

Unified English Braille:

A Concept Paper for Pacific Island Nations

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Abstract

This paper briefly discusses Unified English Braille, focussing on its relevance for the education of blind children in Pacific Island countries. Recognising the fundamental role of braille for literacy acquisition and development, the pivotal role of braille in the successful implementation of the EFA-VI global campaign, and the historical factors that shape the environment for braille in Pacific Island countries, the paper offers recommendations to guide progress over the next few years to achieve the required increase in the availability of braille in the Pacific. The paper is non-technical, directed to opinion leaders and decision makers, with the ultimate purpose of Unified English Braille being adopted in Pacific Island nations as their standard for English-language Braille.

Braille

Braille is the system of reading and writing by touch used by blind people. Braille was invented by Louis Braille, born in France in 1809. The braille system was first published in 1829 and by the turn of the twentieth century had been adopted in many countries including France, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Braille was adopted in the United States in 1932.

There are 63 distinct braille characters made up of dots arranged in two columns of three dots each. The so-called literary braille code has been augmented by codes for mathematics, music and other technical materials, and there are braille codes for most written languages worldwide. Whilst the literary codes used in the United Kingdom and the United States are very similar, their codes for mathematics are completely different. In some languages, including English, contractions are used to reduce the bulk of braille and increase reading and writing speeds. This is known as contracted, advanced or Grade 2 braille, as compared with uncontracted, basic or Grade 1 braille where contractions are not used. Some braille characters have several meanings, and some printed words or symbols are represented by several braille characters. These rules bring added complexity to the task of learning braille for transcribers, teachers and students.

Unified English Braille

Unified English Braille (UEB) has been developed by the International Council on English Braille (ICEB). UEB was developed in the 1990s, recognising that the braille code needed greater flexibility and updating so that braille would be cheaper to produce, more robust and easier to learn. UEB was judged sufficiently complete by the ICEB in April 2004 for consideration by member countries as their national standard for braille. ICEB's members are countries where English is widely spoken and that have standards-setting bodies for Braille. Among the ICEB members: Australia, New Zealand, Nigeria, and South Africa have adopted UEB; Canada has indicated its interest to adopt UEB; and the United Kingdom and the United States have not yet adopted UEB. Australia and New Zealand have commenced their programs of UEB implementation, with Australia's due for completion by mid 2010.

UEB is two-dimensional: the integration and harmonisation of literary and technical braille codes into one code suitable for beginner and advanced braille users, and the reconciliation of differences in the braille codes used in the United Kingdom and the United States. UEB accommodates both basic braille or advanced braille; and, in either case, UEB is suitable for English-language texts containing passages in indigenous languages that use the Roman alphabet.

UEB simplifies some braille rules, making braille faster to learn by transcribers and teachers, and easier to learn for blind students coping with the full curriculum. UEB has braille signs for commonly occurring print symbols, and UEB's code for primary school maths is much easier to learn and use than the current maths codes of British and American braille.

The adoption of UEB in Australia has received strong support from educators, who recognised that it is an easier code for students to learn and that it has many features that promote better understanding between blind students and their sighted peers and teachers. Less ambiguity in UEB, making it easier to produce and teach, led to UEB support from transcribers and educators.

The main reason for adopting UEB in New Zealand was the belief that UEB was faster to learn for transcribers and easier to teach in mainstream learning environments, and that UEB was a suitable braille code for both beginner and advanced braille users.

Braille in the South Pacific

Australia and New Zealand both have braille authorities which determine their national standards for braille. No Pacific Island nations have braille authorities, so that the decision-making about braille codes to be used in these countries has sometimes been ad hoc and uncoordinated. Of course it must also be recognised that in many Pacific Island nations English-braille must co-exist with Indigenous-language braille. In Fiji, for example, braille should be available in Fijian, Hindi and English.

Australia and New Zealand have different heritages for braille. Australia used British braille until the codes diverged in the 1980s, and New Zealand has used American braille for many years. Pacific Island Countries tend to use American or British braille depending on arbitrary factors such as: the braille codes learned by braille teachers or transcribers and the origin of books donated to the school for blind children. For example, Fiji uses American braille including the Nemeth code for braille mathematics and Papua New Guinea used Australian braille.

UEB in the South Pacific

Australia and New Zealand have adopted UEB. Adoption of UEB by Pacific Island nations will remove variations in braille codes, making way for one code for English-language braille to be used throughout the region.

The change to UEB is not a major change for literary braille. Story books in American or British braille will not become unusable overnight when UEB is introduced. However, the change for mathematics is significant. Australian experience suggests that transcribers, teachers and students will appreciate the simplified code that results.

Australia and New Zealand have traditionally provided support, and their braille codes have been influential, for braille in Pacific Island countries. However, following the transition to UEB in Australia and New Zealand, support for Pacific Island countries may be compromised if they are using braille codes other than UEB. The reasons are that practitioners in Australia and New Zealand will quickly lose their expertise in American or British braille and training materials will only be available from the United States or the United Kingdom.

Braille courses

Braille courses for Australian and New Zealand tertiary students (for example, the *Braille for Educators* professional development course at the Renwick College in Sydney) teach UEB. Accordingly, students throughout the South Pacific can take such courses and apply their knowledge directly and without variation in their home countries.

Training materials

UEB means that training materials developed for teachers or transcribers in Australia or New Zealand can be used in neighbouring countries without modification. It makes no difference whether teachers or transcribers have learned braille in Australia, New Zealand or their home country—and which particular braille manual they have used.

Braille certification

The braille authorities of Australia and New Zealand are developing a common system of braille proficiency testing. The first joint examination in UEB is due to be held in the second half of 2008. One can anticipate that certification will be open to candidates from Pacific Island countries where UEB is being used.

Braille production

It is easy for transcribers to switch to UEB. Manual transcribers will quickly find that, apart from the maths code, there are not many differences between UEB and American/British braille. There are no new contractions; there are a few contractions deleted; there are some new UEB signs for printed symbols; and there is less ambiguity in UEB.

UEB is easy to produce with computer software known as DBT (the Duxbury Braille Translator). This software can produce braille in many other languages—including French and Spanish, and soon Mandarin and Hindi. It is also well suited to producing braille in Indigenous languages based on the Roman alphabet. This leads to a very strong feature of UEB—its compatibility with Indigenous languages. In many cases UEB can provide all of the symbol assignments needed for braille in these languages. This let's young children begin to learn braille in their mother tongue, and then transfer to English-language braille without the need to learn a new braille code as well.

All that is needed to produce UEB with DBT is to choose UEB as the translation table and to make this the default setting. The translator will then take care of most things, including simple formatting—especially if Microsoft Word is used for data entry and Word styles are used for headings and lists.

Workshops and seminars

It should be possible to organise within country and between country workshops and seminars to transfer knowledge and skills in the use of UEB for teachers and transcribers. As always, the biggest hurdle is harnessing funds to cover the travel and accommodation costs of presenters and participants, but this challenge is by no means insurmountable. Already in Australia, and soon in New Zealand, one can expect there to be a pool of sighted and blind people knowledgeable in UEB who are willing and able to transfer their knowledge and skills through workshops and seminars.

Deciding to adopt UEB

Each country has the right to decide what braille codes it will use for English-language braille, and that decision should be made with the involvement of all stakeholders: braille users, Ministries of Education, transcribers and teachers.

In Australia and New Zealand the braille authorities bring together the various stakeholders to adopt specific codes as national standards for braille and to review these codes from time to time. In Pacific Island countries which do not have braille authorities this responsibility might best lie with the Ministry of Education. This is because the choice of braille code is of most critical importance for blind children at school—affecting the availability of textbooks and their learning of braille.

Implementing UEB

The critical issue with UEB implementation is timing for school students, to ensure that any disruption by the transition is kept to a minimum. This may be achieved by a phased implementation: start with the youngest children first, and then spread the implementation to the senior classes over the next couple of years. Ensure familiarity with UEB for transcribers and teachers ahead of each implementation phase.

EFA-VI global campaign

The Education For All Children with Vision Impairment (EFA-VI) global campaign is a partnership between ICEVI (the International Council on the Education of Children with Vision Impairment) and WBU (the World Blind Union). The EFA-VI global campaign is harmonised with the United Nations EFA (Education For All) global campaign, and aims country by country to increase the education participation rate of blind and vision impaired children to be equal to the education participation rate of sighted children.

Fiji has been chosen as the first focal point for the EFA-VI global campaign in the ICEVI Pacific region. This brings to the attention of the Ministry of Education in Fiji, through the Director of Special Education, the current situation regarding braille in Fiji. There is currently a pause in braille production in Fiji due to staff turnover at the Fiji Society for the Blind. As a result, there is a need for training in the braille code and in braille production methods.

This raises the question: In what braille code should the personnel be trained? And is this an opportune time for the UEB transition to commence?

Similar considerations are relevant for Papua New Guinea, where the same questions arose: Should UEB be adopted as the national English-language braille code and the UEB transition commence? It is pleasing to report that PNG has adopted UEB as its national braille code.

Summary and Recommendations

This paper has provided background on English-language braille codes used in Australia, New Zealand and Pacific Island countries. It has then introduced Unified English Braille (UEB, the new standard for braille in Australia and New Zealand) and given reasons why adoption and implementation as soon as practicable of UEB in Pacific Island countries might be beneficial.

Recommendation 1

That the Pacific Disability Forum adopt the policy position:

- (a) that blind children in Pacific Island countries must be taught to read and write in braille;
- (b) that braille codes used throughout the Pacific region should be harmonised to the greatest extent possible; and
- (c) that Unified English Braille should be adopted as the standard for English-language braille used in Pacific Island countries.

Recommendation 2

That PDF partner with the ICEVI Pacific region, the WBU Pacific Oceania sub-region and national associations of blind people (NDPOs where NABPs do not exist) to communicate with the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, and the ministry of Education in each Pacific Island country where English is a teaching language in schools:

- (a) to raise awareness about the fundamental importance of braille for literacy by blind students, and the importance of the EFA-VI global campaign in the Pacific;
- (b) to encourage the adoption by the Ministry of Education of Unified English Braille, following consultation with the national association of blind people (NDPO where an NABP does not exist), as the national standard for English-language braille;
- (c) to provide advice to each country, seeking support from experts in Australia and New Zealand as necessary, on the implementation of Unified English Braille as soon as practicable following its adoption; and
- (d) to consider the use of Unified English Braille as the base code for Indigenous-language braille in each country in which it has been adopted.