

VISUAL ART AND VISION IMPAIRMENT

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My experience

I work in the Center for rehabilitation and education "Vinko Bek" in Zagreb for 22 years. From preschool education, through the primary school education, high school therapy and art therapy with adults. Of course, my students are people who have visual problems and also multiple damages.

Art culture is a subject which is dealing with **visual perception** of a world around us. Everyone experience it on it's own way and reproduce it more or less successfully, what depends on several factors - understanding, creativity, motor skills, motivation... And that leads us to an issue.

The Issue

Fine art textbooks and official educational programs in Croatia always start with a drawing because, in the technical sense, this is the simplest form of art work - you take a paper and a pencil and you're already creative... you create. But in the same time, it is the hardest form of artistic expression because you are transferring 3D objects into 2D shapes and to be able to do that, you must have some **visual experience**. Blind and visually impaired pupils are pretty much punished in that sense. So, because the people who wrote that program did not think about visually impaired children, I can say only this:

"What works well for a child with vision may not be as good for a blind one".

But if we reverse it and take it in a opposite way:

"What works well for a blind child is just as it is good for a sighted one" – we can have a solution.

The Solution

I began to think in a completely different way. We need to build a tactile experience and simplify everything in order to be able to express ourselves artistically. So I set up a program that goes from a spatial world into a panel, from the real world to illusion, with usage of an art language to describe and simplify visual experience so a blind person can understand it.

Let's take an elephant for example - we all admire this great glamorous animal. So, can a blind child draw an elephant... Hm, it can not see it... OK, well – we can hand a child an elephant toy to feel it... but can a child feel its size, body position, strength, surface... nope, it can not. Is this enough experience to independently draw it – not what I have experienced. But – if you try to explain an elephant with an art language and teach a blind child how to use that language, understand it and work with it – a child can have more benefit out of it because it will understand the space around that elephant, the size of it, of what primary objects it is build, how the surface looks like and how to transfer it to a drawing.

So, in order to draw (dots and lines), first I have to explain and teach a child every separate art language element and how to use it. Starting from **space** which surrounds us, than get to **objects** in that space, the **surface** of that objects, **colors** of that surface, **shapes** as a 2D representation of those objects and finally get to **dots and lines** or a "drawing".

You need to keep in mind that every blind or vision impaired child is a story for itself and that we need to approach everyone individually, customize the program to the child's abilities. Some of the art program will be adopted with ease and some will be difficult. What we can

offer to all of them are ARTISTIC ELEMENTS and compositional principles that every child, in their own way, can adopt. So – let's start...

1. SPACE – Where am I?

The first tasks would be related to the introduction of the child with the space that surrounds it, exploring and defining it through games as the indoor and outdoor, small and big, full and empty. That's why we're first going to study small space where a child can learn the limits of space (for example, a box in which you can enter your whole body and meet the relationships of space by touch such as up - down, front - back, left – right). That way we can explain to the child that this is the way each indoor space works. Observing the differences in relations inside-out, building obstacles so a child can become aware of the differences of the simple and the complex, empty and full. Through education, knowledge, experience and development of motor skills, tasks can be more difficult and demanding. The first visual tasks should allow students to build their own space of ready-made elements like Lego bricks, cardboard, boxes and later clay.

2. OBJECT – What is around me?

When we have become aware of the relationships of empty compared to full, we can start speaking about forms. In order to make them as simple as possible for a person with impaired vision, we need to start from the simplest shapes heading to complex. It's a good idea to immediately start calling them as compact mass, flat mass and line mass. Offer the child something compact: a ball, an egg, an orange, a cherry... different sizes, different structure, but the same tendency of density. With line mass, the examples could be: a branch, a pencil, fingers, hair... all of the shapes that are long and thin and that can be reshaped by rolling them. Flat mass gets created by flattening out some materials: papers, leaves, windows, doors... Each of these masses we can dent and hollow out so it is good to find examples that are close to them. When we have mastered these simple masses, we are ready to engage in much more complex volumes like plants, people or animals. It is important that we use motives that are known to the students so they can create them by themselves.

3. SURFACE – What surface are they?

Introducing the individual shape, we are also meeting its surface. The basic division of the surfaces would be smooth – coarse, hard – soft, dry – wet. It is important to familiarize the child with the diversity of surfaces and enable for him to connect the surface with its proper name. By getting to know the surface, we are meeting the relief. Having their tactile knowledge increased, the children can shape relief in all of its forms – dent, low and high. Here I would also name clay as the leading material.

4. COLOR – Which color are they?

Color is the visual element that is exclusively intended for use by sighted people. Depending on the damage of sight, experience of color is different. Some students will be able to explore all of the characteristics of color and some will only see the strongest contrasts. Blind people cannot experience color but they can use it as a painting technique. They can make texture by painting with their hands on paper, scratching the paint or applying it in thicker layers. When it comes to blind people that have the stimulus of light, they can vary the strongest contrast of light, black - white and, potentially the contrasts of heat, yellow – blue or more. When it comes to achromatopsia, the problem with colors is quite unique. The selection of white, black and all the shades of gray is safe and correct. Using achromatic colors, we can get large differences in brightness which is enough to make an interesting art work.

5. SHAPE – How does it look like on a flat surface?

The transition to a flat format must be gradual. It is extremely important that, when transitioning to the surface, the students know how the shape looks like in space. The start of the unit would be dedicated to the shadows because they are absolute surfaces. Students first learn about geometric objects such as a cube, a sphere, a pyramid, and after they learn about the objects' characters in the space of paper. Later, the children are able to create free-formed characters by themselves out of paper-mache paste. These exercises help students to understand the two-dimensional space. It will be quite a challenge to a blind person, but also an excellent base for later tasks on the surface.

6. DOT AND LINE – How do I draw it?

When learning to draw, we start with a dot and when we line up all the dots very tightly, we are talking about a line. First we're adopting the straight line and all of its routes and slowly we're describing individual characters with those lines. Then we're adopting curved lines. After we have learned those as well, we are ready for more complex drawings consisting of dots and various lines. Then we could draw ourselves, our faces, or shapes that are known to us. We are limited with blind students because it is really difficult for them to draw on a positive film since they haven't developed graphomotoric skills and to draw on foil, you need strength and strong moves in order to create tactile tracks. To introduce blind pupils to drawing, you need ready-made dots and lines made out of thick paper or magnets for the students to sort them on a large paper sheet or a metal board. The same effect is achieved with paper-mache on an impregnated cardboard surface. The drawing of a blind child is unique because blind children gather all the experiences collected while drawing and use them as a whole.

It is extremely important to establish communication between people who see and people who do not see so most of our students' work is tactile and accessible to everyone - thus enriching the touching world at least within our center.

All these contents are in correlation with the rehabilitation goals that are to be achieved by special education teachers (e.g. encouraging development of fine motor skills and tactile sensation and perception, space perception, shape recognition, attention generally...).

As a conclusion...

It is extremely important to enable each child to create, learn through playing, to be confirmed as a creative and imaginative person, to show us their vision of the world and not to impose them our patterns. Their art is clear and full of simple symbols making it beautiful and beautifully unknown.