

MEETING CONSULTING NEEDS IN GENERAL EDUCATION SETTINGS:

Five Strategies for Itinerant Teachers of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

By Brittany Dorn

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Teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing find consultation increasingly part of the job due to the national trend toward inclusion. The push toward inclusion has been accelerated by implementation of universal newborn hearing screening and advances in technology that have included digital hearing aids, cochlear implants, and hearing assistive technology systems (Berndsen & Luckner, 2012). As a result, deaf and hard of hearing students are increasingly educated by general education teachers—and these teachers may lack knowledge of what it means to be deaf or hard of hearing.

While teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students continue to offer direct services to students, with 87 percent of these students spending at least part of their day in a mainstream classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2013), consultation with teachers and support staff is increasingly important. According to Miller (2008), “a variety of service delivery models [are] available to support students who are deaf or hard of hearing, but the itinerant teaching model is the predominant model nationally, even internationally.” This means extensive collaboration, which sometimes involves working with resistant professionals who may be less than thrilled about having an “outsider” in their classrooms.

In a 2013 survey of 365 itinerant teachers, consultation with professionals and parents was rated as the second most important job responsibility (the first was working with students). The majority of teachers responded that their undergraduate and graduate programs did not adequately prepare them to work as itinerant teachers. When itinerant teachers were asked to suggest professional development topics, they cited consultation and effective collaboration (Luckner & Ayantoye, 2013).

Very little research exists on consultation in deaf education, but other fields offer research and suggestions that may be applied to this area. These suggestions include: setting and focusing on shared goals, using objective measures—not emotion—to justify accommodations, listening, being careful with language, and emphasizing why—not just how—students need services and accommodations.

Photos courtesy of Brittany Dorn



Left: The author (center) with staff from Clarke Mainstream Services. As more students who are deaf or hard of hearing are educated in neighborhood schools, the need for itinerant teachers of the deaf and mainstream services grows.

Forced into consulting by changes in how deaf and hard of hearing students are educated, teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing can use research from other fields to learn how to become effective consultants. They must master skills implicit in the role of consulting so that they can do this in a collaborative way that acknowledges shared responsibility for problem solving and solution monitoring with classroom teachers and other school professionals. Becoming effective consultants not only makes the work easier but also ensures swifter and more effective accommodations for the deaf and hard of hearing students.

The following five strategies have been developed for fields such as business and psychology, but they may also be effective for teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students who find themselves working with general education teachers.

Strategy 1: **Work to Set Up Shared Goals**

Sometimes teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students may feel that they have opposing goals from those of the classroom teacher, administrators, and special education director within the school district. While a teacher of a deaf or hard of hearing student focuses on that individual student, the classroom teacher focuses on the achievement of the class as a whole. Similarly, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students may struggle to ask the special education director about purchasing technology for one student when the special education director is focusing on saving money to allocate across the entire district. However, each of these professionals shares one overarching goal: to help students be successful. The principal may have a more general focus on the student body, the special education director may be thinking

about all the students with disabilities in the district, and the teacher of a deaf or hard of hearing student may be working with one profoundly deaf third grader. However, when these professionals gather to discuss this third grader, the student becomes the common denominator for all three professionals.

Many people are unfamiliar with the idea of mutual gain, and this unfamiliarity presents a major obstacle to effective collaboration (Feinberg, Beyer, & Moses, 2002). Mutual gain is the idea that both parties can benefit from the decision made. Too often, people feel that they are in a win-lose situation. Discussions focused on mutual gain and shared interest naturally position all players on the same team and lead to increased buy-in (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011). How does this apply to deaf education? Teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students should remind other teachers



Left: Often the job of the itinerant teacher involves working in any available school space, including the staircase and hallways. Here, the author conducts a listening check on a student's hearing aid in the hallway of a public school.

of a problem. Solutions must fit the context of the school, and school professionals know this context better than an itinerant consultant. For example, in the case of helping a student access the announcements made over a

loudspeaker, multiple

solutions exist. The announcements could be typed, printed, and delivered to the student, or they could be projected on a television or computer screen. There is no best solution—there is only the solution that works within the context of the school. On teamwork with school staff, Fisher et al. (2011)

caution, “If they are not involved in the process, they are unlikely to approve the product. It is that simple.” When other professionals feel ownership of a solution, they are more invested in its success and work harder to try to accomplish it.

Additionally, there are often ways to meet individual student goals in a way that improves the environment for all students. For example, high expectations for speaking and listening may lead to higher-level classroom discussions. Amplification, such as a pass-around microphone and corresponding Soundfield system, which allows all students—not just those who are deaf or hard of hearing—to hear amplified sound, projects important information to the whole class. The transmitter of a personal FM system can be used as a “talking stick” to remind students to take turns when speaking, thus increasing expectations for all students in the room.

Strategy 2:

Use Objective Measures— Not Emotions—to Persuade

The job of an itinerant teacher can be emotionally taxing and isolating. It is common for a district to employ a single teacher for students who are deaf and hard of hearing, and to task that teacher

and administrators of the shared goal and use the word “we” whenever possible. When faced with an obstacle, for example, the teacher of a deaf or hard of hearing student can ask the team, “How can we best deal with this challenge?” and “What can be done to help us reach our goal?” Whenever possible, the teacher of the deaf or hard of hearing student should physically sit beside the classroom teachers (Fisher et al., 2011) as they discuss or face a challenge together.

While the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students works with team members to establish goals, the team members should determine the best way to meet those goals. Although tempting, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students should avoid the urge to try to provide every step toward the solution

Right: Whenever possible, position the work or “obstacles” across from you and your collaborative partner as you work together on a solution.



with advocating for every deaf or hard of hearing student in the district. This teacher may observe students in difficult situations—in a classroom where the videos are not captioned, in the lunchroom where the student is socially isolated, or with a teacher who, despite instruction, addresses the interpreter rather than the student. Further, the classroom teacher and other educational professionals may not understand deafness, may downplay its educational significance, or may listen intently to suggestions but then fail to implement them.

According to Wrightslaw (www.wrightslaw.com), an advocacy resource for parents, intense emotions can become an Achilles' heel during the negotiation process (Wright, 2008). It may be tempting to appeal emotionally to the school staff—to plead with the general education teacher to incorporate the deaf or hard of hearing student into the classroom in the manner that the teacher of deaf or hard of hearing students knows is best. However, this is not an effective course of action. According to Wright (2008), "You must transform your emotions into energy." As much as possible, this energy should transform into suggestions and recommendations presented through statistics, data, and objective measures. According to Fisher et al. (2011), "The more you bring standards of fairness, efficiency, or scientific merit to bear on your particular problem, the more likely you are to produce a final package that is wise and fair." Further, basing arguments on objective data decreases the likelihood of a battle of wills or feelings (Fisher et al., 2011). For example, teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students may be tempted to state what they think or feel about the need for a student to receive increased service time by saying, "I can tell he needs more time working with me because he's struggling in his classes and he seems lonely at school." This appeal is largely emotional, and it can be easily disputed. A general education teacher

might reply, "Well, he's doing fine in my class, and I've seen him smiling in the hallway. I think he's fine." A better course of action is to seek out and use data that adds credibility to suggestions. For example, a teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students who believes it necessary to increase the amount of time a student spends with her might report: "Out of the six classes in which he is enrolled, this student currently has three Fs and three Cs. Additionally, I observed him in the cafeteria on five separate occasions, and four of the five times he sat alone and engaged with fewer than two peers during each 35-minute lunch block." Assessments and checklists, sometimes available for free through websites, can structure and add credibility to data. For example, using the Hearing Itinerant Service Rubric, which is available for free downloading (<https://successforkidswithhearingloss.com>), can help teachers develop and present data that shows whether a student's service time should be increased.

Similarly, when advocating for equipment such as the FM system, the numerical results of the student's functional listening evaluation, which measures how well a student can hear at different distances and with different levels of background noise, should be emphasized. Not only does data persuade more effectively than emotions, it is harder to dispute.

Right: Requesting listening breaks from the student's perspective—in addition to the rationale of the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students—is more meaningful.

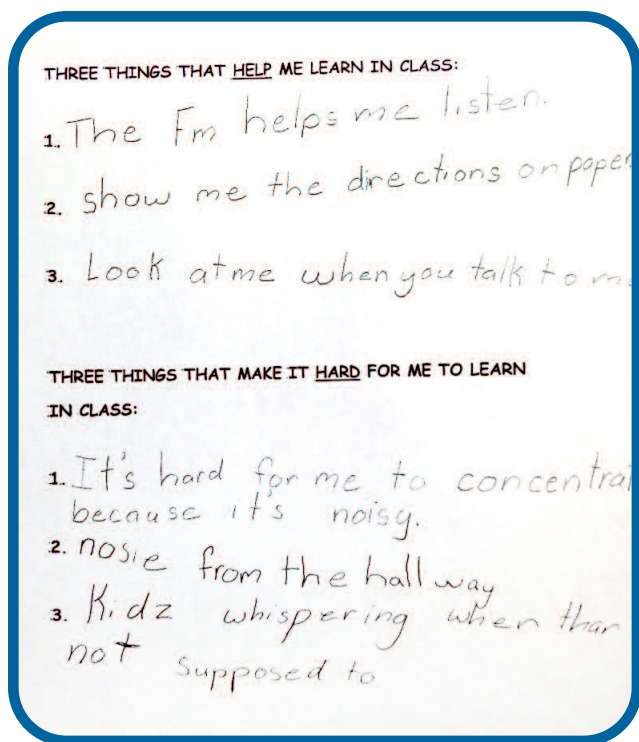
Strategy 3: Listen

In his book *Just Listen*, Goulston (2010) explains that in the same way new knowledge builds on prior knowledge, initial judgments about people (e.g., this teacher doesn't want extra work) form a filter through which we interact. In order to really hear people, Goulston explains that we need to remove this filter: "Open your own mind and look for the reasons behind the behavior, and you'll take the first step toward breaking down barriers ... if you want to open the lines of communication, open your own mind first."

Certain behaviors such as eye contact, nodding, and rephrasing help people know you are listening. In a study of effective early childhood consultants, resource consultants "actively listened, showed empathy, reflected on feelings, and asked clarifying questions" that led to more effective teamwork (Frankel, 2006). When people feel heard, they are more open to your message, according to Goulston. In addition to helping people feel heard, active listening helps solve the problem. As explained in the book *Getting to Yes* (Fisher et al., 2011),

Listening break Info Sheet

<p>How many breaks can you take each day?</p> <p>I take 6 breaks</p>	<p>How long is each listening break?</p> <p>my breaks is 5 minutes</p>
<p>When is a Good time to take a listening break?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> when my work is done after listening for a long time may be shakti time 	<p>When is NOT a good time to take a listening break?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> During a lesson During morning meeting When I'm teaching or doing an important job <p>I need listening breaks because...</p> <p>Sometimes I get tired of working so hard to listen.</p>



Above: Using the words of the deaf or hard of hearing student is often a more powerful way to show the *why* than any advice the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students could give.

understanding the other person's perspective does not simply help with the negotiation, it *is* the negotiation.

As teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, we find that some classroom teachers immediately understand and implement our suggestions; in other classes, it is two months into the school year and despite our constant reminders, the closed captions are still not turned on—or the FM system is misused, or the teacher still gives direction to the interpreter and not the student. As we learn to effectively consult, we realize that *who* is being asked (and in what context) is as important as *what* is being asked. To ensure our students receive the accommodations they need, we, the consultants, need to focus not only on the request but on the individual teacher to whom the request is addressed and on

the school context within which we are doing the requesting.

Strategy 4: Be Deliberate with Language

Language matters! This is especially true in deaf education, in which the stakes are high, the situation is personal, and the teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing is often working with classroom teachers who are overwhelmed and at times defensive. In this environment, the words that the teacher of the deaf and

hard of hearing uses to deliver a message may often be as important as the message itself.

In his book *Schools That Learn*, Senge et al. (2012) provide sentence starters for effectively providing information and asking for clarification; in other words, “balancing inquiry and advocacy.” For example, when explaining the reasoning behind a decision, a teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students might say, “I am proposing this [accommodation or modification] because [it is indicated by this data, assessment, or observation]. Is this a fair conclusion?” (Senge et al., 2012). Teachers who consistently use data to support their points can expect the same from others. When following up on a point made by someone else, the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students might ask, “What leads you to say that?” or “Would you please help me understand your thinking?” as a way to probe for objective data (adapted from Senge et al., 2012).

The Region 13 Education Service Center, a Texas-based resource that

offers ideas on collaborating to benefit students, suggests in its videos that teachers pay attention to the *type* of question asked. Consultants should avoid questions in which the wording is leading (i.e., questions in which the wording hints at the answer), closed (i.e., questions that require only a yes or no answer), or negative (i.e., questions in which a student or situation is portrayed in a negative way). Although the speaker may not realize he or she is asking these types of questions, the listener may subconsciously shut down or become defensive as a result of the language that constitutes these types of questions.

Strategy 5: Emphasize Why, Not What

Simon Sinek (2009), in a popular and powerful TED talk, introduces a visual to represent the way people communicate ideas. It is an illustration made up of three concentric circles: the largest, outer circle labeled “what”; the next largest circle labeled “how”; and the smallest, inner circle labeled “why.” According to Sinek, most people ineffectively make requests by moving from the outer to the inner circle, explaining what they are asking, then how to accomplish it, and finally why they are making their request. He suggests reversing the strategy, beginning with the rationale—the “why” of the request—and then moving to the “how” and finally stating the “what.”

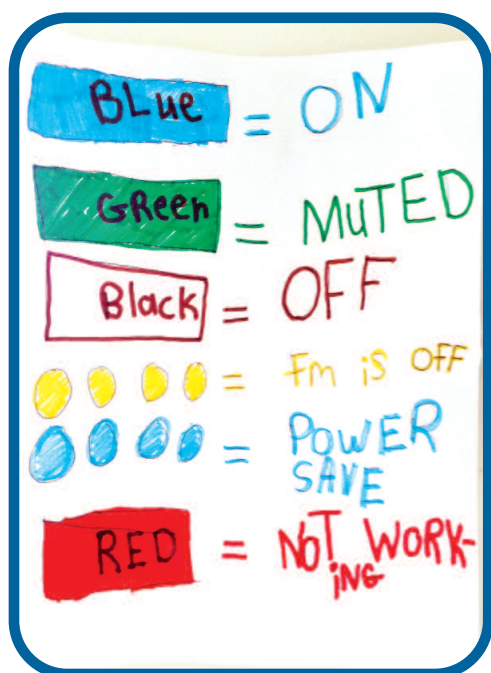
For the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students, this means addressing the *why* might be more effective than putting in successive requests for the *what*. Through in-service and follow-up meetings, using simulations of hearing loss and incorporating hands-on activities, the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students can help the classroom teacher understand the meaning and purpose of inclusion, the educational implications of deafness, and how compromised accessibility means compromised learning. The teacher of

deaf and hard of hearing students can help others understand what it is like to be deaf or hard of hearing in a typical classroom and the importance of making accommodations.

Working Together for Student Success

Teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students have the important role of bringing awareness of individual students' needs for accessibility and modifications to classroom teachers and working with those teachers to identify ways to assist the student in the context of the individual school setting. As consultants dedicated to the educational success of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, our success comes more easily when we help classroom teachers understand the rationale for accommodations. Once this happens, teachers do not need to be told of every single accommodation. Instead, they

Below: Equipment reminders are stronger when they are written by the students themselves. This sign was created by a fourth grader to remind her classmates and teacher of the sign lights on the Soundfield tower.



start to independently assess the student's environment and look for ways to support the student. The role of

the teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students is to act as a problem-solving partner throughout this process.

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