

# ROUND TABLE

P.O. Box 257, Glen Huntly  
Victoria 3163  
Telephone 03 9505 3270  
rosalynb@melbpc.org.au  
ABN 64 941 990 153



## **Senate Inquiry Into The Education Of Students With Disabilities**

### **Submission From Round Table On Information Access For People With Print Disabilities**

President: Di Francis  
C/- Royal Society for the Blind South Australia  
dfrancis@rsb.org.au  
Phone: 08 8223 6222

Submission compiled by:

Maureen Ward  
Convenor of Working Party – Guidelines for Conveying Visual  
Information  
C/- Education Queensland  
[Maureen.Ward@qed.qld.gov.au](mailto:Maureen.Ward@qed.qld.gov.au)  
Phone: 07 3247 3286

7 May 2002

The **Round Table on Information Access for People with Print Disabilities** is an association comprising of organisations involved in the production, distribution and use of alternative format materials such as braille, audio, large print and electronic text. Member organisations range from State Government departments, direct service providers, production organisations, tertiary institutions, libraries, through to volunteer-based community groups. Members have a common mission to work collaboratively in providing leadership for the creation of an accessible information environment in which people with a print disability enjoy full citizenship.

## **Background to the Submission**

This submission to the Senate Inquiry relates to issues recently identified by a Round Table Working Party which has been established to develop a set of guidelines for conveying visual information in alternative formats.

As printed material, particularly educational textbooks, is increasingly characterised by the presence of non-textual elements such as diagrams, flowcharts and tabulated information, a set of guidelines on how to deal with specific forms of visual information is considered an essential resource for producers of alternative format materials. The present Working Party has undertaken to refine and further develop the draft *Guidelines for Conveying Visual Information v1.7* which was circulated to Round Table members in 1998.

Statements in the draft document enunciate the following standards:

1. Producers of alternative formats should ensure that all information – both textual and non-textual - is made accessible to people who are blind or vision impaired. It is no longer appropriate to assume that visual information can be omitted from special format versions of printed matter.
2. In the short term there may be practical limitations, such as time pressures and resource constraints, to achieving this goal of representing all visual information. However, the ideal is that all information available to the sighted reader be made available to the reader with print disability, and producers should work towards achieving this.
3. It is imperative that people who are blind and vision impaired are trained to understand the symbols and conventions of visual communication, for example, print punctuation, colour, spatial relationships, 2D representations of 3D reality, speech bubbles. This training is essential if people who are blind and vision impaired are to participate fully in a very visual world.

A consultation process was initiated to gather comment on the draft document from a range of producers and consumers of alternative format materials. The responses received highlighted a number of issues which relate to the current Senate Inquiry.

## **Issues Related to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.**

### **The Effectiveness and Availability of Early Intervention Programs**

To be able to cope with the increasing prevalence and importance of non-textual information, young children with print disabilities need to develop tactile literacy skills from a very early age. The skills to interpret tactile diagrams need to be developed in conjunction with the acquisition of braille literacy skills. The ability to interpret tactile 2D representations of 3D objects requires intensive instruction and must be preceded by concept acquisition through experience with concrete objects and models. Of equal importance is the development of auditory comprehension skills, with particular emphasis on understanding verbal descriptions.

The incorporation of such specialised instruction into early intervention programs requires the development of specific instructional materials, for which funding needs to be made available.

The same concept of "early intervention" should apply if a student becomes blind or vision impaired at Primary or Secondary School age.

### **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

- If development of tactile interpretation skills in blind children is to be effective, training courses for teachers need to include specific instruction in the complex skill of teaching spatial and visual concepts. These courses and qualifications need to be consistent across Australia and not "state / territory specific", with national standards of teacher competency adopted and monitored frequently.
- When completed, the Round Table's *Guidelines for Conveying Visual Information* will be an essential resource in the skilling of producers of alternative material. However, more detailed and specific training needs to be available for narrators and braille transcribers, many of whom are volunteers. This workforce needs to be supported by having the capacity to access those with expertise across a range of areas – for example, science, technology, mathematics, the arts, design and architecture, art and photography – so that correct terminology and interpretations are given.
- The work required to bring the draft *Guidelines* document to completion is beyond the capabilities of the current Working Party. A Project Officer dedicated to the task is considered essential if a quality and comprehensive resource is to be produced. Round Table will seek funding for the employment of a part-time Project Officer so that this vital project can be completed.

## Other Issues of Educational Relevance

- There is a need for training programs to enable adults with print disabilities to develop/improve tactile skills and understand visual concepts. This applies particularly to adults who have been blind since birth and are being denied access to information because of their inexperience with visual symbols.
- The increase of non-textual elements in educational materials is adding to production time and costs for alternative format material. Considerable time and care is required to prepare concise, clear and accurate narrators' / transcribers' notes, and tactile diagrams are labour intensive and expensive to produce. Publishers of educational materials should be alerted to this repercussion for the agencies which produce alternative formats, and the subsequent flow-on to students with print disabilities.
- Additional production time affects the availability of books in alternative formats and this is often compounded by initial production delays because texts are not available before the beginning of the academic year.
- The policy of educational institutions to constantly change textbooks is having a direct impact on the availability of essential study materials for students with print disabilities.
- The increased use of graphics for conveying information also presents issues for students who access information by electronic means, such as screen reader software. Visual information is lost unless alternative text descriptions are linked to each image.
- Students with low vision may be unable to access visual information which is too cluttered, indistinct or lacking in contrast against the background. It is not acceptable that students with print disabilities are forced to rely on assistance from sighted peers, aides or teachers to access core information.
- The complexity of the issue of providing people with print disabilities with access to information is highlighted by the following statement by a staff member of an agency which provides information in audio format.

Print disability is a broad term ranging from total blindness to degrees of vision impairment, to learning disabilities and motor neuron co-ordination. This has implications for the way visual information is narrated. For a blind person, visual information needs to be described succinctly and in detail, sometimes incorporating explanations of concepts intrinsic in the visual information. A sighted student with a learning disability does not require a description of the visual information, merely an explanation which complements the text and any words read out. Student material to be narrated needs to be accompanied by details regarding a

student's disability, and even his/her knowledge on the subject being narrated.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this submission is to highlight a number of educational issues which relate to access to information by users of alternative format materials. Many of these concerns were expressed by consumers and producers in providing comment on a draft document *Guidelines For Conveying Visual Information v1.7*. It is considered essential that these issues be addressed if inequities for people with print disabilities are to be resolved. It is anticipated that comments presented in this submission will be endorsed in submissions made by groups such as Blind Citizens Australia, South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment and the Australian Braille Authority.

---