

Including Students with Deaf-Blindness in General Education Classes

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Abstract: This article describes three field-tested approaches to planning educational programs in an inclusive setting for students who are deaf-blind, making decisions about support services, and developing lesson accommodations to include the students in typical class activities.

Historically, students with deaf-blindness have attended special education schools and classes on the assumption that their unique needs could not be appropriately addressed in more typical educational settings. Because of the national movements toward inclusive education and school restructuring (Sailor et al., 1989; Villa, Thousand, Stainback, & Stainback, 1993), these students are being afforded new opportunities to receive appropriately individualized education within general education classrooms alongside peers without disabilities (Ford & Fredericks, 1994; Haring & Romer, 1994).

Many students with deaf-blindness have significant orthopedic and cognitive disabilities in addition to their sensory impairments (Baldwin, 1994; Baldwin & Bullis, 1988). When people who are accustomed to special education schools and classes think of placing students with deaf-blindness and multiple disabilities in general education classes, they usually raise a number of legitimate questions about whether the students will receive an appropriate education. Among these questions, three are basic: 1) How are educational programs for individual students in inclusive settings designed? 2) How can it be determined which services are needed to support the students in these settings? and 3) How can individualized lesson accommodations be developed to include the students in typical class activities?

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This article summarizes some of what we have learned over the past six years from students with deaf-blindness, their families, teachers, and related service providers in general education schools and classes. These ideas are based on a series of research studies, a set of field-tested strategies, and our direct experiences in the schools.

The successful education of students with deaf-blindness in inclusive educational settings requires the implementation of a constellation of exemplary practices, including involvement of the family, teamwork-collaboration, curricular planning and adaptation, and transition planning, used in combination (Fox & Williams, 1991; Meyer, Peck, & Brown, 1991). Thus, the potential impact of the strategies and ideas presented in this article are affected by the extent to which other exemplary practices are contextually individualized and implemented.

The remainder of this article is divided into three sections. The first section presents our definition of *inclusive education* and insights that we have gained from general education teachers who have worked with students who are deaf-blind. The second section provides information in response to the three questions posed in the introduction, and the third section offers suggestions for future directions.

Definitions and insights

We believe that inclusive education has at least six basic characteristics (Giangreco, Baumgart, & Doyle, in press):

1. All students are welcome in general education classes in their local schools. ("Inclusion for some" is a contradiction in terms.)
2. Students are educated together in groups in which the number of those with and without disabilities is proportional to the local population (for example, 10–12% have identified disabilities of some sort).

3. Students with various characteristics and abilities participate in shared educational experiences while pursuing individually appropriate learning outcomes with necessary accommodations and supports.
4. Shared educational experiences take place in settings, such as general education classrooms and work sites in the community, that are frequented predominantly by people without disabilities.
5. Educational experiences are designed to enhance individually determined valued life outcomes for students and therefore seek to maintain an individualized balance between the academic-functional and the social-personal aspects of schooling.
6. Inclusive education exists when each of the previously listed characteristics occurs daily.

A study by Giangreco, Dennis, Cloninger, Edelman, and Schattman (1993) chronicled the experiences and perspectives of 19 general education teachers, each of whom had a student with deaf-blindness in his or her class (grades K-8). Although all the teachers described their initial reaction to the proposed placement of the students as cautious, fearful, or negative, 17 became more positive and eventually were proactive in planning with the educational team for the education of these students. They usually started with something as simple as directly interacting with teaching the students. They reported that doing so was not as difficult as they first imagined, even though they had little or no training for this new task. Over time, the teachers reported that their role with the children evolved from that of host to teacher.

The approaches that the teachers found most helpful in facilitating the inclusion of the students with deaf-blindness were built on the similarities and abilities of all students. Adaptations accommodated the unique needs of the students with deaf-blindness, so they could participate in activities with peers who did not have disabilities. The favored learning experiences were active and participatory (such as projects, games, laboratories, field study, and group problem-solving). Teachers who modified approaches to learning to include the students with deaf-blindness frequently found that many or all the other students benefited as well. This finding was reported in other research (Giangreco, Edelman, Cloninger, & Dennis,

1993) that surveyed parents of children who had a classmate with deaf-blindness.

The teachers acknowledged that they needed support from others (including parents, special educators, teacher assistants, and related service providers) and judged the usefulness of the support based on how it was provided. They viewed support that they considered disruptive to the class routine, stigmatizing for the students, or unnecessarily specialized unfavorably. They also identified alternatives that reflected the types of support they appreciated receiving, including being part of a team that worked together to achieve shared goals and ongoing moral and technical support.

Educational programs and services

DESIGN OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Educational teams use Choosing Options and Accommodations for Children (COACH) (Giangreco, Cloninger, & Iverson, 1993) to plan an Individualized Education Program (IEP) that reflects what a student's family identifies as valued life outcomes (such as social relationships and health). A national expert validation study (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1993) established that COACH is an educational planning tool that is congruent with many exemplary practices for all children.

COACH consists of three parts. Part 1 (Family Prioritization Interview) is used to identify family-selected priority learning outcomes for the student. Part 2 (Defining the Educational Program Components) is used to 1) translate these outcomes into goals and objectives for the student's IEP, 2) assist the full team (including the family) to identify other important learning outcomes in addition to those selected exclusively by the family, and 3) determine general supports and accommodations to be provided to or for the student to allow his or her access to and participation in the educational program. Part 3 (Addressing the Educational Program Components in Inclusive Settings) is used to determine options for addressing the components of the student's IEP in general education classes and other settings with people who are not disabled through the use of a scheduling matrix and guidelines for adapting lessons.

In a recent study (Giangreco, Edelman, Dennis, & Cloninger, in press), the use and impact of COACH was evaluated with 30 students (aged 4-21) with deaf-blindness who

attended general education classes either full time (83.3%) or part time (16.7%). The participants (educational team members, including special and general education teachers, parents, and related service providers) reported that when COACH was used in ways that were consistent with those described in the manual, COACH 1) helped them design IEPs that were appropriate for implementation in an inclusive setting, 2) provided a practical way to operationalize the tenets of collaborative teamwork, 3) improved or established positive relationships between parents and professionals, 4) provided substantive opportunities for parents' involvement in the development of their children's IEPs, 5) assisted in establishing a shared framework and a set of common goals, 6) prompted team members to look at educational planning from new perspectives, and 7) resulted in positive educational and valued life outcomes when used in conjunction with other promising practices.

DETERMINATION OF SERVICES

Although we believe that competent general education teachers are able to educate students with deaf-blindness, the unique sensory and communication needs of these students require specialized support services. Therefore, it is not unusual for a student's team to include a variety of support personnel. The presence of an extensive set of support personnel, although helpful, may result in fragmented educational programming and conflicts among team members as an outgrowth of ambiguous roles. The likelihood that support services will be ineffective is increased when each group member retains his or her own goals, rather than agreeing to shared goals, and makes decisions in isolation (Giangreco, Dennis, Edelman, & Cloninger, 1994; Giangreco, Edelman, & Dennis, 1991).

One of the few tools for determining support services that was pilot-tested (Giangreco, 1994) with teams serving students with deaf-blindness is the Vermont Interdependent Services Team Approach (VISTA) (Giangreco, 1995). VISTA provides a sequence and format for exploring the interrelationships among recommended services to ensure that support services are educationally relevant and required for the student to gain access to and participate in his or her educational program. The determination of educational support needs is accomplished through a

team process that is based on making consensus decisions on shared goals.

VISTA includes 10 interrelated guidelines that teams can follow to make reasoned decisions on support services. When used in combination, these guidelines are designed to 1) ensure the educational relevance and necessity of support services; 2) increase agreement among team members regarding which aspects of a student's program require support from various team members; 3) increase agreement among team members on which functions need to be served by support service personnel; 4) reduce unnecessary and undesirable gaps, overlaps, and contradictions in the provision of support services; 5) reduce conflicts among team members by focusing intra-team communication on student- and context-specific information; 6) help the team members match the mode and frequency of services to the proposed function of service providers; 7) guide the implementation of support services in minimally intrusive ways; and 8) assist the team members to evaluate support services based on their impact on learning and valued life outcomes.

DEVELOPMENT OF LESSON ACCOMMODATIONS

Many students with deaf-blindness who have additional disabilities have IEPs whose outcomes differ significantly from those sought for their classmates without disabilities. This situation generally raises the question, How can a student with deaf-blindness be educated in, say, a fifth-grade class when what he or she needs to learn is at a primary level? Traditionally, grade-level placement has been synonymous with curricular content; this is not the case in inclusive classrooms in which students can pursue individualized learning outcomes that are appropriate to their needs.

Two ways of conceptualizing this individualization are *multilevel instruction* (Collicott, 1991) and *curriculum overlapping* (Giangreco & Putnam, 1991). Multilevel instruction exists when students pursue individually appropriate learning outcomes at various levels within the same curricular area (such as language arts) during the same activity. For example, during dramatic role-playing, several students are learning voice intonation and signing to express the emotions of the dialogue, while the student with deaf-blindness is learning three new signs.

Curriculum overlapping occurs when students pursue individually appropriate learning outcomes at various levels across different curricular areas (such as science and social skills) during the same activity. For example, in a science class, lab groups consisting of four students each are assembling a model of the human heart. The outcomes for three of the students are to learn the names and functions of various parts of the heart, whereas the outcome for the student with deaf-blindness is to learn social skills, such as taking turns, sharing materials, and interacting appropriately with classmates.

Once team members can conceptualize how shared activities can create a forum for teaching and learning to accommodate a wide range of students' needs, the logical next question is to ask, "How do we come up with these ideas?" Effective teams who use some type of problem-solving process have a mechanism for meeting the challenges associated with inclusive education, rather than relying on specialists who may not be readily accessible or do not have the answers. Teachers who share a problem-solving process with the class tap students' natural creative abilities and provide them with a generic way to overcome various social, academic, or personal challenges that arise.

One problem-solving process that we have found effective is the Osborne-Parnes Creative Problem Solving Process (CPS). CPS has been used and researched since the 1950s in such fields as advertising, product development, business, and education (Parnes, 1992). Only within the past few years has it been applied to inclusive education (Giangreco, 1993).

CPS consists of six interrelated stages: 1) "visionizing" (creatively identifying general challenges), 2) fact finding (gathering data), 3) problem finding (clarifying the challenge), 4) idea finding (generating ideas), 5) solution finding (evaluating ideas), and 6) acceptance finding (refining and acting on ideas) (Parnes, 1988). These stages are characterized by the alternating use of divergent thinking when judgment is deferred and convergent thinking when judgment is engaged. CPS helps participants to clarify the problem, propose and select ideas to solve the problem, develop a step-by-step plan, and take action. In response to the needs of students with deaf-blindness and other severe disabilities, shorter and more focused variations of CPS have been devised to address lesson adaptations in inclusive class-

rooms (Giangreco, Cloninger, Dennis, & Edelman, 1994).

Future directions

Approaches to educational planning and implementation provide a starting point for expanding the opportunities available to people with deaf-blindness to gain access to and experience environments and activities that have long been available to people without disabilities. As educational opportunities increase, we propose the following directions for the future:

- Special educators and related service providers need training to apply their specialized knowledge and skills in ways that general education personnel will find supportive.
- Preparation programs for general education teachers should promote teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion, so teachers will welcome students whom they are unaccustomed to teaching.
- Professional preparation and in-service training programs need to replace consultation with experts with collaborative teamwork.
- Additional methods should be developed to plan for and implement IEPs in inclusive settings to account for the variations in families' needs, preferred styles of interaction, and cultural traditions.
- Families have to be recognized as critical members of the team and be encouraged to become partners in the education of their children.
- The provision of support services needs to be more individualized, flexible, and portable, so people who are deaf-blind are not limited by the current configuration or location of services.
- Multiple forms of research need to be conducted to gain a fuller understanding of the effect of innovations on people who are deaf-blind.
- Efforts to encourage self-advocacy by people who are deaf-blind should be expanded to ensure that these personnel perspectives are accounted for when decisions are made that will affect their lives.

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