 

**World Blind Union** and

**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment**

WBU – ICEVI Joint Position Statement

Braille Literacy

**Replaces: Braille Literacy Position Statement approved December**

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## **Introduction**

Braille represents information and education, the currency of the future. All of us recognize that being able to manage and manipulate information is vital to economic success as well as to our dignity and perceived self-worth. It is therefore important that whatever educational system we have, we ensure that there is choice in learning and in access to information now and in the future.

The relevance of Braille has been emphasized even further after the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) came into effect in a majority of countries around the globe. The CRPD explicitly mentions the need to recognize Braille in several places, particularly in Articles 2, 9, 21 and 24, in language that stresses the use of Braille as the means of communication and social inclusion for blind persons. The convention places particular importance on the fact that Braille should be taught and produced by competent people who have the appropriate skills and experience.

## **What is Braille?**

Braille is a system of communication for those who are blind or who have severe low vision. It is a system of raised dots which represent letters and numbers. Braille takes its name from its creator, Louis Braille. Louis, born in France in 1809, lost his sight at age three, the result of an accident. At the age of fifteen, he had completed an alphabet consisting of raised dots in groups of six.

Louis adapted and perfected his system of raised dots. He wrote a book at age twenty, explaining his reading and writing methods which have become known worldwide as Braille.

There are nowadays several ways to write braille. A slate and a stylus is the most simple and inexpensive equipment to write braille through punching the dots into the paper using a dedicated frame and a pointed hand-held tool. This method is especially used in many developing countries where such an inexpensive low-tech solution requires no complicated maintenance. This method is also generally used during initial braille training and is also convenient for jotting down notes as it is portable - like when a sighted person uses pad and pencil.

Other braille writing tools include the braille writer which has keys corresponding to the 6 dots and may be compared with a typewriter. Moreover, in today’s world of Electronic technology, braille is written and read from refreshable braille displays, braille note takers (a dedicated computer for braille users), and braille embossed on paper and in books is produced from high-speed braille embossers using braille translation software to convert the printed word into braille cells.

The braille system in its basic 6 dot configuration is depicted in an appendix to this paper.

## **The importance of braille**

The importance of well-developed literacy skills for all individuals is reflected in the value placed on reading and writing in schools and throughout society. Instruction in literacy skills can justifiably be considered the cornerstone of education. For individuals who are blind or partially sighted, the value of literacy skills is equally important. The way in which students with visual impairments develop literacy skills may differ, but the goal is the same: to use reading, writing, and other literacy tools to gather and understand important information and to convey important information to themselves or to others.

For instance, achievement in all subjects – such as mathematics, science, and social studies – is linked to reading and writing skills and the ability to gather, use, and convey information. Without question, literate individuals can excel in school and enter adulthood with a competitive advantage in employment and in life that is less possible for individuals with low or no literacy skills.

For adults who lose their sight later in life the acquisition of Braille skills will help them regain the lost literacy resulting in greater self-respect as well as a number of very practical aspects that will improve their independence.

Braille is slowly but surely finding its way into everyday life: elevator controls are marked with braille symbols; braille labels are sometimes found on medicinal packaging; and a growing number of regular consumer goods display information in Braille. Braille has also helped to open up avenues into modern information and communication technology. Braille displays, lines of electronic Braille cells, make computers accessible thus allowing the use of e-mail communication and opening up the vast resources provided by the internet. Braille translation software and special printers that can rapidly emboss braille characters on paper make educational as well as leisure reading material available in many languages.

Braille is also essential to perform particular tasks for which spoken output is no substitute, e.g. where it is necessary to make close and detailed reference to a text such as a legal document, where it is necessary to be able to check the accuracy of things like spelling and punctuation or where it is desired to deliver the verbatim text of a speech or a dramatic performance.

## **Conclusion**

Braille always has been and always will be more than a tool or means of literacy for those blind individuals who use it. Braille represents competency, independence, and equality. We need to be careful to present Braille not as a code to be deciphered, not as something that sets people apart, but as a method of reading and writing that is equal in value to print for the sighted.

Literacy – the ability to read and write–is vital to a successful education, career, and quality of life in today’s world. Whether in the form of curling up with a good book, jotting down a phone number, making a shopping list, or writing a report on a computer, being literate means participating effectively at home and in society. Learning to read and write in Braille can make a dramatic difference in the life of a visually impaired child or adult.

# WBU AND ICEVI POSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The ability to read and write braille is a key to attaining literacy, independence and full participation. Braille for a blind person is similar to print for a sighted person in terms of facilitating communication.
2. Evidence supports our belief that those who have the opportunity to fully acquire braille reading and writing skills attain better literacy, better education and employment outcomes than those whose learning has primarily supported through spoken word technology (i.e. use of screen readers and audio books). Fundamentally, we believe that children and adults should have access to braille, be given the opportunity to learn and use Braille and that children and adults should have the right to choose to learn and use braille.
3. We strongly recommend that all blind and severely partially-sighted children must be given the opportunity to learn and become proficient in braille reading and writing skills and that they must receive instruction from those who are thoroughly trained and qualified to teach braille.
4. We strongly recommend that all blind persons must have access to a variety of books and publications in braille that are up-to-date and will include such materials as textbooks, education support materials, leisure reading materials and materials that support their full and active participation in community life (for example, health information, cookbooks, fitness, political, hobbies and so forth).
5. While advances in technology enable faster and more efficient production and use of Braille, we recommend that technology should be used to enhance the use of Braille, not to replace it.
6. We recommend that all governments should ratify the Marrakesh Treaty which allows for copyright exceptions to facilitate the creation of accessible versions of books and other copyrighted works for visually impaired persons and for the import and export of such materials across national boundaries.

## **Contacts:**

**World Blind Union Office**

1929 Bayview Avenue

Toronto, ON M4G 3E8

Telephone: 1-416-486-9698

Fax: 1-416-486-8107

E-mail: [info@wbu](mailto:info@wbuoffice.org).ngo

Website: [www.wbu.ngo](http://www.wbu.ngo)

**International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment**

#5030, Third Floor, Sreevatsa Center, G N Mills Post,  
Mettupalayam Road, Coimbatore 641 029,  
Tamil Nadu, India  
Telefax :+91 422 2648104   
E-mail: [sgicevi@vsnl.net](mailto:sgicevi@vsnl.net)  
Website: [www.icevi.org](http://www.icevi.org)

## **APPENDIX 1: THE BRAILLE ALPHABET**

The basic Braille system: The Braille alphabet is formed within a Braille cell. A Braille cell is a group of six dots. Braille letters are made by raising one or more dots in the cell. The six dot positions within the cell are numbered and referred to as dot 1, dot 2, dot 3, dot 4, dot 5, and dot 6.

Here are the letters of the alphabet and numbers in Braille:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dot 1 a | Dots 1 2 b | Dots 1 4 c | Dots 1 4 5 d | Dots 1 5 e | Dots  1 2 4 f | Dots  1 2 4 5 g | Dots  1 2 5 h | Dots  2 4 i | Dots  2 4 5j |
| Dots  1 3 k | Dots 1 2 3 l | Dots 1 3 4 m | Dots 1 3 4 5 n | Dots 1 3 5 o | Dots  1 2 3 4 p | Dots  1 2 3 4 5 q | Dots  1 2 3 5 r | Dots  2 3 4 s | Dots  2 3 4 5 t |
| Dots 1 3 6 u | Dots 1 2 3 6 v | Dots 2 4 5 6 w | Dots 1 3 4 6 x | Dots 1 3 4 5 6 y | Dots 1 3 5 6 z |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  | | |  |
| Numbers: Numbers are formed using the number sign and then the first ten letters of the alphabet correspond to the numbers 1 - 0 | | | | | | | | | |
| Dots 3 4 5 6 # | Dots  2 4 5 0 | Dot 1 1 | Dots 1 2 2 | Dots 1 4 3 | Dots 1 4 5 4 | Dots 1 5 5 | Dots  1 2 4 6 | Dots  1 2 4 5 7 | Dots  1 2 5 8 | Dots  2 4  9 |

When you first touch something written in Braille, it will probably feel like a jumble of dots. However, like any other code, Braille is based on a logical system. Once you understand it, you’ll be able to read and write Braille easily. That’s because Braille is not a language, it’s just another way to read and write English – or any other language, such as Japanese. Braille codes have been developed in over 140 languages so far.