BANZAT Building Better Braille:

an accreditation framework for

producers using computer translation software

**Author**: Mary Schnackenberg, Secretary-Treasurer, the Braille Authority of New Zealand Aotearoa Trust (BANZAT)

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# Abstract

A key challenge for all braille authorities is how to implement the standards we strive to set with such passion and dedication. We often hear the phrase “We are not the braille police”. But we have the power to persuade. This paper discusses the power of persuasion in the context of improving standards of braille production in New Zealand.

The paper provides a brief introduction to New Zealand and the teaching and production of braille in the context of the blindness service provision and consumer advocacy sector. The purpose and activities of the Braille Authority of New Zealand Aotearoa Trust (BANZAT) are described. Braille readers had drawn BANZAT's attention to some examples of poor quality braille in some public documents. BANZAT drew up a draft accreditation framework for braille producers and sent it out for consultation. Feedback received contributed to significant improvements in the framework. The first candidate has been accredited.

Marketing accreditation to the three audiences of requesters and purchasers of braille, readers of braille and potential candidates for accreditation is outlined. A training plan for candidates is also discussed.

The paper concludes with an outline of how the work to date has been paid for, and how work still to be completed might be funded.

# Some braille history in New Zealand

New Zealand is a small nation of some 4.5 million people in the South Pacific. It was first settled by the Māori in the 14th century. European settlement dates from the late 18th century. In 1840 Māori signed the Treaty of Waitangi with Queen Victoria and New Zealand became a British colony. Settlers including missionaries brought 19th century values of religion, education and trade to the colony.

The Jubilee Institute for the Blind was set up in 1890 under the sponsorship of the Anglican Church. The word Jubilee in the name reflects the celebration of the colony's 50th year. A school was set up in Parnell, Auckland, on the site where the now Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind is headquartered.

Braille was taught. Books were imported largely from the Royal National Institute for the Blind. There were some hand transcribed books to support the school's students, in particular, the musicians who played the organ at the nearby Anglican Church and later on the school's own organ.

Until the mid 1960s only a few students were mainstreamed into secondary schools. In 1964 the school moved from Parnell to its new site in south Auckland at Hōmai College, now the Hōmai Campus of the Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ (BLENNZ). With the move to its new site came the decision to mainstream all secondary school students. A few exceptions were students who had major additional disabilities.

A year or two before Hōmai was opened Miss Lesley Walsh joined the staff of the Parnell school. She was a New Zealand qualified teacher who had taught at Jericho Hill School for the Blind in Vancouver, Canada. There she learned not only about the education provided at Jericho Hill School, but also the issues of mainstreaming and braille codes. Under her influence, the Foundation of the Blind agreed to follow the North American braille codes and formats, including the Nemeth Code for Maths and Science.

To support its braille students in mainstream education the Foundation of the Blind enlarged its braille transcription department when the school was opened at Hōmai.

One of the transcribers of the day, whose name later became internationally known, was the late Terry Small. Terry was totally blind and grew up without the opportunity to attend a secondary school. He was an avid reader, but more importantly, he was passionate about literacy through braille and the need for blind people to win a formal education in order to get a job and earn a living just like sighted people do. Terry had a six month internship at the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress in 1976, returning to New Zealand even more convinced about the importance of mainstream education and the superior support American codes and formats provided for students in an integrated setting.

The Transcription Department moved from Hōmai to the Foundation of the Blind's head office in 2000 where it remains today.

Our teachers of braille included some wonderful blind role models. In addition, sighted teachers at the school for the blind and itinerant teachers also needed to learn braille. By 1962 the Australian and New Zealand Association of Teachers of the Blind had established an examination and awarded certificates to the teachers who passed it. In the mid 1980s the Auckland College of Education (now part of Auckland University) set up a course for teachers of the blind and visually impaired. The Braille Proficiency Certificate was established. Teachers attending the Auckland College of Education course were expected to pass the Braille Proficiency Certificate. Massey University now teaches the Postgraduate Diploma in Specialist Teaching Blind and Low Vision and its students are still expected to pass the Trans-Tasman Certificate.

New Zealand needed its own braille authority. The Foundation of the Blind's Board of Trustees knew the importance of literacy through braille and it established the Braille Committee which reported directly to the Board in 1968. But Terry Small knew there was a need to set braille standards independent of the agency that controlled the transcription of New Zealand braille and the importing of books from Britain, the United States, Canada and Australia.

The Braille Authority of New Zealand was set up in 1989. In 1994 it became an associate member of the Braille Authority of North America to maintain links with the North American codes and formats that underpin our braille production today.

The Braille Authority of New Zealand was one of the founding members of the International Council on English Braille. New Zealand's braille authority members were very much involved in the discussions that led to the development of Unified English Braille. There was widespread consultation with braille readers in New Zealand. Because we had a small population we were able to achieve face to face meetings and workshops with as many as three-quarters of our braille readers. In 2005 the Braille Authority of New Zealand adopted Unified English Braille for use in New Zealand, six months after the Australian Braille Authority made its decision to do so.

The Braille Proficiency Certificate became the Trans-Tasman Unified English Braille Proficiency Certificate in 2008. Transcription using Unified English Braille began for New Zealand schools and the library in 2008.

# The Braille Authority of New Zealand Aotearoa Trust (BANZAT)

In 2010, following extensive consultation, the braille authority became the independent trust known as The Braille Authority of New Zealand Aotearoa Trust (BANZAT). Five organisations came together to form the trust. They are:

• Association of Blind Citizens of New Zealand Inc. (Blind Citizens NZ), the leading blindness consumer advocacy group in New Zealand;

• Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ (BLENNZ), the school for blind and vision impaired students;

• Kāpō Māori Aotearoa/New Zealand Incorporated (Kāpō Māori), the leading consumer group for blind Māori;

• Parents of Vision Impaired NZ Inc. (PVI); and

• Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (the Blind Foundation).

BANZAT's purpose is to:

• set standards and to make rulings on braille code usage within New Zealand,

• maintain awareness and consistency with current international developments in all braille codes,

• accredit practitioners involved in braille production,

• promote braille as the prime literacy medium for blind people, and

• promote best practice in teaching, acquisition and distribution of braille.

BANZAT has set the standards for

• the code – Unified English Braille – with the correct treatment of Te Reo Māori; and

• format of heading, paragraph and list styles, the use and position of print page indicators and more.

In fulfilling its purpose to accredit practitioners involved in braille production, BANZAT administers the Trans-Tasman Proficiency Certificate in Unified English Braille in conjunction with the Australian Braille Authority. The certificate is awarded if candidates pass the open book examination which is offered annually.

Trustees of BANZAT are drawn from right across the sector of users, teachers and producers of braille in New Zealand. Collectively we are in a good position to know what is happening in the braille arena in New Zealand.

# The need for another braille producer qualification

## Rogue braille, the problem

In 2012 BANZAT became aware that some braille was being produced by individuals using computer translation software. Some individuals were charging for their service but were not delivering braille to the standards set by BANZAT. As we discussed the problem we were reminded that BANZAT is not just concerned about braille code and format but also about the quality of embossing, binding, labelling and packaging of the product being supplied to end users. Examples of poor production in all these aspects have been reported to BANZAT. More importantly this poor braille was adversely impacting on the participation of some adult users who needed the braille in meetings with government and other officials.

BANZAT believes that not only do end users need confidence that the braille is accurate but also those requesting and/or paying for the braille need to know that the producer is suitably qualified to transcribe the print.

As we know, braille can be produced by six-key entry of the code into a manual braille machine or on a computer keyboard. It can also be produced with computer software that translates text into braille ready format files for embossing. The Trans-Tasman Unified English Braille Proficiency Certificate examines knowledge of the braille code and the six-key entry method. It does not test knowledge of computer translation software and there is only some testing of knowledge of braille format.

## New Zealand format guidelines

BANZAT's first step towards persuading the sector to generate better quality braille was to publish format guidelines for New Zealanders using the Duxbury Braille Translator.

“Essentials of Braille Formatting” covers letters, agendas and minutes, accounts, the treatment of tables and print page indicators and tables of contents, as well as BANZAT's rules for the transcription of Te Reo Māori. Guidance is given about copyright and cataloguing and the handling of print errors that producers might encounter. It has been agreed to use the Duxbury template developed by the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (the Blind Foundation). Print and braille files of “Essentials of Braille Formatting” together with the Duxbury template are on the BANZAT website [www.banzat.org.nz/BrailleCodes.htm](file:///C:\Users\Judy%20Dixon\Dropbox\icebweb\www.banzat.org.nz\BrailleCodes.htm).

The Blind Foundation has been training its administrative staff to produce quality braille using Swift and the Duxbury Braille Translator. In 2012 Blind Citizens NZ, the consumer advocacy group, also ran its own training programme for blind people interested in becoming braille producers.

## Accreditation framework

As the next step in fulfilling its purpose to accredit practitioners involved in braille production, BANZAT set about developing an accreditation framework for braille producers using computer translation software.

We prepared a first draft and sent it out for consultation. We reached out to the Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ, the Blind Foundation and to braille readers. In addition we contacted organisations who had purchased some of the rogue braille.

In particular we wanted advice from experienced organisations about how to structure a code of practice or code of ethics and a feedback system which could include complaints. We were inspired by the Code of Conduct and the Code of Ethics of the Sign Language Interpreters Association of New Zealand. We sought guidance from the Human Rights Commission, the Health and Disability Commissioner and the Office of the Ombudsman about complaints systems.

We strove to write the framework so that it could be a foundation for building a climate of open conversation among producers, readers and providers of braille. Just as producers need upskilling as print styles and translation software are changing, so also readers of braille should be more accepting of the range of needs among braille users.

Feedback received contributed to significant improvements in the framework. To check the accuracy of our revisions we went out to the sector a second time. Although we received further requests for improvements, overall the sector was very positive about the accreditation proposal. It was adopted in March 2015.

The first individual candidate has been accredited. In submitting their work both the candidate and the BANZAT examiners realised a few tweaks were needed in the provisions for the samples of work to be handed in for assessment. The document on the BANZAT website has been updated accordingly.

Accreditation is available to both individuals and to organisations. Individuals seeking accreditation must submit self-selected samples of their own work for assessment by BANZAT that demonstrate specified criteria of braille code and format. BANZAT has resolved to give accreditation at the outset to two organisations, Blind and Low Vision Education Network NZ (BLENNZ) and the Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind (the Blind Foundation). This recognises that the production of braille is a core service of both organisations who together produce in excess of 90% of New Zealand's braille. Both organisations have been producing braille for many years. Both organisations demonstrate their commitment to uphold the principles set out for the accreditation of individuals.

The accreditation framework for individuals and organisations is not just about the technical aspects of braille production. More importantly, it is about the commitment to upholding a professional code of practice and a feedback process (which may include formal complaints) throughout the production of each braille item. Monitoring of and reporting on poor quality braille relies on adherence to the producers' quality standards or on the requesters or purchasers or end users providing feedback which may include making complaints.

The accreditation framework also provides for the cancellation of accreditation of individuals and organisations.

Individual and organisation accreditation is a once only process and is ongoing from the date of issue of the accreditation, subject to specified provisos.

BANZAT will market accredited producers on its website. BANZAT will also market this accreditation framework in particular to known purchasers of braille.

The work to write the accreditation framework was funded by BANZAT itself supported by a good deal of volunteer time.

# Training potential braille producers

At the outset BANZAT realised we would have to develop and run occasional courses to upskill those not working for BLENNZ or the Blind Foundation who wanted to produce good quality braille. The course outline is being written. As with earlier courses run by Blind Citizens NZ and the Blind Foundation it will teach the use of Swift and Duxbury in the New Zealand context of formats and correct translation of Te Reo Māori.

Our next step will be to seek funding for the course. The New Zealand Government is taking seriously the need to upskill personnel working in the disability sector. We expect to be able to tap into this source of funding. In addition there are several other potential partners who run short courses for professional development we can approach.

# Marketing the building of better braille

BANZAT trustees are working on a marketing plan. Three different though overlapping audiences have been identified. They are: requesters and purchasers of braille, readers of braille and potential candidates for accreditation as producers of braille.

There are a couple of myths that are out there. Some assume that because a blind person can read braille, therefore they will write it correctly. Some also assume that because someone offers to produce braille (sometimes for a fee) they must be doing the work properly. In our marketing we are striving to find appropriate words to promote the quality standards and commitments of accredited braille producers.

# Police and persuasion

BANZAT is not the braille police, but we can persuade. Some words from the paper published by the International Council on English Braille about “Setting up a braille authority” are of interest here.

“Braille authorities do not have actual “authority” over braille in their countries. There is no legislation in any ICEB country that gives legal enforcement to the decisions made by their braille authorities. They succeed in their work to the extent that they include and involve all stakeholders in braille in their decisions. The more inclusive and open and transparent braille authorities can be, the more likely they will be successful in promoting the use of braille and in introducing change to keep braille relevant in today's complex environment for literacy and numeracy among blind people.”

In New Zealand there is no legislation that mandates how braille should be produced and what standards should be followed. New Zealand's current climate is in general drifting away from rules for compliance in many aspects of life.

Even so BANZAT's own trust Deed calls upon us to “promote braille as the prime literacy medium for blind people”. We are challenged to do whatever we can to lift production standards so that readers of braille can have equal access to the original print from which the braille came.

BANZAT's accreditation framework and its marketing and training programme are another step along the way to honouring the purposes of the Trust in meeting the needs of braille readers.