

Mainstreaming, technology create a 'Braille literacy crisis'

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Much ado was made in Pittsburgh to print up Braille menus, visitor guides and other material to serve the 2,000 folks who attended last week's American Council of the Blind national convention.

But surprisingly, only a small percentage of the blind and visually impaired, particularly those under 18, can read the raised dot system of Braille. What's considered a "Braille literacy crisis" has developed for a number of reasons.

Children who once were educated in special schools for the blind where Braille was taught extensively began being mainstreamed in the 1960s to regular public schools that lacked trained teachers and equipment in this area.

Also, there's been an explosion of technological equipment that delivers information orally or in large print, reducing the need for Braille.

Blind children who don't learn Braille don't learn to read or write, which can hamper their ability to support themselves as adults, advocates say. According to the National Federation for the Blind, the unemployment rate among the blind is 75 percent; among Braille readers, it's 6 percent.

And it's important to learn at an early age. Older people lose the ability to distinguish detail by touch.

"With the advent of modern technology, some people believe that Braille is becoming obsolete," said Scott McCall, vice president of the American Foundation for the Blind. But Braille is no more likely to disappear than the regular printed page, he said.

The system is as vital today as when it was developed in 1824 by Louis Braille, a 15-year-old blind student. The concept actually came from a raised dot and dash "night writing" system that French Army Capt. Charles Barbier had developed so soldiers could pass messages through the trenches at night.

When Barbier introduced his invention to the Royal Institution for the Blind in Paris, it was deemed too complicated. But Louis Braille, a bright student there, spent three years simplifying it into a six-dot code

that related to the alphabet.

Letters are formed from different combinations of these dots arranged in two vertical rows of three, like a domino.

Several efforts are under way by the American Foundation for the Blind (the organization with which Helen Keller was affiliated) and other groups to expand the teaching and acceptance of Braille, including making it more familiar to the sighted community.

A national Braille literacy center has been established in Atlanta, and Verizon launched a national campaign to promote careers in Braille textbook transcribing at the federal and state levels.

With technological advances, regular type can be converted to Braille electronically rather than mechanically, speeding the process, cutting costs and expanding the availability of Braille material, McCall said.

The Foundation for the Blind has developed an educational Web site to encourage literacy among all children — sighted and visually impaired — with games, graphics, and a book reading club. It's at www.afb.org/braillebugand and is aimed at those in grades two to six.

There also are offbeat efforts to get the message across. At last week's conference, Leslie Ligon of Denton, Texas, was displaying her Braille fashion jewelry that she says is as much for the sighted community as the blind.

For example, she offers link bracelets with each silver piece displaying a Braille letter on one side and corresponding printed letter on the other.

"I call that my Braille fashion cheat sheet," says Ligon, who became interested in designing the jewelry because her 6-year-old son is blind.

Her pendants do the same with words in Braille, such as "faith" or "friends forever." You can find these at 1-800-630-6650 or www.braillestone.com.

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