

## ABSTRACT

Particularly in recent years, prompted by the need to gain greater independent access to a wider range of information, many persons who are blind make extensive use of screen access technology, optical character recognition devices, refreshable Braille displays and electronic notetakers in a variety of contexts. These reading and writing media have proved to be so useful and effective, raising debates in the literature on whether there is a decline in the use of Braille, or whether Braille as a reading and writing medium would become obsolete. Following a discussion on the development of tactual reading and writing media as part of an historical background to blindness, as well as an evaluation of the various reading and writing media used in South Africa by persons who are blind, this study, using a quantitative approach with a survey design, aimed to determine the impact of the various reading and writing media on the education and employment of persons who are blind. Based on the findings of the study, what emerges forcefully with regard to the preference of a medium for reading or writing is that a greater number of persons who are blind prefer Braille and computers with speech output. Notwithstanding this, there is support for the need to provide instruction in the use of the various reading and writing media, highlighting the critical value and role of the various media. Additionally, while persons who are blind appear to be convinced that computers will not replace Braille, they were, however, divided on whether there is a decline in the use of Braille, and whether computers would replace audiotapes. Finally, conclusions, based mainly on the findings of the study are drawn, and recommendations, both for future research, and for an integrated reading and writing model, are made.

### **Key terms:**

Blindness; Blind persons in education and employment; Reading and writing media; Impact; Braille; Audiotapes and talking books; The Optacon; Computers with speech output; Optical character recognition devices; Refreshable Braille displays.