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## **GROUP REHABILITATION: TRANSITIONING AT-RISK YOUTH AND ADULTS**

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### **Introduction**

For every 1,000 births there is one child who is born with a severe- to-profound hearing loss and this loss has a tremendous effect on language development (Samson-Fang, Simons-McCandless & Shelton, 2000). These children are born with average or above-average intelligence, indicating that they are capable of learning yet, they are graduating high school with fourth-grade reading levels (Johnson, Liddell & Erting, 1989). Their hearing loss is not the biggest barrier in regards to academics and employment, but rather the lack of communication access (Johnson, 2004). This factor is further compounded when appropriate rehabilitation training and related services are not available to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, leaving the vast majority of these individuals unemployed (Commission on Education of the Deaf, 1988) and dependent on society for their income and well being.

Without appropriate support, individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing have difficulty finding and maintaining employment (U.S. Department of Education, 2004), leaving them vulnerable to becoming low functioning (Dew, 1999) with no means to become independent (Employment Management Professionals, 2008). According to O'Rourke and Colarusso (1999), "The major purposes of education are to promote literacy, personal autonomy and economic self-sufficiency" (as cited by Easterbrooks, 1999, p. 2). Therefore, new interventions and programs are needed that take into account the multiplicity of factors that are related to at-risk youth and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). Furthermore, these programs will allow them to accomplish their dreams to live independently, work, and have control of their own lives (Dew, 1997).

## Deafness and Identity

The term *handicapped* used to describe deafness, assumes and denotes that people who are deaf are not normal, and are at a disadvantage with a deficit in need of repair (Skliar & Quadros, 2004). Deafness is seen as a difference from the perspective of a person who can hear normally who then limits opportunities for those based on their inability to hear (Skliar-Quadros, 2004). Recognizing an individual who is deaf or hard of hearing as different but able implies an understanding of the auditory loss and its impact on perception via a visual as opposed to auditory medium (Skliar-Quadros, 2004): This understanding can lead to implementation of programs that not only address needed cognitive and soft skills to find and maintain employment, but also to develop self-identity, which encompasses culture and language that will allow deaf clients to think and speak for themselves (Skliar & Quadros, 2004). Skliar & Quadros (2004) indicated that the problems faced by these individuals are that those who can hear are unable to accept and come to terms with the hearing loss.

## Employment

Johnson (2004) found that the Northern California Center on Deafness indicated that 90% of individuals who are deaf are underemployed (Siegel, 2000). Arum and Beattie (2000) stated that jobs requiring a higher level of skill continue to increase due to technological advances, requiring persons with higher education, more so than before. In addition, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2006-2016) indicates that additional job openings will increase in network systems and data communications fields by 53%, personal and home care aides by 50%, medical assistants by 35%, social and human service assistants by 33 % and mental health counselors by 30%. By looking at these labor market trends, one can see that it will directly impact individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing who graduated with a 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading education (Johnson, 2004). These statistics are staggering, making it difficult to believe or accept that individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing continue to turn a blind eye to this reality. Furthermore, these statistics suggest that current and future job market trends will require vocational and college education in order to be competitive (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006-16).

Soft skills are the non-technical skills, abilities, and traits that workers need to function in a specific employment environment (Working in New

Mexico, 2006). They include our sets of workplace competencies, which include problem solving and other cognitive skills (Conrad & Leigh, 1999). According to *Work in New Mexico* (2006), a set of soft-skill clusters known as “Skills for Life,” have been identified for all New Mexicans in the work force to acquire in order to be productive members of society. *Work in New Mexico* (2006) also recommends that the ability to value one’s self and the communities of which one is part of, the knowledge to make moral and ethical decisions, and to act in a socially responsible manner are very significant for one to have in order for one to be successful not only at work but, also in one’s life span.

## **Communication and Language**

Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing do not have the same language input as those who can hear normally; thus, they miss out on a great deal of information while interacting with their families, which is an important part of learning and language development (Erting & Pfau, 1997). Lack of audibly accessible input may lead to an inability to make sense of the world around them (Erting & Pfau, 1997). Cummins (1980) stated that accessible communication is needed to promote the acquisition of critical abstract thinking, problem solving and learning new information. “Without communication an individual cannot become an effective and productive adult and an informed citizen in our democracy” (Siegel, 2002, p. 1). Language is the primary means by which people communicate their thoughts, feelings and ideas with others (Lessow-Hurley, 2000) and can be influenced by culture (de Valenzuela & Niccolai, 2004). When interaction and conversation is person – centered, learning is more effective (de Valenzuela & Niccolai, 2004) may lead to the ability to think critically, abstractly reason, solve problems and learning new information, all of which are important according to *Working in New Mexico* (2006).

## **Risk Factors**

Many individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing may not have had the opportunity to learn the needed cognitive and soft skills while attending public school and since graduating from high school (COED, 1988). More importantly, without having learned crucial cognitive and soft skills, such youth and adults may demonstrate at-risk traits, attitudes and behaviors that can contribute to leading poor quality lives (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). In addition, such affected individuals may also have secondary or tertiary

disabilities like learning disabilities, (Cook, Graham, & Razzano, 1993) and mental and emotional challenges, all of which impact the development of language performance, psychological and social development, and vocational opportunities (Dew, 1999). Furthermore, it may also take an average of three to five times longer for a person who is deaf to learn when compared to a hearing person. Consequently, many are not able to learn in a typical classroom setting. Ultimately, these individuals may fall through the cracks by becoming disadvantaged and chronically unemployed (Banks, 2005). The goal of the proposed curriculum is to target the risk factors by building cognitive and soft skills that may be lacking or underdeveloped in youth and adults who are deaf and hard of hearing so that they are able to prepare for competitive employment while being empowered to lead productive and independent lives (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997).

### **Group Rehabilitation and Curriculum**

Employers have reported that employee job loss is directly related to employees lacking soft skills, which are key to succeeding in the workplace (Leigh, et al, 1999). Problems with interpersonal and other cognitive skills are also a major barrier to employment that employers cannot address on their own (Welfare to Work partnership, 2000). The group rehabilitation movement has been progressing within North America (Goldstein & McGinnis 1997) as a promising and effective intervention for individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing (Goldstein & McGinnis). Its main function is to combine the use of various non-traditional instructional techniques to teach individuals cognitive, soft skills and other crucial ‘skills for Life’ (Work in New Mexico, 2006). Our program, known as Teaching Thinking and Learning by Doing is the direct result of a dedicated collaboration between the New Mexico Community Outreach Program for the Deaf, New Mexico Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, and Quota International of Albuquerque. This innovative curriculum design was adapted and developed to respond to the vocational, language, and cultural issues and needs of at-risk youth and adults who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The “Teaching Thinking and Learning by Doing” curriculum design elaborates on what employers and the U.S. Department of Labor have identified as needed skills for competitive employment. The program is cognitive-skills based and has been applied extensively as a rehabilitation intervention with a variety of populations in both institutional and community-based settings, as well as in a number of different countries (Porporino &

Fabiano, 2000a). Cognitive skills are the skills we use to think such as social perspective taking and social, interpersonal problem-solving, self-control, critical reasoning, and value reasoning skills (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000b). These critical skills are personal qualities and characteristics of an individual that are acquired through learning, education, experience, and represent a person's strengths and personality (Jacowski, 2008).

It is a known fact that thinking guides all action and behavior, but if thinking skills are limited and faulty, then so is the potential for the individual's ability to change in order to meet the requirements of employment and/or postsecondary education (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). According to Porporino and Fabiano (2000a), individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing, and who lack cognitive skills can be impulsive in their thinking and lack self control because they do not understand the benefits of stopping to think before acting (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). They need to learn how to reason abstractly and solve interpersonal problems by weighing solutions and consequences to make better-informed decisions (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). Another cognitive skill that they have difficulty with is social perspective taking; young adults who are deaf or hard of hearing have a tendency to be egocentric in their thinking, which makes them unable to consider thoughts and feelings of others (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a). Thus, their inability to think critically affects their ability to analyze information so that they easily jump to conclusions (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a).

According to Porporino and Fabiano (2000a), lacking one or more of the above stated cognitive skills make them susceptible to repeated terminations from their jobs, and they continually blame others for their problems at work, in turn creating repeated conflicts with their co-workers and employers (Employment Management Professionals, 1989). These negative behaviors and attitudes have trapped them in a lifestyle of unemployment with ongoing series of employment failures (Employment Management Professionals, 1989). Porporino and Fabiano (2000a) further express that, "...in method of delivery, an educational approach has been shown to be most effective, where clients are 'coached'. To learn and relearn, and where they become aware of their thinking biases through structured exercise and practice" (p. 20). The Teaching Thinking and Learning by Doing curriculum is infused with innovative skill-building training and teaching methodology that demonstrates examples of positive skill-building behaviors with opportunities to rehearse what they have learned, encouraging them to

utilize a new sets of skills in both work and their daily lives (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). Opportunities to understand and learn, and be motivated to change will affect their ability to apply a good work ethic that employers are looking for in the people they hire (Porporino & Fabiano, 2000a).

Porporino and Fabinao (2000a) further stressed the importance of making sure that training is “not through discussion, lectures, or confrontation. Cognitive skills training leads to cognitive restructuring but, it is the person, over time and with support from facilitator “coach”, who chooses to restructure, reorient, and reframe their thinking”. When done appropriately, cognitive skills training can truly motivate and generalize sustained change (p. 20).

### **Conclusion: Breaking the Cycle of Failure & Anticipated Outcomes**

In conclusion, a group rehabilitation program such as, Teaching Thinking and Learning by Doing for at-risk youth and adults who are deaf and hard of hearing clearly needs to be person-centered and taught by skilled professionals in the language that is most accessible to the participant (Position Paper, 2004). Communication access must be determined by the individual who is deaf and/or hard of hearing (Position paper, 2004). In addition, a multi-agency coordination and collaboration is highly recommended and encouraged so that all available resources in the community are used. Successful individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing can communicate ideas and concepts, while serving as role models (Position Paper, 2004). We have learned over the years that individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing need the chance to believe they have more control over their own lives, and can create and affect change. As a result, they are empowered to move forward in their lives (Miller & Rollnick, 2002) toward meaningful employment opportunities (Employment Management Professionals, 1989). For young adults who are considered at-risk, life can not only hold more potential and hope, but can start to hold a new beginning where they can have a job and an income (Position Paper, 2004). Thus, the program will allow them to have a real future moving from service users to tax payers (Employment Management Professionals, 1989).

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