

“MAKING IT WORK!” Good Practice case study



How the development of the Tibetan Braille (local language) promotes preservation of cultural heritage with education and learning access for the vision-impaired Tibetan ethnic minority in China?

Title: Promotion of Tibetan Braille (local language)
Organization/project: Braille Without Borders
Location: Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) - CHINA
Scope: Regional (TAR)

Related articles of the CRPD

This practice relates to **article 24** concerning the right to education.

Related article of the China National Law of the Protection of Persons with Disabilities (2008)

This practice relates to :

Chapter 3 -Education, **article 29** concerning “research on Braille”.

Chapter 5 -Cultural Life, **article 48 2)** concerning “support the development of Braille books and other reading material for the visually impaired persons.”

CCP TAR Party Committee, TAR People's Government, Opinions on promotion of the disability work development, May 20, 2010, mentioned “**Develop and popularize Tibetan Braille** and Tibetan Sign Language “(point 9)

<p>KA KHA GA NGA</p>	<p>EDUCATION – EQUAL OPPORTUNITY INNOVATION BRAILLE ACCESSIBILITY – LOCAL CULTURE -INCLUSION</p>
<p><i>TARan Braille script developed by Sabriye Tenberken in 1992 at the Bonn University</i></p>	<p><i>Key words</i></p>

Background and context

According to national sample survey (2006), 45.000 of the 2.5 million inhabitants of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) are Blind or vision-impaired. In TAR, blindness prevalence is high due to climatic and hygienic reasons: dust, wind, high ultra-violet light radiation, soot in houses caused by heating with coal and/or yak dung, and lack of vitamin A.

In the Tibetan society, it is believed that blindness is a punishment for wrong doings in previous lives. Before the opening of the Braille Without Borders school, children with vision-impairment in TAR did not have access to education, leading a life on the margin of society with few chances of integration.

Description of the practice

Sabriye Tenberken, vision-impaired herself, has created the **transcription of Tibetan in Braille**. She opened a school in Lhasa **to teach students with vision-impairment in their own language**. Before the creation of the Tibetan Braille, only education opportunities in Braille for the Blind community were in mainland China, using Chinese Braille. Initially, for her own use in her study of Tibetology at Bonn University, **Sabriye developed a Tibetan script for the Blind persons**. This script combines the principles of the Braille system with the special features of the Tibetan syllable-based script. This script was submitted for close examination to an eminent Tibetan scholar, who found it to be readily understandable, simple, and easy to learn. As Tibetans until that time had had no script for Blind persons, he suggested to Sabriye that she let Tibetans who are Blind take use of it. In 1997, Sabriye traveled within TAR to investigate the possibility of providing training for persons with vision-impairment. She realised there were no programs educating and rehabilitating persons with vision-impairment within TAR and decided to found the Braille Without Borders project.

Process involved

1. The school was established in 1998, with 6 children from different villages boarding at the school. A local teacher was found and instructed in the Tibetan Braille script. The children learned the **Tibetan Braille alphabet on wooden boards with velcro dots**. Within just 6 weeks they knew all the 30 Tibetan characters and were able to count in three different languages (Tibetan, Chinese and English).
2. Today, the schools in Lhasa and Shigatse welcome more than 95 students starting with the preparatory school to later integrate mainstream schools.
3. To provide reading and working materials for the students attending the in-house and mainstream school, a **workshop for the production of Tibetan Braille materials** has been established. The school has the only Braille printing press and Braille library available in TAR.
4. A **computer program to convert written Tibetan into Tibetan Braille is under finalization**. Before, Tibetan books had to be read to a person and typed in Braille Tibetan, which was time consuming.
5. In 2004, a Governmental Special Education School was open in Lhasa. Government teachers were sent to Braille without Borders to learn Tibetan Braille.
6. Today, students with vision-impairment in special schools can learn both in Chinese and Tibetan Braille.

Resources required

- The project is mainly funded by individual donors, private companies and foundations (national and international).
- The cost of Braille related equipment is quite important: special paper, Braille printer, Braille display. Some donors are exclusively supporting the project for equipment related to Braille (such as paper).

The factors that made this practice possible

- Strong determination of the school founders.
- Training of key Tibetan Blind persons to ensure daily project management, long term sustainability and continuous research on Tibetan Braille development.
- Involvement and cooperation with the Tibet Disabled Persons' Federation (TDPF) which is the government agency in charge of disability in the region. The TDPF is always proud to mention the creation of the Tibetan Braille and the added value of Braille Without Borders school.

Some of the difficulties encountered

- The Tibetan language is very rich; with many similar spelling, combination and different way to write. But Braille allows only one system. The honorific Tibetan (coming from Sanskrit) used in religious scripture is very difficult to transcript. Extra combinations of Braille still need to be developed.
- The transcription in Braille of Tibetan books by reading is time consuming. That is why the school is actively working on the development of an OCR (optical character recognition) system in Tibetan.

- Nowadays, with the development of technologies, such as computer, e-book with screen reading devices, the necessity of Braille learning seems less essential. Nevertheless, learning Braille for studying purpose will continue. Listening to a e-book or a computer can not replace the pleasure of reading with the fingers.

The effects / impact of the practice

- ✓ The development and the promotion of the Tibetan Braille have a very **positive impact for the inclusion of persons with vision-impairment in the society**. It contributes to the preservation of the Tibetan culture and identity. Persons with vision-impairment, as any citizen of TAR, are entitled to learn in their own language, in addition to the Chinese language.
- ✓ The Braille Without Borders school has translated most of the official school manual in Tibetan, Chinese and English. When the students with vision-impairment are integrated into mainstream school, they can learn all the subjects, including Tibetan. **By accessing to education, the students showed increasing self-confidence which is a very important step to be able to face the daily life and become valuable members of the society.**
- ✓ Moreover, the project receives a lot of positive attention from the media it became renowned in TAR but also in the rest of China. Local Tibetan and Chinese community have a better attitude toward disability. By promoting the Braille, the community understands that persons with vision-impairment can also read and learn as anyone else. The community no longer sees the children with vision-impairment as victims of their fate, but as persons able to learn and be integrated in the society.

Recommendations for the replication of this practice

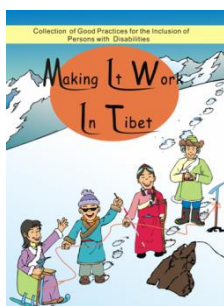
Every local language can be developed into Braille. Louis Braille made the biggest work; Braille can be adapted by making specific script. Other character from other languages can be used and adapted into your own language.



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More information

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Full project report: [Collection of good practices for the inclusion of people with disabilities](#)

Criteria for the good practices: see page 8 (Part 1 of the report)

Recommendations from the good practices: Part 3 of the report

