
critical issue that can make a difference in the future of students with visual impairments, and I hope her work will stimulate readers to consider how the variability in services can be addressed in their own states and communities.

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Jane N. Erin, Ph.D., associate editor for practice, JVIB, and retired professor, Department of Special Education, Rehabilitation, and School Psychology, College of Education, University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210069, Tucson, AZ 85721; e-mail: <jerin@u.arizona.edu>.

Contradictory Instruction of Orientation and Mobility within Virginia's Schools

Valery Kircher-Herring

Fazzi and Petersmeyer, in their book *Imagining the Possibilities: Creative Approaches to Orientation and Mobility Instruction for Persons Who Are Visually Impaired*, stated that the “most effective teaching is always a combination of art and science” (Fazzi & Petersmeyer, 2001, p. ix). The “science” of instruction may include the best practice in-

structional techniques, and the “art” may include creative approaches to teaching in different environments. In Virginia, instruction varies in off-campus communities; several smaller school districts allow off-campus instruction, whereas other, larger school districts prohibit it. This Practice Perspective discusses the outcome of a survey that was sent to all orientation and mobility (O&M) instructors in Virginia school districts about their experiences with community-based instruction. In particular, the author was interested in whether those surveyed were allowed to instruct in communities and wanted to explore the ramifications of such instruction in regard to policy and professional practice.

WHAT DO O&M SPECIALISTS DO?

An O&M instructor receives “specialized training in orientation and mobility . . . [and] has completed [an] undergraduate or graduate university training program in this area” (Po- grund et al., 2012, part one, p. 2). In 2010, the Virginia Department of Education issued the *Guidelines for Working with Students Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired in Virginia Public Schools*, which indicated that O&M instruction may take in the “community, including residential and business environments and public transportation systems” (Virginia Department of Education, 2010a, p. 14). As specially trained individuals, O&M instructors have the responsibility of teaching the concepts and skills behind O&M in all environments, including off campus in the community, whether in residential neighborhoods, rural areas, business or commercial districts, or in large cities. The O&M instructor assesses and writes individualized education program (IEP) goals that are appropriate for the student, and should always be included in the IEP team decisions when O&M services are needed.

A handbook published by the Academy for Certification of Vocational Rehabilitation and Education Professions (ACVREP) includes a

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Code of Ethics for certified O&M specialists (COMSes) that sets standards for advocating for students who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision). A COMS commits to the student he or she works with, including by “make[ing] recommendation for the continuing or discontinuing of services. . . .” (ACVREP, 2013, Commitment to Learner, para. 5). Further, a COMS will “disseminate information to service providers involved with the learner as it relates to knowledge, instruction, and experiences so as to facilitate the goals of the learner. . . .” (ACVREP, 2013, para. 13). Thus, COMSes need to inform parents and other educators of the importance of O&M services in all environments, which could be accomplished through presentations to parent groups or in-service presentations to school personnel. A COMS also determines whether or not to accept a position at a school that has abandoned the principles of O&M unless the COMS intends to modify, change, or not follow those principles (ACVREP, 2013, Commitment to Professional Employment Practices, para.1). The O&M instructors who were invited to complete the survey described here were not asked if they were certified; however, for those respondents who were certified, the ethical standards described in the ACVREP materials would be applicable.

VIRGINIA AND FEDERAL LAW

Virginia has written and published regulations that state that O&M instruction should be taught in the school, home, and community. Further, regulations cover:

spatial and environmental concepts and use of information received by the senses (e.g., sound, temperature, and vibrations) to establish, maintain, or regain orientation and line of travel (e.g., using sound at a traffic light to cross the street) (Virginia Department of Education, 2010b, p. 8).

The Virginia regulations mirror the federal law with regard to off-campus instruction in the community (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004, *Subpart* §300.34 [c] 7).

Wanda Council, the Virginia Department of Education specialist who oversees related services for visually impaired students in Virginia (personal communication, September 4, 2014), stated:

Both the Virginia regulations and federal IDEA [(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act)] regulations anticipate the need for O&M services to be considered in environments outside of the immediate school building. There are no federal or Virginia State mandates requiring off-campus O&M instruction for all students. The IEP team must consider the individual educational needs of the student when making this determination in accordance with the description of the student’s present level of performance.

The VI Guidelines are not regulatory and they do not supersede the Virginia or federal regulations. The VI Guidelines provide information and serve as a resource of suggestions for implementing services, which comply with the Virginia and federal regulations. Each local Educational Agency (not VDOE) develops local policies and procedures for implementing the Virginia and federal regulations.

The issue of inconsistent O&M instruction is further complicated because school districts are left to decide and implement policy supporting IDEA and its regulations; and, according to the O&M instructors surveyed, some districts are not fully implementing community-based O&M instruction.

SURVEY RESULTS

A survey was compiled because it was suspected that many students in Virginia were

not receiving O&M instruction off campus and in the community. The survey was distributed to all 24 O&M instructors working in public school districts in Virginia, whether they were hired directly by the school district, were “contract employees,” or were provided through a state agency. The O&M instructors completed the online survey anonymously; the only identification was the region of employment. Responses were received from 21 of the 24 O&M instructors in Virginia. The survey excluded school administrators; however, a related survey on their perspectives would be appropriate, as would a national survey on the topic of off-campus O&M instruction.

The survey asked about community-based instruction, other options provided by the school district, transportation of students to lessons, and the possible provisions made by the school districts for students requiring off-campus instruction. The first question asked whether instruction in the community was permitted by school districts, and 6 instructors out of 21 were not allowed to instruct off campus (see Table 1). The survey was then directed to the 6 O&M instructors who were not able to provide off-campus instruction to determine whether alternatives were offered to students for such community-based instruction. The majority of these 6 instructors responded that there were no alternatives for such instruction for students (see Table 2). In addition, the issue of how students were transported to community-based lessons was queried (see Table 3). Survey respondents indicated that the need to provide transportation for students to an off-campus learning environment may be a factor prohibiting community-based instruction. The 6 O&M instructors who were not permitted to instruct off campus were asked whether they would be willing to provide this type of instruction if allowed (see Table 4).

Results from the survey generated findings that document inconsistent O&M services for community-based travel in Virginia. Question

two asked the O&M instructors if they were given a reason why they were not permitted to instruct in the community (see Table 5). One instructor stated that instruction was “not including off-campus travel in the IEP. I should mention that I can’t even get O&M services for the students that should be getting it (now). . . . [O]ff-campus travel is a concern, but just getting O&M in the first place is an even greater issue” (Norfolk region); “The State Agency provides off-campus instruction after school” (Roanoke region). Another instructor indicated that it was not possible to secure such O&M services for students because “administrators refuse to believe that off-campus travel is the responsibility of schools” (Norfolk region); still another explained the lack of off-campus instruction: “Not including it in the IEP” (Norfolk region); and another instructor stated “off campus travel is not included in the IEP. I can’t even get O&M services for some of the students with visual impairment” (Norfolk region).

The survey reveals that O&M instructors do not believe that students have equal access to O&M instruction across the state. Though several school districts permitted off-campus community instruction, school districts in the Norfolk region only permitted two out of seven O&M instructors to teach in the community, leaving many students unprepared to enter the next phase of their lives when they graduate high school. These discrepancies may seem insignificant; however, the students who graduate from high school, or transfer to other regions of the state, without having had community-based instruction may be behind other peers who are visually impaired because their instruction in navigation, including how to travel safely and efficiently in all environments, has been limited to on-campus training. Thus, these students may not have learned how to independently cross streets, take public transportation, or locate businesses in commercial districts. This inconsis-

Table 1
Survey responses regarding whether instruction in the community was permitted by school districts.

Region	“Yes” response	“No” response
Norfolk	2	5
Roanoke	2	1
Richmond	2	0
Fairfax	6	0
Bristol	3	0

tent off-campus community instruction has far-reaching implications, since “community instruction assists with the transition of students from school to adulthood” (Griffin-Shirley & Lawrence, 2006, p. 3). Students with visual impairments need to have consistent instruction in O&M in all environments to enable them to become independent and competent travelers as adults.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTION IN THE COMMUNITY

Certified O&M specialists have a mandate in their code of ethics to ensure that all students receive the necessary instruction in all environments. All O&M instructors should strive to ensure that all environments be included as appropriate venues for student learning. Though this may not be easy, O&M instructors must use a variety of resources in educating parents, peers, colleagues, students, administrators, and the general public about the role of O&M instructors. Further collaboration with groups such as the National Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairments (NAPVI), the National Federa-

Table 2
Survey responses regarding whether alternatives were offered to students for off-campus instruction.

Regions	Yes	No	Other
Norfolk	0	4	1
Roanoke	1	0	0

Table 3
Survey responses regarding how students were transported to community-based lessons.

Region	Public transportation	School bus, city or county vehicle	Privately owned vehicle
Roanoke	0	0	2
Norfolk	1	1	0
Bristol	0	1	2
Richmond	0	0	2
Fairfax	1	3	2

tion of the Blind (NFB) parent group, and the National Organization of Parents of Blind Children (NOPBC) should be considered to garner support in advocating for community-based instruction. Other resources for professionals in the field of visual impairment are the state and national chapters of the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER). In particular, AER’s Division 9 is dedicated to the needs of O&M instructors. An electronic discussion group is available through AER in which ideas, problems, and solutions are shared by professionals.

In the author’s case, administrators were given written memos regarding off-campus O&M instruction, and meetings were held between administrators and the instructor (the author). But because the parental support for O&M was lacking and encouraging parents to fight for O&M was implicitly discouraged, the author’s efforts were unsatisfactory.

To address the lack of community-based instruction, the author and two other COMSs started a monthly Teen Orientation and Mo-

Table 4
Survey responses regarding whether O&M instructors would be willing to provide off-campus instruction if permitted.

Region	Yes	No	Other
Norfolk	5	0	0
Roanoke	0	0	1

Table 5
Survey responses regarding whether O&M instructors were given a reason why they were not permitted to provide instruction in the community.

Region	Yes response	No response
Norfolk	3	2
Roanoke	1	0

bility Club in the region. The sole purpose of the club, which was backed by a local Lions chapter, was to expose the teenagers in the area to community-based O&M instruction. This monthly club was supported by parents and professionals in local school districts. The club exposed students to public transportation as well as to travel in residential areas, stores, shopping malls, and business districts. In Richmond, a summer Learning Independence, Feeling Empowered (LIFE) program is also an option for high school students to discover expanded core curriculum skills, including about a month of community-based O&M training by National O&M Certificant (NOMC) and COMS instructors. These activities, while beneficial, do not replace a year-round O&M program that includes community travel in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

The survey indicates that O&M instructors perceived that the traditional sequence of instruction, including in community environments, did occur in many school districts in Virginia. However, for the O&M instructors who were not permitted to teach in the community, little support was afforded them in accomplishing this task. To eliminate this contradictory O&M instruction in Virginia, all school districts must be required to adhere to both federal and state laws. Allowing school districts the freedom to choose whether or not to offer community-based instruction enables the inconsistent outcomes as reported by the O&M instructors. Instead of leaving the decision up to each individual

school district to decide, legislation should be enacted that would require community-based instruction for all students who are visually impaired after a qualified O&M instructor has assessed their present level of performance and determined that community-based instruction is appropriate. The corresponding issue of how the students will be transported to lessons also needs to be addressed by school districts. Requiring O&M instruction in the community will ensure that visually impaired high school students will be better prepared to make the transition into adulthood. The end result justifies the instruction, because more visually impaired students will be better prepared to seek post-high school education, to remain employed, and to be productive citizens in their communities.

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Valery Kircher-Herring, J.D., M.A., COMS, orientation and mobility instructor, Virginia Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired, 6325 North Center Drive, Suite 131, Norfolk, VA 23502; e-mail: <valeryherring@yahoo.com>.