INCORPORATING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE DEAF-BLIND INTO TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS:

One Director's Experience

By P. Lynn Hayes

Deaf-blindness is defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as "a concomitant hearing and visual impairment, the combination of which causes such severe communication and other developmental and educational needs that [deaf-blind individuals] *cannot be accommodated in special education programs solely for children with deafness or children with blindness.*
(Federal Register, 2004, 34 CFR 300.8 (c) (2))

Deaf-blindness is a low incidence disability and within this very small group of children there is great variability. Many children who are deaf-blind have some usable vision and/or hearing.
(National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2018)

In recent years, teacher trainees have seen an increase in the number of students with both vision and hearing loss (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). The *2015 National Child Count of Children and Youth Who are Deaf-Blind* identified 10,611 students with dual sensory impairments in programs throughout the United States (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2016). Further, many children who are deaf-blind have also been identified as developmentally delayed, multiply disabled, and visually and hearing impaired (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2016). Clearly, a need exists for well-trained teachers to work with this extraordinary population.

The faculty of Vanderbilt University's master's degree program in education of the deaf wrote and received a grant from the Office of Special Education to address the needs of these unique students—and in the fall of 2014, our first deaf education master's degree-level

Photos courtesy of P. Lynn Hayes, Djenne-amal Morris, and Heather Lightfoot Withrow

P. Lynn Hayes, EdD, IT/TC, director of Vanderbilt University's master's degree program in education of the deaf in the Department of Hearing and Speech Sciences in Nashville, Tennessee, has over 30 years of experience working with deaf and hard of hearing children and adults. She also has experience as a teacher trainer and an American Sign Language interpreter. Hayes has been vice principal of a residential school for the deaf and director of an early intervention program, and she is currently a consultant for the Tennessee Deaf-Blind Project. She welcomes questions and comments about this article at *Lynn.Hayes@vanderbilt.edu*. To learn more about Vanderbilt's master's degree program in education of the deaf, visit *www.vanderbilt.edu/innervu/news/masters-in-education-of-the-deaf.*

Right and below: Students in Vanderbilt's master's degree program in education of the deaf prepare materials for lessons and work on ASL assignments for class.

students began our new two-year program of study. In fact, the students began the program before they arrived on campus. In June 2014, the project director sent students lists of webinars, websites, and articles on both vision and hearing loss and shared some of the wonderful resources we are fortunate to have in both communities.

Creating a Program

Where to Begin?

The challenges and decisions related to setting up a successful program were enormous. We had to figure out how to meaningfully educate teachers of students who had vision and hearing loss as well as other concomitant disabling conditions. We had to further consider how to adapt our current program of study to meet the growing needs of both future teachers and students in public schools.

The following seven steps explain how we made our decisions, and what we suggest other administrators faced with such challenges consider as well:

1. Look on campus. At Vanderbilt, we are fortunate to have a graduate program in vision impairment (VI) in addition to our own graduate program. This allowed us to talk with experts and figure out what VI courses and programs would be appropriate for our students. We decided, for example, to allow our deaf education students to audit the Medical and Educational Implications of Visual Impairment course. As this class was held in the evening, it would provide a perfect fit for master's degree program students who often lack the flexibility to add daytime coursework. In the VI course, students develop an understanding of the anatomy and physiology of the eye (in part by dissecting the eye of a cow), learn about syndromes and diseases that affect the eye, consider assessment and literacy strategies, and explore opportunities to work cooperatively with both students and faculty in the VI field.

We also developed five weekend seminars, one credit hour per semester, to be taken over the two-year program of study. Dates, decided with an eye to avoiding football games, family reunions, and weddings, were determined months in advance. In addition, a $1,000 stipend was available to cover income lost for students who usually worked on the weekends.

Students in both the vision and hearing programs received PowerPoint presentations and required readings for each seminar. Students in the vision program were not required to attend but always invited to participate as their

calendar allowed. Participants were asked to rate each seminar and provide feedback to the project director for upcoming events.

2. Talk to educators of students who are deaf-blind. I am thrilled that individuals working with children and adults who have dual sensory impairments comprise the most welcoming community, and they want to see future teachers with a new skill set.

Prior to writing the grant, I contacted the National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) and the Tennessee Deaf-Blind Project (TNDBP). The NCDB, a technical assistance program funded by the Department of Education, is housed in the Research Institute at Western Oregon University. Its mission is enormous:

> [To] *provide families, professionals, and the community with: opportunities for shared leadership and collaboration, a national network of supports and services across the age range, personnel who are qualified and knowledgeable, and systems with improved capacity*. (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2017a)

The NCDB website (*https://nationaldb.org*) offers so much in the way of assistance and education to families, consumers, teachers, and the public, including information about projects in each state. It notes project names, personnel, and the number of children served in each state, and it lists numerous resources and events in which students can participate.

Each year the courses are reevaluated, and seminars are tailored to reflect suggestions made by students from previous seminars.

3. Meet with state project staff for children and youth who are deaf-blind. We are fortunate to be located in the same working community as the TNDBP. The TNDBP goal is:

> [To] *provide families, educators, and other professionals with information and training to help improve outcomes for individuals from birth through age 21 who have combined vision and hearing loss*. (Tennessee Deaf-Blind Project, 2017)

I met with project staff and we agreed that students in the program of study could complete some of their 100 hours of community service with the TNDBP. That meant our students could elect to go on school or home visits with the TNDBP staff, participate in workshops, provide office support, and do other helpful tasks.

Further, students would be welcomed to TNDBP-sponsored workshops (*www.childrenshospital.Vanderbilt.org*) at no charge and participate in any of their activities. In addition, we would work cooperatively to find speakers who could benefit both the TNDBP and Vanderbilt master's degree program students. In return, TNDBP staff were invited to attend the students' weekend seminars. This collaboration proved especially helpful when one of our speakers asked to include local families in his presentation. TNDBP staff contacted families and we greatly benefited from their participation.

4. Determine the program of study. Using campus resources—educators who specialized in education for students who are deaf-blind—and the TNDBP, we determined what we would cover in the two-year program of study. This included courses entitled Introduction to Deaf-Blindness, Orientation and Mobility, Literacy Strategies for Children with Deaf-Blindness, Sensory Learning for Children Who Are Deaf-Blind, and Sensory Integration. Each year the courses are reevaluated, and seminars are tailored to reflect suggestions made by students from previous seminars.

5. Locate instructors. The weekend seminars required instructors, and again assistance from individuals at the NCDB and the state Deaf-Blind Project was vital. On the NCDB website, we browsed through names of NCDB state projects, national initiative groups, site directories,

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family specialists, and Helen Keller Nation Center for Deaf-Blind Youths & Adults region representatives. I spoke directly with individuals at the NCDB, and they led me to speakers who, in turn, led me to other speakers.

6. Find community happenings. With minimal money for travel, we again went to the TNDBP staff for suggestions about what was happening in our community, state, and southeast region. In addition to local and state workshops, we were happy to learn about the Southeast Region Transition Institute, which is hosted by a different state each year. This weekend seminar is for teens who are deaf-blind and on track for college or employment.

Our students participated in this workshop not only by working with students who are deaf-blind but also by meeting with project staff, listening to speakers, and learning about the work of interveners, individuals who personally assist deaf-blind children and youth. To date, students have participated in two weekends, and this summer we will be more involved as Tennessee is hosting the Southeast Region Transition Institute. We are also fortunate to be within driving distance of the American Printing House for the Blind (*www.aph.org*), in Louisville, Kentucky. Visiting requires a road trip, made special as students in both the vision and hearing loss programs travel and tour together each year.

7. Prioritizing resources. The NCDB and the TNDBP are the most essential resources for our graduate students—each offers a glorious bag of tricks for those who would work with individuals who are deaf-blind and their families. The NCDB website, available to the public, shares unique and important information and projects.

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Bringing It All Together

When our students graduate, they understand the characteristics of students who are deaf-blind as well as those with additional disabilities. They have a sense of where to begin and whom to contact. They have had the invaluable experience of meeting and working with service providers and other individuals in the VI field, and they find their future employment opportunities enhanced by these connections. School administrators and special education directors have expressed appreciation that graduates have these additional experiences, and in some cases it has helped with employment opportunities.

Are our graduates ready to tackle all that lies ahead? Do they have every skill to meet the needs of every student? Of course not! Still, they are on their way. At Vanderbilt, we believe that we've set up a model for other training programs in deaf education to follow. The need is critical. What might work in your community?

Literacy for Students Who Are Deaf-Blind: Training from the NCDB

By P. Lynn Hayes

The National Center on Deaf-Blindness (NCDB) maintains a wealth of knowledge and information on its website, Literacy for Children with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss (*http://literacy.nationaldb.org*), for individuals and professionals who want to work with students who are deaf-blind on developing literacy skills.

According to the site:

> [The NCDB literacy website] *incorporates the stages of literacy development and key components of reading into instructional strategies for children with dual sensory challenges. The content is organized around evidence-based strategies identified as being effective in building emergent literacy skills and moving children along a continuum toward independent reading.* (National Center on Deaf-Blindness, 2017b)

For example, under "emergent literacy," a list of strategies and sections on "What to Do" and "Things to Consider" is presented. In addition, users can download printable information (e.g., material entitled "Ask Yourself" that offers reminders of the content covered in each section). One section focuses on skill development and has helpful information for those writing Individualized Education Programs for their students. Video clips, teacher-friendly articles, and examples (e.g., activities, strategies, adaptations) that relate to the topic areas are also included. Webinars, contacts within the community, and information on what's new in the field are available as well.

The NCDB, in partnership with a diverse group of experts in the field of deaf-blindness, has also created the Open Hands Open Access Deaf-Blind Intervener Learning Models (OHOA), a series of 27 modules that is especially useful for interveners—individuals who work one on one with children and youth who are deaf-blind, assisting them throughout the school day. The idea was to provide online training, up to six hours per module, to interveners working in educational settings. The goal has grown to include online instruction and educational materials for administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Each module focuses on a specific area, such as emergent communication, and includes an introduction, a series of questions to be addressed, and a review. PowerPoint presentations, relevant articles, video clips, and learning activities are also available.

One of the wonderful things about the OHOA modules is how the collective community— state and national deaf-blind project staff, parents of children who are deaf-blind, higher education faculty, teachers, educational interpreters, and interveners—worked cooperatively to build them. Learn more at *https://moodle.nationaldb.org*.

Reference

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