

# Communication Therapy International



An organisation for those working with people with communication disabilities around the world

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This Newsletter is longer than usual because we've been sent two fascinating articles about developing communication services, and for a change they're both from Europe. Seray Ibrahim in Northern Cyprus and Dorothy Fraser in Romania describe their involvement in improving communication, teaching and learning in special schools. In both articles it is clear that their work was based on links with local professionals already committed to special education provision. Seray and Dorothy are also both using international connections to support their projects.

## Communication projects in Romania 2004- ongoing

Dorothy Fraser MCSP, retired physiotherapist, Scotland UK



Workshop at Special School 6 Bucharest

In 2003 I worked for a short time as a volunteer physiotherapist on a project in Romania funded by a UK charity. After completing my allocated time I registered with the Department of Child Protection and continued to work at a day centre for children with severe disabilities, who were not included in the education system. At that time I worked hands on with children as well as explaining theory and teaching practical methods to local therapists, parents and grandparents.

My visits were for 2 or 3 weeks at a time with several visits per year. My travel route in and out of Romania was via Bucharest where a Romanian colleague asked me to go with her to a special needs school in the city to see if there was anything I could do to help the school director, Mrs Mariana Meran, with her aims for changing and improving special education. That was the beginning of a partnership between us which has developed over the past 5 years and is ongoing.

In recent years in Romania legislation has changed the special education system so that children with severe disabilities, many of whom were previously looked after at home or in institutions, are entitled to education in special schools. This includes children with a wide range of disabilities and created a situation where a new approach was required to provide suitable, relevant education to cater for their needs.

## Dorothy Fraser MCSP, retired physiotherapist, Scotland UK

Mrs Meran and members of her staff, including the psychologist, teachers and speech therapists told me some of their frustrations regarding the system of special education.

- They found it hard to meet the needs of individuals. They wanted to provide interesting relevant topics as they were concerned about pupils abandoning education, truants going out in the streets and underground begging for money etc.
- They identified a lack of suitable materials for special needs; text books provided from the main stream curriculum had very small print, no graphics. Maths books were very complicated with too much detail on a page making it difficult to see and understand.
- The traditional style of classroom with pupils sitting all day in rows of fixed height desks and the teacher writing on the blackboard, did not take into account the physical problems of pupils, e.g. those with cerebral palsy, Down's Syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and also those with speech, vision, hearing problems and in some cases multiple disabilities

Mrs Meran has a special interest in education for pupils with ASD. She is also concerned about pupils reaching school leaving age without the necessary skills for employment or independent living. I was asked to help them make changes by providing examples of good practice in UK and by working directly with therapists, teachers and pupils.

## Contacts

I initially contacted speech therapists and colleagues in the UK who then put me in contact with other professionals. Everyone has been extremely helpful either with practical ideas or written material. The early requests were for developmental toys, not available in Romania but easy to find in charity shops in Scotland. Books and information from the National Autistic Society ([www.nas.org.uk](http://www.nas.org.uk)), information from HM Inspectorate Scotland ([www.hmie.gov.uk](http://www.hmie.gov.uk)) and collections of papers on Augmentative Communication Practice: Scotland ([www.acipscotland.org.uk](http://www.acipscotland.org.uk)), have been put together to create a small reference library in Special School 6.

Because Mrs Meran also has strong connections with other people in special education, including inspectors from the ministry of education it has been important throughout our project to provide evidence of good practice that she or others can refer to.

The most recent addition to information is regarding the use of symbols from Widgit with examples of Symbol Inclusion in Warwickshire Local Authority, Symbols for Learning and Symbols in Education all translated into Romanian. There is also a PowerPoint presentation of Communication Friendly Environments plus, from the collection of Scottish papers with permission to have them translated into Romanian, examples of visual strategies, how to make communication boards and an example of a symbol ladder.

## Widgit ([www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com))



At the 2005 Communication Matters (ISAAC) conference in England I was introduced to Tina Detheridge, international director of Widgit. I explained my project and she decided to offer help. The timing was perfect. Earlier in 2005 a small communication project had been funded by The Netherlands, for which speech therapists in special school 6 Bucharest had prepared a pack of communication information for rural schools. They searched the internet for programmes with suitable pictures but were very disappointed as they could only find programmes in English. The pictures were good but there was no way to remove the English text. We prepared the packs using [www.dotolearn.com](http://www.dotolearn.com) which had examples of class timetables, behaviour, emotions, and sequences of dressing etc. Within Special School 6, as the interest grew for 2 way communication, there was an obvious need for better resources to develop and change the education methods to become interactive. Widgit Software provided the solution.

## 2006, Bucharest

Widgit and I started a joint project to introduce Widgit Software into 4 special schools in Bucharest including practical workshops. I was also asked to take part in a meeting for staff working in all of the special schools in Bucharest, hosted by special school 11. This was the first opportunity to present, to a wide audience, examples of images from Communicate in Print, one of the Widgit Software programmes. I used "Story Bag" from KEYCOMM ([www.keycommaac.ik.org](http://www.keycommaac.ik.org)), as my theme which was appreciated because it was relevant to Romania, a practical, inexpensive way for children who may not be able to hold a book to be involved in the process of telling a familiar story and also an introduction to symbols which for some children would become their future means of communication.



## Conclusion

Our joint project in Bucharest will continue after the summer holidays.

I plan to add training presentations at the CCD in Sibiu city and school workshops in Sibiu County, Transylvania where there are 5 special education schools and itinerant teachers. Interactive communication is still in it's infancy with resistance from some teachers who are reluctant to change but there is also a growing number of people who do see the need for improvements and are looking at ways to do this. Over the past 5 years there has been a huge increase in the use and availability of computers in schools and in general life too. In addition to schools and inspectors, universities are showing interest in symbol use and AAC. Romania now has 20 members of ISAAC ([www.isaac-online.org](http://www.isaac-online.org))

Anyone interested in finding out more,

please contact me on [dotfraser@hotmail.com](mailto:dotfraser@hotmail.com)

Acknowledgement and thanks for their support to

[Sally Millar, CALL, University of Edinburgh, \[www.callscotland.org.uk\]\(http://www.callscotland.org.uk\)](#)

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[Tina Detheridge, Widgit Software, \[www.widgit.com\]\(http://www.widgit.com\)](#)

[Mrs Meran, director and Alina Tutu, speech therapist and teacher, Special School 6, Bucharest](#)

[Catalina Salam , and Aurelia Luca, the 2 translators](#) who are reaching the final stages of a huge amount of work creating materials which can be used in the future throughout Romanian wherever symbols are needed.

## Developing Special Education Services in Cyprus

### Seray Ibrahim Speech & Language Therapist



On May 1st 2004 Cyprus became a member of the European Union (EU). Many believe that this provided the opportunity for development in health and education systems, financial sector and trade. To date however, many issues remain as they previously were, including the unresolved division of the island. Cyprus is home to two separate communities; the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot populations. After a period of internal conflict between 1963 – 1974, Cyprus has been split in two; the north and south.

The southern part of the island has developed drastically over the years. Walking down the high streets you will immediately notice the familiar chain stores, structured roads and pavements.

On my visits to private sector schools and state health settings I was impressed with the services

Turkey. The embargoes placed upon international trade have stopped them from developing financially.

In Northern Cyprus the state-provided services are not scrutinised or governed by a higher entity such as the EU, as may be expected services are minimal and in need of development.



#### The Yesilyurt Special Education Centresouth.

provided. These included varied and sufficient number of specialist professionals, working to meet the needs of children and adults with special needs. Speaking to colleagues who work in the southern part of Cyprus, it is clear that a lot has been done to maximise the skills and the potential of these clients. I found that many of the issues being discussed, such as inclusion, are the same as those I'm familiar with in the U.K.

In Northern Cyprus, special education has taken longer to evolve and there is still a long way to go. When Cyprus became a member of the EU, the southern part was recognised internationally as The Republic of Cyprus, but the administration in the north has only been recognised by

In 2007, I moved to Northern Cyprus with the intention of staying for six months. I wanted to support families of children with special needs by volunteering my services as a Speech & Language Therapist. Being of Turkish Cypriot origin, I thought I had a reasonable grasp of the language to deliver a service in Turkish. Also, frequent visits in the past and my experiences whilst growing up had given me a good idea about what to expect in terms of culture and attitudes towards disability. I ended up staying for almost two years, and still find it difficult to break the tie, even now that I am back in the UK.

I started my project volunteering my services to the state special schools. At the time, there were

five special education centres across Northern Cyprus; situated in Nicosia (the capital), Kyrenia and Famagusta. I travelled between three special education centres, offering in-class support to teaching staff and students. I also ran workshops for developing communication, language and play skills and offered advice to support children with eating and drinking difficulties. I also worked with families in their own homes. As the word spread, I found myself being called to the Ministry of Education to assess and offer advice to children with a wide range of difficulties, from Autism to speech sound difficulties.

One particular aspect which struck me was that, people rarely asked for support for children with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), or significant motor disorders like Cerebral Palsy. Looking back, I realise this reflected local perceptions towards disability. I found that the expectations for children with complex physical, and learning needs was low. Many children were cared for in their own homes behind closed doors and this is demonstrated by the limited services available for this client group.

At the end of the six month period, I was employed by the Ministry of Education to work with a small team of special education teachers and assistants, in order to establish a special education centre in the north west of Cyprus, in the Morphou region. The Yesilyurt Special Education Centre is now in its second year of running. The centre provides education and support to children with special needs aged between 3-18 years of age. For one day a week, it also opens its doors to adults with learning difficulties aged between 18-35 years. The school has faced many obstacles since opening, and these are by no means resolved. Some of these obstacles include: the lack of space, limited electricity

supply, limited financial support and very significantly inadequate multidisciplinary professional involvement. However, for many of the children who attend, this is the first time that they have been accepted into a school setting. Also, it is the first one of its kind in the North West of Cyprus.

The lack of multidisciplinary input remains a serious issue across the whole of Northern Cyprus. To my knowledge, there are three practicing Speech & Language Therapists (one of whom currently works in the state special education centres). Only one of the Special Education Centres has physiotherapy input, this is the school which historically catered for children with physical difficulties. Currently, there are seven state special education centres throughout Northern Cyprus, so other children needing physiotherapy input receive this in hospital settings on an ad hoc basis, or seek private therapy. There are no Paediatric Neurologists or Occupational Therapists in Northern Cyprus, to name but a few of the crucial missing links.

Despite these challenges, I found that scattered within these settings there were some very dedicated and skilled professionals who work extremely hard to make change. This was one of the factors which motivated me to stay for longer than I had planned to.

Since returning to the UK, a group of local professionals and I have set up a not-for-profit organisation, called 'Samanyolu' (meaning, a starry path / Milky Way). Through this, we aim to share knowledge and information between families and professionals about special needs services which are available and offer advice through creating culturally relevant resources. Funding is being sought from local sources

and from international bodies in order to meet our goals. On a positive note, the Famagusta and Yesilyurt Special Education Centres have recently been granted funding to develop their services for supporting children's physical skills. Another hopeful development is that the government is now planning to create a separate Special Education division within the Ministry of Education. The government is also working on creating a Special Education Law which will start to create baseline common practices for special school settings.

Back in the UK I have been fortunate enough to begin working in an area of London which has a large Turkish population and a Special School team who are very keen to develop provisions for children and families where English is a second language. In Haringey at The Vale Resource Base, we have started to look at different ways of offering support to Turkish speaking families in the UK. We are also planning an exciting project to jointly work with the Yesilyurt Special Education Centre in Cyprus to share knowledge and skills.

Through the joint working with The Vale Resource Base and the Samanyolu organisation we are hoping to provide ongoing sustainable support. We strive towards the moment where special education services across the whole of Cyprus are in line with European Union Standards.

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## Seray Ibrahim Speech & Language Therapist

A small charity called British Consultancy Charitable Trust (BCCT) is seeking names and details of people who are qualified and with at least 5 years experience to carry out voluntary assignments in developing countries. The visits usually last from 2 weeks to 3 months and food and reasonable accommodation is provided locally. BCCT provides 'pocket money' and insurance.

If you are keen to volunteer, please visit [www.bcct.org.uk](http://www.bcct.org.uk) for information and to sign on to join the register of skilled BCCT Volunteers by sending us a short e-CV.

Thank you, John Trinder

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