



# Step Up!

## A Comenius Project

Project Newsletter No.1

November 2012

### Introduction to Step Up!

#### **Step Up!**

**S**afe travel and movement

**T**hrough the

**E**nvironment for young

learners with visual  
impairment,

**P**romoted by all!

**U**nderstanding and

**P**articipation.



Step Up! is a two-year school cooperation project funded through the Comenius programme and brings together partners from seven different EU countries.

The focus of the project is children and young people with a severe visual impairment, particularly in supporting the development of core skills on which proficiency in orientation and mobility is built. The target groups are parents/carers and professionals working with children and young people with impaired vision.

This is our first project newsletter following our first project meeting held in Sweden in October 2012. We hope you will find our project and news of interest.

## Background to Step Up!

For the general public, two of the common images they associate with blindness are the white cane and guide dog. They sum up the public's perception of the determination of the person who is visually impaired to be independent and active within the community. Thought might not then be extended to the skills that must be taught and learned in order for any level of independence to be realised.

Teaching pre-cane and cane competence takes place through Habilitation or Orientation, Mobility and Independence (OM&I), a key part of the essential additional curriculum for young learners with a visual impairment. However, that far from covers the work that must be done to enable the young person to become the driver in any mobility activity. The young learner should be encouraged to be an active participant and engage with their environment. Across Europe, education for the visually impaired is delivered through a range of different services including mainstream schools, units and special schools. The availability of formal OM&I also varies from country to country and from region to region. There are

limited OM&I specialists but unlimited demands. As such, pupils may well not be receiving the input in this vital area that they require and deserve, particularly in the early development of essential core skills such as understanding how their residual vision and other senses can be used facilitating safe movement, how information can be gained safely from other people and how the environment can be audited and set to encourage exploration, even from the earliest age. This project does not aim to replace formal OM&I training, but aims to identify simple steps that can be employed by non-specialists which will improve the participation of the young person in wanting to engage in independent and safe movement within the environment. This work could then be built upon through formal training.



# Project Aims

This project aims to challenge some commonly held misunderstandings and lack of public knowledge related to orientation, mobility and independence for young learners with a severe visual impairment in full time education. Too often adults will take charge of a situation and those who are over-helpful can deprive the young learner with visual impairment of opportunities to be the 'driver' and achieve tasks independently. Consequently learners may not have the 'know-how', motivation or confidence to ask for appropriate help. Young learners may become passive passengers through learned helplessness.

Through data collection by literature review, questionnaires, interviews, case studies and reports of good practice, this project will provide appropriate strategies to avoid learned helplessness occurring. The project aims to provide easily accessible information to:

- provide appropriate, relevant information to raise the awareness of parents/family, carers and educational professionals of their role in supporting and assisting the learner who is visually
- impaired in the area of developing core essential conceptual skills required to understand that the environment is complex and constantly changing. In addition, to allow the young learner to make full use of information that can be gained through use of remaining vision and the other senses.
- challenge and contribute to the ending of the inconsistent use of recognised Orientation & Mobility and Independence terminology by producing a glossary of standardised terminology and definitions for use by pupils, staff, parents and all.
- combat a lack of knowledge and awareness of environmental features and potential hazards for a child with a visual impairment.



# **The Magnificent Seven or is it Eight?**

## **Step Up! Project Partners**

**Gymnazium pro zrakové postizene a Stredni  
skola pro zrakové postizene**

Prague

Czech Republic

**Jyväskylän näkövammaisten koulu**

Jyväskylä

Finland

**Institut pour Deficients Visuels**

Luxembourg

**Jordanstown School**

Belfast

Northern Ireland

**Primary School for Children with Visual Impairment**

ChildVision

Dublin

Republic of Ireland

**Royal Blind School**

Edinburgh

Scotland

**Ekeskolan/Resourcentre Vision**

Orebro

Sweden

**Awaiting national agency funding:**

**Zavod za slepo in slabovidno mladino**

Ljubljana

Slovenia



# Impression of my first Comenius meeting

by Jana Loudova

*Gymnazium pro zrakově postizene a Střední odborná škola pro zrakově postizene is a school which provides secondary education in four fields of study – high school, business academy, business school and social work. The school is mainly attended by pupils with visual impairment but also by pupils with other disabilities (physical impairment, autism or with educational disorders).*

*I have worked at this school for five years. At first I worked here only as a social worker, which included providing social, legal and health advice to pupils and their parents, and help with their social and health problems. From the beginning of 2011 school year my working activities have extended and I became a teacher and orientation and mobility specialist.*

Our school has participated in the Comenius project „From School to Resource Centre“ in 2002. But for me the meeting of the STEP UP project in Örebro was the first. In fact my very first meeting took place in Dublin in February this year. As you know it was a preparatory meeting.

I'm very glad, that despite initial problems our school was allowed to participate in STEP UP. To explain, at first we received a statement from our National agency, that our application was approved, but because of lack of money we were on the waiting list. All depended on another institution not signing the contract. Fortunately that happened and in mid-September, only three weeks before the first meeting in Örebro, we received the final approval from our National agency, that we can participate in the project.

Three weeks is a short time to prepare the meeting, that's the reason I travelled to Örebro by myself. I hope next time I will be able to come with my two colleagues.



Participation in this kind of project is a big challenge for our school and especially for me. It's a way how to gain new information about orientation and mobility, to learn some new knowledge and skills and meet people with the same interest. It's good chance to visit foreign organizations and schools which take care of children with visual impairment and to exchange our experiences.

Before the first meeting in Örebro I was a little nervous. I went to a foreign country by myself and with my imperfect English. I didn't know what to expect. I had met some partners at the meeting in Dublin but it was only a part of our working group.

All my worries were unnecessary. Although the working meeting was very demanding for me, because it's a challenge to think in English all day, I met a lot of nice people who were very understanding. In Ekeskolan an amazing program was prepared in a very friendly environment. We had a pleasant time in the lovely town of Örebro. All members of the Swedish team took great care of us. This way I would like to thank you for everything.

Finally I would like to thank the Principal of our school that he put the trust to me and gave me the chance to be a part of this team.



# Building on the Past, Looking to the Future

By Gail Lawther, Jordanstown  
School, Northern Ireland

We have now participated in 4 Comenius projects. Each has had its own merits but I am excited to be renewing some old friendships and starting our new project “Step Up!”.

We have worked on previous projects with some of the countries involved now in Step Up!. Therefore we know that this project is bringing together a group of like-minded and experienced personnel currently working throughout Europe with children and young people with a visual impairment. We have met twice and it is clear just how committed and passionate we all are about Mobility and Independence (OM&I) being such a key part of the essential additional



curriculum for our young learners with a visual impairment. Our School is unique as it is the only school in Northern Ireland offering specialist education for the visually impaired so we recognise that we need to reach out beyond national boundaries to work with others who are dealing with the same issues and challenges. Moreover, many of our pupils with a visual impairment will never travel to experience the life and culture of our European neighbours, therefore it is our duty to bring the outside world into our school.

So we hope that Northern Ireland will **STEP UP** to the mark and have our voice heard!!!!!!!

# To join or not to join STEP UP!

By Marija Jerasa

Zavod za slepo in slabovidno mladino  
Ljubljana



... that has been the question for the Slovenian working team since July when we were informed by our national agency CMEPIUS that STEP UP was on the waiting list in Slovenia and there was no funding at the time being. Our disappointment was even bigger since all the other partners had been approved.

The question has never been whether the theme of the project is interesting enough for our Institution as it covers the field of work that we believe to be crucial in the development of independent living skills for a person with visual impairment. Furthermore, it is probably the most understaffed area of work at our school at the moment.

The project is not meant to develop specialists of Orientation and Mobility, but to meet those who are specialists within our working group, to exchange ideas and different practices, share experience, study of literature, there are discussions during the meetings and informal talks which are undoubtedly the best way to gain at least some knowledge especially valuable to our less experienced members of staff.

Therefore, the question whether to join the project or not, turned into how to join it without re-

sources. The first meeting in Örebro had been approaching and the decision had to be taken. The Slovenian working group consists of nine members, for some this would be the first visit in a similar institution abroad. However, as a contact person I was the lucky one to take part in the meeting. The meeting met all my expectations: friendly working atmosphere, tolerance, clear objectives ... I was well received by the partners representing all the members of our team and they accepted our way of work from the distance. Homework was taken home, it will be distributed and done by our next meeting in Luxembourg.

We really wish we could all participate this time. There is still a glimmer of hope till the end of December. But if our dream is not fulfilled, we will continue in our way and we will try to contribute as much as we will be able to. Many thanks to our friends in the partnership who are making this possible!