

Beyond the Classroom and into the School Community

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Introduction

Students who are deaf-blind may have better opportunities for learning and develop a greater sense of belonging and communication with the world around them if they can increase the diversity and frequency of direct experiences within natural environments. One way to accomplish this is to expand the learning environment at school beyond the classroom doors. Broadening the frame of the school experience is especially important for students with deaf-blindness who frequently have more limited exposure to society at large.

The wider school community has many resources that are often untapped for the student who is deaf-blind. All schools have the capacity to offer children and youth with deaf-blindness an enhanced array of positive social and educational experiences with its staff and students beyond the classroom itself. These can include: 1) a larger and diverse body of students and school personnel, 2) diversity of classes and services offered, 3) multiple places in the school where students can do a variety of activities, 4) school events, 5) special clubs or activities that promote social integration, and 6) interconnection with other schools.

An Example

A school that worked more like a community was Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Massachusetts. It was the 1990s, and at that time I was doing an internship in their deaf-blind program.

Perkins was on a large campus, with several buildings and houses, old and modern. It had small roads for cars and pedestrians and lots of green areas with tall trees. They had day and residential students and a great variety of programs and services. It had an indoor pool for recreation, exercise and therapy, vending machines where the students could purchase a snack, and a greenhouse where they could plant things and observe the cycle of life. They also had a weekly field trip so the students could have enriching experiences in the community at large. The school felt like a small community within the larger community of the city of Watertown.

The sense of community at Perkins stemmed not only from its physical and operational characteristics but also from the people who worked and lived there. In their actions it was clear that they understood that they were there to support the students and create meaningful

relationships with them. Communication was at the center of this educational approach and the life in the school community. It didn't matter if the person was a teacher, a classroom assistant, a therapist, a specialist, an administrator, most of them knew how to sign and use alternative forms of communication with the students who were deaf-blind.

Also, the whole community was involved in supporting the jobs the students had on campus. For example, there was a job of recycling soda cans. All staff (educational, residential and administrative) kept their used soda cans for the students to pick up on their rounds. The student knew that he could approach any person, interact with this person and pick up the empty cans. As another example, the students could make something, and then learn about the entire process of preparing the product, packaging it, selling it at the school, saving the money in the bank or buying something they wanted.

The sense of community was also felt within the school staff. The teamwork between teachers, classroom assistants, therapists, specialists and school administrators was very horizontal. This amazed me at that time because I was coming from a culture with a more vertical structure of power and knowledge. I now view this way of working together—in which nobody in the community was more important than anyone else—as a very positive approach because it enriches the educational program and the school staff.

This non-hierarchical orientation translated into their relationships with the students as well. No matter what the student's communication system and degree of disability, the "balance of power" between student and staff was well distributed. For example, the staff offered choices throughout the day, paused and waited for the student's responses and worked with the student's strengths and preferences.

Since then I have observed a few schools here in California that have each tried to create a sense of community for all students, so students might have richer learning and social experiences. This was the case with some students who were served in inclusive settings and had the support of inclusion specialists and very involved family members. This was also the case with several teachers from special education classrooms in general education schools who helped to create learning opportunities for their students with special needs in these school communities. In all these cases the support of the administration was critical.

Possible Strategies for Creating School Communities

School may be at different stages of providing learning experiences that can go beyond the walls of the classrooms. Here are some strategies that may be useful in advancing it in that direction:

- I. Have a discussion in the school about
 - Its culture as a community, and how this culture is reflected in the education of students with special needs.
 - The importance for students who are deaf-blind to have direct experiences in natural environments.

- The idea that regardless of each person’s role at the school, everyone can contribute to and support a learning and social community for all students.
2. Think of practical ways that the school can provide learning experiences beyond the classroom setting.
 3. Identify and recognize what the school community has to offer (e.g., people, places, activities, services, classes, social clubs, etc.) and identify ways in which this diversity can provide hands-on learning experiences.
 4. Identify supports and adaptations that may be needed for students to participate in the school community.
 5. Discuss how existing supports can be more effectively utilized within the school community.
 6. Promote a more “open door” approach in which teachers from different classrooms and grades plan and do activities together.
 7. Organize short training activities for parents, administrators, students, and teaching staff on the unique needs and strengths of students with disabilities, including students who are deaf-blind.
 8. Provide training on basic interaction with students who are deaf-blind.
 9. Provide training on sign language and alternative forms of communication.

Conclusion

A school community can provide enriched and meaningful learning experiences to students with deaf-blindness because it can offer a variety of real life experiences outside the classroom setting relatively easily. This is especially important for students who are deaf-blind because they may have fewer opportunities than typical students to engage with a wider world. For a school to grow into a community that provides these opportunities, the participants need to think and talk about their school cultures, look at what each person and school community has to offer, and find ways in which these can enhance the learning experiences of all. This might also require some training for the staff on the unique needs of this population, especially in the areas of socialization and communication. The ultimate goal is to go beyond the limitations of the desk and walls of the classroom, and learn in the larger world of the school community.