

Deafblind International celebrates 40 years of service to deafblindness

Beginning officially in 1976 as an organization of professionals committed to creating a worldwide awareness of and provision of service for persons with deafblindness, Deafblind International (DbI) is celebrating forty years of achievements towards improving the lives of individuals with this uniqueness. However, the roots of this organization goes back many years earlier.

First a look back at our roots

The roots of DbI go back to the 1950s, when just a few organizations around the world were beginning to collaborate in discussions concerning educating children who were deafblind. Among this group were representatives from organizations and schools such as Conover Hall¹ in the UK, the School for the Blind in Hannover, Germany, the Institute for Defectology in Moscow², St. Michielsgestel³ in the Netherlands, Perkins School for the Blind⁴ in the USA and several schools from the Nordic countries. This group corresponded by mail, sharing their observations and results, successes and frustrations of their work with children who were deafblind and, on rare occasions, managing to visit each other.

It was in 1962 that this group first met through a formal conference, "Teaching Deaf-Blind Children", hosted by Conover Hall School near Shrewsbury in the UK. Forty-one people attended this first conference representing the UK, USA, USSR, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Turkey. This group of attendees can be considered as the 'Founding Members' of an unofficial organization, although it would take some years before it would become an official organization.

Subsequent worldwide meetings involving this were held in Denmark in 1965 (hosted by the State Institute for the Deaf in Kalundborg); in the Netherlands in 1968 (hosted by St. Michielsgestel Institute for the Deaf); in the USA in 1971 (hosted by Perkins School for the Blind, Watertown, Massachusetts); in the UK in 1974 (hosted again by Conover Hall School for the Blind), and in 1976 in Sydney Australia (hosted by the North Rocks Central School for Blind Children).

¹ www.conoverhall.com

² <http://www.tandfonline.com/>

³ www.kentallia.nl

⁴ www.perkins.org

During this period, nearly all the membership in attendance were connected with the education of children with deafblindness. This was also the time when educators were seeing children with congenital rubella syndrome from the rubella epidemic of the 1960's and 1970's. These early conferences/seminars were organised under the aegis of the International Council for the Education of the Visually Handicapped (later changed to ICEVI⁵) which had created a special interest section or subcommittee for professionals interested in deafblind education.

It was during the 6th formal conference of this group held in Australia in 1976 that the International Association for the Education of the Deafblind (IAEDB) was officially born. The aims of the early organization were clearly defined as two-fold: to promote the education of the deafblind throughout the world and to promote world deafblind conferences.

Early organizational developments

The organizational structure of the newly formed IAEDB included a Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary-Treasurer and an International Newsletter Editor. These positions were supported by an Executive Committee comprising individual country representatives and Regional Officers established to assist with the dissemination of information about deafblind education in the Regions of Oceania, Central-South America, Scandinavia, Asia, Africa, Europe and North America. Records from the founding IAEDB meeting list the initial senior appointments as follows: Keith Watkins as Chair (Australia); John McInnes as Vice Chair (Canada); T. Grunsell as Treasurer (Australia) and W.Zinger as Newsletter Editor (Australia).

The IAEDB Newsletter was published beginning in 1977. It was renamed in 1988 as Deaf-Blind Education – The Journal of the International Association of the Education of the Deaf-Blind. The magazine had grown originally from a one-page mimeographed sheet to an acclaimed international journal renamed Dbl Review in 1998.

A Secretariat was appointed during the mid-1980's to help manage the growing affairs of the organization. Rodney Clark from Sense UK became the first Secretary of the organization

An organization review was called for

⁵ *Icevi.org*

By the late 1980's, twenty-five years had now passed since the 'Founding Members' in the field first met. Two more world conferences were held (Hannover Germany in 1980 and New York in 1984) since the organization was first formed in 1976. The deafblind field was rapidly changing and there was wide consensus that the organization IAEDB needed to change with it.

While deafblindness education continued to be important, service delivery to the full spectrum of people with deafblindness rose up on the priority list of the growing list of IAEDB members. In addition, parents and family members were wishing a greater voice in the organization as were people with deafblindness. Research initiatives were taking place in various universities and specialists were looking for means to collaborate with each other to explore theories of communication, and discuss and present the latest research.

What was becoming urgent then was that IAEDB needed to become a more truly worldwide organization and better able to represent these broader interests while still including its initial reason for being – education.

It was agreed that a new constitution to build upon the previous one would better serve the organization to function better in the future.

A committee was appointed during the 9th World Conference held in Poitiers, France (1987) to draft a new constitution. The process involved discussions and reviews during subsequent conferences in Orebro, Sweden (1991) and Cordoba, Argentina (1995).

Significant changes in the makeup and focus of the organization resulted from this organizational review. It was decided the organization's focus should expand from solely education and conference hosting to promoting service delivery for the full spectrum of people with deafblindness, from infancy through adulthood. Consequently, it was decided that membership would be extended to a greater variety of people interested in deafblind services, including, but not limited to, administrators, clinical specialists, family members, rehabilitation and adult services workers, and deafblind people themselves. This decision has resulted in the rapid expansion of membership and a great growth in the scope of topics covered within meetings and conferences.

Ultimately the organizers agreed that the organization be renamed Deafblind International (DbI); a name that would more accurately represent the array of issues and services represented by its growing international membership.

Steps were also taken to make DbI a truly worldwide organization through encouraging development of services and participation of members from the developing world, especially in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Becoming Deafblind International

After a number of years of task forces and Strategic Plans, DbI was officially born at a meeting prior to the opening of the 12th World Conference in Lisbon, Portugal in 1999.

A new governance structure was established, when the former IAEDB Executive Committee was dissolved and replaced by a Council (now called the Board) and a Management Committee. This structure continues to be supported by a number of networks in which people of common interests meet and interact more frequently between conferences. Today, DbI has evolved from an organization initially focussed on education and organizing conferences into a mature, broad based professional organization representing programs and services for thousands of people with deafblindness around the globe.

A thoroughly new membership structure was developed based on two different types of memberships: Corporate Memberships and Individual Memberships. Within the corporate member designation, three levels were established: Large, Small and Mini corporates. Each membership designation has a fee structure which has resulted in greatly increased income to manage the organization. This increased revenue has provided financial support to DbI to better manage its various international activities, including the Secretariat, the Information Program, World and Regional Conferences, Network activities and Strategic Planning.

In the words of Former President of DbI, Mike Collins, the growth and expansion of our organization in the coming decades is limited only by the limits of our imagination.