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DbI REVIEW

THE MAGAZINE OF DEAFBLIND INTERNATIONAL

Deafblind International DbI



DbI & WFDB

World Conference

Davos, Switzerland 19-23 July 2027

Innovate + Empower + Collaborate

The First Joint DbI and WFDB World Conference

Have you checked out a journal (like the DbI Review), attended a webinar, participated on a committee, joined a network, attended a conference or even "shared" or "liked" something on social media? These are all great ways to learn about best practices, discover new research, explore innovative approaches with your peers **and expand your network!**

Deafblind International (DbI) is THE effective point of connection in deafblindness on a global scale.

DbI offers its members many ways to stay connected, starting with membership. With the new strategic plan for 2023 – 2027, DbI will focus on "connecting to maximize positive impact" for people with deafblindness, DbI members and to boost the organizational strategy.

Membership is the starting point to making these connections. For **DeafBlind Ontario Services**, DbI membership helps us offer employees professional development opportunities they cannot receive anywhere else. Membership opens the door to webinars, participation on working groups with international colleagues and professional growth experiences at international conferences (most recently, the 18th Global Conference held July 2023 in Ottawa, Canada).

DbI membership also offers insight on the experiences our colleagues across the globe face. For example, through **DeafBlind Ontario Services**' partnership with Asociación de Sordociegos de Nicaragua (ASCN) (or the Deafblind Association of Nicaragua), we learned about the importance of continued advocacy of disability rights and shared practical tips and techniques in orientation. We also gained insight about the resilience of people wherever they live, embraced the chance to share our learnings, and explored innovative ways to offer supports while building positive working relationships.

DeafBlind Ontario Services supports the work of our colleagues at ASCN – to build their connections with other organizations across the globe and by supporting their agency's membership with DbI. For our organization, a component of our work together included helping cover the cost of their DbI membership fees.

A DbI membership offers a threefold benefit:

- For the Deafblind Association of Nicaragua → access to rich, innovative, international resources
- For DeafBlind Ontario Services → alignment with our belief that *Engaging others makes us better. Each of us has something to learn and something to teach.*
- For DbI → member organizations who bring fresh perspectives, insight, and expertise

"We rise by lifting others."
Robert Ingersoll

Staying connected is the goal of DbI. If you are a large corporate member, we encourage you to sponsor a smaller member agency today and Connect to Act!

https://www.deafblindinternational.org/about-us/become-a-member/

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I recently returned to Switzerland following an advocacy tour in Indonesia for the Global Education Campaign, in collaboration with the young local NPO MIPI. I'm delighted to say that the tour was a great success and very much in the DbI spirit.

Our network thrives on passion, expertise, (lived) experience and an incredible amount of voluntary commitment. We are a network spanning all inhabited continents, with a particular affinity and talent for interaction and communication across multiple differences and barriers.

The tour in Indonesia, for example, may well lead to a very exciting project on the early identification of children with deafblindness in Indonesia, in collaboration with the Directorate of Special Education and Special Education Services, MIPI, Professor Andrea Wanka from the Heidelberg University of Education in Germany, and the young Swiss organisation full-rainbow. A key factor in opening doors was a shared enthusiasm with the Directorate for the song 'Bohemian Rhapsody' by the British band Queen. The song features a piano solo immediately before the 'Bismillah' chorus that evokes 'Hallelujah', thereby linking, amongst other messages of diversity, two world religions.

I am therefore delighted that this edition of the DbI Review also highlights the significant increase in diversity within our network. It takes you on a journey to South America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, the European Union, the United Kingdom and – to Switzerland. Switzerland, or rather the World Conference in Davos in July 2027, is the focus of this issue.

So here's some information about Switzerland itself. Switzerland is situated in Central Europe and borders Germany, France, Italy, Liechtenstein and Austria. It is a small country with great diversity and a long tradition of direct democracy: with four official spoken languages (Swiss German, French, Italian and Romansh), corresponding cultural regions and geographically very diverse areas, ranging from the palm trees in the south to high mountains and the gentle landscape of the north.

The majority of the approximately 9.1 million inhabitants live on the Swiss Plateau, home to major cities such as Zurich and Geneva; the Swiss Alps, however, make up the largest geographical part of the country. That is exactly where the conference will be held – in Davos, the highest town in Europe.

Pluralism is also a defining feature of Switzerland in other respects. 26–27 per cent of the population are foreign nationals. Furthermore, Switzerland practises a distinct form of federalism, comprising 26 different cantons (the Swiss equivalent of states).

Politically, Switzerland operates a multi-party system and does not have a single president, but



MIRKO BAUR

DEAFBLIND INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

a collegial executive body, the Federal Council, comprising seven members elected by Parliament from different parties, with a rotating chairperson serving for one year.

Switzerland has maintained a policy of armed neutrality since the 16th century and is often involved in peacebuilding. It is a member of the Council of Europe and the UN, is a founding member of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) but is not a member of the European Union (EU).



Switzerland is the birthplace of the Red Cross and home to many international organisations. Among other institutions, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is based at the United Nations Office in Geneva, the UN's second headquarters.

Switzerland is definitely worth a visit, not to mention the fantastic diversity of the conference programme and the emphasis on all the social aspects of the conference. So hopefully we'll see you soon, in person, in Davos!

The 2027 DbI–WFDB World Conference in Davos



For the first time ever, Deafblind International (DbI) and the World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) are joining forces to host a joint World Conference on Deafblindness. It will also be the first time the conference takes place in Switzerland.

From **July 19 to 23 2027**, the **Davos Congress Centre** will bring together people with deafblindness, families, professionals, researchers and advocates from around the world. Under the motto **Innovate + Empower + Collaborate**, the conference will be a place to share knowledge, exchange experiences and build new connections across our global community.

Around the conference:

- **July 18–19:** DbI Networks Pre-Conference, the first one organised jointly by the DbI Networks
- **July 24–25:** WFDB General Assembly

Registration is now open for both the World Conference and the Pre-Conference. Programme details, practical information and the latest news will be published on the conference website as they become available.

Website: deafblind27.org

Questions: conf@deafblindinternational.org

More Than a Pre-Conference: Two Days to Connect, Explore and Create

ANNE SCHOONE
MARTINA CELIZIĆ
ANDERS MARTIN RUNDH
TREES VAN NUNEN

What happens when people from all over the world come together, not simply to listen, but to share experiences, challenge ideas and create new possibilities?

On 18 and 19 July 2027, many of the official DbI Networks will join forces for a two-day pre-conference in Davos. This will be a separate event, prior to the DbI and WFDB World Conference. It does however align very well with the conference themes of **Innovate, Empower and Collaborate**. The pre-conference is open to people with lived experience, families, professionals, researchers and anyone with an interest in deafblindness. The program offers something different from a traditional conference: plenty of time to meet, interact, discuss and experiment with one another.

Rather than each network staying within its own area of expertise, the pre-conference brings networks together around questions that cross professional, geographical and personal boundaries. The result is a program in which themes and topics continually intersect.

Theme sessions: From questions to shared knowledge

Both morning programs invite participants to choose one of three broad themes. The first theme is **Technology, Innovation and Tools for Participation** sessions explore what innovation means when viewed through the reality of everyday life: Which technologies genuinely increase participation? What is already accessible and affordable? Where are the gaps, and whose needs are not yet being met? How could games build connection and learning opportunities? Participants will explore these and other topics, moving beyond exciting innovations to consider what actually works for children, young people and adults with deafblindness.

The second theme; **Education, Learning, Knowledge Building and Knowledge Transfer** is approached just as broadly. One session uses the idea of an inclusive family holiday to explore learning, empowerment and participation, while another follows educational transitions across the lifespan, from early intervention and starting school to the transition into adulthood, work, care and living arrangements. The central question throughout is how knowledge and expertise can be shared so

that people with deafblindness and their families can participate on their own terms.

And then there is the third theme of **Communication, Interaction, Expression and Access**. What do we actually recognize as communication? Who decides when something has meaning? How do relationships, trust, context and access shape interaction? On the second day, the program takes this further by examining communication through times of transition, including experiences of loss, uncertainty and grief, but also the discovery of new possibilities for connection and participation.

Not just listening, but participating

What makes this pre-conference particularly exciting is **how** these topics will be explored.

Several sessions use the **World Café** approach. Instead of sitting through a conventional lecture, participants move between small-group conversations, meet people with different perspectives, build on one another's ideas and ultimately bring those ideas together. It is a format designed to harness collective knowledge rather than positioning expertise at the front of the room.

On Sunday afternoon, participants will take a **Deep Dive into Real Cases** involving children, young people or adults with deafblindness. Using the structured Incident Method, we will invite participants to resist the temptation to jump straight to solutions. Instead, we will look at situations from different perspectives and explore what may be happening beneath the surface. The aim is to transform individual experience into collective wisdom.



Then it's time to get hands-on

Monday afternoon adds yet another dimension: **Learning Through Experience**.

Step outdoors with the **DbI Outdoor Network** and discover how nature and outdoor activities can be made meaningful and accessible for people with (congenital) deafblindness. Participants will experience aspects of outdoor activity themselves and explore concepts such as scaffolding: creating the support necessary for someone to participate, while still leaving room for discovery, challenge and success.

Prefer creating something together? In **Quilting DbI Dreams**, the Creative Arts

Network invites all participants to use conversation, stitching and shared creation to explore hopes and ideas for the future. No artistic or sewing skills are required. The emphasis is not on producing the perfect quilt, but on what happens while creating it: conversation, imagination, belonging and connection.

Or join the workshop **Technology That Works in Real Life**. From simple solutions to orientation aids, detection devices and AI-based support, the focus is on practical experience: what helps, what does not, and what is still missing? You certainly do not need to be a technology expert to contribute. Join us to explore what truly makes a difference in daily life and help shape technology that works for people with deafblindness.



Bring your experience. Leave with new perspectives

Across these two days, one goal runs through the entire program: **everyone brings valuable knowledge to the table**. A family member's experience may change a professional's perspective. A practitioner from one country may have found a solution to a challenge faced somewhere else. A conversation about transitions may suddenly offer new insights into communication, education or technology. Building new connections with individuals from around the world might be one of the most valuable aspects of this pre-conference.

That is exactly why bringing the DbI Networks together matters.

Come to Davos with your questions, experience, curiosity and ideas. Meet people you might not otherwise meet. Try something new. Challenge your assumptions. Share what you know and discover what others know.

Don't just attend the conversation. Help shape it.

The Joint Pre-Conference of the DbI Networks takes place on **18 and 19 July 2027**, from 09:30 to 16:00, in Davos, Switzerland. The location is the same venue where the DbI and WFDB World Conference takes place; Davos Congress Center. The conference fee is including coffee, tea, pastries and a lunch bag on both days.

Innovate. Empower. Collaborate. And be part of what happens when networks truly connect.



PRECONFERENCE

DbI & WFDB

World Conference

Davos, Switzerland 19-23 July 2027

Innovate + Empower
+ Collaborate

First time jointly organized by all DbI networks

•

Thematic discussions & case study analysis

•

July 18th and 19th, 2027
Davos, Switzerland

Visit official site of the conference

https://deafblind27.org/

Deafblind
International DbI

Demystifying the Election Process: The Work of the Nominating Committee



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As Deafblind International (DbI) begins preparing for its next election cycle (2027-2031), members may start hearing more about nominations, candidate recruitment, elections, and governance. While most members are familiar with the act of voting, fewer have the opportunity to see the extensive work that takes place behind the scenes to ensure a fair, transparent, and effective election process.

At the heart of this work is the Nominating Committee.

What Is the Nominating Committee?

The Nominating Committee plays an important role in supporting the democratic processes of DbI. The committee helps oversee nominations and elections, ensuring that established procedures are followed and that members have the information they need to participate fully.

Its responsibilities include promoting awareness of leadership opportunities, supporting candidate recruitment, monitoring election timelines, verifying eligibility requirements, and helping ensure transparency throughout the process.

The committee does not choose who is elected. That decision rests with DbI members. Instead, the committee works to ensure that the process is fair, well-organized, and accessible to all eligible participants.

The Work Starts Long Before an Election

Many people think of elections as a single event, but in reality, the process begins months before ballots are distributed. In fact, the Nominating Committee began preparing for the 2027 election in June 2026, laying the groundwork well in advance of the voting period.

The Nominating Committee spends considerable time preparing for elections by reviewing governance requirements, identifying upcoming vacancies, developing communication plans, and ensuring members understand available opportunities to become involved.

Committee members also work to encourage diverse participation and help potential candidates understand the expectations and responsibilities of leadership positions within DbI.

Meet the DbI Nomination Committee

Supporting Strong Leaderhsip for a Strong DbI Community

50 Years DbI



Marielos de Rueda
Honorary President, Meritorious Committee for the Blind and Deaf of Guatemala



Sachin Rizal
Head- Capacity Building, Sense International India



Roxanna Spruyt
CEO, DeafBlind Ontario Services



Sue Wookey
Director of Governance and Strategy, DeafBlind Ontario Services

Understanding Membership and Voting Rights

One area that often generates questions is the difference between voting and non-voting members.

DbI's membership structure includes several categories of membership, each with specific rights and responsibilities. Eligibility to nominate candidates, stand for election, or vote may vary depending on the membership category and the position being filled.

As the election cycle progresses, members will receive information outlining:

- Who is eligible to vote.
- Who may submit nominations.
- Who may stand for election.

Understanding these distinctions helps ensure that all members can participate confidently and appropriately in the election process.

How Nominations Work

The nomination phase is one of the most important parts of the election cycle.

When nominations open in January 2027, eligible members may nominate qualified in-

dividuals for available positions. Candidates must meet the eligibility requirements established in DbI's governing documents and agree to have their names stand for election.

The Nominating Committee reviews nominations to confirm eligibility and ensure that nomination requirements have been met before candidates move forward to the election stage.

The committee also works to ensure that members have access to information about candidates so they can make informed decisions when voting.

Different Elections, Different Processes

DbI's governance structure includes several types of elected positions, each with its own process and membership involvement.

President and Vice Presidents

The President and Vice Presidents provide leadership to the organization and help guide DbI's strategic directions. Elections for these roles follow specific procedures outlined in the organization's governance framework. Members eligible to participate will receive detailed information about candidates, voting procedures, and key dates.

Corporate Members

Larger corporate members play an important role in the governance structure and participate in elections designed to ensure broad organizational representation. Under DbI's constitution (Article 11.5), up to 15 large corporate members may serve on the board.

Smaller Members, Mini-Members, and Networks

DbI also recognizes the importance of ensuring that smaller organizations, mini-members, and networks have a voice. Election processes for these groups are designed to support diverse representation and encourage engagement from across the DbI community. This includes a focus on geographic representation to ensure perspectives from different regions are heard, as well as a commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), which promotes fair access, meaningful participation, and a sense of belonging for people with diverse backgrounds and experiences.

What Can Members Expect in the Months Ahead?

As preparations continue, members can expect regular updates regarding:

- Upcoming election timelines.
- Nomination periods and deadlines.
- Candidate information.
- Voting procedures.
- Election results and next steps.

The Nominating Committee is committed to keeping members informed throughout every stage of the process.

Your Participation Matters

Strong member engagement is essential to the success of DbI. Whether you choose to nominate a colleague, stand for election, vote, or simply learn more about the process, your participation helps strengthen the organization and its future.

Over the coming months, we will be sharing additional information and resources to help members better understand each stage of the election cycle. We encourage you to watch for future communications and consider how you might become involved.

Together, we can ensure a transparent, inclusive, and successful election process that reflects the diverse voices and perspectives of the DbI community.

Celebrating 50 Years of DbI: Podcast Series

DEAFBLIND ONTARIO TEAM

To mark Deafblind International's 50th anniversary, Amy Stevenson of Deafblind Ontario Services sat down with people who have shaped DbI and the field of deafblindness over the past decades. The result is a series of conversations full of personal stories, practical wisdom and ideas for the future, released between September 12 and October 16 2026.

All episodes are available on the DbI website. Scan the QR code or follow the link to watch or read.



Siân Tesni

Podcast episode · September 12 2026

Teacher of deaf learners, former CBM Global Advisor for Inclusive Education and DbI board member, Siân reflects on three decades of building inclusive education and ear care systems in low-resource communities worldwide.

Link



David Brown

Podcast episode · September 18 2026

From hand-mailing photocopied articles to families around the world to tracking the emergence of CHARGE syndrome, David shares five decades of child-led practice in deafblind education and early intervention.

Link



Graciela Ferioli

Written spotlight · September 25 2026

Former DbI Vice President Graciela Ferioli of Argentina looks back on more than 30 years of advocacy in Latin America, the World Conference in Córdoba and the DbI Global Education Campaign.

Link



Roxanna Spruyt

Podcast episode · October 2 2026

The CEO of Deafblind Ontario Services talks about founding a worldwide communication network, a global "yarn bombing" movement started at her kitchen table, and how international collaboration fuels local impact.

Link



Marleen Janssen

Podcast episode · October 8 2026

A DbI member for 46 years, Professor Janssen recalls her early days as a teacher in the Netherlands, founding the world's first Master's programme in deafblindness at the University of Groningen, and turning practice into research.

Link



Mirko Baur

Podcast episode · October 16 2026

In the series finale, DbI President and director of the Tanne Foundation Mirko Baur reflects on connection, communication and systems change, and on steering DbI into its next half-century.

Link

When Behaviour Is the Message: Mental Health Assessment in Congenital Deafblindness

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Distress need not be described in words to deserve attention. Yet recognising distress differs from establishing its cause. When spoken self report is unavailable and tactile expressions unfamiliar, psychiatric assumptions become uncertain. Eye contact and conventional facial expression may be unsuitable reference points. Conventional tests compound this difficulty when sensory and linguistic demands obscure psychological functioning (Dammeyer, 2015).

Congenital deafblindness involves combined hearing and vision impairment before language is established; it does not necessarily mean complete absence of both senses. Communication profiles vary (Dammeyer, 2015). This discussion focuses on people for whom conventional interviewing is inaccessible.

When Behaviour Resembles Psychopathology

Mental disorders can coexist with congenital deafblindness. Dammeyer's (2011) study of 95 adults reported diagnoses including psychosis. However, its broad grouping also included intellectual disability: its overall figure is not a prevalence estimate of acquired psychiatric illness, nor necessarily generalisable.

Two errors deserve scrutiny: attributing distress automatically to deafblindness or intellectual disability, and interpreting unfamiliar sensory behaviour as psychopathology. Together these errors create a two directional diagnostic problem. The first is conventionally termed diagnostic overshadowing. Evidence on overshadowing in intellectual disability is itself mixed and methodologically limited; its frequency in congenital deafblindness cannot be inferred from that literature (Dell'Armo & Tassé, 2024).

Moroe et al. (2022) found that rehabilitation professionals had difficulty distinguishing descriptions of deafblindness from autism. Their knowledge questionnaire did not measure diagnostic accuracy with patients. Behavioural resemblance warrants investigation, not certainty.

Autism, Psychosis and the Limits of Observation

Communication differences, restricted exploration, sensory responses and repetitive movements complicate autism assessment. In 71 children with congenital deafblindness, Dammeyer (2014) found autism checklist symptoms at levels resembling those of children with other developmental disorders. Sensory impairment severity was not associated with symptom severity or type. Checklist findings do not establish that deafblindness causes autism.

More discriminating observations emerged from a study of ten people with congenital deafblindness and profound intellectual disability. Participants classified as autistic differed in the quality of reciprocal interaction, contact initiatives and communicative signals and functions. Groups did not differ in stereotyped behaviour quantity or persistence, or play and exploration (Hoevenaars-van den Boom et al., 2009). This shifts attention toward engagement during accessible interaction rather than counting unusual movements, but the small sample cannot supply diagnostic rules.

The Observation of Autism in people with Sensory and Intellectual Disabilities was evaluated in 60 people, including 16 with deafblindness (de Vaan et al., 2018). This was not an exclusively congenital deafblindness sample. Developmental history, sensory adaptations and clinical judgement remain necessary; neither checklist scores nor engagement with a familiar partner settle diagnosis.

Dammeyer (2011) documented psychosis diagnoses among adults with congenital deafblindness, but apparently internally directed behaviour is not diagnostic. Turning, vocalising or reacting when an observer notices no stimulus describes an observation. Calling it a hallucination adds an inference about experience. Delusions and thought disorder likewise cannot be established merely because an assessor cannot follow an expression's meaning.

Ask what supports that inference: a consistent, accessible account where obtainable; corroborating changes over time; and assessment of sensory experiences, physical illness, neurological conditions and medication effects. Uncertainty about mental content should remain explicit. Diagnosis requires evidence meeting psychiatric criteria after differential assessment, not an interpretation of an isolated movement.

Change From Baseline as Clinical Information

An unfamiliar behaviour may carry less information than something familiar disappearing. Begin with how the person usually initiates contact, enjoys activities, seeks comfort and recovers from frustration. Loss of communicative initiatives or altered tactile engagement deserves attention even without conspicuous behaviour.

Intellectual disability guidance identifies withdrawal, avoidance, irritability, lost skills and reduced interest as reasons for assessment (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE], 2016). Its application here is extrapolation. Changes in enjoyment, activity, relationships, sleep, appetite and regulation can inform depression or anxiety assessment, but are nonspecific. Pain, inaccessible activities or disrupted routines may generate similar observations.

Baseline has limits. Longstanding patterns may include untreated distress or deprivation; familiarity does not make them healthy. Autism assessment concerns developmental patterns, not simply deterioration. Gradual changes may escape notice. Baseline is a reference point alongside distress, functioning

and opportunity, never a requirement that suffering must look new.

Families, educators, intervenors and other familiar partners can contribute dated observations across settings. Compare their interpretations. Caregiver evaluations did not correspond with observed effects in one communication intervention study (Damen et al., 2021). Partner knowledge should therefore complement direct observation and the person's accessible expressions.

From Behaviour to Formulation

Self injury and aggression call for a functional account: what precedes the behaviour, what follows it, and under which conditions does it diminish? Guidance for intellectual disability recommends examining physical and mental health, communication, sensory needs, environmental conditions and consequences that may maintain behaviour (NICE, 2015). These are extrapolated principles, not functions established specifically in congenital deafblindness.

Consider pain or illness, sensory regulation, communication breakdown, unpredictable demands, anxiety and difficulties regulating emotion. A consequence may reinforce behaviour without deliberate intent. Neurological factors and treatment effects also require consideration. Several explanations can operate together; finding a behavioural function does not exclude psychiatric illness.

Behaviour may communicate refusal, discomfort or a request, but, as Dammeyer (2015) cautions, behaviour such as head hitting can have several possible explanations. Record the observable action separately from the proposed explanation, and identify evidence that could challenge it. Success should include restored comfort, participation and agency, rather than simply fewer movements or greater compliance.

Assessment as a Communicative Encounter

Research on video feedback in congenital deafblindness reports improvements in interaction and shared understanding, while leaving uncertainty about which intervention components produce those changes (Damen et al., 2020). A 2026 study involving five children and youths and seven communication partners also reported improvements in communication following partner coaching (Rorije et al., 2026). These are communication findings, not evidence of improved psychiatric diagnostic accuracy.

How much of an observed interaction reflects the opportunities the assessor provides? Co created communication means working with the person and knowledgeable partners to establish and check shared meaning (Sugai, 2016). It requires time for responses, attention to bodily and tactile expressions, and respect for preferred communication and refusal. Partner interpretations should invite confirmation or challenge from the person, not close discussion on their behalf.

An integrative review identified 32 intervention studies involving children with deafblindness; 24 focused on social interaction and communication, while none specifically targeted psychological health (Sundqvist et al., 2023). Improved communication should not be presented as a proven treatment for depression or psychosis. It can support participation in assessment.

A Practical Framework for Differential Assessment

This proposed clinical synthesis is not a validated instrument. Begin with the established individual baseline and recent change. Review physical health and pain, sensory access, communication access and environmental change. Explore relationships and significant events, including loss or possible harm, then sleep and biological functions, sensory and emotional regulation, and behavioural function. Integrate developmental and neurolog-

ical factors and medication or treatment effects into a psychiatric formulation.

This sequence organises questions; it does not rank causes or postpone psychiatry until every alternative is excluded. Urgent deterioration or risk requires concurrent assessment and support. The team may need clinical psychology or psychiatry, medicine, audiology, vision expertise, deafblind communication specialists, educators and people who know the individual well. Consistent with broader assessment guidance, it should document competing explanations, remaining uncertainty and a plan for review (NICE, 2015, 2016).

Conclusion

Good assessment resists diagnostic neglect and premature psychopathologisation. The question is not merely whether behaviour looks unusual, but what has changed, what the person can communicate, and how securely an explanation is supported. Diagnostic inference also depends on an accessible communicative encounter. Understanding the person is part of the diagnostic work itself.

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Congenital Deafblindness and Linguistic Development: Reflections in the Light of Sociodiscursive Interactionism

Abstract

This research investigates the impact of deafblindness on the linguistic and discursive development of prelinguistic deafblind individuals. It presents: (a) characteristics of deafblindness; (b) communication among deafblind individuals; and (c) effects on linguistic development, based on Almeida (2008), Jakobson (2008), and Bronckart (2006). It seeks to contribute to the academic debate by broadening the understanding of the implications of deafblindness in the field of language.

Introduction

This article investigates the impact of deafblindness on the linguistic and discursive development of prelinguistic deafblind individuals, highlighting not only the pathological aspects involved but also integrating a biopsychosocial perspective that recognizes the complexity of deafblindness and its multiple dimensions.

The interest in this research arose from the observation of the scarcity of studies addressing the effects of congenital deafblindness from a linguistic perspective. The methodology adopted is qualitative in nature, with a bibliographic and interpretive approach (Lösch, Rambo, & Ferreira, 2023).

By investigating the impacts of congenital deafblindness from a linguistic and discursive perspective, this study aims to contribute to the development of educational practices that are sensitive to the uniqueness of deafblind individuals and to reinforce the need for public policies and teacher training that ensure these individuals' rights.

Theoretical Framework

Communication is the key for deafblind individuals to access knowledge and actively participate in society (Watanabe, 2017).

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In this regard, the author presents several levels of communication that vary according to the specific characteristics of these individuals. These levels include: (i) pre-intentional behavior; (ii) intentional behavior; (iii) unconventional presymbolic communication; (iv) conventional presymbolic communication; (v) concrete symbolic communication; (vi) abstract symbolic communication; and (vii) formal symbolic communication.

From a linguistic perspective, Almeida (2008) points out that the lack of language acquisition during the first years of life compromises the development of thought and subjectivity.

According to Vygotsky's interactionist perspective (1987), all psychological functions initially develop at the interpersonal level and are subsequently internalized at the intrapersonal level.

Authors such as Maia (2004) and Ikonomidis (2009) emphasize the centrality of communication in the process of linguistic construction. For individuals with congenital deafblindness, communication is not a natural given, but rather a handcrafted process that requires attention, multiple repertoires, and an interactional, situated, and multimodal approach on the part of mediators.

In this sense, Bronckart's (2006) Sociodiscursive Interactionism (SDI) provides the theoretical basis, offering analytical tools for understanding the development of the individual through language practices and discourse genres. Bronckart (2006), drawing on Vygotsky's interactionism (1987), emphasizes that this process is intrinsically linked to participation in social activities mediated by language, even when such mediation occurs through alternative means, as in the case of deafblind individuals.

In line with this idea, from a Vygotskian perspective, all cognitive activity is socially constituted and historically situated, reflecting the conditions and evolution of the culture in which it takes place. In this regard, it is necessary to investigate how the linguistic and discursive development of prelingually deafblind individuals unfolds, given that this is a heterogeneous group. Although many of these individuals are deprived of language acquisition during childhood and remain socially isolated, others achieve satisfactory linguistic and social development when provided with specialized support.Thus, it is necessary to investigate how the linguistic and discursive development of prelinguistic deafblind individuals is affected, since these individuals are, for the most part, deprived of language acquisition during childhood and socially isolated.

Understanding Deafblindness

According to Ikonomidis (2009) over the last 20 years, cases of deafblindness have increased, caused by rare syndromes such as Zellweger, Usher, and Wolfram, extreme prematurity, chromosomal abnormalities such as Wolf-Hirschhorn syndrome, as well as cases whose causes have not yet been identified (Álvarez, 2012). The lack of information, combined with the absence of effective public policies, makes the process even more challenging (Falkoski, 2024).

A child without visual or auditory sensory impairments interacts with the environment even before developing language. In the case of children with congenital deafblindness, however, it is necessary to create a communicative environment so that they can understand and communicate.

When the condition is congenital, several aspects stand out, including: modeling, unique learning style, incidental learning, communication, motivation, anticipation, curiosity, imitation, emotional bonding, self-stimulation, and discipline (Ikonomidis, 2009).

In this regard, based on the literature, although these children are born with an innate predisposition toward interaction, parents may have difficulty activating and developing it in a concrete and effective manner because of the lack of a communicative code with their children.

Thus, the importance of placing deafblind individuals in a responsive, rather than directive, environment is emphasized. In other words, an environment that encourages

interaction with the surroundings, thereby developing autonomy (Maia, 2004).

Therefore, when it comes to communication, it is found to be an individualized process for each deafblind person, since each individual has their own specific characteristics.

Among the main forms of communication used with deafblind people in Brazil are: Tactile Manual Alphabet; Tactile Braille; Raised-Contour Drawing; Enlarged Writing; Writing on the Palm of the Hand; Amplified Speech; Sign Language in the Reduced Visual Field; Tactile Sign Language; Reference Objects; Reference Objects with Hand-Under-Hand Support; Textured Tactile Cues; Braille Alphabet Board; Tadoma; Assistive Technology with Braille Output; Social Haptic Communication, among others.

It should be emphasized that communication is not limited to verbal communication, encompassing various forms of expression. It is understood as the use of a code shared by interlocutors, allowing for the expression, reception, and resignification of the message conveyed.

Prelinguistic Deafblindness: Repercussions on Linguistic and Discursive Development

The analysis begins with the recognition that deafblindness requires a broader perspective that takes into account the historical and social contexts in which individuals are situated. By bringing together contributions from authors such as Ikonomidis (2009), Almeida (2008), and Jakobson (2008), the study seeks to understand how this condition compromises the processes of language acquisition, symbolic development, and discourse development.

In the case of prelinguistic deafblindness, the impairment of cognitive and psychosocial processing is even more severe, since these aspects are directly associated with communication. According to Cormedi (2011,p.25), deafblindness affects " overall development: learning motor skills, social wellbeing, mobility, and above all, language and communication.

Based on Jakobson's (2008) theory of communication, these individuals experience delays at different stages of message transmission. This is because the construction of thought and subjectivity begins with the establishment of a shared language and, consequently, so does the individual's insertion into social practices.

In this sense, based on the literature, congenital deafblindness may affect the construction of identity (cultural, personal, and linguistic), the symbolic function of language, and the maturation of social skills, making discourse production more difficult.

Furthermore, external factors such as the family environment and overprotective attitudes negatively influence the development of autonomy and the discursive identity of these individuals.

Final Considerations

The reviewed literature suggests that congenital deafblindness affects not only sensory aspects but all dimensions of development. It can be observed that the absence of a shared language from early childhood and the lack of responsive communicative environments contribute to weakening the subjective and discursive constitution of these individuals.

Communication, in this context, should be understood as an individualized process mediated by trained professionals who are capable of adapting and creating communication strategies according to individual needs (Souza, 2024).

In terms of academic contributions, this research broadens reflection on deafblindness in the fields of Linguistics and Education.

It is acknowledged, however, that a limitation of the present study is the fact that it was based exclusively on a bibliographic review,

without empirical research being conducted. This limitation points to the need for future field studies that may validate or refute the understandings presented here.

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From Isolation to Inclusion: Communication Support for People with Deafblindness Across Five Low- and Middle-Income Countries

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Introduction

Communication is fundamental to participation. It enables people to express choices, develop relationships, access information, participate in education and employment, and engage with their communities. For people with deafblindness, communication may take many forms (American Association of the DeafBlind, 2009). It can depend on the degree and onset of vision and hearing loss, educational opportunities, personal preferences, and the communication supports available within their environment(National Center for Deafblind, 2026). In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), access to appropriate communication support can be particularly challenging (World Federation of the Deafblind, 2018). Shortages of trained personnel, limited access to assistive technologies, low community awareness, inadequate funding, and limited recognition of deafblindness can restrict opportunities for communication (Kamenopoulou et al., 2025). These barriers can contribute to exclusion from education, healthcare, employment, community activities, and social relationships (Hersh, 2013). This study explored communication experiences and support systems among people with deafblindness in five LMICs: Tanzania, Bangladesh, India, Malawi, and Zambia. It examined the communication approaches being used, barriers to accessing communication support, the roles played by families, caregivers and organizations, and strategies that may strengthen communication access and social inclusion.

About the Study

The study used a mixed-methods design involving 169 people with deafblindness as well as caregivers, family members, interpreters, service providers, and community members across the five participating countries. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, observa-

tion, and document review. Questionnaires for participants in countries other than Tanzania were administered remotely using online platforms and mobile communication. Quantitative information was summarized using descriptive statistics, while qualitative information was examined thematically (DeFranco, 2020).

Communication Is Diverse and Individual

One of the clearest findings was that there is no single way in which people with deafblindness communicate. Participants described tactile sign language, speech, gestures, fingerspelling, lipreading, print on the palm, object symbols, braille, large-print writing, adapted visual communication, and digital or technological aids. Family members, caregivers, and interpreters also frequently facilitated communication. The communication approach used by an individual was influenced by their vision and hearing, educational experiences, previous communication methods, and availability of appropriate support.

Participants' experiences illustrate this diversity. One person with deafblindness explained:

> "I am a totally deafblind person and I use tactile sign language and braille for those aware of it and sometimes print on palm to communicate with those who are not aware of tactile sign language."

Another participant, who described being deaf with low vision, reported relying on large-font writing, lipreading, and gestures because they were not familiar with sign language. A participant who was blind and experiencing progressive hearing loss described a different transition: having previously depended on speech and braille, the person had decided to learn tactile sign language as hearing declined.

These experiences emphasize that communication needs are not static. They can change over time, particularly for people experiencing progressive sensory loss. Communication support therefore needs to be individualized and sufficiently flexible to adapt as a person's circumstances change (American Association of the DeafBlind, 2009).

Barriers to Communication Are Also Environmental

Participants described substantial barriers to accessing appropriate communication support. One of the most prominent was a shortage of professionals with expertise in deafblind communication, including interpreters and teachers familiar with tactile sign language and other communication approaches. Access was also shaped by financial circumstances. A participant from Malawi explained:

> "Due to our poor economic status here in Malawi most of us can't even afford some assistive communication methods and other accessibility methods for our daily lives."

Assistive technologies may provide important communication opportunities, but their usefulness depends on whether people can afford them, obtain them, learn to use them, and receive ongoing support. Geography created another barrier. Communication services, specialist personnel, Braille materials, training, and assistive technologies were reported to be more readily available in urban areas or through non-governmental organizations. People living in rural areas consequently faced additional challenges.

Low awareness of deafblindness within communities was another recurring theme. Participants reported that many people were unfamiliar with tactile sign language, Braille, object-based communication, and other approaches. One participant from Zambia described continuing to encounter negative attitudes despite awareness-raising activities.

These findings suggest that communication difficulties cannot be understood sole-

ly in terms of an individual's combined vision and hearing loss. Communication also depends on whether other people know how to communicate, whether appropriate technologies and services are available, and whether environments are prepared to accommodate different forms of communication.

Families, Caregivers, and Organizations Fill Critical Gaps

Families and caregivers emerged as essential communication partners. They frequently helped people with deafblindness understand their environments, express their needs, access services, and participate in everyday activities. However, families themselves may receive little formal communication training.

As one family member from Bangladesh explained:

> "We communicate with her the way we understand each other easily even we don't have training on deafblind communication so sometimes communication is not effective."

This finding highlights both the strength and vulnerability of family-based support. Families may develop highly individualized ways of communicating, but relying on them without providing training and resources can place responsibility for accessible communication primarily on the family.

Organizations of persons with disabilities and non-governmental organizations were also reported to play important roles. Across the participating countries, organizations provided communication training, advocacy, assistive devices, educational support, and community awareness activities. They also trained teachers, interpreters, and family members and advocated for policies supporting people with deafblindness.

While these organizations help bridge important gaps, sustainable communication access requires broader systems of support rather than depending exclusively on individual families or organizations.

From Communication Support to Inclusion

Participants identified several priorities for improving communication access. Communication training was ranked particularly highly, alongside accessible learning materials and inclusive educational opportunities. Participants also emphasized affordable assistive devices, greater community awareness, increased funding for disability services, and stronger inclusive policies.

These priorities point toward several areas for action.

First, governments and organizations should expand training opportunities for interpreters, teachers, families, caregivers, service providers, and other communication partners. Training should recognize the diversity of communication approaches used by people with deafblindness rather than assuming that one approach will meet everyone's needs(World Health Organization, 2011). Second, communication services should reach beyond major cities. Rural residence should not determine whether a person can access trained communication partners, education, assistive technology, or accessible information(World Health Organization, 2019). Third, assistive technologies need to be both available and affordable (Dyzel et al., 2020). Providing a device alone is unlikely to be sufficient; people also require training and continuing support to integrate technology effectively into everyday communication.

Fourth, awareness of deafblindness and deafblind communication needs to increase among healthcare professionals, educators, community members, government agencies, and other service providers. Communication accessibility is a shared responsibility. Finally, communication access should be incorporated explicitly into disability and inclusion policies, accompanied by adequate funding and mechanisms for implementation.

Conclusion

The experiences reported across Tanzania, Bangladesh, India, Malawi, and Zambia demonstrate both the diversity of deafblind communication and the persistent barriers to accessing appropriate support. People with deafblindness use many different communication approaches, and these approaches may evolve throughout life. Yet successful communication does not depend on the individual alone. It also depends on knowledgeable communication partners, accessible services, appropriate technology, supportive families and communities, and policies that recognize communication as essential to participation.

Improving communication access therefore requires more than teaching people with deafblindness how to communicate. It requires creating environments that are ready and able to communicate with them. Investment in communication training, assistive technology, accessible education, community awareness, rural services, and inclusive policy can help move from isolation toward meaningful participation and inclusion.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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BSL/English Interpreters' Experiences of Tactile Sign Language



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Introduction

This briefing paper presents findings from a UK-wide study of 137 BSL/English interpreters exploring their experiences of Tactile Sign Language (TSL), including training, confidence, barriers to practice and professional regulation. Conducted as part of the MSc Advancing Practice in Signed/Spoken Language Interpreting at Queen Margaret University, the study identified gaps in training and professional development, and tensions between professional competence and DeafBlind people's communication access. While international research identifies similar concerns, UK research on TSL interpreting remains limited. This study seeks to address this gap and highlights implications for education, policy and professional support.

Background and rationale

Deaf people who use British Sign Language (BSL) who then experience vision loss may adapt their existing BSL to tactile sign language (TSL). In the UK, tactile BSL interpreting is also known as 'hands-on interpreting'.

The UK interpreting profession has diverse routes to qualification and registration. The National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) is the main UK registration body for BSL interpreters (NRCPD, 2026). Opportunities to develop specialist DeafBlind communication skills remain limited, with few training pathways including specific TSL or DeafBlind interpreting content. Registered interpreters can undertake TSL assignments if they consider themselves competent; however, not all have specific DeafBlind training, experience or qualifications. The extent of TSL work undertaken without additional specialist training is therefore unknown.

Research exploring the working conditions of sign language interpreters suggest that relatively few regularly undertake DeafBlind-related work, with limited engagement in TSL interpreting and concerns about preparedness (NUBSLI, 2017; Napier et al., 2020). International studies simi-

larly identify inadequate training, limited opportunities for practice and low confidence as barriers to TSL assignments (Walker & Shaw, 2011; Chambers, 2019; Holaly, 2020). These challenges have implications for DeafBlind people, who experience wider societal exclusion and barriers to health and social care, including limited interpreting provision (Jaiswal et al., 2018; Atkinson & BSL Advisory Board, 2025).

At the same time, registration pathways for deafblind interpreters are evolving, with higher qualification requirements being introduced. (NRCPD, 2025) While intended to improve standards, these developments raise questions regarding the accessibility of training and the availability of appropriately qualified practitioners. This study sought to explore interpreter perspectives on these issues and identify factors influencing their engagement with TSL.

Method

Data were collected through an online survey of 137 UK-based BSL/English interpreters: 128 RSLIs and 9 trainees, with experience ranging from under 3 to over 15 years. The survey used closed and open-ended questions to collect quantitative and qualitative data. Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Ethical approval was granted by Queen Margaret University's School of Health Sciences.

Findings

Training

Training emerged as the most significant issue identified by participants. 77% reported receiving no training relating to TSL, deafblind awareness, or the Deafblind Manual Alphabet during their initial interpreter education. Only 5% reported receiving formal teaching relating to TSL.

Participants consistently argued that deafblind communication should be embedded within interpreter training rather than treated solely as a specialist area. 77% believed TSL should be compulsory in initial interpreter education. Those who had received previous TSL training unanimously supported compulsory inclusion.

Participants frequently described frustration at being qualified as interpreters without meaningful preparation to work with deafblind people. Many reported that specialist training opportunities were difficult to access, geographically limited, or prohibitively expensive.

Confidence, Comfort and Familiarity

Confidence was strongly associated with training and experience. Only 15% of participants felt very confident using TSL, while 44% reported low or no confidence. Newly qualified interpreters were more likely to report lower confidence.

Participants distinguished between communicating using TSL and feeling competent to interpret professionally:

"I'd be comfortable giving it a go for friends or family but not professionally because I have zero experience." (Participant 120)

TSL was also used infrequently, with 77% reporting that they never or rarely interpreted using TSL. Lack of training (55%) and experience (45%) were the main reasons for discomfort, compared with familiarity with the client (24%) and physical proximity (6%).

Some participants also expressed uncertainty about professional boundaries and whether they were appropriately qualified:

"I think there is lots of need in my area however I really am unclear what is

'allowed' re visual frame, hands on etc, I've always avoided both as I don't want to take jobs I'm not qualified for and be in trouble with NRCPD, I would desperately like to do some training in this area but fees and geography make courses hard to justify." (Participant 72)

Overall, training, practical experience, and opportunities to develop TSL skills influenced confidence.

Experiences and Ethical Decision-Making

TSL experience varied considerably: 9% of respondents often interpreted using TSL and 20% sometimes did so. However, 39% had arrived at an assignment to unexpectedly discover that tactile BSL was required, sometimes despite the client requesting it in advance:

"I explained that I wasn't qualified when the guide/companion arrived ... and that it hadn't been stated on the booking when I accepted the booking...they were furious with the agency (they checked with the GP reception that they'd requested a deafblind interpreter, which they had)." (Participant 56)

Participants described an ethical tension between working within their competence and leaving a DeafBlind person without communication access. Some attempted to adapt despite limited training or experience:

"I really struggled, but felt that I could not just leave the Deafblind patient without any communication support. I figured that my bungled attempts at hands-on signing would be better than no support at all." (Participant 91)

These accounts highlight tensions between professional standards, workforce capacity and communication access. Reluctance to undertake TSL work appeared to reflect concerns about competence, training and regulation rather than unwillingness to work with DeafBlind people.

Discussion and Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings align with international research identifying inadequate preparation, limited specialist training and low confidence as barriers to DeafBlind interpreting (Walker & Shaw, 2011; Chambers, 2019; Holaly, 2020).

Participants linked confidence to training, experience and opportunities to work with DeafBlind people. Financial and geographical barriers to specialist training may restrict these opportunities, creating a cycle of limited experience, lower confidence and reluctance to accept TSL assignments.

Participants generally supported specialist qualifications but raised concerns about increasing qualification and registration requirements where accessible training remains limited. The evolving NRCPD DeafBlind registration framework may result in interpreters holding different levels of specialist training. Without accessible pathways to meet changing requirements, higher thresholds could reduce an already limited workforce.

The findings also highlight tensions between professional competence and communication access. Some participants worked beyond their perceived skill level when no suitably qualified alternative was available rather than leave a DeafBlind person without communication support. This suggests a need for clearer professional guidance during regulatory transition.

Service access may also be affected by limited TSL awareness among agencies and commissioners, with participants reporting assignments where the tactile requirement had not been communicated.

Coordinated action is needed across training providers, agencies, professional bodies and regulators to ensure training, professional standards and workforce development progress together. Without this, DeafBlind people may continue to face barriers to appropriately trained communication professionals despite interpreters' willingness to provide TSL services.

Recommendations

- Embed DeafBlind communication, including TSL, within initial interpreter training and provide accessible and affordable TSL continuing professional development.
- Involve DeafBlind people in interpreter education, assessment and professional standards.
- Future research should explore DeafBlind people's experiences and the effectiveness of different interpreter training approaches.

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The Two Possibilities of Tactile Braille as a Form of Communication for People with Deafblindness

Introduction

This article aims to demonstrate the two possibilities of tactile braille as a form of communication for deafblind people. It is important to emphasize that currently the spelling of the words “deafblindness” and “deafblind” should be written continuously, without a hyphen, as a way to value and legitimize deafblindness and recognize the complexity involved in a deafblind person and accept them as a unique individual. As highlighted by Lagati, 1995.

There are several possible forms of communication for deafblind people, among which the main ones are: Tactile Sign Language; Sign Language in a reduced field; Tadoma; Oral language or amplified speech; writing on the palm of the hand; Tactile or manual Braille and Haptic Communication (Godoy, 2011; Cader-Nascimento and Costa, 2010). It is important to remember that Haptic Communication is a complementary and supportive form of communication.

This article will focus on tactile or manual braille, which some authors and institutions refer to as “digital braille” or “braille in hand.” In this text, we will adopt the term “tactile braille” because it prioritizes the tactile use of braille.

There are two types of tactile braille: one that uses the phalanges of the index and middle fingers to form the braille dots, and another that uses three fingers of each hand to simulate the finger movements on a braille typewriter (Grupo Brasil, 2012; Lupetina, 2019).



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Tactile Braille on the phalanges of the index and middle fingers

In this tactile braille modality, the interlocutor touches the fingertips of the deafblind person with the pad of their index finger, this touch being at the point corresponding to the position of the dot in braille. In this way, the deafblind person will receive tactile feedback on each letter.

The fingers have fold lines, and these lines provide the demarcation for the three rows and two columns with the points: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, equivalent to the Braille

cell. In this modality, the points of the Braille cell are represented on the phalanges (segments) of the fingers of the person's own hand and/or that of an interlocutor.

The figure below shows a numerical representation of the six Braille points located on the phalanges of the index and middle fingers.



Image 1: Braille dots positioned on the phalanges of the fingers.

Source: image created by the author to demonstrate the braille dots on the phalanges based on the readings of Abreu (2008); Lupetina (2019).

In this method of communication, the speaker will touch one of these six points with their fingertip to tactilely indicate the letter. The deafblind person will then feel the touch of the Braille points, mentally identify each letter, connect them to form each word, and subsequently, each sentence.

When a word is finished, the listener can tactilely perform a sweeping motion with the side of their hand, the hypothenar eminence or round edge, to indicate that they have finished a word and will begin another. This movement is equivalent to a tactile spacing. It signals that the previous letters formed a complete block and that a new word is about to begin.

The dots of the Braille alphabet positioned on the phalanges of the index and middle fingers, simulating a Braille cell, would look like this:

This type of tactile braille is usually chosen by deafblind people who first lost their sight and then their hearing. Because they experienced visual impairment first, they learned braille. With the second sensory loss – hearing – they use their already internalized knowledge of braille and adapt it to tactile braille. Especially those who learned to write with a slate and stylus will find the tactile braille modality easier to use on their phalanges.

Tactile braille simulating the finger positions on a braille typewriter

In this second type of tactile braille, the deafblind person will position the three fingers of each hand in the same position they use to type on a braille typewriter, with points 1, 2, and 3 on the left hand and points 4, 5, and 6 on the right hand.

The interlocutor or guide-interpreter will place their fingers and hand on the hand of the deafblind person and push the finger down, demonstrating the point of each letter being indicated in a tactile way.

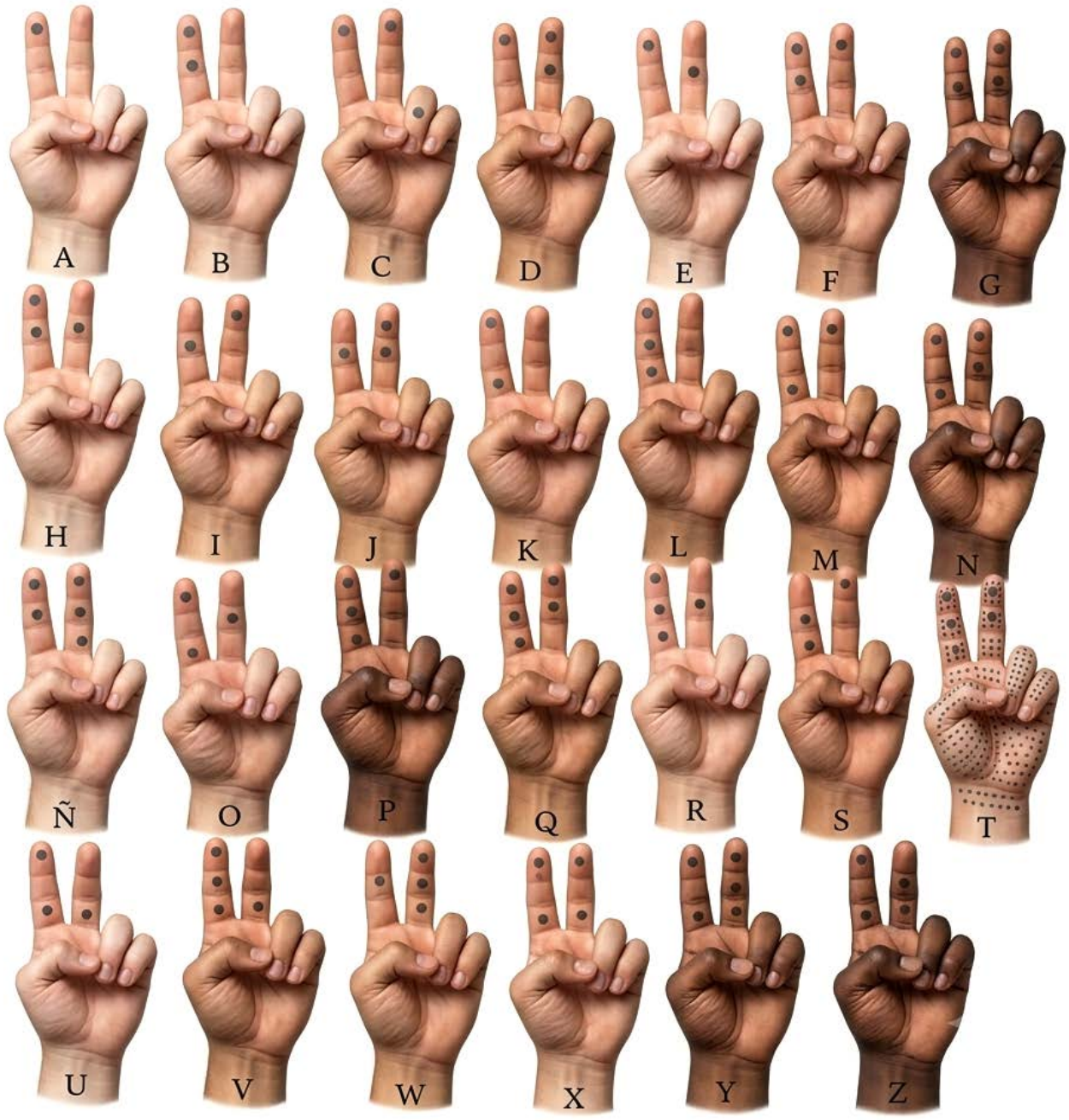


Image 2: Tactile braille alphabet on the phalanges

Source: image adapted by the author from material by Grupo Brasil (2012).

From this image, it is possible to see that the braille dots are adapted for touch using the hand-over-hand and finger-over-finger technique, simulating the positioning of the letters as if they were being typed on a braille typewriter. This tactile braille modality is usually chosen by deafblind individuals who first lost their sight and learned to write in braille on a typewriter. Because they have the tactile knowledge and memory of writing on a braille typewriter, when their hearing is impaired, they use their knowledge of finger positioning and switch to tactile braille.



Image 3: Tactile Braille with finger positioning equivalent to a Braille typewriter.

Source: image created by the author based on Grupo Brasil (2012); Lupetina (2019); Walker (2018).

Conclusion

This text has demonstrated, in a didactic and objective way, the two modalities of tactile braille: the modality that uses the phalanges of the index and middle fingers, and the modality that uses the three fingers of each hand to make the writing movement on the braille typewriter. In both modalities of tactile braille, it is usually used by deafblind individuals who first experienced visual loss and therefore know the Braille system, and subsequently experienced hearing loss.

It is important to point out that the form of communication for a deafblind person should be chosen by the deafblind person themselves, being the one that is most comfortable for them (Keller, 2008; Masini, 2011).

Therefore, choosing tactile braille as a form of communication can bring advantages to a person with deafblindness, especially when they possess sensory, cognitive, and motor conditions that favor the use of this form of tactile communication. Furthermore, constant contact with braille letters can contribute to the cognitive exercise of memorization, writing, and reading in braille.

One of the advantages of using tactile braille is that this form of tactile communication can be used in quiet, noisy, bright, or dark places, since it depends exclusively on touch. It does not require electronic equipment or complex materials and can be used only with the hands of the interlocutor and the deafblind person. Because it is a tactile communication that occurs through hand-to-hand or hand-over-hand contact, it contributes to promoting direct interaction, trust, and shared attention between the participants in the communication.

From an inclusive perspective, tactile braille represents not only a means of communication, but also an instrument for accessing information, education, autonomy, and the exercise of citizenship, contributing to the active participation of deafblind people in society.

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Current Trends in Haptic Devices to Support Communication for Individuals with Deafblindness: A Scoping Review



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The term haptic refers to the sense of touch. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2026), haptic relates to touch or to devices that create physical sensations such as vibration, pressure, or movement. When integrated into technology, haptic systems allow users to receive information through touch rather than through sight or hearing.

Haptic is commonly used in smartphones, computers, gaming devices, and wearable technologies such as smartwatches. Haptics includes tactile feedback, which stimulates the skin, and kinesthetic feedback, which provides information about force and movement (American Library Association, 2015). Together, these forms of feedback influence how deafblind people interact with technology and understand their environment (Ozioko et al., 2020).

Methodology

To systematically map these emerging technologies and understand their landscape, this study conducted a scoping review of the literature. This methodology was chosen to identify current trends and examine global prototype developments for people with deafblindness.

The literature was identified and selected using the primary data sources such as PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, APA PsycArticles, APA Psych Info, including the secondary sources such as articles published on the research section of the University and digital libraries. The period covered for the search was the last 10 years and the basic selection criteria included the existing inventions, ongoing research and prototypes in development with haptic technology for the use of individuals with deafblindness.

Findings

The term haptic originates from the Greek word meaning "touch." Social haptics is a communication method that uses touch to convey information. Touch signals are commonly applied to the shoulders, upper arms, hands, or back.

Social haptics enables communication partners to share information that may be difficult for a deafblind person to access independently. Through touch, it is possible to communicate emotions, facial expressions, body language, social interactions, and information about the surrounding environment. This provides deafblind people with access to contextual information that may otherwise be unavailable and supports greater participation in social situations (Deafblind Information Australia).

Recent developments in wearable technology have attempted to integrate social haptic principles into digital systems. Researchers are exploring how social and environmental information can be converted into vibration patterns and transmitted through wearable haptic devices, allowing information to be received in real time through touch.

Researchers globally are investigating innovative haptic technologies to improve communication and independence for deafblind people.

One example is Tacsac, a wearable device that combines vibration output with touch-sensing capability. Users can receive information through vibration while also sending information through touch, supporting two-way communication (Ozioko et al., 2020).

Another example is the CHAT (Communication Haptics and Tactile) System, developed with protactile deafblind participants. The system explores how emotions, social information, and conversational interactions can be communicated through tactile feedback (MacGavin et al., 2025).

Researchers have also developed HaptiComm, a haptic communication device designed to facilitate information exchange through touch, and a Protactile-inspired wearable system aimed at capturing key elements of deafblind communication (Duvernoy et al., 2018; MacGavin et al., 2021).

More recently, HaptiShare explored how one person could send haptic information to several users wearing haptic vests simultaneously. This technology may have applications in education, employment, conferences, and community activities (Theil et al., 2025).

An important recent development is the artificial intelligence enabled smart e-textile glove created by researchers at Nottingham Trent University. The prototype uses artificial intelligence to inter-



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pret spoken conversations and convert information into vibration patterns delivered through small haptic actuators embedded in a glove. The technology aims to communicate speech and environmental information through touch, potentially improving access to real-time conversations for deafblind people (Nottingham Trent University, 2025).

Researchers have also investigated wearable systems that use sensors and radar technology to provide navigation and environmental awareness through vibration feedback. These systems may improve mobility and safety for deafblind users (Sorgini et al., 2018). Additional studies have explored tactile editing tools and wearable tactile interfaces to improve access to information and learning opportunities (Yabu et al., 2016).

In India, researchers have developed smart gloves using braille input and haptic feedback and introduced the Haptic Encoded Language Framework (HELF), a digital tactile language for deafblind (Prasath Alias Surendhar et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2023). Research into tactile fingerspelling has also demonstrated the potential of touch-based communication systems for individuals with deafblindness (Topp et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Together, these developments demonstrate growing international interest in wearable haptic technologies that support communication, accessibility, and independence. However, most of these systems remain at the prototype stage. In practice, primarily refreshable Braille displays, accessible smartphones, and vibration-based alert systems are used because they are widely available, reliable, and require less specialist training.

Future recommendation and Limitations

AI-enabled haptic systems with current technology have the potential to translate speech, social information, and environmental cues into tactile feedback in real time. However, further research is needed with collaboration and more direct involvement with individuals with deafblindness with real-time testing to determine their long-term usability, affordability, effectiveness, and accessibility in everyday settings.

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INTERVIEWS



"DbI has Never Operated in Silos"

Interview with Mirko Baur, President of Deafblind International

LESLIE GIESBRECHT

IRINA MOISEEVA

1. When we look back at the 2027 World Conference in Davos years from now, what is the single most important 'legacy' or impact you hope this gathering will have left on the global landscape of deafblind rights and support?

Within our deafblind community, I am certain that this World Conference – as the FIRST joint World Conference organised by DbI and WFDB – will convince everyone of the value of further joint, inclusive projects and deeper cooperation between the two organisations – and that this will, amongst other things, lead to the further development of our conference formats and organisations.

Beyond our community, I am certain that the conference, with Switzerland as the host country and on an international level, will significantly raise awareness of deafblindness as a unique, distinct and very diverse condition, and will enhance the perception of our joint network as a strong partner for initiatives promoting human rights across disabilities and across other groups.

2. Historically, advocacy and professional/research networks have sometimes operated in separate spheres. How does this partnership actively break down those silos to better serve individuals with deafblindness on the ground?

The early days of DbI were strongly shaped by families and practitioners, and the focus was always on practice and rights – initially on the right to access adequate education and the question of what such education can and must look like in order to be adequate. As the field became established and achieved its first successes, research approaches have become more important, also within DbI. Today, DbI is an inclusive network of people with and without deafblindness, whatever their role –

such as practitioners or researchers – and specialized organisations. Of our 18 official DbI Networks, one specialises in research.

The long tradition of DbI conferences – and indeed this first joint conference between DbI and the WFDB – has always been thematically inclusive: it is about practice and research, advocacy and personal encounters, and forges lifelong friendships across all manner of barriers.

DbI has therefore never operated in silos, and this first joint World Conference with the WFDB strengthens this inclusive, diverse culture many times over.

3. In the context of your partnership with WFDB, how is the 'LET ME IN' campaign and your broader educational focus being integrated into the conference programming?"

The Global Education Campaign is a key project and has been an important part of our collaboration with the WFDB from the very beginning. The campaign has had an enormous impact, achieving things we could never have imagined at the outset. The campaign is strongly represented at the conference: with presentations on new research projects from the campaign's focus areas – namely Africa, Asia and Latin America – concerning the education of children with deafblindness, as well as a celebratory overview of all the campaign's activities, its achievements to date and its future work. The campaign has dedicated presentation rooms set aside for this purpose, and thanks to sponsorship from DbI, we are able to facilitate face-to-face meetings with those leading the research projects.

Education also plays an important role in other aspects of the conference. And DbI's Education Network is certainly well represented; amongst other things, it will be collecting further data to continue mapping specialised services around the world on the corresponding world map on our website.

4. As you manage a global organisation with diverse regional needs, what do you see as the biggest challenge in translating high-level research and professional best practices into tangible improvements for deafblind individuals in developing regions?

In my experience, everywhere in the world – to varying degrees and in a wide variety of situations – the focus is on the same four main themes as in the Global Education Campaign: capacity-building, information, collaboration, and resources. I do not see this as a one-way flow of 'imports' from here to there, however the 'poles' may be defined, but rather as the challenge of sustainably strengthening or creating viable, creative and robust local networks that, in turn, become part of the ongoing exchange within the wider network. It is always also about learning from one another on all sides – and thus about exchange and joint development. To put it in terms of a phrase famous within the field: it is about 'co-creation', including 'co-creating communication' again and again.

This is by no means intended to blur any differences. These differences always exist; they can be difficult, and, in my view, they call for correspondingly different contributions required of each party. There is no co-creation between pseudo-participants – only between genuine participants, with all their differences and their indeed very different local contexts. This world is anything but well-balanced, and DbI works in this world – not anywhere else.

In that respect, it would be wonderful if DbI were not only incredibly rich in individual members and member organisations, with all their experience and expertise, but also had a few incredibly wealthy sponsors.

5. For those who haven't been to a World Conference before, how would you describe the 'energy' of the event in three words?"

With these three Cs: Connection, Collaboration and Celebration.



"Our Deafblindness Should Not Overshadow Our Knowledge"

Interview with Dr Sanja Tarczay, President of the World Federation of the Deafblind

LESLIE GIESBRECHT

IRINA MOISEEVA

1. When we look back at the 2027 World Conference in Davos years from now, what is the single most important 'legacy' or impact you hope this gathering will have left on the global landscape of deafblind rights and support?

For us, the most important legacy of the conference would be to create lasting change in how deafblindness is understood, recognised and addressed worldwide.

I hope that, years from now, people will look back at Davos not simply as a successful international event, but as a turning point that strengthened the connections between the deafblind community, professionals, researchers and organisations working in this field. I believe the conference will help raise awareness and increase the visibility of deafblindness, ultimately having a meaningful impact on policymakers and decision-makers.

Most importantly, I hope the conference will serve as a starting point for concrete action, stronger partnerships and better opportunities for persons with deafblindness worldwide, while also creating new opportunities for professionals, researchers and organisations to work together towards shared goals.

2. Historically, advocacy and professional/research networks have sometimes operated in separate spheres. How does this partnership actively break down those silos to better serve individuals with deafblindness on the ground?

I have been working in the field of deafblindness for more than 30 years. I was there when WFDB and EDbU were established, and I have witnessed how advocacy organisations and professional and research networks have sometimes

operated in separate spheres. In fact, I would say that this has happened much more than just occasionally.

I believe this separation is one of the reasons why progress has sometimes been so slow, particularly when it comes to the recognition of deafblindness and the establishment of appropriate services and support for deafblind people. Even today, in many countries, deafblindness is still not properly recognised, and the necessary services are either insufficiently developed or do not exist at all.

This is precisely why we need each other.

Organisations of persons with deafblindness bring lived experience, knowledge of everyday barriers and a clear understanding of what needs to change. Professionals and researchers contribute their expertise, research, evidence and practical approaches. Both perspectives are essential, and neither should work without the other.

For me, however, this partnership goes beyond bringing two organisations or two professional worlds closer together. It is also about strengthening the global deafblind movement and empowering persons with deafblindness and their organisations to take an active role in shaping decisions that affect their lives. It is about creating opportunities for deafblind people not only to be represented and consulted, but also to become professionals, researchers, experts and decision-makers in this field.

I am truly excited about the partnership between Mirko and myself, and between WFDB and DbI, because I believe we have an opportunity to make history by breaking down these long-standing barriers. We want to bring together two areas that have too often been treated as separate and ensure that the voices, knowledge and expertise of persons with deafblindness are recognised and valued on an equal footing with those of professionals and researchers.

I believe that by working together, we can accelerate progress, influence policies and, most importantly, bring about changes that will improve the everyday lives of persons with deafblindness around the world.

3. You have been a powerful force for the 'Nothing about us without us' principle. How does this joint conference with DbI ensure that the voices and leadership of persons with deafblindness remain at the center of the agenda, rather than being sidelined by professional discourse?

To be honest, I have always preferred to use the expression "Nothing about Deafblind without Deafblind" rather than "Nothing about us without us". For me, it sends a very clear message: it should encourage the deafblind community to become actively involved, take the initiative and take matters into their own hands, rather than allowing others to speak and make decisions on their behalf.

Persons with deafblindness must not be present simply as deafblind participants or recipients of services. We must be recognised as experts in our own lives, as leaders, decision-makers and equal partners in shaping policies, research and professional practice.

There is another important aspect that I would like to see change. Too often, when people look at us, they see only our deafblindness. They see a person who needs support, but they do not necessarily see the knowledge, qualifications and professional expertise that person may have. There are people with deafblindness who are professionals, experts in their own fields, researchers and people with a great deal to contribute. Yet, we are not always recognised in these roles. I would love for this conference to help change that perspective. I hope that, after Davos, when people talk about a deafblind person, they will not only say, "She is a deafblind person", but also, "She is a deafblind professional", "She is an expert in her field" or "She is a researcher". Our deafblindness should not overshadow our knowledge, abilities and professional contributions.

This is why the partnership between WFDB and DbI is so important. It brings together two different but complementary perspectives and gives us an opportunity to ensure that the experiences, knowledge, priorities and leadership of persons with deafblindness are an integral part of the conference.

We want to create a space where persons with deafblindness are not simply invited to contribute, but are actively involved in shaping the discussions and outcomes.

Of course, this also means ensuring accessibility throughout the event, so that persons with deafblindness can participate on an equal basis with others, contribute to discussions, share their expertise and take on leadership roles. Their participation must be meaningful, not merely symbolic.

4. The WFDB is heavily invested in youth leadership and the inclusion of women. What specific opportunities does this joint venture create for the next generation of deafblind advocates to engage with the professional community in a way they haven't been able to before?

One of the things I am particularly happy about is the opportunity to bring young persons with deafblindness closer to the international professional community.

The Youth Camp connected with the World Conference will provide an important space for young people to meet, exchange experiences, develop confidence and build international connections. But I believe we should go one step further.

Young persons with deafblindness should have opportunities to engage directly with professionals, researchers and decision-makers, to share their perspectives and contribute to discussions. Their experiences and ideas can challenge existing approaches and help us understand what needs to change for the next generation.

The same applies to women with deafblindness, whose voices and leadership still need greater recognition and visibility.

I hope this conference will help build relationships that continue long after Davos. We should not only prepare young people to become future leaders; we should also create opportunities for them to lead today.

5. For those who haven't been to a World Conference before, how would you describe the 'energy' of the event in three words?

Empowerment. Inspiration. Connection.



Stronger Together: Riku Virtanen on the Road to Davos

Mr. Riku Virtanen, LL.M, university researcher, Executive Council member of WFDB

LESLIE GIESBRECHT

IRINA MOISEEVA

1. *Why now?* This joint World Conference brings DbI and WFDB together.

From your perspective, why is this the right time for this collaboration?

Historically, persons with deafblindness have been the recipients of support and services. Professionals have talked about that group as the patients of medical care, users of different communication methods and different ways of learning. Particularly after the adoption of the UN CRPD in 2006, this approach is changing. Although persons with deafblindness are using different communication methods and different ways of learning, persons with disabilities are currently seen as subjects of rights, not only the recipients of support and care.

Another reason is the increasing number of highly educated persons with deafblindness. Persons with deafblindness are gaining more academic education than in past, and there are the increasing number of professionals with deafblindness working at the field of deafblindness.

Third reason is the need for co-operation between DBI and the WFDB. From a financial perspective, the WFDB works currently without paid staff, and the WFDB has limited resources to organize own events. With cooperation DBI and the WFDB are able to organize the international conference.

2. *Legacy.* Looking back at Davos 2027 years from now, what is the single most important impact you hope it will have left on deafblind rights and support?

I hope persons with deafblindness will gain more recognition through the adoption of the international day of deafblindness at United Nations in 2025.

3. *Breaking down silos:* Advocacy and professional/research networks have often worked separately. How can bringing them together make a real difference for people with deafblindness on the ground?

Persons with deafblindness need statistical and scientific data in

order to do advocacy and awareness-raising. Professionals working with and for persons with deafblindness can receive valuable information on persons with deafblindness. In addition, participants from the Global South obtain valuable information and experiences when the conference will bring professionals and persons with deafblindness together.

4. *In three words:* What three words best describe what you expect from the World Conference in Davos?

Cooperation, participation and awareness-raising: The conference can be an event which will increase cooperation between DBI and the WFDB, promote participation of both professionals and persons with deafblindness and raise awareness regarding persons with deafblindness.



Aerial View of Davos

An Invitation to Davos

A personal invitation from Vanessa Vlajkovic, Master of Ceremonies of the 2027 DbI – WFDB World Conference



VANESSA VLAJKOVIC

MASTER OF CEREMONIES OF THE 2027 DBI–WFDB WORLD CONFERENCE IN DAVOS.

As preparations for the World Conference in Davos get under way, we asked the conference's Master of Ceremonies, Vanessa Vlajkovic, for a personal invitation to everyone thinking about joining us.

Why shouldn't anyone miss Davos 2027?

Vanessa: Because it is a very rare opportunity, only every four years, to come together as a community in one place: to meet old friends and make new ones, to listen to people's stories and to learn new, incredible things. There is so much to take in, from such a wide variety of people from right across the globe, that it would be a huge shame to miss out on this experience. Otherwise, you would have to wait another four years for the next one!

Davos in three words

Inspiring. Thrilling. Unforgettable.

Deafblind Pedagogy: A Textbook

What distinguishes pedagogical practice in the field of deafblindness, and why is there a need to describe deafblind pedagogy as a distinct field of professional knowledge and practice?

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These questions are at the heart of Deafblind Pedagogy: A Textbook, published in Danish in 2025. Rooted in Nordic deafblind practice, the book brings together theoretical perspectives, practice-based knowledge and case examples to examine what characterises deafblind pedagogy and how it relates to broader pedagogical and special educational traditions.

Although the book was developed and written in Denmark, many of the questions it raises are relevant beyond the Nordic countries. How can pedagogical practice support communication, participation, agency and a meaningful life when combined vision and hearing loss restrict a person's access to and engagement with the world? What do professionals need to know and be able to do, and what should they be committed to in their practice?

This article outlines the background, key perspectives and structure of the textbook. It also invites professionals beyond the Nordic countries to consider how this understanding of deafblind pedagogy relates to their own practice. An English translation of one chapter is available via the link at the end of the article.

Pedagogy in a Danish context

In Anglo-American educational discourse, *pedagogy* often refers primarily to theories and practices of teaching and learning. The Danish concept of *pædagogik* has a broader scope rooted in the continental European tradition of *Bildung*. Here, pedagogy encompasses care, upbringing, development and participation. For our textbook, a central concern is how pedagogical practice can support a person's opportunity to act as a subject in relation to the world (Biesta, 2018).

Within this tradition, pedagogy can be understood as an "*expression of human practice arising from needs for care, upbringing, and learning*" (Madsen, 2021, p. 21). Pedagogical practice is therefore action-oriented: it is concerned with what professionals seek to make possible together with another person (Pedersen, 2024). This *something*—what deafblind pedagogy should seek to make possible—is central to the textbook.

Rooted in Practice

The textbook is a product of the synergy between theory and practice. As our aim is to describe the reality of Danish deafblind pedagogy, the writing process was deeply informed by the expertise of the Centre for Communication and Special Education in Aalborg. We have also benefited significantly from the academic guidance of Bent Madsen, an external lecturer at The Danish School of Education, Aarhus University (DPU) and a specialist in pedagogy (MA in General Education). This, combined with feedback from focus groups across various departments, ensures that every chapter is grounded in research, professional expertise and real-word experience.

The focus of the book

Although the field of deafblindness has developed a substantial body of specialised knowledge, this knowledge has not previously been brought together within a coherent pedagogical framework based on the Nordic definition of deafblindness (Nordic Leadership Forum on Deafblindness, 2024). At the same time, general and special pedagogy rarely address the specific roles of vision and hearing in activity and participation.

The humanistic perspective within the Nordic field of deafblindness has been strongly shaped by dialogical theory and traditions of communication, where a central orientation is towards *the other* (Marková, 2003). From this dialogical perspective, communication difficulties cannot be located solely within one individual; communication is inherently relational and necessarily involves at least two participants (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999). Consequently, Nafstad and Rødbroe (2015) emphasise the responsibility of the professional communication partner to notice and respond to the communicative expressions of a person with deafblindness, thereby enabling them to experience being seen, heard, and understood.

The textbook seeks to bridge these gaps by bringing deafblind-specific knowledge together with broader pedagogical theory and with embodied phenomenological, biopsychosocial, dialogical, and rights-based perspectives.

Deafblind Pedagogy: A Textbook describes a specialised pedagogy that addresses how we support individuals from vulnerable positions to positions of a higher degree of participation (Madsen, 2013).

A central focus is how to pedagogically support individuals with congenital deafblindness in how they experience and understand themselves, creating frameworks for positive life experiences and supporting their fundamental human rights, including:

- To experience safety and care
- To be seen, heard, and understood (and to meet and be met by others)
- To learn, develop, and achieve a sense of competence (also communicatively and socially)
- To have autonomy, self-determination, and influence over one's own life
- To be an active participant in one's own life
- To be part of a community
- To experience a sense of coherence
- To have a meaningful everyday life

These universal human themes are central to the pedagogy that we describe here. The basic understanding is grounded in what we share as human beings, regardless of differences in abilities and support needs. Throughout the book, we explore how pedagogical practice can support these needs and rights when combined vision and hearing loss affects a person's access to the world around them.

Contents and structure of the book

The structure of the book reflects a gradual widening of perspective, from the immediate encounter between the person with deafblindness and the professional to broader social and organisational contexts. It begins with bodily and tactile access to the world and communication, before moving on to relationships, agency, learning and identity, and then to participation in communities, self-determination and a meaningful life. The final chapter focuses on the professional and organisational conditions needed to support this practice. *Professional judgement in deafblind pedagogy* runs through all these levels, underlining that pedagogical practice cannot be reduced to methods alone.

The book features twelve chapters, which can be read individually or in sequence. Together, they provide a structured introduction to deafblind pedagogy:

1. Deafblind Pedagogy – A Speciality within the Specialised Services Field
2. The Tactile Focus – A Gateway
3. Communication – No Communication Without the Body
4. The Relationship's Significance for Basic Trust – Creating Safety and Care
5. Agency and Vitality – Having Your Own Voice
6. Learning and Information Acquisition – When Incidental Learning Is Difficult
7. Identity and Sense of Self – Being Valued and Mattered
8. Social Life and Community – A Sense of Belonging
9. Self-Determination – Knowing Opportunities in Life
10. The Vibrant Life – Not Wrapped in Cotton Wool
11. Professional Judgement in Deafblind Pedagogy – Knowledge, Commitment and Actions
12. Leadership, Management and Organisational Perspectives – An Additional Dimension

Collaboration and translation

Currently, we are seeking an international partner interested in translating and publishing the book in English. To give readers a sense of the book's approach, we have made an English translation of chapter five available.

The chapter, *Agency and Vitality*, explores how professionals can support people with congenital deafblindness in developing a sense of agency. It is about having their contributions recognised and valued, to develop resilience and life competences needed to participate actively in their own lives. It includes one of the book's many authentic and anonymised cases from practice, showing how even a seemingly simple expression such as clapping can become a way of taking initiative, initiating interaction and being recognised as someone whose contribution matters.

For inquiries about collaboration on translation or international publication, whether in English or other languages, please contact Lasse Winther Wehner at lasse.wehner@rn.dk

The textbook is a Danish attempt, grounded in Nordic traditions, to describe deafblind pedagogy as a field in its own right. We do not assume that all its concepts can be transferred directly across educational, professional and cultural contexts. Rather, we are interested in how this understanding of deafblind pedagogy relates to practices and professional traditions elsewhere. We want to raise the question; how can an international dialogue about deafblind pedagogy contribute to the field?

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From Training to Touch: Low-Cost Innovations for Deafblind Learners in Kenyan Special Schools – Lessons from KISE, Kwale and Mundika

Abstract

This practice reflection traces the author's professional pathway from specialized training at Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE) to field practice at Kwale School for the Deaf - Deafblind Unit, and current service at Mundika Special School for HI and Deafblind Unit, Busia. It documents persistent systemic challenges in low-resource Deafblind education in Kenya including lack of tactile learning materials, limited orientation and mobility support, communication breakdown, and community stigma. It then describes locally grounded, low-cost innovations developed with learners and parents, including tactile environmental mapping, individualized tactile communication passports, parent co-teaching Saturdays, and adapted inclusive ball games. Notably, in 2026, under the author's coaching, Mundika Deafblind learners represented Western Region for the first time ever at the National Special Schools Ball Games Championships, marking a historic shift from exclusion to recognition.

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Introduction

The Fall 2026 issue of DbI Review dedicated to the First Joint World Conference of Deafblind International (DbI) and the World Federation of the Deafblind (WFDB) comes at a time when the global deafblind community is demanding one voice, one movement. For me, a Kenyan specialist teacher based in Busia, that jointness is not abstract. It is lived daily in a classroom where touch is the only reliable channel.

I am a graduate of Kenya Institute of Special Education (KISE), with field exposure at Kwale School for the Deaf and now teaching at Mundika Special School for HI and Deafblind Unit. My journey shows that global principles only become inclusive when translated with local hands, local materials, and local language.

1. KISE as a Training Institute: Foundation and Gaps

KISE (Kasarani, Nairobi) remains the only national institute training teachers in Deafblindness in Kenya. From 2021-2023 (Adm: DSNE/DB/0012/21), I trained in Diploma in Special Needs Education in the area of Deafblind (9103).

KISE taught me:

- Kenyan Sign Language and tactile KSL
- English Braille and functional Braille
- Psychology, curriculum adaptation, research and rehabilitation
- The philosophy of hand-under-hand and person-centered planning

The strength of KISE is its comprehensive curriculum and commitment. The challenge is that training is largely institution-based. We have limited prolonged immersion in active Deafblind Units with learners who have multiple disabilities. Many teachers graduate confident in either deafness or blindness, but not in deafblindness as a unique disability requiring touch, time, and structure.

My response while at KISE was to start building a personal tactile toolkit – documenting every object cue, calendar system, and resonance activity during Teaching Practice.

2. Kwale School for the Deaf - Deafblind Unit: Learning Humility

My field experience at Kwale School for the Deaf (Coastal Region) exposed me to the reality of many Deafblind Units in Kenya.

Observed challenges:

a) **Communication mismatch** – Teachers used visual Kenyan Sign Language which learners with combined vision and hearing loss could not access.

b) **Material poverty** – No tactile balls, no textured surfaces, no light adaptation.

c) **Occupational emptiness** – Learners spent hours without meaningful, tactilely accessible activity, leading to withdrawal and self-stimulatory behaviour.

d) **Late identification** – Most learners arrived at school at 10-14 years without any formal communication system.

Interventions we tried at Kwale:

- Introduced object-of-reference calendars using locally available materials: a spoon for mealtime, a piece of soap for washing, a small ball for play.
- Shifted from hand-over-hand to hand-under-hand to respect learner autonomy.
- Fabricated tactile audible balls using old socks, dried beans, sisal, and small bells from the market. The sound + texture allowed tracking.
- Introduced daily routine boards with real objects fixed on a wooden plank.

Learners who were previously labelled "difficult" began to anticipate activities and reduced self-injury.

3. Mundika Special School for HI and Deafblind Unit: Current Station and Innovations (2024-Present)

Mundika Special School, Busia County, hosts both Hearing Impairment and Deafblind Units. I serve as Special Needs Teacher in the Deafblind Unit under TSC (Teachers Service Commission).

Current challenges at Mundika:

1. **Orientation and Mobility:** School compound had no tactile landmarks. Learners depended fully on adult guidance.
2. **Behaviour as communication:** Without a communication system, frustration manifested as hitting or withdrawal.

3. **Parental stigma and distance:** Many parents from rural Busia believed deafblindness was a curse or punishment. Some hid children.
4. **Low expectations in co-curricular:** Deafblind learners were spectators, never participants.

Solutions I have employed with support of Headteacher Mrs. Ruth Nyange:

a) Tactile Environmental Mapping:

We laid textured pathways – sisal mats at classroom entrances, bottle-top lines leading to latrines and dining hall, and embossed cardboard markers. Learners now independently orient using foot cues and touch, reducing dependence.

b) Individualized Tactile Communication Passports:

Each learner has a simple A4 passport showing: How I communicate (e.g., tactile KSL signs for EAT, FINISH, PLAY), how I want to be guided, my likes/dislikes. This has reduced communication breakdown and has been shared with house mothers and parents.

c) Parent Co-Teaching Saturdays:

Once a month, we invite parents for "Touch and Learn". Parents practice one skill: hand-under-hand feeding, tactile sign for "drink", or making a calendar box at home using local materials. One mother from Nambale now trains other mothers. This has improved home carry-over.

d) Sport as a Tool for Visibility and Dignity - The 2026 Historic Achievement:

This is my most significant innovation as a scholar-practitioner.

Deafblind learners love play but were excluded from ball games because standard balls are visual and fast. I adapted:

- Created low-cost audible tactile balls (sisal-wrapped, bell-embedded)
- Created tactile boundaries using sisal ropes pegged on ground
- Developed a consistent auditory-tactile signal system: one whistle + shoulder tap = start, two taps = stop
- Used peer guide runners from HI Unit who run alongside with arm contact
- Implemented structured routine: warm-up on same spot daily to build body memory

We trained for 6 months after school hours.

In 2026, for the first time ever in history, Mundika Special School – Deafblind Unit represented Western Region at the National Special Schools Ball Games Championships. Our team qualified at county and regional levels and performed extremely well at Nationals. For Western Kenya, this was unprecedented – Deafblind learners have never been at that level.

The impact was beyond medals. The community saw our learners as athletes, not as charity cases. Our learners returned with confidence, communication attempts increased, and enrolment inquiries for Deafblind Unit rose from neighboring sub-counties.

This achievement demonstrates that inclusive sport, when adapted tactically, is a powerful, low-cost intervention for social inclusion, communication, and orientation.

4. Reflection in Light of the First Joint DbI-WFDB Conference

The Joint Conference theme is powerful: lived experience and professional practice must speak together. In Kenya, we have very few adults with deafblindness as role models. In our schools, teachers become teacher-intervener-counselor-advocate because the intervener cadre does not yet exist formally.

My experience calls for DbI to recognize African low-cost innovations as legitimate practice knowledge. We may not have high-tech devices, but we have solutions that work: community-built tactile materials, parent-led intervention, and sport as pedagogy.

Conclusion

KISE gave me knowledge. Kwale gave me humility. Mundika gives me daily opportunity to invent.

The future of Deafblind education in Kenya will not be secured by imported equipment alone, but by investing in teacher training that trusts touch, by producing tactile materials from local resources, and by recognizing families and learners themselves as co-teachers.

I dedicate this paper to my learners at Mundika whose hands taught me that communication does not require eyes or ears – it requires patience, respect, and presence.

We look forward to learning from the global community at this historic joint conference.

Keywords: Deafblind, Kenya, KISE, low-cost innovation, tactile communication, inclusive sports, Western Region

Acquired Deafblindness in the Context of a Rehabilitation Program in Brazil: Challenges and Possibilities

The process of perceiving and accepting the condition of deafblindness was a long journey, involving personal daily experiences and interactions with deafblind individuals in both academic and social settings that began at age 17. However, I only embraced it as an identity at age 47, from contact with deafblind people from various countries at an international deafblind conference I attended in São Paulo.

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During this period and especially after embracing my deafblind identity, I was involved in support groups and movements advocating for the deafblind community. I participated in various training courses in the field of deafblind education and on communication used by deafblind people, which contributed to my professional development and to my identity affirmation as a deafblind person.

I organized several seminars in partnership with the Federal University of Uberlândia to discuss topics related to deafblindness and the means of communication used by deafblind individuals. Recently, I created and coordinated a continuing education extension course on literacy and education for deafblind individuals, aimed at K-12 teachers across the country, in partnership with the Ministry of Education's Directorate of Bilingual Education for the Deaf (DIPEBS).

As a deafblind individual with a higher education degree, many might consider it unnecessary to participate in a training program focused on deafblind rehabilitation. However, I have always sought new knowledge, experiences, and partnership, even more so in an historic and renowned institution in the field of specialized care for blind and deafblind individuals. The Benjamin Constant Institute (IBC) is a national and international reference in the field, training professionals and enabling autonomy for the deafblind individuals it serves.

The course provided an experience of new knowledge and learning with the professors, the guide-interpreters, the course

colleagues, and a collaborative deafblind participant who enriched the training with her real-life story, providing insight into a unique life reality.

At the start of the course, participants learned about the weekly syllabus, general concepts of deafblindness, communication methods, rehabilitation, and shared experiences. This included orientation and mobility practices, as well as practical communication exercises complemented by an interactive environment rich in history and meaning, a place whose very name can represent a beacon of light for blind and deafblind individuals.

The knowledge about the male and female professors and the course colleagues, each with their profiles and experiences related to the area of deafblindness, constituted a remarkable moment. The professors arouse curiosity due to the fact that the institution transitioned its exclusivity in serving the blind to serving the deafblind, a distinct and very specific area that requires skills from the professional to work beyond those necessary for working with blind people, mainly the mastery and use of Brazilian Sign Language – Libras. It was noticed that some professors do not master this language; however, empathy, the appreciation of others, and the pursuit of the involvement of the attended deafblind students reflect the quality characteristic of the provided services.

Among our classmates, we find different professional profiles and varying experiences regarding contact and work with deafblind individuals. One fact stands out: most participants lack basic knowledge of Libras (Brazilian Sign Language), which is essential for interaction, communication, and, above all, pedagogical work with deafblind students. Although aware that deafblind individuals use various forms of communication, basic knowledge of Libras constitutes a relevant differential in professional qualification, since teaching work should not rely entirely on the support of a Libras/Portuguese interpreter.

Still in the initial phase of the course, the contact with the three professional interpreters who also work as sign-language interpreters/deafblind guides, one of them also acting as a mediating instructor, bringing distinct experiences and backgrounds in the field of deafblindness, provided moments of interaction, sharing, and learning. This created an environment that certainly had the potential to influence the formative process of the other participants.

In the discussion regarding the concept of deafblindness, both congenital deafblindness and acquired deafblindness were addressed, as well as the impact of this condition on the lives of deafblind people, especially regarding interaction with living environments and principally concerning communication. The main causes of deafblindness were discussed, with an emphasis on Usher Syndrome and genetic issues, though other factors were also covered, such as retinitis pigmentosa, meningitis, and rare syndromes, among others.

Depending on the cause and the age of onset, deafblindness can be congenital or acquired, presenting in varying degrees. Regarding vision, it relates to visual acuity and the visual field. Regarding hearing, it relates to the different levels of hearing a person may have. The concomitance of these visual and auditory conditions characterizes deafblindness.

Considering the communicative impact of deafblindness, communication types such as tactile sign language, reduced visual field sign language, palm-writing, Braille, tactile Braille, amplified speech, Tadoma, social haptic communication, among others, were addressed.

Continuing the discussions, following the female professors' approach regarding the consequences of deafblindness, the theme of general concepts of deafblindness and the specific communication methods most used by deafblind people was retaken.

The issue of social isolation imposed by the condition on the individual stood out, stemming from the family's lack of knowledge on how to handle the situation, also caused by the fact that both the family and the deafblind person themselves do not accept and/or understand this unique condition, in addi-

tion to the lack of seeking guidance and creating strategies and communication alternatives to maintain the level of social relations in a participatory and integrated manner.

Given this situation, the deafblind person may feel insecure to exercise their citizenship, both within the family itself and, above all, in the social and educational environment. Contributing to this isolation is the fact that the family, due to safety concerns and lack of knowledge, ends up depriving the deafblind person of their possibilities to exercise their potential as a citizen.

The fact that the family lacks a meaningful communicative interaction with the deafblind person results in a lack of guidance ranging from sexual orientation issues to routine daily demands, such as those known as Activities of Daily Living (ADL), which involve personal care and the exploration of the living environment, thereby enabling autonomy and independence for the deafblind individual.

Due to a lack of understanding about deafblindness, worsened by the lack of a loving and effective way for the family to talk to the deafblind person, talks looked at using remaining senses (even for those with some sight and/or hearing) and using touch to feel and connect. Talks also looked at smell and taste, which help know other people, find bugs and animals, and know foods and places. The first three senses, sight, hearing, and touch, decide how a deafblind person will communicate in their own special way, based on their exact needs.

Continuing the discussions in the course, rehabilitation issues were addressed, ranging from family guidance, Activities of Daily Living (ADL), and orientation and mobility, to communication processes and the use of assistive technologies and other support resources. The practical component of orientation and mobility and communication used by deafblind individuals, carried out in pairs among participants, was another impactful moment in the training provided by the course.

The participation of a deafblind student from the IBC enriched the training, as it demonstrated, in a practical sense, the reality of a deafblind individual with a unique personal history and distinct characteristics; her identity has been taking shape through daily experiences that began precisely when she entered the institution's rehabilitation program.

The fact that the IBC is located in a city over a thousand kilometers away from mine made extra-curricular experiences possible for me. Preparing for a six-day stay in Rio de Janeiro, including scheduling bus tickets, accommodation, using a ride-hailing app to get around the city between my lodging and the IBC as well as other places I visited, mobility around my lodging to find food, and safety concerns, all of this required searching for alternative communication and information strategies, mobility tactics, and the use of assistive technology resources. These provided me with new experiences that certainly strengthen my self-esteem, self-confidence, and identity self-assertion as a deafblind person.

In short, I consider it essential that professionals and even individuals with deafblindness pursue such courses not only as part of their academic training, but as a way of experiencing and understanding what it means to be a person with deafblindness.

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DbI Communication Ambassador: Call for Action

DbI's newly formed Communication Committee (DbI ComCom) is reaching out your help!

We expect an Ambassador to take DbI's communication to the next level by leveraging your knowledge and expertise in this area. As the old saying goes, it takes a village.

We assume that an Ambassador has well established communications with local, regional and maybe national media, an inspiring website and/or an involving social media presence. We believe that these resources could help us to spread the word about deafblindness, quality services and DbI all over the world.

What are the responsibilities of a Communication Ambassador:

1. Assist DbI in ensuring that its social media posts are reposted on your organization pages within a short period of time (1-a5 business days).
2. Assist DbI by ensuring access to your media network and sharing DbI press releases and communication with your media network within a short period of time (1-5 business days).
3. Assist DbI by having the key contact keep his/her ears to the ground to assist in sourcing regional news and information that could be shared with DbI membership and can be posted on DbI pages.
4. DbI would be grateful to have the key contact act as an ambassador and connector within their geographic area.

Organizations serving as DbI Communication Ambassadors will receive the official DbI Communication Ambassador Logo to be used freely in all of their communication. You will have your finger on the pulse of DbI's communication and be fully informed about worldwide developments in our field. Your organization will have a presence in the upcoming short film about DbI's Communication Committee ComCom. In addition, twice a year you will be invited to join an online meeting with ComCom to discuss the collaboration and the further development of DbI's communication.

Help us to make a difference for people with deafblindness worldwide and join us as a DbI Communication Ambassador! We are looking forward to your answer.

Please reach out directly to Leslie Giesbrecht about your interest at leslie@deafblindinternational.org.