Titolo: Braille…an essential tool for the visually impaired or blind.

Why is it the trend nowadays to tell the visually impaired/ blind and their families that Braille is out of date, unnecessary and complicated? Is Braille really no longer a useful and essential tool for people who have little or no sight?

I live in Northern Italy and my daughter was born visually impaired. She has cone rod dystrophy which is a degenerative eye condition and the syndrome she has usually leads to a serious hearing disability too. The doctors underlined early on that one of the constructive steps we could take was to make sure that she learnt Braille as soon as possible. To me it seemed obvious that that was what we would be doing.

As of nursery school, in Italy, a blind/visually impaired child is assigned a professional figure called a typhlologist who is supposedly an expert on all that which is necessary for the inclusion of blind students in the classroom. The exact responsibility of this person is somewhat mystifying but I had imagined that he/she would encourage and promote the use of Braille. In the mainstream classroom, children with sensory problems in Italy are provided with a special needs teacher and another assistant who is responsible to the typhlologist and carries out his or her instructions. We were very fortunate to be assigned a really talented and competent assistant who not only started teaching our daughter Braille, but in a very jocose, fun way, involved the whole class. Right from the beginning it became clear however that the typhlologist did not share the assistant's enthusiasm for Braille but in fact she began to obstacle the procedure. She argued that visually impaired children should be encouraged to use their remaining sight and that it was psychologically negative and stressful for the visually impaired to have to learn Braille. The assistant and the typhlologist did not see eye to eye and we realised that the assistant's days were numbered. She left before our daughter completed primary school and there was no longer anyone able to continue with Braille at school. The typhlologist insisted adamently that Braille was too difficult, too stressful, unneccessary, obsolete and insinuated that we were unfair and ambitious parents to expect her to learn this code. We had our daughter continue with braille at home privately but this meant that she was not able to use it at school as a tool. Once you know the rudiments of Braille you have to use it regularly as it's a skill which requires practice and maintenance if you want to be on a par with your peers.

My daughter is now in her second last year of language high school. She has always been able to cope with mainstream school as she is bright, motiviated and does not have cognitive difficulties. She hardly has any sight now and can no longer rely on an enlarged document, her hearing has worsened and she now needs a hearing aid too. She is fortunate to have understanding, helpful teachers, special needs teachers and a very caring assistant. Had she had Braille at her finger tips she would be much more autonomous now, instead she has to be supported by many to make school material accessible.

I would like to reach all those parents who are in doubt as to whether the effort of learning Braille is necessary. I would like all those parents who are told that Braille is superfluous to reflect on the following:

The school system lacks qualified instructors, resources and time needed to teach braille in the classroom. In most cases braille is discouraged because special needs teachers/assistants do not

know braille and they have not been given the right tools to work with. In most cases they too have been brainwashed into thinking braille a waste of time and effort. It is much easier to tell parents that braille is obsolete than to have to justify that the school or service cannot provide it beacuse it's an expense.

I find it perplexing that a person with an academic background should consider braille ' too difficult'. Shouldn't music or physics or maths be removed from school for sighted pupils then because it's generally considered difficult?

Language learning requires 4 skills: writing, reading, listening and speaking. Each skill presents a different cognitive activity and if you are learning a foreign language you are at an enormous disadvantage if you are only able to listen to the spoken language. A foreign language spoken does not allow you to discern the various words. Learning a language like English as a foreign language can be a real headache because there is little correspondence between the phonetics and spelling. You need to have something 'tangible' to be able to organise new language, spelling and structure. Karen Wolfe of the American Foundation for the Blind reports:" You can't be literate just listening. Literacy helps us to communicate and to think. You will never be truly literate without Braille".

Technology has advanced by leaps and bounds but screen readers and recorders cannot replace the ability to read and write. When giving a speech Braille is the only way to collect thoughts on paper. Braille is necessary to identify labels, medicine packages, follow directions around a city, read menus in restaurants and so on,.

Partially sighted children are forced into bad posture which in the case of our daughter caused bad scoliosis. Eye strain, headaches are part of each day and it is heart breaking watching your child try fathom out what is written on a screen. Braille allows good posture and the visually impaired can save their remainig sight for TV or other pleasure activities.

When Braille is presented to a blind/ v.i child by a competent person and the child understands it's importance for him, it is neither too difficult nor a strain. Children accept it as natural. Robert Englebretson, Prof of Linguistics at Rice University explained in a presentation:" While sighted children learned to read and write in print is seemed just so natural that I should learn to read and write Braille." Englebretson speaks about having a core attitude, valuing Braille as both natural and necessary.

Blind individuals deserve a chance at equality, and Braille provides them with this. Listening alone is not enough!