

Practice Report

Beyond the Borders: A Partnership Between U.S. and Mexican Schools for Students Who Are Visually Impaired

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Since 2002 the New Mexico School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (NMSBVI) in Alamogordo, New Mexico, has worked to create a partnership with the Centro de Capacitación para Invidentes in Durango, Mexico, and the Instituto de Asesoría y Apoyo para Ciegos in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The purpose of this association was to provide the opportunity for students who are visually impaired (that is, those who are blind or have low vision) in both countries to increase their proficiency in orientation and mobility (O&M), improve their academic and self-help skills, develop relationships, and share experiences beyond the borders of their own countries. Specific goals of the program were to identify visually impaired students aged 12-21 and provide training and support in academic and compensatory skills, ancillary services

and resources in the area of O&M, and a productive and nurturing environment for students that will help them in the transition from school to work. This article describes an international summer academic and recreational program for students who are visually impaired.

How it all began

The International Summer Program began with a conversation between the leaders of the Alamogordo Rotary Club and NMSBVI who were interested in expanding the summer program in Alamogordo to include students from Mexico. In the past, the Alamogordo Rotary Club had provided funds to its sister Rotary chapters in Ciudad Juárez and Durango to help support their local schools for students who are visually impaired. Therefore, expanding support for students in Mexico to attend a summer camp in New Mexico seemed logical.

The Rotary chapter in New Mexico distributed applications for the NMSBVI summer enrichment camp to various Rotary clubs in Mexico, so they could distribute them to local schools for students with visual impairments. In New Mexico, applications were mailed to teachers of students who are visually impaired in the state, special education directors, and parents of students who had previously attended the camp. The directors and faculty at NMSBVI reviewed Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and applications

that were submitted by the student participants, their parents, and teachers. The structure and content of the course were determined by the individual needs of the students. Because this was a two-week summer program, a variety of academic, social, and leisure-time activities were designed and scheduled to incorporate IEP goals and objectives.

The program included students and school personnel from Durango and Ciudad Juárez--28 students in the first year, 18 students in the second year, and 18 students in the third year--who traveled by bus to attend the summer camp in Alamogordo. Once they were in the United States, the students continued to receive financial support from Rotary for room and board. At NMSBVI, all the students were oriented to the campus by certified O&M instructors. These professionals assessed each student's ability to travel safely in the camp environment using a combination of observations, school standards, and professional knowledge.

The camp structure

The program was structured to schedule academic activities in the morning and prevocational classes in the afternoon. Certified O&M instructors, special educators, and educational assistants (from Mexico and New Mexico) collaborated to provide direct instruction in all the classes. The content of the curriculum was based on the individual evaluations that were

submitted with the initial applications for the students by their home-school teachers. Learning experiences were provided both on and off campus to ensure that the students were exposed to a variety of social and cultural events. The teachers reported improvement in the students' self-esteem as a result of achievement in the varied activities by observing conversations outside class and the excitement expressed by the students in their willingness to participate in all the activities. The teachers noted that when the students first arrived, they rarely spoke to each other and stayed within their own groups, but that by the end of the program, the students were speaking more frequently to one another and interacting on a regular basis.

Summer camp

The summer enrichment program was originally designed to serve students with visual impairments who were aged 12-21 in New Mexico. This age requirement ensured access to the camp for more children in New Mexico and Mexico than if enrollment had been limited to high school students. Criteria for enrollment included a documented visual impairment, current enrollment in an academic program during the regular school year, and the ability to function at a level no more than three years below grade level. Some of the students currently attend the academic program at NMSBVI during the regular school year, while others attend only during the summer.

Year 1

The program included students, teachers, and aides from Durango and Ciudad Juárez. Many of the students participated in individual instruction in O&M. Several interpreters (English and Spanish) were provided by NMSBVI, New Mexico State University-Alamogordo campus, and the Alamogordo Rotary Club. The students attended classes in reading, math, technology, science, music, physical education, prevocational training, and independent living skills. All the students were proficient in braille, which led to their easy transition to the academic climate at NMSBVI. A multicultural teaching approach that focused on the students' learning styles, collaborative learning groups, and preferred language was adopted. As Blair (2003, p. 5) stated:

Understanding students' cultural backgrounds relates specifically to realizing that culture influences the learning style of students. For example, the cultures of African Americans and Hispanic Americans generally reflect the attribute of working collaboratively. Thus, individuals from these groups generally learn well in cooperative environments rather than the traditional competitive individualistic reward environments.

Classes were taught by qualified teachers of students who are visually impaired. Eight bilingual (Spanish and English) educational assistants helped with classroom instruction and accompanied the students to their classes. The aides from Mexico were assigned to specific groups of students with whom they stayed

throughout the day.

After their classes, the students worked at various jobs (as office assistants, braille proofreaders, library and cafeteria aides, vending machine technicians, and mail aides who sorted and delivered the campus mail). They earned a salary--for some, their first paychecks. One student commented that in Mexico, he was a salesman and sold kitchen gadgets. He liked his job because it was interesting, and he liked working with people. However, he wanted to be a teacher or a news reporter after he completed his formal education. Other students also shared their stories of the jobs they held in their communities.

The morning classes were structured and focused on content-area activities. In reading classes, the students brailled and illustrated with tactile markings books in Spanish for the younger children at their schools in Mexico. In the technology laboratory, they learned to use JAWS, a text-to-voice software program, and composed short essays. Time in the technology lab also gave the students the opportunity to maintain daily contact with their families and friends in Mexico via e-mail. Students whose family members and friends at home did not have e-mail enjoyed e-mailing each other at school. In math, the students learned measurement skills using a variety of assistive technology devices. They transferred their math calculations, to scale, to create individual art projects.

Afternoon classes were more informal and included training in prevocational and independent living skills, physical education, and art. One student expressed his enjoyment in taking courses in music and computers. He participated in all the activities at NMSBVI because he thought they were necessary for performing his daily routines. Another student liked recycled paper and expressed himself creatively in art via this medium. During food preparation, the students planned menus, shopped for groceries, prepared meals, set tables, served meals, and were responsible for leaving the kitchen and dining room clean. Each day, a different team of students was assigned to participate in the food-preparation activities.

Year 2

The program for Year 2 was limited to students and their teachers from Ciudad Juárez because of the lack of funds to support the travel needs of the students and teachers from Durango. This year was structured the same as Year 1. The students participated in similar activities on and off campus during camp.

Year 3

During Year 3, students and their teachers from both Durango and Ciudad Juárez participated in the NMSBVI project. The five students from Mexico who attended during Year 2 and returned in Year 3 had no difficulty adapting to the routine and helped the new

students adjust to their new environment and navigate the campus. Administrators, teachers, and educational assistants were there to support the students and to enhance their own individual teaching skills and knowledge. They focused on accessing resources that were unavailable to them in Mexico and were surprised to learn of the numerous U.S. federal funding sources. The teachers particularly enjoyed training with new technologies, such as scientific calculators and notetakers. According to the principal of the Durango school, all their materials are ordered using private funds.

Moving forward

By Year 3, the staff members at NMSBVI better understood the needs of the students and acknowledged their ability to communicate with each other even if they did not speak the same language. They were able to recognize cultural differences and become more sensitive to the individual needs of each student. They used various strategies to assist the students with limited English skills to help them comprehend educational ideas and concepts (Milian, 2001). The faculty created environments in which the students felt comfortable and were given the opportunity to be creative. Rather than focus on one activity for all, the faculty gave the students the opportunity to create projects that related to their experiences using their own language and cultural interests (Wormsley & D'Andrea, 1997). The students worked together and

demonstrated a desire to help each other in and out of class. Language did not appear to be a barrier. Students who spoke Spanish communicated in Spanish. Those who did not speak Spanish either depended on the interpreters or developed their own form of communication. For example, the principal of NMSBVI watched two students communicate with each other via oral language, sign language, and gestures about the schedule of activities, times, and locations. Even though they did not speak each other's language, they communicated well enough that both young men were able to attend their classes on time and at the correct location.

During leisure-time activities, some cultural differences surfaced. When given the choice, the students from Mexico preferred to stay by themselves, play dominoes and musical instruments, and sing even though they were given the opportunity to leave the campus (Nieto, 2006), whereas the students from New Mexico wanted to go somewhere or do something, such as to the movies, to a restaurant, or to a water park. After numerous conversations with the principals from Mexico, we better understood why the students from Mexico remained on campus. At their schools in Mexico, these students are taught at an early age to take responsibility for themselves and to pay their own way.

In addition, the students from Mexico were far more frugal than those from New Mexico in how they spent

the money they received for performing their on-campus jobs; they preferred to purchase items to take home to their families. In contrast, the students from New Mexico were eager to spend their earnings at a shopping the mall, a movie, or a restaurant.

Goals achieved

The goals of the program were reviewed by the NMSBVI faculty and administrators to determine the effectiveness of the summer program.

Goal 1.

The first goal was to identify and serve students who are visually impaired aged 12-21 through a two-week summer enrichment program. Students with visual impairments from New Mexico and Mexico prepared and submitted applications to NMSBVI for the summer enrichment camp program, and all who applied were admitted.

Goal 2.

The second goal was to provide training and support in academic and compensatory skills to the participants. The structure of the program (morning academic courses and afternoon prevocational training, training in independent living skills, physical education, and art) proved successful. It is likely that future programs will resemble the original program. The students performed more actively in the morning and completed

their assignments in a timely manner. After lunch, the prevocational activities were less structured, which allowed for a more relaxed camp experience. At this time, there are no plans to alter the structure of the daily schedule.

Goal 3.

The third goal was to provide ancillary services and resources to the participants. On the basis of each student's IEP, O&M instruction was provided for those who qualified. Documentation of the students' progress was recorded and mailed to the Special Education Departments of the students' home schools. The teachers from Mexico maintained their own progress reports.

Goal 4.

The fourth goal was to provide a productive and nurturing environment for the students that would help them in the transition from school to work. There was a 2:1 ratio (student to adult) in every classroom, activity, and kitchen setting. The students attended an introductory session at the beginning of the summer camp that provided orientation to the campus. The students were permitted to move about the campus independently only when they had mastered safe travel skills, as determined by the O&M instructor. They were supervised and encouraged to participate in all the activities. The curriculum was created from input

on the students' admission applications and was designed for interactive participation. The curriculum provided support for career development and training. The students were offered a choice of the available activities and were encouraged to select different ones each week. A written schedule was maintained to ensure that each student participated in a variety of career-awareness activities.

Implications for further study

The summer enrichment program has demonstrated that two cultures, two countries, can reach beyond their own borders and form a collaborative academic partnership. There is a need to continue to examine the academic activities (braille, reading, math, technology, science, music, physical education, prevocational activities, and independent living skills) provided to meet the individual needs of each participant.

Reviewing and aligning the curriculum with the criteria of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (P.L. 107-110; U.S. Department of Education, 2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (Mandlawitz, 2006) will provide for continuity between the regular school year and summer camp. To evaluate the students' achievement more effectively, scientifically based research techniques will have to be implemented. There is a need to provide time for faculty and staff members to nurture professional relationships, exchange information, participate in professional development activities, and

network in the field. Exploring cultural diversity and engaging in discussions may provide educators in the United States and in Mexico with a better understanding of how to optimize the students' experiences at the NMSBVI International Summer Program.

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