

## Closing Ceremony 2015 “Student Reflections”

by Graduates of the Specialization Program in the Education of Students with Deaf-Blindness  
at San Francisco State University

In the fall of 2014, the Moderate-Severe Disabilities Program at San Francisco State University received a four-year federally-funded personnel preparation grant to prepare student teachers in the education of students who are deaf-blind entitled Specialization Program in the Education of Students Deaf-Blindness. CDBS staff collaborated with this SFSU specialization program by leading seminar sessions and providing fieldwork and internships experiences to seven selected student teachers. The following selections were compiled from reflections written by the first cohort of students in response to course readings and presentations from CDBS staff, as well as fieldwork experiences. We found that each piece selected is a strong representation of each candidate’s unique experiences, philosophies, and approaches to the fields of deaf-blindness and education.



**Edith Arias** reflected upon the importance of motivation to encourage and develop communication and a student’s individual “voice”.

*Communication in general is a key aspect of human relationships. People with and without disabilities are social beings that rely on communication to have essential needs met or have the need to socialize with others. However, when the communication process or the motivation to communicate with others is not there, an isolated and frustrated feeling becomes part of that individual who can’t or won’t communicate... As a future teacher and after observing a student who is deaf-blind in three different occasions, I now understand how important the environment is for communication.*

*I think that is what I experienced in my observations. It wasn’t that the student couldn’t communicate, but it was that she was not motivated or challenged enough to create more communication with others in her classroom...The goal for me will be to motivate the student who is deaf-blind to use more communication and to realize the power of his or her voice. In addition, to create opportunities for personal relationships to flourish and isolation diminish!*



**Jessica Coop** shares the importance of careful observation to recognize all communication attempts and to build rapport with a student.

*In Special Education, we find that sometimes we need to change the environment in order for our students to learn best. This same idea can definitely be applied to learners who are deaf-blind. It should not be seen as a problem with the student being able to communicate, but something that can be worked on when we change how we think and how we are trying to communicate... We need to be very observant as educators because anything that a student does with their body, whether hand/foot movements, vocalizations, anything could be our student attempting to communicate. When we are receptive to the child’s form of communication we can help to establish a rapport and build a richer communication. This will help impact a student’s development and educational program by giving the child a voice and the tools that they need in order to succeed.*



**Mary Gomez** shares her belief that educators must recognize and appreciate the student's view of the world to provide effective instruction and support.

*Recognizing perspective is another essential element an educator should possess as well. It is first essential that we recognize viewpoint, although we may not be able to completely understand how a student is affected by deafblindness, an educator should try and recognize perspective in order to properly support a student. What adaptations does a student require in order to reach their highest quality of life and furthermore their communicative potential? Educators must recognize the ways in which they can support a student so that they are able to communicate their wishes, desires and needs.*

*Based on our last class session, the main takeaway was that educators working with students that are deaf-blind aren't miracle workers and don't have magical powers. They are just patient, caring and observant educators who work hard in assisting students to reach their potential in as many ways as possible.*



**Kayla Kenton** reflects on the impact a dedicated and informed teacher can make on each student and his or her family.

*If a student doesn't learn the way you teach, you should teach the way they learn. An idea that makes so much sense, but is not practiced daily in the classroom. As a teacher of students with different abilities, I can appreciate every student's different way of learning. It's one of the challenges in teaching that makes this job so much fun. For example, if I were to get a student that is hard of hearing, I would get to focus on a new way of teaching my regular lessons focusing more on different senses, such as touch and sight, while keeping the lessons accessible and meaningful for the student...*

*As a well-educated teacher, it is also my duty to be a strong advocate for every family. I need to explain to the parents what their rights are and teach them how to push their child at school and at home. A parent who does not have a sensory problem did not think they would have a child with a sensory issue and most likely didn't choose to have a child with a sensory issue. Which is why it is important for the teacher to be there for the parents, not only as the advocate, but as the bank of information. It's important to give the parents some ability awareness about their own child. Giving parents information about their child's sensory needs and ability can help them feel more confident and proud of their family.*

*As Myrna discussed on the CDBS website, "I really wish I had known early that DCM (Dilated Cardiomyopathy) did not mean the end of the world for Norman, and that we could've spent more time enjoying our life with Norman and as a family" (Medina, 2009). If Myrna had a doctor or therapist at the beginning of this journey to help her advocate and support her and be more positive, this realization she talks about could have happened sooner.*

*Being creative and patient can only help when teaching a new student. Everyone learns differently and some impairments will mean that you adjust your lesson plans. Every child deserves an education and as teachers we are taking on the job to find a successful way of learning for that child! It's important to teach the way the child learns best to have a meaningful and fun learning environment.*



**Sara McGee** shares her thoughts on the importance of emotional reciprocity and meaningful relationships to enhance a student's positive self-image.

*Developing a positive self-image and a concept of self is an important to improving the quality of life of any human being. Students who are deaf-blind have the capability and the right to participate, belong and grow within their social circles and their community. It is my job to create meaningful opportunities that will extend the student's reach and contribute to his quality of life.*

*When students are deaf-blind, sharing experiences is an integral part of teaching and supporting the development of positive image and the concept of self. Whether it be play with a young child, or crab fishing with a teenager, when creating activities to share experience it is important to remember to also share in the emotion that the activity evokes and have tactile conversations to reflect on the experience afterwards. With consistent emotion sharing experiences and reciprocal interaction, connections will be made and relationships will be created. These relationships will help the student to understand the concept of self and increase his/ her self-image. The shared experiences need to be consistent and close enough in proximity so that the partner can understand and be attentive to what the student is communicating and feeling.*

*Identifying peers who are excited about interacting with their classmate would be a great step in creating more opportunities for the child's self image. When a teacher models positive, reciprocal interaction and joint attention with a student who is deaf-blind for the student's peers, the social circle for the student can grow along with the student. By providing opportunities for the student to recognize that people want to spend time with him and share experiences with him, his self-esteem with increase just as it would for every child. Creating these relationships is beneficial for all parties involved and contributes to the development of individual personalities.*



**Hillary Trainor** considers how an educator finds the balance between providing attentive, responsive support and fostering a student's independence.

*Regardless of ability and disability labels, every student needs to feel safe in their environment before they are able to learn. In the case of working with students who are impacted by deaf-blindness, laying the groundwork of a safe and responsive environment is even more essential... Because the autonomy and ability to experience the world of a child who is deaf-blind are at first entirely dependent on others in order to sift through and make meaning of the environment with which they come into contact, a teacher must demonstrate a readiness to be responsive as incidental learning arises, so connections can form between what outside "life" is taking place around a student and what it means...*

*When teaching, a teacher must also be acutely aware of how much support a deaf-blind student truly needs in order to avoid over prompting or unnecessary dependency on adults/peers. While students who are deaf-blind do need physical and frequent interactions in order to interact with the world, giving too much support can limit opportunities for the student to learn when or how he or*

she can be independent. This may also stifle a student from maintaining their internal locus of control and sense of safety. In order to maintain a student's trust and limit unnecessary support, then, a teacher must maintain a character of attentiveness, as an individual's communicative efforts and strides in independence may be communicated or demonstrated in less obvious ways than with other students.



**Dana Zimpelmann** reflects on the connection between happiness and fulfillment and the development of positive self-concept and how responsive environments, shared experiences, and positive relationships can build “moments of joy”.

*I have a lot of dreams and expectations for my students. I expect them to be independent, strong individuals with something to contribute to the world. I dream of them having strong ties to their communities, being surrounded by people who love them, and holding full time meaningful jobs. However, when I think big picture of what I really and truly want for my students; happiness and fulfillment are the big ideas that come to mind.*

*Concepts are the ideas that give meaning to our world and students with the most significant disabilities, such as deaf-blindness, will develop their own unique self concept based upon personal experience. According to NCDB's article titled “Developing Concepts with Children Who Are Deaf-Blind”, a positive self-concept begins with a responsive caregiving environment. ...as a teacher of students who are deaf-blind I can ensure that their school environment is responsive, supportive and enriching. One way to do this is to foster relationships with the student and be responsive and present when interacting and communicating with the student. Shared experiences between the student and teacher/intervener are also very meaningful and can help create a responsive school environment, especially when the experience can be repeated and the student can be reminded of the moment shared with his or her teacher/intervener.*

*As explained by Jan van Dijk, experiencing “moments of joy” can help students who are deaf-blind develop a positive self-image. At the Texas Symposium for Deaf-blindness I heard a mother and daughter present about how inclusive opportunities and being a member of the school dance team made a huge difference in the life of a girl named Rachel who had CHARGE Syndrome. In fact, feeling a sense of belonging at her school was so important for Rachel that even though her family had to make sacrifices and often her health was compromised it was “worth it” as her mother phrased it. I will never forget when her mother was describing Rachel's experiences on the school dance team and stated “van Dijk calls it moments of joy, I call it belonging, and Rachel calls it friends”. I imagine that for Rachel, who appeared to be a happy, well adjusted high school student, having friends and being a part of a team has been the most influential aspect for her development of a positive self-image.*