

Deaf-Blind Perspectives

Volume 10, Issue 1

Fall 2002

PHASES: Psychologists Helping to Assess Students' Educational Strengths

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Editor's note: A longer version of the following article was originally published in Deafblind Focus, the newsletter of the Indiana Deafblind Services Project, Vol. 13 (1), Fall 2001. It is reprinted here with permission.

Imagine that you are about to be interviewed for an important job. You prepare by anticipating questions, considering what the employer is looking for, and thinking about what makes you uniquely suited for the position. You arrive at the interview nattily dressed and confident. There's some idle chat, and then the interview begins in earnest. You are asked, "How many days make a year on the planet Neptune? Name the currency of Myanmar. In what direction is the Leaning Tower of Pisa leaning?" When you look puzzled, the interviewer clucks and shakes her head, jots down a few notes, then continues with other questions that really have nothing at all to do with the job. You leave the interview feeling like "the weakest link," knowing that you did not have a chance to demonstrate your competence.

As ludicrous as it sounds, this experience may not be so different from what students who are deafblind go through in traditional psychological evaluations. Such evaluations involve the use of formal tests to obtain information about a person's intelligence, language skills, academic abilities, social competence, and emotional functioning. There are literally thousands of psychological tests. But unfortunately, most tests are not appropriate for use with individuals who have dual sensory impairments and other disabilities because they require normal vision and hearing and because they were developed for use with children in general education programs.

Yet, in schools across the country, the "competencies" of deafblind children and adolescents are often judged by tasks that are invalid because they have little connection to the students' actual learning experiences, achievements, or educational needs and goals. When these tests are administered to deafblind students, whose curricula have been individualized throughout their school years, the students typically perform poorly. The "results" may reflect low IQ or achievement scores. They may focus on one's delays and disabilities instead of true capabilities, leaving students and their families disheartened. Indeed, in one recent survey of parents and guardians of school-age children who are deafblind (Mar, 1998-1999), 43 percent of the respondents felt that the findings of recent psychological evaluations were not useful or did not accurately reflect the skills of their children.

Suppose that the job you are applying for is that of a store manager or an information technician or a home health aide, and suppose that the questions now have to do with work experience. No matter that you're the

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