

Linking schools, universities, and businesses to mobilize resources and support for career choice and development of students who are visually impaired

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Abstract

This study documents how linking schools, universities, and local organizations can make school curriculum more relevant for career development for students who are visually impaired. Two schools, one for the visually impaired with students aged 4–19 years and another school for students aged 11–19 years who have severe or profound learning difficulties, were part of the collaboration, along with local university students who were teachers in training. Outcomes included new curriculum material for use in public schools to sensitize sighted students on visual impairment. The project also initiated employment apprenticeships for two students who are visually impaired. Our findings suggest that we can educate multiple groups of students simultaneously while building stronger ties between schools, universities, and local public and private employers. Using an outreach approach results in building relationships that facilitate education and employment for students who are visually impaired. St. Vincent's School obtained consent for all participants in this study and participants chose to be identified, rather than have a pseudonym used.

Keywords

Curriculum innovation, employment, reverse inclusion, school university collaboration, service learning, social capital, social entrepreneurship

Visually impaired individuals experience high rates of unemployment and underemployment in the United Kingdom (Wittich, Watanabe, Scully, & Bergevin, 2013). Research analyzing Quarterly Labor Force Survey has found that low employment rates have decreased further:

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3.9% between 2010 and 2015 among people with visual impairment, compared to the general workforce, which has had a reduced rate of 0.2% for the same period (Hewett & Keil, 2015). Not surprisingly, concerns about employment are among the list of worries for adolescents who are visually impaired (Khadka, Ryan, Margrain, Woodhouse, & Davies, 2012; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2014). Historically, approaches to address lower than average employment rates among persons who are blind or partially sighted have provided special training in the workplace or ensured that specialized schools were available. These educational opportunities are critical and have made an important difference in the quality of life for many individuals as well as enriched the companies. This approach is limited in its reach because of its focus mostly on the person with visual impairment. At the same time that a person with visual impairment is gaining new knowledge, skills, and abilities, we need to be changing the attitudes and behaviors of sighted individuals and organizational culture to include individuals who are blind or partially sighted. To facilitate increased employment of people with visual impairment, specialized schools need to build inter-agency collaborations. In this study, we contribute to this emerging literature shifting away from students who are visually impaired as passive service recipients to a model of reverse inclusion and community service learning (both terms defined and review below) in which they are active agents engaged in creating and contributing to the workplace and their own social capital (explained below).

The needs and wishes of students who are visually impaired have only recently been included when considering teaching practices (Whitburn, 2014) and have the potential to deepen students' learning and enjoyment of education as well as preparation for future work. They identified the need for teachers to be prepared in advance in order to provide access to materials and to be attentive to allowing autonomy to develop, while at that same time being supportive in and out of the classroom. From this research, we have a better understanding of what students want in pedagogy; future research can extend this work by asking them about employment hopes and dreams. The work of Khadka et al. (2012) has examined concerns about education, as well as social and leisure activities among children and young adults aged 5–18 years, comparing visually impaired to fully sighted counterparts. They found concerns about how being visually impaired prohibits driving that limits the dream job of a young man. We have an opportunity to engage students to develop additional dreams and to take control working to make dreams a reality.

Visually impaired students can exercise control over decision-making and be competitive in employment (Steinman et al., 2013) when training and employment organizations work together. Essential employability skills are teamwork and interacting with others (Kaine & Kent, 2013; Wolffe, 2011). Increasingly, there is a trend in expanded core curriculum to explicitly teach social skills, as evidenced by a meta-analysis with over 1000 students (Botsford, 2013). Skill development in an educational setting does not automatically transfer to the workplace. In the United Kingdom, a model pre-employment program identified that one of the key factors in employment of those visually impaired is for educators and employers to have a shared perspective (Wittich et al., 2013). Developing a shared perspective requires relationship building and Brown, Brown, and Glaser (2013) provide feasible recommendations for accomplishing that through interagency collaborations: start small (e.g. meetings, networking) and focus on open effective communications to learn more about each organization's resources and responsibilities. These kinds of interagency collaborations have potential for using the strategy of reverse inclusion for mixing students in the classroom and other educational activities.

One model of collaboration used in school settings is reverse inclusion. The concept of reverse inclusion is to have *students without special needs* attend classes with *students who have special needs* to serve as social and educational models. In the United Kingdom, reverse inclusion in sports is having positive outcomes; one visually impaired person reported, "it has given me social

skills, self-confidence, self-esteem, opportunities for travel and the vehicle to show my ability rather than my disability" (Vickerman, Hayes, & Whetherly, 2003, p. 49). In addition to benefits to individuals, reverse inclusion across agencies provides additional resources to schools; collaborations with local a university and businesses can enrich educational settings, often this occurs in the form of service learning.

Community service learning is "an educational approach that integrates service in the community with intentional learning activities" (Canadian Alliance for Community Service-Learning, 2006, p. 1). Explicit use of service learning has been identified (significantly in the United States) as an important part of civic education curricula (Pritzker & McBride, 2006). It offers a means to empower students and for institutions to "become engaged and civically active in mutually beneficial ways" (McKnight-Casey, Davidson, Billig, & Springer, 2006, p. xi). In earlier versions of service learning, the goal was for students to receive practical knowledge about a particular curriculum content while serving. Service learning has been related to enhanced student development (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Mahin & Kruggel, 2006) and career development (Baetz, McEvoy, Adamson, & Loomis, 2012). Beyond the impact on student collaborations, it can have a positive effect on local organizations and their service recipients (e.g. serving in a soup kitchen benefits the local charitable organization that needs human resources and benefits the men, women, and children receiving a warm meal).

One of the limitations of the extant literature on service learning is that it is unidirectional, mostly having examined the impact of service learning on sighted individuals providing service, not the person(s) (or organizations) engaging in it. Similar to the inclusion research before reverse inclusion was introduced, and there is a missed opportunity for exchange and for all those involved to be simultaneously providers and recipients such that individuals in organizations shift their perceptions about contributions to be made by visually impaired individuals. Viewed from this perspective, service learning integrated with reverse inclusion flattens the hierarchy and works in a model of collaboration that demands attention to outcomes for all those involved, particularly to those traditionally engaged as service recipients (Patterson & Loomis, 2007). Combining the approach of reverse inclusion with community service learning can increase the social capital of students who are visually impaired.

Social capital can be defined as "investment in social relations by individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns of instrumental or expressive actions" (Lin, 1999, p. 39). There has been a growing debate about the idea of embedding social capital into school systems where efforts have been made to secure a radical, moral, and social reconstruction of communities. Attention to the worth of social capital has gained pace since the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) linked educational achievement to social inequality, emphasizing the functional value of social relations as an educational resource. In *Bowling Alone* (Putnam, 2000), social capital is central in reclaiming public life, linking it with civic engagement. Ultimately, social capital is about how people interact with each other (Dekker & Uslaner, 2001), links to civic engagement, community cohesive, and innovative and creative learning experiences interwoven with signposts toward employment.

Informed by these concepts of community service learning and social capital in 2000, Liverpool Hope University designed a project to connect the aims of post-secondary education with needs of secondary education and local communities through teacher training that includes volunteering in local schools. Two aims were for university students to have practical teaching experience and to learn how to be better citizens (in the United Kingdom, this was referred to as the Citizenship Education cycle). The project is called the Schools Intergenerational Nurturing and Learning (SIGNAL) Project. At the core of the project's philosophy is a belief that positive outcomes emerge when social capital theory is engaged (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2001) with

creative learning experiences, as championed by the popular education theory discussed by Gramsci (1971) and Freire (1972):

The SIGNAL process has three defined stages: the engagement of children's (and student) interest through explicit citizenship assemblies, cross-curricular education through the foci of engagement, and the final celebration of work through a social enterprise reinforcing the initial citizenship engagement. (Patterson & Loomis, 2007, p. 10)

Research on SIGNAL shows positive outcomes for student-teacher in schools for sighted students (Patterson, 2013), but SIGNAL has not been examined in schools for the blind and visually impaired. Students who are visually impaired have engaged with two large-scale SIGNAL projects in 2000 and 2005, where the celebration event on each occasion involved over 20 local schools; however, the impact on students who are visually impaired was not investigated. In April 2013, SIGNAL was initiated at St. Vincent's School for sensory impairment with an important difference. The SIGNAL framework was used as a means to facilitate reverse inclusion, with a goal to reshape the focus away from sighted university student-teacher to visually impaired students. This study examines whether SIGNAL would have benefits for primary and secondary visually impaired students and if it would support career choice and development of visually impaired students for employment.

Method

The 12-month SIGNAL project started April 2013 occurred in the City of Liverpool, one of five districts in Merseyside County, England, with a population of 1.39 million (i.e. in an urban setting). It was initiated with a collaboration that included two schools (St. Vincent's School for the blind and partially sighted for students aged 4-19 years and Palmerton School, educating students, aged 11-19 years, who have severe or profound learning difficulties), a university (Hope University), a police department, and several local businesses and organizations. Data were collected using participant-observations over a period of 1 year and analyzed for impact on the collaboration and students.

Results

We report on outcomes for the interagency collaboration and on an aggregated group of students who are visually impaired, as well as present two individual students as case study illustrations.

Impact on interagency collaboration

Among the community agencies conversations occurred about how to institutionalize interagency collaboration in the schooling process for visually impaired students. One important outcome for the collaboration was new partnerships. The UK government has an initiative called PREVENT that is a strategy designed "to reduce the risk of terrorism to the UK ... [and] to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism" (for more information, see <http://merseyside.police.uk/advice-and-protection/terrorism/prevent/>). Within this initiative, a police department and two not-for-profit organizations, one to engage senior citizens and the other to promote optimum early child development, became partners for the first time, Merseyside Police, Dark Horse Venture, and Small Wonder, respectively. This collaboration resulted in intergenerational activities and the agencies have remained key partners. This intervention successfully generated new interagency

collaborations that support the educational and employment outcomes for students at a school serving solely students who are visually impaired and it continues as of this writing in March 2016.

Impact on students and a local charity

The SIGNAL intervention with visually impaired students had three guiding activities with positive outcomes: (1) engage, (2) educate, and (3) celebrate. Engagement activities started with a values-based assembly delivered by Liverpool Football Club. In this gathering, school children were asked to consider a number of core-value messages, examples are as follows: “we is better than me,” “show racism the red card” (in football lingo meaning to be thrown out of the game), “kick drugs into touch” (meaning kick drugs out of the main game), “more important than being a good footballer is being a good person,” and “give bullying the boot.” University student–teachers worked with children (educate) and generated lesson plans to reinforce messages. Some children wrote poems and songs and others completed artwork. Student–teachers invited parents and community members to have group discussions about children’s activities and to foster supportive home environments, reinforcing curriculum content. The final stage of SIGNAL (celebrate) encouraged children to celebrate their work within a social enterprise. Engaged lecturers taught elements of enterprise and entrepreneurial skills to participants. Outcomes included children deciding to sell tickets to their celebration and several small- and medium-sized enterprises developed. In keeping with SIGNAL, values-generated funds were given to a charity decided on by the children.

Impact on two students’ career and enterprise development

One outcome is seen in the career development of Mahmood, a 19-year-old student who is visually and hearing impaired. Mahmood developed an idea for the school to participate in a national bid for solar panels. Writing a rap to support the schools solar panel bid (www.solarschools.org.uk/stvincents), Mahmood’s wish is to work as a sports presenter. Therefore, there is a need to provide him with opportunities whereby he can develop his skills and engage employers. Mahmood was given a challenge. He had 2 hr to teach five professional musicians, a mobile recording unit and two student filmmakers his “Rap.” He had to describe what he wanted and organize everyone so as to bring it into an event held at school. His work on YouTube is evidence of his abilities: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoVtzO2iS7I&feature=youtube>. He won a national Solar Star Pupil award and his project generated multiple outcomes including demonstration of his excellent communication skills (great resume material) and a socially cohesive project. This process enabled us to present to CAPITA, a local business, and ask a simple question: does not this young man have communication skills your company could well use? The discussion around apprenticeship is now in progress.

A second student interested in the hospitality industry was given the opportunity to work in our newly generated community café. It opened to support the martial arts and sporting events the school undertakes on weekends and to provide a workplace for students learning skills in managing a small restaurant. The student working in the café was noticed by local police officers attending a sporting activity and invited to apply to become a police cadet. She passed the entrance requirements and is now a police cadet. Not only is she enjoying a career she had not considered she is also providing other police cadets with a better understanding of visual impairment.

At the level of integration, partner organizations worked together to create new educational materials to help sensitize mainstream students to those who are marginalized in society due to sensory impairments or learning disabilities. The result is a project with a mission of “Helping

Liverpool to See" through photographs, poems, and a children's book. The enterprise was to develop the content for the book and produce it. With support from the Royal Photographic Society and Amber Trust, the partnership launched 24 photographs (depicting life in Liverpool over a 24-hr period) along with a range of literacy projects to develop text attached to each photograph. The text serves to evoke the same feelings portrayed in the pictures or to make sense of them in some way. Collaboratively, we developed values-based lesson plans to support the text and photos. Collectively, the photographs, text, and lesson plans have been made into a book to be gifted as a learning resource to every student-teacher and each primary school in the city.

Impact on curriculum development

This project also provided fodder for curriculum development within the school for students who are visually impaired. The process embraces student voice, specifically involving students within projects at the place where they have asked to have input. In the Solar Schools project, classroom lessons have already discussed the "green agenda." The project exists as the children's answer to reducing their carbon footprint. As part of this project, Liverpool Hope University and Liverpool College students are working with St. Vincent students to secure the purchase of individual solar panels. Children are providing ideas for action, and are involved in managing the processes.

A primary goal of the reverse inclusion activities was to create photographs, poems, and songs for a public presentation that would sensitize sighted people about visual impairment. In helping Liverpool to see, 24 photographs have been taken in 24 hr in the project area of the City. Working with the Reader Organization, each photograph has poems written to express the feelings as the photographer intended to capture. A collaboration with Liverpool Hope University generated a range of lesson plans to accompany the photographs and poems with particular attention to including aspects to enhance the audience's sensitivity and understanding of visual impairment. The photographs and poems are being made into a book for Hope University student-teachers to take into schools across the region; (when available these may be viewed from St. Vincent's School website <http://www.stvin.com/news/projects/124>).

Discussion

This study examined the impact of a local project on building partnerships among organizations that have the potential to increase employment opportunities for visually impaired students. The name of the project is SIGNAL and it has an explicit philosophy of building collaborations among school, university, and local organizations and business, and of increasing students' social capital, providing them with greater opportunities to integrate into and participate more fully in society. This approach is consistent with previous research showing a need to focus on the needs of students who are visually impaired (Whitburn, 2014). Applying SIGNAL to a residential and day school for visually impaired students has positive outcomes. Using a SIGNAL approach can help other schools and business to generate new curriculum content that addresses local issues; it can also foster social entrepreneurship among students who are visually impaired.

We observe that using a SIGNAL model can change the ways sighted and visually impaired educators, students, and employers interact. Consistent with research findings on the importance of teamwork (Kaine & Kent, 2013; Wolffe, 2011) and decision-making (Steinman et al., 2013), our research shows that making equality a foundational concept in school-community-university partnerships is possible to realize. In our study, equality was realized at the individual level (school pupils who are visually impaired equally sharing in curriculum development with university student-teachers) and at the organizational level with institutions and businesses sharing

obligations and rewards. Our work is consistent with the popular education theories of Gramsci (1971) and Freire (1972) and add support for previous findings on how developing shared perspectives facilitates learning for students who are visually impaired (Wittich et al., 2013).

The employment apprenticeships came as a direct result of interactions of agency partners with visually impaired students. Seeing their abilities, rather than a disability, opened new windows for dreaming about career choices for visually impaired students and enriched human resources for employers such as a local police force and a local business. Findings from this study are consistent with previous literature showing significant components are active participation, thoughtfully organized experiences focused on the community needs, school and community coordination, academic curriculum integration, structured time for reflection, opportunities for application of skills and knowledge, and the extension of learning opportunities (Billig, 2000).

Limitations and future research

This study is limited in at least two ways. First, adopting SIGNAL to St. Vincent's School was not entirely new to school staff because the school principal (also the first author of this article) had worked in SIGNAL previously with the university partner. Other schools adopting the SIGNAL model may not have similar successes if some yet unidentified insider knowledge is needed. Another possible limitation of this study is that the lead researcher was a part of the collaboration from St. Vincent's School. Although bias is likely to be present, it may be held in balance with interagency partner communications and positive outcomes are objective (e.g. curriculum material and apprenticeships); future research may want to include both an insider and an outsider to the research setting.

Future research is needed to explore if SIGNAL may be adopted and adapted to schools and training programs in other geographical regions to increase employment rates among individuals who are visually impaired. Existing programs with similar interagency collaborations may want to review their agency mix and consider if opportunities for intergenerational activities exist. If not, add one or more agencies, considering those in the public and private sectors as well as not-for-profit organizations. We encourage other collaborations to review their framework in comparison to the SIGNAL model particularly for the underpinning philosophy and for its activities. Where needed fine tune the philosophy of collaboration and adopt one or more SIGNAL activities not currently employed (e.g. engage, educate, and celebrate). We also suggest using reverse inclusion and engaging student-teachers to test whether local curriculum development for schools dedicated to serving the visually impaired may work for them as it did at St. Vincent's School. Similarly, a test of engaging visually impaired students in the process of generating curriculum content to be used in schools serving sighted students will be important. Finally, we ask other program developers and planners to consider if adding a dimension of social entrepreneurship would create more opportunities for individuals who are visually impaired.

Implications for practice and conclusion

Findings from this case study have implications for developing collaborative and productive partnerships that extend beyond the school's boundaries. The SIGNAL model can be used in institutions involved in the education of visually impaired students offering a wider set of opportunities afforded by interagency collaborations. Findings from this study show that a project-based approach delivers in enhancing education and employment for students who are visually impaired. Doing so requires schools to generate meaningful collaborations with multiple agencies and institutions that potentially seek to impact vocational learning and employment experiences for visually impaired

individuals. Instructors and staff can reach out to organizations and institutions in the local geographical area and engage them in co-creating contemporary curriculum content that is a resource for educating sighted students and employers about visual impairment. Using an outreach approach results in building relationships that facilitate education and employment for students who are visually impaired. We maintain it to be extremely important that each child is the focal point of a customized multi-disciplinary, vocational strategy, doing so creates a context where every visually impaired individual may aspire and attain a career that is personally rewarding and contributes to a society in which those with visual impairments are not marginalized and disenfranchised.

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