



# Step Up!

## A Comenius Project

Project Newsletter No.2

May 2013

### 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! Partnership at the Second Project Meeting ...

# Project Update!

By Gail Lawther, Jordanstown School.



Step Up! is now well underway and we have had our second project meeting which was hosted by our partners at Institut pour Deficients Visuels in Luxembourg. Unfortunately our partner from Slovenia has not received funding but they are still very much part of the project as the school is self-funding.

The focus of our project is on 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, and the phase is to gather data on this area.

After our first meeting in Orebro, Sweden each of the partners were tasked with collecting information for a literature review. This literature review was devised to address the essential core skills development (seeking and using clues, cues, landmarks and people) for Orientation and Mobility (O&M) for non-specialist professionals and the role of parents and carers in supporting the young learner with a visual impairment. Each partner had also to distribute our devised questionnaire to a variety of Mobility and Orientation workers/teachers in their own

country. The questionnaire was to ask O&M specialists to identify key concepts, approaches and simple activities to support the young learner. Feedback was given from each country regarding the preliminary findings from the questionnaires and from the literature review.

However, the task of processing the questionnaire and collating the draft findings proved to be quite onerous but, with a great team effort, we completed the task. This did mean that the work plan had to be revised.

We did get to address some of the commonly held myths/misconceptions surrounding visual impairment but still need to explain and challenge each set of myths – focusing on the person not the disability. Work on the website is on-going and a poster has been planned to be displayed at a variety of conferences. Last minute progress was made on an Environment Audit template, but other planned work on the glossary of common terminology associated with O&M and blindness was postponed until our next meeting in June in Edinburgh.

We did make time to have a very interesting visit around the Institute and were welcomed by the Principal Mr Frank Groben.

Each of the partners left a snowy Luxembourg with some home work but more importantly with a fresh enthusiasm for the project and its objectives. We also left with memories of a beautiful city and the warm welcome from our partners in Luxembourg. We look forward to the next project visit to the Royal Blind School in Edinburgh in June.

# Why Step Up! Matters

**By Iain Prain**

Vice Principal Royal  
Blind School (Retired)



In the recent review of learning provision in Scotland for children and young people with complex additional support needs

(November 2012), the report notes that *“The Scottish Sensory Centre (SSC) and staff at the University of Edinburgh have recently undertaken an investigation of the numbers and qualifications of teachers teaching children and young people with sensory impairments which indicates that nearly 60% of teachers specialising in visual impairment are aged 45 and over while 68% of those specialising in hearing impairment are over 45. The review also heard that some of the lead practitioners in services and schools have either retired or are nearing the end of their professional careers with the consequent loss of expertise.”*

Furthermore in the university research sector the review notes that, *“In one university that had ten lecturers specialising in additional support for learning a few years ago, the number is now two.”* This is a trend I believe is also taking place across many European countries. In itself this does not have to have a negative effect upon the education of young learners with a visual impairment, it can give opportunities for new models of practice to evolve but the present situation is greatly complicated by the on-going and seemingly endless financial crisis in Europe. Many of the practitioners with significant experience of visual impairment are not being replaced and there appears to be a trend, possibly financially driven, for a more generic approach to teacher

training and service delivery, with a consequent loss of specialist expertise in visual impairment.

In the education of young learners with a visual impairment, we do not want to preserve a curriculum and methodology that is rigorously followed without question but there is a real danger that knowledge, skills and expertise that should be supporting young people with a visual impairment, will be lost. Back in 2004, at the ICEVI 4<sup>th</sup> workshop on teacher training in Budapest, the team at Dortmund University noted that the basic idea in producing the ISaR network was that, *‘The key to further development of education of individuals with visual impairment lies in mutuality and in a network of expertise and resources. What is mutually developed will support and facilitate individual work.’* The Step Up project and the practical guide it will produce, fits very much into the wider network envisioned by ISaR. Step Up will indeed become part of the wider Shared European Treasure where ‘thousands of teachers, trainers and educators cooperating in partnerships share the wealth of their experience.’ It goes further than this because building upon the experiences of other projects ie OPTIC, (OPTimising the Inclusive Classroom), Step Up will be produced in a format that is easily accessible to not only teachers and trainers but families, carers and society in general. Step-Up will not only preserve expertise it can disseminate it to a society wide audience. Only when we achieve a society wide core understanding of the needs of people with a visual impairment will we get a more coherent and inclusive society for all. That is why Step Up matters, so more power (and hard work) to you all and I look forward to seeing the finished product. I am however left with one question, what will your next project in this ‘series’ focus on?



# The Joys of Hosting a Comenius Meeting

by Pierrot Felten

Step Up! is our current COMENIUS project and includes 8 different nations. The preparatory meeting was in Dublin where the organisational standards were set very high. The first meeting took place in Örebro where it was very cold, but the meeting was very well organised. At first, when it was announced that Luxembourg would host a meeting, we were more than excited to organise this encounter and welcome the group in our beautiful country. But this exaltation changed at one blow, and the level of uncertainty climbed constantly as suddenly we weren't confident if we could manage the complex planning of the event. We had 1,000 questions that needed answering, one more complicated than the other, and no appropriate solutions. A nightmare:

- What kind of hotel will suit?
- Will they appreciate Luxembourgish food?
- Will they find their way between the airport and the hotel?
- Will they manage to get around in the "megacity" of Luxembourg?
- Will they.... ?
- Have we... ?
- Is there...?

But we jumped in at the deep end! Fortunately we already knew most of our guests so we assumed they would be indulgent with us. We started the planning with the distribution of different tasks to get a global overview of the entire event and to formulate and plan the different steps.

We needed to find a well-located hotel with good value for money and to formulate a nicely



balanced program with enough spare time for our guests to explore the beautiful city and its surroundings on their own.

## **Many points had to be considered and so we drew up a checklist**

**The Budget:** Can any financial allowances for the participants be expected? We had to ask our headmaster to let us know the financial plan in all its details.

**Time:** The exact starting and ending times for the conference needed to be indicated, telling how many days the conference will last.

We sent our group coordinator a mail to get detailed information about the sequence of the meeting.

**Head Count:** Since the hotel asked for the detailed number of guests to make the reservations, we needed to know as soon as possible how many participants would attend the conference.

**Agenda:** The agenda is based on the objectives and focuses of the project, typically very detailed. Then, when our team got together, the agenda laid out each part of the project, including the person in charge of this part. We have to ask Rob! Pierrot's job.

## **Accessory material / Facilities**

**Management:** Extra facilities are required, like overhead projectors, teaching aids, whiteboards, markers, writing pads, pencil/pens, etc. All this is readily available in our institute, we only need to request it.

**Catering Services:** Will there be tea / coffee/ snacks / lunch / dinner / drinks served for all  
Cont ...

the guests at the conference? Happily, our headmaster confirmed that all this would be provided free of charge for all of us – many thanks to him!



#### **Accommodation Facilities:**

Accommodation was organised by the host, according to the agreement of the group members.

**Logistics/Travel:** Is the transport for our guests going to be organised and if so, does this transportation also include leisure time and off-conference hours?

We decided to arrange transportation from and to the hotel for the meetings on a private level and organised a pick-up service.

Happily we got a full support of the whole staff of the institute especially our headmaster who did everything to help us with our task.

We wanted to formulate the goal of the meeting clearly and concisely so that every participant was well aware of the workload to be expected. The agenda, including the goal of the meeting, was sent well in advance to give everyone enough time to prepare mentally for the

upcoming event.

With this task, the group coordinator, who always had the exact timetable well in mind, helped us a lot. Thanks Rob!

Loads of work, phone calls, e-mails, and faxes followed and finally, some time later, we were actually done. We were relieved to see that we had managed to balance well all tasks and could look forward to the arrival of our 21 guests.

We were very happy to meet all our friends and also some newcomers on Monday morning in the lobby of the hotel. All our worries had passed and the meeting went fine!

We managed to stay close in our timetable; we worked hard, laughed a lot and had a lot of fun. Still we are relieved that another group will be in charge of organising the next meeting and will be hosting us!



We are already looking forward to going to Edinburgh!



# Impressions of My First Comenius Meeting

by Paul Taylor

The Royal Blind School provides specialist education, term time residential care, therapies and health support for young people aged up to 18 years. Based in Edinburgh, the school is a National Centre of Excellence in the education and care of young people who are blind or visually impaired (VI), including those who have complex, multiple disabilities and visual impairment (MDVI).



I started working at The Royal Blind School in 2005 and for the first 6 years I worked as a Residential Care Worker. There was then an opportunity for professional development and I was able to study for a Graduate Diploma: Specialist Qualification in Habilitation and Disabilities of Sight (Children and Young People). After my first year of studies I was employed by the school as a Habilitation Assistant and I was then promoted to a Habilitation Specialist when I graduated.

The first meeting that I attended on the Step Up project was when I visited The Institut pour Deficients Visuels in Luxembourg. Prior to attending my first meeting, I had been kept up to date with the progress of the Step Up project as my colleague Angie Bisson had been involved in the project from the start. I was also able to carry out research in relation to the literary review and I completed the questionnaire. It was therefore a good experience when we met and started to discuss the topics that I had been reading about. I had previously seen photographs of

the group, so it was great to meet everyone in person. I was very impressed by the professionalism of all the partner countries and how well the group worked together to achieve a common goal. This display of team work continued throughout our meetings.

It was evident that all the partner countries had completed lots of work in preparation for the meetings and that was seen by the amount of research that everyone brought to the meetings. The organisational aspects of the group was very impressive and I enjoyed the discussions that we had. It was good to share information and experiences with fellow professionals and I liked how everyone in the group was respected and given time to share their knowledge. It was a very productive time and I was impressed at the work rate of the group.

As a result of the meetings being hosted at The Institut pour Deficients Visuels in Luxembourg, we were given the opportunity to have a tour of their building. It was good to observe different educational settings and our partners in Luxembourg were great hosts and we were shown the range of services that they offer and the facilities that they have. I enjoyed my experience in Luxembourg and I was made to feel more than welcome throughout my visit. I look forward to working with everyone again at the next meeting.



# CREATING A NEW SCHOOL

## News from a Step Up! Partner

Jyväskylän School for Visually Impaired and Haukaranta School (established for hard-hearing and deaf pupils and later on working with pupils with autism spectrum disorders and language and communication problems), now merged, were two of 8 state-subsidized special schools and service centres in Finland.

From 1st January 2013 on we've been ONE - Onerva Mäki School named after PhD Onerva Mäki who worked at Jyväskylän University as a lecturer, special education teacher trainer and researcher concentrating on CP, hearing disability and visual disability. Onerva Mäki has promoted equal and full social participation of disabled people by organizing and developing education and rehabilitation services.

Onerva Centre of Learning and Consulting offers consulting and support services especially when the need for support is related to vision, hearing, language, communication and autism spectrum disorders. The two special schools were founded and built in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In spite of several renovations, the pupils and staff in both schools kept suffering from Sick Building Syndrome. Both old school buildings are now empty and the pupils study in temporary facilities on the school campuses. Our functions and services are divided into four units for a moment... or for the next two years.

The new school building should be ready by 2015 when ONE will host a "grand opening" to celebrate the completion of the merger. The head designers in the project are Aarne von Boehm and Airi Vesala from architectural office Aarne von Boehm. Besides principals and staff working with the architects, we have engaged pupils in the design process as well. The staff has participated in working groups, brainstorming, discussions and a planning forum in Facebook. In the past month we have had a weekly builders' "café"; a chance to hear the latest news and express our opinions and even talk with the architects.

In a series of six architectural workshops organized by art educator Jorge Raedó and The Alvar Aalto Museum, pupils were introduced to the basic concepts of architecture. They visited several buildings using iPads, iPhones and digital cameras to record images, videos and sounds in order to express their sentiments about the buildings and what they thought about colors, contrasts, lights, noise levels, materials, textures, etc. On 28th March 2013, we had an exhibition opening at Alvar Aalto Museum and on 11th April 2013, the pupils gave the films to the architects of architectural office Aarne von Boehm and started a dialogue about the new school building.

In Newsletter 3 we will reveal the new plan and tell about the demolition process. Before the new Onerva Mäki School building can rise we have to tear down our old one and clear the grounds for construction.

To be continued ...

