

THE AUSTRALIAN

Mandy Shuk-Man Lau wanted to design a toy for blind children

JILL ROWBOTHAM THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 05, 2012 12:00AM



Mandy Shuk-Man Lau, who has invented a toy to help vision-impaired children learn braille, is a finalist in the worldwide James Dyson awards. Picture: David Geraghty Source: News Limited

GLOBAL declines in braille competency prompted Mandy Shuk-Man Lau to design the Reach and Match educational toy for vision-impaired pre-schoolers as part of her masters in industrial design at Monash University last year.

"Reading" for the blind has dropped off steeply since children with sight problems were integrated into mainstream schools, hastened by the advent of talking computers, electronic books and books on tape.

Ms Lau says there are also fewer teachers of braille, and a range of disincentives for tackling it, including that it is difficult to learn and that braille typewriters are cumbersome and noisy.

"I wanted to design a toy for blind children because I understand the global decline of braille is a problem," Ms Lau said.

"Parents are concerned about it. It was to give the children exposure to braille and to be a "bridging" toy, something children can enjoy together, those without vision or with vision."

One side of Reach and Match consists of soft mats that can be arranged into a pathway, designed for sight-impaired children who are wary of starting to walk. It includes introductory braille alphabet exercises.

When the mats are turned over, and rearranged as a square, toddlers match discs to depressions in the surface, touching and manipulating with hands, feet and other body parts. They begin to understand the links between touch, shape and sounds.

Last week it was announced that Reach and Match had made the finals in the worldwide James Dyson awards.

"I am trying very hard to seek funding to develop and commercialise the toy and make (it) happen," Ms Lau said.

Her interest in designing aids for people with disabilities goes back to her undergraduate days at Hong Kong Polytechnic University, where she graduated with first-class honours in 2009.

As part of research for creating a way to help visually impaired people manage supermarket shopping, she attended a workshop conducted in the dark.

When she won a scholarship to Monash, she was keen to pursue her interest. The result was Reach and Match, and a high distinction in her masters. Ms Lau plans to return to university for doctoral studies, once she has some more experience in the workforce.

"I am thinking about another design, for another age group of visually impaired, but also with educational applications, but I haven't finalised my concept yet," she said. "And I have another idea to help people with hearing problems, because during my research I also studied the other senses."

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