Braille, the effective tool against illiteracy among blind people

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Since the formation of the World Blind Union (WBU) in 1984, we have become a strong and well structured organisation, which is uniting millions of blind and partially sighted persons around the world and is represented in 176 countries.

WBU is speaking and advocating on our own behalf for our human rights and fundamental freedom on an equal basis with others, for a dignified treatment in society and for education for all.

We actively seek the support and co-operation of other players in the field of blindness, such as the co-operation with ICEVI, IAPB, SSI, CBM and UN agencies.

WBU has consultative status in the United Nations Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC. That leads us to be actively involved in the process of the elaboration of a new UN Human Rights treaty body, under the name of the “International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities”.

In the drafting of this new Human Rights Convention, WBU is strongly advocating for the acknowledgment and acceptance of Braille as the script for blind people.

Three years ago the cooperation between WBU and ICEVI was formalised through a joint position paper. This paper clearly states the importance of appropriate and quality education for blind and visually impaired persons.

The joint position paper include the need of recognition of Braille as the script for blind persons. It also points out that a condition for education is that all necessary means must be covered such as accessible school books, suitable devices and specially trained teachers.
The statement also recommends that alternative settings of education must be provided as an opportunity if so wished by the parents of blind children.

The principle of inclusive education is without doubt a very good goal for most disability groups and stems from a perspective of equal human value and non-discrimination.

However, the problem is that the perspective of inclusion has become too narrow and in its strive for equal treatment of all, it has unconsciously become a discriminative factor towards blind people, who have other communicational needs than sighted persons, who also may have disabilities as well.

This is very clear in policy making processes such as the work towards the new convention on disability, where we have to fight for our standpoint to make our companions and governments understand that Inclusion divide more than include for some groups. We will become excluded because of the fact that the educational system is based on sight.

The whole society of today relies on written information and visual messages. People who cannot benefit from this kind of information are said to have a communication disability, like blindness, deafness or deafblindness. To overcome this, special measures must be taken.

How do you teach out abstract phenomena, such as colours and symbols, advanced mathematics, geography or geometry to name a few subjects, without assistance of visual means? Unless a child receives special education on abstract matters in an appropriate setting, the inclusive education will turn out to become exclusive.

For a person with visual impairment or blindness from birth, tactile and hands on information has a special meaning, which makes the education of literacy skills, the daily life skills, the mobility and orientation training etc, effective and meaningful.

In a teaching situation other factors also become important and this puts strong emphasis on the teacher, whether it is a professional teacher, a parent or a rehabilitation officer.

Many vision diagnoses are degenerative. A child with partial sight at the age of 6 may have lost all vision by the time he or she may attend higher education. This is a stigma to the child or the youth but the solution is not to pretend that tactile equipment or Braille is not necessary or that special education for blind children is redundant.

Thanks to Braille a blind student will be able to study, read documents, take notes, read maps, orient in the environment, access public transportation or manage an ATM
machine, etc, equally to sighted persons. Without the knowledge of Braille, blind people will become illiterate.

Braille was developed for more than 150 years back, and has since then made a difference for blind people in the life and have made blind people to become literate.

Through Braille we have gained the opportunity to take part in all spheres of the society, gain our own living and becoming social and contributing citizens in our society.

It has, unfortunately been very difficult to convince the general public of that Braille for blind people, is a script equal to the script in ink for sighted persons. This resistance of recognition of Braille has existed since its first development in the early 1900 century and is still prevailing.

How long shall blind and visually impaired people wait until we have Braille acknowledged as a script, which is making us able to read and right.

Both teachers and organisations of the blind have to underline the importance and need of Braille. We have to make a common standpoint where we do not accept any exception or substitute for literacy skills.

We must stand firm that it is a human right to be able to read and write, no matter which script is being used.

I therefore call upon members of ICEVI to jointly with WBU make governments and authorities aware of the need for Braille as the most effective literacy tool for blind people.

We must advocate our national delegations to the UN and its agencies of the need for a strong stance in policy documents such as the Convention on disability.

WBU urges all of you to support the Convention text concerning article 24 on Education, which reads as follows:

3. States Parties shall enable persons with disabilities to learn life and social development skills to facilitate their full and equal participation in education and as members of the community. To this end, States Parties shall take appropriate measures, including:

   a. Facilitating the learning of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, orientation and mobility skills, and facilitating peer support and mentoring;
c. Ensuring that the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf and deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments which maximize academic and social development.

4. In order to help ensure the realization of this right, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to employ teachers, including those with disabilities, who are fluent in sign language and Braille, and to train professionals and staff who work at all levels of education. Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.

If this text will be adopted and then implemented in all national law and legislation, blind and visually impaired persons will for ever be granted their right to their own script – Braille!