

## Louis Braille Celebration

### The Need for Braille Standards in University Preparation Programs

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As we celebrate the bicentennial of Louis Braille's birth, it is appropriate to reflect on the level of braille skills that new professionals entering the field have acquired in their personnel preparation programs. For decades, university programs that prepare teachers to work with children or adults who are visually impaired have included courses in braille reading and writing. There have been many articles published about braille in general over the decades, but there have been very few that specifically addressed what aspects of braille preservice educators should learn and how they should learn them. Spungin (1975) developed general guidelines and performance indicators for the braille skills of preservice teachers, but the guidelines did not include specific standards for how performance should be measured. Another, more recent, document used by the field of visual impairment and blindness, *Education Service Guidelines* (Pugh & Erin, 1999), also lists a large number (20, in fact) of competencies related to braille needed by teachers of children who are blind, but it does not offer any guidance as to how proficient teachers need to be in those areas.

#### TEACHING BRAILLE TO TEACHERS

Although there is widespread consensus that braille is a critical skill for prospective teachers to learn if they plan to work with people with visual disabilities, there are a variety of methods by which the literary braille code is taught to preservice teachers. University programs offer literary braille instruction in several ways: a single stand-alone online or face-to-face course, a series of courses spread over several semesters

or quarters, a course that combines braille instruction with general literacy strategies (that is, how to teach braille reading and writing), or a course that also provides instruction in the Nemeth Braille Code for Mathematics and other braille codes. These differences in approach to braille instruction by university programs are often related to an individual state's unique guidelines for teacher certification, a university's particular requirements for its teacher preparation program, the challenges of scheduling, and other factors.

Although the methods of training teachers of students with visual impairments differ from university to university, the goal of braille instruction in such programs is to create beginning teachers who are knowledgeable in the literary braille code and can read and produce braille accurately (Amato, 2002). To date, however, the field of visual impairment has not developed clear standards for what a competent beginning teacher of students with visual impairments should know about braille, and how that competence should be demonstrated. Amato (2002) surveyed university teacher-training programs regarding their braille instruction; she compared their requirements and braille formats taught, grading policies, criteria for passing, and topics covered. Amato's study found:

“. . . there is widespread diversity and a lack of consistency in university-level braille courses with respect to the format of instruction, content and instructional materials, expected student outcomes, and standards and criteria for competence in braille literacy. There appears to be no consistent standard for training teachers of students who are visually impaired in braille” (p. 149).

#### CREATING COMPETENCIES

A field-wide initiative was responsible for the development of a National Literary Braille Competency Test (NLBCT) in the 1990s. This tool was designed to assess skills in reading

and writing braille. Although NLBCT was field-tested, it was never validated; in fact, the validation process was compromised when incorrect versions of the test were used (Pierce, 2006). There were already concerns about the content reliability of the test before the validation process derailed (Allman & Lewis, 1996), and some researchers felt the test was not an appropriate assessment for use in teacher certification (one intended use of the test). In recent years, however, the concept of a national braille competency test was revived, and a new form of NLBCT is now being offered by a private organization. The new exam has been pilot-tested, and a group of subject matter experts has conducted some analyses of the results of the pilot test. However, to date, nothing has been published in a peer-reviewed professional journal about the development of the new test or the analysis of its content, and the test is not currently required by any state for teacher certification—although this could change. Many states do require teachers of students with visual impairments to complete a state-level exam in braille competency; however, the level of braille mastery that must be demonstrated to pass such exams varies considerably from state to state. Although braille skills and knowledge are sampled in certification examinations for vision rehabilitation therapists conducted by the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals (ACVREP), test takers can pass these examinations without answering the questions on braille correctly.

#### DEVELOPING STANDARDS

The Personnel Preparation Division (Division 17) of the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired has undertaken a study as a first step in developing voluntary standards for the minimum level of braille skills individuals preparing to be teachers of visually impaired students or vision rehabilitation therapists need to demonstrate during their university training. The study will use the Delphi method to reach consensus as to what

those minimum standards should be for beginning practitioners. The Delphi method is an iterative process in which experts are asked for judgments regarding a topic for which there is insufficient or incomplete knowledge. This method originated at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s on the premise that “two heads are better than one” (Dalkey, 1969, p. 6)—that is, surveying a number of experts would lead to more reliable results than asking just one expert for information or an opinion. Unlike focus-group research, the Delphi method uses surveys and questionnaires, rather than face-to-face meetings, to minimize the effects of group pressure and the influence of one strong individual opinion. There are generally several “rounds” in a Delphi study, and each successive round is based on the responses from the previous questionnaire. The goal is to come to greater and greater consensus in each round. By the end of the Personnel Preparation Division study, researchers expect to have developed a set of agreed-upon minimum standards for literary braille competency for beginning teachers.

Two groups of individuals will be participating in the Personnel Preparation Division study. The first group will include instructors at university programs who have the responsibility for teaching literary braille courses. The second group will be individuals who have completed university teacher preparation courses in the last 3 to 5 years and who have worked with at least two students with visual impairments who use braille as their primary literacy medium. The researchers believe that analyzing the perspectives of these two groups of key individuals will provide richer data on which to base future recommendations for the establishment of a set of minimum competencies for preparing and reading of literary braille.

In addition to some demographic questions, respondents to the Delphi questionnaires will be asked in what medium (embossed or simulated braille) they require students to demonstrate braille writing proficiency. Additional areas to be studied with regard to braille writing

proficiency include the length of passages that students must transcribe in contracted braille, the level of accuracy expected, how that accuracy is measured, the acceptability of erasures, utilization of Braille Authority of North America (BANA) formatting in specialized documents, and whether the demonstration of skills is timed. The rate at which students are required to read braille aloud (and how this skill is demonstrated) is also an area that will be explored in this Delphi study, as will the requirements for interlining and proofreading braille. Additional questions will ask participants to indicate their opinions regarding the use of resources, such as braille code books, while transcribing, proofreading, and interlining. Finally, respondents will be asked to rate the importance of graduating a teacher-preparation program with a knowledge of the history of the braille code, the role of BANA, the parts of the brailler, types of slates and styli, storage of braille materials, repair options for braillers, and resources for purchasing tools for braille writing.

The results of the study will be shared with all university programs that prepare professionals in visual impairments, with the hope that the recommended minimum standards can be used as a benchmark for evaluating existing program requirements and expectations and for measuring the braille skills and competence of new teachers.

Braille is the key to literacy for children and adults who are blind and, as such, it is incumbent on educators who teach people with visual impairments to be competent in the braille code. There is evidence that other factors—such as instruction in the methodology for teaching braille reading and writing and ongoing in-service refresher courses in braille—are also critical to the success of teachers in providing high-quality braille instruction to their students (Allman & Holbrook, 1999; Wittenstein, 1994). This Delphi research project, however, is the first step in a long-overdue process to identify the levels of competency in reading and writing braille that experts believe are necessary for

educators of adults and children who will rely on braille for literacy.

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