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# Rural Dots

## Challenging Negative Attitudes to Blindness in the Countryside

Today’s connected world offers the chance to learn, consume literature and even form new relationships with people all over the world. A good grounding in the skills of communication is key. Without literate proficiency, people struggle to express themselves or gain employment. But if you are blind or visually impaired, how do you participate in such an essential part of life?

For millions, the answer to that question is braille, the tactile writing system which allows blind people to read and write the letters and symbols of many different languages and forms of notation like mathematics and musical scores. It doesn’t use a modified alphabet or punctuation system, so once it has been learned a student is able to develop their reading, writing and other skills in tandem with their sighted peers.

In many countries around the world, braille is taught from an early age. Unfortunately, not everybody is in a position to receive such a thorough introduction. A large number of people in developing nations or rural communities suffer from a shortage of instructors, funding or awareness that it even exists. I spoke to Isabel Del Castillo, a teacher from Mexico, to learn about the challenges and negative attitudes towards disability she faced while growing up in the countryside and why now, at the age of thirty, she’s trying to spread awareness and teach the concepts of literacy which she missed out on during her own childhood.

Isabel was born in Tamuín, a rural town in the state of San Luis Potosí. “When you are born blind here, it is likely that your future will consist of staying at home, sitting in a corner listening to the television," she told me. However, she was fortunate enough to have an older sister who would read her fairy tales and other stories to stimulate her imagination. She faced issues in the wider community, though – the local school which her siblings had attended couldn’t cope with a blind student, and it wasn’t until the age of eight that she learned about the existence of special education schools from her eye doctor. “That day, I came home with butterflies in my stomach, happy but scared at the same time. Most of all I was full of questions."

Sadly, Isabel and her mother were met with disappointment upon travelling the twenty miles to the nearest such school. Working mostly with learning difficulties, they had only one other blind pupil and no braille teacher to speak of. “They decided to send a member of staff on a two-week crash course and we could at least learn the alphabet and some simple words. But I wanted to find more stories and perhaps create my own." That teacher’s limited knowledge, along with a slate and stylus purchased by her mother, allowed Isabel to become proficient enough in reading and writing within three months to transfer to a school with sighted peers for the first time. “I love a challenge, but in that school everyone would look at me like I was a rarity, because that's what the culture said I was."

Access to accessible textbooks was extremely limited, and braille examination papers were unheard of. “I enjoyed school using whatever materials I could get my hands on. Sometimes I would write my own practice tests, dreaming of how wonderful it would be to not have to wait for my classmates to finish an exam so that I could dictate my answers to the teachers. But I didn't mind those obstacles; I was just happy to finally be at school where I thought I could learn everything." That enthusiasm rewarded Isabel with some of the highest marks in the school, a trend which continued up to university level where she obtained an undergraduate degree in Law. By that point she’d swapped the slate and stylus for a laptop and screen reader, but braille played a key role in learning English, something she’d wanted to do since she was eleven years old. “Being able to read English braille improved my speech and helped me get closer to the language – when I read braille the content and structure sticks in my mind much more than when I listen."

On a visit to England, Isabel had the opportunity to finally learn contracted English braille, this time using a Perkins Brailler and braille notetaker for the first time. “I was impressed by the difference in speed when writing with those devices, rather than trying to keep up using a slate and stylus. I don't have anything against those tools, but I now know there are better ones out there." It’s this knowledge which she is now seeking to bring back to Mexico. Three times per week, she tries to share the gift of literacy and other skills she’s gathered along the way with the blind people in her area. Her youngest student is five years old and hasn’t had the chance to attend school yet. Her oldest is a retired teacher of Psychology who lost his sight due to illness and was subsequently shunned by his former colleagues – he’s now learning to use a braille keyboard with his iPad to further his learning.

"At the moment I do this voluntarily, hoping that for my students, braille will be the passport which allows them to travel to places both real and imaginary as it has been for me." Isabel faces an uphill struggle when trying to convince people that her project is worthwhile and persuading her students of their right to an education and place in society. However, her own thirst for learning provides proof that with the right attitude, you can turn relatively little into a lot. “It doesn’t matter what you start with, everybody has the right to gain knowledge and the skills to express themselves. My perspective has changed so much after visiting the UK and seeing that blind people there can afford to take their access to education for granted. I believe everyone should have that chance."