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Researcher develops tactile books for visually impaired students

Master's dissertation investigates the learning process of visually impaired children by developing specialized materials

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Tactile books are illustrated books for visually impaired children that combine different materials and textures. There is evidence that the origin of tactile books traces back to the early 70s in Italy. These books not only help visually impaired children to learn but also serve inclusion efforts, since not only visually impaired children can read them, but also children with regular vision, an appeal which promotes interaction among all kids.

In May this year, the professor of the Catarinense Federal Institute, [Roberta Stockmanns](#), defended her master's dissertation entitled: "[Illustrated tactile books and the literacy process of visually impaired children](#)". The study was conducted in the Post-Graduate Program in Education at UFRGS and it is part of the line of research on Special Education and Inclusive Processes.

Differently from what common sense believes, education is not the same literacy, which is the development of reading and writing skills. Education is more complex; it includes the whole communication process that develops throughout any person's life. This process is very important since it is through communication that social practices are established and emotional bonds are born, like friendships among children. Therefore, education suggests the social use of literacy.

Stockmanns says that the dissertation's theme was an old interest of hers. Since her undergraduate education, the study of children's learning processes has always been of a research interest to her. Before her master's, she did a *latu sensu* specialization in Special Education and Neuroeducation focused on children with learning disabilities or disorders. Research supervisor [Cláudia Rodrigues de Freitas](#) also contributed to define the research proposal. Freitas has been a book researcher for diversity for many years, experience which motivated Stockmanns, even more, to defend her dissertation thesis about the afore-mentioned theme.

Steps of the project

The research that substantiated the work was divided into three steps. The first step was a bibliographical survey on an existing corpus of tactile books in Brazil and Italy and an analysis of the prospective materials and elements to be utilized in our work. From this data collection, Stockmanns identified some problems in the published books, such as the scarcity or absence of some elements. Braille books with no graphical resources, completely blank or only with raised dots around drawings do not promote inclusion since children with regular vision have no interest in reading them.

The second step of the research was the result of the participation of Stockmanns in an outreach community program devoted to the production of tactile books and offered by UFRGS to specialized teachers in the Special Education area or to teachers with work experience with visually impaired students. The community outreach program, part of the line of research on Special Education and Inclusive Processes, had the books designed in eight-hour in-class course. The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) funded the classes, giving resources for the acquisition of materials. It was in this period that Stockmanns produced the two books that she would utilize as the object of her research: *Vovó Esquecida* ("Forgetful Nana") and *Gatinho Adolfo* ("Kitty Adolfo").

In the third step, the professor invited two children to participate in the study: Francisco, 8, with blindness, and Ricardo, 11, with low vision. It was possible to see through their participation the tactile book's effectiveness in the learning process of these children. According to Stockmanns, the research outcome was positive: "the kids said that those were the first tactile books they had contact with. Being able to give them this opportunity is one of my biggest joys throughout this process."

In her dissertation, Roberta highlights the importance of tactile books also being accessible for people with regular vision. The learning process is also favored by the interactions among children. Therefore, the book must not contain only texturized images, the writing is also very important. The researcher was able to witness the benefit presented by tactile books: "Francisco, in all reading mediations, asked to show the books to his classmates. In these moments of socialization, he was the protagonist, reading and presenting the books with enthusiasm. The other children were delighted and watchful, they would touch each tactile image saying: 'oh, what a cute nanny', 'she is so soft', 'what a cool book', showing that these books are also attractive for children with no visual impairment."

The inclusion of students in the learning process

In Brazil, the available materials for the learning of children with visual impairments are still very poor. In most cases, the books contain only huge texts with no color or sensorial stimulus – which do not motivate children's instincts. One of Stockmanns' findings is that the kids' interest is stimulated more by textures rather than Braille writing. "Like any other kid, the initial interest is focused on the images contained in books. But this feature is not usually found in books designed for visually impaired children, which are so often completely blank or only have drawings for visual appeal," she says. Stockmanns believes that all educators should know Braille, even if they do not have blind students. Everyone has the right to be assisted in their necessities and not to be left aside.

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 states that students with visual impairments have the right to have specialized education, preferably in regular schools. Besides that, in the Global Conference of Special Education held in Salamanca, Spain, 1995, the right to study in regular schools was extended to all children. The Declaration of Salamanca – how the document elaborated in the conference is known – consolidated inclusive education as a right.

The theme of Stockmanns' dissertation is also studied by the [Multi project](#), UFRGS' research group, which the professor is part of. She continues to research the theme and look for ways to benefit children with visual impairments, even more, in their learning processes. "To me, literary inclusion occurs when a book can be read by any children, be them visually impaired or not."

Translated into English by Marianna Tórgo, under the supervision and translation revision of Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS



Gatinho Adolfo ("Kitty Adolfo") was one of the books developed by Roberta Stockmanns in her research. – Photo: Gustavo Diehl/UFRGS

