



**TRANSNATIONAL REPORT ON INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES AND
COLLECTION OF PRACTICES AND CASE STUDIES (EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE) BY
THE V.I.S.I.ON CONSORTIUM ON THE IMPORTANCE OF THEATRE FOR THE
DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE OF VISUALLY
IMPAIRED PEOPLE**

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Project number: 2014-1-BG01-KA201-001555





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THANKS!

Before commencing, the compilers of this transnational report would like to express their gratitude for the unmeasurable support and valuable contributions received from:

- Lyubomir Velkov, Ivelina Vateva & Tzveta Baliyska, School for v.i. children "Louis Braille"; Rositsa Todorova & Petya Marcheva, Association "Hope for all"; Stefania Vitale, "Music'Arte"; Casimiro Alaimo & Katuska Falbo, "I Bohemiens", Dinos Aristidou, Jane Latham, Bernard Latham & Louise Hobson, "UCAN Productions", Daniela Maniscalco & Giovanna Pandolfelli, "Societa Dante Alighieri";
- all the theatre experts and external interested parties that spared some of their precious time to share their thoughts, experiences and feelings with us;
- and last but not least - all the young people, involved in the V.I.S.I.ON activities, which have honored us with their deep interest and devotion and already impressed us with their potential and strength.

A successful project needs as many interested people as possible to be able to discover information about it and use its resources and possibilities. Good promotion and support is crucial for its visibility and sustainability. We greatly appreciate the contribution of our technical partner – Inforef, Belgium – and are also grateful to our associated partners – the European Blind Union and Unione Italiana dei Ciechi e degli Ipovedenti – for their support to the project and for their encouragements and valuable information.



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1. INTRODUCTION: OUR PERSPECTIVE

Learning is our life-long challenge. Life learning¹ is our everyday challenge. The concept behind this simple but deep difference completely changes the way of seeing “growth”: so far, the majority of institutions and school-education organizations have focused on the idea of “teaching” concepts and information to the young generations. This may be important for the development of an active thought about human knowledge, but it gives no opportunity for them to grow personally or to have a stable natural concept about themselves as human beings. We believe that “life learning” does not come from the knowledge (the inculcation) of information but rather from the consciousness concerning who we are and what we are capable of, which is based on the self-experience and the social skills.

The V.I.S.I.ON purpose, thus, has does not envisage teaching Visually Impaired (V.I.) people who they are and how they might achieve things in life, because that knowledge is internal, it could not come from the outside, but can be unlocked with certain external support. Our “vision” relies on helping V.I. people on how they can educate themselves to build self-assurance for self-esteem, self-respect and self-inclusion. By its experiences, our team realized that social exclusion frequently comes first from the inside (feeling or looking different, dependence, the difficulty of accessing education or culture, the fear of interaction, not being able to show, express their feelings) as does its counter-term - social inclusion.

We, as externals, have no real power for their “life learning”; we have no right to teach them how to see the world or how to live their lives, since we have no consciousness of their “sight” and their capacity of bearing their condition. Thus, we realized how essential is for us to learn from them first in order to be able to help them develop their capacities to the fullest. The new perspective guiding us is therefore to stay open for everything they need to show us in order for us to become as well informed about their needs as possible. On this basis, providing gentle and steady external support and advice would step by step lead to unlocking and refining all their

¹ Understanding the expression “life learning” as respecting the everyday experiences that enable children to understand and to interact with the world and their culture.



potential and social skills, enabling them to continue learning, playing, practicing and contributing to life to the fullest.

Our life-experience teaches us that social skills seem to be automatic for us. When we look at people, we realize that words need to be accompanied by body language, so we automatically monitor our environment and adapt our interaction to it. According to this - since social skills are mostly learned by repeated visual observation and connecting visual images - it is estimated that 75-80% of everything we learn, we learn visually. When a person is visually impaired this monitoring and adaptation cannot develop automatically. In this case a loss of incidental learning (an unintentional learning, which is grounded in the natural capacity for observation and free re-elaboration) is observed.

The development of social skills and inter-personal relationships is at the basis of building and raising our self-esteem and our confidence to “take risks”. Taking risks is a key-concept in our belief of “life learning”: the better we feel about ourselves as persons, about our interactions with friends and other people in the environment, the more likely we are to take measured risks and continue to develop socially.

Therefore, the V.I.S.I.ON perspective focuses on supporting v.i. people to become more dynamic and independent in their actions – active “life learners”, ready to grow via taking measured risks. Undoubtedly, risk taking is one of the basic components that shape us and help us to progress. Growing is hardly possible without taking risks and this is universally true for all people.

2. EXTRACTS FROM THE NATIONAL REPORTS BY THE PARTNERS, RELATED TO USE OF THEATRE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND AWARENESS



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A. FDCBPCS, SCHOOL FOR V.I. CHILDREN "LOUIS BRAILLE", ASSOCIATION "HOPE FOR ALL"

The Bulgarian national report, which embraces the three intra-organizational reports from FDCBPCS, the school for visually impaired children "Louis Braille" and association "Hope for all", gives already a first spark for a future perspective and opens new potentialities towards the establishment of the pillars of our V.I.S.I.ON.

The three Bulgarian partners have worked as a single national team, responsible for two groups of young participants. Their work is complimentary for the purposes of the project, since their experiences cross different specific fields and have been enriched by different perspectives, which will have a significant importance in the construction of the path we are about to walk on.

In detail, **FDCBPCS** practice, which counts years of experience and has gained understanding and conceptualization thanks to big international projects such as Kinder Kulture Karawane (Children's culture caravan, which has been bringing cultural groups from the South - Africa, Latin America & Asia - to Western European countries for 15 years now) or the "Cultural and peer-learning approaches to integrate socio-economically disadvantaged youth and young adults with an immigrant background" (getting into contact with such cultural groups from the South as *Theatre of the oppressed* from Palestine, *Baobab culture troupe* from South Africa, *Teatro Trono* from Bolivia and others) or the three years project "Strengthen Creative Cooperation" (giving the possibility for Bulgarians to encounter Kenyan acrobats, South African actors and Brazilian capoeira dancers) - defines the following main points (Staneva, 2015):

- **Institutions working with children and young people:** the institutions, which are undertaking a project focused on this specific target group, should have sufficient experience in working with children and young people. This means that the management and staff of the institution shall be adequately familiar with the target group representatives and their environment (family, school, and leisure habits).



- **Target group:** Important criteria for the composition of the groups (participating in youth projects or initiatives) are gender, age, type of background, school and grade level. Joint groups of girls and boys may promote discussions and experiences regarding their own gender role, but can also block activities, especially for children and young people at pubertal stage. Very important are also considerations for compiling the groups by schools and classes. The adjustment of the teaching rhythm of groups for a continuous and long-term collaboration for children and young people from many different schools and classes is often very difficult. These factors lead to preference of short-term forms, such as holiday workshops.

Sometimes it makes sense, and it is more desirable, to compose groups mixed by age, gender, and artistic orientation etc., only after an introduction period with more homogeneous groups. *As far as V.I.S.I.ON is concerned, the selected groups of young adults include both genders, since the approach focuses on the individuality of the person in several potential contexts with several potential participants and the synergy of the two genders is, thus, essential. The project could not reach the results it claims if we only concentrate the workshops on one gender, thus losing the completeness of our target group and end users.*

- **Gender segregation:** An important result of practical experiences is that a gender-mixed group can work successfully only under specific conditions. Although the participants could promote the direct examination of their own gender role, they could also block activities and exchange, especially if children and youth in the (pre-) adolescent phase are involved. They do not like to treat certain topics in the presence of or even together with the opposite sex. Sometimes in cases of practicing or even presentation of music, dance or theatre, the shyness towards the opposite sex could be so great, that any development is hindered. *Regarding V.I.S.I.ON, all these conditions have been previously taken into consideration prior to the formation of the groups and are being observed during practical work.*



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

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

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

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

- **Planning and time horizon** – participants need to have a good idea of the schedule, with which the activities they are involved in are going to progress.

- **Continuation of the activities and cooperation** – having a feeling of control of the future that follows and a vision about how the running activities would continue in a sustainable manner, creates excellent stimuli for participants' dedication to the initiative.



- **Approaches for development of training programs and training methods:** It is difficult to 'learn' to use training methods effectively simply by reading about them. Ultimately, one tutor has to try them out, and be prepared to make mistakes. One must not be surprised if things work out in different ways than expected. It is advisable to keep a record of the methods a trainer uses, and reflect on his/her own experience of using them, to help him adapt and improve them. *It would be even better if a trainer could ask colleagues or friends to observe him using different methods in order to get feedback from them not only on his/her actions, but also on the actions/reactions of trainees.*

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

The school for visually impaired children "Louis Braille", on the other hand, is a state high school for v.i. children from 5 to 19 years old. Within its system of teaching, the school "has recognized theatre as one of the best tools to build confidence and self-respect on the basis of improved sensory and motor skills, verbal and physical expressiveness" (Velkov & Vateva, 2015) due to their experience: in 2005 the school saw 15 students record on a CD a dramatization of eight fairytales from world-famous authors and, in 2009, these same pupils established a theatre group that presented (together with theatre VIA) an interactive sensory theatrical performance "The colors of the dark" with the participation of the author/director Velimir Velez and the producer Blajo Nikolich (who had a lot of theatre-work experience in Zagreb with visually impaired people).

The inner presence of an experienced state school, dedicated to provision of education to and by visually impaired people (quite a few of the school staff are v.i. teachers, some of whom have once studied there), is extremely important for establishing and stabilizing mutual confidence and



respect between trainees and trainers, and has been enhancing the consortium with specific elements and concepts related to the situation of visual impairment that would otherwise be very tough to reach/achieve. Beyond the common school education, “Louis Braille” school fosters theatre activities that develop the confidence of proper speech as well as of initiative properties in a solitary context or among other people. Their activities with young people affected by visual impairment have also shown how theatre can act as an essential element for overcoming the psychological barriers (that people sometimes surround themselves with) of showing themselves before an audience.

The school also worked in projects that included the participation of blind students from Bulgaria and Germany (in a project entitled “The face of the night”, supported by the “Culture” program of the Municipality of Sofia), and has seen the establishment of a theatre groups by children who participated in a dramatization event in 2005. Last, but not least, starting from 2007 until today the graduates finish their secondary education with a theatre performance.

Our last Bulgarian partner, **association “Hope for all”**, reflects another reality: marking the image and the focus of work in benefit of disadvantaged groups.

Their educational background walks through several European projects (such as „SUCCESS”, BG051PO001-4.2.05-0001 „School for self-affirmation and preparation for the European horizons” - Operational program “Human Resources Development”) and fosters the creation of national dance clubs, artistic ateliers and theatre clubs. The main objective of these establishments “is to improve the sensory and perceptive activity of students with special education needs, to achieve a higher level of sustainability of their attention and concentration, to enrich their linguistic capacity, as well as to help them accumulate new practical knowledge”. (Todorova, Marcheva, 2015) According to Rositsa Todorova, national dances and performing arts have the power not only to rationalize the free time of students with special education needs, but also to increase their motivation for personal manifestations, in accordance with their interest and needs.



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“Hope for all” association has been involved in activities with a big number of children and young adults with different disadvantages; therefore, they are used to hear parents ask them “Why did you choose theatre?”; the answer is clear – theatre is a great educational tool because it is entertaining and does not resemble lessons, but is rather taken as a game. “During the exercises we crawl, we sing, we turn into animals or fairy tale or book characters” Rositsa continues. The action that takes place in the children’s theatre studio takes an entertaining, play-like and dynamic form. The interesting exercises and etudes turn the activities into games and the game is a model of life. “The game however differs from regular training since it introduces an additional crucial component – love. Thus playing not only develops the young participants’ craftiness, attention and intellect, but also their souls.” (Todorova, Marcheva, 2015).

Therefore, according to Todorova’s experience, a core and indispensable element in the world of theatre addressed to children and young people is fun: playing means developing yourself; throughout the activities in the “drama-bubble”, the pupils find their qualities and adapt their actions in the different contexts where everything is done together in a group situation but each of them is responsible for him or herself as well as for his or her friend. Theatre has another value: it helps active participants trust not only in themselves but also in the other people. Diligence and responsibility are then important outcomes that every participant learns to develop within the activities. We learn by our experiences and we should not forget that our first experiences come through playing games.

We shall close this section by quoting a part of a conversation between BG team members (Claudio and Zornitsa):

“We were meeting the kids and asking some questions. One question was “how do you imagine dancing”; there were many various answers showing that they have hardly any concept about it. But one very quiet and little girl said “dancing is music with a path”.... Again, I dropped dead. “When a blind child leaves you speechless” could be a nice motto. [...] But I really need to share... I am experiencing this with my two new theatre friends and I doubt if everyone can understand or even be close to understanding this ... When I leave the school I



am in trance, I do not see, I do not hear, I am up in my happy head because we are doing something for someone ELSE who loves and needs it."

B. UCAN Productions

The organizational structure of the V.I.S.I.ON project has been enhanced and is blooming thanks to the outstanding efforts and commitments of the Welsh partner: UCAN (Unique Creative Arts Network) Productions.

Their knowledge counts with years of experience in using the creative arts to increase physical and vocal confidence, support mobility and independent living and challenge the general public perceptions of the capabilities of those with sight loss. Their groundwork is the fact that all the forms of art (drama, dance, music, creative writing, tactile art and photography) are extremely helpful for those with low vision: participants having the opportunity to take part in series of artistic activities on a rotation basis boost their capabilities for reacting and adapting to different conditions, always having the consciousness of the body and the sense of its movement. In this perspective and according to their experience and efficient workshops, UCAN Productions start their report with a few ideas:

- stations for different art forms (music, drama, circus skills and tactile arts) need to be set up throughout the workshop building (or premises) breaks, for the children and young people, to have space and possibility to socialize and chat;
- there should be no judgment regarding what was produced and how;
- each encounter with an artistic form is meant to be exploratory and instrumental, designed to achieve the project aims (raising self-esteem, self-awareness and confidence among v.i. youths) rather than develop the children's artistic abilities.

One of the most important features, attracting the attention in the practice of UCAN Productions, is the ***active involvement of visually impaired young people in the decisions and considerations***



of the organisation. They have an impressively successful Young People's Steering Committee, which provides advice and support to every aspect of the organisational activities.

"Listening to, and working with, the young people and building long and lasting working partnerships with national and regional sight loss organisations has been key to our success."
(Aristidou D, 2015, p. 2)

Another key point in UCAN organization is the **participation of young sighted volunteers** who acquire a better understanding of what it might be like with sight loss and support community cohesion, as well as make friends to share experiences and give the chance to their visually impaired peers to build friendships without feeling different or excluded.

The UCAN case study is the most significant one in terms of dealing with young visually impaired people: the Maggie's Club Theatre Workshops was set up in honor of Dr. Margaret (Maggie) Woodhouse OBE, who is based at the School of Optometry and Vision Sciences and whose expertise lies in visual development in children, particularly those with special needs.²

The workshops project is based on practical activity with the assumption that: "The 'hands on' experience will lead to stronger motivation and more permanent learning than the experience that is purely abstract" (Courtney, R. 1982).

The UCAN experiences in general and Maggie's club in particular, engage children and young people emotionally, physically and intellectually, in coherence with Hilton's levels of learning self-expression, which translated into drama exercises and activities are as follows:

- Psycho-motoric - physical activities involving movement, gesture and voice, often dealing with energy and focused on the body and on physical activity.
- Affective - activities designed to engage the children and young people emotionally with material and are focused on giving them a sense of well-being.
- Cognitive - these are drama games and problem solving exercises, which engage young people's minds and their creativity.

² <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/experts/dr-j-margaret-maggie-woodhouse/>



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From 2012 to 2015 Maggie's club has involved forty-seven participants aged between 7 and 22 with low vision and additional disabilities to achieve all those results that unsupported people with visual impairment hardly ever achieve in their lives: among all, to improve social skills, to develop children and young people's self-confidence and self-esteem, to give them the opportunity to make and stay friends, to create a sense of community where everyone is valued and accepted, and to provide them with appropriate role models.

The content of Maggie's club is focused around the concept of play. (Aristidou, D. 2015) Considering its huge success among and for the v.i. young people involved, this approach reconfirms also the observations of the Bulgarian colleagues from association "Hope for all".

Another extraordinary example given/experimented by UCAN is the involvement, as experienced practitioners, of visually impaired young people aged 16-25 who had been part of UCAN LEAD, a yearlong programme of workshop leader training, equipping visually impaired young people interested in theatre, with workshop leading skills³.

It is clear how significant and valuable this synergy has proven to be for all the users (participants, facilitators - both visually impaired or not, volunteers, and families).

The UCAN National report perfectly demonstrates how profound this experience is for all who participate in it (actively or not) by quoting several witnesses, whose words reflect the privilege they had in watching the young people develop in so many ways.

For example:

Mrs Julia Godin (Parent)

Maggie's Club is always eagerly anticipated by our 12 year old daughter. She has autism, learning disabilities, is partially deaf too but Maggie's Club staff make her feel valued special and completely included. Maggie's Club gives our daughter the space to be herself, to be valued for who she is, plus fun and friendship with other young people. It has given her

³ <http://ucanproductions.org/2013/07/ucan-lead-graduation/>



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confidence to be more independent and to participate as an equal. Maggie's Club activities use venues that are valued within the community so the young people actively experience feeling part of the wider community not excluded by being shut away in inferior spaces. Our daughter would miss Maggie's Club hugely if it were to stop. She has few activities where she feels equal. We thank UCAN staff and volunteers most sincerely for giving so much joy to young people who don't normally experience the range of activities, in other settings, that this organisation puts on.

Eleanor, age 15:

"The main thing I have gained from UCAN is confidence – to accept my visual impairment and not feel like I have to hide it or worry about it because I've done so much despite my visual impairment."

Megan, age 22, UCAN LEADER:

"I've had the experience of acting and recording through UCAN but it's opened up so many more options. With the experience you have in UCAN you're able to do anything you want to do. You don't need to do UCAN just to do drama; you could come to UCAN and become a lawyer. Just because it's given you that extra edge and that confidence to believe in what you want to do."

Lloyd, Junior Chairman, 22

"UCAN has had a huge impact on my life, both personally and professionally. The experiences I've had through UCAN have given me an optimism and self-esteem that would have not developed in the same way had I not been a member. They have also given me that important sense of drive and ambition - not, I hope, in the ruthless and selfish sense, but more in the spirit and belief that there is a positive future out there for every individual to go and grab for themselves. Whilst visual impairment is the one similarity that brings everyone together at



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UCAN, we whole-heartedly reject the idea that it actually defines anyone. We see past the disability, and we exist to show others how to do the same."

Healthy group dynamics and social skills development are essential elements according to UCAN experience as is working in a creative atmosphere, consistently with imagination, with a sense of play and with the "ability to imagine". (Aristidou, D. 2015, p. 20) And theatre, at this stage, represents the most adequate instrument for young visually impaired to build a sort of possibility, which is aspirational and empowering also developing their capacity to make a world, which challenges prejudice and discrimination, for its process of transformation, of idea into action, of one person into another, of space into place, and its creation of communion and community leaving room to every participant to be himself and to retain his individual identity. In particular, ***Creative teaching, teaching creativity and creative learning*** (Lucas, 2001) provides a list that gives guidelines regarding the development of young people's creativity.

- i. Being respectful rather than dismissive*
- ii. Encouraging active not passive learning*
- iii. Supporting individual interests rather than standardised curriculums*
- iv. Engaging many learning styles not one*
- v. Encouraging and exploring emotional responses*
- vi. Posing questions not statements*
- vii. Being open-ended rather than closing-down*
- viii. Being known as surprising rather than predictable*
- ix. Offering many patterns rather than a standardised model*
- x. Moving the 'classroom' to varied environments*
- xi. Recognising the multiple intelligences*
- xii. Including tactile and experience-based activity*
- xiii. Stimulating social as well as private learning*



Community and Belonging is another inseparable element in the development of social skills - an atmosphere where young people and children feel comfortable, safe and valued, which allow them to play, develop, and be courageous at taking risks and grow.

UCAN, specifically, possesses a best practice in this case:

“The practice of WE is important in making sure that young people do not see themselves as ‘other’ but perceive themselves as part of an ‘us’ – meeting, working and being with others all united through play and theatre. This is true collaboration - the recognition that difference brings richness while simultaneously enjoying being part of a group. It is also empowering for young people to recognise that they don't need to feel ‘other’ or conform to a particular profile to fit in; they can be themselves or a particular aspect of themselves, and be accepted and part of the ‘us’.” (Aristidou, D. 2015, p. 19)

Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little. (Kushner, T. 2001)

C. MUSIC'ARTE and I BOHÉMIENS

The values of theatre, considering courses, activities and the concept of art-therapy, are perfectly reflected in our two Sicilian partners’ principles and actions, whose experiences go far beyond the idea of the simple workshop. After all, the whole project turns around the fulcrum of the city of Palermo, which will host the final intensive international week of our most important deliverable: the workshop with the children.

The main experts from *Music'Arte* and *I Bohémiens* have in fact worked together and built a stable friendship, the synergy from which enabled them to perform and be part - as active members and facilitators - of the highest dimension in the Sicilian cultural life. Their experience walks through various forms of art, which several times have been finely forged together for a further assimilation for the potential audience.



Both organisations aim at creating an alternative space, in which there can be events of different genres, from musical entertainment and comedies to classical music concerts, from speech theatre to dance as well as social theatre projects and events, to keep alive Art in its broadest meaning in all its forms and to give everyone a chance to share it, benefit from it and grow with it. As far as their belief and experiences are concerned, Art (even the classical art music) is for everyone and anyone should be able to get in touch with it, especially children, students, disabled people, who need to receive the right incentive to listen to themselves, to find that inner place from where they can increase their awareness for their growth path.

Their most valuable experience with people affected by visual impairment belongs to few years ago, from 2007 to 2012, when significant courses focused on art and theatre took place at the Institute of the Blind of Palermo “Florio-Salamone”. The participants were selected by the psychologist of the Institute who expressly selected the most serious cases (also with multiple disabilities, a fact that placed before the responsible experts a further test for their actions that had to be inevitably adapted to the various special needs and circumstances) to take part in the project, so that they could have a beneficial effect from the workshop.

The difference, from before and after the experience, was astounding: their commitment and behavior, the critical and creative abilities they developed during the workshop and the feedback from their families, doctors and psychiatrists. Moreover, the need of the participants to test themselves and their ability to play was a significant mean for the audience and all the others external participants to simply consider them as people, as human beings.

Casimiro Alaimo, main director of the courses and performances, and theatre expert from *I Bohémiens* said:

“From my point of view it was an extreme, powerful experience. It changed my way of living, looking and exploring the world around me. Also my way of directing has changed since then.” (Alaimo, 2015, P. 8)



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Also Stefania Vitale, our theatre expert from *Music'Arte*, took part in the courses as second director and coordinator within the activities, stated:

"I understood that the art of acting is suitable for everyone. No matter what kind of physical or psychological obstacles are put in your way. Acting is a form of communication that goes far beyond our five senses. It has to do mostly with presence and consciousness of who we are and what we are capable of. I also learned that blind or partially sighted people have much to teach us about "being". They're not so easily influenced by surrounding circumstances and they're normally more in touch with their emotions." (Vitale, 2015, p. 8)

The theatre training method they mostly rely on, which sees the influence of the theatre-laboratory by Jerzy Grotowski and *Odin Teatret* by Eugenio Barba, is focused on the belief that "the awareness of the body-person as an organism made of mind-heart-body is strongly involved and put on the line. Removing psychic inhibitions and focusing on the creative process are our main objectives. The creative process itself, using symbols and metaphors, involving users in activities that involve a sensitive and kinetic commitment, is proposed as a mean to identify, express their emotions and to understand and resolve certain difficulties". (Vitale, 2015, p. 10)

Their experience is indeed essential for the purposes of our V.I.S.I.ON which intends to go beyond the idea of the "theatre for the performance" and try to establish the idea of the "theatre for yourself".

D. SOCIETÀ DANTE ALIGHIERI

The experience of the Società Dante Alighieri in Luxembourg is widely different: the national report shows the difficulties they have found, and are dealing with, within the territory of the Grand Duchy, where 60% of the population is foreign-born, where there are three national languages (Luxembourgish, French and German) but a myriad of spoken languages in its cosmopolitan capital. All these conditions inevitably influence the academic and educational



organization whose perception of new projects is partitioned in several and divergent “personalities” that slow down and sometimes block the acceptance even of significant ideas and propositions.

Therefore, they have set the basis for an intercultural communication, which is at the core of their activity, a necessary perspective for a further understanding and strength of the different cultural identities of the singular nationalities that make up the varied landscape of Luxembourg.

Regarding the Visual Impairment, the Società Dante Alighieri, before V.I.S.I.ON, did not meet real conditions and opportunities for the development of a parallel education considering the value of theatre. They did, yet, have great experiences with children in schools and in theatres; thus, they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to deal with the youngest generations to understand the needs, the feelings, the reactions and so to recognize the adequate moments when to intervene and educate, as well as when to let the children be and learn from them.

In this context, they firmly believe that, the educational value of theatre for the self should also be provided to people affected by visual impairment, most of all the young generations, so as to boost their self-awareness to consciously leave their comfort zone and experiment without fear, to express their emotions in an articulate and socially acceptable way and to break down the last barriers to full and complete social inclusion.

Luxembourg does not possess, like other European countries, specialized centers for educating people with visual impairment. Hence, the *Institut pour déficients visuels*, is apparently the only institution responsible for coordinating the inclusion of visually impaired children and their integration in regular schools, which, as seen above, possess various systems and traditions and are difficultly willing to co-operate with other systems and traditions.

Therefore, as they claim themselves, a simple collaboration with only one organization in Luxembourg is not possible. This would involve, in fact, a number of logistical and organizational difficulties that the Società Dante Alighieri can hardly manage alone.

In cases of children with disabilities, it is not uncommon that the individual never had the chance to develop a clear sense of self, or he or she may have difficulty differentiating his/her person



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from the environment. The failure to distinguish oneself from the environment is common in children with disabilities, and especially with children who are blind, because the self-development process involves a significant amount of very early interaction with caregivers, interaction that is disrupted by the disability. That is why "art therapy" is essential for establishing a stable awareness with your own body and all the actions you are capable of in life because it is based on the belief that the creative process mirrors the self, and is healing and life-enhancing.

On the basis of enormous efforts and via various channels Società Dante Alighieri has achieved the success of generating the interest of schools, visually impaired youths and parents, which is one of the main tasks. They have also identified the theatre expert to work with the children and are expecting the much appreciated approval of the Institut pour defectives visuels. Should the latter fail to see the value of the VISION offer, Società Dante Alighieri is ready to move the activities to Liege (within the wider area around Luxembourg) and involve local participants and theatre experts.

3. GENERAL AND SPECIFIC PURPOSES IN RELATION TO VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

We shall start this section with several professional opinions and deep honest feelings – theatre being a profession, in which empathy and compassion are intensified to the fullest - concerning the relation between theatre and the evolution of personality in general as well as concerning the ways in which the use of theatre in work with visually impaired young people has changed experts' practices and approaches. These opinions come from a few of the experts' questionnaires, which



can be discovered in their full content and number on the project web-site, section “other results”
- <http://vision-erasmusplus.eu/pages/other.php>.

“Based on my entire experience in the field of applied theatre, I consider that assigning specific social functions narrows the totality of the theatre experience. On the other hand, if theatre is considered as a playfield, it offers an unlimited variety of communicative, hence therapeutic, cognitive, etc. forms and models and is an invaluable tool in the social and educational spheres. [...] Theatre (and arts in general of course) combined with playing, creates a neutral meeting territory. Human beings have an inherent need and capacity to play. We play all the time, we enter and exit roles (of a parent, a child, a manager, a mentor, an authority, of someone who is in love), we create plans and scenarios, consciously or subconsciously model our behavior. Theatre however takes away the imposition and brings us out of the clutches of necessity. The person is empowered, according his/her own choice and without a life-imposed necessity for that, to create and destroy roles.

Theatre [...] gives you confidence that you can be different according to your own choices, that you can entertain the others, to be interesting, funny, scary, unpredictable, good, bad, smart or stupid. The stage gives you the power to say things you would never say in your everyday communication, to find new means to express yourself. It increases your self-assessment.” (Yavor Kostov, actor and free-lance director, English language teacher)

“Because it is a communal process, a gathering together of people to share stories and experiences, it (theatre) is also a celebration of our shared humanity and in this respect it is joyful. It gives permission to anyone of any age to play and to discover the world through play, to try out different roles in order to find our true self and to experiment and take risks within the make believe, knowing that any consequence in the make believe will not affect our real lives. It takes away fear and makes us resilient, prepared to take risks. This is the very basis of self-confidence.[...] It’s also humbling, as someone with sight, to suddenly find yourself in a situation where, in terms of



visual impairment, you are not the expert. In fact, you are the one person in the room who has the least knowledge or understanding of what it means to be visually impaired. [...] I have found this a very powerful and effective way of working. This has affected all my practice as I now tend to view theatre making as the creation of a dialogue rather than the staging of a vision.” (Dinos Aristidou, Education Consultant, Director, Playwright, Workshop Leader, Teacher Trainer)

“To me, being visually impaired is an inconvenience not a disability. So I work with the same goals in mind, only a little slower. Knowledge of the space is crucial and much more time needs to be given to allow those participating get to know and feel comfortable in the space. Of course all this requires patience, but once overcome, anything is possible. To encourage a blind actor to simply walk across a stage with confidence takes time, but has a huge impact not only on the actor but also the audience. [...] There is no doubt that working with these young people has changed my own practice. It can be very challenging but I have never found anything in my entire professional career that is more rewarding. I have changed the way I write and I am constantly looking for script adaptations to include audio description within the text (almost like a radio play).” (Bernard Latham, actor/director)

Now it would be wise to continue with a look outside the present partnership, in order to note and appreciate what other professionals have done in the same sphere.

Thus for example, the book “What’s Special? Opera, dance and music education for and with people with special needs across Europe”, published by RESEO (the European Network for Opera and Dance Education) shows how much has been done so far in the diverse corners of Europe, and how much can still be done demonstrating, through the publication of several examples, successful outcomes of exciting and enchanting artistic journeys, celebrating the creative soul in us all.

“Carmen: Bird of Prey” is, for instance, a collaboration between The Finnish National Opera’s education department, the DuvTeatern (a theatre group consisting of adult disabled and non-disabled actors and theatre professionals) and Blue Flamenco (a dance studio providing high-



quality training to a diverse range of students including young dancers with disabilities. The most important aspect of the “*Carmen: Bird of Prey*” project, related to our purposes, is its process that “values all participants, focusing on their talents and possibilities rather than on their limitations”. The working method is based on the idea of seeing disability as a personal and artistic resource. This idea is emphasized in every rehearsal session by giving time and space to the actors and their special creativity. The original text is approached through the use of improvisation and a variety of stimuli from the actors, using words, body language and singing. Every scene is built on the personal qualities, abilities of the actors” (Finnish National Opera, 2010, p. 16).

Another remarkable event took place in Lille, France in celebration of the designation of the city as *European Capital of Culture* in 2004. In that occasion, the Japanese choreographer Saburo Teshigawara put together a performance with eighteen blind and partially-sighted young people (aged 11 to 14) who had had no experience on stage. With these words he affirmed that those students had “*a different approach to dance. With our eyes we see the forms that surround us, but those who cannot see have to use something other than their eyes to perceive space in different ways. I asked them to use their breathing. And this is the principal theme of “Prelude of Dawn”, breathing and thus the air... Breathing has become the way of counting time, the transcription of space and the center of their actions... With them I had to develop another way of teaching them dance techniques... Sometimes, those who see are blinded by what they see. They then forget to feel*” (Teshigawara, 2010, p. 53).

Regarding V.I.S.I.ON, our industrious consortium is already setting the basis for the development of a training method “teaching self-awareness and consciousness of the space around” to visually impaired children through the expressions of theatre and interactivity with the stage, music, sounds and skin contacts. This training method will help them understand the surrounding world and, which is most important, understand themselves. It would give visually impaired children the confidence to believe in themselves and to learn how to expand and project their freedom and abilities around them. The project envisaged developing the training method with the



participation of 45 visually impaired children from the four countries involved, but at this very moment the number of those involved in Sofia, BG is almost double to the envisaged and the situation is the same in Palermo, IT and Cardiff, Wales. No team members are sparing time or efforts to bring happiness to as many participants as possible through joint activities for self-discovery and growth by playing the learning game of theatre.

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

We pledged to focus our method on the children whose specific behavior, attitudes and expectations are an important basis for appropriate design and implementation of future workshops and courses.

Since we are dealing with four countries and several theatre experts, we realized it is advisable to keep a record of the methods a trainer uses, and reflect on his/her own experience using them, to help him adapt and improve them. During activities with participants a team member or volunteer is always observing the use of different methods in order to provide feedback on the theatre expert's actions, as well as on those of the participants. The participants in the training / workshops can also give feedback on the methods introduced; after all, they are the ones who should be benefiting from the activities directly.

The discussions after each session between active theatre tutors and those with observing roles are always amazing with the special moments, which made impression on those having different roles. Sometimes these do not match or are seen differently and need to be further investigated during the next session.

In our case – work based on the unfathomable riches of performing arts – exists an extremely wide range of methods, exercises, games, activities, which could be used with the participants. The theatre experts are however never tempted to use all the interesting methods in one session. The



participants may enjoy them at first, but too much variety in one serving may cause confusion and frustration. As practice shows, it is advisable to have some new trick up the sleeve every once in a while – this surely triggers an energy outburst from the group. It however must never be forgotten that training methods are used to enable learning to take place, not to prove that the trainer is a good performer.

Another important aspect of the experiences so far proves that it is advisable to involve young performing arts trainers, students in artistic classes for example, young actors, even if only as assistants or volunteers. They can more easily interact with the young VI people and with them the VI youths can more easily associate themselves and establish peer relations of trust and mutual respect. An experience like this would also bring new vision about the ways, in which theatre can be used for the benefit of children and young people with visual impairment.

Paola Bonanomi, tyflopädagogist of the Blind Institute of Milano, affirms that the introduction of a new method of raising self-esteem and the use of a creative theatre will offer an extraordinary resource to our visually impaired children's social learning process:

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

To make creative theatre with V.I.P., Bonanomi continues, it is necessary to deal with two problematic categories (Bonanomi):



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

Within the V.I.S.I.ON workshops, we will start with a thorough presentation of ourselves, our ideas and achievement goals in order for the participants – both children with visual impairment and theatre experts to become well acquainted with the team, the philosophy behind the actions and the involvement & devotion requirements in order for maximum results to be achieved. Starting from the inspired team, V.I.S.I.ON will spread its notions in order to prepare the participants for the practical joint activities that are about to follow.

Fostering and facilitating social integration, which is intended by the project, will start with the building of friendship.

4. BEYOND THE “THEATRE FOR THE PERFORMANCE” TOWARDS THE “THEATRE FOR THE SELF”

The first question we asked ourselves, the answer to which triggered the writing of the project, was “how can theatre and artistic expression help people with visual impairment communicate?”. At the very beginning, during the brainstorming, we were wondering what theatre is and what it means for people who attend courses. The word used is “people” and not “actors” on purpose because theatre is not a close *tertulia* of pedant actors who are devoted to the performance; theatre is open to everyone, young and adults, boys or girls, and represents one of the most significant means to “learn about yourself” and be prepared for “life learning”. A theatre course,





for instance, consents to all participants (visually impaired, blind or able-bodied - no difference has to be made: since it is a personal learning, everyone finds his/her own meaning) to open the mind to creative imagination and to emotions. Expressing, through word and non-verbal language (that has an indivisible value in the communicative act), the imaginary world that every pupil creates and paints in the various theatre activities expands and automatically amplifies the personal freedom and the ability (and easiness) in communicating among mates and people in different social contexts. Theatre and the artistic expression - in any form - gives us a deeper look into ourselves, enables us to get to know ourselves and to react with assurance in the various social interactions that life abundantly provides. Considering the provided comments in the theatre expert questionnaires we created – this is confirmed in all respondents' personal experiences.

According to RESEO, the European Network for Opera and Dance Education, (RESEO, 2010) “the creative process allows for no “wrong” way of thinking, and no “correct solution”. Some of the best creative results are achieved by inviting diversity and difference. Apart from intrinsic artistic merit, arts education also fosters individual development, enhances creativity, builds self-esteem and social skills, and encourages the exchange of ideas between participating individuals” (Heid and Joly, 2010, p. 6).

A radical change of perspective is needed at this stage. When we ask people how they consider theatre according to the most frequent answers theatre is seen as “the stage”, a place where a performance has to be rehearsed and performed in a number of events where an audience of well-dressed adults wants to be entertained. We keep affirming that theatre has a deeper meaning and that every person (who begins a course or a workshop) models in a different way inserting his/her emotions and colors. People who have gone through time dedicated too theatre, as are quite a few from VISION team members, claim that they have been enriched and sublimated by it and that they have discovered thoughts and emotions they had no idea were in them. It is a difficult concept for those who have never participated in a course or in a workshop, but theatre, through its activities focused on trust, respect, self-investigation and an infinite



variety of possibilities, offers you a new reliance in your person and an alternative to consider yourself in the world.

In 2010, Jan Truszczyński - Director-General for Education, Training, Culture and Youth in the European Commission - stated that “having an active cultural life encompasses both creation and participation. Both dimensions open up opportunities for self-expression and communication, and can be crucial in overcoming the isolation that too often constitutes the heaviest burden of a disability. Artistic expression fosters independence and allows all to experience the joy of discovery and exploration; it deserves a central role in policies and measures aimed at fighting exclusion”⁶. It is clear then (and it would be clearer after a course or a workshop) that a substantial changeover is needed: from a theatre which is only meant to the mere performance, to the concept of theatre as essential mean to raise our self-esteem and to figure out our capabilities in life by building our confidence in “taking risks”.

What better closing of this section than quoting William James: *“The greatest revolution of our generation is the discovery that human beings by changing the inner attitudes of their minds, can change the outer aspects of their lives”*.

5. INVOLVING PARENTS AND PARENTAL CONTROL

The aspect about parent involvement is one that has to be taken carefully: its importance can be seen from the fact that when exaggerated, the role of the parents on their child during the workshop could provoke an intermission - and an interruption - of his personal learning.

Leaving the stage to Jane Latham, expert from UCAN Productions, a grand colleague and beloved friend, would help us better comprehend how important the “deemed” interactive participation of parents is for the blind and visually impaired kids:

Engaging with Parents, Carers and Guardians of Visually impaired young people



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When planning a new drama workshop or activity for visually impaired young people it is vital that all communications with the parents, carers, teachers and guardians are clear and concise and provide all the information required in a simple and easy to understand format. Particular attentions should be paid to communications needs, as it is possible that some parents may also have visual impairments⁴.

Drama and performance arts is often a new activity for those who are blind and partially sighted and like anything new, can sometimes be difficult to promote. Parents and those who care for vulnerable children, have an absolute right to be concerned about the wellbeing and safety of their child and it is the professional drama workshop organisers responsibility and duty to make sure that every necessary action has been taken to safeguard these young people at all times.

At the very least these should include:

- ◆ *A current child protection policy with clear instructions on procedures.*
- ◆ *All necessary legal requirements and checks on those working with the young people.*
- ◆ *A Risk Assessment of the workshop venues.*
- ◆ *Information on the young persons' special requirements e.g.: medical, allergy.*

Without the permission and enthusiasm of the parents and carers it can be difficult and sometimes impossible to engage with these young people outside a school setting. The key is to make sure that all their concerns are listened to and addressed.

⁴ One of the most talented and dedicated participants in the group in Sofia – the completely blind Ilkai – has a brother studying at the same school, with some remaining useful vision. Both their parents are completely blind. They have a part-time assistant, but usually the brother – Hakan – is one taking care of most family concerning tasks. Ilkai is a very quick learning when dancing and body movements are concerned, but she had never been previously involved in extracurricular dance lessons due to the inability of her parents to take her to such.



Parents often have specific concerns and a common worry is: “My child is very shy and needs me to be with him all the time, he doesn’t like loud noises and doesn’t mix well with other young people.”

It is true that drama is not for everyone, however do encourage the parent to bring the child along, reassuring them that their child will not be asked to be involved in any activity he/she doesn’t enjoy and invite the parent to stay with the child until they are confident that their child is engaging with the activity.

It has been widely reported that there is a major benefit to parents attending activities, as it is an opportunity to meet and share experiences with others who live with the same day to day issues. This is something that often happens organically and should be encouraged whenever possible.

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

However, as anticipated, another particular consideration must be taken into account: parental background and the restrictions by parents and family and traditional cultural and religious attitudes and behavior. The latter could be handled in the artistic discourse context, but a less homogeneous group could also lead to failure.

It is understandable for the parents to brace the children and protect them from their fears; on the other hand, by doing so, they could be actually assisting the lack of self-reliance in their children, causing the latter to automatically stop facing their fears and stop growing socially.



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Being over-protected, in fact, is another element that entails a lack of trust in the self and personal capacities since an extreme help and preservation have the same effects as leaving someone completely alone: it impedes the establishment of courage and reliance in yourself and the individual, as a natural consequence, stoops and closes him/herself in a shell that, in fact, gives him/her no protection in daily life. The motivation lies in the shortage of social abilities: the person finds no means to behave with reliance in himself, being that he has not developed the important skills of speaking, acting and presenting himself for the other people to take into account and respect.

In a similar situation, the children walk into the world of adults with less personal energy, less personal skills and an unavoidable need of someone else's aid.

6. A SOCIAL FUTURE, A BETTER FUTURE

In conclusion, self-esteem and self-reliance are indivisible from the positive interactions we establish in our environment. Thoughts and emotions are intrinsic in the person but always take value when an interpersonal relation is involved. We, as individuals, are bound to the need of cohabiting in our environment, which always include other persons. It is essential, then, to build a stable assurance that helps us interact and positively communicate with different people in different contexts.

According to Lindefield (LINDEFIELD, 1999, p. 24) the internal conception of self-esteem is a cyclical process that might be started from the idea of "me" as a good human being. This belief triggers new positive thoughts within the psychological sphere of the individual such as specific



appreciations on “my value” and positive thoughts on “my possibilities” (I deserve to be happy, I have what I need, I can make people like me, they care of me, ...). All these steps bring to an experimentation of further positive sensations and optimism relieving your mind that begins to be filled by positive and creative ideas for the present and future. In these conditions, we indeed start to move and act in order to pursue what we need and/or desire.

As a consequence, people in the surrounding would feel more at ease and interested in someone who is open, expressive, optimist and active in life. That leads to better feelings from both sides that automatically bring mutual aid to the interaction.

Without making any difference between children and young adults with or without visual impairment, it can be pointed as a fact that, already at school age, the differences between pupils' self-esteem are pronounced and may affect their interpersonal relations at school and outside it. Childhood is indeed the most important period and the most valuable moment when to build self-assurance, since it is when the first habits and traits of our personality are built.

Self-esteem is a fleeting concept at this stage that can head to a deep declivity and loss of self-reliance in life's challenges: feeling abridged, ridiculed or humiliated, and being adversely compared with other people, are the main reasons for which a child/young adult abandon the self-confidence and may provoke psychological consequences that might not be easily solved.

It is then a proper time for our V.I.S.I.ON to gain a deeper meaning and a higher value: preventing these consequences by letting the children with visual impairment experiment their skills and play as protagonists within a group. Our role in the game of life is just as spectators of a purer concept: let children be children.

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;



Project number: 2014-1-BG01-KA201-001555



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So is it now I am a man;
 So be it when I shall grow old,
 Or let me die!
 The Child is father of the Man;
 And I could wish my days to be
 Bound each to each by natural piety.

W. Wordsworth (1802)

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"This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein."



Project number: 2014-1-BG01-KA201-001555

