CREATING A FRIENDLY LITERATE ENVIRONMENT FOR THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS: A STUDY FROM "LOUIS BRAILLE" SCHOOL, BULGARIA

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Abstract

Discussing about literacy makes us think about literacy for "normal" people. Only a few do care about thinking literacy for the visually impaired ones. However, there is a school in Sofia, Bulgaria that educates visually impaired students to be independent ones.

While teaching in Bulgaria, the researcher met an independent blind girl joining the class. The challenging situation to teach a blind in class led the researcher to know her deeper. There are some surprising facts that she asked to get the material used in class to be sent to her mail; she did not join classes any more after some meetings as she was preparing her departure to America for a student-exchange program. She wrote her emails to the researcher and the communication later was done through emails; she asked for the researcher's phone number so that further communication could be done through the phone. She picked up the researcher at a metro station nearby and led the researcher to the school, be an interpreter for both the director and the researcher, and guided the researcher to every room of the school, with no one help, when the researcher studied the way her previous school taught their visually impaired students' literacy.

This observation method led the researcher to know that the school really provides friendly literate environment that makes the students able to read and f ace any condition around them. Further, teachers give them confidence to face this life so that the visually impaired students live as normal people.

Keywords: friendly literate environment, visually impaired students, Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

Discussing about literacy makes us think about literacy for "normal" people. According to English Cambridge dictionary online, literacy simply means the ability to read and write (http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literacy). While UNESCO has some definitions of adult literacy from time to time:

In 1958 "A literate person is one who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement related to his/her everyday life" (UN, undated) although the meaning of "a short simple statement" was never specified (UNESCO, 2013).

In 1978 "A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his/her group and community and also for enabling him/her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his/her own and the community's development" (UN, undated).

In 2003 "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential and participate fully in community and wider society" (UNESCO, 2013).

From all those definitions above, we find 'read and write' as the essential factors of literacy. The definitions develop through the times so that literacy makes people not only achieve his or her

goals but also participate fully in community.

It seems that the last definition is easy to reach for 'normal' people, but then, how are people who are visually impaired meet that criteria of being literate. There should be thoughts on how those unlucky people can be literate that way. Unfortunately, only a few do care about thinking literacy for the visually impaired ones.

As we see in Indonesia, most of visually impaired ones need others' help to lead their life. Thus, it is almost impossible to find a blind in Indonesia walk alone on their walks but a friend accompanies. When they work, only specific jobs seem appropriate to them. Further, only a little experience high level of academic life. The phenomena shows as if people who are visually impaired cannot be independent in life. However, there is a school in Sofia, Bulgaria that educates visually impaired students to be stand-alone ones.

While teaching in Bulgaria, the researcher met an independent blind girl joining the class. The challenging situation to teach a blind in class led the researcher to know her deeper. There are some surprising facts that she asked to get the material used in class to be sent to her mail; she did not join classes any more after some meetings as she was preparing her departure to America for a student-exchange program. She wrote her emails to the researcher and the communication later was done through emails. She asked for the researcher's phone number so that further communication could be done through the phone. She picked up the researcher at a metro station nearby and led the researcher to the school, be an interpreter for both the director and the researcher, and guided the researcher to every room of the school, with no one help, when the researcher studied the way her previous school teaching literacy to their visually impaired students.

RESEARCH METHOD

This observation was done at St. Louis Braille School in Sofia, Bulgaria from November 2016 until Januari 2017. It was done by observing teachers professionalism, the way the students learn, the interaction between school communities, as well as the school environment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

St. Louis Braille School in Sofia, Bulgaria is a school for visually impaired students that was founded more than 60 years ago. Thus, this school has got much experiences on how to educate the students with vision problems. Even, some teachers as well as the employees are the blind ones and those with the visual impairment as well. The school which applies general curriculum has so many students from some countries and they are graded from preschool to twelfth grade.

The name of the school is taken from the founder of Braille codes, Louis Braille, who was born in Coupvray, French on January 4th, 1809 and died on January th, 1852 at the age of 43. Braille literacy is taught here as the basic knowledge that is given from the preschool year. Braille was firstly used at L'lnstitution Nationale des Jeunes Aveugles, Paris for the blind students. Anyhow, it passed challenges on its go. Dr Du-fau, the assistant director of the institution banned and burnt all the braille books and manuscripts. However, braille was legalized at education proces since 1847, soon after the blinds learnt the codes. In 1851, the French government legalized Braille through its colonies that made Braille spread all over the world and got its legacy internationally in the end of the 19th century.

Braille codes consists of 64 different codes contained dots and lines combinations that are read from left to right. Learning the code, the readers develop their tactile sensitivity of sensory-motor skills. Thus, the learning is different from the way we read print literacy.

Some activities are also trained to support the students' sensory-motor skills. Hence, they do not only read the braille codes by touching them but also increase their daily living skills through any tactile arts activities. As follows, it is very common to see the poor vision ones go along

the school building alone, doing some sports and arts, besides read and write. All they do really support their process of literacy development as well as life literacy.

Figure 1. The School Building

Teachers Professionalism

The teachers there are those who have achieved a high professional level. They use braille, three-dimensional models, and embossed images in the presentation of scientific materials and art samples. Not only that, they also standardize individual disciplines so that everybody can help himself.

In 1993 in Bulgaria, the braille textbooks, journals and magazines were printed mainly by mechanical presses. Early electronic braille printing using braille printer is set in 1993 at the National Library for the Blind "Louis Braille". The school has its own team taking care of braille printing house. Through the development of modern technology, modern computer printing provides more braille books and largers print artworks for the blinds in Bulgaria.

The team of the school consist of a teacher in elementary school and a resource teacher, professors of mathematics and computer science, and IT specialist. So far, the team has produced over 25 textbooks and teaching materials with more than 1500 total relief images. They also prepare test materials for state graduation tests as well as annual competition for the visually impaired students.

In spite of the high cost of braille books publications, technology help is needed to anticipate illiteracy for the blinds. This way, information technology based on specialized software is absolutely needed. By using high technology, the blinds still can read and write and get their rights to be literate. So, it is so wonderfull to have the students of twelfth grade offering their phone numbers to the researcher so that the researcher can contact them anytime.

Teachers do not only motivate students literacy on reading and writing but also in facing their life. They do not help students fulfilling their need. They let the students do everything by themselves. So, every student goes to every room by himself and read the braille code set in front of each room to know whether they come to the right room or not

After all, the teachers' motivation to work is their belief that blind children can be complete and

independent personalities. They are also sure that braille has limitless possibilities in the future.

Figure 2. A Teacher Is Training Her Students Playing Chess

The Way The Students Learn

Learning braille from preschool level is proven to be effective for every student as a basic way to written communication. In addition, they do not only learn to read but also write by using a specialized type writer. As a result, they have enough skills in reading braille by using electronic resources when they reach upper secondary school.

To support the students ability in facing the life, they are also trained to do everything themselves. They make tactile arts and enjoy the beauty of their works by touching the works. They also do some sports common people do. The different thing in doing sports is that the properties are managed according to their need. Chess board, for example, has some holes on it; in a ball, there is a bell that rings whenever they throw it, so that they know where the ball runs. They also can find any room themselves as they are accustomed to go anywhere by themselves. The blind girl who lead the researcher even can pick up the researcher at the metro station and deliver to the school. The communication between the girl and the researcher when we were not face to face was though email and phone call as she is also accustomed to use technology.

The point is that the students learn to do things as they get enough confidence to do so. It happens since the environment support them to be so by providing supportive setting as well as trust that they can do so.

Figure 3. Visually Impaired Girl Finds Her Way

The Interaction Between School Communities

The main effort to make the visually impaired students independent is by giving them experience: All children, regardless of whether or not they have a vision loss or additional challenges, must begin with continued exposure to meaningful experiences. In this sense, literacy is much more than learning to read, whether it be in braille or print, as it begins with an understanding of one's environment, including people, activities, and routines. Learning to communicate about these experiences may be through speech, sign language, objects, or some combination of these. (Cushman, http://www.pathstoliteracy.org/general-literacy).

As braille is the first way to make them read and write, community should convene a child to use braille as to a way of communication. Next, for upper classes, the students are introduced to braille symbols in mathematics, physics, chemistry, which is in accordance with approved rules for braille transcription in the country.

Of course, it is not only school that supports. Any part should also provide assistance. In Bulgaria, the braille printing houses are fully financed and equipped by the Ministry of Education. It helps to attain more textbooks needed. By providing high technology books, more creation of images can be made and help the man with vision problems acquire wider picture of environment. Further, they can find their position in the society and even experience more in wider world.

The success of the school in educating its students can be seen from Ralitsa, one of its graduates. With her confidence and mastery of technology, she can get a scholarship to join a student exchange programme to America. Ralitsa's experience in America must be a great thing that she can learn more on cultural things. Her existence also confirm the teachers' belief on equal education and independent life for the blinds.

Figure 4. Meeting the Twelfth Graders

The School Environment

Enviromentally, the school is designed to be friendly for children with impaired vision. It consists of several floats that are connected so that it provides easy access to each of them for the children. The outer and inner areas are marked according to the requirements for accessible environment - with tactile paths and color markings. Library, cafeteria, lounge physical education are located near the classrooms for children of primary school on the first floor.

Every classroom is equipped with a computer with speakers programs and optical aids. The school has a computer lab, rooms for language learning, biology, physics and chemistry, where it has the necessary equipment to teach according to modern requirements.

Body boarding school has:

- sufficient number of bedrooms;
- igroteki with contemporary furnishings;
- toys for safe play stimulation and development of children.

On the first floor are:

- classrooms;
- bedrooms for children with multiple disabilities;
- sector medical massage;
- room Cinsaut - motor stimulation;
- playing therapy.

the three floors has rooms with household equipment and appliances, where children learn to work with them.

The sports complex at the school include:

- sports hall with changing rooms and bathrooms;
- tatami mats for judo;
- fitness room;
- table showdown;
- pit for long jump;
- playground for handball basketball, football and others.

It also has a concert hall with professional stage and studio, which has 200 seats. Yard - Sensory garden with safe walking paths, playground.

Figure 5. The Specialized Computer

CONCLUSION

This observation led the researcher to know that the school really provides friendly literate environment that makes the students able to read and face any condition around them. Further, teachers give them confidence to face this life so that the visually impaired students live as if they are normal people.

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