



SCIENTIFIC STATE OF THE ART IN THE USE OF THEATER IN VISUAL IMPAIRMENT SITUATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This report aims to present the outcomes of the common efforts of a group of researchers addressing different points of view of the visual impairment situation: psychologists, tyflopédagogists (experts / educators, specialized in the field of visual impairment) and experts in theatrical techniques.

The experts who took part in the development of this intellectual output are as follows:

Psychologists:

Valentina Filingeri – Music'Arte / I Bohemiens

Rositsa Todorova & Petia Marcheva – Association "Hope for all"

Tyflopédagogists:

Nicola Crews - UCAN Productions

Ivelina Vateva & Lyubomir Velkov - School "Louis Braille"

Theater experts:

Dinos Aristidou – UCAN Productions

Casimiro Alaimo – I Bohemiens

Stefania Vitale – Music'Arte

Claudio Ingoglia – FDCBPCS

Daniela Maniscalco - Società Dante Alighieri

Thanks to asynchronous discussions and flashmeetings that took place:

- with psychology perspective on 24th of April 2015, 14:00 CET with participants Zornitsa Staneva (FDCBPCS) on behalf of Rositsa Todorova and Petya Marcheva, Stefania Vitale (Music'Arte) and Daniela Maniscalco (Società Dante Alighieri) - link: <http://flashmeeting.e2bn.net/fm/fmm.php?pwd=19af0b-18723>



- with theatre perspective on 24th of April 2015, 16:30 CET with participants Claudio Ingoglia (FDCBPCS), Stefania Vitale (Music'Arte), Casimiro Alaimo (I Bohemiens) and Daniela Maniscalco (Società Dante Alighieri) – link: <http://flashmeeting.e2bn.net/fm/fmm.php?pwd=cb880c-18722>
- with tyflop pedagogical perspective on 13 May 2015, 14:00 CET with participants Zornitsa Staneva (FDCBPCS), Ivelina Vateva (School for v.i. children “Louis Braille”) and Jane Latham, Dinos Aristidou & Nicola Crews (UCAN Productions) – link: <http://flashmeeting.e2bn.net/fm/fmm.php?pwd=5b7bde-18724>
- with theatre perspective on 18 May 2015 (2nd thematic meeting), 15:30 CET with participants Dinos Aristidou (UCAN Productions), Claudio Ingoglia (FDCBPCS), Stefania Vitale (Music'Arte) and Casimiro Alaimo (I Bohemiens) – link: <http://flashmeeting.e2bn.net/fm/fmm.php?pwd=29a373-18747>
- with psychology perspective on 8 June 2015 (2nd thematic meeting), 17:00 CET with participants Zornitsa Staneva (FDCBPCS), Stefania Vitale (Music'Arte) and Daniela Maniscalco (Società Dante Alighieri) – link: <http://flashmeeting.e2bn.net/fm/fmm.php?pwd=98d006-18808>

By means of undertaking the activities related to this intellectual output, the V.I.S.I.ON consortium expanded its results in the direction of new scientific dimensions related to knowledge in the field of Visually Impaired People Psychology and Physical situation.



Considering context and engagement (by Dinos Aristidou, UCAN Productions)

It is essential, in the development of the project and the theatrical approach that we take, to pay attention to the context of both the young people and the organisations. The level of self-confidence of the young people is related to the following contexts:

Personal: This has to do with the individual.

It takes into consideration a young person's particular visual condition, their home life, age, gender, physicality, emotional and psychological states (which are often the results of other contexts)

Social: This has to do with geographic location and interaction of the individual to their world. It takes into consideration a young person's education, their friendships, leisure, provision and legislation regarding visual impairment

Cultural: This has to do with ethnicity and attitudes.

It takes into consideration a young person's ethnicity, the education system, the positioning of and attitudes to disability, the cultural perceptions and attitudes to visually impaired people, the positioning of visually impaired people in society, historical perceptions and attitudes

Theatrical: The role theatre plays in cultural life.

This takes into consideration young people's perceptions of what theatre is and way theatre is used and valued in society and education.

As we proceed, all partners need to be as knowledgeable as possible regarding these contexts and sensitive to them. The changing location for each partner meeting, the discussion and contributions of the experts and the case studies provide a information regarding these areas.



Having said this, we must also consider some factors which are common to all young people and are not necessarily related to visual impairment. Not all young people engage with their learning and with cultural activity in the same way. Young people between the ages of 12-17 can sometimes feel awkward, unconfident, emotional and sensitive. This has nothing to do with their visual condition but is part of the nature of growing up. We must be conscious of their stage of development, as well as their visual impairment, and their cultural context when as theatre practitioners we consider strategies for engaging them.





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1. The psychological point of view of the visual impairment situation

It is indisputable that the psychosocial adjustment of the visually impaired people is deeply connected to the issues of confidence and self-esteem that can play a crucial role on their mobility, orientation and mastering of the surrounding space.

Achieving positive psychosocial adjustment to blindness and impaired vision requires education of both the visually impaired and society as a whole. The group of visually impaired members of society is as varied and characteristically heterogeneous as the rest of society. Understanding this could help us to overcome some of the general misunderstandings and misconceptions about the status of visual impairment.

People who are blind or have impaired vision are constantly challenged to adjust to their situation psychologically as well as socially. According to Tuttle (Tuttle, D.W., 1987), adjustment is the process of responding to life's demands and stresses. This adjustment varies considerably from case to case, because the nature of sight-conditions as well as all the variations related to family, level of education, social and economic status is far from uniform and depends on the individual's experiences.

It is important to state that the age of sight loss or impairment has considerable importance on the self-concepts developed by the affected people. Thus for example, even if it may seem incomprehensible at first hearing, it makes perfect sense that some congenitally blind youths consider themselves lucky to be born this way instead of losing their sight later on in life. Having no idea what it actually means to be able to see gives them the feeling that they are not missing something. Thus it appears that the status of being congenitally blind is much easier to come to terms with (Morse, 1983; Warren, 1984). After doing an inquiry under the VISION project with participating children in Sofia, one of them, who lost sight due to severe glaucoma, mentioned that there is nothing more desired in life than getting back the lost vision. Even if we should never allow ourselves to over generalize such a statement, because there most certainly will be differences in the adaptation of each child, congenital blindness does have the effect of almost automatically forcing acceptance of the condition, which is not



the case when impairment happens later in life. This usually brings about traumatic and depressive consequences and requires a certain period for accommodation. In order to facilitate the process of developing a positive self-concept, social classifications should be considered really seriously. We are all social beasts and our sense of identity is greatly dependent on the way that the others perceive us. We control and organize our actions on the basis of constant feedback from our surroundings - the family, the community, our circle of friends. This feedback provides checks on our behavior and allows corrections. Thus, society should be educated about cases of visual impairment where the person can be blind or visually impaired even if he/she does not wear eyeglasses, a white cane, his/her eyes appear normal and there are no expressed blindisms or mannerisms. Lack of sufficient information concerning this could lead to prejudice, mistrust and even accusation from both teachers and classmates. When a person in a similar situation actually makes it in life, successfully finishes education and gets a job due to his/her strong belief in the self, this is rather an exception than a rule, because more fail if they miss on support and understanding.

False societal concepts are also related to the nature of the limitations imposed by visual impairment. Vision can be hampered in many different ways, obstructing certain actions and surprisingly allowing others, which are sometimes considered as impossible by the rest of the society. For example loss to the lower half of the visual field usually manifests in mobility difficulties but does not mean that the individual cannot watch television or work with a computer. Loss to the right field is associated with difficulties in reading (since left to right eye scanning is required in western countries) but does not mean a lack of independence in terms of mobility or spatial awareness. Lack of understanding of these particularities often places a sign of equality between low vision and total blindness or leads to suppositions, which can greatly discredit the general abilities of the affected person.



“The manner in which people are labeled and classified can have important implications in their social and personal lives. Limit is related to vision not to behavior in general.” (Schinazi, V. R., 2007)

Understanding the various situations and conditions of partial loss of vision, compared to blindness, which is considered as the exact contrast to seeing, can be really challenging and requires a lot of attention and flexibility on behalf of society.

“An incorrect classification imposes an inaccurate reality. People with residual vision are usually labeled as blind and many times act or convince themselves that they are blind.” (Schinazi, V. R., 2007).

Thus for example the lack of proper understanding of a certain condition can mislead the parents of affected children to undertake educational strategies that fail to take advantage of residual vision. It could also lead to overprotecting or over caring, which robs the child from its independence and potential for development.

An important aspect of psychosocial adjustment to life in a world, which is dominated by visual images, is the development of a positive self-concept. Lack of adjustment in cases of gradual or immediate loss of vision can lead to anxiety, the inability to study or work, and avoidance. Self-conceptualization can be defined as a set of attitudes, which individuals develop and maintain about themselves, which help them shape their identity, the image of themselves, and their self-esteem. The self-concept is what formulates our expectations and shapes our behavior, which inevitably affects our social and professional lives. Having a positive self-concept is a prerequisite for coping with and overcoming the consequences of a disability. It creates a feeling of satisfaction with oneself and with life in general and generates positive views for the future and one’s role in society.

Individuals accept their disability in differ ways. Sometimes the inability to cope leaves the individuals feeling isolated from the general society or isolating themselves, because they have



the feeling of inability to fit or that they are pitied by others. Negative self-concepts are usually associated with isolation, depression and mental and health problems (López-Justicia, 2006).

Researches have given very different results concerning the self-concept of the blind or visually impaired: according to some there are no significant differences between the blind and the sighted, while others found that the blind tend to view themselves extremely negatively and that the partially sighted have a greater degree of anxiety, insecurity and loneliness, expressing feelings of isolation and unfairness. In some cases people with low-vision even tend to reject services that would be beneficial for them only because they do not want to be labeled.

One of the key components of self-concept is self-esteem since it relates to the value that a person places on his/her own characteristics, skills, abilities and qualities (Griffin-Shirley & Nes, 2005). To a great extent self-esteem is built on the feedback received from the surrounding environment. The active involvement of friends, counselors, tutors as guides and role models can play a significant role for the formation of good self-esteem that is resistant and supports the person in his/her perseverance towards success, no matter the form in which success is envisaged.

Here below we will present some of the observations already made by involved psychologists in the VISION project. The experts from the Bulgarian team have already been presented in the first national report, developed under the project. However, we have so far not presented the psychologist from the Italian side – Mrs. Valentina Filingeri – who works as a psychologist at the local office of Palermo of Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti (Italian Union of Visually impaired people). She has accumulated enormous experience working there since 2005. Her main role in the establishment consists of supporting and coordinating the activities undertaken in favor of blind and partially sighted people and also of people with multiple disabilities. The “Union” Valentina is mainly employed at offers to the visually impaired people those activities that aim to favor and encourage autonomy and integration.

The **group under observation in Italy** participates in various forms of afterschool activities. Some of these activities are: psycho-mobility, speech therapy, art therapy, music therapy,



dance and movement and, for those who have already left school, support for University students.

The VISION proposal was at first accepted with some hesitations, but the project fully responds to the needs that the users show in everyday life and they were all very pleased to meet their performance arts tutors - Casimiro Alaimo and Stefania Vitale.

Once the Italian V.I. young people met Casimiro and Stefania, who presented the project and its objectives, they all welcomed the idea of putting themselves to the test working through theatre.

The working group in Palermo is formed by 10 young people of the age bracket 11-17, plus other children and young people - a little older and a little younger - that have joined the group because they have expressed a spontaneous interest in theatre.

The main issue, which arose from the first activities conducted by theatre experts working for the VISION project Stefania and Casimiro, for example during presentations in circle time etc., is the *lack of affection*, which often occurs along with the visual impairment.

This implies that visually impaired young people *tend to close in on themselves, or as an alternative they unknowingly and unintentionally diffuse any emotion they feel, not managing to express what they feel* in the right way. By the right way is meant the way they would really like to express them.

Their daily life is more schematized than usual. It is regularly marked by precise schemes, extremely fixed patterns, which do not allow them to be open minded.

If they find themselves out of those fixed patterns they will be lost. If you do not give them the strategies to explore something new, they will never move from their position. They tend to live everything automatically. Consequently, to be able to assume other roles is fundamental to think out of the box and break out of their own established schemes.

Activities have been monitored using an observation form of the functional context of skills and autonomy of every single participant. The Italian team started from an initial observation of the group and continued with two itinere checks. The obtained results are affected by the

participants' social life (most of all family and school) and of course by their visual impairment and also by the period of their life, in which the pathology has developed.

In the ongoing monitoring the Italian team noticed many improvements in the motor skills, linguistic and relational skills and in the socialization ability. In particular, their self perception as well as the perception of their body scheme and of the environment around them has improved greatly, and also their fine motor skills and coordination abilities have been enhanced.

Another important issue we need to underline is the kids' *initial difficulty in communicating their own discomfort*. This implies that they don't usually manage to be active and enterprising in a relationship and do not even manage to ask for help. After only a couple of exercises during the theatre workshop, many of them changed their attitude completely. That is exactly what happened to Manuel, a partially sighted 16-year-old, a very introvert boy, who finally managed to express himself in a spontaneous way, with genuine interest and to communicate his emotions and feelings.

The workshops are really of great help for all Italian visually impaired young people, they are quickly changing their attitude and behavior and are becoming more open, creative, self-assured and proactive day by day. They are more willing to communicate and share their emotions, especially those they associate with acceptance of their disease.

In the social autonomy context, many of the kids taking part in the Vision project, revealed some difficulties in the spatial orientation, the perception of the others and proximity. The Italian team will keep working on these issues, although they have already observed some improvements. Working with the group has given rise to a greater awareness of the individual, the theatre workshop final objectives are to raise the level of self esteem and emotion regulation and the participants are clearly approaching the goal.

Bulgaria has two groups of young visually impaired participants – one in Sofia and one in Veliko Tarnovo. As a result from the well focused and scheduled work with the kids from the



project target group, during the period January-June the BG teams are witnessing quality results in their development in the following directions:

1. **Cognitive skills** – improved level of the perception (how they acquire and assimilate information) as well as improved presentation skills and qualities, including good attention and concentration, amount and contents of the information offered and accepted/assimilated, as well as building of a complete understanding about certain objects and phenomena from the surrounding environment.
2. **Emotions and behavior** – experience for imposing quality control on the emotions and their expressions. For both BG groups gaining self-control was demonstrated as an issue for the children at the beginning. They all gradually started to master their reactions in order to react adequately in various situations.
3. **Linguistic and speech development and communicative skills** – they are developing their oral communication skills, as a tool for social interaction. If in the beginning they were expressing themselves with as few words as possible, by the end of the period they opened up and began experiencing freer manners of communication and using a greater scope of words and expressions when they “painted” their emotions and thoughts.
4. **Social skills** – they develop a good concept about the nature of feelings and emotions – pain, joy, sadness, happiness and are beginning to initiate their interaction within the group without prior arrangements. This is particularly important for the group in Veliko Tarnovo, which comprises of children from various homes and institutions in the area. The group of children in Sofia is rather homogenous, they come from one and the same school environment.
5. **Artistic skills** – elementary music and art culture is being formed and it is expressed in various activities such as researching short literary texts, correctives for beautiful and ugly, materials and theater techniques, mastering certain basic drawing techniques – using real drawing tools in Tarnovo as well as their own bodies (particularly used in Sofia where the children are helped to make postures, faces, body sculptures, which is body art/painting).



The work with the children from the target group in Veliko Tarnovo within the period (Jan-June 2015) is marked by good participation in the groups and high ability to adapt of the children. It is particularly important to specify that the initiative for involvement of volunteers was accepted extremely positively. These are students from the local Math and Science highschool in Veliko Tarnovo, the American college “Arkus”, students from the arts school “Emilian Stanev” as well as students from the Veliko Tarnovo University. All volunteers created a plan of their own, following the agenda of the project and envisaged that during the summer there could be many more meetings in order for greater results to be achieved. The volunteers joined their ideas, they searched and they exchanged information about theatre types, theatre techniques and complete performances. They allocated the work among themselves with exceptional precision and implemented it with remarkable interest.

The parents’ initiative to join events with greater scope and more intense schedules was accepted also with great interest. It was the parents’ decision to support the future implementation of the project, related to the creation of costumes, decors or participation in the conducting of various initiatives.

As experts in this project we believed that the involvement of volunteers in the activities would further motivate the children. And we were proven right! After enjoying this enormous success, we decided to include in the project also peers of the participating visually impaired children. This again proved to be accepted with great interest. The hall was filling with children, who were full of energy and positivism. They were all ready to help, they got into roles, they gave ideas, they demonstrated and kept smiling.

The workshops turned into an interactive artistic process, which will lead to the creation of a performance, tied to a specific field. The people from the audience will go through a trip they have never been on. They will enjoy the achievements of the visually impaired participants and will encounter experiences, which are an intense sensual mixture of the so called sense portals – audible experiences, touch experiences, smell experiences, visual and flavor experiences/.

It is not easy to talk or write about the workshops and the activities under the project – they should best be lived, experienced. It goes in the shape of contemporary theatre, which

combines theatre, psychology, sociology, drawing, scenography and many other artistic forms. During this sensual voyage we are diminishing the use of two of the things we use most in our daily lives – speech and vision, in order to intensify our hearing, sense of smell and touch as well as the tools for communication.

The work taking place in Sofia during the same period involves two theatre experts and representatives of the local partner organizations – FDCBPCS and the school for v.i. children “Louis Braille”. Considering the need of the children for regular communication as well as the expressed need and desire for constant work on behalf of the theatre experts – the meetings have been taking place every Friday (except on national and school holidays) in two groups and for 2 hours with each group. The reasons for separating the children in two groups are related to the fact that some live in the school and for them it is easier to attend at a later hour, while others, who go home after 3,30 pm, needed an earlier time for the workshops. Another reason is that the two groups involve more than 10 children (14-15). The work with the children in Sofia has been going in an uninterrupted manner and the involved adults (professionals) have done everything in their power to bring theatre to their everyday life, including via taking the group twice to playback theatre performances in Sofia and bringing Shakespeare in the school with the play “Midsummer night’s dream”, performed by peers on stage in the school for the entire local v.i. community – both children and teachers. Four of the participating children, together with one volunteer working under the project, created a dance miniature, which was presented before the entire school and the entire VISION community.

Some of the results already observed are:

- through their need to communicate, express their needs and feelings, make contact, the participants develop their possibilities to improve their linguistic (speech) and communicative skills;
- through their need to use adequately the various theater techniques presented, to participate in musical and dance exercises, to receive a positive evaluation and attention, the



participants also develop their potential skills for self-expression through the expression instruments of performance arts.

- through their need to participate in suitable theatrical acts, they develop their potential ability to improve the gross motor movements and coordination.

Considering the potential capacities and needs the VISION teams set the following objectives: improving the speech and communicative skills through proper articulation, development of oral speech, as a tool for social interaction and full participation in the communication process; enriching the knowledge about various types of arts; developing skills and habits for handling the requirements of the daily routine. For the achievement of quality results contributed the implementation of the following tasks and games:

- participation in various sound-imitating games
- environment rich in speech simulations
- enriching the active dictionary;
- participating in storyline and role-play exercises;
- mastering practical skills for presentation in various situations;
- to accept the others around them as partners in communication;

When working with the target group kids the following methods were used - exemplary (monitoring and demonstrations), practical (repetitions and exercising), oral (explanations) and role-plays (role games, situational games and dramatizations). The best quality results were achieved through the use of the game (play) methods, which appeared to be a suitable expression tool in a small group – to share your attitude towards a certain issue with an objective. Due to the fact that the child is placed in a real or imaginary environment (plot), he/she creates a situation, which allows him/her to be “someone else”, to share emotions, to use aspects from real life, to reproduce certain scenarios in the form of a dialogue or movements. By using these methods the kids understand how the other feel and react, they form skills for adequate reactions to certain situations, the activities build the character and



the kids adopt values, form their skills for work in a team and for a more thorough and extensive communication.

Here are some criteria for evaluation of the progress of the groups from the psychological point of view.

Cognitive development of the kids: improved qualities of the senses; enriched concepts about the surrounding environment, improved verbal memory, improved mechanical memory, increased concentration of attention and higher volume of the active attention and concentration, the target group has improved the level of their perceptive and presentation skills, it is able to focus and to assimilate a larger volume of information and thus acquire a notion about certain objects and phenomena from the surrounding environment.

Linguistic and speech development and communicative skills: enrichment of the active dictionary, articulation techniques, including intonation, tempo and timber of the voice.

Emotional status and behavior: mastered social norms of behavior; level of emotional control and self-control; contacts and relationships in the group; building a circle of friends; joining group exercises and activities.



2. The visual impairment situation from the tyflopedagogical perspective

When speaking of delivering education and training to visually impaired children, there are some general statements, which are relatively fixed regardless of their nationality. One of these fixed requirements is that training, regardless of setting, is provided by professionals, who are thoroughly prepared and qualified to teach visually impaired students. The skills and knowledge needed by these educators have to cover three classifications: a foundation in regular education, including methodology in teaching reading, mathematics, and other scientific subjects; possessing skills for the application of techniques for curriculum adaptation for visual learning experiences so that the concepts taught remain the same with adapted teaching methodology and materials; competences for assessing skills and delivering instruction in specific academic areas, providing career education, specialized areas of independent living skills and last but not least - social skills and competences (2).

Another important unique need area, which is shared by visually impaired children, is orientation and mobility. The students must be offered educational programs of appropriate frequency and duration.

We should keep into consideration that due to the low incidence of visual impairments, many students and adults have too rarely or even never had the chance to communicate with a person who has limited or no vision. Hence, even though people want to be helpful, they often have no clear idea of how and what to do. Some do nothing, while others do too much, robbing the child from its abilities to be independent. This is why in order to be assistive, professionals, peers, and parents must have a realistic picture of what the student can do and of course about those situations in which help is really needed.

These general statements need to be accompanied by some additional clarifications concerning the challenges in teaching visually impaired children and which is equally important – preparing them for an independent and fulfilling life, because psychological and emotional orientation and mobility is as important as physical orientation and mobility.



The process of developing the part that follows called for a common effort on behalf of the BG and UK tyfopedagogists involved in the project. Following an online discussion on the specifics of education of visually impaired children and the level of their social integration within each respective country, on the basis of a proposal from the UK colleagues, a part of this section has been elaborated in the form of an interview, giving insight into what and how is taking place in two countries that are placed at the two opposite extremes of the chart, focusing on the care for, support and inclusion of v.i. people.

The first question, formulated for the purpose of bringing mutual clarity, was **“What is the context of VI education in your own country?”**

Feedback concerning BG: There are several basic concepts in the education of visually impaired children in Bulgaria. First of all, there is a need for acquisition of enough social and everyday skills that would result in successful social integration. Another important facet is the academic education of visually impaired children, which should be corresponding to the one that children at the same age obtain in the other schools.

The specialized schools in BG, in which visually impaired children receive education uses the same program of studies as any other school. Children with vision, which is lower than 0,2 of the better seeing eye with correction and depending on the diagnose of the condition. In some cases the visual impairment is accompanies by additional psycho-motor or intellectual deficits. The difference in BG, compared to other countries, comes with the provision of a protected environment for the blind and visually impaired students, as well as specialized equipment and well trained specialists that are not available in other schools. Especially important advantage is the early professional orientation and the preparation for selecting a suitable professional realization.

Feedback concerning Wales & the UK: In Wales there are about 1600 children and young people receiving specialist (visual impairment) support for their education. The prevalence rate of visual impairment is roughly 2 per 1000 children (0.2%). The responsibility for their



education lies with the education departments of the local authorities – the country is divided into 22 local authority areas.

About 70% of children with visual impairments attend mainstream schools with their sighted peers. They receive support from specialist teachers who have completed a post-graduate course specifically in teaching visually impaired learners, but this varies according to their levels of need. Most children would use computer software to enable them to access lessons in schools. They may also have a personal assistant in lessons where they require extra support. Specialist teachers monitor their progress, advise schools on how to meet their needs and provide extra tuition in Braille, using low vision devices (magnifiers), touch typing etc. Some children receive specialist tuition in mobility and daily living skills from a mobility officer or habilitation officer. Unfortunately not all local authority areas provide this support.

The remaining 30% of children would have additional special needs or multiple disabilities and would find it too difficult to learn in a mainstream environment. They would either attend local special schools, where staff are trained to teach learners with a range of disabilities). Very few learners would be educated at specialist residential schools in England.

Wales has autonomy from England in terms of how it provides education for children and young people. There is currently new legislation being written, which aims to provide better support for learners with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). This should be consulted on and passed into law within the next 12 months.

The responses, concerning the second question **“What are the barriers and obstacles to learning for V.I. young people?”** from BG, are:

- Overprotection from parents
- Lack of self-dependency in simple everyday activities and situations
- Difficulties in forming of abstract ideas and concepts in the environment – streets, public transport, parks and others due to the inaccessible environment – this is a country-



specification, which still relates to Bulgarian reality, even if some progress has been made in this direction.

- Behavior issues in an unfamiliar environment.
- Poor mobility, often attended by lack of initiative in acquainting with new forms, objects and so on.
- Fear of animals and refusal of contact.
- There are very serious gaps in the education of students studying in Secondary schools. There are even cases with blind children with no intellectual deficits that are left illiterate until the 5th grade. In the same relation we can see a very serious problem with the mass integration, which is observed in Bulgaria, and consists of the overprotective and pitying behavior of the teachers, who happen to have a visually impaired child in their class. The rest of the children become either assistants of the visually impaired child or just the opposite – reject him/her completely and refuse any contact. Apparent is the isolation of the child from the social group.

The response from Wales outlines very different difficulties:

- Low expectations are a key obstacle to learning. This can be from the non-specialist teachers working with them, the family and from the young person themselves.
- Lack of social and independence skills mean that the experiences of VI young people can be restricted. This includes the ability to organize themselves and also the inability to travel independently where mobility training is not available.
- Inclusion in all aspects of school life, including educational visits outside of the school environment and in social opportunities outside of the classroom (e.g. break times, extra-curricular opportunities such as participation in after school activities). These are often hampered as learners rely on taxis or school transport to transport them between home and school).



The efforts, which are exerted for overcoming barriers in BG are as follows:

- Educational seminars with parents for lessening overprotection. Lessons observed by the parents and with the help of interactive methods.
- Demanding co-operation of the public institutions on the implementation of lessons with the children for the purpose of teaching them about the different kinds of transport and facilitation for disabled people.
- Consultations with civil engineers who are responsible for the planning and building of infrastructure.
- Taking the children out in different places – theatre, cinema, pastry shops, supermarkets, trade centres, public buildings, parks and so on.

The efforts in Wales for neutralizing the local observed obstacles and difficulties, are formulated as follows:

- Where possible, use of role models (people with V.I. who have been successful) to demonstrate what can be achieved. Celebrating their success.
- Voluntary sector organisations (eg. Royal National Institute for the Blind / Blind Children UK) work with parents and families to engage them when the child is young so that appropriate training is available on parenting skills and expectations are raised. They also lobby and campaign at National and Local Government levels where services for VI learners are lacking.
- Parent networks enable parents to meet and share their own experiences and ideas.
- Organisations such as UCAN Productions work with young people to strengthen their social skills and self-concepts, empowering them to take control of their own lives and aspirations.

The most important **challenge to working with visually impaired young people** in Bulgaria from the point of view of the teacher is to overcome the prejudice of the potential of a visually impaired child. The teacher's next task is to find a way to cope with the overprotection of the



parents. There is always the need to help the colleges from the other schools where visually impaired children are integrated, so they could work more adequately with them and according to their potentials.

The challenges in Wales are only to some extent similar to those shared by the Bulgarian educators. There is a need to raise the expectations of teachers, family, society and the individual. Similarities stop there, but not because the Welsh challenges to follow do not exist in Bulgaria. The reason is because some of them have not even been recognized yet, due to the necessity for much more basic problems to be resolved. The Welsh colleagues continue with sharing that keeping pace with technology and the ways, in which technology can be used to the advantage of visually impaired young people, is a challenge for them. They also consider the need to promote team-work and a multi agency approach to ensure that the visually impaired young people acquire all the skills they need for life and independence (not just a good education). And another challenge, specific to Wales to also easy to spot in other EU regions, is related to the geography of the area. Wales is a very rural country and the transportation links are not very good. Getting groups of v.i. young people together can therefore be an expensive and time-consuming challenge. This is not far from Bulgarian reality however, which does not enforce all its limitations due to the mere fact that v.i. children are relatively organized in several schools, which provide to those who live outside the respective city boarding house. The family of a girl from the group in Sofia lives in a far away rural region. Getting to and back from school for her is a challenge. Sometimes the social services are sent by the vice-headmaster to her family in order to get her and bring her to school. The family is not able to guarantee her transportation every time and sometimes, when she gets back home for vacations, the family sometimes “forgets” to send her back to the school.

When asked “**What does a teacher working with VI students need to consider?**” the Welsh and Bulgarian teachers respond that first and foremost the teacher needs to remember that they are dealing with learners ... and secondly that these learners cannot see. They are responsible for the education of the visually impaired child in exactly the same way as they are



for all the other children in the class. There is more to a visually impaired child than just an eye condition. All children (VI children included) have their own unique strengths, psychological characteristics and challenges. Even in homogenous classes of visually impaired children, as is the case in Bulgaria, the stages of psychological and locomotion development and the rates with which the students learn one or other abstract definition should also be taken into consideration. The presence or the lack of another sensory deficit or physiological damage is also important to consider. It is necessary also to understand that individual work is needed to a much greater extent than group work. Slower rate of work is observed because of the specifics of partial vision in case the child can use his/her vision as well as due to the specifics of the work with Braille – all these additional factors influence the work of the child as well as the work of the teacher. The teacher should take this in mind in order to guarantee successful obtaining of new knowledge. Another thing to keep in mind is that every lesson containing academic knowledge should be closely related to everyday practice and the curriculum should contain subjects like daily living skills, orientation and mobility and visual assistance.

The colleagues from Wales recommend that the child should be spoken with, in order for an understanding how they feel and what they need. The Welsh colleagues also remind that VI learners learn differently because they cannot learn incidentally by what they see happening around them. They learn primarily through what they hear or read and through what they experience. They will need to have things explained to them.

Other important things that teachers of v.i. students need to consider are:

- that most concepts are very visual (up / down / here / there / behind / in-front) and these need to be taught;
- that levels of sight will vary depending on how tired the learner is, whether they are on medication and this has changed, whether or not they are ill etc. Things that they see in the morning, when not tired, may not be seen in the same way at the end of the afternoon when they are tired (3);



- That they will not know you are talking to them unless you use their name – always to use their name before issuing any instructions they need to follow;
- That it will take them longer to do things than it will their sighted peers – so the amount of work expected (though not the level of difficulty) may need to be less or the time devoted to a written test for example should be longer for them, thus putting them on par with their sighted peers;
- That they may need their work in Braille / audio / large print or other formats in order to be able to complete it successfully. The reading materials for each course/study attended by v.i. students should be transcribed into Braille or put onto audio tape before classes begin. The reading lists (including texts, handouts, and any other materials v.i. children will be expected to read) should be compiled as early as possible and provided to them for preparation.
- That they need opportunity to practice skills they have learned – both academic, social and independence skills.
- That “the visually impaired children are children first, who happen to have a visual impairment, rather than visual impairments with children attached. Unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, treat them as you would any other student.” (B&D Franson, 2/17/2000).

According to the BG and Welsh teachers some of **the best ways of engaging VI participants with learning are:**

- To make studying fun and to support it with stimulating materials.
- To let them understand the relevance of what they are learning – why are they doing / learning it and to apply in practice what has been learnt.
- To use interactive methods of work.
- To include elements of Development education.



- To include art therapy elements as well as all kinds of arts during the educational process.
- To face the students with achievable tasks in order to simulate their willing to progress, ensuring that they can succeed. Success builds success and small steps may be necessary if a task is to be achieved.
- To provide a variety of contexts for learning – individual tuition, working in a group, being part of a production (e.g. drama).

According to the Bulgarian and Welsh teachers **the best ways to improve the confidence of a VI young person** are:

- Personal example.
- To avoid the old system of “lector-listener” and to replace it with a new one in which the child could be an active participant in the class.
- The teacher has to be a psychologist as well, which means that he must increase his qualification in order to overcome the stereotypes.
- To give them the skills they need to be independent. They should be enabled to become as autonomous as possible. If there is an option of doing something for a student, or helping that student learn to do for him/herself, the latter should be selected. This will not only enable the student to continue to perform important tasks long after leaving the classroom, but it will also build self esteem. For example, it would be better to help a student find a way to read class assignments on his/her own rather than always relying on readers.
- To give them opportunity to succeed and celebrate their achievements when they do.
- To give them the opportunity / supporting them to make choices and to learn how to deal with their mistakes.



- To enable them to contribute / take part / teach other young people.
- To provide emotional support and a safe environment for them to try things out.

Considering how important that **last week of the international part of the workshop** is going to be for the visually impaired participants in the project, its proper planning is of major consideration. The suggestions given are that the children should experience the result of their effort taking the shape of an interactive performance or a short program that could include elements of a performance. They should be provided time to reflect on what has been learned, the journey so far, and to plan for what happens next.

The participant should summarize and present in front of others how the aims of the projects influenced the target group.

Their personal and group successes as well as the success of the project - the sharing of the journey - should be celebrated.

The final question to the Welsh and Bulgarian teachers was **“What do you think is best practice in terms of learning for the VI student, what have you found works well?”** According to the Bulgarian experience there is no ultimate or best method. Everything depends on the aims and the work with the children. An example of good practice in the school for v.i. children “Louis Braille” is the making of relief images added to the lesson in case there is no image that would be in use for the teacher. Interactive methods adapted for visually impaired children are also useful. When considering severe damage of vision or sight loss, a good Braille literacy, which at this stage could be acquired only at a special school in BG, would be of great benefit. Of course, using the resources of the special school – materials and brainpower of teachers in special school – would bring success to other schools and locations, which cater for the learning needs of v.i. students.

The suggestions coming from the Welsh teachers are found on the understanding that every student is unique and it is therefore essential to talk to the student to find out how they learn and what support they need. From here on, after this proper understanding has been



achieved, appropriate learning materials must be available in the format the student needs (Braille / large print / audio / tactile etc.) and in time for the lesson. Sometimes extra tuition is needed to review the lesson and teach new concepts or ideas. Last but not least, it is important to encourage participation of the student in all aspects of learning.



3. *The theatrical point of view of the visual impairment situation*

'What is emphasized in applied drama is its concern

to encourage people to use the experience of participating

in theatre to move beyond what they already know'

(Nicholson, H. 2005)

1. Considerations on the basis of the developed national reports & case studies

Theatre theory and theatre theorists over time have been primarily concerned with performer training, with the transformation of ideas into action for an audience or with the impact theatre has on society. In contrast, our concerns are how to use theatre authentically for a non-theatrical purpose i.e. the development of confident learners. The question we must ask is:

'How can theatre be used to build confidence and develop the visually impaired young people?'

Our research and the experiences we have shared in the national reports have led to the certainty of the indissoluble thread between theatre and self-development; the reference points are, therefore, best taken from the fields of 'Applied Theatre' and 'Drama in Education' (see attached bibliography) which are fundamentally concerned with using theatre to bring about some sort of social and/or personal change.

'Applied theatre operates from a recognition that throughout time theatre has been applied or rendered as a powerful educative tool' (Taylor, P. 2003)

We must, therefore, be mindful that we are not developing a performer training programme for the visually impaired young people. We must also keep them at the heart of the planning



and make sure they are empowered through theatre- this means making them aware of their powers not of their limitations and involving them in the shaping of our program of activities.

Being confident is fundamentally about our ability to make decisions and to interact with other people without fear. In addition it is about being curious, open to new possibilities, to alternatives and learning about the world. It is about feeling empowered to express and communicate our ideas, thoughts and feelings. These are also the qualities that make young people motivated and engaged learners.

'Drama is a means of learning, a means of widening experiences even if we never act in a play or stand upon a stage.' (Heathcote, D. 1982)

If we break down the above definition of confidence we have:

- Decision making
- Interaction
- Curiosity
- Open mindedness
- Empowerment
- Expression- having a voice
- Communication
- Being listened to and being heard

We must now work backwards. If these are the qualities of confidence, then these are the aspects we want to develop through this project in our young visually impaired learners. And the focus of our inquiry must be how do we develop these qualities, these attributes through theatre? How does theatre develop decision making in visually impaired young people? How does it develop interaction? How does it foster curiosity? How can theatre develop open mindedness and empower young people? What theatre activities help us develop our expressive and communication skills?

Our task is to begin to identify the processes that will best create the conditions for the development of these qualities.

2. Considerations on the basis of the children's feedback

The stable relationship the different countries have been maintaining with the young participants has been providential and has been helping us visualize the behaviour and the actions the theatre experts shall embody within the future workshops after the realization of the new method.

By our experience in the various and divergent realities that our partnership bridges, we are now able to identify the principle aspects we need to take care of during the future workshops with the children. We cannot forget that we are dealing with different realities (children and young adults, girls and boys, different countries, different languages, ...) and that implies the necessity of a physical input for a physical output; we cannot rely only on theory and, therefore, the constant contact with children gives us the possibility of understanding the specific social situations. We all should take into consideration the single conditions of our participants and the exercises should be adapted to those situations. Moreover, every young person entails his/her own emotions and reactions and must be considered as a unique case.

Since a possible generalization cannot be stated, we are now outlining the main aspects and the most significant feedback we have received so far from the different nationalities:

- in Bulgaria, the participating v.i. young adults have various interests, but a division between the boys' comments and the girls' comments is preferable: the boys are unanimous that everything can make them happy, they want to be independent and be able to manage the situations themselves without external help; and, when it comes to start the activities, they have always been eager to join. On the other hand, the girls very much rely on their families and believe that the adults are paying attention to them and taking good care of their needs.



They need to be taken care of and those who have older siblings look up to them and try to imitate them. The speed with which they accept and join new activities is slower; they seem more reluctant to jump into the new things than the boys.

Regarding the taking of responsibilities, both sexes consider it is early for them to be too responsible.

- In Italy, among the most significant points, there is a difference between children and young adults on the interests and the short/long term vision of their lives; the older guys, for instance, have clear ideas, want to be fine within the society and want to find a good job; they all love music and many of them study in the musical academy (playing instruments such as piano or even drums). According to the theatre experts in Palermo, their main problem is related to the movement and the fact they do not like disciplines (specially dance) even though, in theatre, movement does not imply a discipline and has to be found within ourself.

- in Wales **consultation** is the key word. They have the greatest experience within our consortium about educating v.i. Children in theatre and affirm that confidence is also about being listened to. That is why they are very conscious of always working in consultation with visually impaired young people. Exercises, activities and projects are always reviewed, evaluated and if necessary adapted. In this way, the young people's interests, responses and feedback always guide UCAN theatre work. This consultation, we believe, is one of the key factors of UCAN's success. The valuing and consideration of the voices of the young people is an important starting point for the building of the young people's confidence. We must, as we develop the shape of this project, keep this in mind and make sure all our decisions are the result of consultation with visually impaired young people. Nothing is more empowering

A Final Shared Outcome

A final shared outcome provides a clear focus for all participants and gives meaning and sense to the work that might otherwise feel like a series of disconnected activities and random



exercises. It also gives the young people a chance to express their ideas and apply their learning and theatre skills.

We have found that a great amount of satisfaction, confidence and learning comes out of this sense of achievement. It is the reward for making and sharing something, which expresses your ideas. It makes you stand taller.

A central area of inquiry or theme should be decided as the focus of the work. This will help to establish this as a learning experience, as well as a theatrical one. The focus or area of inquiry could be quite general or related to the location where we are e.g. the sea OR Travel OR Telling stories etc. Alternatively we could each choose a fairytale or folk tale from our cultures to use as a starting point for theatrical exploration.

3. Considerations on the basis of the theater experts feedback

By our experience as theatre experts and the opportunity to use tools such as Flashmeeting to bridge the distances that (only physically) divide us, we have been able to converse about the situation of Visual Impairment condition related to and on the stage in order to visualize and outline a first draft of activities, the purpose of which is prominent in the achievement of our participants self-esteem. An extremely important element that all stakeholders must take into consideration is that every action has a different result on a different pupil; and since each participant is a unique case it is essential to be patient and be capable of listening to and fostering each personality. Moreover, the positive values that these actions might imply, always have to be balanced with their potential counterpart. It is notable, then, to discourse on the two aspects of the same action that can be associated to the two faces of the same medallion. Only in this way, our approach can be analytic and can prepare those who are in charge of the creation of the method, giving them the necessary material for the establishment of the main pillars the method will be based on.

In UCAN experience, for example, based on a number of projects with sighted and visually impaired young people internationally, the process involves 5 consecutive stages:



1. Ensemble building
2. Skills building
3. Sharing ideas, playing and creating
4. Presenting
5. Reflection and closure

1. Building The Ensemble

"In all the...shows I have taken part in, there has always been an element of 'warming up'...But in reality the function of these exercises is not only warming up but forging a 'group' out of a bunch of people; a sort of 'communion'-if we do something together we become a real group, rather than a mere juxtaposition of individuals." (Boal, A. 2002)

Ensemble Building is probably the most important stage. Interacting and working well with others is at the heart of confidence. Our confidence comes from our ability to feel comfortable and equal with others.

Theatre has a great capacity to build this sense of ensemble as collaboration and the collective are fundamental to theatre. This is the part of the process where trust, safety and collaboration is built, step by step. It is worth investing a lot of time doing this.

There are a variety of theatre games and exercises designed to create the sense of the collective, of being a community. At the same time this creates a sense of trust and above all develops a sense of safety for the participants so that they are comfortable with themselves and with each other.

Theatre games and activities fall into the following categories:

- Name games
- Energisers
- Spatial exercises



- Focus exercises
- Teamwork
- Imaginative exercises
- Body work
- Voice work

Participants should work in pairs, in small groups and as a whole group.

2. Skills Building- Body and Voice

The way we hold and control our body and our movement is often an indicator of confidence. This is also true of the way we use our voice, taking into consideration tone, articulation, volume and breathing.

Theatre, through its long tradition of performer training, has a wide range of physical and vocal exercises that can be used to develop body, movement and voice. We recommend that these are used to build the young people's physical and vocal qualities and give them strategies for relaxation, presenting themselves and speaking with confidence.

3. Expressive Skills And Creativity

Theatre is a form of expression, a way of communicating ideas and feelings. We recommend that the participants are introduced to exercises, activities and forms which are accessible and which will give them a framework to express and share their ideas e.g. still pictures/ tableaux, bamboo stick work, improvisation, storytelling etc.



4. Presentation

A final sharing, this can be informal and can simply be presenting to each other, gives a sense of closure and also provides a common purpose that we are all working towards. It gives the young people an opportunity to share their ideas and work with each other, as well as an opportunity to apply their skills and learning. It builds confidence and a sense of achievement. This is where confidence is often observed. The final presentation should be short (5-15 mins) and on the last day.

Some other things to consider

Based on our theatre work with visually impaired young people we also recommend the following:

- Safety of the participants is paramount. All necessary safeguarding and insurance requirements should be in place.
- Time should be set aside before activities start to allow the participants to 'explore' the space. Also it's a good idea to 'narrate' the surroundings explaining where doors, windows and furniture are. It would also be a good idea to run theatre exercises that deal with spatial awareness and the body in space.
- The use of language is important and exercises should be adapted or developed so that the use of language and the instructions are appropriate.
- That the program of activities is shaped in **consultation** with the visually impaired young people. This is an area that UCAN values very highly and believes it is important not to speak on behalf of the visually impaired but to involve them in the process. As these young people live with sight loss all the time, their opinions about activities should be valued. It is important to remember that they are the 'experts' in their own eye conditions.
- We consider this a wonderful opportunity for visually impaired young people from different backgrounds and cultures to come together and learn new skills and most importantly make



new friends so as well as ensemble building exercises we recommend social time is built in to the schedule. There should also be some sort of cultural activity related to the location that we can then explore theatrically.

- In our experience, many visually impaired young people tire quickly, it is important to take frequent rests and initially begin with workshops that last no longer than 90 minutes.

These effective stages have been a great topic of discussion among the theatre experts who are now favourable to combine the Welsh experience with the Italian one which is based on different (yet all significant) concepts:

1. IMAGINATIVE SPACE

The creation of an “imaginative space” and its contextualization during the action give the participants the possibility of visualizing shapes and colours they cannot properly see.

That would be the first step; by the continuation of the exercise they have the chance to gain strength in visualizing by other senses all the rest they might seek to create a cognitive status of things they imagine or talk about (for instance a rose, how it is tactilely made, what the colour is and what the smell, if it is open or closed, the process of its life from blooming to death, and so on).

This enables them to have an interface with reality, an imaginative experience of things that will be internalized for a greater sense: how you “see”, how you could be a rose; are you a delicate colour? Is the rose sensitive? Are you as sensitive as the rose? Why does it have thorns? Do you have thorns? Why do you?

By opening a similar method, we let participants flow in a stream that triggers a new typology of curiosity regarding things in your environment that gives you a better consciousness/cognition of how you use to live them and how much more you may live them.



Outlining the uniqueness of each individual, a smell is not only a smell, it transmits you some things, it communicates you emotions that you learn to recognize in yourself acquiring a better comprehension of you are.

This could lead to further exercises such as the “imaginative movement” (sticking with the rose, how it would move or grow, how it differs from another flower, ...) and to the personal motor development for a better cognition of the diverse possibilities of moving your body.

The next step (there is no final step in knowing yourself) walks away from the individual exercise to finally meet and boost the interactions between the participants who might also feel free to convey their personal emotions.

At the end of the session we shall see the magic of a context, a common space of creative energies where infinite peculiarities exist: every participant, by describing the rose, gives an individual contribute to the experience he/she just lives, shows the emotions he/she embraced and imports new possibilities into a context that everyone shared.

2. SENSORY EXERCISES

Sensory means bringing back to memory (and facilitating the access) a smell, a taste, a shape, a peculiarity that you find and take from your life experience. It enables to sharpen the senses, bringing them to light, and keep a tactile, olfactory, auditory and gustatory contact which is further careful, steady and closer to reality, enabling to better register and better feel the things you live.

Referencing Uta Hagen, “The *five sensory organs* (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin) *are our receptors of external stimuli*. The more “sensitive” we are, the more intensely we respond to the stimuli that induce in us everything from spiritual ecstasy to excruciating pain - because the *physical* responses evoked by these stimuli are, of course, accompanied by *psychological* ones.” (Hagen, U., 1991, p. 75). The recognition of our senses is easy when the reception is



extreme (hot, cold, salty, spicy, loud, screechy, ...) but most of the time our sensations stay “average” and remain unexplored. It is in this circumstance that the sensory exercises acquire their real value.

Observe how you respond to these stimuli. Observe your physical and psychological responses to the weather, the light, the humidity when you open or shut the window at night or in the morning. Note how strongly they can influence your ensuing behaviour. *Anything* dormant that can be awakened by attention to the sensory process will help give meaning to what you are capable of receiving.” (Hagen, U., 1991, p. 76)

Concentration permits to recognize and train your senses and the capacity of **your personal** contact with things. This exercise help realize how much we are losing in our everyday life since habitude makes us materially distracted and not totally present in what we do, not totally conscious of what we live.

It makes us understand that everything, which is related to senses has a profound relation with interiority, with how you internalize the object or the act and the emotions they communicate to **you**. The following step is the affective and emotional memory.

The sensory journey proposed by Michael Margotta, for instance, teacher who practiced his profession at the actor's studio in New York for several years, provides different exercises including the **breakfast** (the very first exercise in fact in this context) that triggers the senses to turn on the emotional memory.

In this exercise, those who opens their sensoriality often face emotions that drag into the world of memories and allow you to pick up from the past far away memories such us when breakfast still represented a value; images, smells, tastes or touches materialize at that moment, and the exercise (that you usually deal with your eyes closed) becomes cause for memory retrieval of memory sections that seemed forgotten forever.



“Therefore, the five senses are the avenues of our psychological as well as of our physical perceptions. They are the avenues to our body, and to our mind and soul.” (Hagen, U., 1991, p. 84)

3. ROLEPLAYING and IMPROVISATION

Viola Spolin¹ has created a method based on the WHERE, WHO, WHAT, where the peculiarity of the role (whatever character, person, entity) is grounded on three questions: where are you? Who are you? What are you doing? We may introduce an example; I am a farmer looking at the flock of sheep in this stunning landscape. Now the context has been created I can develop the role: how a farmer looks at his flock of sheep, what his thoughts are, how he is dressed, he might have a hat for the sun, maybe a straw between his teeth, he might be recumbent on a rock, he might be hungry or thirsty. With the three initial magical words we are able to create a series of exercises based on imagination where improvisation and creativity entail an evolution of the role of character whose development and experience of personality helps the one who imports emotions and movements in his/her daily life for he will be using those experiences and temperaments to dealing with situations in real life. That is because you go further into deep and the character development triggers the development of yourself and **yourself in that character, in that context** that makes you aware of how human beings behave in life. Luigi Pirandello², in his novel *Uno, nessuno e centomila* (One, no one and one hundred thousands) brings to light how all humans contextualize in their daily life and make an unconscious analysis of situations and persons we need to deal with. Theatre

¹ Viola Spolin (<http://www.spolin.com/>) is the internationally recognized originator of Theatre Games - the basis of improvisation theatre. Her work is recognized by many sectors of society outside the theatrical circle. It is a respected and cherished tool for directors, educators and psychologists and has benefited many, in their everyday lives, who have been exposed to it.

² Luigi Pirandello (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/461518/Luigi-Pirandello>) is an Italian playwright, novelist, and short-story writer, winner of the 1934 Nobel Prize for Literature. With his invention of the “theatre within the theatre” in the play *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921; Six Characters in Search of an Author), he became an important innovator in modern drama.



activities enable us to originate a work on the awareness of how people are and behave in diverse contexts of life letting us build a stable assurance on our capabilities of interaction.

Actually, this experience and everything you may live within the theatre magic is meant to have you find your own **neutrality**, the “yourself” that shows his natural nudity with no fear. ***Because (you are) conscious (of who you are).***

The importance of these activities does not halt at their implementation during the workshop, but encounters its real value once the implementer walks out from the safeness of the theatre (experience without consequences) and faces real life: his/her new reaction to life, due to the reborn sensitivity, is supported by the words of Hagen who states: “Open your senses, no matter how painful it may be. Doing so will heighten your sensitivities, which are an integral part of the actor’s talent. It will also increase your understanding of the world in which you live and may even induce compassionate actions in your daily life” (Hagen, U., 1991, p. 75)

In conclusion, even though the times are premature, the synergy between our theatre experiences and the question “**how do we become confident learner through theatre?**” have enabled us to cater the ground concept on which the future report on the creation of the V.I.S.I.ON method might be based: converging imagination into creativity, a condition for a greater awareness.



4. *Points of intersection and general conclusions for the grounds of the*

V.I.S.I.ON method

Access is a key element of inclusion, which calls for much more than a simple placement in a particular setting. The connection between access and inclusion may not be immediately obvious to those who are unfamiliar with the educational and social impact of a vision loss. Placing a visually impaired student in a regular classroom does not as a rule provide access and the student is not included by default. A visually impaired student, who does not have access to physical and social information due to his/her condition, is not included, no matter what the physical setting he/she is placed in. Students with visual impairments will only be included if their unique educational needs for access are addressed by specially trained personnel in appropriate environments and with equal access to the curricula through appropriate specialized books, materials and equipment.

It is not possible to meet the unique educational needs of all visually impaired students within a single environment. Identifying and meeting these needs is of major importance as is the consideration that these needs vary, depending on the age and development of the student. Therefore, services provided will also have to vary. There are extensive periods of time for most students for beginning Braille reading, broadening of orientation and mobility skills, career orientation, social and independent living skills. During these periods the children need to be supported by adequately trained staff.

Children and young people with visual impairment need to have enough opportunities to practice the skills, which would allow them to gather information about themselves, about their environment and about people's feelings. However, considering that they have limited visual access to their surrounding, as well as fewer and sometimes less consistent experiences, they are prone to needing more time to achieve a sufficiently broad range of experiences. Because of these limitations, visually impaired children often face socio-cognitive difficulties.



In order to provide visually impaired children with opportunities to develop and master their social competences, a simple interaction with others would prove insufficient and inadequate. Theatre and performance arts are exactly the type of social interaction that maximizes social development.

“It is important that adults’ view of good interaction is not based on a lack of physical or verbal abuse, but rather than on the presence of positive social interaction (MacCuspie, P. A., 1992).”

Children, who are socially competent, in addition to the positive self-concept, self-esteem and confidence, possess mastery of a wider range of strategies to gain group entry, which is of major importance for the human society, formed by “social individuals” (Roe, J., 2008). In order to achieve social competence, children need to be able to interpret situations correctly and to understand others’ feelings, interests and points of view. They need to be able to put themselves in the position of the other, to be compassionate, appreciative and supportive and at the same time – fully aware of themselves as independent and empowered individuals.

Considering how subtle some the behavioral specifics are, the ability to see can be considered as a strong advantage. Children with impaired vision can use other clues and tools, most of which they can gain access to via playing. Play, which is at the basis of performance arts and theatre, has a significant role in children’s development and progress, understanding of themselves and others, oral expression development and conflict resolution. The story that unfolds during a child’s game is of major importance for the development of an understanding of the connections and logic between people’s thoughts and beliefs and people’s actions (Dunn, J., 2004). We should never forget that each individual child is different and how they behave, play and develop interactions with others depends on their own experiences and personality. It is therefore important not to attribute any of their preferences only to their visual impairment.

Considering that children with visual impairment need to develop their awareness of themselves together with a range of social skills, in the same way that any other child would



need, they require a variety of experiences in order to be able to do this. The opportunities for interaction with others should not only be presented into everyday activities at school, but also need to be purposefully created and taken at the time and place of their manifestation. Theatre, with its unlimited array of settings, characters, moods, feelings, tools and techniques presents a remarkable instrument for purposeful creation of awareness building situations in a safe environment. Theatre provides an environment and strategy that is conducive to positive learning experiences where incidental learning is very likely to occur. It creates opportunities for the practicing of skills that are sometimes difficult to access, especially considering that visually impaired children cannot learn as easily from unguided imitation of others.

To promote positive social interaction embedded in everyday activities as well as through theatre workshops, it is important to consider the following aspects:

(1) The layout of the physical environment, the space where the action takes place

The layout of the space (room, hall, yard) can have an impact on the child's possibilities to interact with the others in as independent manner as possible, i.e. clear layout known to the child where they can find objects, where they understand what happens and where it happens, where they know how they are positioned compared to the others who are present, etc.

(2) Social context

Visually impaired children need opportunities to interact with a wide range of peers and adults – exiting the comfort zone of their circle - including people with very good social and communication skills, who can act as role-models and provide a compassionate yet reasonable and logical line of thought and expressive behavior. Theatrical rules, as they are summarized by Aleksey Burago (1), state:

1. Look for the positive qualities of everything around you
2. Avoid gossip



3. Avoid judgment
4. Respect and love your props and costumes
5. Invest spiritually in the super-objective of your shows

If we need to elaborate, make a dissection of these rules through the visual impairment situation, they do match most perfectly to the needs of the affected people. The search for the positive qualities will keep us away from the plunging into depression, denial and negative self-concepts. It will promote us as productive, capable and trustworthy human beings. Avoiding gossip would help us maintain honest and healthy relationships with the surrounding world. Avoiding judgment will make us compassionate and supportive, thus needed and appreciated by the others in our surroundings. Respect and love of what surrounds us will put us in a state of care and appreciation of what we have and what is provided for us. Spiritual investment cares of the soul, without which even the most perfect body remains an empty shell.

Theatre is therefore an effective inclusive practice, in which the social context of the setting reflects an understanding attitude that looks at the context characteristics, their impact on the children and how this impact can be transformed into the effect of a positive self-concept, rather than viewing the visually impaired children as individuals with problems and difficulties.

(3) Collaborative planning of the learning activities – advice from tyflopeditors

Advice from qualified teachers of visually impaired children is crucial for the purpose of planning effective activities for the latter. It is important that access to the curriculum and group activities, such as performing arts workshops, go together in a smooth and coherent manner, without obstructing each other. The focus of collaborative planning should therefore be successful combination of proper education and adequate support for social inclusion.

(4) Support

It is important and necessary to monitor friendships and social interaction and to encourage positive social interaction. This calls for a good level of understanding and sensitivity from



those providing support to the child. As practice proves it, often the best way of providing support is through an indirect manner. Responsible adults should have the ability to stand back, occasionally supporting and extending the potential of an activity to a child, unobtrusively letting social interaction take place. The following approaches can be used when providing support and opportunities for practicing skills for development of social competences:

- work in small group sessions, which can be planned both for development or reinforcement of skills the child needs, but also for assisting the child and his/her peers to engage in positive social interaction. These activities could include games, discussions, story telling, artistic workshops, etc and cover the following aspects that have been considered through the prism of theatre:

- participate actively as a member of a group – being a part of a larger play but having your own role (value, significance, importance);
- express feelings and understand others' feelings (practicing and discussing facial expressions and what causes them);
- solve problems in a team effort (deciding in groups how to evolve a certain scene, a meeting, a task);
- understand others' perspectives (get into different characters' shoes through taking roles and turns);
- help the others (rather than being helped, consider that their success on stage is crucial for your success as well);
- gain attention, initiate and maintain conversation (step in the center of lights, be given a major role, master your emotions and patience);
- develop strategies to cope with conflict (be put into conflicting situations and learn the outcome of them as well as possible to them); and

- develop self-esteem and confidence (because the others pay attention to what you have to say, because you discover how big and capable your body is, because you learn new expressions – physical and oral, because you gradually uncover the puzzle of your own personality).

Theatre makes sure that that skills learnt in the small group situations can be transferred to real-life situations, because it bases itself on real life situations. It also provides opportunities for children with visual impairment and other young people to meet each other and to experience, discuss, imitate positive role models – “growing” like this together is also important for the building of self-esteem.

- create opportunities and conditions for individual sessions, because visually impaired children and young people also need to be able to speak to someone about issues that concern or worry them one-on-one. Others need specialized, differentiated individual opportunities to develop social skills, which may not be appropriate to take place within a group and these needs must be taken into consideration and cared for by means of individual counseling or mentoring.

Last but not least, actively involving visually impaired children and young people in the development of the environments, which would ensure the formation of their positive self-concepts, is crucial for maximizing the learning potential of their experiences.



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End notes and further readings:

- (1) <http://www.backstage.com/advice-for-actors/acting-teachers/5-rules-theater-actor/>
- (2) <http://www.afb.org/info/programs-and-services/professional-development/teachers/inclusive-education/1235> - "Educating Students With Visual Impairments for Inclusion in Society", A Paper On The Inclusion Of Students With Visual Impairments The American Foundation for the Blind's, Josephine L. Taylor Leadership Institute, Education Work Group
- (3) http://www.google.bg/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDcQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmy.ilstu.edu%2F~bafrans%2Fhandouts%2F6things.doc&ei=T7uHVdCiH8LkUZ6Kj8AM&usg=AFQjCNH6mhl6pfioP_rT3FMOenPs3OU61g&bvm=bv.96339352,d.d24 - "Six things teachers can do to help visually impaired students in their classrooms", B&D Franson, 2/17/2000

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