

# Teachers of Students With Deafblindness: Professionalizing the Field

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In recent decades the population of students who are deafblind has grown more diverse, and teachers with credentials in special education, visual impairments, and deaf and hard of hearing have struggled to gain knowledge and modify teaching approaches to serve these students. Students who are deafblind are often served by educators with who have never met a deafblind student before, or have never met one like the individual they currently serve. Often students and their parents are told to be patient while staff members try to discover and implement an educational program. Sometimes a professional with an interest or expertise in deafblindness serves only a small number of deafblind students while also providing services for students with other disabilities. There is a history of educational practices and a growing body of knowledge specific to the education of children with deafblindness that addresses their unique educational needs discrete from students with multiple disabilities (McInnes, 1993). We believe it is time again to raise the issue of teacher certification in deafblindness.

## Recent History of Deafblind Education

From 1970 to 1975 most states had several specialized programs for children who were deafblind (Collins, 1993). Federal funding supported over half of the cost of these projects, which provided quality direct services by staff members with specific knowledge and training in deafblindness. These projects provided ongoing training and consultation to local programs and produced publications and training videos. Preservice programs were developed to train teachers of deafblind students (McLetchie, 1993), and teaching jobs in the field of deafblindness were available in any state. Regional centers and pilot school programs resulted in a strong body of knowledge utilizing effective intervention approaches. In the 1980's a technical assistance network emerged in the form of state deafblind projects and a national technical assistance project. In the early 90's a national clearinghouse devoted to deafblindness, DB-LINK, was funded.

Shifts in educational philosophy and policy have had implications for students who are deafblind. As students moved from self-contained pilot programs to local school districts, they were spread over larger geographic areas and often in classrooms with heterogeneous groupings of students. As a result, there were fewer jobs available for teachers trained in deafblindness and the quality of services suffered (Collins, 1992). In most school districts deafblindness is too low incidence to justify hiring specially trained teachers. Currently in the field of deafblindness, there is a defined population of students tracked by state counts and a national census, a body of knowledge and effective educational practices, a technical assistance network at state and national levels, an emerging paraprofessional model of service delivery in the form of deafblind interveners, but no certified teachers.

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## The Need for Teachers

What would a teacher of students with deafblindness do? Many states have itinerant teachers of students with visual impairments and itinerant teachers of students with hearing impairments. A teacher of students with deafblindness would fill a similar role. Individual situations would vary, and some students would have all three types of teachers serving them, while others may only have a teacher trained in deafblindness serving their educational needs. These teachers would provide both direct and consultative services.

Direct instruction may include activities incorporating the following:

- vision awareness or vision efficiency activities
- auditory awareness or training
- activity routines which facilitate use of object symbols, tactile symbols, spoken, signed or picture symbols
- tactile awareness training leading to tactile symbol or pre-braille activities
- spatial awareness and exploration
- literacy awareness including pre-braille or print activities
- assistive technology devices and applications

Consultative services include supporting and participating in planning with the entire educational team, particularly the classroom teacher and intervener. Areas in which the teacher of students with deafblindness would have particular expertise are:

- assessment and evaluation of sensory and communication skills
- creating, providing and supporting the use of materials appropriate for the student's sensory needs
- information and support of communication systems
- supporting the use of assistive technology
- collaborating on accommodations and modifications of instructional materials and activities to meet the students sensory needs
- developing meaningful educational activities

In some areas, sufficient numbers of students may exist to form a special class taught by a teacher certified in deafblindness. Such a class would have the advantage of infusing appropriate communication modes into all activities, and modifications for students' sensory needs would be present throughout the day. Education in a special environment would enable students to develop trusting relationships with capable communicators including adults and peers. This classroom teacher would have the opportunity to fully know their deafblind students and understand their needs and abilities. Educational approaches would be individualized for each student. Both academic and Expanded Core Curriculum areas would be addressed by the teacher with the support of interveners.

## The Future of Services

We believe the time has come to advocate for teacher certification in deafblindness at the national level. With a national teacher certification in deafblindness, many states would follow the lead and recognize or require teachers certified in deafblindness as vital educational team members serving students. It is the right of students with deafblindness to receive appropriate educational services in an appropriate setting, utilizing appropriate communication modes, individualized to meet their unique sensory needs (Davidson, Miller and Collins, 1993)

### References

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### *Dancers of Life*

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