

Constants and variables of GOA or the high school for visually impaired at the beginning of the 21 century

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Abstract: *The paper reflects main changes which happened in the high school for visually impaired in the last decade. It is focused on substitution of the exclusive position of the special school for a possibility of a choice of the pupil (and the family) where to be educated., on providing mainstream high schools integrating visually impaired pupils with methodological support, on strengthening competitiveness of the school, on interdisciplinary co-operation etc.*

Simultaneously, it emphasizes positive values accompanying the school in the period of its existence. In addition to educational activities obliging the students with special needs, the school provides a wide scale of activities to prepare students with visual impairment for independent life.

Analysis of constants and variables in the development of the school as well as insertion into the context of contemporary conditions enables to indicate prospects of the school.

Key words: *high school, independent life, interdisciplinary co-operation, methodological support, student with visual impairment*

1 Introduction

The intention of the article is to evaluate the main changes of Gymnázium pro zrakově postižené a Střední odborná škola pro zrakově postižené (Grammar School for Visually Impaired and High School for Visually Impaired – hereafter only the School) in Prague during the last decade and to indicate the prospects of further development of the the School. The School is attended by students who are fifteen and older. The School has been transformed so that it could meet the needs of students with visual

impairment in the context of contemporary conditions, opening space for keeping choice of a student (and his family) which school to be educated in as the consensual choice is a prerequisite of optimum co-operation in mutual relations student – family – school. Selected aspects of the transformation policy of the School are focused in the following text. The article draws upon the School documents demonstrating synoptical outline of its development in the last decade. Some of the documents are available on the School website <http://goa.brailnet.cz>. Used literature is, with some exceptions, connected with the School activities.

Selective approach, focused on the School priorities, was used because of the length of the article. Analysis of priorities ought to show strenuous search for the School policy in the context of contemporary trends in education of people with special needs. The article is based on the paper which was presented at the conference organized by the department of special pedagogy of Olomouc University in March 2012.

2 Constants and Variables

2.1 Policy Transformation

Considering the role of the School for students with special needs means not to omit the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education from 1994. The delegates of the World Conference under the patronage of UNESCO appealed to the governments of all countries to support the policy of inclusive education of children, youth and adults with special needs. While the Statement leaves only marginal space for special schools, Framework opens relatively wide area for them as an important source for development of inclusive educational system. (1)

Effective co-operation in the framework of the international group MDVI Euronet (www.mdvi-euronet.org) aids the School among others to be oriented in the changing reality. Experience, expertise as well as conditions of our partner institutions providing services for people with multidisabilities including visual impairment present confronting relation between policy ideals and real needs and conditions.

Participation of the School in the Comenius project From School to the Centre from 2002 to 2005 played an important role in our school development. Our partners were special schools in Dublin and Edinburgh and Centre Vision in Örebro. While to some of our partners the project showed the way to establishment of a national resource centre (with a special school in its framework), other oriented to reestablishment of a special school as an autonomous part of the centre. Work on the project helped the School to get policy support for its transformation in the conditions of decentralized and diversified system of services for visually impaired in the Czech Republic.

The final output defined a model of a national resource centre and identified the key services resource centre could provide. Six years later a revised version of the final output was released. (2) The School because of its specifics and conditions for its activities, focused on development of the following services for students with visual impairment: access technology, adaptation services and methodological activity to support integration, activities preparing for independent life, support for learning and leisure.

2.2 Students

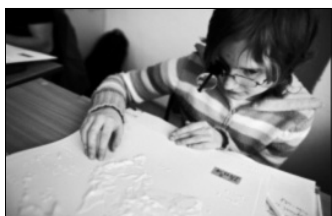
While the School (and especially Grammar School) was attended mainly by the élite of visually impaired students in the last century, substantial changes became evident at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

- mainstreaming of students with visual impairment at high schools even though sometimes aimed at the most talented and capable ones
- low populated forms entering high schools
- supply of high school education finished with A-levels not only balances demand but highly overcomes it
- influence of economic and social situation on family decisions about further education of their children with visual impairment.

Changed conditions in this way could be illustrated quantitatively. While the average number of students was ten at the beginning of the last decade, it decreased to nine in the middle of that period, and it was eight at the beginning of the school year 2011–2012. As far as the qualitative changes in the structure of new-coming students, the number of multidisabled students and autistic ones increase as their mainstreaming sometimes overcomes the possibilities of high schools or it means unwillingness of certain mainstream schools to solve a relatively difficult modification of their settings. There is also growth of students who manage demands of high school study only with serious difficulties even in optimum adapted conditions of the School. The number of students with visual impairment who were not successful in mainstream schools and continue their study at the School increases in a mild way.

The positive fact is that the exclusive position of special schools in the past was not substituted for the exclusive inclination to mainstreaming of students with special needs as the only alternative but students (and their families) have the possibility of choice which ought to be based on full information about schools. Neither parents nor students should be persuaded with the strength of legal documents or buoyant ideals but with the quality of special pedagogical work and optimum settings for effective education of visually impaired.

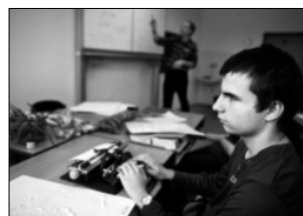
Two priorities of the School continue from its early beginnings even nowadays. We are the School for visually impaired and unambiguous majority of our students have been the ones with visual impairment. The needs of this group are fully covered by professionally trained teachers and care staff as well as with modern and purposeful equipment of the School. There is an effort to provide the students with such a level of education which is fully comparable with the level in mainstream high schools. At the same time, our students are prepared to become self-sufficient so that they could be ready for independent life despite of their disability.



Geography



Physics



Picht typewriter

2.3 Independent Life

Preparation for independent life is a long-term integral part of educational activities of the School. Considering that the students are over fifteen years old we follow up with activities realized in previous stages of forming of the pupil. The level of independence, the student enters the School, depends on co-operation of the family with early intervention centres and then with special pedagogical centres, and on purposive guidance to independence in special as well as mainstream basic schools.

Practical part of tuition of the School subjects includes, in accord with school educational programmes for different branches of education, support of activities oriented on acquirement of skills and habits requisite for becoming independent. They are incorporated not only in compulsory subjects but they are embodied in voluntary classes (drama, arts, goalball) and further school activities such as ski training course, tandem cycling and hiking course, adaptation course, excursions, class trips and school tours. The School offers the students according to their needs individual training lessons to improve in special activities (orientation and mobility, reading and typing Braille etc.). Other activities (housework and cooking, leisure time sports) are a part of the educational programme of the school boarding facility and are organized by care staff.

Preparation for independent life is not purposeless. Students' skills and abilities should be developed in such a way so that they could join successfully everyday life

after graduation from the school, continue in further study and/or start their working career.



Working on PC



Physical training



Break

2.4 Professional Team

The constant of the School during all period of its existence is the professional team of pedagogues. It is required because of the School milieu as well as the position in the system of education. Not only professional qualification is needed to become a useful member of the team. Practical knowledge, experience and skills acquired in teaching of visually impaired as well as professional and common human enthusiasm are important qualities to be able to work with students with special needs.

Further education of all pedagogical staff belongs to priorities of the School. It is fully supported as regards both teachers and care staff. The educational needs and professional interests of the staff are the way out for realization of further education of our pedagogues as well as requirements of the School on professional qualification, innovation of methods and forms of education together with reasonable financial support of the programme of further education.

Ninety-six educational programmes to increase qualification and four ones to fulfil the qualification assumptions of teachers were put into practice in the period 2008–2011.

The School supports the interests of the pedagogues in accord with the plans of further education including full payment of the postgradual study of special pedagogy and programmes for administration of special activities. (3)

Mainstreaming of the students with visual impairment changes and extends the use of professional expertise of the staff in favour of the students. In addition to internal use of the expertise which is the prior constant of the School, the external role strengthens, e.g. provision of methodological support of mainstream high school teachers of visually impaired students, professional assistance in preparation of projects (new A-levels, school educational programmes etc.), training practice of special pedagogy students.

2.5 Computer Technology

The School disposes computer technology more than a quarter of a century and it is effectively used in favour of teaching students with visual impairment. The beginnings were modest from the contemporary point of view as the first computer was eight-bit SAPI situated in the steel cupboard built up into the office desk with TV set Merkur as a black-and-white monitor and with an operational system adjusted from a cassette player. The first computers were used in teaching programming in language BASIC.

16.10. získala škola první a 30.10. druhý
počítač pro vyučování programování v matematice
a odborných předmětech ZOPu

The school received the first computer on 16 October and the second one on 31 October for teaching programming in mathematics and rudiments of economic subjects.
(Record in Chronicle of the School – school year 1986–1987)

Nowadays, the School prepares the students with visual impairment to universal use of computers as a compensatory aid, a working tool, and a communication device. Material and technical conditions were established. The School dispose of three special classrooms equipped with computers including special software and hardware. The system is compatible to comply with the needs of part-sighted (zoom programme with/without voice output) and blind (voice output interpreting software environment of the computer, voice output with special hardware of Braille reader which enables tactile output for a blind user).

Teaching the students, all specifics of visually-impaired-person work with computer are respected. The structure of comment is adapted, subject matter of the curriculum is modified so that it could be objective and understandable for students with visual impairment. Diversified approach is used to blind and part-sighted according to their specific needs. (4)

The spectrum of subjects when computers are a part of teaching process during the classes has been enlarged. ICT (information and communication technologies) as a subject is taught in accord with the School Educational Programme On the Way to Understanding. It is a part of curriculum during the whole length of the study while in most of mainstream high schools it is taught only in the early part of the study.

The students with visual impairment do not form isolated local units but they have to be fully connected with the computer milieu. Only in this way, computer

technology can be used effectively during the lessons and all the participants are able to get feedback.

Computers enabled teachers widening of communication with students, sophisticated preparation of teaching aids and materials. Of course, the development brings paradoxes too. Braille printer made preparation of texts in Braille much easier. It opened wide space for improving students in reading in Braille. However, most of blind students prefer (and it is understandable) "reading" with voice output which is also a product of computer technology development.

Managing computers is a prerequisite for an independent life of a person with visual impairment.

2.6 Support of Integration of Students with Visual Impairment

The School has been involved in the project of provision adaptation services and methodological activity to support integration of students with visual impairment in mainstream high schools for six years. The project is funded from the city of Prague programmes supporting education.

Research concerning the state in education of students with visual impairment in mainstream high schools was carried out in the first year of the project. Potential clientele were addressed. As the highest demand of mainstream teachers was oriented on methodological materials dealing with science (chemistry, physics, mathematics), the initial work on them began.

Teachers of the School have created eight fundamental methodological materials. There have been organized fourteen seminars for mainstream teachers of students with visual impairment. Methodological materials were presented there together with practical exhibits, visits in the lessons, discussions and mutual exchange of experience. Teaching materials and prints in Braille were lent. Consultations concerning teaching students with visual impairment were held. Methodological outputs were presented in conferences (including international ones) and professional seminars.

The project is a complex programme of the School in favour of students with visual impairment integrated in mainstream schools.

The project represents a creative use of the School expertise in the situation when mainstream high schools dispose initial prerequisites for integration (individual educational plans of students with special needs, assistants, co-operation with special pedagogical centres), however, the way how to ensure professional level of education of a student with visual impairment is left on schools. (5)

Systematic supply of methodological support assists to forming of optimum special pedagogical conditions for mainstreaming the students with visual impairment.

2.7 Competitiveness

To stand the proof with other providers of educational services and to keep its specifics means that the School cannot rely on advantage or support from outside. The main directions, the School focused on in the last decade, are outlined in the following paragraphs.

Supply of branches of education is specified and extended so that it could be attractive for the candidates but first of all so that the school graduates could be successful in labour market.

The school results and achievements are presented not only in a traditional way (open-door days, through the mediation of special pedagogical centres and special schools) but also in regional and Schola Pragensis exhibitions, in the School materials (leaflets, yearbooks), on website, in performances and activities for public (drama group, arts workshop), and in organizing competitions (national competition in computer typing, goalball tournament, poetic competitions). Presentation of our students' achievements has an important motivation effect (especially our graduates' success at university studies and in labour market).

The School makes the best for implementing modern technologies in favour of students with visual impairment. It also makes an effort to keep relatively low economic demand for creation of optimum milieu for students with visual impairment.

Support is given to project teaching (partial projects in the class or across the classes and branches of education) with interdisciplinary approach. Interdisciplinary co-operation not only forms space for understanding the context but it also opens the way to team co-operation and strengthens the feeling of responsibility of both students and their teachers.

3 Conclusions

Even marginal space could be effectively used for high-quality educational activities of the school for students with special needs.

Quality of special pedagogical work as well as optimum milieu for education of students with special needs are important for those who decide where they/their children will be educated. (6)

Preparation for independent life is an integral part of education in the school for students with special needs.



Building where the School is situated

Notes:

- [1] See The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, UNESCO, Salamanca 1994, http://www.unesco.org/education/pdf/SALAMA_E.PDF
- [2] See The Lighthouse Model. From School to National Visual Resource Centre, MDVI Euronet, revised edition 2011
- [3] See Vlastní hodnocení školy 2008–2011
- [4] See JELÍNEK, Jakub. Kompenzace zrakového handicapu využitím výpočetní techniky. Gymnázium pro zrakově postižené a Střední odborná škola pro zrakově postižené, Praha 2009
- [5] See Věcná zpráva o užití grantu v rámci “Celoměstských programů podpory vzdělávání na území hl. m. Prahy pro rok 2011”
- [6] See FUCHS, Eberhard. The School for Visually Impaired Is Changing. ICEVI conference 2000, <http://icevi-europe.org/cracow2000/proceedings/ps2c.html>

4 Documents and Literature

Documents

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Photographs

black and white photographs (6) – Martina Kaderková, Ivan Antov (1)

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