

BLINDNESS EXPLAINED TO THE CHILDREN: LET ALL THE CHILDREN PLAY TOGETHER

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Abstract: “Of all major disabilities, blindness is perhaps the easiest to simulate, but the most difficult to really comprehend. At first sight, it might seem to be sufficient to close one's eyes.

What can it be like when closing your eyes makes no difference? What is it like when behind those closed eyes there's a blind persons' brain, a brain without colors, without stars and smiles, without scenery and horizons, and perhaps above all without faces?”

Into the words of John M. Hull there's all the relationship essence with a blind person. Now, in my daily job with childhood in Italian primary school, I understood that a real inclusive education is possible only if adult (advisers, teachers, or parents) leave their exclusive and direct actions to special child, and try to create terms and conditions so that all the children can grow together, playing, working and staying together.

We often fear a child that cannot see is always in dangerous situations, but forget that the worst is don't let to stay with same age persons. In my experience, children learn and understand fast and effectively the meaning to be blind, and show attention, care and coherence to their blind friend, but only if adults are able to lead them about they must do.

This is my proposal: some key-words and method to understand the meaning of blindness, both adult and child.

1 Introduction

Some years ago, one morning I was working in a primary school, called for Luca, a blind child; during the break, I stayed with the personal teacher of another one, Valentina, a girl with progressive spastic quadriplegia, and we've chatting. While all the children were playing together, taking a look at Luca, the blind boy, the teacher told me “Ok... Valentina cannot walk, or run, or play no movement games with another friend of hers, but I'm thinking that not to see must be the worst thing!”

“Really?” I asked, “but don't you think that one day Luca will be able to go himself, make a job and, perhaps, live in autonomy and in self-sufficiency, while Valentina will need some help in every time?”

“Yes...” She answered, “but Valentina can see everything... do you understand what I mean? See everything!”

“Yes!” I've cut short! Later in the same morning, we saw Luca pushing Valentina on her wheelchair, they were running around the park: while she told him to turn right or left, or go slower or faster, he let Valentina go without assistance. Nobody taught them how to play that game, but they were enjoying so much: than I thought “Whose is the problem? Theirs (the children), or ours?”

Do Valentina and Luca know the deep meaning of “blindness” or “progressive spastic quadriplegia”, or are they a sort of mental labels and categories created by adults to describe realities that are out of our normal way of life? Isn't it more and more easy for them think how to play with a friend that cannot see, or cannot walk and run?

2 Blindness seen from an adult...

These questions seem trivial in an International Scientific Committee, but they give the deep sense and the real spirit of special education if I have to cope with children. Let me make an example: I spend much of my time in deeply understanding the meaning of a complex reality like blindness, and a good way that I've found is to read experiences written by blind people. One of the most famous, John M. Hull, in a book translated in Italian with title “The Dark Gift”, writes <<of all major disabilities, blindness is perhaps the easiest to simulate, but the most difficult to really comprehend. At first sight, it might seem to be sufficient to close one's eyes [...]. What can it be like when closing you eyes makes no difference? What is like when behind those closed eyes there's a blind persons' brain, a brain without colors, without stars and smiles, without scenery and horizons, and above all without faces?>>

Hull's writings are known to be at the same time sublime and tragic and they're the hard image of blindness, especially when a person loses sight in adult age, because they remind us how much our brain need sight to have informations from outside world around (we can evaluate that 70% of our knowledge is built on visual experiences). But if this is the experience in the adult age, what can we know about the experience of blindness

in childhood? Surely we cannot know anything reading books, because children hardly write books! There's only a way: stay with children, make with them a real relationship, and trying over it to feel world around in the same mode. Compared to adult, child has a different balance, so child consciousness must not be seen for its major or minor distance from adult one, but like a self case, in the same way in which we would value an infant drawing: in that sketch we find all the elements of reality that a child can detect, and it must not to be seen for how to break as to an adult one.

So, a blind child doesn't know the entire meaning of blindness just like an adult means it: his experiences hasn't the poetry of Hull's writings, or Homer's intensity when he tells about Tiresia in *The Odyssey*, but they're simply and easier. Again through literature, I find more honest and direct the words of José Saramago, in all their rawness, when he writes <<Blindness doesn't spread by infection, like an epidemic, blindness doesn't pass from a man from another only because a seeing man look at a blind one. Blindness is a private case between a man and the eyes who's born with>>

3 ... and from a boy

If we ask a child or a teenager about their own blindness, it appears really like “a private case”, and it's very interesting to discover its nature. Luca is a good example, because many blind children told me that their main problem was not to be so able to walk or run alone, and they say it in a disarming way “I cannot run because I don't see where I'm going!”. So, Luca finds in Valentina a good solution to his personal problem. But I've gathered many experiences and information during my PhD research, lived with teenage boys and girls, too. They're worry not about blindness in as to its existential meaning, but about its practical and realistic issues, like Christian, 19 years old actually, who has lost sight because of a cancer near occipital cortex when he was ten: <<When I went to the hospital, I was afraid I lose some school years! But later I could go to high school, filling in gaps quickly thanks to my family, who helped me a lot both studying (my father is a technician, so he built for me some personal devices) and physical rehabilitation (my mother persuaded me to follow a judo training: it was made for blind people, but it helped me so much to feel and understand environmental elements all around).>>

In another case, during a training for tyflo-psychologists in Albania, two years ago, we spent a whole afternoon with a blind child (eight years old) and his family, showing to apprentice how to approach blind childhood. All the activities resulted so funny, in a nice public park in the centre of Tirana, spending all our time playing games. At the end of journey, the child said he had enjoyed a lot with us, than we asked him if he would like to play another game, the best one he could choose. So, he answered us <<I'd like to go for a run, if you want to lead me. I can never run with my friends, 'cause they usually run without me!>>.

4 Some educational ideas

What do these experiences mean in special education's field? Let's try to fix some ideas. First of all: blindness often makes you afraid, in a reality where we deeply depend on our sight to understand what happens around. Actually common people live in a sort of “visual-culture” where most of information passes by visual inputs, so the only idea to lose visual abilities makes you afraid.

Special educators are common people with more responsibilities, because they can experience the same fears, they can feel them, but they must find some solid interpretations, too. And it's often hard work: every educator at the beginning of his work must compare himself to disability. I don't want to spend much words around this theme: everybody knows what it means to be in relationship with physical or mental diseased people, everyone tries it one time in life, at least. But, if empathy needed to sustain relationship with these people modifies our behavior because in physical or mental disease differences are clear, it isn't the same thing with sensory disease, because differences appear not so evident and direct, at first time: when we meet a deaf or a blind person usually he looks like a normal one, but after few moments we feel that there's “other”, something we hardly understand because it gives you a sensation to be “behind”, or “under the skin”. Out of these simple sensations, I think maybe a neurological implication: I haven't direct evidences and I've found none in scientific literature, actually, but I believe that our mirror neurons are not so ready immediately to “perceive in the Other perceptible differences”, in a sort of short-circuit which asks our brain a bit of training, before.

If this last hypothesis would be true, many of educational implications could find their explanation: to draft

an educational project for a blind person is usually a completely different thing compared with other types of disabilities, not only because special needs are different, but above all because neuron-physiology has shown us that brain-cortex of blind people is organized in a different way, so some part of cortex appointed to visual abilities in blindness can develop other functions. From this point-of view we can consider blindness not as a disease, but like “another thing” or a “different thing” from a seeing person's brain, the particular logic of which must be understood. But it makes a big difference to get into this logic in adult age, when blindness implications appear in all their gravity (remember what does John Hull write?), instead of trying to comprehend them from children's point-of-view: for an adult to be blind means to lose the life lived before and discover how to keep on living, while for a child it's only a problem, taken one at a time, to solve “here-and-now”.

During my experience of special educationist I've realized that most often we look at blind children as “a complex problem in a simple reality”: in this way we force children to look at adult like “a simple problem in a complex reality”. But if adult learn to see the world of children like they feel it, he'll become their main point of reference, showing that he'd like grow up with them. A good educational work is done when adult is able to gather every child's needs, and fuse them in one harmonic contest: there's not so many differences between the special needs of a blind child and needs of all the other children: everybody asks the way to stay and play together. Any examples? Some days ago in an infant school some children asked me how to play with Simon, blind with Down syndrome; so, I started to play with them, making all together a toy train; at first Simon was in the middle, feeling his friends before and behind; than he was at the end, running behind other boys, than he was at the top, so the friend in second position drove Simon touching the left or the right shoulder. They enjoyed so much, since they needed only a simple solution to stay all together. In another situation, in a primary school, boys aged ten with a blind one in their class asked me which way their friend could understand his living space around; I led the group into a large place unknown before (the middle school's gym room), everybody had a blindfold on their eyes. I made a mess with lots of objects everywhere, than I told them to explore all the room in perfect silence, trying to recognize other boys they'd met using only their touch. Than we went into the classroom to make a personal picture of the experience: every sketch was different because every child had felt different part of place: in this way they understood that blind people can feel only parts of surrounding environment, which sense of touch, hearing and smell can detect, making a partial image: the same concept that in special education we use to tell that blind people do not globalize.

Scientific and technological knowledge's growth has allowed to solve much of handicap people's problems, regarding body's functions, or helps and assistances duty to improve quality's life. But we never forget that, in special education, science and technique are useless without a good relationship, even if it maybe very difficult, sometimes. Relationship strictly depends on personal traits and on surrounding environment: a blind person shows us that his world's perception is simply “another way to feel”, and often it isn't less than ours, it's only different. But it is this kind of difference that makes us in crisis, because it moves perception from our mode to his, and blind people's world must be discovered through them. Nobody leaves easily his own certainties, so it's easier to use our own technical knowledge before, instead of trying to create deep relationships. But all the children (and specially blind children) are often rotten technicians, but they're finest to bare our soul!

In an inclusive prospect, special education must enlarge one's competence from direct actions to special children, to create terms and conditions so that all the children can grow together. Everything will be real when we'll move our attention from single function's rehabilitation to all the human and environmental factors that allow or thwart free activities and participation.

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