Position Statement of the South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment Inc. on Braille Literacy in Australia

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Introduction

The South Pacific Educators in Vision Impairment (SPEVI) Inc. is the major professional association for educators of students with vision impairments in Australia, New Zealand, and the South Pacific region. SPEVI Inc. acts as the professional body in matters pertaining to the education and support of persons who are blind, deaf-blind, have low vision, with or without additional disabilities (SPEVI, 2016). This SPEVI Inc. Position Statement addresses braille literacy in Australia.

As a reflection of the diversity in the ways in which individuals with lived experience of vision impairment identify themselves, a range of terms have been used within this document to refer to them. These terms include 'people who are blind or have low vision', 'people with vision impairment', and 'people who are vision impaired'.

Rationale

SPEVI Inc. endorses the right of children and young people with vision impairment to learn and use braille, as proclaimed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) (United Nations, 2006). Article 24.4 of the UNCRPD recognises braille as a means of communication and social inclusion and emphasises the teaching and production of braille by qualified people who have the appropriate skills and experience. The World Blind Union and International Council for Education of

People with Visual Impairment (2016) emphasise the ability to read and write braille is a key to attaining literacy, independence and full participation for persons who are blind.

Anecdotal evidence suggests Australian students are provided with variable instruction in braille. This variability of quantity and quality exists across Australian states and territories, government and non-government education sectors, and metropolitan, rural and regional areas. The variability is associated with several factors. These factors include:

- the sufficient training, recruitment, and retention of qualified braille teachers
- the policies and practices regarding the education of students with vision impairment, including the workloads of Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) who provide braille literacy and numeracy instruction for preschool and school-aged children learning braille; and
- the tyranny of distance affecting the service provision for students located in remote locations.

Aims

In this statement, SPEVI Inc. sets out its position on braille literacy in Australia. The aims of the Position Statement are to:

1. Make explicit the importance of quality instruction in braille literacy and numeracy for preschool and school-aged students with vision impairment, as a means of ensuring their equitable inclusion in education, employment and society
2. Advocate for improved student access to and support for braille education by Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) as per UNCRPD Article 24.4

3. Present a Call to Action to Australian state and territory governments, and government and non-government education sectors to:
    i. support professional learning in braille literacy and numeracy for classroom teachers of students with vision impairment,
    ii. recruit and adequately remunerate Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) who are qualified in braille literacy and numeracy to provide direct teaching to students who are learning braille, and
    iii. ensure student-to-teacher caseloads for students learning braille are aligned with the time allocated for literacy and numeracy instruction as mandated by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2016).

This statement addresses the challenges, gaps and opportunities in braille education, promoting the right of students with vision impairment to an equitable education in literacy and numeracy. It seeks to advocate for recognition of, improved access to, and support for, braille literacy as a fundamental tool for communication and education.

Definition of Literacy

Literacy is a complex capability that can be understood through a range of definitions. SPEVI Inc. adopts the definitions used below to describe the types of abilities that are developed through the learning and use of braille, as SPEVI Inc. believes that braille literacy is equivalent to print literacy.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as "a continuum of learning and proficiency in reading, writing and using numbers throughout life" (2024). It extends beyond fundamental reading and writing abilities to include understanding, analysing and extracting meaning from information presented in various formats such as texts, symbols and visuals. Literacy involves critical thinking, comprehensive understanding, and application of knowledge in

practical, everyday situations "in an increasingly digital, text-mediated, information-rich and fast-changing world" (UNESCO, 2024).

According to ACARA (2016), students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. ACARA recognises that "many students with disability are able to achieve educational standards commensurate with their peers, as long as the necessary adjustments are made to the way in which they are taught and to the means through which they demonstrate their learning" (ACARA, 2013, p. 1).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states that success in reading provides the foundation for achievement in all subject areas and for full participation in adult life. The ability to convey information in written form is one of humankind's greatest assets; however, the OECD states that learning how to read and write requires effort because it cannot be achieved without mastering a collection of complex skills (2010).

Braille

Braille is a tactile reading and writing system that consists of raised dots arranged in specific patterns within cells. Each cell contains up to six dots, arranged in two vertical columns of three dots each. These dots can be felt with the finger pads, enabling people to read using touch. Braille characters represent the print equivalent for literacy, mathematics, science, and music notation. By combining different dot patterns, braille allows for the representation of various written language elements. There are various braille codes used around the world. The Unified English Braille code (UEB) is used in Australia and throughout the English-speaking world for literary and technical materials.

Braille is usually read by moving one or more fingers across the dots, feeling the patterns and interpreting them as specific letters or symbols. The ability to recognise and differentiate these raised dot patterns through touch is crucial for braille readers. Becoming a fully literate braille user in most languages generally entails learning language-specific contractions that represent whole words or strings of letters. This is called contracted braille (Engebretson et. al., 2023).

Braille can be embossed on paper or created as an electronic file for reading and writing on an electronic braille device, which raises small pins on a refreshable braille display. When connected to the internet, electronic braille devices allow access to a wide range of digital content, including online books and documents, emails, and webpages. This degree of access can enable a braille user to read and write at the same time as a print user, which is an important affordance for braille learners and users in educational and wider settings.

The importance of braille literacy

SPEVI Inc. believes that braille literacy is equivalent to print literacy for sighted students. Braille literacy is a fundamental right that must be supported, promoted, and preserved. SPEVI Inc. believes that braille is an essential tool for students who cannot efficiently and sustainably access print. Braille provides access to, and increased opportunities for, education, employment, and independent living.

SPEVI Inc. holds the position that braille literacy empowers students who are blind or have low vision by providing independent access to written information. Braille fosters autonomy in reading, writing, and communication, enabling students to engage with information, communicate ideas and knowledge, and pursue employment. The many rich benefits of literacy extend to people who are print or braille literate.

Equality of access to braille literacy in line with government policies

To become proficient learners of braille, students must receive regular, explicit instruction and ongoing support from a Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) to ensure equal opportunities to develop literacy skills (United Nations, 2006). Research supports the importance of competent braille teachers (Emerson et al., 2009) in educating braille learners.

The Australian Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA) (Australian Government, 2023) enshrines the right to accessibility and non-discrimination for individuals with disabilities, including those who are blind or who have low vision. The DDA mandates that reasonable accommodations and adjustments be made to ensure equal access to services, education, employment, and public facilities for people with disabilities.

ACARA (2016) recommends that primary school students receive a guaranteed minimum of 300 minutes, equivalent to five hours of direct instruction in literacy and numeracy per week. This ensures that students have ample opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge in these crucial areas of education.

Braille's relevance in the age of technology

Braille offers advantages over audiobooks and screen readers because braille allows readers to physically feel and interact with the text in a manner commensurate with print readers (Englebretson et al., 2023). Braille enables engagement with written language that is equivalent to print for people who are sighted (Englebretson et al., 2023). As with competent print readers, competent braille readers are in control of the reading experience. They vary the pace of reading according to the complexity of the material, reviewing, and scanning text, and skipping sections of text during the reading process. This tactile feedback enhances comprehension and helps users understand

the structure of the written word, including punctuation, grammar, and formatting (Fanshawe, 2017).

Electronic braille devices enable people to gain immediate access to read and write braille and develop skills of spelling and punctuation required to promote independence in community participation and employment (Fanshawe, 2022). Using technology to access braille ensures a more enriched and comprehensive approach to accessibility and empowerment for students who are blind or have low vision.

Braille literacy for students who use dual media

Students who acquire literacy skills in both print and braille are known as dual media learners. Dual media instruction is delivered when a Functional Vision Assessment and Learning Media Assessment determine the need for instruction in both media (Koenig & Holbrook, 1995).

SPEVI Inc. holds the position that dual media instruction should be provided for students who (i) have a progressive or deteriorating eye condition, (ii) require a font size larger than N36, (iii) have a reduced reading speed as compared with their sighted peers, and (iv) have difficulties maintaining visual stamina when reading print (Corn & Koenig, 2002; Koenig & Holbrook, 2000).

SPEVI Inc. believes it is important that braille and print literacy are taught concurrently and with the same level of frequency and consistency. Dual media instruction should be direct, intense, and consistent over a long period of time and should begin as early as possible (Winter, 2023).

Essential requirements for braille literacy teaching and learning

SPEVI Inc. holds the position that access to braille literacy is a fundamental right for students who are blind or have low vision. We believe the following requirements are essential in achieving equity of education access for students who are blind or have low vision:

1. Qualified Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment): These professionals play a crucial role in providing individualised support, training and guidance to students, school staff, allied health professionals, and families. Increased numbers of qualified Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) will expand access to explicit instruction in braille, improve the development of braille literacy, and increase access to an equitable education.
2. Accessible educational materials: Producing and providing educational materials by trained braille transcribers such as braille textbooks and tactile diagrams requires adequate and ongoing funding.
3. Professional development: Ongoing training and professional development for teachers and support staff regarding best practices for teaching students who are blind or have low vision is imperative.
4. Access technology: Adequate funding is crucial for providing access to specialised braille reading and writing technologies. Technology needs to be supported within the education system and students and teachers trained in the effective use and maintenance of devices (Fanshawe, 2022).
5. Accessibility of learning environments: Adequate funding is required to accommodate students who are blind or have low vision in their learning environments. This includes accessible physical spaces, adequate signage, and resources for modifying classrooms to cater to the needs of students, thus improving their participation and engagement in the educational process.
6. Additional supports for students in rural and remote areas, including Indigenous students: Recognising the impact of distance on the equitable education of students learning braille in rural and remote

areas, including those who are Indigenous, adequate funding for travel, training and development and technologies should be made available to support braille literacy learning.

A Call to Action

SPEVI Inc. calls on Australian state and territory education departments to prioritise the following:

Curriculum

- The provision of braille to access curriculum as a fundamental right of students who are blind or have low vision.
- Provision of adequate time for Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) to plan and implement lessons that ensure equitable access to literacy and numeracy learning though braille.
- The teaching of braille and print concurrently, and with the same level of frequency and consistency, for students who are identified as dual media learners.

Staffing

- Recruitment of qualified Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) by strengthening their opportunities to undertake specialised qualifications that incorporate braille literacy within their university studies.
- Retain qualified Specialist Teachers (Vision Impairment) through incentives and ongoing opportunities to develop and collaborate professionally.

Resourcing

- The availability of funds to provide, maintain, update, and upgrade braille technologies.

- Adequate resourcing for regional and remote students, staff and families to ensure equitable access to learning.
- Supports for the provision of professional learning in braille literacy for the classroom teachers and educational support staff of students who are learning braille.
- Funding to support learning environments that are rich in braille learning materials and resources to ensure an equitable education for braille learners.
- Funding for the production and timely delivery of educational braille materials.

Addressing the SPEVI Call to Action requires a collective effort from Australian state and territory governments and respective Departments of Education to enact systems and supports that afford equitable rights to literacy education for students who are blind or have low vision as proclaimed in the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006).

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