

MAKING STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT'S RIGHT TO ACCESS TEXTBOOKS REAL: THE ROLE OF MINISTRY OF EDUCATION IN PUBLISHERS' VIEWS

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Abstract

Access to textbooks in accessible format is one of the important barriers generations of students with visual impairment in Thailand face in their education. The purpose of this paper is to present a part of findings yielded from the study of students with visual impairment's right to access textbooks in the perspective of publishers who are copyright owners. The main question was what are the essential factor to make students with visual impairment's right to access textbooks real.

A semi-structure interview was employed to inquire administrators from four major publishers who are approved by the Ministry of Education to produce and sell textbooks under the national curriculum to schools nationwide.

Results showed that in the views of publishers, the Ministry of Education is the important stakeholder to make the right to access textbooks of students with visual impairment real. Publishers are ready to collaborate provided that the Ministry of Education issues a clear policy to deal with the textbooks electronic files. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should initiate the establishment of a central centre/organization to reproduce, store and distribute textbooks of publishers to students with visual impairment.

People may consider that publishers who are copyright owners are the important factors to make the right to access textbooks real for students with visual impairment. However, findings of this study indicate that in order to mobilize this issue Ministry of Education needs to take responsibilities. We will not achieve inclusive education for all children if students with visual impairment still being left unable to access their textbooks just as other sighted peers.

Keywords: students with visual impairment, right to access, copyright owners.

Introduction

Access to textbooks in accessible format is one of the important barriers generations of students with visual impairment in Thailand face in their education. (Sirirungruang, 2011) Resource teachers in mainstream schools who are expected to provide extra tutorial to students with visual impairment and to provide advices to subject teachers regarding students with visual impairment, however, have to change their role to become persons who reproduce accessible textbooks and learning materials. Regardless of the advance technology nowadays, the reproduction of textbooks in accessible

formats still require extensive resources; i.e., human, time and budget. This is because resource teachers have to manually retype the whole textbooks into electronic format before converting the file into other accessible formats such as braille. With the advancement in computer technology, textbooks are now being prepared and produced using computers. (Dakin and Wijesena, 2005) Thus, the new possibility opens up for students with visual impairment. The ready available electronic files of the textbooks means that the reproduction of these textbooks into alternative formats that are accessible to students with visual impairment can be done with less time (Dakin and Wijesena, 2005; Roos, 2007) and less cost (Harpur and Suzor, 2013). Nonetheless, studies show that publishers who are copyright owners are reluctant to provide electronic files. (Harpur and Loudoun, 2011)

This paper, therefore, would like to find out views of textbooks publishers who are copyright owners to learn what the publishers think are the essential factors need to be in place to make the right to access textbooks of students with visual impairment real.

Research Methodology

This research is a small-scale qualitative research. A semi-structured interview was employed to inquire administrators from four major textbooks publishers. These publishers were those who were approved by the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards under the Office of Basic Education Commission, Ministry of Education to produce and sell textbooks under the national curriculum to schools nationwide. (Learning Media Development Group, Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards, 2010)

Results

The results presented in this paper is a part of a study “Right to Access Textbooks of Students with Visual Impairment: A Perspective of Publishers who are Copyright Owners” which aimed to find out about publishers’ awareness regarding students with visual impairment and their views towards students with visual impairment right to access textbooks. Results presented in this paper derive from the recommendations of the publishers of what they think would be essential factors to make students with visual impairment’s right to access textbooks just as their sighted peers real.

The interviews with four publishers found that around ninety per cent of textbooks were in print format. Publishers were willing to approve their textbooks to be reproduced into Braille or audio books by authorised organisations provided services to students with visual impairment. Nonetheless, when the researcher asked whether or not it would be possible to request the electronic files of the textbooks from the publishers in order to shorten the process and to reduce the cost of reproduction, they were quite reluctant. Publishers were worried about the security of the files.

“If we provided the files and they {organizations} reproduce them {files} into Braille, that’s all right. But those organizations must guarantee that they will not pass the files to other parties. They have to take good care of the files. They use the files to provide non-profit services for students with visual impairment, that’s no problem. However, they should have a rule or measure to ensure that our files will not leak out to other places.” (Publisher A)

“As a content producer, we don’t want our files to go out from our company...it’s related to copyright and the possible leakage of the manuscript. If there’re ways to

ensure the security of the files, I think companies would be glad to be a part in producing these {accessible} books.” (Publisher B)

For most of English textbooks and exercise books, publishers bought the license from publishers overseas so they were not sure they could provide the electronic files of these books due to copyright issue. However, publishers indicated that if government had a clear policy, they were prepared to try to negotiate with the international publishers.

“Actually, if there’s a clear policy or project, we’re prepared to be a mediator to negotiate.” (Publisher C)

When asked what would be the recommendation from publishers should they have to provide electronic files for the reproduction of accessible textbooks for students with visual impairment, publishers stated that it is necessary that there must be a central centre/organization which will act as an intermediary to coordinate, monitor and protect the possible leakage of the files in the way that may jeopardize publishers’ business. Options were suggested by the publishers but all of them indicated that publishers would like the government to act as an intermediary and collaborate with other relevant organizations – both private and public.

“Ministry of Education may act as a host and collaborate with other institutions provided services in the whole education system; i.e., non-formal education, vocational education and basic education.” (Publisher A)

“We may upload the files into the web platform that’s established by the government and students with visual impairment log in to read books.” (Publisher B)

“There must be a centre...and it should be headed by the government because it will be credible when requested for collaboration from other organizations. Moreover, if the government has to provide education for children, it should cover every child.” (Publisher C)

“I think if the centre/organization is hosted by private organizations, they will get less collaboration because publishers may not see the importance as much as the centre/organization that is hosted by the government.” (Publisher D)

The interviews with the four publishers in this study showed that in order to make the right to access textbooks of students with visual impairment real, the government must initiate and issue the policies or rules and regulations to support the accessible textbooks reproduction process.

“Suppose that there’s a rule and regulation to require publishers that any textbooks published must submit the electronic files to the organization. This organization will then reproduce the files into Braille books or other alternative formats.” (Publisher A)

“Of course, they {government} can do but they will have to initiate to issue the policy.” (Publisher B)

Moreover, before the textbooks were approved by the Ministry of Education as the textbooks that schools nationwide could select as textbooks to be used in their schools, publishers had to submit the files of the textbooks for approval. Therefore, the Ministry of Education already had those files.

“There’s the Bureau of Academic Affairs and Educational Standards that we have to connect with. It’s true that all books we published did not have to be submit for approval from the Ministry but textbooks that children had to use in their classes, we had to submit for approval.” (Publisher A)

“Some books may be very popular but if we didn’t receive the approval from the Ministry, we couldn’t sell it to the schools.” (Publisher B)

“We must submit the books for approval before the books got listed in the list that schools can select as textbooks.” (Publisher C)

“Books have to be submitted to check whether or not the content is accurate according to the curriculum. Therefore, books must pass the standard check before they are announced on the website for schools to select.” (Publisher D)

Discussion

Results in this paper indicated that publishers had no problem with the reproduction of printed textbooks into braille. However, publishers were very worried about the security of the electronic files if they had to provide files of the textbooks to organizations to reproduce accessible textbooks for students with visual impairment. This finding is similar to those found with the publishers in other countries which did not have problem if the libraries for the blind reproduce their books into braille. Nonetheless, as the technology advances, libraries for the blind began to expand their books in more variety of accessible formats, publishers became very worried about the copyright of the books, especially books in electronic formats. (Roos, 2007) Similarly, a number of publishers in Australia did not respond to the request for the electronic files of the books for the use of students with print disabilities by universities. Those publishers were afraid that if they gave the files for students with print disabilities’ use in higher education, there was a possibility that the files may leak out. (Harpur and Loudoun, 2011) The reason for these findings maybe due to the fact that braille books are limited only to students with visual impairment who can read braille whilst electronic files can be read by wider groups of people and can also be duplicated or adapted easily.

Electronic files, however, are very advantageous for students with visual impairment. This is because not only students with visual impairment can promptly access the files with their assistive technology like a screen reader software, but they can also convert the files into other formats such as braille or audio easier and with less resources required. (Kramer, 2007; Mason, 2012)

Publishers, therefore, recommended the solution they thought would, in some ways, make them feel more confident. The recommendation was that the government should be the leading agency in the establishment of a central centre/organization that compiles, reproduces, stores, distributes and ensures security of the files. Publishers remarked that this central centre/organization would have the capacity to disseminate the textbooks widely to students with visual impairment. This central centre/organization could compose of private organizations provided services for persons with visual impairment. These recommendations are in consistent with those recommended by the Royal National of the Blind in the United Kingdom (Mann, 2005);

and the implementation in India led by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment who, together with DAISY India and non governmental organization working with persons with visual impairment, established a system that manage the distribution of accessible books to persons with print disabilities. (Pillai, 2012) Other countries such as Canada and Ireland also established a central depository of accessible textbooks for students with visual impairment. (Harpur and Loudoun, 2011)

Similar to the findings of Harpur and Suzor, 2013 publishers in this study also considered the market of textbooks for students with visual impairment to be too small for the beneficial investment. Thus, they suggested that the government must provide a budget to make available accessible textbooks for all students with visual impairment. In addition, from the economics point of view, the central centre/organization would also allow the efficient use of limited resources.

Conclusion

People may consider that publishers who are copyright owners are the important factors to make the right to access textbooks real for students with visual impairment. However, findings of this study indicate that in order to mobilize this issue Ministry of Education needs to take the leading role. The central centre/organization as well as the clear policy or rules and regulations are essential factors considered by the publishers. We will not achieve inclusive education for all children if students with visual impairment still being left unable to access their textbooks just as other sighted peers.

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