THE BRAILLISTS FOUNDATION

BRAILLECAST PODCAST EPISODE 29

Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Teaching Braille But Were Too Scared To Ask

29th June 2021

Matthew Horspool: Welcome back to Braillecast, the official podcast of the Braillists Foundation, and coming up this time:

Melanie Pritchard: I would just approach it on an individual basis. It's not a one size fits all thing, because everybody wants to do it for different reasons and maybe when they were taught braille at school, they didn't really want to do it, and then as an adult, they feel there's a use for it.

Matthew Horspool: Everything you ever wanted to know about teaching braille but were too scared to ask.

Most of us who know braille were taught it. It sounds like such an obvious statement, so obvious, in fact, that it seems appropriate to conclude that the world has an abundance of braille teachers and the methods and techniques that they use are mature, uniform and understood by everyone working in the field.

Presumably approaches that work well have been iterated over time. Those that haven't worked so well have been abandoned, and the entire process has been well documented, so that future teachers can learn from the mistakes of the past.

The reality is less clearly defined, although certain concepts, which have withstood the test of time especially well, have become accepted as common knowledge.

Pre-braille skills, for instance, feature regularly in discussions about teaching braille, as do the differences between learning braille by touch and by sight, and teaching braille to children and adults.

On Tuesday, 29th June 2021, we explored this topic in more detail in a live panel discussion with three braille teachers.

Kirsten Roberts is a lifelong braille user, a Qualified Teacher of the Visually Impaired, QTVI, and Deputy Braille Tutor for the Mandatory Qualification for Teachers of Children and Young People with Visual Impairments offered at the University of Birmingham. In addition to her university work, she regularly teaches braille to both primary- and secondary-aged children.

Christine Williams recently retired from Exhall Grange Specialist School and Science College in Coventry, where she held the post of Lead Teacher of the Visually Impaired. In that capacity, she taught braille not only to the pupils at Exhall Grange, but also peripatetically to pupils of all ages in mainstream schools throughout Warwickshire, via the Vision Support Service. Prior to this, she taught French at Exhall Grange for a number of years, where braille also played a significant role. In her retirement, she teaches braille voluntarily at Coventry Resource Centre for the Blind, predominantly to adults who are losing or in danger of losing their sight.

Melanie Pritchard has an extensive background in teaching braille to adults, either with visual impairments themselves, or who are sighted friends or relatives of people with a visual impairment. Most recently she taught the Braille for Beginners course remotely for the Braillists Foundation.

The discussion that follows was moderated by Ben Mustill-Rose and hosted by Dave Williams.

Dave Williams: So, let's start with you, Kirsten. In your experience, who decides who should be taught braille?

Kirsten Roberts: I think it really has to be a combination. So, if it's for children, I think it has to be a combination of the child, whether they want to learn, because if they don't and they're at a certain age, then they're not going to; also the parents, and the vision support staff around the child, so that could be the QTVI, the HAB officer or the TA, for example, who might all be involved in helping that happen.

Parents are really important, certainly for children, because they really need to be there to promote it outside of school. It's not just an in-school thing. You can do all sorts of things with braille around the home. So, that's a really important aspect.

Briefly on adults, I think it's up to the adult, really, whether they want to learn it or not, but I'm sure my other two panellists, who have got more experience than me, will add more to that.

Dave Williams: So, the desire's got to be there, but, Christine, how would you advise a blind or a partially sighted person, particularly, maybe they're using large print and maybe struggling? What's the threshold at which you would advise that they perhaps start down the road of learning braille?

Christine Williams: Well, certainly in terms of older children, what we used to do was a functional vision test, to get an idea of exactly what the young person could see and based on the results of that, we'd then start looking at braille as the next step.

We often found that there was quite a psychological barrier to break down, before we could start on the road to braille, because, for the parents as much the children, there's a recognition that their child might well lose their sight and that's a big thing to come to terms with, so we had to be very careful how we went about that. But to have evidence, if you like, from a vision test, certainly helped to get a discussion going on that score.

With older adults, it's often that they decide that they need to do something about it and they will often make that move in the first instance.

But with youngsters, it's the motivation definitely to want to do that.

Dave Williams: Mel, do you think that learning braille is a reactive intervention, rather than somebody's eyesight being on a trajectory and maybe it'd be a good idea to learn braille early so that they've got that in the bag for when eyesight changes? Or do you find that actually it's a reaction to circumstances, perhaps after they can't read print anymore?

Melanie Pritchard: A little bit of both, I think. Most of the people I have taught have come to me, wanting to learn braille, because their sight is already too poor to read print. I haven't had many who feel that they wanted to learn before they lost their vision, until quite recently with the Braille for Beginners, where we had a couple who did feel that, but in my experience that's been slightly more unusual.

Dave Williams: Kirsten, when a new student is in a room with you for the first time, where do you start?

Kirsten Roberts: I think you start with either what they know, where they're at and also what's important to them. So, it might be that you just start with their name, for example, so it's something meaningful for them. Or it might be you start with games, so they can see, okay, braille is actually fun, we're not just sitting here reading and writing, and I'm not doing this on my own, out of class, when I could be doing something fun in class.

Dave Williams: Is there an established curriculum and how rigidly would you follow that?

Kirsten Roberts: There isn't really. There are various different attempts, for example, the I-M-ABLE approach in America, which is a more developed version of what I just said, where you start with what they can do and what they're interested in doing, so writing the words for their pets or for their parents and things like that. There are lots of reading schemes, for example, but there's not really a set curriculum and I think a lot of QTVIs have tried to reinvent the wheel and I know I certainly do.

With the changeover to UEB, there's a lot of tracking things you can do, do they know this symbol, do they know that letter? But really you've got to come up with your own stuff to really make it meaningful and fun, because that's the important thing if you want them to keep going.

Dave Williams: Christine, did you find any particular schemes worked well or did you roll your own?

Christine Williams: Firstly, I agree with everything that Kirsten and Mel have just said. In terms of teaching the children, the first thing I would say is that before going anywhere near braille, I would do a lot of tactile work with them, the usual tracking and all sorts of games that we've mentioned. I would certainly start with that and then build up. With adults, dominoes are a great way of getting them going with identifying raised dots and so on and so forth.

In school, well, the established course that I used to use was Abi and that worked really well with a young girl that I can remember teaching. She was the right age to identify, if you like, with Abi. Apart from that it was a bit of a problem. Teaching Abi to a teenage boy, I'm afraid, did not work, because the material just wasn't relevant and so I ended up making up a lot of my own resources and I think that's what a lot of people do.

Resources was the problem in teaching youngsters, definitely.

Kirsten Roberts: I use Fingerprint, but it's so repetitive.

Christine Williams: Ooh, gosh.

Kirsten Roberts: It's great and I love it but it doesn't really appeal, and I tend to use it because I work a lot with teenagers, but it doesn't necessarily appeal. It's a bit of its time as well and there's perhaps nothing for the 2020s.

Christine Williams: I have to agree wholeheartedly with that.

Dave Williams: You touched on something there, Christine, pre-braille skills as well are so important, tracking, fine motor, dexterity, all really important and supported with other activities, playing a musical instrument, cooking, crafts, all those things can really help.

Mel, any contrasts with adults returning to braille. I know you've worked with some people who've perhaps come back to braille, having let it kind of wither. Is there anything specific you would do there that's not been mentioned?

Melanie Pritchard: My main thing to do in that instance would be to try and work out why the braille hadn't worked for them the first time, so that I can maybe tailor it a little bit, not just to encourage and motivate them, that this time it's going to work, kind of thing, but to make it interesting and see if maybe they didn't carry on with braille because of tracking difficulties, then we've just all talked about the importance of tracking and tactile skills. So, yes, I would just approach it on an individual basis, because it's not a one size fits all thing, because everybody wants to do it for different reasons and maybe when they were taught braille at school, they didn't really want to do it, and then as an adult, they feel there's a use for it. Probably that's the best time to learn, when you know you're going to use it.

Dave Williams: A question for all of you, would you use different techniques when teaching somebody who's perhaps been blind from birth versus somebody with deteriorating vision?

Kirsten Roberts: Their tactile skills might be different. You wouldn't necessarily do it differently, but you would certainly approach it differently.

Christine Williams: I would like Kirsten and Mel's opinions on to what extent the learner with some sight that might be deteriorating should use that in acquiring braille skills, or whether we concentrate totally on the touch aspect.

Melanie Pritchard: When I first started teaching braille, the learners had already begun the course and I came in several months into it and I was horrified because a young man who still had some vision was using his vision and encouraged to use his vision to read the braille, and of course as he lost it and then had to learn the tactile skills, when he was struggling by this time with Grade 2 braille, and we almost had to start again.

So, I think it's really important, even if someone can still see, if they think they are going to lose that vision, I think for them to learn tactile as soon as possible, even if it means closing their eyes or all these other strategies you can use. It is totally different, learning visually to learning in a tactile way. I think it's really important.

Kirsten Roberts: I totally agree with that. I thought I was going to be perhaps on my own there, but I do really believe that and I think a lot of the situations that we might come across where we have learners who are coming at it later in life, whether that's just from the second decade of life or whether it's from the seventh decade of life, they will be losing their sight and to rely on it, then it's almost like a double loss then, isn't it?

Dave Williams: Kirsten, you said earlier that you felt we could do with something that was a bit more 2020s. How would you characterise the availability of age-appropriate material for teenage braille learners?

Kirsten Roberts: I think there's a dearth. I personally really quite like the magazines that RNIB publish and I will take the articles from those and often will type them into print, so then I can put them into the appropriate braille format in Duxbury, because obviously they'll come in a certain contracted or uncontracted form as it is. The difficult with teaching braille, probably to anybody, is that you have to be very personalised, because the way you teach the contractions of just the general symbols and letters might vary, and it will take a different amount of time from each person and therefore you've got to make sure the resources are in that particular format for that person. If they don't know a particular symbol, then you would need to maybe not use that, but it's a question of whether you want to expose them to that and encourage it, or whether you want to hold off until they're a bit more confident and then bring it to them.

So, I think things like that and I like blogs. A lot of the bloggers that we all know of in the VI world, they write quite long blogs, so taking bits of those is useful, trying to do things that are really up-to-date, finding articles on the Internet about VI people like the blind skateboarder, Jesse Dufton, the blind mountain climber, that sort of thing.

Dave Williams: Those of us, who work in the sector, who use braille, try quite hard to teach braille to sighted colleagues as well, to help raise awareness and some of them are just not interested. Do any of you have any tips or have any of you taught braille to a fully sighted person and how did that go?

Christine Williams: I had a role at Exhall of teaching staff braille and it was quite marked as to how people took to it. Some of the staff just did not take to braille at all. It just for some reason didn't make any sense to them whatsoever. Others were absolutely fine, took to it and treated it like learning another language almost, it seemed. The key to it all was confidence and building up their confidence to learn this new skill, which they perceived to be really difficult, for whatever reason, was core to helping them make any progress.

The other difficulty is that you've got a group that are going to work, as Kirsten said, at different rates and in different ways, so it really is quite challenging when you're teaching a mixed group of adults, because they will reach certain stages at different times and you can end up doing quite a lot of preparation, to be honest with you, to meet those different needs.

Dave Williams: During your introduction, Christine, you said you were retired and that you'd been teaching braille for a number of years. During that time, did your teaching techniques change or evolve, and if so, how?

Christine Williams: I suppose in terms of when I was teaching braille, the big new piece of equipment that came along or a couple, firstly the BrailleNote and then there was a bit of a discussion going on as to whether you taught children to get as far as what was then Grade 2 braille and then you introduced the BrailleNote, or whether you start off straight away teaching them with the BrailleNote. I left with that being unresolved.

The other big one was using software to convert text to braille in a number of different ways, so that helped an awful lot in terms of resources, but it's still a question of time, of using time to make sure that you find resources relevant to that child.

Dave Williams: Most of us listening to this are not ourselves teachers, but the three of you are in various ways. So, I'd like to hear from each of you, and I'll start with Mel, of resources, quick-fire resources that are out there online or available generally that would be useful for anybody who is keen to either start teaching braille informally, maybe amongst their friends or family, or maybe then even want to take it to the next level and perhaps become a braille tutor. We're always hearing that there's a lack of people teaching braille, so if somebody wanted to get into that field or wanted to start teaching braille, what resources, if any, could you recommend?

Melanie Pritchard: I don't have much knowledge of the online resources, although I know they're there and I know they're much better than they used to be, but certainly with sighted learners, I've always used the Primer and found that quite effective. I know not everybody likes it but the Braille Primer I've always found good. The difference now is that if you have a sighted learner or somebody who's interested, using software, they can use their computer rather than having to find a Perkins from somewhere, to actually produce the practice braille, and simply attach it to an email, in the same way as you would attach a file and then one of us can sit there and correct it and make comments on it. So, you don't always have to be there, teaching.

For sighted learners, I think the Primer, but I suspect Kirsten has much more of an idea of the online resources.

Kirsten Roberts: There are a couple of quite small pamphlets or leaflets which I think have probably been around for a long time, but A Braille Reader In The Family and Cracking The Code are really quite useful little documents for the real start of braille.

I know, speaking as a vision impaired person myself, who is a braillist, when I was little and at special school, my parents went to the school and learned braille, and there's nothing like that now, I don't believe. There might be obviously if you're quite local to places like New College Worcester or Exhall, but I think it's certainly a lot more limited in terms of the number of special schools and as you said already, the number of braille teachers out there.

Online, perhaps using YouTube, there is a lot on YouTube now, a lot of things about how to form the different letters. I really like UEB Online. I don't know that it's necessarily suitable for a parent and a child, but it might well work for the parent to get an idea and it certainly gives them sheets that they can download and keep hold of, even if they don't want to actually do the exercises. That's about five or six years old now, but it's still a really good program and actually you can do that if you use speech technology as well, so if you're vision impaired and you don't know braille but you have speech technology, you can use that as well.

Dave Williams: Anything to add, Christine?

Christine Williams: That was really good, I have to say. Like Mel, I also the UEB Primer, pick and choose from it. I'm not a huge fan of it, but it's great resource material to fall back on. The other thing we used to use with children in school is books that Clearvision produce and they were a great resource, but of course they're not aimed at teaching braille. That's for children who have got at least some knowledge the code.

Kirsten Roberts: I think the Clearvision are brilliant for children and parents, aren't they? They can enjoy both.

Christine Williams: It gives the parents a real insight into what their child is doing, that they might perhaps not have otherwise.

Dave Williams: Now, when I learned braille many decades ago, it was with a Perkins and a great big pile of braille paper that I chewed my way through. Christine mentioned BrailleNote earlier. What is the role of technology in braille education? When is the right time to introduce a braille note taker or a braille display? What challenges should everyone be aware of? I know you're a great fan of technology, Kirsten, but you'll appreciate its limits. How do you find braille tech and your learners get on?

Kirsten Roberts: I was really interested in what Christine said earlier about the ever or never changing question of when do we introduce technology, because that's still a question that comes up all the time and I think you can introduce it whenever it feels right. Sometimes it's about introducing it just so they don't have the pressure of using the Perkins. So, in the past you might have had a Perkins or a Mountbatten, for example, which is slightly easier to write on and still produces braille on paper, but then if you've got children with other disabilities, physical disabilities or arthritis, for example, or adults even, then using a piece of technology that is a bit easier with the keyboard on the fingers might be really worthwhile.

It's really difficult, because for a lot of them, you've got to be able to read the braille to navigate the devices, but some of them have got screens and so that might help. Usually most of them speak, so that's also useful and I quite often encourage my students to use both at first and then move on to what they prefer.

I don't think there is an age limit. I just think it's the same with all braille questions of what is right for that student and again, it might be that it's not right all the time but it might be right in just their English lessons or just their intervention lessons with the QTVI or it might be just once a week as something on which they can play a game, but then they can move on to developing those skills.

Dave Williams: Christine, you'll have witnessed quite a few braille technology changes in your career. Did it make braille more or less difficult to teach?

Christine Williams: Well, both I and the student were mastering the technology at the same time, because the thing about a BrailleNote is, you've got to learn how to use that as well as learn the braille that goes with it. So, on the one hand, it helped the relationship between me and the child, or the student, I have to say, and we could have a bit of fun doing it, but for me it was a challenge, I'll be honest with you.

The adults that I teach now, because BrailleNotes costs a lot of money, so you've got a finance implication here, they still use a Perkins, but they do things in such an old-fashioned way, if you like, to be honest, especially for little fingers. So I think we've gone beyond that for small children, definitely.

Dave Williams: I wanted to move on to the question of advocacy. We heard earlier that there isn't really a formal braille curriculum as such, but does that curriculum, as well as teaching the braille code and reading techniques, also need to include some advocacy skills? I found, going out into university and employment, that I had to speak up if I wanted braille. It didn't just happen auto-magically as it might do, particularly in a specialist school. Any thoughts around that, panel?

Melanie Pritchard: With older students, whether they're braillists or whether they're low vision or whether they're multi-disability with VI, I think advocacy is a massive part of what we have to do now. The world isn't going to come to them, like you said, they're going to have to ask for things, but know how to be polite about it, how to explain why they need it, to make people understand that sort of thing. So, yes, it does come as part of it, but I think it comes as the more holistic package of the role of the QTVI or the braille teacher as well, to help that path.

Christine Williams: Yes, from the youngster's point of view, asking them to be quite assertive sometimes really, in asking for these things and I'm sure some youngsters find that a lot more difficult than others, depending on the situation that they're in. My experience, as a QTVI, unless somebody raised the issue, the child or parent or QTVI or another adult, then the braille got pushed to one side. That tended to happen, not always but it did tend to happen.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Kawal in a moment, but there's been some great discussion going on in the chat and we've got a question from Andrew. Andrew has submitted a couple of comments actually. He is saying that he's a big fan of the Orbit Reader and similar displays because of their top quality braille, very easy for people who are maybe struggling with sensitivity issues, but his question is around how to encourage learners who are maybe a little bit reluctant. He works at a centre where learning braille is a requirement, but perhaps some of his students maybe aren't so keen to progress down that route just yet.

Christine Williams: Yes, there were one or two cases where there was reluctance. Now, this was partly perhaps because in a special school, we had a system of taking the children for their braille lesson out of, say, their maths or their English lesson or whatever fitted in with their curriculum. So, sometimes that was the frustration. They were missing the lesson with everybody else and had to come and do their braille.

Generally, I'm thinking of one child, my aim was to make it as much fun as possible and to come up with as many different kinds of activities, turning things into a game and maybe having a little bit of a laugh about things and keeping the atmosphere fairly light and trying to cajole a child on that basis. Basically just chip away, lots and lots of praise, raising confidence, getting them to think that they're doing something really special here, something different, and then sharing what they've done with their classmates, that also worked quite well sometimes. But it was often quite a slow process and not one to be hurried.

Dave Williams: Any reluctant adults, Mel?

Melanie Pritchard: I haven't really taught many adults with using technology, so the only ones I can really think of are our most recent ones and many of them are really enjoying products like the Orbit, for reasons, as much as anything, for tracking, because of course older people who struggle with tracking, if they can run to a braille device, and it's all about confidence as well, as Christine says, in the product you're using. I think there are a lot of good reasons and I think, if anything, technology has made braille even more popular, generally, certainly with adults.

Dave Williams: Like learning anything new, there are going to be times when it gets hard and you just want to pack it in. How do you keep people motivated?

Melanie Pritchard: When I've been teaching adults certainly, one of the first questions I ask people is, why are you learning braille, why do you want to learn braille. And it always sounds really mean and cruel, but actually with any kind of teaching, forget braille, but any teaching, you've got to want to do it and you've got to have a good reason for doing it, so if they have a good focus and they've got something good that's going to happen at the end of it, it keeps them going. It might only be to label stuff in their cupboards or it might be to read War And Peace, but whatever it is, it's unique to that person and if you can tap into that, that's my thoughts.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great discussion still going on in the chat. We've got quite a few hands up, so we're going to Kawal now and then Anne Wilkins.

Kawal Gucokoglu: I just wanted to explain my experience to you. I'm no teacher. I was a transcriber for 23 years and once I left, I didn't know what else to do, so then first of all I got a job in the Bank of England and I got asked to teach someone braille, so I did that for a bit and he didn't like it. So, then I thought, well, what else am I going to do. Then I got another job teaching braille to children, and listening to what you were all saying, made me think, yes, I was going along the same lines as you, making it fun. At the end of it all, they got back to me saying that they were going to cut the funding. So, I wonder what you thought.

Dave Williams: Have you encountered that, Kirsten? You're on the front line with teaching youngsters braille.

Kirsten Roberts: Not within education, but I can well understand the funding argument and it very much disappoints me, but I'm sure it's probably been heard many times before. These things tend to go in cycles, so they'll get rid of their braille teachers or whatever, and then five, ten years later, they'll be thinking, ooh, this is what we really need, and then they employ more. Unfortunately that doesn't help the children in the ten year interim, or even the adults in terms of the social care, because a lot of the adult teaching comes through payments from social care and social worker support to find a teacher, to keep a teacher and to pay for it through personalised budgets, etc. If those change or those drop off, then the braille teaching will probably be one of the first things to go. So, yes, funding is really important but as a teacher, you have no control over it.

Ben Mustill-Rose: We're going to come to Anne Wilkins next and then Judith.

Anne Wilkins: I'm an experienced braillist and I've always used braille. My question was mainly that I have taught braille to adults and I'm currently teaching braille music to a teenager in Wales, who's doing very well, and I think the same problems of resources apply as much to braille music as they do to literary braille, because there is work ongoing regarding braille music to get more resources but they don't update very quickly, I find. I'm wondering really how to keep people motivated. I think the question has slightly been answered by the panel, but I found that people say, oh, it's difficult and I don't want to keep on, and that sort of comment and I wondered what's the best way, but you have covered that really with mentioning games and other resources, which I haven't actually used but I have got people to try to write a little story about the previous week or something that they're interested in.

Dave Williams: What motivated me, Anne, in terms of braille music, I was taught braille music years ago and put it down for quite a long time and then during lockdown, I wanted to improve at the piano and I didn't really want to learn any classical pieces, and the thing that really motivated me was I found a book of jazz braille music and then suddenly there was all these pieces that I wanted to learn to play, and so it's a bit like learning to read generally, if you've got content in which you're actually interested. For my son, who is sighted, we got him books about football and space and dinosaurs and trains and stuff that interested him and that often seems to be the carrot, I think.

Melanie Pritchard: I think Anne's raised a really important point about braille music, that your average QTVI wouldn't teach braille music, because it's a very acquired skill and most sighted people don't know braille music. I know I learned it, like you, Dave, at school, then subsequently forgot it, after I finished my music GCSE, and then had to re-teach myself when I was trying to teach a child in preparation for his music GCSE a couple of years ago, still can't quite get to grips with it and get it back in my head. I don't know where it's gone. But that's a really important point and I think that's an area that's possibly missing from braille teaching. I think I saw that James Bowden is on and he will be a whiz at braille music, so he might have some thoughts.

Ben Mustill-Rose: It looks like James does have something to contribute, so we'll bring James in for a final point on this question and then we'll go to Judith.

James Bowden: Regarding music, and notice I didn't say braille music, I just said music, many sighted people can't read music. So, if they can't read print music, they've got very little chance of teaching braille music, so it's a double thing there. However, there are some good schemes to introduce print music. I think it's Harry Cox, who's a QTVI London way, who's doing some great stuff there.

Like braille itself, braille music is not difficult. It just requires effort and I think all the teachers, I hope, might agree, the more you do it, the easier it gets.

Melanie Pritchard: The RNIB have a new navigable library where you can request something and have it sent to you and then you dispose of it rather than sending it back. Is that the same with braille music, because that could make it more available and that might really help you, Anne?

James Bowden: Yes, I think you can request stuff from the library. I don't know how much is yet up and running, but certainly it is the intention.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Thank you, James. We're going to come to Judith next and then George Bell.

Judith Furse: I was concerned to hear that there's not very much suitable material for teaching teenagers and I'm wondering, whose responsibility is that? Should we be campaigning for the RNIB to be producing some? Should we be looking to independent producers to try to come up with something? Surely this isn't rocket science, it should be possible to produce something for teenagers.

Kirsten Roberts: VIEW, Vision Impaired Education Workforce, is an association for everybody who works in the education of VI children and young adults. They are currently undertaking a massive project, whereby a lot of these sorts of things are trying to be sorted out. There's a lot of resource sharing going on. I think that is due to end in November, so we might see something come out of that. That could be a way forward. I know certainly lots of people are very desperate, as you say, Judith, to get something that is more appropriate and equally, as I think it was Christine raised earlier, teaching Abi to a teenage boy, for example, or a young boy even, is not so great.

We've also got to think about, what we get now, a lot of children who have English as their second language, as an additional language, so they didn't learn it first. I've spent quite a lot of my career teaching students like that and we need to make resources accessible to them as well, and available to them to learn braille in English.

So, there's a lot of things that need doing. It's going to take a lot of time, but I do think VIEW, in collaboration with the University of Birmingham, VICTAR, I believe, are considering these sorts of things. How quickly it will come on board, I don't know, but I totally agree with you and I know the other panellists do as well.

Christine Williams: I'd like to just add there, I'd like to think that the youngster themselves are asked about the sorts of things that they would like to have produced in some very general terms for these resources and their opinions sought as well as everybody else making the decisions.

Kirsten Roberts: I'm sure they will have thought about that.

Ben Mustill-Rose: James has his hand raised again.

James Bowden: Two points and I absolutely agree that we need age-appropriate, relevant material. That probably means you're on a treadmill, because what's relevant now will be different in five, ten, 15 years time. So that probably means you'll need to produce new books, new courses all the time. Language changes, interest changes, what's current affairs changes.

The other interesting thing about the courses like the Abi books, the Fingerprint, and the other reading courses from the RNIB, is they only actually use fully contracted braille. Now, that sounds completely odd when you're teaching braille, but what they do is they only use vocabulary which uses the signs which have been taught, so you can't have the word "she" until you've introduced the "sh" sign. You can't have the word "through" until you've done dot 5 signs, which makes things quite difficult at the early stages. I wonder what you good teachers think about that. Is that a sensible approach or do you think the language should be completely free and then the student has to learn the word up to possibly four different ways before it's settled?

Melanie Pritchard: For my teaching, I have found that an excellent approach, James, and I wouldn't want to teach someone to write out the word "through" and then in chapter whatever it is, suddenly say it's dot 5 "th" sign. I think that is really confusing for a learner. While I take the point about resources and everything else, and I know George is going to pop on in a minute and he'll tell us that Duxbury can actually produce braille with some signs in and some not in, which is brilliant, but when you're trying to teach it, I like the Fingerprint approach actually.

Kirsten Roberts: I'm going to upset the apple cart, because I totally disagree. I much prefer the Duxbury way of doing it, that as you say, I'm sure George is going to talk about it. You can set it to a specific level so that the child can be at that level. You can also now do this on BrailleNotes for example, as well, so the BrailleNote internal braille table can be set at a specific level, so all the menus and everything can be put to that level which the child is at. But I think if we're thinking longevity, both for resources as James was saying, then we need to take that approach, but also the child is going to also need to use technology, so be able to touch-type and be able to spell and one of the things is that VI children are often quite poor spellers, not always but quite often, and I know I was taught to spell both ways and I'm sure most braillists are taught that, but I don't see any reason why they can't learn both ways, or however any different ways it is, whether it is four ways.

Yes, they have a lot to take in, in that way, but it's over a longer period of time and also they have a lot to take in, in life. When you're using technology, you have to learn how to do lots of different things in different ways, so in a way it's just a good start.

Dave Williams: Let's bring George in. They think they know what you're going to say, George. Are they right?

George Bell: I think most of what I was going to say has been covered, but certainly this question of what is the student interested in, is a very important one, because that way you can obtain interesting material from all over the place at the moment, if they're interested in spaceships or warships or shopping or anything, you can obtain material which you can then use at the appropriate level that you're teaching up to, is one thing.

The other thing is at the moment Duxbury does handle certainly the UK courses of the UEB Braille In Easy Steps, if you're using that for the youngsters, UK UEB Fingerprint for more adult types, and the UEB Take Off series, so those are three and we'll add more if the demand is there. The beauty of that is that if you've got something like Fingerprint, you can spend weeks at a particular level until the student is comfortable before you move on to the next one, in addition to the course material that you've got.

So, I'll close down now and let Jeff come in, as I'm sure he's got something valuable to say as well.

Jeff Bashton: A couple of quick points. Firstly I'd like to thank the three of you for your non-dogmatic approach. That's absolutely great. In my personal experience, what has done a great disservice to braille and other things where difference is required, whether it be BSL or braille, is the concept of normalization. It's thought that everyone should be the same. That's why braille has often been shouted down in the past, because it's different and why should blind people be different, even though difference can be empowerment.

My last point is, are you saying to us that we should advocate and see what we can do to get a reading scheme or age-appropriate material and where do we start? There are plenty of reading schemes for sighted children. It seems to me a gross injustice that there aren't similar things for blind people.

Melanie Pritchard: The reading schemes that are available for sighted people are available to braillists as well because they're available on RNIB Bookshare. It's just that they are not specific to teaching braille contractions in a specific way, like the braille reading schemes would do, as James alluded to earlier. So, no, I wouldn't be advocating at this point as a collaborative for reading schemes, because I think if you're a good teacher, you can use those to teach the braille in the way that you need to and that adds to the interest and, to link into your point that being different, actually helps keep students doing the same things. Even if they're reading it in braille, they're still doing the same things. As I said earlier, I think there are things on stream anyway in terms of newer reading schemes and things.

In terms of the different, that's a really interesting point. That's a lot of the reason why a lot of parents and a lot of children do not want to learn braille because they don't want to feel different or don't want to seem different, don't want to look different. I think it's important actually to get over that and to encourage them that, yes, they are reading a different way, but we're not talking a different language, we're not talking a different code, we're just talking a different use of fingers instead of eyes, and, yes, there is a really snazzy shorthand. I tend to encourage it by a display in my classroom, whereby I talk to a lot of blind kids and say, "What do you use braille for?" and things like, "I use it for reading in the dark when my parents don't know I'm still awake," or, "I use it for writing down phone numbers really quickly." So, encouraging that sort of thing, so why is braille used in the real world.

Holly Scott-Gardner, who is a member of this group as well, is a massive advocate for that and I've taken a lot of ideas from what she's said as well, over the last few years, because I think it is really important. How can we make braille 21st century? Yes, Louis Braille was amazing, he's fantastic and we can teach all of that, we can teach the history, but how can we make it now?

Christine Williams: I think technology makes that more attractive as well, because a lot of younger people do like technology and it's not like having to carry huge big books around, as we used to 50 years ago, and I think that is helping to deliver a bit of a rebirth almost for braille. People are finding it more interesting because they can use it on their iPhone and such. I think that is really helping.

Ben Mustill-Rose: Great question from the chat from John. Why do the panel think that so many people are ready to dismiss braille today and say that it is no longer relevant?

Christine Williams: What I hear quite a lot is, "Oh, you don't need braille because you've got audio books, technology and whatnot, so why do you need braille?"

Dave Williams: And what would your response to that be, Christine?

Christine Williams: If you don't learn braille, then for reading, audio books, it's second-hand, isn't it? So, in order to interact with the written word, you need to be able to do it for yourself, make up your own mind, and that's where the braille comes in, and not rely on somebody else's interpretation.

Dave Williams: Find your own voice rather than that of an actor or a synthesizer.

Christine Williams: Yes, definitely.

Dave Williams: Mel?

Melanie Pritchard: That would be more or less what I would say.

Kirsten Roberts: I would say, "How are you going to know what medicines and medications you have got in your hand if you can't read the braille label?"

Matthew Horspool: Kirsten Roberts concluding a live panel discussion on teaching braille recorded on Tuesday, 29th June 2021.

The other panellists were Christine Williams and Melanie Pritchard. The session was moderated by Ben Mustill-Rose and hosted by Dave Williams.

There were a number of resources mentioned in this episode and you can find information about all of them in the show notes.

We hope you've enjoyed this episode of Braillecast, the official podcast of the Braillists Foundation. You can find more braille-related content by subscribing to Braillecast in your podcast client of choice or listening to Braillecast: Connecting The Dots For Braillists Everywhere on your smart speaker. You can also find past episodes on our website at braillecast.com.

If you have comments on the podcast or suggestions of topics or guests for future episodes, we'd love to hear from you. Please email help@braillists.org. You can also find the Braillists on Twitter, @braillists, or on Facebook, facebook.com/braillistsfoundation.

Finally if you like what you've heard, spread the word. New listeners are always welcome, so if you know other people who are interested in braille, please tell them where to find us.

In the meantime, on behalf of everyone at the Braillists, thanks for listening and bye for now.

The costs of producing this episode were defrayed by a grant from the Activate Fund of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust. For more information, visit wcmt.org.uk.