



# Blind Citizens Australia

---

**Submission to the House Standing Committee on  
Education and Vocational Training**

## **Inquiry into Teaching Training**

---

This submission has been compiled by John Power, National Policy Officer for Blind Citizens Australia and has been approved by the President and Executive of Blind Citizens Australia.

### **Contact Details**

John Power: National Policy Officer, Blind Citizens Australia  
PO Box 24, Sunshine, Victoria 3020. Phone: (03) 9372 6400  
Fax: (03) 9372 6466 Email: [john.power@bca.org.au](mailto:john.power@bca.org.au)

**November 2005**

## Table of Contents

---

Introduction .....	3
Summary .....	4
Inequality in literacy standards: Ableism and the print bias .....	5
Braille: The tool of literacy for people who are blind or vision impaired. ....	6
Teaching the teachers braille: Building equality in literacy.....	7
Conclusion .....	8
Bibliography .....	10

## Introduction

Blind Citizens Australia (BCA) is the National peak advocacy organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired for people who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. We have in excess of 3,000 individual members, branches nationwide and around 15 affiliate organisations.

## Summary

Blind Citizens Australia asserts that education policy makers and teaching institutions need to broaden their teaching practices to include braille instruction to improve the literacy standards for students who are blind or vision impaired. On the basis of this assertion, the following submission will focus principally on the teaching of braille literacy for primary and secondary school teachers relevant to the terms of reference **7(i), 7(vi) and 10**. It is our hope that by the conclusion of this work, the Committee will understand that the long term future of children who are blind or vision impaired will be greatly improved when the teaching profession attain braille instruction upon graduating from teachers college.

## **Inequality in literacy standards: Ableism and the print bias**

Since the 1970s students who are blind or severely vision impaired have been integrated from specialist schools to the mainstream Australian education system (Gale, 2001, p.15). Amongst other benefits, this move of inclusion has brought about increased tolerance and acceptance of students who are blind or severely vision impaired in the community. Paradoxically however, the creation of this inclusion has excluded students who are blind or severely vision impaired from reaching the literacy levels of their peers.

Print discrimination in our schools is a by-product of the broader ableist assumptions that are deeply rooted in our education system. Hehir (2002), writing for the Harvard Educational Review correctly asserts that ableism equates to the devaluation of disability in society. Perverse by nature, discriminatory in spirit, ableism sets a curriculum for the education system where it is better for “a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read braille, spell independently than use a spell check, and hang out with non-disabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids” (Hehir, 2002, p.3).

Commenting on the far reaching affect of ableist assumptions on braille instruction, Gale asserts that there “exists currently in Australia, an increasing anxiety in the professional education system, as well as in the adult braille reading community about the decline in the use of braille” (2001, p.13). In discussions with its membership, Blind Citizens Australia is aware of situations that warrant this anxiety, including examples where children attending integrated schools are being denied instruction in braille, despite their parent’s requests. Instead of braille, parents are being told that their children can learn to read by using audiotapes or a computer with voice output. While these technological options are more

appealing to an ableist education system, they are inadequate when compared to braille.

BCA is also aware of situations where parents have requested braille instruction for their child who may have some usable sight; the child is often denied braille instruction because he or she has some vision. Medical and educational professionals, including some staff of blindness agencies, hold the view that if the child is not blind, then that child should learn to use his/her existing vision to the maximum. Again, ableist discrimination pervades the notion that it is better to be like a sighted student.

### **Braille: The tool of literacy for people who are blind or vision impaired.**

Braille is the most important literacy tool for early childhood students who are blind or severely vision impaired. Those who do not have access to sound braille reading and writing skills will have a greater chance of becoming illiterate. It is not an exaggeration to say that a blind person who does not have sound braille reading and writing skills is functionally illiterate. To acquire knowledge of words, spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar from reading a book on an audio cassette or by reading by a computer with voice output is not possible. Generally, a child who reads by audio cassette or by computer with voice output does not comprehend the material as well as a child who is able to read and write braille competently.

However, despite the importance of braille, the print bias in our education system is denying adequate access to braille for students who are blind or severely vision impaired (Gale, 2001). Nadia Mattiazzo (2005), Victorian Advocacy Officer for BCA comments on the negative affects of inadequate braille instruction:

“Students who are blind or have very low vision that don’t have access to braille simply miss out. People, who rely on audio as their main means of reading, miss out on the constant reinforcement of spelling, grammar and syntax which you only get reading with your eyes or your hands. I know of students who have only had very little access to braille and as a consequence they freely admit in their adult life that they struggle with basic literacy skills”.  
Nadia Mattiazzo (2005).

## **Teaching the teachers braille: Building equality in literacy**

The mainstream education system must do more than simply move children with disabilities from a specialist school to an integrated school to create inclusion. Equality and inclusion go hand in hand. To bring a student who is blind or severely vision impaired into the mainstream system of education and then frustrate his/her learning experience is simply unacceptable. However, as it currently stands, this is exactly what’s happening to blind children.

Specialist itinerant teachers of braille are in short supply and when available, have infrequent access to children who are blind or severely vision impaired (Gale, 2001, p.15). While sighted children in the classroom are free to immerse themselves in print, the child who is blind or severely vision impaired must struggle with infrequent access to his/her primary medium of literacy. Inadequately equipped with braille teaching instruction, mainstream teachers are unable to bridge the gap.

Very few teacher training university courses have on campus training modules in braille instruction, while others only offer such training through distance education. There is also a lack of post-graduate opportunities for teachers to specialise in teaching blind children. Consequently, teachers are graduating into an inclusive and challenging class room environment profoundly ill-equipped to deal with the literacy needs of students who are blind or severely vision impaired. If this trend continues, “it is difficult to imagine that a dynamic and viable future for braille literacy in the Australian school system will eventuate” (Gale, 2001, p.16).

To alleviate the potential of this future outcome, student teachers, in the first instance, need to acquire a broad understanding on the rights of children to access literacy and how these rights are impeded for children with disabilities due to the bias of ableism. Following from this, teaching curricula should contain constant training modules in braille literacy. Learning braille is just one example of how varying teaching instruction can help teachers successfully adapt to their inclusive environment and help students with disabilities reach the literacy standards of their peers to achieve equity.

## **Conclusion**

In the briefing papers provided for the recent National Inquiry into Literacy undertaken by the Federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), it was noted that “proficiency in English literacy is of major importance for every Australian’s personal, social and cultural development” (DEST, 2005, p.1). To deny people who are blind or vision impaired the right to this proficiency is to deny them the chance to participate fully in society; and for this to be occurring in a wealthy and advanced nation like Australia is simply intolerable.



While an inclusive education system provides obvious benefits it can create inequities due to prevailing biases. As it stands, the dominance of ableist standards in our education system are leaving children with disabilities with unreasonable and discriminatory measures of adaptation to acquire skills in literacy. To build equality, it is educators that need to adapt and with it the system. For children who are blind or severely vision impaired, this means teaching the teacher's braille.

## Bibliography

---

Federal Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) (2005). 'Committee for the Australian Government's National inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy: Briefing paper 1'. *National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2004-2005*.

Gale, Gillian (2001). 'In Australia: Braille Literacy Matters'. *The Educator*, 13, (1), Autumn, pp.13-20.

Hehir, Thomas (2002). 'Eliminating Ableism in Education'. *Harvard Educational Review*. 72, (1), Spring, pp.1-32.

Power, John (2005). Interview with Nadia Mattiazzo, Victorian Advocacy Officer, Blind Citizens Australia, Friday, 15th July.