

**Submission to
The Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
Inquiry Into the Implementation in Australia of
the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

National Federation of Blind Citizens of Australia - 1998

INTRODUCTION

The National Federation of Blind Citizens of Australia (NFBCA) is the united voice of blind and vision impaired Australians. Our mission is to achieve equality and equity through our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs. The NFBCA provides peer support for members and information and advocacy services for all blind and vision impaired people. Our voting members are legally blind persons over the age of 18 years, who are legally blind according to the definition used by the Department of Social Security for the purpose of eligibility for the Disability Support Pension (Blind). We welcome the support and involvement of sighted people as non-voting associate members. Membership is available by right to all legally blind Australians on payment of a once only joining fee.

TERMINOLOGY

In this submission, the word "blind" is used to include both people who are totally blind and people who are vision impaired.

Braille is the system of reading and writing by touch used by totally blind people. Braille characters, denoting the letters of the standard alphabet and punctuation, combinations of letters and having other special meanings, are 64 in number. Braille characters are formed out of combinations of dots from within a mix of three rows of two columns. Braille is used by a minority of legally blind people - mostly totally blind people, who have learned the code as children or in early adult life. As well as a braille code for ordinary literature, there are special codes for music, mathematics, science and computer science.

OUTLINE OF SUBMISSION

This submission focuses on the education of blind children and in particular on the teaching of literacy. The submission explains why braille is the key to literacy for blind and vision impaired people, records our concerns with respect to the lack of availability of braille instruction in schools and the lack of training for teachers of braille. The submission then relates the denial of quality braille instruction and braille literacy to the denial of Convention rights. We submit that the Committee should find that "to the extent that Australian educational authorities, blindness agencies and schools follow educational and resourcing policies which deny blind children access to braille, Australia is not implementing its obligations under articles 13.1, 23.1 and 28.1 of the Convention". We recommend that while education is primarily a State/Territory responsibility, the Commonwealth, as the provider of funds and as the Government primarily responsible for Australia's compliance with its obligations under the Convention, should exercise leadership to ensure that quality instruction in braille is available to all children in Australia who need it. The text of the provisions of the Convention referred to in this submission are set out at attachment (a).

RELEVANCE TO COMMITTEE'S TERMS OF REFERENCE

In focussing on the importance of braille in the education of a blind and the current situation of braille teaching in Australian schools, we relate this submission to paragraph 7 of the Committee's Terms of Reference, "the adequacy of programs and services of special importance to children". Education programs are of special importance to children and those programs for blind children are of particular importance to them. Our submission does not relate to any of the 45 questions directed to Australia by the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

BRAILLE AS THE KEY TO LITERACY

It is our experience as blind and vision impaired people that for those blind people who use braille, braille is the key to their literacy. Through reading, a child learns words, spelling, syntax, grammar punctuation and language. A blind child, who is properly instructed in braille and who has braille materials available to him or her, can use reading by braille in the same

way as a sighted child will use reading by print to acquire knowledge, skills and literacy. A child, who is not given adequate braille instruction, cannot develop the same competency in literacy as a sighted child. As a result, the child is disadvantaged later in life when he or she has to function in a print literate world competing for educational places and jobs and educating his/her own children. It is not an exaggeration to say that a blind person, who does not have sound braille reading and writing skills, is functionally illiterate.

It is not possible to acquire a knowledge of words, spelling, punctuation, syntax and grammar from reading a book on a audio cassette or by reading by a computer with voice output. 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.

It can be said, generally, that until the 1970s, most blind children would receive quality braille instruction. This could be reasonably assured in an era where blind children did their primary education in special schools for the blind and braille instruction was a valued and crucial component of the curriculum. Today, most blind children go to integrated schools. This is a development which we welcome and support. However, blind children have paid an educational price for the benefits of social integration. In an integrated setting, there has been a serious decline in the value placed on and the priority given to imbuing a blind child with blindness specific skills such as braille literacy. The result is that blind children today do not have the same opportunities that previous generations had to acquire sound braille skills and literacy.

We are aware, through the involvement of our members in the education of children both as professionals and as parents, that instruction in braille is not always available to children who need it, that children are discouraged from learning braille and are directed to reading by cassette or computer, that teachers are not receiving adequate training in braille and that students are not acquiring proficiency in braille and literacy. We are concerned by the decline in braille literacy we observe among younger blind people and its implications for them in education, employment and daily life.

We are aware of situations in which children attending integrated schools are denied instruction in braille notwithstanding the requests of their parents. Parents are told that their child can learn to read by using audio

tapes or a computer with voice output. We have explained above why this is not possible.

Even where parents have requested braille instruction for their child, the child is often denied instruction in braille because he or she has some useable vision. This is often done on the basis that the child is not blind and the view of medical and educational professionals, including some staff of blindness agencies, is that the child should learn to use his existing vision to the maximum. We do not disagree with the view that a vision impaired child should be instructed to maximise the benefit of his or her remaining vision. However, we believe that as a general proposition, the child's parent's are best placed to know his or her needs. Accordingly, if the parents of a child with some useable vision want him or her to learn braille, the child should have that opportunity. As a mother of a vision impaired child explained to us "having my child taught braille is not taking away his sight, it is giving him an extra option".

If a child in an integrated school has access to braille instruction, the quality of that instruction is problematic. Braille instruction is generally done by visiting teachers. Sometimes braille instruction is provided by teachers whose qualifications are in fields other than vision impairment e.g. deafness, as there is no other teacher available. These teachers have had training in braille. However, the quality of this training varies greatly and is often a very small part of a broader disability training. Because a teacher may not come in contact with a vision impaired child, who has used braille for some time after completing training, they have forgotten many of their own braille skills and are thus unable to pass braille proficiency on to the student.

The quality of training in braille given to itinerant teachers is also declining. One example from NSW is that the University of Western Sydney has discontinued its course on "teaching and vision impairment" and has incorporated vision impairment into a generalist disability course.

Many blind children do not have adequate access to a visiting teacher. A child needs tuition in braille on a regular basis to build his/her braille reading and writing skills. As one mother of a vision impaired child puts it, "a sighted child receives instruction in literacy each day. A blind child, who uses braille, only receives effective instruction in literacy when the visiting teacher visits once a week". Our Western Australian members have expressed concern about the student/teacher ratio of visiting teachers, who

are qualified to teach braille, and the access of students in remote areas to these teachers.

In some States and Territories, students in non-government schools do not have the same access to visiting teachers as students in Government schools. In the ACT for example, a blind child in a government school can receive braille instruction from a visiting teacher. However, if the child attends a non-government school, the non-Government school has to purchase the visiting teacher service from the Department of Education. If the non-government school is not prepared to pay for the service, the child cannot attend the parent's school of choice. This is effectively a denial of the parent's and the child's educational rights and possibly raises issues under article 14 of the Convention.

The above comments on training of visiting teachers and access of children to their assistance are not to be taken as criticism of individual visiting teachers or the work they do for blind and vision impaired children. Many visiting teachers make extraordinary efforts to ensure that the educational needs of their students are met. It is the inadequacy of training and the lack of resources that prevent visiting teachers providing blind children with quality braille instruction and braille literacy.

CONVENTION RIGHTS AND BRAILLE LITERACY

We submit that the denial of quality braille instruction to a child is a denial of that child's convention rights in the following respects:

Article 28.1 "the right of a child to equal opportunity of access to: primary education, general and vocational secondary education, higher education and educational and vocational information and guidance.

Article 23.1 "the right of a child with a disability to enjoy a full and distinct life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. Access to education and to information is crucial to a child with a disability being able to the rights conferred by this article. Article 13.1 "the right of a child to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas ... either orally, in writing or in print, in a form of art or through any other media of the child's choice". We submit that for the purposes of article 13, braille should be recognised as a child's media of choice for seeking, receiving and imparting knowledge and ideas.

Accordingly, the child should be provided with the quality braille instruction which will enable him or her to exercise this choice both as a child and an adult in later life.

We direct the Committee's attention to Article 5, which recognises the role of the child's parent's or guardian in providing guidance to the child in the exercise of their rights under Articles 13, 23 and 28 of the Convention. We also refer the Committee to Article 3.1 which establishes the "best interests of the child" as the primary consideration to govern actions concerning children.

The provision of quality braille instruction to blind children in schools should be seen as part of the implementation of the education component of the Australian Disability Strategy. There is scope for developing and applying policies for the provision of quality braille instruction to blind children in schools through the National Equity Program in Schools. This program is the Commonwealth contribution to the National Program for Equity in Schooling which is an initiative of the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment Training and Youth Affairs. Students with disabilities are a major target group of this Program. The provision of quality braille instruction to blind children in schools will contribute to the achievement of the Program goals. These are

- . to maximise educational outcomes for all groups of disadvantaged students;
- . To ensure the range of outcomes for schooling for students in the target group approaches approaches the same range as for the non-target group; and
- . to lift the educational attainment of all target groups to an acceptable standard.

INTERNATIONAL CONCERN

The provision of instruction in braille to children is a matter of concern to organisations of and for blind people in countries other than Australia. In some U.S. States, as a result of the work of the American Federation of the Blind, laws have been passed which give blind children the right to access to braille and to braille instruction in schools.

The World Blind Union is the world peak body for blind people. In January 1992, the World Blind Union's Committee on Joint Organisational Effort endorsed the principle that in planning the education of a blind child, these guidelines should be followed:

- if reading or writing are to be taught and if the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school want the child to be taught braille, this should be done;
- if reading and writing are to be taught and if the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school want print to be taught, this should be done;
- If the parent or parents and the decision makers for the school cannot agree, then both braille and print should be taught.

CONCLUSIONS

We submit that the Committee should record as a finding that "to the extent that Australian educational authorities, blindness agencies and schools follow educational and resourcing policies which deny blind children access to braille, Australia is not implementing its obligations under Articles 13.1, 23.1 and 28.1 of the Convention and that blind children are being denied access to literacy, information, education and employment". We recommend that, while education is primarily a State/Territory responsibility, the Commonwealth, as the provider of funds and as the Government primarily responsible for Australia's compliance with its obligations under the Convention, should exercise leadership to ensure that quality instruction in braille is available to all children in Australia who need it.

There are many means by which the Commonwealth could exercise this leadership role and ultimately the way in which it does so will be a matter for negotiation. One way in which this might be done is for the Commonwealth to work with the NFBCA, blindness agencies and State and Territory authorities to develop strategies to create more positive attitudes towards braille instruction in schools, to improve the training in braille and the support to visiting teachers and to find ways of funding these initiatives.