



Reading – window into the world for blind children

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Abstract: First books are of the greatest significance for each child. Picture books help him to connect the abstract image of the letter with the illustration that he understands. This is far more important for the blind or partially sighted child that gets less stimulation for its development from the environment. He also needs the tactile picture book but it has to be adapted to its way of perception and it has to follow the lawfulness of the essential difference between the sight and the sense. The tactile picture book is a picture book that is adapted to a blind child. Usually, it is composed of the text in black print (so that the ones with the vision, for example: parents, teacher... can also read it), Braille alphabet and of visual and tactile illustrations. Tactile picture book help the blind child to expand his vocabulary which is usually modest and at the same time they educate him into a future reader.

Key words: reading, blinds, tactile picture books.

The meaning of the picture books

With the help of illustrations a child exceeds beyond the stereotypes and develops his artistic skills, discovers the imaginative images which were created for him by others. His world spreads. He learns that it is possible to combine the old thing with the new ones on a several different ways. This type of learning is happening on a cognitive level and just as well on an artistic sensitivity. Illustrations are developing a child's creativity, joining together the real and unreal world, the world of dreams and fantasy. With their help a child goes beyond the stereotypes and develops his artistic skills. Why should not the blinds participate in this privilege as well?

Reading is fundamental human skill. A word is foundation on which the communication leans, whether if it is about the direct communication between people or if it is about the transmission of the experiences out of the cultural framework. This holds true for the blind and partially sighted so much the more. For them, a word is the carrier of information, meanings, hidden intonations, feelings and of everything that we, the sighted ones, transmit via visual way. A word is their fundamental tie with the world and the others. With its help, the blinds could be integrated into the society of the visual people at the highest level, quite better than for example the deafs. Word makes them completely equal with the fully-sensed people.

Every child has a right to be literate, even a blind or partially sighted one. The partially sighted learn the usual letters of Latin alphabet but they have to be enlarged to an appropriate size which is dependent on each individual. The process is mostly the same as with the



children with a good sight. A blind pupil learns a special writing which is read by fingers – the Braille. It is composed of the combination of six dots in the primary cell, lately eight dots (the computer version). With the help of special exercises, the blinds can sharpen their sense, so that they can read as fast as the seeing ones.

The preparation for the literacy of the blind: blind children, from the age of 5 to 7 years, are being prepared on such a manner that they play with different didactic games. Like this they train the fingertips on the forefinger which is the preparation for reading the Braille. They recognise different textures and shapes of the objects. They construct various tactile puzzles where they have to search for pair only by touching them, they sort seeds in a box, play games that are adopted to the blind, for example tactile cards (Black Peter), tactile ludo, etc.

Literacy: blind pupils in the 2nd grade recognise different letters, at the beginning more simple ones (from a to j) and the combined ones. They use the Braille textbook where at the beginning more simple forms are printed, then the simple letters and later on when they already master the simple letters and even more later when they master the combination of several embossed letters they learn the most complicated ones (u, v, z). They learn the letters on a tactile expedient with letters and they also use the didactic package for literacy where one can find concrete objects in connection with letters that a blind child can also touch

But what about the literature for the blind children? Is it accessible for the blinds? A sighted child can go to every library and borrow a book that he likes. Can a blind child do the same?

In Slovenia, there is a big library for the blind where one can find transcribed or recorded forms of the entire international and Slovenian literature in Braille. But what about the illustrations? Braille books are as a rule without tactile images, but it is said that the meaning of illustrations is exceptional for the children, although for the blind ones.

Tactile pictures

What do we understand when saying tactile picture book? That is a picture book that is adapted to a blind child. Usually it is composed of the text in black colour (so that also the sighted can see it; for example parents, teachers...) in Braille and of visual and tactile illustrations. Tactile picture is any picture that is accessible to tactile perception but it has to have along its message also the artistic dimension. The tactile reviews have to be cleaned



from all the unessential information, which have to be adopted to the age of a child methodically and didactically (right size, safety, etc.). Even though the tactile picture book can not replace pictorial material, it is frequently the only source of learning for the blind pupils.

While creating them, we must start from the differences between sight and touch: sight is a distance sense and touch is a proximal one; sight perception is synthetic which captures all the picture at once and touch is an analytic, connected with details and format in a gradual way.

However, we must take into account the tactile threshold, which can be very different with different blind persons. We are indicating the ability of the blind, that he can notice the information from the tactile picture, which is shown in a form of a symbol or some other information.

Some rules in making tactile pictures

Size: tactile pictures should be made in the dimension of hands of a blind person. A tactile picture should not be bigger than a format A 4.

Generalisation: a tactile picture should be generalised to the extent when its motives are still well recognised by touch.

Colour contrasts: since the majority of blind pupils still detects some stronger colours, we colour tactile pictures with strong, contrast colours.

Proportions: we try to keep natural proportions, for example, a cat should not be bigger than a horse.

Material: should associate to the real materials of the represented objects on the tactile picture or it should at least support some essential characteristics (cold materials – cold colours).

Safety – the materials and the making should be safe.

The meaning of a tactile picture

A tactile picture is not only a tactile review. It wishes to be more than that. As sighted people distinguish between a photography, an exactly drawn image or an artistic illustration, we should strive to the highest artistic value in making tactile reviews.

By a help of a tactile picture, we are aiming at:

- Development and training of touch: we already start developing touch in tender periods. We are constantly stimulating it, developing and taking care of it.



- Development of a precise motorical skills: As selectivity and recognition are important while watching, is the selective touch perception essential while touching.
- Understanding of certain objects in the process of generalisation.
- Collecting new information (new conceptions and new phenomena) and connecting them with the experiences of a daily life.

Tactile pictures enable blind persons to enjoy pictures. The illustrations help to develop the language, if they are accessible to the children.

Not all tactile pictures are accessible to the children; especially not to the ones who have no sight experiences. Conventional realistic pictures, even if adapted in a relief print, are extremely difficult to be understood for children who were born blind. If we want to make pictures understood to children, it is better that we draw small objects, shapes, sizes and surfaces which are known to a blind child and which he can meet in his daily life.

Of course blind children are able to enjoy in tactile pictures even if they can not exactly explain the things that they are supposed to represent. It happens quite often that they need help of a sighted person. However, it is extremely important that we give them simple reviews which they are capable of understanding by themselves without help of another person.

Tactile picture book in Slovenia

In our country, the prototype of the picture book was designed by female professor Nina Schmidt in her final composition. She illustrated a book by Slovene writer Kajetan Kovič. She used a positive foil and contour colours. Illustrations are simple and schematic. The text was printed in Braille as well, but the book was made in only one copy, just for the needs of the final degree.

First slovene tactile picture book, written by Aksinja Kermauner: Snežna roža (A Snow Flower)

It was created in order to explain colours to totally blind children. How do they mix together? How to describe a colour circle, related, opposite colours? Colour contrasts?

To explain these teachings about colours and their relations to blind children, we help ourselves by using the music and different materials. Related materials – related colours; colour contrasts – contrasted materials. Artistic exercises, such as creating an object in warm/cold contrast, we can convert into an exercise where warm/cold contrast is changed by warm/



cold materials. I made a research on my pupils concerning the fact which material seem cold or warm to them. With covered eyes, they had to classify 33 different types of materials (glass rock, foil, fur...) according to their heat or coolness. The results have shown that smoother material are colder, and rough material seem to be warm. That is why we can use this findings for our future work with blind and visually impaired pupils in classroom and also for the makin of the tactile picture book. Therefore, when choosing the materials for tactile images we share similar feeling (warm or cold) of the material to which we add corresponding (warm or cold) colour. When making illustrations for the book Snow flower, I took into consideration also the blinds with a little sight – I used strong colours and sharp contrasts. I was attentive to the aesthetic of the tactile images because the tactile picture book is meant also for the people with sight. The text is in enlarged writing (size 25, letters Arial Narrow, bold) and in Braille. In the tactile picture book, a simple story is happening in the north (cold colours), kjer a little Eskimo girl, called Aja lives. Some day she prickes herself and a drop of blood (warm colours) fall on the icy ground from her finger. Over the night, a flower grows out of her blood. All the Eskimos admire this flower, but during the night, the flower almost freeze. Aja brings her warm scarf and protects the flower and this flower spreads happiness among the Eskimos with its gaudy colours. In the tactile picture book, one can find a booklet where we can see didactic instructions on how to guide an artistic lesson with blind pupils in primary school (theme: warm/cold contrast).

In 2006, Klara Ramljak, student of preschool education, has made a very interesting tactile picture book for her thesis. The title of a book is Vid na izletu (Vid's excursion). Pages are made of wood. Although objects or animals are not numerous, they are made of materials which correspond to their characteristics – tires of a bus are made of caoutchuc, terarium is made out of plastic, a spider out of a wool, a snake out of a synthetic skin and cicada out of elastic strings which ring if you grab them. The story is about a blind boy, named Vid who goes on a trip to a zoo with a kindergarten. There, the electricity runs out and children are using their sense of touch in order to recognize animals, and Vid is guiding them.

A completely new project is »The tactile picture book in every Slovene library«. The number of the blind and partially sighted children in Slovenia in only 102, and only 15 of them are blind. Due to the smallness of the group, one has scruples about making the tactile picture book only for them. But with the publishing house Miš we went a bit broader: the tactile picture books are also interesting for all the children because they are made in such a



manner that they can also be read by the fully-sighted children. This project is supporting the principle of the inclusion that it has to adapt the environment to the blind: blind or partially sighted child that goes to school in his hometown will be able to read the appropriate book in the library among the children of the same age, the number of the tactile picture book will increase and like this we can stand beside European countries in spite of the fact that the number of blind children in our country is so small. The honourable sponsor of this project is Barbara Miklič Türk, a wife of the president of the Slovenia. The first tactile picture book that was published in this project is Spaghetti Joe goes to the wide world.

Spaghetti Joe goes to the wide world

This is an unusual picture-book, which can be read, searched through, touched – and even smelt. The witty text tells of Spaghetti Joe who escapes from the cooking-pot and, on his way into the world, comes across an apple. The apple is convinced that this strand of spaghetti is an enormous worm that will eat him up. The illustrations, by the renowned Slovene artist Zvonko Čoh, are clear and concise, and the objects depicted are real life-size, which is of help in (re)constructing the images. The picture-book as a whole (visual, tactile, even olfactory stimulus) functions in a multi-channel way, offering the ultimate artistic enjoyment – also to the fully-sighted reader.

The particularly valuable quality of the tactile picture-book is that it is intended not only for the blind or partially-sighted children, but also for the fully-sighted, who are only now discovering the world of reading. This is why the text is printed in raised-point type and in Braille script. Experience has shown that tactile picture-books are indeed of immense importance for all children – when using them, the blind can touch the illustrations, while the fully-sighted are for the first time encountering Braille script and beginning to think about their schoolmates with special needs, which develops their empathy towards 'otherness'.

At the end of the tactile picture book there is the appendix designed for the parents and teachers.

The tactile picture book is the first from the series »Tactile picture book«, where the main hero will be spaghetti Joe who will discover the world and will prove himself in the situations that are near to the children.

Tactile picture books help that a blind child will reach for new books in future. They are also expanding its vocabulary which is usually more modest and sometimes inadequate.

For the blind child reading is really a window into the world!

