

# **The Croatian Association of the Blind in Supporting Braille in Everyday Living**

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## **Abstract**

Braille in everyday life enables blind persons to access needed information. The review of literature has shown that braille has an important role in everyday life and activities of blind and visually impaired persons (Orjasaeter, 1981; Zabelski, 1981; Amato, 2002; Strobel et. al 2010; Cooper, Nichols, 2007; D'Andrea, 2009; Mcmillin, 2009). The most recent research and professional paper of Croatian scientists analyse braille at the code/matrix/tactem level and implications on braille communication skills (Fajdetic, 2010), some aspects of educational support in the family of blind children and written communication (Fajdetic 2011). The Croatian Association of the Blind (CAB) has an influential and advocating role in Croatia. CAB has a long tradition of realising projects in different areas. Special attention is given toward braille by creating and supporting different activities of promotion of braille and braille literacy and the development of the Croatian Braille Notation. Also, CAB realises many different activities that help to include blind and visually impaired in everyday activities and social surrounding. The purpose of this investigation is to collect relevant information about the CAB braille related activities and through analysis present the state of art of braille in Croatia, from the CAB perspective.

To realise the purpose of this paper, data about the relevant CAB activities was collected through different available sources: web portals, conference proceedings, CAB official publications etc. Data collection and data analysis was conducted in the premises of the Croatian Association of the Blind. After collecting and analysing the content of collected data, relevant information was sorted out, and most significant examples were extracted. Data was structured in three data related groups: 1) Projects and other activities, 2) Cooperation with other institutions, 3) Croatian Braille Notation.

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# **1 Introduction**

Even though new technologies give many opportunities to blind persons, braille facilitates many every day activities: inclusion in everyday activities, professional activities, leisure time, education, and according to Sacks, Kamei-Hannah, Erin, Barclay, Sitar (2008) social interaction as well. There are couple of strategically important institutions of the blind and for the blind in Croatia. Croatian Association of the Blind (CAB) traditionally has a very important role in advocating for its members and promoting braille in the community of sighted and blind braille readers.

## **1.1 Croatian Association of the Blind (CAB)**

Croatian Association of the Blind through over 27 regional and municipal organisations includes approximately 6100 blind persons in Croatia. The association has been established in 1946 in Zagreb. During the meeting organised in the country residence of the blind, few dozens of blind persons from all over the Croatia have gathered and established their organisation. Until that moment, the care for blind persons was taken by humanitarian organisations, by people that were inducted by humanity to feel the problems of the blind. Organised care for the blind in Croatia started by the great benefactor Vinko Bek who has established a humanitarian-charity organisation "Society of St. Vid for support to the blind" ([www.savez-slijepih.hr](http://www.savez-slijepih.hr)) in 1893. Today, CAB is a modern and well organised non-governmental organisation. According to the global trends, CAB articulated its mission. The mission of the CAB is, among other things, to sensitise the public for the social needs of the blind, to achieve full inclusion in life of the blind into community as its different, but equal member, to ensure respect of the human rights and elimination of all forms of discrimination against the blind and to ensure practical application of the latest achievements in the field of education. CAB gets involved in many braille related activities and projects.

## **1.2 Braille in Everyday Life**

Few decades ago, braille was on the wane, among some students' families, and educators (Samuels, 2008). In the same time, the use of braille was seen as a sort of failure. However there is no doubt: braille has an important function in everyday life of the visually impaired person since early childhood (Orjasaeter 1981). Even though braille is often taken for granted, different projects that include site visits and teacher training for teachers and students with visual impairment have proved to have a positive impact on the students' writing and reading skills. Cooper, Nichols, 2007 conclude that, in addition of the expected project results, positive influence on social skills and interaction of the participants had been noticed.

Parents (Zabelski 1981, Fajdetic 2011), teachers (Amato 2002, D'Andrea 2009) and other important persons, have an important role in helping their children adjust to blindness by using braille. Braille helps in performing well at school and reaching for academic excellence (Zabelski 1981) or a successful professional career and employment (Mcmillin 2009).

One of the challenges that blind persons face is information access during education elementary, secondary and higher education or professional career.

Everyday life often relies on accessing information with the help of computer, and the help of computer is important in vocational setting (Strobel et al., 2006). The computer helps as a tool for web navigation, communication with e-mail or using different Microsoft Office programmes (Word processing, Excel etc.). Contemporary trends show that many visually impaired users prefer audio modes (speech synthesiser) to access information, but tactile modes as well (braille display) (Shimoura et al. 2010). The same authors also state that the audio mode is not always the most suitable one. In the era of new technologies, assistive technologies take place over more traditional tools, but for sure, braille is not easy to replace. Samuels (2008) states that the assistive technology is seen as a perfect tool to replace tactile communication method, but braille has proven its importance and it cannot be replaced in preschools, while being educated or during professional career.

## **2 The Purpose of this Paper**

The review of the literature has shown that braille has an important role in the everyday life of blind and visually impaired persons, and their sighted peers and the family. The Croatian Association of the Blind (CAB) has a long tradition supporting different activities that promote braille and braille literacy. Also, CAB realises many different activities that help to include blind and visually impaired in everyday activities and social surrounding using braille as the media.

The purpose of this investigation is to collect relevant information about the CAB braille related activities and through analysis present the state of art of braille in Croatia, from the CAB perspective.

## **3 Method and Data Collection**

To realise the purpose of this paper, data about the relevant CAB activities was collected through different available sources: web portals, conference proceedings, CAB official publications etc. Data collection and data analysis was conducted in the premises of the Croatian Association of the Blind.

After collecting and analysing the content of collected data, relevant information was sorted out, and most significant examples were extracted. Data was structured in three data related groups: 1) projects and other activities, 2) cooperation with other institutions, 3) Croatian braille notation.

## **4 Results**

Over the years, CAB had realised many projects that promote braille and support the use of braille in different activities in everyday living. Projects have been realised with resources of CAB has or with close cooperation with other institutions in Croatia. At the same time it supports the promotion through different activities and development of the braille code.

## **4.1 CAB Projects and other activities that support and promote Braille**

For more than 50 years, CAB realises adaptation activities and by doing that facilitate everyday living for visually impaired children and support them in education and integration in their social surrounding. CAB realises the activities of adaptation of books and other educational materials important for mainstreaming visually impaired children. The importance of this fundamental activity has been recognised by the Ministry of Science, education and sport of the Republic of Croatia (MSES) that financed publishing braille educational material (adaptation, editing and printing) and other donators. It is important to mention, CAB is an NGO, and to be able to carry out and finance aimed activities, experts write and apply for different projects. For example, MSES financed several projects for the adaptation of geographical and historical atlases (project "Dodirni zemlju" ("Touch the earth") Kovač ed. 2008). This activity was pointed out as an example, because publishing atlas is important example of contribution and support of blind children in Croatia, because ever since Croatia became an independent country there were no atlases available, and they are obligatory during elementary education. As new technologies have been used, CAB experts were challenged in adaptation of braille for application on the swell paper.

CAB has also published non obligatory educational material for music education and an international manual of braille music notation in braille and print.

CAB has recognised that by involving parents and children in different braille related activities are creating braille rich environment and by that promote braille and support early braille literacy. Up till recently, braille picture books and other tactile materials were not available for purchase in Croatia. Through realisation of the project "Dodirni pricu" ("Touch a story"), CAB has ensured that all preschool blind and visually impaired children have the opportunity to experience written stories and gain much needed language skills. According to Kovač, (ed., 2007) with these activities, CAB diminished negative influences of apparent limitations and shortage of material in this area.

CAB ensures that all members of the association get all important information, first hand in braille printed form, by publishing journal "Rijec slijepih" ("Word of the blind persons") in braille.

In ongoing effort to promote braille in the community of sighted braille learners and competent readers, CAB has published the guide: "Učenik s oštećenjem vida u redovitoj školi" ("Student with visual impairment in mainstream school") (Nenadic ed., 2007), and "Osnove hrvatske brajice" ("Basics of Croatian Braille") (Bakovic ed. 1994).

## **4.2 CAB Supporting Activities through the Cooperation with other Institutions**

CAB has important role in consulting different institutions, companies, government and government agencies in adaptation of everyday surrounding (with braille labelling) and technical devices for personal use, home or information access in public areas. For example, CAB consults different Croatian food and beverage companies, pharmaceutical companies. To avoid overlapping in publishing materials, CAB cooperates with other MSES licensed braille

publishers: centre "Vinko Bek", the Croatian Library for the Blind, and the Association for the Development of Education for Blind and Partially Sighted Persons. Cooperation of CAB and "Tactilis", company that specialized in 3D printing and tactile mapping, resulted with activities of corporative initiative with the society that has its foundation in synergy of all members.

Also, CAB has an important role in disseminating results through official CAB publication. Cab disseminates information about different braille related projects, activities of partner institutions and personal experiences of braille readers. For instance, Dinjar (2007) presents the experience of the Croatian Library for the Blind and implementation of the braille on pharmaceutical products, and Milković (2007) shared the information about activities of popularisation of braille among sighted children.

Among many other related activities, CAB had a consulting role in the process of making necessary adaptation of the voting ballot for blind persons. Croatian radio television released the information that blind persons could vote without the help of sighted persons. Braille voting ballot had been implemented for the first time during presidential elections in 2009.

New technologies for the blind have strong influence on information access. CAB and partners started an initiative to improve information access for blind persons in Croatia. Butorac (2009) presented the realisation of the joined CAB and CarNet (Croatian Academic and Research Network) pilot project that developed web portal for publishing adapted books for the blind. The author stated that the aim of this project was to set the standard procedure for scanning and adaptation of the material for digital publishing. Also, CAB organises ECDL courses that enable blind individuals gain skills related with different computer programmes, earn international computer skills certificates, while being able to use 8-dot computer braille.

### **4.3 CAB Commission for Braille – Development of the Croatian Braille Notation**

CAB Commission for Braille has the most important and decision making role in the development of Croatian Braille Notation.

The braille code, at the national notation level, evolves differently depending on resources a certain community (language) has. In Croatia, braille readers use grade 1 braille, even though there were some periods during the 1980's, when essential changes in the code occurred and grade 2 braille was also promoted as the notation standard. Fajdetic (2010) compared literary and mathematical context of Croatian braille notation and by applying the evolution principle in the context of braille concluded that Croatia still uses grade 1 braille. But, it is important to emphasise that in 2010, some members of the CAB Commission for Braille, have shown initiative and made suggestions for necessary changes towards a unified braille code. After this action, new trends in the development of braille code started.

## 5 Conclusion

Today, CAB is a modern and well organised non-governmental organisation, financed through projects and partnerships with different institutions in the country. It has successfully made a transition from a fully state funded organisation to an organisation with 2/3 of funding through projects and donations. According and similar to the global trends, CAB articulated its mission that successfully addresses promotion of braille in everyday living. After collecting and analysing resources and archive of the Croatian Association of the Blind, it can be concluded that this national NGO strongly supports braille everyday. At the same time, it realises a wide range of activities that aim different age group (preschool children, students and adults) and all groups of braille readers, visually impaired and sighted. Data showed that activities can be grouped in three different groups: 1) projects and other activities, 2) cooperation with other institutions, 3) Croatian braille notation.

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