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## Educational Potential of the Artistic Expression of Visual Impairment in Books for Children and Youth<sup>9</sup>

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**Abstract:** In accordance with the request of holistic child's personality development, education by artistic means seems to be helpful and effective in removing barriers and deepening a child's skills to understand and respect otherness and as one of the effective ways leading to the social acceptance and inclusion of people with some kind of handicap. This paper deals with the possibilities of the educational use of illustrated books for children and youth, which thematise one handicap type – visual impairment. It starts from the assumption of the high effectiveness of experiential methods and examines inclusive thinking formation options and the attitudes of unimpaired pupils through experiential activities, which use illustrated books thematising blindness. The solution to the issue comes from the analysis and comparison of the poetological aspects of artistic expression of such handicaps in concrete book titles. The paradigmatic differences between books illustrated in traditional ways and artistically experimental books are defined.

**Keywords:** book illustration, visual handicap, aesthetics, reception, pre-school and elementary education.

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## Introduction

Although the inclusion of physically, mentally and socially disadvantaged people is currently a high social issue, the realization of inclusive changes in society as well as the promotion of inclusive educational ideas are only progressing slowly in school practice. The success of inclusion depends mainly on the understanding and acceptance of the specifics of disadvantaged people, while the key is, according to several authors (e.g. Gash, 1996; Siperstein et al., 2003), the active building of positive attitudes towards the disadvantaged on the part of the able-bodied majority. It is necessary to start with the formation of inclusive thinking from an early child age, ideally from the family environment and the lowest levels of education in order to make inclusive changes successful. Nowadays, mainly the identification and elimination of barriers between the intact and disadvantaged population to build an inclusive culture is required, in which disadvantaged persons are perceived and accepted as unique and fully-valued individuals. The experiential teaching methods are offered to able-bodied pupils to overcome distorted perceptions and prejudices. These methods support the development of emotional intelligence and act on pupil motivation and activation.

The area of world book production for children and youth also reflects the global trends in the inclusion of disadvantaged. The titles that represented various types of handicap are becoming more frequent in these trends. These books provide diverse opportunities for the formation of inclusive thinking and attitudes towards the disadvantaged according to the important position of artistic literature in the life of the child and their school education. The paper examines the educational potential of illustrated books that thematize the visual impairment, particularly its most severe form – blindness.

The starting point is a definition of blindness as a sensory disadvantage. We give, for a better understanding of the issue, some mistaken beliefs that remain about this disability among the intact society. A mode of the artistic expression of handicap largely reflects its perception by the society and at the same time forms the personality of a young person.

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We will focus on the different modalities of the artistic transformation of visual impairment in children's books in another part of the paper. The book illustration is a visual interpretation of a literary text and its features are in many ways derived from the very literary purpose and content. It further develops the literary idea, as a visual similarity of the text, while use specific and sensory language picture. Therefore, we have analysed perceptual and reception specifics in the context of intact as well as disadvantaged child reader/viewer on selected books. We examine, by means of fine arts methods (description, interpretation, qualitative analysis and comparison), paradigmatic shift between traditional and innovative ways of artistic expression of visual impairment in illustrations. The aim is to identify the ethical and axiological dimension of the child's authentic experience from these illustrations and on this basis to specify the opportunities that are offered for capitalizing on educational communication.

### **Blindness as a severe sensory handicap**

Sight is the most important sense in human interactions with the environment. It is stated that a healthy individual obtains about 70–80 % of their information<sup>10</sup> about the outside world through the visual channel. Sight allows the simultaneous perception of large amounts of information about the environment without the risk of threat by immediate contact (Démuth, 2013). Blindness belongs to the most severe sensory disabilities. This is either a complete loss of the sight (complete blindness<sup>11</sup>) or a significant reduction of visual acuity (practical blindness<sup>12</sup>).

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<sup>10</sup> Some authors have reported up to 90–95% of the information obtained from the visual perception (e.g. Démuth, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> A complete blindness is medically defined as the loss of vision; it ranges from a total loss of light perception to a preserved light perception with faulty light projection, i.e. loss of the ability to determine the direction from which the light comes.

<sup>12</sup> In practical blindness the rest of a sight is preserved but at the insufficient rate for the ordinary practical life.

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Blind people compensate for a deficit in visual information by means of other sensory channels (supplementation of the missing visual perceptions by hearing, touch, smell, taste). Nevertheless, they have specific needs in terms of self-service, movement and spatial orientation, in access to education, written communication, etc. Visual impairment, except for impossibilities of visual perception, carries peculiarities in area of visual imagination. There are differences between individuals with congenital and acquired loss of sight. Once created, sight ideas maintain in the memory for long periods of time and fade away only slowly for those who have lost their sight in adulthood. Loss of sight at an early age in which visual skills are just developing<sup>13</sup> means for later life a complete lack of sight ideas (a state comparable with congenital blindness). Congenitally blind people create phenomenal ideas of physical world on the basis of tactile-kinaesthetic perception.<sup>14</sup> However, these ideas are limited to relatively small and close subjects. These ideas are either missing or they are in a form of considerably subjective ideas about subjects that cannot be reached (the sun, stars in the sky, valley), about their specific visual properties (colour, light-superficial aspect of subjects, their optic manifestation, perspective phenomena) or intangible concepts based on visual experience (horizon, top view). Although the language registry of blind people does include terms related to visibility, the blind cannot rely on their own sensory experience and knowledge, these words are used by "learning method" according to standard speech and knowledge mastery (a lemon is yellow, the sun sets over the horizon).

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<sup>13</sup> As stated by A. Démuth (2013), "*vision of colours, shapes, motion, face recognition, but also the resulting images and problems of the constancy of colours, sizes, as well as the actual awareness of the seen is extremely complex process that does not take place only on the retina but it requires participation of higher cortical centres*" (p. 36). For storing visual images in memory it is usually stated age limit of vision loss in 5 years.

<sup>14</sup> Space perception in sighted individuals is ensured by the coordination of three sensory analysers – visual, cutaneous and kinetic.

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## Myths and prejudices related to blindness

The representation of blind people is not high in the total number of population in developed countries.<sup>15</sup> Their inclusion into normal life currently faces various obstacles. Most of the people from standard population have, therefore, no personal experience with the blind persons. There is a huge amount of distorted notions about blindness, due to the lack of education about disabilities in society, specifically concerning the nature of these sensory limitations and how it affects the mental and social life of a blind person is poorly conceived for a healthy individual. We can choose, from the extended misconception of how the blind people perceive the world, the following:<sup>16</sup>

*Blind people see only darkness.* In fact, the blind person sees nothing, visual sensations are absent. This condition is described to the sighted as “I see the way you see with your elbow”.

*Blind people have much a better sense of touch and hearing (often musical, too) or have developed special senses (e.g. for the perception of obstacles, colour perception, etc.).* In fact, the loss of sight is not used to being compensated for by the congenital strengthening of other senses or “the sixth” sense. However, it is an incentive for their gradual development to the extent that it can give the impression of special skills or talent of a blind person.

*You shouldn't talk to blind people about colours and other visual stimuli. The inability to see means for them a significant impoverishment of life.* In fact, the blind person commonly uses expressions associated with sighted perception and visuality. People with congenital blindness do not feel the inability to see colours or beauty of the landscape as depletion. They create a practical relation to the visual aspect of the world.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the WHO, there are 39.000 people affected by total loss of vision in the world, the majority in developing countries. In Slovakia 0.06% of the population suffer from the total blindness (according to Pšenková et al., 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Prepared according to the publications issued by associations for the blind (Kovářiková, 2016; Hořová, Hůrková, & Michálek, 2015).

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*Blind people do not dream and fantasize; respectively their dreams and fantasies are deficient.* In fact, dreams and fantasies are a normal part of the blind life, even though they are filled with non-visual content (sounds, smells, tactile sensations). The absence of figurative elements in their dreams and fantasies does not mean their incompleteness for the blind persons.

*Blind people live outside the visual culture. They do not engage in visual aesthetics.* In fact, blind people are also interested in fine arts, photography, films and architecture. They care for the aesthetics of the environment and clothing. Not only can blind persons perceive some aspects of images (e.g. space accessible via tactile illustrations), but they are also able to create the picture representations on their own – symbolic drawings to express their own cognition (Kennedy, 1993).

It should be noted that when calculating prejudices about blindness, even a blind person applies mistaken beliefs to sighted people. Barriers between the world of the blind and the sighted are often reversible. The prerequisite of the development of inclusive thinking is the cognition that the emotions, needs and aspirations of the sighted and the blind are in many ways similar.

### **Overcoming the barriers between the worlds of the sighted and the blind through art**

The implementation of inclusive ideas in the educational environment impacts also upon educational stereotypes. A widespread misconception in school practice is the assumption that in order to change the negative attitudes of fully abled pupils towards disadvantaged ones, factual information about the handicap and the use of teaching methods affecting the intellect are sufficient. However, as noted by L. Požár (2009), "under appropriate attitude we understand not only a simple disappearance of unequivocally refused tendencies, but also confidence in the possibilities and capabilities of a disabled one, the willingness to join

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with him in a variety of interactions, the confidence in his own competence to handle interaction" (p. 40).

With this aim, the methods of experiential learning appear to be much more suitable. An authentic experience of an intact pupil with one with a handicap supports the internalization of principles and values of an inclusive culture, the development of social skills in contact with the disadvantaged that will ultimately pave the way for the creation of an inclusive society.

Art is one of the ways in which we can approximate the world of the blind to intact pupils, not only at the level of factual knowledge. "It provides an image of reality peacefully and emotionally" by its very nature, "transforms the reality itself through sensory perception, adventures and personal experience, too" (Šupšáková, 2007, p. 101), while helping to shape the cognitive, emotional and behavioural components of a pupil's attitude towards the disadvantaged ones. A child learns the moral standards and values of the society through art and due to the authenticity of art's statement learns to be naturally perceptive and empathetic. As noted by E. Mistrík (2001), "information about the world acquired from an art is soon becoming a part of the children's experiential world"; and thus they do not need to be "transformed with difficulty from the rational designed schemes to live and practical experiences" (p. 429).

### **The portrayal of the world of blind people in visual art and contemporary illustrations**

Visual impairment is not a rarely embodied topic in art by any means. Portrayals of blind persons are often, for instance, in the art of ancient Egypt. In Western culture they appear in mythological and biblical scenes. Modern attributes of blind people are the blind cane, guide dog and dark glasses; however, the "iconography of the blindness" has been formed over a long history. Closed eyes, their deformation or the sight obscured by a cataract resembles blindness in historical depictions. Their physical pose emphasizes servility (a blind person groping in space, relies on close subjects, is directed

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by a sighted person). It is often referred to by the social allocation of a blind person (located away from other people, in a specific area of the orphanage, hospice). The negative state of mind might be read out in his face (sadness, hopelessness, loneliness, closeness). Images of working exclusion and the poverty of a blind person are often found in the illustrated images (beggars, street musicians). In history, images of the blind are associated with the allegorical expression of ignorance. They are usually portrayed in didactical or satirical works in a negative light. Historical variations of embodiment of blind people depend on varying societal attitudes towards the handicapped that has changed during times from exclusion and loath up to compassion and kindness. The multiplicity of portrayals of blind people is related to the prevalence of visual impairment in the past. However, the images of blind people have appeared increasingly rarely in recent centuries. Persons with medical and psychological peculiarities were marginalized in modern times and the cult of physical beauty pushed them to the edge of artistic attention.

In the contemporary society there is growing interest in marginalized groups and the effort to know and understand their otherness is noticeable. The shifts in the societal thinking are reflected also in the artistic literature and its illustrations. Children's books that represent various types of medical, mental and social disadvantage have started to increase in the new millennium. The intention of their creators is to overcome prejudices and provide double-sided access between the culture of the majority and disadvantaged people. The outlined literary trend abroad reflects the initiatives and projects that are systematically devoted to this type of book. They create databases for parents and educators and provide guidance for their educational implementation.

Good examples of the current artistic depiction of blindness are the illustrations in the Slovak book *Mimi a Lisa* (Kerekesová, Moláková, Salmela, 2013) and in its sequel *Mimi a Lisa II* (Kerekesová, Moláková, Salmela, 2015).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Books follow the homonymous series of animated bedtime story by Katarína Kerekesová and Katarína Moláková. The author of the text is Alexandra Salmela, illustrations and book design originated in cooperation of animators and illustrators Katarína Kerekesová, Boris Šíma and Ivana Šebestová. Simultaneously with animated and literary treatment the radio adaptation of the story was published.



These fairy-tales represent the friendship between a sighted and a blind girl, who, due to their contrasting natures, also discover the diversity of the world and life's peculiarities together (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 1: *Mimi a Liza* (2013), book illustration  
by K. Kerekesová, B. Šíma and I. Šebestová, p. 92–93**

The book is generously illustrated throughout. The blind Mimi is portrayed as an ordinary girl and her closed eyes are the only conventional sign of her visual impairment. Mimi's enlarged ear cleverly emphasizes the importance of the hearing compensation of blind people. Everyday life, with children's playful imagination, is mingled in the girls' common experiences. Their fantasy world is portrayed extraordinary sensual and it is colourful and rich in fine details. It is filled with a lot of human and fairy-tale creatures and interesting things. The painting structure alternates between graphic patterns and areas reminiscent of various surface textures in the mode of artistic presentation. This visual variety acts also evocative and synesthetic on other senses. The images are intertwined and run into the text, with the typography sometimes expressive, as if it reminds us that the pictoriality of language is also important for

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blind Mimi. Therefore there is nothing to suggest that the blind girl lives in a deficient world,<sup>18</sup> in which dark emptiness and sadness is extended. The illustrations enable the child reader to empathize with the position of the sight impaired and such a “reincarnation” does not create discomfort, but an exemption that helps to discover new and unusual ways of perception.

### **Experimental approaches to the illustration rendition of visual impairment**

Many contemporary illustrators are looking for unconventional ways of artistic design aspects of visual impairment. Their illustrations, in the experimental books, do not count only with the visual but also with tactile perception. That is the way they get closer to the tactile books<sup>19</sup>, which are used as a didactic tool in typhlopaedics<sup>20</sup> for several decades. Practical-educational function is not prevailed in them. Primarily, they are made from artistic motives and their circle of recipients is not strictly narrowed only to blind people. The texts in these books tend to be (considering the stress placed on the artistic element of the book) minimalistic, printed simultaneously in black print and in Braille. This type of book tends to be marked with the attributes “accessible” and “inclusive” abroad, because it is as a new and specific “genre” of the art book that is interesting for the sighted as well as for the blind. At the same time, it is open to

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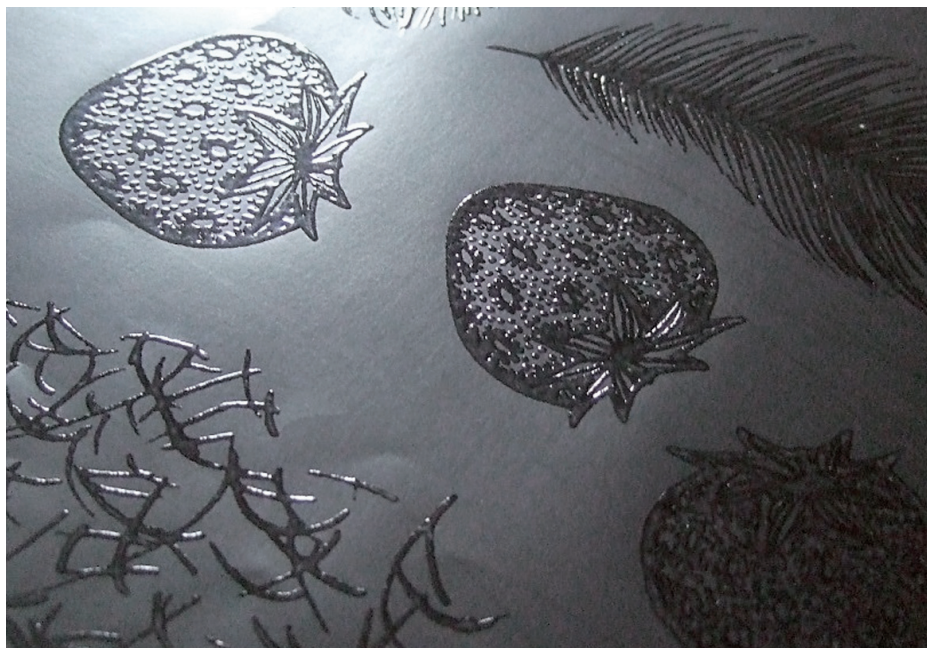
<sup>18</sup> A deficient world is the world, “*which is for the subject of epic events or subjective termination of certain terms (ultimately existential) problematic – i.e. scarce, inadequate, incomplete*” (Rédey, 2012, p. 7).

<sup>19</sup> Tactile books help blind and partially sighted children to explore the world through touch. They may or may not contain text in a larger black print and Braille. The illustrations in the book are in relief, made of dissimilar materials (textiles, cardboard, felt, leather, wood, etc.). They are made by hand (several copies) or three-dimensional relief printing images to the plastic sheeting. Tactile books develop kinesthetic and tactile perception, preparing to read Braille and stimulate the spatial imagination of blind children.

<sup>20</sup> A field of special education – the education of visually impaired.

their shared reading and “viewing”. The extraordinary rendition of topics related to visual perception is a challenge for the dialogue between the blind and sighted recipient (educator, parent, classmate) in which the parties can exchange information about the individual specifics of perception and cognition, but also about their perception and understanding of visual culture. We will try to suggest the educational potential of these experimental approaches by means of concrete examples.

The book pages of *The Black Book of Colours*<sup>21</sup> (Cottin, 2008) are “colourless”; their black colour is a “zero” colour, the lack of light that is reflected from objects and which is the physical prerequisite of colour perception. The “colour” of strawberries, birds’ feathers, leaves and rain is indicated only by plastic lines, contours and surface textures of natural materials (Fig. 2). This visual deficiency allows us to perceive the colours of nature by “other” eyes – as an emotional quality paradoxically. It also suggests the relativity and volatility of reality which is a human construction.



**Fig. 2: *The Black Book of Colors* (2008), book illustration  
by R. Faría, unpagged**

<sup>21</sup> Text by Menena Cottin, illustrations by Rosana Faría.

Another book, *El cuento fantasma*<sup>22</sup> (Gamboa, 2012), is a fairy-tale about the ghost of a never read story, who hides in a dark corner of the library. He feels himself inferior to the ghosts of other and more famous stories. In a formula that is always repeated when someone approaches (“I’m a phantom, no one sees me, I’m a phantom.”) he expresses the humble acceptance of his own predispositions and fear of interaction that is experienced by many blind people. The ghost-story ultimately finds its reader – a blind girl who helps him to appreciate his uniqueness and value. The book is interesting not only by the literary idea, but also by its visual processing. An individual diversity of ghost-stories is reflected in deliquescent rainbow swirls of felt paper, which trace the relief of the library space created by the stacking of cuttings from white paper (Fig. 3). This stylization of the architectural environment is subordinated to the optical phenomenality of the material objects and applies strict laws of perspective. This haptic information might be “at a first touch” confusing for a blind person, but might also be a source of knowledge about visual perception and visual culture.



**Fig. 3: *El cuento fantasma* (2012), book illustration  
by Hsu Wen Chen, unpagged**

<sup>22</sup> Text by Jaime Gamboa, illustrations by Hsu Wen Chen. The author of the illustrations won an award at the Biennial of Illustrations Bratislava in 2013.

Therefore, it is obvious that the experimentality of these books does not lie only in the artistic innovation of the illustrations. It is a mere change of philosophy in relation to blind people. Slovak artist Emília Blašková is the illustrator of the book *Žirafia mama a iné príšery/Giraffe mum and other creatures*<sup>23</sup> (Salmela, 2015) in the version for the blind. In the haptic as well as in the non-haptic illustration of this book, she uses cut-outs in paper through which the subsequent pages can be seen or at last guessed at (Fig. 4). The author justifies the use of this creative principle as follows: “‘Hatches’ are considered as the opening of the page (image – illustration) to the spaces ‘beyond seen/beyond seeing’. At this moment, I find several meaning layers for a sighted and a blind person.”<sup>24</sup>



**Fig. 4: *Žirafia mama a iné príšery/Giraffe Mum and Other Creatures* (2015), book illustration by Emília Blašková, unpagéd**

<sup>23</sup> Text by Alexandra Salmela. The tactile book won the special award in the illustrator competition The Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia in 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Private e-mail communication with the illustrator dated 2016-10-25.

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The creators of these books emphasize the idea that visual impairment limits access to only one aspect of reality, the visual. Many essential things remain invisible to the eyes. Even the blind can live a colourful life, although its "colour" refers to something other than visual quality.

### **Conclusion**

Contact with an artistic interpretation of the reality of blindness creates authentic situations in which a child can realize its own feelings, attitudes and values. It provides strong incentives for reflective perception: "a child receives news about the inner world of other people through emotionally saturated images", the artistic work thus represents "very important article of socialization and enculturation, because it broadens the horizons for children from narrow family, school or peer environment to universal human vision" (Mistrík, 2001, p. 430).

Despite the unique realizations of inclusive activities, we still lack a more specific and systematic didactic-methodological foundation for the development of inclusive attitudes. The presented analysis of the educational potential of illustrated books, with the topic of visual impairment in this context, might be seen as an outline of one of the possible ways of addressing the issue. Although it puts very high demands on the multi-disciplinary competencies of educator and cross-subject linking, pupils can in this way discover and appreciate not only the otherness of the perception of blind people, but also individual traits among individuals from the standard population (e.g. the diversity of cognitive styles according to sensory preferences) as well as the way of its own perception and knowledge of the world (metacognition).

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