



Because they Have very Few, they Must Have the Best !

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As a teacher, my 16 years of experience as a “publisher” have been in the field of the visual impairment and since 1999 within an international panorama.

Context

On one hand, all *librarians* are aware of the many types of children’s books, their importance for education and their role as a powerful tool for any child to assimilate into its culture (social codes). They are also very good at knowing how books can be used with children, how can they be used in relation with others, and librarians are also the best mediators between children (and their relatives) and the books.

Nevertheless the situation is very different in each country depending on the standard of living, the place of children in the society, the culture, the religion, etc. We could say, that today, in the wealthiest countries, most of the “ordinary children” have mainly easy access to books and children’s books are a big part of the book industry, especially in France.

On the other hand, *special needs* deals with different kinds of children; those having sensory, motor, cognitive impairments or mental, learning, cultural disabilities, etc.

¹ Teacher for v. imp. children since 1992. 1994: Creation of Les Doigts Qui Rêvent (charity). 1996: Creation of a producing workshop (workers are people with social disabilities). 1999: Organisation of the international meeting “To learn to read yes, but to read what ?” (Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden, Russia, United Kingdom). 2000: Creation and organisation of the European award “Tactus” (5 countries). 2005: Tactus became Typhlo & Tactus (8 countries). 2007: Creation and organisation of the international project BiTiB (Blind Infant’s Tactile Illustrated Books (5 countries). 2008: Issue of the *Typhlo & Tactus Guide for children’s books with tactile illustration* (articles from 23 countries, in French and I English). 2009: Typhlo & Tactus became a partner of ICEVI; 147 titles produced = 28 000 tactile illustrated books. Publications: *Un long couloir rempli de fauteuils en haut d’une escalier en plein vent* (in French) (2008); *The Typhlo & Tactus Guide for children’s books with tactile illustration* (in English) (2008). Translations (from English to French): *Tactile pictures: representations for the Blind, 1784-1940*, Eriksson Y. (Sweden) (2008), *Language and visualisation*, Eriksson Yvonne, Holmqvist Kenneth (Sweden) (2008), *Eliska my little girl, blind ... and deaf*, Jarníková Ivana, (Czech Rep) (2008), *The gliding language*, Linders Clara (Nederland) (2008); *This little finger*, Lee Mary (Scotland) (2010), *Learning together*, Lee Mary, MacWilliam Lindi (Scotland) (2010), *Space and self*, Nielsen Lilli (Denmark) (2010), *Early learning, step by step*, Nielsen Lilli (Denmark) (2010), *Are you Blind ?* Nielsen Lilli (Denmark) (2010). Work in progress: *On the way to literacy*, Wright Suzette, Stratton Josephine M., (USA); *Insights of the Blind*, Fraiberg Selma (USA), *On Blindness*, Magee Bryan & Milligan Martin (USA).



Children with special needs are in a quite different situation than that of ordinary children. And I would like to list here some of the aspects involved in that problematic situation.

First, there are children's books talking *about* children with special needs, and then there are children's books *for* children with special needs. But there are also books about the education of children with special needs. Those three kinds of books have some items in common. We have also to bear in mind that ordinary parents and ordinary teachers do not "produce" any books during their life, but adults caring for children with special needs, do.

1. The place of children with special needs in their societies

If we agree that a child with special needs is at first a child, and that any child has a *right* to learn to read and to write or at least to be on the way to and to reach the highest level he can, then this child, as any other child, has the right to get access to one of the best tools, that is to say, books.

2. Social integration

For many years, children with special needs have been integrated into mainstream schools, at least in Europe. That means that there has been a willingness to integrate socially those children. And of course, their parents and caregivers have noticed that there are big differences in their cultural access compared with ordinary children in the same classroom.

3. The varieties of special needs

Visual impairment, mental impairment, and other special needs require different types of books. Large print or not, contrast, pictures with sign language, Braille or not, very simple text according to cognitive level, etc.

4. The few children with special needs compared with "ordinary children"

This is related to the place of children with special needs in their society. In our modern societies, everything is made for the largest amount of people (who are then in fact customers). As soon as there are just a few people concerned, the tendency is to "forget" them because they are negligible minorities.

5. The economical aspect



This is the crucial point. If we expect luxurious products, actual business of modern printing does not provide for a few copies. All machines are designed for great quantities.

What is the aim of books for children with special needs ?²

Exactly the same as for ordinary children. Yes BUT they are maybe even more important for those *exceptional* children. Most of the children with special needs don't get as much information as ordinary children. They may spend many weeks (or months) in hospital and because of low motor skills they may not move around very much and so don't explore enough the world around. Also, because of mental disabilities, they don't understand as quickly and because of visual impairment a such children may not explore by touch as much as all what one can see... (Their experiences of the life world are diminished compared to his "normal" peers who have experienced their world just by seeing).

What are books for children with special needs ?

- are those books only for children with special needs or are they made in such a way that they can be shared by ordinary relatives or friends together with a child with disabilities?

What is the most important? A book specially designed for a child with special needs BUT not accessible to an ordinary child (and relatives and friends) or a book which is a compromise between the adaptation to special needs AND accessibility also to ordinary people in order to allow them to share this book between the two categories?

- the content

Is it possible to use the same content of an ordinary children's book in a book for a child with special needs or do we have to "adapt" it? Or do we have to create specific books?

Some disabilities need specific subjects.

Some disabilities need ergonomic care.

² For example, in the field of the visual impairment, see Wright Suzette *On the way to literacy*, APH, 1991, 2007.



Therefore, working in partnership with scholars and professionals is the easiest way to find the best content³.

- the way they are “published”

As we have already mentioned earlier, the publishing business is not made for minorities. Depending on the countries, those books are made by libraries (*Celia*, Finland, *ABBE*, France...), or by charities (*ClearVision*, U.K; *Les Doigts Qui Révent*, France,...), or by institutions of disabled people (*APH*, USA; *Furai Bunko*, Japan;...), or by private publishers (*Solum*, Norway; *Rubinstein Publishing*, Netherlands; *Changbi*, Korea) but private publishers (commercial ones) are very rarely ready to jump into this adventure and when they publish such a book it is always because of a miraculous grant wherever it comes from, or by artists (*URART*, Korea, *Les Doigts Qui Révent*, France).

But mostly, those books are made by parents and professionals (teachers, caregivers...) for a special school or an education department which has a very limited area and concerns very few children. And curiously, it is not guaranteed that a book, even a very good one, made in a special school in that town will be known in the next town because such books are made in one single copy without any concern for distribution.

Those professionals working for children with special needs are not necessarily professional writers or illustrators, nor good craftsmen. But they know very well those children and their specificities, and mostly they hand make those books out of kindness and a wish to do good work. So how can one say “*This is not a good book !*” even if it is not, when you know that a caregiver or somebody else spent lots of hours in doing that “book” for free ?

Also, for parents and caregivers, it is not so easy to get those books if they can get any, in a bookshop or in a mainstream library. Social integration is then limited, because there is hardly any distribution of this types of books.

- the cost

³ Since 2000, we have partnerships with 5 universities.



Again, this is a crucial point. Of course it costs much more to hand make a book than to produce it mechanically. Of course it costs much more to cut and glue many materials on pages than to print at once coloured pictures in large quantities of copies. Of course it costs much more to sew many different fabrics in an interactive way for a child with disabilities than to sew a single printed fabric. Of course it costs much more to make a book with print and Braille than just printed.

And of course it costs much more to hand make a book in Europe than in Asia or in India.

When in some western institutions for disabled children, a caregiver is given some hours a month to make one book by hand, the real cost of that book becomes a huge one. But all the work to prepare one copy (to select a subject, write a story, layout, searching materials...) could be used to make several if not more and so there should exist a kind of organisation or network to share between institutions.

The place of books for children with special needs, in youth literacy

For many years, those books (made in special institutions for disabled children) were not considered as “books” but as something else which was under the quality standards of ordinary books: draft books which are rough, not sturdy, made with materials found around at home (no time to search and more economic), home printed, with this idea in mind that those books were *good enough* for “those children”. But as soon as school integration started, those books were suddenly confronted with the books available in all mainstream schools. Overall, parents were asking for more choice and quality, “as for the other children”.

For some years, it has been possible to see some attempts which show that those books can be considered as beautiful books by ordinary librarians and by youth literacy specialists (whether they are single copies or produced in several copies or mass produced). The huge exhibition made at the French National Library in 2008 showed tactile illustrated books beside the best books of the last twenty years; in Italy, tactile illustrated books were exhibited in three prestigious places, Salaborsa in Bologna, Casina di Raffaello in Roma, and in Salaeventi Mondadori in Venetia⁴.

⁴ Organized with the huge help of Pietro Vecchiarelli (Federazione Pro Ciechi).



Some youth literacy specialists look at those books made for children with special needs as “artist books”. They know very well to judge the content of a book as much as the way it is made. And this proves that even a handmade book produced in few copies can be as good and as aesthetically pleasing as ordinary books.

Even more interesting, ordinary librarians look at those books as extremely interesting for *all children* and not just only for children with special needs. Michel Defourny, a youth literacy specialist from Belgium called this phenomenon “an anthropological revolution”; before, ordinary books were “adapted” for children with disabilities, now it is the opposite. Even more interesting, professional writers and illustrators are very interested in this new field of youth literacy.

What is the situation of books for children with special needs?

I can’t be so wrong in saying that there are not enough books for children with special needs.

I can’t be so wrong in saying that the small quantity of those books does not reach yet (in general) the quality level of ordinary books (in general too).

I can’t be so wrong in saying that, those books still cost much more and that this is not *equal opportunity* at all, but discrimination.

But in the same time, it is still possible to see, nowadays, books made with a technique completely unsuitable to the target. For instance, pictures made by thermoform for v. impaired children under 5. Because one has a machine for thermoform, he will use it even if all research shows that it is too difficult for V.I children !

That means that there is a lot still to do concerning the requirements we ought to have when either making or choosing those books.

The crucial role of librarians

If there is one single place to symbolise cultural integration, I would say **libraries**, public libraries. If any child with special needs can find some books for himself in the library near where he lives, then integration is a reality.

The Outstanding Books catalogue and exhibitions of Ibbotson Books show some samples of such books for disabled children and everyone in the world is able to see those selected



good books and see that it is possible to produce them. Because of the very good work of Ibby, I have discovered the books of Anette Diesen, the work of Mitsuko Iwata and many others.

In France, nearly all public libraries have some books for disabled children but as I said before, not only for disabled children but because they are interesting books and beautiful books they are useful for all children.

As said Emma Breseghi from Ibby in Italy, “the difference is not a subtraction”.

Are there solutions ?

In each western country, there are few children with special needs, at least not enough for commercial publishers. So there is only one solution: to cooperate for conception, production and distribution. If there is somewhere in a country a good book for children with a special need, why not either this country produce it for another country or produce it with another country ?

This is the aim of Typhlo & Tactus and BiTiB project we run since many years.

Case study

Recently, we started a real cooperation in production with Italy. Italy produced an Italian book in Italian and in French and we produced in France a French book in French and in Italian. We also borrow regularly each others tools and we do for the other country what it can't do, and in this way we can distribute more books at a lower cost in each of our respective countries.

More recently, we start an international cooperation between France (Les Doigts Qui Rêvent), Italy (Federazione Pro Ciechi) and South Africa (I Read With My Hands). This new collection of fabric books is called oUKoU PATA which means “Touch” in Zulu. We are not able in France or in Italy to produce such wonderful fabric books (clever, sturdy, beautiful...), so we asked Lynette Rudman (Typhlo & Tactus award 2009) to produce some for us, and she accepted some changes, as an open-minded person. And this year we have also taken our part in her production (to cut thousand shapes in plastic), in doing what is difficult or waste of time for her to do by hand since we have machines to do it.



Conclusion

Let's start cooperation !

