Overcoming Social and Communication Barriers for Students with Deaf-Blindness

Lauren Bethune
University of North Florida

Abstract

For students diagnosed with deaf-blindness, expressing oneself is often difficult due to the communication and language barriers that accompany the nature of the disability. Previous research has indicated that the majority of deaf-blind students do not receive adequate opportunities for socialization. The major influence that causes this lack of social participation can be attributed to a lack in communication and language skills. This literature review will focus on research and educated stance articles that analyze both communication and social skills of students with deaf-blindness. The author will also address the most appropriate and least restrictive environments, and adaptations professionals can make within the classroom settings to optimize student communication and social skill success.

Students with deaf-blindness can be provided with opportunities to become included in the general education curriculum and become well-rounded citizens in the community. According to Correa-Torres in the article, "Communication opportunities for students with deaf-blindness in specialized and inclusive settings: a pilot study," she revealed that recent studies and research on the integration of deaf-blind students in the mainstreaming environment indicate that the majority of deaf-blind students "rely on teachers or other adults for communication and are less likely to initiate interactions as often as do their hearing and sighted peers." This limited interaction can be attributed to the language barrier, which in turn, decreases the socialization between students with disabilities and students without disabilities.

Purposes for Conducting the Literature Review

The purpose for conducting this literature review is to analyze and synthesize research studies and reviews on the communication and socialization issues that deaf-blind individuals face in and out of the classroom. Further, the author aims to provide professionals in the field of deaf-blindness with the necessary strategies and resources to facilitate successful social and communication interaction.

Problem Description

Research indicates individuals with deaf-blindness have often been isolated from society due to the prominent language barrier. Based on Correa-Torres in the article, "The nature of the social experiences of students with deaf-blindness who are educated in inclusive settings," individuals with deaf-blindness "have limited access to information that hearing and sighted people may regard as inconsequential: facial expressions, body language, daily activities of family and friends." A possible solution to increasing deaf-blind individuals to exposure with non-disabled peers is to implement research-proven interventions. The focus of the interventions must be on the facilitation of communication and socialization skills. Correa-Torres mentions that it is necessary to alter the classroom environment, curriculum, and it is crucial to adopt a team-collaborative approach in the classroom. This notion can only be successful if educators are well-trained in working with deaf-blind students. In order for success to occur, professionals should arm themselves with a plethora of strategies for promoting socialization and interaction among students with and without disabilities. The strongest ammunition is knowledge about the disability and ways to make the learning environment more conducive for communication, which, in turn, will provide opportunities for socialization.

The following are research questions that this literature review will seek to address:

Research Questions

1) What are proven strategies that will facilitate socialization and communication of students with deaf-blindness?

2) How can the mainstreaming environment become more responsive to the needs of students with deaf-blindness?

3) How can, educators and professionals working in the field, prepare students with deaf-blindness to face societal barriers and interact with the public?

4) How can related service staff assist in facilitating communication and social skills of students with deaf-blindness in the mainstream environment?

Facilitation of Socialization and Communication

In the past decades, many individuals with moderate to severe disabilities were not provided with adequate opportunity for socialization. This inadequacy can be attributed to the segregated environments where these individuals were placed. However, since the creation of the ADA (American with Disabilities Act) and IDEA (Individuals with Disability Education Act), more individuals with disabilities are becoming included and accepted in society including educational place settings. In today's education system, the majority of students with disabilities are being taught in inclusive settings. Within these inclusive settings, students with disabilities are being taught alongside their non-disabled peers and share in the same educational experience. In order for success to be made in an inclusive environment, great alterations must be made in making the environment the least-restricted and the most appropriate for each individual with a disability.

To support the facilitation of socialization for students with deaf-blindness, researchers have studied and support the benefits of teacher collaboration, teacher training, and the implementation of an appropriate model to adopt into the classroom. According to Correa-Torres (2008), researchers have discovered that more students with moderate to severe disabilities rely more heavily on the teacher for communication rather than utilizing a peer for assistance. As the research indicates, more and more students with deaf-blindness are entering the mainstream environment. Although this increase is promising for the aspects of inclusion, research has indicated that more and more students with deaf-blindness are not in an environment that would be most beneficial for communication and socialization development without alterations to the environment. As the authors, Vervloed et. al, mention in their article, "Interaction between the teacher and the congenitally deaf-blind child," when designing an educational curriculum for a student with deaf-blindness, it is crucial to make sure the foundation is built upon "careful assessment and is facilitated by empirical data on the communication and language development of congenitally deaf-blind children." (p. 2)

The question that needs to be asked is how related service staff can assist in facilitating communication and social skills of students with deaf-blindness in the mainstream environment. The authors, Engleman et al (1999), eloquently provide a synopsis of evidence-based strategies for increasing communication skills among students with deaf-blindness in their article. The authors emphasize that students with deaf-blindness do not learn in a typical fashion as their non-disabled peers due to a loss in their senses and do not acquire language at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. As one can imagine, with strategies to improve communication, students with deaf-blindness will have the means for self-expression and the opportunities to take a role in their future.

The authors, Engleman et, al (1999), share the following strategies that are proven to increase the communication skills of students with deaf-blindness:

Team Collaboration

The primary strategy that the authors suggest is the utilization of team collaboration, where all involved will be able to provide direct instruction for the student with deaf-blindness. The team members can work together in finding the least-restrictive environment that works best for the student. The authors stress the importance of team collaboration for the success of students with deaf-blindness in the classroom. If the professionals in the environment do not work together for the betterment of the student, the student with deaf-blindness is less likely to succeed in development.

Use of Technology

An additional strategy that the authors emphasized as crucial to incorporate into the classroom is the use of amplification devices. This action will make communication easier for all involved and will promote socialization among peers if communication is made easier through the use of technology. According to Engleman et, al, the use of communication and language boards has proven beneficial for enhancing the communication aspects of students with deaf-blindness. The following are several devices that the authors encourage and assist students with deaf-blindness in communication: "closed circuit televisions, large print, Braille, Braille/print conversion technology, and voice output devices." (p. 5)

Being Culturally Sensitive

Furthermore, the authors emphasize the importance of being culturally sensitive to the family members of the student with deaf-blindness and suggest to actively listen to their preferences for their son or daughter's communication development. The authors support this realization with this statement: "the support of the family for the communication goals of the IEP will have a profound effect on the student's motivation to communicate, as well as the number of communication opportunities available to the student outside of school." (p. 3) The underlining message to take from this piece of literature is that not every strategy is going to be successful for every student; this is why it is crucial to individualize each strategy for each student with deaf-blindness.

In conclusion, as one can gather from the above research, a student with deaf-blindness can greatly benefit and increase their communication skills from these proven strategies. It is essential for educators to consider each strategy and how each strategy will work for each student. By increasing ways to communicate, students with deaf-blindness will have more capabilities for socialization in and out of the classroom and an increase in development will be evident.

Responsiveness to the Needs of Student with Deaf-Blindness

As Correa-Torres (2008) mention more and more students with deaf-blindness are being welcomed into the general education classroom and the numbers of students will continue to rise. Due to this impressive rise of students with deaf-blindness into the mainstreaming environment,

professionals, parents, and general education peers need to be responsive to the needs of each student entering the classroom. By paying close attention to these unique communication needs, students with deaf-blindness will have more resources to utilize when socializing with others in the environment.

To illustrate this need, the author, Correa-Torres (2008), conducted a study that would illustrate the frequency of the social experiences of students with deaf-blindness and compare this frequency with other students in the mainstreamed environment. The participants in the study consisted of three students with deaf-blindness, a parent, and those professionals involved. An important aspect to take into consideration is that none of the participants were profoundly deaf and blind. The data that was collected was administered by interviews, data sheets, and observations. All of the qualitative materials were set in place to determine the social experiences of students with deaf-blindness in the inclusive setting and to determine the frequency of interaction among students with deaf-blindness and their non-disabled peers in the classrooms. The findings indicated that the majority of deaf-blind students' main interaction was with adults in the environment. The results also indicated that due to the severity of the disability, these students were in need of intensive instruction and required ample amounts of assistance during classroom activities. In this case, many of the non-disabled peers acted as peer helpers; however, this was not the case during free time, where socialization is most likely to occur.

Correa-Torres's study opened the eyes to professionals in the field and proved that strategies must be set in place to ensure that students with deaf-blindness in the mainstream environment are receiving the appropriate services to enhance their communication and socialization.

<div align="center">Strategies for Students in the Mainstream Environment</div>

The following are several strategies that professionals in the field can utilize in the mainstream environment: discussing the disability with the whole class and providing opportunities for non-disabled peers to work with students with deaf-blindness. It is necessary for educators to converse with the entire classroom (persons with and without disabilities) about disability awareness and how everyone in the classroom has a diverse way of learning. This will not only open the eyes of the non-disabled students about disability awareness, but will create a non-threatening environment where socialization can occur. In sync with this strategy, professionals can also illustrate to the non-disabled students the appropriate ways to communicate with their peers with deaf-blindness. This action can help open the door for communication and socialization. Lastly, professionals can provide opportunities for non-disabled peers and peers with deaf-blindness to interact in and out of the classroom via classroom projects, clubs, and other social events.

With the knowledge of the previously mentioned strategies and techniques for working with students with deaf-blindness, teacher will be better prepared and equipped to implement strategies in the mainstream environment. However, with the implementation of these strategies comes the need for ample training. Training is essential for educators and is the only way for educators to successfully adopt these strategies in the classroom.

Providing Additional Training

First and foremost, Correa-Torres (2008) strongly emphasizes the importance of boosting the knowledge and competency of professionals for working with students with deaf-blindness through extensive training. Along with extensive training for working with students with deaf-blindness, professionals need to have the belief and positivity that inclusion will be successful for these individuals. In order for the communication skills of students with deaf-blindness to improve, professionals in the field need to be responsive to the needs of each individual and be aware of the factors of communication development. Chen (2004) mentions that in order for success to occur with communication development, professionals need to collaborate together with other service providers and work together towards the common goal. Team collaboration is essential when learning new techniques for working with students with deaf-blindness.

Environmental Factors

According to Chen (2004) professionals need to focus on the environmental factors that influence the student's ability to communicate and utilize those senses that are functioning. Chen continues to mention that professionals need to pay attention to the following aspects and offers these suggestions: "the use of appropriate lightning will enhance the child's ability to see a visual target, a visual target with high visual contrast will attract and enhance the child's ability to visually attend, recognize, and discriminate what he or she sees, and the child's visual acuity and visual field must be taken into account." (p. 5)

Communication Strategies

According to Engleman et. al (1999) tactics to implement in the mainstream environment that will improve the communication skills of students with deaf-blindness were addressed in the article. The following are several strategies that were mentioned to implement in the mainstream environment: "maintaining interaction at eye level, using touch cues to initiate or terminate interactions, teaching others to communicate with the student using modes that the student will understand, and adapting communications to the learner's pace." (p.4) In elaboration of the strategies, teaching others to communicate using the student's choice and mode of communication will provide opportunity for other classmates to initiate conversation, thus, leading to socialization development. Lastly, professionals need to keep in mind that motivation will enhance the probability that socialization and communication skills will increase.

The Elimination of Societal Barriers and Preparation for the Future

Due to the nature of the disability, often times individuals with deaf-blindness face attitudinal barriers in the community. These societal barriers occur more frequently than one would think, thus, leading to the need for professionals to adopt a focus into the curriculum that prepares individuals for society and the future. According to Bourquin & Sauerburger (2005) strategies to address in the classroom and effective ways to enhance communication development for individuals with deaf-blindness are mentioned. All of the strategies mentioned are crucial for interactions with society and the community. The authors, Bourquin & Sauerburger (2005), mention that professionals and educators should create a curriculum that

incorporates real-world situations and how this incorporation can assist in overcoming barriers in the community.

The authors also emphasize that the more communication modes that individuals with deaf-blindness can utilize with others in the community, the higher the chances are for the individual to be successful in communicating with the public. These types of communication can be in the form of gesturing, signing, and expressive communication (pictures, symbols, or written communication). Going along with this aspect, the authors mention that professionals can create certain cards with specific communication vocabulary for persons with deaf-blindness to utilizing when interacting with the community and navigating around the environment. Lastly, the authors provide several suggestions for persons with deaf-blindness and professionals to consider when improving the communication skills for community interaction. These suggestions are the following: ensuring the communication is simple and focused, keeping the message short and concise, and preparing the individual for real-life situations that may occur when exploring the community. (Bourquin & Sauerburger, 2005)

Just as previously mentioned in this literature review, professionals in the field should provide disability awareness for those in and out of the mainstreaming environment. This action will assist in breaking down the stigma that society holds for those with disabilities and will hopefully discover more techniques to improve the social and communication skills of individuals with deaf-blindness. Lastly, it is essential for professionals to educate individuals with deaf-blindness to become self-determined in their own future wants, needs, and desires. By teaching self-advocacy, individuals with deaf-blindness will be able to use self-expression, thus, providing opportunities for increasing communication and socialization skills.

Discussion

Great strides have been made in the education of students with deaf-blindness. Society has seen a great shift from educating students with deaf-blindness in segregated and isolated environments to the incorporation of full inclusion. Minimal research has been conducted on ways to enhance the communication and socialization aspects of students with deaf-blindness. However, as an educator, I would like to see more research done on the socialization aspect of students with deaf-blindness and how this socialization can positively or negatively influence an individual's future. The previously stated research takes a focus on enhancing communication skills for students with disabilities and ties this in with socialization, but not a great deal of information provides specific techniques for enhancing socialization in and out of the classroom.

Future Applications

From the above research, there seems to be ample strategies for enhancing socialization in the classroom, but no true and tried materials that can be expanded into the real-world. What happens to these individuals once they exit the school system? Transition planning is implemented and mandated at the age of 16; however, what are the opportunities for independence and employment for students with deaf-blindness? These are important questions

that researchers need to be addressing to better meet the needs of young adults who are deaf and blind.

        Due to the nature and severity of the disability, I am under the assumption that opportunities for students with deaf-blindness to share in the same dreams as their non-disabled peers have not been researched. However, one of the articles that I reviewed did discuss how to interact with society, but mainly focused on mobility and orientation issues. Although this is crucial in order to become independent citizens in the community, additional research is needed to explore the opportunities for employment and independence in the real-world. This all ties back into the need for strategies to enhance the socialization and communication skills of these students. This action will assist the students reach success upon exiting the system and entering the real-world.

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