work in the sphere of special education where she is active today. The positions she held as primary teacher, special teacher and speech therapist in a school for children with special educational needs enriched her professional achievements and experiences.

Rositsa Todorova has worked in classes with multiple disabilities, which also includes students with a visual impairment. She gained professional experience through projects under the Lifelong learning program, sectoral program Comenius, “Multilateral partnerships”. With support under these projects she created national dance clubs, artistic ateliers and theatre clubs. The main objective of these establishments is to improve the sensory and perceptive activity of students with special educational needs, to achieve a higher level of sustainability of their attention and concentration, to enrich their linguistic capacity, as well as to help them accumulate new practical knowledge. These objectives are not only related to the needs of the students, but also tailored to their capabilities. As a result of her the educational work, work in non-formal groups and activities of particular interest, Rositsa achieved quality results with the children she was working with.

Between 2011–2014 Rosi Todorova worked under project „SUCCESS”, BG051PO001-4.2.05-0001 „School for self-affirmation and preparation for the European horizons” - Operational program “Human Resources Development”, funded by the ESF of the EU – as a team member, leader of the extracurricular and outside school activities. Again she started two clubs - national dances and performing arts. The main objective there is not only to rationalize the free time of students with special educational needs, but also to increase their motivation for personal manifestations, in accordance with their interests and needs. Via their involvement in the clubs, Rosi Todorova provided these students with the opportunity to dive into the magical world of theatre, to spend their time in a fun way, by playing and developing themselves. Through the various activities the students shape up qualities, which will help them in the future – expressiveness, the ability to share their thoughts, emotional stability, responsibility and diligence.

Theatre is an extremely important, large and responsible task and which is most important – the children dealing with theatre do everything collectively and each individual is responsible for him or herself as well as for his or her friend. Often the parents ask the question “Why did you choose theatre?” The answer is clear – theatre is fun and does not resemble lessons, but is rather taken as a game. During the exercises we



crawl, we sing, we turn into animals or fairy tale or book characters. The action that takes place in the young people's theatre studio takes a fun, play-like and dynamic form. The interesting exercises and etudes turn the activities into games and the game is a model of life. The game however differs from regular training since it introduces an additional crucial component – affection. Thus, playing not only develops kids' craftiness, attention and intellect, but also their soul.

Each child comes to the theatre studio with his or her own aim. Those who once considered themselves to be shy and clumsy, with the aid of theatre, open themselves up, start to feel confident and to improvise, to unlock their fantasy and wits. Not all of the participants in the theatre studio will become actors, but they will surely become exceptional, creative people.

Theatre activities encourage the participants to increase their self-assessment, to gain confidence, to trust not only in themselves but also in the other people. Each exercise comprises of two parts – a teaching-developing part and a practical part. The first part is a complex series of games within theatrical disciplines. The practical part aims to consolidate the skills obtained through preparation of a play, rehearsal of various scenes or work on a performance. With the work of Rositsa Todorova, she teaches the children not only to speak beautifully, but also to express their thoughts, to experience, to feel.

In 2001 PetyaMarcheva finished her studies as a psychology graduate at „St. St. Cyril and Methodius” University of VelikoTarnovo and also graduated with three M.A. degrees from „St. Kliment Ohridsky” University of Sofia: „Social pedagogy” (2004); „Pedagogy for children with mental deficiency” (2009); „Pedagogy for visually deficient” (2011).

Petya Marcheva is a certified career consultant from the international programme Global Career Development Facilitator.

From 1995 to January 2014 she worked in the field of special pedagogy and students with difficulties.

Her scientific interests lie in the Theory of education and didactics, Art therapy and sport in the process of teaching students with special educational requirements, Improvement of education quality by means of the Euro guidance programme - career orientation and educational mobility.

Petya Marcheva is a member of:

- the Union of psychologists in Bulgaria;
- the Union of scientists in Bulgaria;
- the Association of PhD students in Bulgaria;



Since the beginning of 2014, Petya Marcheva has been working as an Assistant Professor at the College of Education – Pleven.

During 2011 and 2012 Petya Marcheva worked under the project "SUCCESS", BG051PO001-4.2.05-0001 „School for self-affirmation and preparation for the European horizons” - Operational program “Human Resources Development”, funded by the ESF of the EU – as a team member, leader of the extracurricular and outside school activities. The main objective of “SUCCESS” was to enrich the free time of students from state and municipal schools, students with identified need for specific support, as well as students at risk of dropping out, expression of aggression and violence, through their involvement in extra-curricular and out of school activities.

Under the “SUCCESS” project Petya Marcheva led the activities in the discussion club “Do I know life? Successful behavior of a young gentleman and a young lady, both connected to the prevention of drug abuse, violence and trafficking of students with special education needs.

During the demonstrations carried out by special teacher Petya Marcheva, students openly discuss issues before parents, teachers and guests; resolve various cases, related to improving the safety and limiting the risks for the young people – aggression and violence; human trafficking and illegal migration; when and why to call the European number for emergencies 112.

During the four months of work the students from the club meet with police officers, with the regional health inspectorate, the regional fire and population safety department and went through a number of positive emotions. New valuable friendships were created, thoughts were exchanged on current issues, and tolerance was encouraged.

Petya Marcheva participated in the following:

- 2011 – 2013, „Democratic structures in schools in Europe”.
- 2011 – 2012 eTwinning project „Happy vegetables”.
- 2010 – 2012, „Safe Communities”, Bulgaria, England.
- 2011 – 2012, „RAPVITE”.
- 2010 – 2012, „Together against drugs and violence”.
- 2010 – 2012, “I am not Scared”.
- 2010 – 2011, „Europe@School”.
- 2009 – 2010, „ONAIR”.
- „Accessing Development Education”.
- 2008 – 2010, A. L. I. I.” - Adult Learning for Immigrants Integration”.



- 2006 - 2009, „Together against drugs“.

4. Case studies

Case study 1: KinderKulturKarawane

NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION

Buro für Kultur- und Mediaprojekte, Hamburg, DE

<http://www.kinderkulturkarawane.de>

Mission/objectives of organisation

To encourage and create conditions for the fostering of cultural exchanges and peer learning initiatives.

Cultural exchange and peer learning are creative pedagogic methods addressed particularly to young people; children and teenagers are those most affected by poverty.

Child labour and the growing number of street kids are also consequences of poverty, as is insufficient education, the risk of HIV/AIDS, exploitation of children as soldiers, migration and exile. Partners from the South are socio-cultural organizations who support young people living in challenging situations to find their way out of misery and social disintegration by means of cultural activities.

These young people perform theatre, music, dance and circus – all kinds of performing arts - embracing relevant topics of campaigns concerning global issues. Workshops in common with young Europeans deepen insight and facilitate peer learning activities.

Moreover, ***Cultural approaches and peer-learning are becoming more and more accepted by pedagogical methods especially in informal education. The nature of the training approach to be used in V.I.S.I.ON relies on theatre as a cultural expression, within the context of an informal educational setting.***

“Cultural education means education in cultural participation. Cultural participation, in particular, means participation in the artistic cultural events of a society, and in the ability to act these out in general. Cultural education is one of the prerequisites for a happy life both in a personal, as well as, societal context. Cultural education is a constitutive element of general education.” - (Federal Centre for Political Education)³



"The true meaning of art lies not in the production of beautiful objects. It is much more a method, used, to understand. A way to comprehend the world, and to find one's own place in it." – (Paul Auster)⁴

Description of your work: *What is its purpose, who do you normally work with, how many people do you work with, what type of activities are you normally involved in?*

Every year the KiKuKa invites 5 to 7 children's and youth culture groups from Africa, Asia and Latin America to Germany, Austria, Denmark and Switzerland and since 3 years ago, also in Bulgaria and Slovenia. These groups present their artistic productions in schools, youth and cultural centers, theatres, at festivals or at other cultural events, and also give workshops, which pass on the message about their lives, their fears, desires, and hopes for the future.

KiKuKa aims at high artistic quality

All the groups that come to Europe have two things in common: the productions they perform in Europe have a high level of artistic quality. Secondly, all the young artists involved come from marginal backgrounds (street children, child workers, war and AIDS orphans, refugees, lives of poverty, violence and drug abuse). Through the individual projects and related cultural work, they have managed to rediscover their dignity and self-confidence, thereby developing new perspectives for themselves.

Through a process of exchange, the children and young people of Europe are able to meet those of a similar age from other cultures, and to see them as talented artists and as equal partners, and with whom they can discover the many things that they have in common.

We promote dialogue between young people based on equality, and lasting partnerships organised by projects and schools.

Stimulating creativity and activity

The groups of the Kinderkulturkarawane bring a wide variety of cultural forms of expression, and the diversity of different cultures into schools. They thereby, not only broaden the cultural horizons of the young people in Europe, but also confront the audience indirectly with the question of how creativity and cultural diversity exists in their own country.

In the workshops of the Kinderkulturkarawane, the children and youth get to learn first hand, different forms of artistic expression. African dance, acrobatics, physical awareness, forms of theatre, dance choreography and the most diverse rhythmic forms, are so well rehearsed that they are able to perform them themselves.



Of most importance, however, is that the contact with the groups of the Kinderkulturkarawane clearly shows how closely education and culture are interlinked, and, additionally, what role culture can play in both personal and societal development.

Passing on of skills

Contact with the groups of the KinderkulturKarawane requires the participants to consider how the world is interconnected and the challenges that exist on a global scale, such as climate change or justice. It also requires an analysis of the complex economic, ecological and social causes of these problems, as a dialogue on equal terms is otherwise not possible.

The passing on of intercultural and social skills, and above all, the ability to take action, through the groups of the KinderkulturKarawane is successful and lasting, chiefly because in the company of young people of the same age, 'peer-to-peer learning' and most importantly, 'authentic learning', is made possible.

The participation in decision making processes in society through the young people of the Kinderkulturkarawane seems to young people as being as obvious as taking action autonomously. Both of these are fundamental aspects of the skills necessary to take action; based on interdisciplinary knowledge and forward thinking.

PROJECTS NAMES:

1. Kinder Kultur Karawane
2. "Cultural and peer-learning approaches to integrate socio-economically disadvantaged youth and young adults with an immigrant background"
3. "Strengthen Creative Cooperation" (SCC)

PARTICIPANTS: *(Who took part? What age? How many? What ages? Gender? Description of participants - children/ elderly/ special needs/ particular ethnicity/ deprived etc?)*

The variety of participants and end users Buro fur Kultur- und Medieprojekte has reached cultural groups from the Southern continents - Africa, Latin America & Asia – such as "Theatre of the oppressed" (Palestine), Baobab culture troupe (South Africa), Teatro Trono (Bolivia), Golden Youth Club & M.U.K.A. Project (South Africa), NAFSI Africa Acrobats (Kenya) and many others – who had the chance to go to European countries and implement peer-learning by means of cultural expressions including theatre and



other performing arts. A common initiative – Strengthen Creative Cooperation – with FDCBPCS made it possible for Bulgarians to encounter Kenyan acrobats, South African actors and Brazilian capoeira dancers.

The groups from the South met and collaborated with children and young people from the visited countries. There have been no limitations regarding the background of the children involved, from both sides – European and non-European.

The age of the participants varies, but most often the groups that meet in Europe include kids at the age of 12-17.

The visiting cultural groups usually consist of 8 to 12 members and when in workshop, they work with groups of 10 – 30 European young people. The groups include both boys and girls – from both sides.

The visiting groups are young people that have decided to address their issues through the performing arts – they are ex-gang group members, orphans, and children of the street, children endangered by misusing drugs or being abused.

The welcoming groups in Europe are often from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with varying religions, or sometimes homogenous. Groups with physical and learning disabilities have never been excluded from the initiative.

AIMS: *(What were the aims of the projects?)*

The main aims reside in the implementation of peer-learning by means of cultural expressions. The young adults we involved had been working for years as ambassadors in their cultures, addressing the issues faced by young people in their countries and the solutions, which the different types of art (theatre, circus, dance, acrobatics, music) could offer them for the purpose of their development as strong, independent, confident, skilled and caring human beings.

Stimulating creativity and activity, as well as an education for sustainable development are also at the core of our concept that is automatically applied within the implementation of all projects: “Education for sustainable development imparts to children, youth and adults, sustainable thinking and ways of acting. It puts people in a position whereby they are able to make decisions for the future that make allowances for the effect these decisions may have on future generations, or on other parts of the world. The individual, experiences through education for sustainable development: my personal actions have consequences, not



only for me and my immediate environment, but also for others. I can do something to make the world a little better. Such thinking is urgently needed to create a climate for change to address global problems such as the plunder of the natural world or the inequality in the distribution of wealth.' (UN-Decade 'Education for sustainable development').

The passing on of intercultural and social skills, and above all, the ability to take action in the groups of our team is successful and lasting, chiefly because in the company of young people of the same age, 'peer-to-peer learning' and most importantly, 'authentic learning' is made possible. These are fundamental aspects of the skills necessary to take action based on interdisciplinary knowledge and forward thinking.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION: *(Describe the activity that took place: What did you do? Where did the project take place, location, organization etc.? When did you meet? How often did you meet? What was the length of the project?)*

Groups visit Europe in spring and autumn for a total of 4-5 months a year. They have performances and workshops almost every single day of their visit. They usually stay in one location for three days to one week, but sometimes, when there are more intense common actions – for example a group performance – to be carried out between visiting groups and host groups, the visitors stay longer in one location.

The locations are schools in various cities throughout Europe – mainly Germany, all the way from Hamburg to Cologne – small towns and big cities. The region in Denmark is around Kalundborg municipality, not far from Copenhagen. The region in Bulgaria is around the municipality of Plovdiv. In Austria – Vienna and Langenlois and in Slovenia – Ljubljana and Sejana. The workshops with school children in Europe last up to 3 hours and there is usually more than 1 session in order for effective passing of skills to take place.

The initiative started 15 years ago and is still going strong.

FACILITATORS AND BIOGRAPHIES:

Who ran the project? What roles did they have? *Provide names and short biographies*

Ralf Klassen, Bettina Kocher and Teresa Majeovski

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS:

How were the participants selected?

The hosting schools in Europe are all those who express desire and interest to invite a group from the South.



The groups from the South are selected in accordance with the experiences of their members, the strength of the NGO, which is organising the activity, the background of the community where the cultural group and the NGO are situated, the issues, which the group is fighting and the scope of the work – number of children involved, number of trainers available, structure and message of the performance and the workshops they can bring to Europe.

PARTNERS/FUNDERS: *(Did you work with any other organizations? Tell us about them. Were you funded by any organization?)*

The founders of the Kinder Kultur Karawane approach were two German organizations:

- Buero fuer Kultur- und Medienprojekte, Hamburg, DE - www.kultur-und-medien.com
- Institut equalita, Cologne, DE - <http://equalita.de/>

Funders: European Commission through EuropeAid programme, UNESCO & UNICEF as well as other national funds provided on federal level.

OUTCOMES: *(What were the outcomes? What changed as a result of the project?)*

- ***For the participants***
- ***For the facilitators***
- ***For the organisation***

Working “with” these groups, sharing our experiences for a further emotional life, enabled us to better comprehend the difficulties and the resources of the end-users involved, getting together educators, young adults, parents, experts and novices, adults and children, to bridge the different cultures and different perspectives and express them together into the world that we see, that we hear, that we touch, that we feel with all our body and that brings us to knowledge and emotions.

The solid and enduring emotional involvement between the members of the groups (young adults, coordinators, representatives, educators and audience – which is always part of the greater idea of group) brought socialization and sharing that is outstanding from such distant and different cultures.

Even if some beginnings were a little hard or awkward because it is not easy for the participants to be equally prepared at the beginning, the outcomes of the cultural interactions were always fantastic and gave



us the happiness to foster our commitments and build a constant meeting and an even deeper thread with South America, Africa and Asia.

EVALUATION METHODS: *(How did you evaluate the project?)*

Questionnaires for the level of satisfaction of the involved European children were used.

At the same time, questions and interviews were held with the visiting groups in order for us to understand how well we were meeting their requirements and expectations.

Several groups even had filming crews accompanying them in order to capture all moments and impressions. For example the movie "BREAKING BARRIERS - on tour with Teatro Trono" created with representatives of Teatro Trono from Bolivia is a fantastic example of the work we do and the experiences we create for young people across the globe:

Link to Spanish version - <http://vimeo.com/102871689>

Link to English version - <http://vimeo.com/102882588>

Link to Bulgarian version - <http://vimeo.com/102882589>

Link to Slovenian version - <http://vimeo.com/105385279>

Link to German version - <http://vimeo.com/102933024>

Link to French version - <http://vimeo.com/109683749>

Link to Danish version - <http://vimeo.com/98722128>

How did you know you met your aims? How did you measure success? What systems did you use?

Satisfaction has been demonstrated by means of the questionnaires we used and the interviews we undertook with participating children – from visiting groups as well as from host schools. We are observing changes in the attitudes in the visited schools and the satisfaction from the visiting groups is demonstrated by the fact that according to statistics, for the last 15 years on average there has not been a day without a visit from a group from the South to a European school. And this is a considerable success.

EVIDENCE: *(What evidence do you have to show that your aims were met? Statistics, anecdotes, data, photographs, film, etc)*



We have a lot of “smiley” questionnaires, happy videos, films, as well as a long list of comments by participants (quotations), which can be found on <http://www.kinderkulturkarawane.de>.

DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW: *(What did you learn from the project? What impact has this project had on your practice?)*

The initiative is at the core of our running activities and the main purpose of the organisation’s existence. Cultural and peer learning between Europe and the southern continents is at the basis of what we have been doing for 15 years.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: *(What guided what you did and how you worked? What did you think about in order to make this best practice?_Theory, policies, approaches, expert advice etc.)*

(1) Institutions working with children and young people

It is also important that those responsible for the target groups are able to assess and balance the dynamics of the groups in an appropriate way. Do the children and young people get on well together (gender, age, different backgrounds)? Does the educational background fit (type of school, grade level, and compatibility with training rhythm)? Does the composition of the group allow for continuous work in the school over a longer time, or are short time offers preferred, e.g. in the form of vacation programs and workshops?

(2) Target group

Important considerations for the composition of the groups are gender, age, type of background, school and grade level. Also, although mixed-age groups are desirable, it is sometimes difficult to manage their implementation in everyday life. Large differences of interests, both in terms of artistic preferences (what kind of music, dance form, the form of theatrical staging), and in terms of issues treated, could arise. Also the coordination with the teaching rhythm in different classes (stages) can often be difficult to balance over a longer period.

Another particular consideration is related to parental background. Barriers can exist, which are set for children and adolescents due to restrictions by parents and family, traditional cultural and religious attitudes and behavior. The latter could be handled in the artistic discourse context, but a less homogeneous group could also lead to failure.



Sometimes it makes sense, to compose groups mixed by age, gender, and artistic orientation etc., only after an introduction period with more homogenous groups.

We need to make clear that these shared considerations are not intended to intimidate, but to update and inform about the potential risks related to this type of initiative in general.

(3) Gender segregation

An important result of practical experiences is that a gender-mixed group can work successfully only under specific conditions.

The issues at this age are not necessarily all that different, but the artistic realization often requires a huge "self-opening" and "come out of one's shell". The inhibition of pubertal age towards to the opposite sex is so high that a presentation is often perceived as an exposure. Saying all this does not mean that the initiators should not experiment with mixed groups, but that they need to keep in mind the particularities.

We should also keep in mind that mixed groups seem possible particularly in a school setting with fixed theatre plays or in cultural institutions where theatre enthusiastic young people participate.

(4) Artistic and educational management

Artistic and educational management plays a central role in the implementation of the concept. Such experts should have both artistic skills, as well as pedagogical competences, in order to be able to inspire children and young people for the activities and to motivate them to take part in long-term activities.

In addition, they should have close contacts and references to children and young people from the targeted group, and if possible have experience in collaborating with them. The specific knowledge of their behavior, attitudes and expectations is an important basis for appropriate design and implementation of workshops and courses.

(5) Design of services and activities

The appropriate design of the offer is also an important factor in the implementation of cultural concepts. Despite the variety, one-time and short-term offers are a first approach and provide incentive. For the sustainable implementation of the concept continuous courses for half of a school-year with fixed weekly schedule are recommended. The regularity and fixed structure usually makes it easier for children and young people to get used to and engage in the offers and setting after an introductory period.

A special appeal lies in the inclusion in the courses of final and interim public presentation events. There is usually a certain shyness and fear of public presentations, but with increasing security in the artistic



activities during the course these become normal, and the challenge and interest in the presentation of the newly acquired skills are at the center.

(6) Planning and time horizon

Long-term and detailed planning is a key prerequisite for the success of such projects and activities.

The starting point of planning is to clarify the financial resources and funding. Only when this is secured, can the artistic and educational director be contracted and the contacting of potential participants begin.

(7) Continuation of the activities and cooperation

Culture-related activities for the integration of children and young people are more effective if the youth centers and cooperating schools or organizations consistently offer them, over time. Individual short-term actions and events should only be used for creating an initial incentive.

Another important component of the concept is the artistic and educational coordination. Often it is not easy to find suitable trainers for these offers, covering both the artistic side, and the specific needs of the target group. Cooperation with cultural institutions, such as music schools, dance projects, theatre groups, and circus projects is recommended.

(8) Approaches for development of training programs and training methods

It is advisable to keep a record of the methods a trainer uses, and reflect on his/her own experiences of using them, to help him adapt and improve them. ***It would be best if a trainer could ask colleagues to observe him using different methods in order to get feedback from them not only on his/her actions, but also on the actions/reactions of trainees.*** The participants in the training / workshops can also give feedback on the methods introduced; after all, they are the ones who should be benefiting from the activities directly.

The most appropriate methods for training and developing a training program should be chosen in relation to the content and learning materials needed to bring about the achievement of the learning outcomes. Even if a trainer develops skills in using a wide range of methods, he/she should not be tempted to use all the interesting methods in one session. The participants may enjoy them at first, but too much variety may cause confusion and frustration. Training methods are used to enable learning to take place, not to prove that the trainer is a good performer.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR V.I.S.I.ON: *(How might this project inform your approach to the V.I.S.I.ON project and your work with visually impaired young people?)*



The shared good practice gives a direction of thinking, which calls for the involvement of young performing arts trainers, students in artistic classes for example, young actors, who can more easily interact with the young VI people and with whom the VI young people can more easily associate themselves and establish peer relations of trust and mutual respect.

Within V.I.S.I.ON we will start with a thorough presentation of our ideas and achievement goals in order for the participants – both children with visual impairment and theatre experts - to become well acquainted with the team, the philosophy behind the actions and the involvement requirements in order for the best results to be achieved. Starting from the inspired team V.I.S.I.ON will spread its notions in order to prepare the participants for the practical joint activities that will follow. Fostering and facilitating social integration, which is key to the project, will start with the building of a large group of friends.

The introduction of a creative theatre may offer an extraordinary resource to our visually impaired children's social learning process⁵:

- Competent integration (distribution of roles)
- Cooperative learning on variable contents
- Enhance the personal sensibility
- Reinforce the interpersonal exchange and the group belonging, but maintaining the individual importance. Individual creativity within the group.
- Foster the creative skills and the sharing of emotions

To make creative theatre with V.I.P. it is necessary to deal with two problematic categories⁶:

- Space and movement: knowing the space implies the ability of the child to mentally decenter and project him/herself within an environment to live it individually (listening spatial perception, exploration, 3D model, materials, embedded tracks on the floor, ...)
- Body scheme and gestures: theatrical contents by hands, arms, body, gestures (common kit of functional actions), and facial expressivity for an active and participative interaction in the relational dynamics.

It is essential that all the members of our consortium and all the involved end-users understand that we need to encourage the students with a visual impairment to become dynamic members of the workshop and future classroom, someone who is active in life and who is out there taking risks, because risk taking is at the basis of what we do. We cannot grow unless we take a risk. And about this matter, there is no difference between people with and people without visual impairment.



Case study 2: Project “Art-social children’s center”

NAME OF THE ORGANIZATION: Theatrical and social formation “Flower”

MISSION/OBJECTIVES OF ORGANIZATION & DESCRIPTION OF YOUR WORK *(What is its purpose, who do you normally work with, how many people do you work with, what type of activities are you normally involved in?)*

The mission of the organization:

1. Creation of conditions for the future positive inclusion of the young people in social life, regardless of their background and status (including such without parental care, with physical disabilities and learning difficulties, with deviating behavior, victims of violence and military conflicts)
2. Activation of society for the purpose of resolving young people’s problems
3. Introduction of art and derivative contemporary psycho-social art techniques in the social, educational and health work with young people

Specific objectives of the organization:

To conduct non-formal civil education among the young people

To support the integration of minorities

To transfer and disseminate good practices in forum theatre

To enrich, update and improve its repertoire, in concert with the needs of various groups

Activities:

- Development and implementation of artistic, social, educational and health projects
- Development and dissemination of professional and youth theatre performances of our students
- Organisation, implementation and participation in national and international seminars, conferences, training courses and workshops for youth trainers (students and professionals), artists, social workers and youth-workers
- Adaptation and introduction of good artistic practices for positive social changes
- Development and involvement in national and international networks of organisations with similar activities



- Organisations, implementation and participation in national and international media events, focused on the resolution of youth problems
- interaction with state and regional institutions, non-governmental organisations, universities, cultural institutions, media in the country and abroad.

<http://theatretsvete.eu/>

PROJECT NAME:

Project "Art-social children's center"

PARTICIPANTS: *(Who took part? What age? How many? What ages? Gender? Description of participants (children/ elderly/ special needs/ particular ethnicity/ deprived etc?)*

12-14 children aged 7 to 15 – blind children and children with visual impairment (v.i.), boys and girls.

AIMS: *(What were the aims of the projects?)*

The aim of this project was to prove that:

- thanks to extra-curricular work with children who are visually impaired, through the instruments of theatre and performing arts, the sensory experience of the participants, their memory, perceptions, speech, attention, motor skills and abilities for special orientation can be developed, enriched and refined as well as the connection and the relationship with one's own body be mastered;
- the process of work for the purpose of creating a theatre play increases personal motivation and determination of the children, improves self-esteem and their self-evaluation, develops new skills for social interaction, stimulates the participants to discover ways and personal experiences roads for social activeness.

The project had the objective of challenging the social deficit of children with disabilities, which is not simply a personal but a societal problem. The lack of opportunities for people with disabilities to make social contacts, which our society is still oblivious about and considers as a family problem, naturally leads to a lack of motivation for social inclusion. The project has the aim of using the potential of art, where everyone can interact.



PROJECT DESCRIPTION: *(Describe the activity that took place: What did you do? Where did the project take place? location, organisation etc.) When did you meet? How often did you meet? What was the length of the project?)*

Period: October 2009 – April 2010

The children from the “Louis Braille” school, for whom it was possible to join the group, were those coming from the country-site and staying in the school during the weekend, i.e. living there in a boarding house. The parents of these children do not take them home due to different reasons – mostly due to lack of funds. There are also three children from an institution for parentless children. Many of the children have other challenges besides the visual impairment – physical, mental, behavioral, which means that more than half of the students have multiple disabilities. Approximately one half of the group is completely blind, while the rest suffer from various levels of visual impairment. Only a few of them are able to orient themselves visually in space.

In the beginning the meetings with the children from the school “Louis Braille” took place each Saturday morning, and later on – on Saturday and Wednesday evening, from 2010 – on Saturday and Sunday, and with the approach of the project finale – on each possible occasion. The activities take place in the “game room” – not too spacious, but sufficiently big for our needs, dedicated for exercises and rehabilitation of children with multiple disabilities. This room is equipped with motion exercise tools, which we sometimes use in our work. The meetings usually take place for three hours, without dedicated recess time, but with alternating activities – changing lighter ones with more strenuous ones.

After the first two meetings we form a relatively fixed group of 12-14 children aged 7 to 15. The team does not filter or divide the group (in fact it has not been possible with the group to work with two groups) – all children who are interested and willing to join are welcomed. As it appears the greater age difference and the variations in the intellectual potential of the children create various difficulties during our work. Before New Year the team tries to work in the evenings and some of the children who go home for the weekend manage to join. Unfortunately the evening activities prove to be unsatisfactory, because the daily regime in the school is more intensive. The evening sessions are shorter; the young people become agitated too easily and then have trouble going to bed, which creates problems for their mentors.

The synergy between music, dance and drama allows us to enter simultaneously the worlds of three arts, which have strong emotional influence on the visually impaired children. The building of artistic skills presents an opportunity for development of the speech technique, the intonation, the facial expressions and the comprehension of the literary text stimulate memory and attention. The musical tasks develop rhythmic skills; the children learn how to control their vocal abilities, while dance helps for harnessing and



coordinating movements. Together these elements turn into a perfect basis for the development of social skills in visually impaired children and create attitudes for motivated behavior in front of an audience. During the real action on stage the tutors search for ways for overcoming the differences between the participants, originating from their varying skills, age and reasons for participating.

Experience shows that blind and visually impaired children enjoy and like theatre. The process of creating a play includes several stages and the first exercises focus on presenting the children with the nature of art, its characteristic influence on the spectator. A special approach is required not only for the creation of a feeling of interest towards the art, but also for encouraging the children that they can also be actors, get into roles and images, which is achieved through their motivation for participation in short theatre pieces and games.

When the young people become engrossed in the preparation of a play, the work has to continue with reading and/or listening to a recording of the script, rationalization of its contents and allocation of the roles. When lines are studied it is necessary to take into consideration the abilities and aptness of the v.i. children to imitate ready intonation.

Music-drama works combine movements, mimics, gestures, dances, songs and artistic speech. Their story, music and costumes attract and motivate the children to participate. The process of developing artistic skills includes tasks related to fixing walking and posture deviations, as well as coordination and mastering new movements and special orientation. On the other hand theatre stimulates the cognitive development of children and enriches their visual conceptions. Introduced in addition to the teaching activities, which explain to the children that mimics express the human feelings, are also artistic techniques taking the form of games for passing emotional conditions – joy, sorrow, seriousness, fear, etc.

During the first sessions the team was surprised to find the children spend almost three hours sitting in a circle without getting tired or bored. They seem curious, open towards the team, some are more communicative, other – shier – but as a general rule – all of them listening carefully. With the course of time this behavior changes drastically. The meetings with the team excite them as a rule, they try to talk each other down, they interrupt themselves in the initial and final circles that mark the exercises. They are very much tempted to break the rules during the games, mainly when they are in a circle, where tolerance and hearing each other are of major importance (for example when they pass a fruit among each other and they need to talk about it without naming it, in order to keep the surprise for the next in line – the third or even the second in line shout out with pleasure the name of the fruit). It is often, even for older kids, to shout without reason, as a way of discharging emotions. None of the attempts made by the team members



are able to stop the euphoric shouting and the attempts for sound domination over the others. The moments when the team achieves perfect silence and attention are the moments when a story or a fairy tale is being told – these children are the perfect listeners. They are really susceptible and easily manage all kinds of tasks based on sounds and rhythm.

Getting to know the objects, which accompany a theatre play, together with the costumes, supported by detailed descriptions of the materials, colors, purpose, is a moment charged with excitement and lively interest on behalf of the children. During these activities the team also clarifies how the objects are used (for example, swinging and cutting with a fake swords in short dance choreography, creating a tambourine and drum rhythm, accompanying and enriching the theatrical act and others) and exercises for precise body, head and arms movements are carried out. Attention is paid to the gestures.

These aspects of the sessions broaden the sensory-learning experience of the children, which is extremely important for communication with the world. During the entire process the children are eager to absorb sensory and sound experiences. They touch and study everything, enjoying sounds created by objects that the team members give them and are limitlessly excited by everything that makes a sound. The small cassette-player the team members carry with them is carefully studied. The team notices that the necessary sensory information, which by rule should compensate the lack of visual one, is a great deficit for the kids. Thus for example the 14 year old M. with regular mental development does not know what a “knot” is, which means that he does not connect the world with the knot he is touching. Among the young people there are some who do not remember ever touching blossoming trees. It is challenging and almost impossible for the description to replace the specific sensory contact. The process of work constantly brings about gaps in the sensory experience of the children and whenever possible the team tries to compensate. At the same time the children start to create their concept of a stage. They are involved in specialized game-exercises for orientation within the stage environment and feeling its boundaries. Communication with the audience is an importance part of the rehearsals – to wait for the reaction of the audience, the intonation of the actors not to influence the mood of the hall (working with visually impaired children proved this to be a high goal due to the avalanche-type passing of emotions through laughter, shouting, stomping, etc.).

In the initial stages of artistic work with the v.i. children, it was exceptionally hard to organise and maintain any kind of movement. Most of the participants are extremely cautious in their body movements. It appears that what we acquire as body culture, we also acquire and feed through visual images. The completeness, aesthetics of the movements, the gesture of details, is foreign to those who are completely



blind. It takes enormous effort to move their fingers in order to make them shake their forefinger – a simple gesture for “no” to those who are sighted.

During the elaboration of the dancing movements, the children become familiar with the accompanying music, exploring the tempo and rhythm of movements. It is necessary that in the beginning a detailed explanation and assistance for the movements is provided to each child, and the position of the body and limbs should also be explained. At the next stage it is important for the young people to carry out the movements following vocal instructions, which is followed by consolidation and independence.

In the case of more complex movements the example giving is of major importance – that is why the children need to understand the movement by touching. Experience shows as that it is better to start with the hand movements and then continue with the legs. The multiple repetitions accompanied by explanations from the team members are a major factor in the process – this way the children are given a chance to feel the movement more thoroughly and thus master it on their own.

Dancing contributes to the communicative skills and habits, because through it thoughts, feelings, emotions, experiences are being expressed and an understanding of one’s own body is developed, and its possibilities expanded, together with the means for making contact with the others via movements. Both in the classes as well as during extracurricular activities, the aim of dancing exercises is to create and perfect the locomotion and spatial concepts of the children, together with education on developing a sense of beauty. During the process of work the children study, experiment and develop their concepts about sensing the body, space and motion. The physical feelings are very important because they include concepts for body symmetry and asymmetry, the presence of internal feeling about left and right side, knowing the body parts and their interactions. And last but not least, dancing creates among v.i. children a feeling of completeness and functioning, which is parallel to that of sighted people.

Creating a dance in a group of children is a long process, which gets even more complex when the work is done with visually impaired young people. The emotional and positive attitude during the exercises is important in order for the correct posture, coordination, plasticity and expressiveness of movement to be established in an enjoyable way. The behavior of the children from “Louis Braille” at the beginning was shy, and they were probably worrying about how they were going to be accepted. It is hard for them to start experimenting with their bodies. The process of work on the dances is favorably influenced by the visit of the blind dance Valentina Radzhani. The young people’s trust and readiness to learn to dance and express themselves through body language is quickly gained. In order to make even small progress each child needs to be individually and frequently supported, until the movements become routine for him/her. If the



exercises are stopped for a certain period of time, the memory for the movement gradually fades away due to the lack of a visual model, which it can feed from. Movement exercises require time, patience and involve trainers supporting each child individually.

An obstacle to the socialisation of v.i. children are stereotyped movements, such as shaking the body and head, swinging with the hand in front of the face, pressing the eyes and others. Some of the children make these movements when they stand still and have nothing to do, others demonstrate them in order to express more emotional forms such as excitement or in more difficult situations – nervousness. What is needed is attention and understanding of the issue, in order for the visually impaired children to be supported in overcoming one of the physical barriers on the way to positive communication. One of the possibilities is to calmly and tactfully encourage the children to stop such movements, for example by placing their hands on their knees or touching and relaxing their backs on their chairs.

V.i. children cannot always notice encouragements with smiles and so vocal encouragement, tapping on the back and shoulders, handshaking and others successfully transmit encouragement. Vocal signs and calling by name are necessary when we need to attract a child's attention. Vocal expressions need to replace nodding, facial expressions or hand signals. When approaching a child it is wise to state our names – this way it is encouraged to enter into communication with someone outside the close family (or school) circle more calmly.

For successful and thorough communication it is necessary that nonverbal communication, such as expressions and mimics: look, mimics, smile, gesture and body posture, happen with actions: approaching, moving away, passing of objects and others. With the aid of artistic techniques, visually impaired children develop a sense for mimics and gestures, get to know themselves and the others better, establish habits for social interactions, skills to willfully control the expression of their emotions, to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings, to manage and demonstrate their best qualities.

Practical part of the initiative

The process – object of study, comprises of three main stages: a cognitive one (getting to know each other) - end of 2009; a stage with a greater variety of activities and games with partial work on the theatre play "Ali Baba and the forty thieves", which marks the end of the project (January – March 2010), the third stage of the process is dedicated to the play (March-April 2010). During this time the group changes – the process ends with ten children – four drop out and one joins. The reason behind some of the drop-outs obviously comes from the fact that the average level of the exercises is below their needs (especially from intellectual



point of view). Most of these participants fought the dilemma whether to stay or not for quite a long time. The activities are interesting for them, but the group is noisy, sometimes slow with understanding of the tasks, interested in simpler activities and challenges; in other words, the work was focused according to the needs of the 7-9 year old children. The older girls need a different kind of attention from the team with a lot more sharing of specific life experiences. Sometimes they are jealous of the team trying so hard to manage and control the group. The older who decide to stay tend to show childish behavior.

Most of the children in the group have no precise concept about the nature of theatre, stage, and audience, performing before spectators. They have accumulated knowledge mainly from television, movies, mainly series, audio-stories. Some of them have been to theatre plays, but cannot distinct the above mentioned elements; they also have no experience about the nature of rehearsing a play, the feeling during a premiere and the reward from the audience for the talent and dedicated efforts. It is sometimes hard for the team to transmit the message that more rehearsals are needed in order for all details to be refined. Still, with the approach of the premiere, intuitively absorbing the excitement of the team, the motivation of the group also increases substantially. If several weeks before the premiere the mentioning of work on "Ali Baba" would have only aroused "O, again?!", at the end of the rehearsal process the participation in the play is a matter of prestige, and the threats to some of them (mostly from school staff, when they are behaving intolerably) or the mere fear that they might not participate, leads to unseen tears. „Most of the visually impaired children included in the group, come from orphanages or from families with poor social background. Poverty teaches these children to automatically connect the category "Good" with material prosperity. Because of this we considered the approaching process of creation of a theatre play on the one side as a possibility for provoking activities for overcoming deficits – consequences of their physical problems, and on the other side – as a chance for reevaluating the real values in human life." (Yaneva, 2010, page 108)

Among the most discussed topics with the children is the faith of the heroes in the running TV series, in this particular case – the Turkish production "Pearl" – which is why the team decides to choose an eastern story. The main theme in "Ali Baba and the forty thieves" – for the spiritual and material values, determines the final selection. Since the most moving comments are those related to love, the original text of the story is slightly altered – romanticized. The short time available as well as the specifics of the work with v.i. children requires the size of the story and the number of participants to be reduced.

„Developing a theatre scenario on the basis of a literary piece means to allocate the lines between the various heroes in such a way that the presentation by the actors on stage to be interesting for the



audience. On the basis of the scenario the director defines the actions of the actors, which have led to the verbalization of those lines." (Yaneva, 2010, page 108) In this particular case, in addition to the listed considerations for the cutting of the story size and intensification of the romantic line, the preparation also requires the actors to express themselves with word and sound, and for the audience to mainly focus on the sound information. This is the reason for the inclusion of a lot of story-telling text, which slightly resembles radio-theatre. Considering the fact that motion results are very slow and hard to achieve, the screenplay envisages only a few of the scenes to be actively played, while others are told or only vaguely mentioned, only for the need to support the logical connection of events.

When defining the scenes, which will be actively played, group tasks are being used, corresponding to the story context, and the children join in all the collective images (salesmen, buyers, thieves, horses, mules, guards, wedding participants).

FACILITATORS AND BIOGRAPHIES

Who ran the project? What roles did they have? *Provide names and short biographies*

Theatre "Flower" allocates the main activities within the project among three basic artistic teams: Violina Vasileva and Yanko Velkov – 28 High school "A. Konstantinov" with integrated children with special education needs, Tsvete Yaneva and Yavor Kostov, frequently supported by Yordanka Andonova, in school for v.i. children "Louis Braille", Yordanka Andonova and Ekaterina Kazakova in IV School for children with special education needs "Prof. Katsarov". All three schools are situated in Sofia and volunteers support the work of each team. Supervisors of the activities in school "Louis Braille" are professors Diana Tsirkova and Emilia Evgenieva.

RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS (*How were the participants selected?*)

The team makes no filtration or division of the group. All children who are interested in joining the group are welcome to do so.

PARTNERS/FUNDERS: (*Did you work with any other organizations? Tell us about them. Were you funded by any organization?*)

No external funding is mentioned. The partners are in fact the schools, where the activities took place.

RESULTS:



Some of the most important results, which appear on the basis of the implementation of certain actions, are the following:

- In the beginning of the meetings the participants are brief when describing their mood – in two or three words or only with a number from 1 to 10. Gradually they become more eloquent and willing to share and they start discussing the reasons behind their feelings and emotions.
- improved attention and control of emotions achieved particularly by means of music tasks. One of the most successful workshops created two groups – one of the groups leaves the room, while the other needs to create a certain sound pictures – e.g. a farm yard – only using voices, flutes and plastic bottles. When the first group returns it has to guess by sound where it is supposed to be.
- one of the most effective and memorable activities for the children is an exercise in which they are seeds, from which plants grow up – all of them are excited to share exactly what kind of plants they turn out to be and which moment was most pleasurable for them (the majority reply that the most pleasurable time was the moment when they were touching with their leaves – fingers, hands – the leaves of other plants).
- thanks to the exercises the children successfully create a number of previously lacking concepts – e.g. what a snow man is, what a blooming branch is, what a knot is, how the different fruits feel and smell.
- to a considerable extent the children refine their fine motor skills and considerably improve their spatial orientation. The tasks, which consist of moving, orientation, coordination of one's position according to the positioning of the others, are particularly hard for the children. This urges the team to seek every opportunity to motivate the kids to practice. As a result, at the end of the activities, the participants move around in a more secure and confident manner, seeking less and less help from other children or from the team members.
- the group efforts and presentation before an audience motivates the children to be concentrated and to support each other. Their behavior becomes really responsible towards the performance. The play is a platform for self-presentation and the good performance is a tool for building confidence, and consolidation of one's person within a certain social circle.
- the feeling of space (particularly among the completely blind) is complimented by tasks for tempo movement, movement towards sounds. With the aid of the volunteers and the team leaders the children feel through their bodies the movement of a "boat in stormy seas" or a "golf ball". The work on the expressiveness of the body movements is a new skill for the v.i. children.



- one of the hardest games appears to be the conceptualization and imitation of body postures, because a part of the kids are afraid to study the body position of a model in details and thoroughly, they get mixed up in the descriptions – left, right, body parts.
- during the work on the creation of a play, the children struggle to understand the stage space and the size of the decor. In order to develop their sense of the stage and its dimensions, the team members use sound milestones (tissue and sound at one of its ends), alongside which the participants move, touching it and orienting themselves with the aid of the sound.
- on the basis of the observations it can be concluded that the participation in adventures does not lead to loss of concentration among the kids, on the contrary, it turns into a strong motive for active participation in the work that follows. The new activities amuse the group, while the repetitions are tedious. Broadening the scope of the activities is supported through the initiation of various tasks for creative arts, based on theatrical principles, which, compared to imposed implementation of repeating tasks, positively influences the motivation of the children, enabling quality and sustainability. When their interest is attracted by a new idea, the children are devoted and concentrated in their tasks and there are no discipline issues.
- thanks to the thieves' game and the imitation of attacking movements, the children learn to focus the energy of movement, learn to be confident and straightforward, to balance themselves, shift their weight, etc. Their initial clumsiness in making the movements is quickly overcome and due to their perseverance and repetitions they improve, their swing and the precision of their movements increase.
- despite the spring vacation break, the children demonstrate surprisingly good memories for their tasks on the script. They show good motor memory and with enough repetitions most of the movement elements of the play are quickly restored.

The summary of the results of the artistic work with the group of v.i. children from "Louis Braille" school and the impressions from the sessions, outline the following conclusions:

- With the help of artistic approaches and games the work with v.i. children leads to considerable progress in the development of their motor skills and orientation abilities (sense for stage space and moving within its limits). The children get to know and accept much better their own bodies (sense of left and right side, symmetry of postures, synchronous movements, the posture is improved, confidence on the stage is much better), they learn how to express themselves through theatrical instruments (dance, ritual games such as sword play, turning in circles around



one's own vertical body axis), how to master gestures and mimics, which come more naturally to sighted people (the "no" gesture with the forefinger, a bow).

- As far as memory is concerned, the children, even those with greatest concentration troubles, demonstrate remarkable ability to memorize the lines, which shape up the final play.
- The sensory experience and concepts for various elements of the world are greatly enriched through touching, studying and smelling of fruits and materials (yarn, vale, styrofoam, plastic, stone, wood, earth, etc.), a car, a cassette-player, musical instruments, theatre costumes. Concepts about seasons, plants and their development, about the various elements that form the surrounding objects are explored and broadened.
- The children's speech becomes more articulate, more expressive; the quieter and shier ones start speaking louder and in a more confident manner, which is noticed by everyone during the last sessions and the performance itself. On the other hand, those who were shouting and trying to out-speak the others made progress by trying to control such impulses. The strong momentary excitement was harnessed and this energy was redirected by the participants themselves towards the implementation of performance-related tasks: they gradually started to treat each other with respect and treat their roles in the play with responsibility, as well as collaborating for the common tasks of the group (a major factor in the process are the team games and the collective adventures).
- An important factor in the work process is the will of the team to encourage the children's confidence, the striving focus towards the achievement of an end product, which presents the abilities and new skills developed by all participants. The improvement of self-assessment by the participants is supported and demanded by the team leaders and the volunteers, as well by as the satisfaction from the participation in the play and the approving and encouraging reaction of the audience.
- Among the objectives of the project is also the creation of conditions for the children to communicate more successfully with their sighted peers. This proves to be hard to accomplish because of certain considerations of the management of the school, which do not allow for taking the children outside of school. Despite this the children implement successful social contacts through their communication with the volunteers. With time, they start to feel more secure and better accepted; they start initiating communication, which obviously pleases them.



OUTCOMES: *(What were the outcomes? What changed as a result of the project?)*

- **For the participants** – improved expression skills, improved attention, ability to concentrate, group work; the artistic performance greatly raised the confidence and self-evaluation; progress in the coordination of movements, mastering new motor skills;
- **For the facilitators** – we will quote the conclusion written by the graduate Sirma Kostadinova, who participated in the project as a volunteer:

“In the end I will go back to a personal experience during the training for volunteers under the project. One of the games organized within it consisted of the following: the eyes of all the volunteers, except one leading the group, are bound tightly with scarves so that nothing can be seen. We all grab hands and the first one leads the line of the group outside the building where the training is taking place. We all started up on a path, then we climbed some stairs, then we all release the clasp and are instructed to run on our own until a certain sound-marked place is reached.

During the exercise I felt certain main feelings: first, a feeling of utter insecurity, I cannot control the movements of my body – they are extremely and unnaturally insecure, as if I never walked, not to mention running, which is even harder (the feeling is as if I am fighting an insurmountable barrier, which numbs my movements). Second, I realise how important it is in that particular moment to trust – to trust the person who leads the group, the person walking ahead of me, the person following me, to let go of the effort to know where I am being led, what lies ahead, what our road goes through, to trust the sound I am running to. And third, I am learning. I am learning that I can quickly get to know the environment, by directing the attention towards all my other senses – I can clearly feel the stony path under our feet, I can sense the light breeze of the wind, I can hear my steps and those of the others, I can even hear my breathing, I am holding hands with the people around me and I can sense their excitement.

On this day I probably start to understand better the visually impaired people and the way in which they experience the world. The exercise helped me to be more effective as a volunteer, to wish very strongly to be helpful to the kids participating in the project, ***with the conviction that through trust and with the help of artistic approaches we can together rediscover the world, feel it with the senses of the other.***”

- **For the organisation** – the project confirmed the conviction that artistic approaches from theatre can considerably improve the development of children and youths with visual impairment.



EVALUATION METHODS: *(How did you evaluate the project? How did you know you met your aims? How did you measure success? What systems did you use?)*

The volunteers observed the children during every session and their behavior was presented and analyzed in short structured reports. The progress made by the children is obvious and is presented both in the results section above as well as in the considerations for the V.I.S.I.ON project underneath.

EVIDENCE: *(What evidence do you have to show that your aims were met? Statistics, anecdotes, data, photographs, film, etc.)*

Each session has a description of the reactions and behavior of each participant – evaluation of individual involvement of the children in each session. There is also photographic material from all the meetings.

DEVELOPMENT AND REVIEW: *(What did you learn from the project? What impact has this project had on your practice?)*

Check outcomes!

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: *(What guided what you did and how you worked? What did you think about in order to make this best practice? Theory, policies, approaches, expert advice etc)*

Theatre and artistic techniques present an enormous field for expression of this force, they lead us to breaking the boundaries of everyday images, to enter a world of endless possibilities, in which we can decide what to be and how to surprise ourselves and others. We are being carried by the confidence that we can be different according to our wish, that we can amuse others, be interesting, funny, scary, unpredictable, bad, smart or silly. The stage gives us strength to say things that we would otherwise not verbalize in everyday conversation, to find new means of expressing ourselves and increase our self-evaluation.

Theatre in itself combines several art forms – music, dance, scenography, by which it enriches and broadens the circle of activities and skills, connected with its creation. The music techniques help the participants to master the rhythm, to synchronize and to listen to others, and discover a new way for nonverbal expression of feelings. Dancing broadens the possibilities of the body and the sense for symmetry. The participants experience a feeling of lightness or boldness, sharpness, and communication



takes place with the other participants, through our movements. All of this is taking place among a magical environment of decors and costumes.

For the v.i. participant or guest the sensing of the magic that is taking place on stage is passed through music, movements, sounds, variety of the costume tissues and objects, lines and the strength of their emotions.

It is known that approximately 80% of the information we receive every day comes through vision. Thanks to their vision babies learn to recognize people and objects from their surrounding, they are attracted to research what surrounds them. Vision helps the children to study the world around them: how to ride a bike, how to bake cookies, how to make mimics that transmit emotions and moods, they understand how the buildings are constructed, etc. In their everyday life children use their vision to study and imitate the activities they see the adults doing: the process is known as incident learning. At school the kids often need to experience comparisons, scientific demonstration, computer presentation as well as everything that is written on the blackboard in addition to their ability to read texts. Children who have issues reading or have a visual impairment need additional materials by means of tactile and alternative materials, in order to successfully expand their capacities.

Even though v.i. young people can learn and do most of the activities just as well as their sighted peers, they at times need focused training in the mastering of knowledge and skills, which sighted young people comprehend immediately. Visual impairments often influence the development of concepts, the ability to move, to orient oneself in space, the abstract learning, peer relations, self-evaluation, as well as the access to many elements from the school life, professional sphere and entertainment, which sighted people take for granted. V.i. children often have various talents, which can be developed with support from a third party through training that uses various sensory models. It is necessary that an array of teaching methods, used for enriching the abilities to learn in all spheres of life is used and from as early a point in life as possible.

The functions, which are important conditions for normal vision are:

- Sharpness of vision: the ability of the eyes to see separately two lighted points positioned at a minimum distance one from the other.
- Vision field: the part of space, which the eye absorbs when fixating on one point.
- Binocular vision: the ability of both eyes to see one object at the same time and join their perceptions in one.



- Accommodation: an adaptive mechanism of the eye, which allows it to maintain clear image of objects positioned at different distances from it.

There are two types of visual impairments:

- Blindness: a condition, under which there are no visual perceptions or there are only insignificant perceptions of light. The blindness can be absolute (total) or partial.
- Poor vision: a condition under which the various levels of lack of vision sharpness do not allow it to absorb fine details from all distances, even with optical correction.

The time when a child or young person lost their vision or their vision became impaired is of major importance. In accordance with this indicator, young people are divided into two groups – early blindness or later blindness. The time limit is placed according to the development of speech and the accumulation of visual concepts, preserved to a certain extent into the visual images of memory. The earlier the visual impairments appear, the more serious the deviations in the nervous and psychological development:

- Early loss of vision: the loss of vision is congenital or appeared when the child was younger than 1 year. These children have no preserved visual concepts and images of the surrounding world in their memory.
- Later loss of vision: the impairment appears after the child is 2 years old. The memory preserves visual images. They are preserved at different depths and there is a tendency for their gradual disappearance. The preserved images are a valuable ground for correctional approaches and for the later cognitive development, especially of their reasoning abilities.

The visual impairments are congenital or acquired and depending on the visual sharpness the following groups can be outlined:

1. Totally blind: their visual blindness is 0; the children have no visual perceptions.
2. Children with perception of light: they have a vision from 0 to 0,01. They can define dark from light, day from night and can sense movement of the hand in front of the eyes. Children with perception of light can feel movement from light to dark, they can sense when a shaft of light penetrates a dark room, but they cannot make out objects in the room by using their vision.
3. Partial vision: visual sharpness within the range 0,01 to 0,04 of the eye that sees better. The children from this group in Bulgaria are defined as children with “residual vision” or with „useful vision”. They can make out colors, contours and silhouettes, they can move freely in a familiar environment, so recognize objects from short distances, to read large advertisements



and news paper titles. At the same time these children cannot differentiate faces and together with the previous two groups use Braille as a main tool for education.

4. Weak sighted: the largest group visually impaired children. Their vision varies between 0,05 and 0,2. The children are able to make the difference between colors, they can orient themselves and move around better than the others, they recognize faces from short distances and are the only group, which can be taught by using large print.
5. Children with sharpness of vision higher than 0,2. they can also be subjects to special education if they have an impairment of other visual functions: for example very narrow visual field, very damaged color differentiation or an eye disease such as malignant near-sightedness, degeneration of the retina or glaucoma. All these circumstances can lead to progressive loss of vision.

A number of visually impaired children also have multiple disabilities. Visually impaired with multiple disabilities are those children whose vision varies between 0 and 0,2 of the better eye and they have at least one more disability – mental, physical, sensory or emotion with various gravity. (Lefterova-Gadzhhalova, 2002, Malinovskaya, 2001, Solntseva, 2006, The Encyclopedia of Blindness and Vision Impairment, 2002).

As a whole the development of v.i. children progresses similarly to the development of sighted children, but problems arise from the relative mental difficulties of the formation and development of the psycho-motor sphere. In connection with that the following specifics of psycho-motor development, conceptualization, reasoning, speech, memory and emotional experiences of children with visual impairment can be outlined.

Psycho-motor development.

The inclusion of v.i. children (particularly those who lose their sight early) influences quite favorably their compensatory skills. The participation in games and later on in learning and work actions increases their activity, motivation, stabilizes the sensitivity of the preserved and of the damaged sensory systems, has a positive effect on the development of sophisticated psychological functions (memory, reasoning, comprehension, speech). The early involvement of the children in cognitive activities contributes to correction and compensation of damaged functions.

The lack of vision means the child cannot learn through imitation, which is extremely important at early childhood, when most of the skills and habits are mastered and knowledge is accumulated mainly through



imitation. The visually impaired child often develops seemingly useless physical activities, also called stereotypes (or blindness), which represent involuntary stimulation: swinging with fingers before the eyes, in order to see movement of light and darkness, other motions with the hands and fingers, swaying of the body and others.

Concepts.

Visual impairments limit, harden or completely exclude the possibility for visual perception, which inevitably affects the formation of concepts. The visual concepts can be partially compensated thanks to the actions of preserved senses, i.e. by increasing the number of other concepts.

V.i. children show difficulties in forming spatial concepts, which influences their orientation in the environment and their mobility. Concepts related to time are built as a rule much more precisely and correctly compared to those related to space. The formation of concepts among v.i. children is not as easy and natural as it is for children with sight. As a consequence of the visual impairment, children form a concept about the surrounding world via their tactile perceptions and on the basis of descriptions provided by sighted people around them. The tactile perceptions however do not possess the power of the visual perceptions. A specific issue arises when trying to form concepts about objects and events, which are very big, very small, fragile and easy to break, hard to check via tactile means, distant ones. Verbal explanation cannot guarantee thoroughness and clarity of a concept created by it. Basically, all concepts that need visual grounds are formed slowly and in a hard way, e.g. concepts of colors.

Attention.

For children with limited vision it is hard to focus and allocate their attention. Deviations concerning conceptualization influence negatively the size, refocusing and maintaining of attention. In the process of work it is possible for the children to lose their focus and to become tired after being exposed to longer sound stimuli, concentration is broken.

Memory.

Memory as an aggregation of processes of retaining and forgetting, learning and recreating represents a necessary condition for human actions. The development of memory is directly related to the progress of society, which constantly requires complication of the functions of memory.



The slowing of memorizing development processes among v.i. children is due to insufficient visual-effective experience, increased tiredness, and lack of sophisticated methods for work with v.i. children in this direction. It is thought that the insufficient volume, the lower speed as well as other particularities of memorizing have a secondary character, i.e. are not due to the visual impairment itself, but appear as a consequence of the deviations in the psychological development. The early correction of brain activities prevents such deviations. It is important keep in mind the individual characteristics of the child, his or her age and the nature of the visual impairment.

The type of memory depends on the dominating character of the activity and the content of the material. Involving v.i. children in diversified activities and exercising the undamaged senses, in some cases also of residual vision, represents a stimulus and condition for development of memory.

Reasoning.

Reasoning is in direct relation to the senses, to the quality and quantity of data, which is absorbed through them.

With children who are visually impaired the process of analysis, synthesis, classification, abstraction and generalization are distressed. They compare the objects by using unsubstantial characteristics.

Due to missing or limited visual perceptions these children form irregular concepts about objects and get to know their nature and properties incompletely. Significant hardships arise when making special connections and understanding the relationships between objects. Abstract thinking has no sound basis in certain concepts and experiences, as a result of which the speech-logic thinking surpasses the visual-objective reasoning of v.i. children.

Speech.

V.i. children start speaking with a delay because the articulation abilities of humans are developed not only on the basis of speech-auditory images, but also through visual images – the movements of the lips of those who speak. It is possible for v.i. children to express certain deviations in their pronunciation, also there can be a change in the tempo and strength of the voice – very loud or very quiet, and stuttering is also frequent.

For children with visual impairments it is hard to master the use of mimics, gestures, intonation and other nonverbal communication means. In her book „The unconscious body image” Françoise Dolto writes: “the affective mimics of the blind have as touching authenticity of those of babies prior to the mirror



experience. They never hide what they feel and everything they feel when meeting someone can be read on their faces." (Dolto, 1984, page 132)

Emotional and volitional field.

Emotions and feelings as a specific reflection of the outer world, presented in the subjective attitude of a person towards reality, depend on how thoroughly, precisely and exhaustively the environment has been reflected.

Quite often the negative emotions of the lack of emotional attitude of v.i. children upon encounters with certain objects can be explained by the lack of satisfaction of their learning needs, or in other cases, the lack of need for studying the object. At the same time, other objects, which usually evoke no emotions from the sighted people, are a cause for strong emotional experiences for the visually impaired.

During contact with a wider circle of unknown sighted people, it is possible to observe discomfort or urge for avoiding direct interaction (lower self-esteem and minority complex), or emotional resistance, taking the form of hostility and animosity towards the others (lack of desire to be considered physically and socially inadequate by the sighted people). Difficulties in orientation in space, for example can be a cause for uncertainty and frustration.

The observed deviations in moral and intellectual feelings (lack of sense of duty, for cooperation, lack of sense of humor, selfishness etc.) can also be noticed among sighted children and the reason for them should not be directly related to the visual impairment. Often they are the result of a child's upbringing, as well as relations in the family or school environment (reproaches, mockery, neglect, comparing with other family members, underestimating abilities). (Litvak, 1998, pages 251-268)

The harmonious development of feeling, as well as that of the v.i. kids' can be achieved through their involvement and their active participation in games and various educational and creative activities (whether they are taught in a specialized or general education establishment), also through encouraging faith in their own skills and talents.

In the beginning of their adolescence (11-14 years) visually impaired children demonstrate a considerable progress in their cognitive abilities. During that period, if some cognitive difficulties have been observed, the children can catch up with their sighted peers to a great extent.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR V.I.S.I.ON: *(How might this project inform your approach to the V.I.S.I.ON project and your work with visually impaired young people?)*



We can point the following fixations/exercises/actions as such, which could be valuable and interesting for V.I.S.I.ON:

- assessment, both at the beginning as well as after each session, of the individual mood in the moment, e.g. using a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 is bad and 10 is wonderful;

- the use of musical tasks requiring the team to be patient and the children to be constantly motivated.

The observations from the quoted good practice show that participating children demonstrate considerable interest towards new sources of sound. Thanks to the musical tasks their attention is preserved for longer periods and the impulse for strong hitting of the instruments in order to dominate the group via sound becomes gradually unnecessary. Sound enriches the sensory experiences of art and contributes to the communication of concepts to the v.i. children. By combining motion and sound theatre increases expression through movement, the sensory experience and the emotional reaction of the group.

- it brings great pleasure for the children to express themselves through matter – in one session they created a storm at sea by means of waving a large veil held by everyone.

- v.i. children often miss concepts for things and objects, which are taken for granted by sighted people – for example a snow-man or how the tree branches blossom in spring – which means that the team's exercises with v.i. children should make as great an effort to fill in these blanks as possible, via sensory activities.

- exercises for fine motor skills are useful, as well as those for spatial orientation and collaboration – in one of the sessions the children are asked to write a letter to Santa Claus and to prepare it for sending in an envelope. Then they are divided into two groups and are asked to walk against each other and when meeting each person had to find a young person from the other group, with which to exchange letters.

When the time of the performance before the audience comes, the children wait for the guests to be seated in a circle. Their faces show excitement, uneasiness – with some it is less noticeable than with others, where nervousness and shame can be noticed. During the performance the children are focused and support each other. Their behavior shows a great level of responsibility towards what they are doing, which contrasts their behavior during rehearsals. They are probably motivated by the presence of their fellow students, friends and teachers – the theatre play is a kind of self-manifestation and their good performance is an instrument, which can help them build their confidence, self-respect and consolidation of their role in their social circle.



- for the purpose of developing a sense of space (especially for the completely blind) it is useful to enforce tasks for group movement, movement towards sound;
- it can be difficult for children to imitate body postures, because some of the participants are afraid to study the body positions in details, and so more efforts are needed on behalf of the team. They also get mixed up in the descriptions – left, right, body parts.
- special efforts are needed to build concepts about the dimensions of the décor and the space of the stage, because it becomes clear that such are missing entirely for a part of the group.
- stories really intrigue the participants, they listened with great attention and express their empathy towards the characters.
- sound expressions please them most, while gestures can be missed
- participation in adventures does not defocus them, on the contrary, it acts as a strong motive for active involvement of follow up activities. It is useful for the children to be engaged in new tasks, because this maintains their interest and enthusiasm. They exhaust some of their emotional energy during the games prior to the real rehearsal and can then work more focused for the implementation of different artistic tasks. The allocation of time between the various activities needs to be done very carefully because if the children are too engaged physically or emotionally during the preliminary activities, they are not sufficiently focused during the rehearsals.
- it should never be forgotten that the children love to break the rules of the games – this is their way to distinguish themselves, to express themselves, to rebel. They do it consciously and openly. The older ones even imitate the younger ones and shout.
- movement exercises are really useful and the team should not be discouraged by clumsiness in the beginning. With the help of enough repetitions and perseverance they refine their motions and the swing and the precision of movements increases.
- family-related conversations often cause painful emotions among the children, but they are also valuable, because they manage to identify each other as members of their “school” families, taking care of each other.
- when working in smaller groups, the children control their emotions better and demonstrate greater attention and focus when doing their tasks.



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End notes:

- ¹Buero fuer Kultur- und Medienprojekte, Hamburg, DE - www.kultur-und-medien.com & Institut equalita, Cologne, DE - <http://equalita.de/>
- ²The measure for visual sharpness is the vision. The vision is measure on the formula d/D , where d is the distance from which the tested person can define a certain visual symbol, while D is the distance at which the normal eye sees the same symbol. Vision is normal when it is equal to one.
- ³ <http://www.kinderkulturkarawane.de/en/>
- ⁴ <http://www.kinderkulturkarawane.de/en/>
- ⁵ Teatro in azione. Proposta metodologica per un'attività extracurriculare. Bonanomi Paula.
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"This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."