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ICEVI European Newsletter
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Content:

Introduction: **ICEVI-Europe**
Education for all children with Visual Impairment

In previous newsletters you have seen the future plans for ICEVI activities in Europe. Happily several matters have been accomplished.

- The 5th Workshop on the Training of Teachers has taken place. You will find an article about it in this newsletter.
- The discussion group on the Website has been opened.
- Preparations have been made for the European Conference on Early Intervention in Europe.
- Contacts have been made with organisations within the European Union to find out the possibilities of setting up a European Masters Degree for teachers.
- We have contact with our colleagues in Lithuania and the Lithuanian Government to find out how to improve Early Intervention and Inclusive Education in Lithuania.
- In the next newsletter we will inform you about the programme for our European Conference 2009 in Dublin, Ireland. Time for the preparation of lectures is coming soon.

A lot in a short time.

In order to accomplish more in the future, ICEVI-Europe has become a formal legal association with its own articles.
You will have read about this on the website.

In the meantime we have opened a bank account:

Number: 4890207
BIC: PSTBNL21
Iban: NL42 PSTB 0004 8902 07

This account will make it easier to pay contributions, also using internet.
ICEVI-World is also a dynamic organisation.
On April 25 and 26 the Executive Committee held its meeting in Oslo. The Norwegian Association for the Blind and Partially Sighted hosted this meeting. The rehabilitation Centre in Hurdal offered hospitality.

Several matters have been discussed, like membership of ICEVI, payment of contributions and resource mobilisation.
For these themes study groups were set up in order to form further proposals.
Naturally it was requested that specific attention be given to the special position of ICEVI-Europe, which already is a member and has paid its contribution.

The most important item on the agenda was the ambitious programme Education for All children with visual impairment, EFA-VI.

It was very good to be informed that in Asia and Latin America plans are completely worked-out to solve, before 2015, the formerly neglected position of children with visual impairments in education.

During the African Forum Conference in May in Nairobi in Kenya, EFA-VI was launched in Africa.

In Europe we can learn a lot at this point. During the board meeting of November 2006 we discussed the desirability and necessity of this programme in several European countries. But there was no follow up.

Hopefully we can inform you of progress in this field in the newsletter of October / November.

Last but not least I would like to wish you all a good summer and an enjoyable vacation.

Hans Welling, Chairman

The Nordic Music profile

A co-operation between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, funded by The Northplus Adult Programme.

A project to create professional music education for visually impaired people in Nordic countries, focusing on the individual profile. A role model for similar educational offerings.

The aim of the project is to follow the political thought of the Nordic Minister Council, creating trans-national education in the Nordic countries. The visually impaired represent a minority group in each of the Nordic countries; developing already existing national non-mainstream educational offerings into trans-national educational offerings increases the possibilities for people with visual impairment to get an education.

Within the music field there are fewer visually impaired people employed today in comparison to 25 years ago. The work possibilities are the same.

Interviewing dozens of visually impaired people around the Nordic countries, most of the children feel much more segregated, not being able to integrate as normal sighted students. Therefore the visually impaired student is more dependent on the teacher's interest in engaging them with the group and the education.

Through comparisons between the Nordic countries the project group has developed four topics, in which, through inductive research, we seek data:

- Work possibilities - comparing the Nordic countries.
- Creating the Nordic Music Profile - inspired by the Music Profile at The Institute for the visually impaired in Denmark and the music education at The Arla Institute in Finland.
- The social and educational law for the handicapped in the Nordic countries - comparing the differences of the social systems in the Nordic countries.
- The music education of visually impaired children in the Nordic countries - is the integration successful? And what happens with the specially gifted students.

We hope to initiate The Nordic Music Profile officially in June 2008.

What makes for an active learner?

The 5th Teacher Training Workshop organized by ICEVI Europe was held between 17-19 May 2007 in Bratislava, a beautiful and welcoming city in Slovakia. The topic of the workshop was training specialist teachers for children with visual impairment: exploring the role of learner-centred instructional approaches. There were participants from 25 European countries who had the opportunity to be involved and actively learn teaching-learning methods and become critical thinkers. This learning process was guided and facilitated by Steve McCall and Mike Mc Linden from the University of Birmingham, United Kingdom.

During these two days the participants were learners and actors, thinkers and practitioners while experiencing and reflecting on active teaching-learning methods. This process took place in a well organised structure, from group activities to individual ones. Each group had its own identity, such as Smiling Glasses, Glasses, T-Team and Tale and this constituted a basis for discovering, in a positive atmosphere, new methods for discussion and reflection on different themes and issues. Working in groups was at the same time learning through cooperation and also learning through competition, in a very constructive way. Who would have thought that one can learn the structure and functions of the human eye while having them represented by the participants who become a part of it? Or to become a human Braille cell in order to learn the

combination of dots that represent a given letter?

Active and experiential learning gave the participants the opportunity to share their experiences and knowledge, to rehearse different roles, to build trust and positive relationships within the small groups and the whole group as well. Each activity facilitated the involvement of all participants followed by a debriefing session focused on what had happened during the exercise, its rationales and how it can be further used in the work with teachers and/or students with visual impairments, in inclusive or special settings. This approach has offered the possibility to participate and think at the same time, which is conducive to a deeper understanding.

The participants were at the centre of the approaches that were used during the workshop, and this experience sets a good example for beginning or continuing to consider each student's needs when planning, teaching and facilitating learning.

Laura Runceanu,
Andrea Hathazi
Babes Bolyai University Cluj Napoca (Romania)

1st International Art Festival for Disabled Children.

First announcement: The Regional Public Charitable Fund of Support and Development of the Music Art and Education in St. Petersburg in co-operation with ICEVI-Europe organizes the 1st International Art Festival for Disabled Children.
The Festival will take place in **March 9th -12th, 2008 in St. Petersburg, Russia**, and will focus on development and use of creative skills of disabled children all over the World.
It is our great pleasure to **invite all children** to the 1st International Art Festival.
During the Festival children will be able to take part in the entertaining program together with the professional theatre actors.
The program of festival provides carrying out the Symposium "Basic ways of work with gifted creative disabled children".
The successful realization of this project will be favourable for social adaptation of children, their integration and friendship.
We will be very glad if this Festival finds response in many hearts and hope you will get the importance of this project.

Important dates:

- 15 Nov. 2007 Deadline for Submission of Abstracts for review
- 30 Nov. 2007 Notification of Acceptance / Rejection
- 15 Dec. 2007 Deadline for submission of DVD, Video, full papers
- 9 March 2008 Opening Ceremony
- 10-12 March 2008 Festival

In-depth information you can see on ICEVI website soon.

Conditions of the 1st International Handicapped Children's Arts Festival

The Festival will see:

- Creative meetings. Round table. Press conference. Master classes.
- Reception of ensemble leaders.
- Exhibitions.

The Festival Competition programme envisages the following:

Dance (no more than ten people)

- choreographic miniatures
- folk dance
- modern
- show groups

Music

- Solo singers: folk, classical, popular, jazz
- Solo musicians (instrumentalists)
- Music ensembles, wind, folk, jazz (2-10 people per ensemble)
- Vocal ensembles (2-10 people per ensemble)
- Folklore ensembles

Theatre

- Artistic readings or poetry recitals to music
- Mini performances (2-10 people)

The programme for these categories should not last longer than the limit of 10 minutes. Competition auditions take place in one round for Dance, Music and Theatre Applied Arts theme: My Homeland

Applied arts (watercolour, gouache, ink, pen, mixed media) Format no larger than 50x70 (with framing) Works must be detailed (2 labels, in Russian and English) No glass.

Decorative applied arts (ceramics, batik, quilting, beadwork, wood-carving, engraving, floral art, dolls) THEME: 1. The history of heraldry: mottos and flags of cities and States. 2. Peoples, regions, daily life, traditions, folk art history and arts. 3. My family (family history).

Participants in the Applied Arts category should send their works or images thereof 10x15 no later than 1 June 2007.

All Applied Arts works are not returned or reviewed and after the Festival become the property of the Foundation.

As this is the First Festival, the organisers have declared a competition to design the emblem, logo, motto, music slogan, prize sketches and diploma design. Participants whose design is used in this and subsequent Festivals will be awarded special Festival prizes.

Jury:

1. The jury exists to judge Festival performances
2. The jury consists of renowned cultural, arts and education figures from Russia and abroad
3. The jury is convened by the Festival's Artistic Director
4. The Chair of the jury is determined by the Organisational Committee
5. The jury is made up of no less than 3 people per category
6. Each jury member has one vote
7. The results of the jury's work are recorded by protocol. The jury's decision is final and not up for discussion
8. Judging criteria:
   a. Professional level of Festival participants
   b. Artistic level of the programme performed
   c. Correspondence of the programme to Festival requirements

Prizes:

The prize committee is determined by the Organisational Committee and Winners are awarded with prizes and diplomas with the competition symbol. Participants may be awarded special prizes by the jury, organizational committee, patrons and sponsors.
Festival winners will be awarded diplomas and souvenir gifts.
All participants will receive official documents.

Official languages:

The working languages for correspondence and all competition documentation are Russian and English.

Teachers, educators, doctors, parents and all interested people may take part in the Round Table. The most topical themes will be accepted for publication. Speeches should last no longer than 10 minutes. Please send speeches no later than 1 June 2007.

To take part in the competition the following documents are needed by 1 June 2007:

1. Complete participant's application
2. Copy of birth certificate (passport) (in order to get visa)
3. Short biography, suitable for publication
4. Two colour photos (by e-mail - no less than 300 pixels)
5. Performance programme indicating exact duration

Documents should be sent by E-mail: plastunova@yandex.ru.
Information on registration as a participant will be sent as soon as the documents have been processed. All documents should be provided in Russian or English.
Incomplete documentation as well as late submission will not be registered. Payment of transport of Festival participants and accompanying persons, including passport fees and visas for foreign citizens are to be paid by the participants or organisations accompanying them. During the Festival the Organisational Committee will provide assistance to participants and accompanying persons with accommodation. Each participant or ensemble has the opportunity to rehearse in the venue.
Where audio equipment or an accompanist will be necessary, please inform the Festival's Working Group in advance. Sheet music should be presented in printed form no later that sixty days before the Festival.

The Network of Primary School Music Teachers

My name is Gemma Fernandez, and I am working with the National Organization of Blind People (ONCE) in Barcelona, Spain. As I have a degree in primary school music teaching, my current responsibilities include teaching visually impaired students and consultation with music professors in Catalonia who teach music to blind students.

Unfortunately, there is not much literature or personal experience available in Spain, regarding methods and suggestions on music teaching for blind children. Thus, I decided to broaden my research and get in touch with professionals from other countries who could aid me in my endeavour. I am convinced that building up of a network of specialised teachers would benefit all of us in our approach to teaching music to blind children.

If you are interested in my research, please contact me at: gemma72fs@hotmail.com or gfs@once.es.

My best wishes,

Gemma Fernández,
Primary School Music Teacher

Second European Conference on Psychology and Visual Impairment.

Innovations in a changing Europe

After our first successful conference in Copenhagen last year, very well organised by Peter Rodney and Lykke Jensen, we are happy to announce the Second European Conference on Psychology and Visual Impairment. This conference will take place in **Huizen, the Netherlands, 10-12 March 2008**. as well as a continuation of the exchange of expertise, the 2nd EC Ψ VI also wants to focus on making international cooperation more concrete.

Main topics will be:

- **Sensorial integration** with a special interest in tactile development and tactile compensation.
- **Social isolation and loneliness** with a special interest in the elderly.
- **New trends in assessment** with a special interest in people with multiple disabilities.

Peter Rodney will present the do's and don'ts with regard to building projects involving international cooperation. In a number of workshops the participants will be encouraged to put their intentions to cooperate into real practice. Therefore this conference aims to produce a number of first drafts of concrete project proposals.

The 2nd EC Ψ VI will be hosted by the cooperating Dutch organisations Visio, Sensis and De Brink, united in the VSdB Group. The conference takes place at the Visio location in Huizen, about 1 hour from Schiphol Airport and Amsterdam.
Further details will be announced at a later date.

Peter Verstraten, pverstraten@sensis.nl
Sensis, sector Innovation & Expertise,
dept. Development & Implementation Grave, the Netherlands

Services for children with visual impairment in the Czech Republic

200th anniversary of the school for visually impaired in Prague

Education of Children with Visual Impairment in the Czech Republic was traditionally oriented towards special education, in special, mostly boarding, schools. The first one in the country was the Private Institute for Blind Children and Visually Ill in Prague founded in 1807! The history of its foundation is curious: at the beginning of the century Prague started to collect funds to build a second bridge across the river Vltava - the only bridge at that time, the historical Charles Bridge from 1357, could not suffice the needs of a growing city. But the monarchy was exhausted by the Napoleonic wars and the plan was abandoned. What to do with the collected sum? A few charitable enthusiasts came up with an idea - fund an institute for blind children! In the first year the school had 4 pupils, it also ran a small hospital unit where eye operations were performed on poor patients who could not afford surgery in regular hospitals.

Now the school celebrates 200 years of its existence! It has a pre-school (3-6), an elementary school (6-15), a special elementary school (for children with slight mental disability), a practical school for children with multiple impairments, a boarding facility, an after-school club, and a special educational centre with itinerant teachers for mainstreamed

children. The pre-school is open also for children without any impairment - this is used by parents who themselves were once students of the school or by families where the school is already attended by a sibling.
The school offers specialised training in many areas: Braille, orientation and mobility, typing, computer skills, use of Optacon and other electronic devices, vision therapy, speech therapy, psychology, music, foreign languages. After school students can choose from many voluntary activities - sports (skiing, cycling, showdown, goal ball, athletics, swimming, horse riding, climbing, canoeing, bowling, chess), arts (literature, drama, ceramics, photography), tourist club, cooking and handicraft club.

Early Intervention

After 1989 thanks to political changes many parents and specialists felt the opportunity to influence the situation in the offering of services and in possibilities of education. Many new services emerged, parents also started to push the authorities into allowing their children to be educated in regular schools.

One of first newly founded organisations was the Czech Union of the Blind in January 1990. It was mainly founded to provide services to adults, but it incorporated also two Early Intervention Centres in Prague and Brno (then called The Advice centre for Pre-school Visually Impaired Children), the core of future Association for Early Intervention.

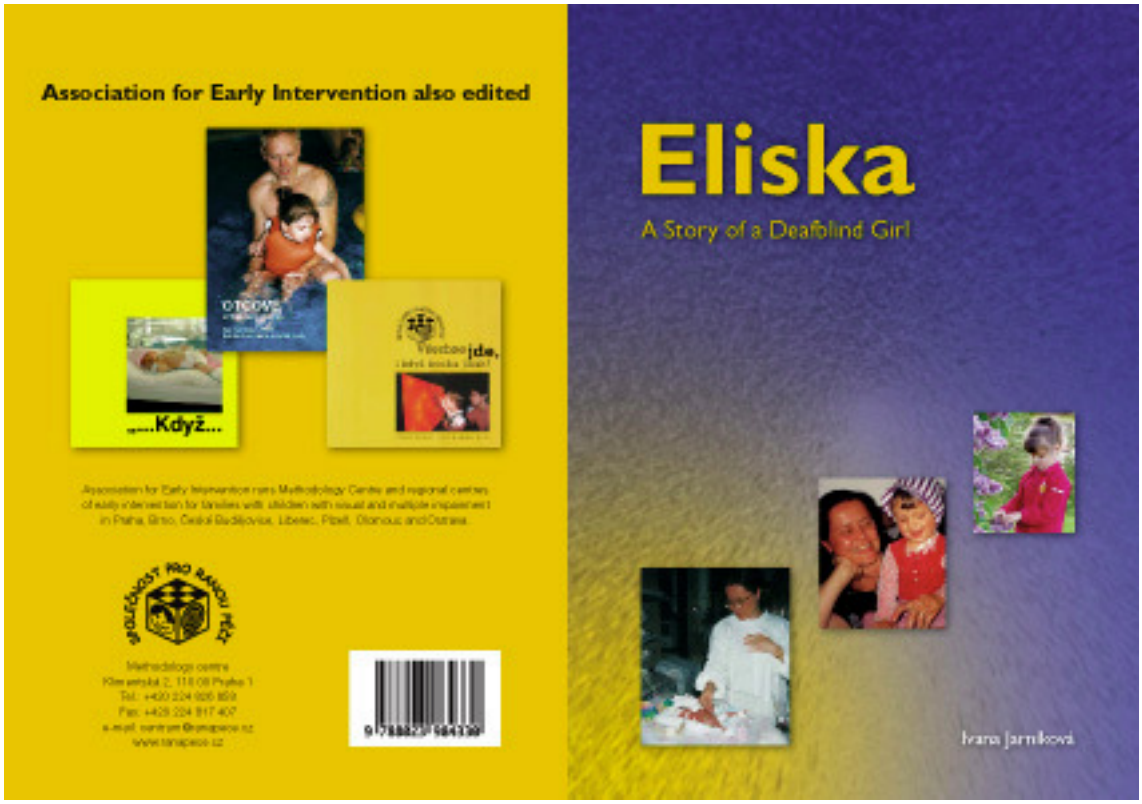
Services for young children with visual impairment started to evolve in the late seventies - early eighties in Brno around a blind psychologist Josef Smýkal at a special school for the blind and around another blind psychologist Josef Čálek and a teacher at Charles University Helena Flenerová in Prague. They collaborated with many volunteers (some of them later founded the Early Intervention Centres). In 1996 the Early Intervention Centres split from the Union and the Association for Early Intervention was founded. Presently it runs 7 Early Intervention Centres and a Methodology Centre and covers, with its home - based services, the whole of the Czech Republic. It serves yearly around 500 families with children with severe visual impairment aged 0 - 4 or children with multiple impairment aged 0 - 7. Families with MDVI children comprise around 80 % of all clients.

Early intervention services focus on support for the development of the child and on support for the family. They offer mainly home based services - early interventionists come to clients´ homes once per 1-3 months and together with the parents they find the best ways of coping with child's impairment and making the most of his capabilities. They teach parents how to create a stimulating environment, how to stimulate vision and train other senses, they advise parents on special aids and on social allowances. Parents can also borrow special toys, aids or literature, or subscribe quarterly magazine Jinglebell. Early Intervention Centres also help parents to meet, they offer opportunities to exchange experiences and feelings - they organise regular parent meetings, seminars, week long courses, support for self-help groups.
The association also engages in the

promotion of early intervention in legislature. Thanks to several years' lasting efforts, early intervention is, since the 1st of January 2007, finally listed in the new law about social services (Law 108/2006) as a regular social service.

BOOK "Eliska - A Story of a Deafblind Girl",
DVD "Eliska and her people"

The Association for Early Intervention published in 2006, an English version of the book **Eliska - A Story of a Deafblind Girl** written by Ivana Jarníková, mother of the girl Eliska.



The book is a compilation of Mrs. Jarníková's narration, her diary records and the notes and recommendations of an early interventionist from the Association for Early Intervention.

The book surveys the mother's feelings and moods, Eliska's problems and progress; also - from her birth, the discovery of her impairment, a cochlear implant operation and her first words. It means that there is a period from 0 to 6 years of Eliska's life, described in the book.

A very valuable and rich book appeared. It's sincerity and the author's depth of feeling will certainly hold all mothers; a lot of information will help fathers. The professional (almost methodological) level of the book will be very useful for students and experts in social work, special education and therapy.

The book Eliska is addressed not only to parents and experts but we strongly believe it will please everybody as a story about strong people who refused the unfavourable

future dictated by the inauspicious diagnosis of their child.

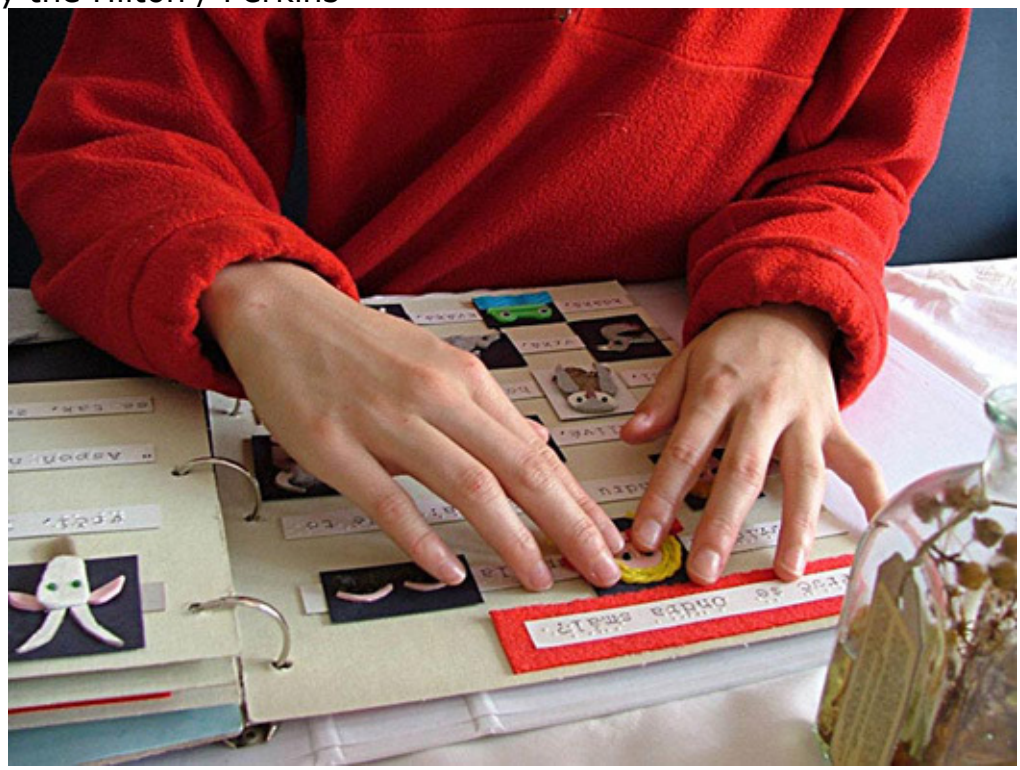
In 2007 a DVD about Eliska was also edited by the Association for Early Intervention. An approximately 26 minutes-long film, composed of VHS family records, catches Eliska and her family at different periods of communication. It is called 'Eliska and her People' and there are also printed English titles available.

A French version is also being printed now; the Association for Early Intervention granted a copyright to a French organization Les Doigts Qui Revent, which has already translated the text into French and is going to publish it as part of a collection called Corpus tactilis.

Both book and DVD were financed by the Hilton / Perkins Program of Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, MA, USA through the grant from Conrad N. Hilton Foundation in Rene, Nevada.

Both are available from The Methodology Centre of The Association for Early Intervention, you can order it at this address: Klimentská 2, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic or by email: centrum@ranapece.cz (please write as the subject, English Eliska or DVD Eliska). Contact phone number: +420 224 826 858, Ms. Anna Hladikova.

The price of the DVD is 280 CZK (ca 10 EUR). The book is gratis, thanks to the Hilton /Perkins Program. We count only the postage costs. The distribution of the book Eliska throughout the USA is provided by Perkins School for The Blind.



Czech Tactus project and Tactus competition

In 2005 the Early Intervention Centre Prague became an official partner of Tactus and Typhlo. The international association Tactus, who run this programme, organises every year a contest of illustrated tactile books for young children. The winning book is then reproduced in a workshop 'Doigts qui Revent' (Dreaming Fingers) in Dijon, France, and sold in partner countries for a subsidised price. Thanks to the partnership of the Early Intervention Centre Prague, authors from the Czech Republic can also take part in the contest. Through this project the foundation of a pre-school department in the library for people with visual impairment in Prague, was also initiated. The library can purchase books produced by 'Doigts qui Revent'. Its fund is also enlarged every year by all the Czech books entered in the contest - the Czech rules require that all enrolled books be offered to the library after the contest. This improves greatly the access of young readers to illustrated books - before there were very limited possibilities for young children to access a picture book - publishing in this area being virtually non-existent. Clients of early intervention centres could use only a few hand made exemplars; school children had textbooks, but there was a huge gap waiting to be filled. Now everyone who becomes a member of the library can use its mailing service and borrow the books. Of course we have to keep in mind that not all of the books are of a great quality from the point of view of tactile perception or art; they are seldom made by professionals in both fields, rather they are made mostly by parents, teachers or other enthusiastic amateurs. But there are also some outstanding pieces - like last year's winner of the international contest, book Rozmanitosti (Wonderland) by art student Kristýna Adámková.

Actual situation in Czech country

At present new school law from 2004 should work more in favour of mainstreamed education. It gives every child the right to get education in a catchment school unless his parents desire otherwise. Children with special needs can be assisted by a personal assistant, their teachers can have a classroom assistant. Special schools should gradually transform into advisory and resource centres.
In recent years more and more parents choose integrated education for their children. In the Czech Republic there are several ways to support children educated in mainstream schools. Most of the special schools for children with visual impairment also run Special Educational Centres. Itinerant teachers from those centres visit children at their schools, advise teachers, provide textbooks. The capacity of these centres is not sufficient, usually they can see one student only once per 2 months or even less - they can only have an advisory function, they can not do direct teaching of skills like Braille or orientation and mobility.

There are presently 102 schools educating children with visual impairment, while 13 of them have a greater concentration of pupils with visual impairment (formerly special schools). There are 720 children with visual impairment (83 blind) in

elementary schools, of which 289 (46 blind) are in special schools. In preschools there are 477 children with VI, of which 256 are in special preschools. (These numbers do not include children with MDVI).

Association of Parents and Friends of Children with Visual Impairment

The Association of Parents and Friends of Children with Visual Impairment also runs a programme of support for integrated children. The association was founded by a group of parents, now it comprises almost 100 families and collaborates with many organisations. Now the Association runs a programme for Integration. In 2006 they directly supported 13 children in mainstream education, furthermore the Association informs parents about laws concerning education and financial resources, helps with transcription of textbooks into Braille, provides parents with material for making textbooks and worksheets (Braille paper and writers, Dymo writer). Last year thanks to a special grant from the Czech Broadcast Foundation, Svetluska, they could also financially support parents who spend several hours a day making school materials for their children. The Association also collaborates with students of special education in the individual production of tuitional materials such as maps, anatomy displays, various models etc. The Association also collaborates with the Early Intervention Centre Prague in the Tactus project.

Resources:

- Association of Parents and friends... Annual Report 2006
- M. Helešicová - text about the history of the school for children with visual impairment
- www.skolajj.cz - webpage of the school for visually impaired in Prague
- www.tactus.wz.cz - webpage of Czech Tactus project
- www.ranapece.cz - webpage of the Association for Early Intervention
- J. Kapr, Ministry of Education - data about special schools and their pupils

Helena Janoušová and Anna Hladíková, Czech Republic

A vision of VIP's as leading (3D) sound specialists

Multimedia design is quite popular at the moment. Education and product development within the subdivision of sound design are undertaking a speedy development right now.

Some visually impaired persons (VIP's) have a higher than average understanding of sound images. Their competence profile of sensory acuteness, awareness, skills and interest could form a unique base for the development of sound-design, -engineering and -management.

I see great potential in making VIP's specialists within this fast expanding market, despite the fact that 3D sound has not yet been commercialized. As a start I suggest a pilot project in order to investigate the possibilities within multimedia and sound design in general and 3D sound specifically. The participants should form a group of highly skilled and motivated VIP's from various European countries in a cross-disciplinary creative team.

This paper is my first mentioning of the vision of VIP's as world-leading sound specialists. I wish to receive any feed-back the reader can give me. Please read this as an invitation to participate in this brain-storm on the vision/hypothesis.

What will it take?

How do the leading experts work?
What are their tools?
What is their take on this vision?

Assessing the market

How do the leading experts foresee *the near future of sound-media?*
Would this specialization be likely to lead to employment?
Have similar initiatives taken place - or are in the making?

Connecting the resources

Who are the leading experts?
Which skills should the group of VIP's have?
Engaging relevant companies, educations and organisations.

The very broadly defined vision can be turned into a meaningful project, by planning one step at a time and allowing for the project to take form, in response to new knowledge and marked feed-back.

- The first phase is to answer the questions above.
- Second phase is to describe the next level of the project.
- Third phase would form a group of VIP's, plan the training and engage external parts.
- …

I am willing to participate in this work, and am looking for others to join me in this exiting work. Also I would love to get some feedback on my thoughts.

Trine Vestergaard Nielsen - tvn@ibos.dk, The Netherlands

Learning Braille: The Relevance of Low-Tech Devices
by Laura Matz

I recently had the opportunity to speak with teachers of students who are blind, as well as government ministers in both Europe and the United States about the type of educational learning tools preferred in their respective countries to teach braille.

One issue raised by several people is whether the low-tech tools which have been standards over the years for teaching and for daily living - the slate and stylus, and the mechanical braille writer - are still relevant given the advent of high-technology tools such as personal computers with audio translation, electronic notetakers with refreshable braille and braille embossers.

The fundamental question is: **Is it better to' leapfrog' the low-tech tools and teach braille to young children using the high-tech tools, or is there still a need to introduce braille and early literacy on low-tech devices?**

As someone who is new to the blind community, I wanted to get an objective viewpoint from people who a) have experience with and access to both low-tech and high-tech tools, and b) are skilled in teaching children who are blind and visually impaired. This is not intended as a scholarly article, simply as a report on a topic of interest, based on interviews and opinions of local experts.

I sought the advice of several European and American specialists including:

- Annelies Buurmeijer from Visio, KIOSB, Comeniusschool in Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Claire Wilson, the Braille Literacy Development Officer for the RNIB, in England
- Anna Swenson, author of "Beginning with Braille" and a teacher in the Fairfax County, Virginia, USA school district
- Brian Charlson, the Vice President of Computer Training at the Carroll Center in Newton, Massachusetts, USA
- Shelley Rhodes, a teacher of students with visual impairment from ages 4 - 21 outside of Boston, Massachusetts, USA

The majority of teachers and administrators with whom I spoke assert that **low-technology devices are still a powerful entry-method - according to some, the most powerful - for teaching braille to young children.** Clearly, anybody who wishes to succeed in today's wired, internet-enabled society must be skilled in the use of high-technology devices. The question is not whether to introduce high-technology, but when. The ideal situation is to be able to select from a range of tools for teaching - high-tech plus low-tech - although most of the experts with whom I spoke believe that the best way to use high-technology effectively is after a child learns the basics through hands-on, low-technology tools.

The responses fall into two categories as to why low-tech devices are still the preferred way to teach early learners. The first are pedagogical and the second are functional.

1. Pedagogical/Educational Rationale

a. Spatial Concepts and Abstract Thinking

Most of the teachers interviewed believe that high-technology devices which use audio to 'translate' braille or have only one line of refreshable braille do not allow children who are blind to perceive spatial concepts. Claire Wilson says that this is a discussion that she and her colleagues have had in the past. They have concluded that "with paper, you can move your fingers up and down, right and left, letting children incorporate concepts such as a 'page'. Most Notetakers and computerized products do not do that."

Anna Swenson agrees. "You can't develop an appreciation for top, bottom, left, right on a Notetaker. It is essential to have the concept of 'book' and 'paper'. Young children aren't ready to grasp abstract concepts. They have to have the paper in front of them and physically feel and manipulate it. As an example, when teaching children to write a letter, you have to develop their understanding of the different parts -- the heading, greeting, body, and closing -- and how they are formatted. Concepts like centering, indenting, and starting a new line need to be tactile in order for students to understand them."

This is echoed by Shelley Rhodes. She says, "When you are blind, nothing exists till you put your hands on it. Only when you hit adolescence, do you begin to gain the capability to do abstract thinking. I want the concept of braille to be tangible, concrete, instant… Young children don't have the capability to understand the concepts of 'file' or 'save' or 'delete'. You have to start with the low-tech device first and later introduce high-technology."

b. Mathematics

Mathematics requires a spatial orientation in order to teach the basic concepts of numbers and graphing. According to Anna Swenson, "Mathematics requires the ability to scan rows and columns. Children learning to add, subtract, multiply, or divide in Nemeth Code need this tactile information to understand the place value of each digit and the overall spatial layout of the problem."

Shelley Rhodes offers, "You can't touch 'over there'. It doesn't register as a concept. A sighted kid will understand 'you're next in line'. But a kid who is blind will say 'what is a line?' They don't know that a group of students is a line. If you never touch a page of paper, you never know what the top of a paper is. It is bigger than literacy. You have to know the abstract mathematical concepts for your entire life."

c. Basics First - Providing a Foundation For Literacy

In order to become completely literate, a child must be fluent in the basics of building and dissecting words. Just as sighted children are taught to write with a pencil and paper before they use a computer, and to add and subtract before they are introduced to a calculator, children who are blind and visually impaired must be completely

connected to the basics of language by physically loading the paper, centering it and feeling the letters and numbers produced.

According to Annelies Buurmeijer, "It is easier to understand the concept of making words if you type them out on a brailler. The braille dots are numbered. If you know that K equals dots 1 and 3, and you can feel it on a brailler, it is very different than simply typing a key on a keyboard where all the keys feel the same. You need to be able to feel the difference between a K and a B, which is dots 1 and 2. That is the way to absorb the concept of letters into your system."

Where sighted children can understand the concept of paper or a book by seeing it, children who are blind must feel it and create it in order to 'own' it on a basic level. "Children who are blind are usually bad spellers. If they don't get the tangible, tactile experience at the beginning of spelling words and feeling them, they won't learn them," says Shelley Rhodes.

2. Functionality

Low-tech devices are more affordable, reliable and functional. For many families without significant means, they are the only option.

a. Cost

Claire Wilson adds, "The high-tech devices assume you have the financial means to upgrade the software. On the other hand, my brailler is 40 years old and I still use it every day. Plus, the high-tech devices are fragile. When you are teaching children, they drop things and spill liquid on them. The low-tech devices can take just about anything."

Brian Charlson says, "I can sit at my computer and type on a PC. That costs $1,500. The PC talks to me and that is $1,000. It translates into braille using translating software for $500 - $800. And then I send it to the braille embosser for a hard copy and that starts at $3,000. Or I can use a brailler for a fraction of the cost of the high-tech devices and not worry about needing an electricity supply or having a catastrophic breakdown where I lose all my information."

b. Accessibility

In addition, the low-tech devices provide accessibility. They do not rely on electricity, are durable and are not subject to frequent and costly upgrades of software or breakdowns. As Brian says, "I am sitting here talking to you with a pencil and paper in my hand. And I teach computers! Would you want your sighted children to not be able to use a pencil and paper? And furthermore, what happens if the electricity goes out - we leave them with no means of written communication? In my opinion, that is not acceptable."

"Kids like to read in their beds," adds Annelies Buurmeijer, "they don't want to be attached to one place through a computer. If you go on holiday, if you go camping, you need to be able to read a book and also to write notes, which means you need to be able to use a braille writer."

c. Independent Living and Personal Management

There are some tasks which are just accomplished best by low-tech devices. Producing labels for food or volumes of books are essential for a

person who is blind to be able to manage their daily activities.

Clearly, the ideal situation is to have the option to use both high-tech and low-tech devices. In certain cases, introducing high-tech first may be the best viable option for engaging a very bright child. But even then, the ability to use a low-tech device is critical to avoid being unable to communicate if a high-tech device fails.

In summary, young children need to learn to read and write braille, learn mathematics and be exposed to abstract concepts. Most of the experts with whom I spoke assert that low-technology devices still provide the most fundamental, low-cost, reliable pathway to literacy. This is not to disparage the use of high-tech devices. They are critical to future success. However, for most children, they should be introduced later in the learning process, after students are completely 'connected' to the basics of language and abstract thinking.

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Perkins Braillers: Grant Money is Available

Perkins Products/ Howe Press wishes to announce that grant money is available for countries classified as low or lower-middle-income. This subsidy can significantly reduce the cost of Perkins Braillers. The eligible European countries include:

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