

Julian's Transition: A Dream Team and Hard Work

by Connie L. Mace and Lyle Romer

Although Julian has only been at his neighbourhood high school a short time, this tall, attractive young man is already making new friends. Girls are particularly interested in talking with him outside class and getting to know him better. He participates in weight training, wood shop and homemaking classes as part of his high school curriculum. All these are normal high school activities for a 17 year old boy. The main difference is that Julian is the only student without vision and hearing at his school. He communicates with tactile sign language, touch cues and tactile cue cards and, until recently, attended an out of district self-contained classroom for students with severe disabilities. Julian's journey from that setting to his neighbourhood high school is a story of anxiety and confusion, dreams and visions, and experiences which have paved the way for Julian and left a pathway for other students with severe disabilities.

Anxiety and Confusion

When Julian's family decided to bring him home from the state residential school to be educated closer to home, the local school district administrator was not sure where to enrol Julian. Until that time, the school district had never enrolled a student with deaf-blindness and the administrator thought that a class for students with severe disabilities in a neighbouring school district seemed like the best option.

Professionals at that school however, were equally confused and reluctant. The Communication Development Specialist stated, "When this lovely lady [Julian's mom] and her son came the very first day, we were fearful, ... we'd never (enrolled) a child like this." His special education teacher told the district director that "he wasn't doing Julian or myself any good by putting us together because I had no training with students with deaf-blindness." But the staff quickly learned through

inservice training provided by consultants from the local Educational Service District. Those inservices focused on: (1) current 'best practices' in inclusive education; (2) the value underlying inclusion and the value of diversity; (3) the increased benefits to non-disabled students; and (4) the increased relevance and functional outcomes of education when it occurs in inclusive settings.

Also at this time, Julian's family became members of a team supported by a grant through the University of Washington called "Innovations" which focused on developing a plan to support Julian's increased integration in general education. The efforts of the team were instrumental in creating opportunities for Julian to be included with his peers in middle school. Julian's special education teacher remembers, "At first we were scared, then we were a team together, and we weren't afraid anymore."

Dreams and Visions

When Julian started middle school, the class was filled with junior high school and high school age students but was actually located in an isolated wing of an elementary school adjacent to the middle school. Julian's special education teacher had a different vision though, one that included chances to be with the other members of the student body. She noticed that in the adjoining middle school, there was a small room that was only occasionally used by staff. With this room, the teacher saw an opportunity for her students to have closer contact with age peers.

Moving from a spacious classroom set up for students with disabilities into a small room on the middle school campus was difficult, but she stated, "We gave up a lot to get something better." Previous attempts to move her classroom had been

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discouraged by the school administration, so when she saw the open classroom, she used a different strategy, she moved in! She told others, "We didn't ask permission because we'd been told, 'no, no, no,' so we asked forgiveness after we moved in."

Now that Julian and his classmates had more opportunities for meeting their age peers, something had to happen to bring them closer together. Here the dream took on a new dimension. Julian's team looked into activities that he could participate in that would give him chances to interact with those age peers. They came up with selling popcorn during school hours in the cafeteria as an objective. This meant a lot of work in developing communication systems for Julian and teaching the other students how to ask him for popcorn and to pay for it. Through this activity Julian increased his communication skills with other people, and he also met most of the other students at his school.

Once again, the dream expanded. The support team now approached a P.E. teacher and she began to include Julian in her classes with the general student body. She became enthusiastic about Julian's inclusion and tried to "make socialisation with the other students work for Julian." This teacher caught the sense of vision from the team, she remembered how "...the team was allowed to dream for Julian and see what happens." But, the dreams were also backed up by hard work on the part of the team. They constantly sought out better ways for Julian to communicate with his peers and to adapt the curriculum so that he was learning as well as making new friends.

Julian's Mom stated, "A parent has dreams and you shouldn't let those dreams die." Well, not only didn't the team let them die, they had one more dream that seemed almost too incredible to believe could ever come true. Julian's mom had always wanted him to go to the same schools as his brothers. Since Julian would need to transition into a high school soon, the team saw the opportunity to bring this vision into reality. As the U.W. consultant reasoned, "Wherever Julian would be transitioned, a program would have to be created, so why not use his home high school?" Julian's

mother remained strong in her dream, but cautiously wanted to be sure it was best for Julian because while, "A lot of times you have the right to do something, but (sometimes) it's not the right thing to do for the child."

It was time to approach another local school administrator. This time, with the support of Julian's team, his mom requested that Julian be allowed to attend his home high school where his brother was a senior. Since this high school did not have a special education class for students with significant disabilities, Julian would be enrolled in regular education classes with his peers. To support his involvement in these classes, an educational assistant would accompany Julian as an interpreter. The team was given permission to begin the transition planning process.

Several months were spent getting Julian used to changes in location, schedules and activities. At the same time through Julian's support team and "hands-on" experience, staff and students at the high school were learning more about people with dual sensory loss and particularly about Julian. His mother knew that the teachers were "scared at first that they might not be able to do the job," but this phase quickly passed as they came to know Julian, as opposed to some abstraction of what a deaf-blind student might be like. Given the support of Julian's middle school team, most of the educational staff at the high school were supportive and willing to adapt their curricula into classes which were functional and meaningful for Julian. An important principle was stated by the consultant from the Educational Service District, "There are dignity issues involved with integrating Julian. It's nice to include him in a classroom, but I think it needs to have some meaning for him and it has to be an experience that the other kids can invest in."

Making popcorn at the middle school was one experience which had given Julian a chance to interact with other students and friendships had been developed. If anything, the opportunities at high school were now even greater. An interaction Julian had with a new friend illustrates this: one day a student named Micki had lunch

with Julian. As they walked to the cafeteria she helped him find his way by showing him how, through his cane, to feel the textures of the hallway, including the doormat. Julian, upon recognising the mat, took two steps forward and knew right where to find the door handle. Julian sat next to Micki throughout lunch. She would sometimes scratch his back or give him a hug; he'd smile and carefully try to steal her Coke can. Of course, Micki would see this attempt, wait until his hand found the can and then grab it and put it to her mouth. Julian's hand would stay on the can and he would laugh as she drank. Once, after this routine had occurred several times, Micki took the can and touched it to his cheek, signing 'cold' at the same time; Julian smiled. After eating, Micki signed 'walk' into his hands. Julian stood up and, taking her elbow, was guided by Micki to a group of her friends on the other side of the room. During the conversation Micki showed two of her friends how to tactually sign 'good' into Julian's hands. Julian appeared very casual as he 'hung out' with the girls while gently holding Micki's elbow. During this activity Micki and Julian acted as so many friends at high school do. They enjoyed each other's company, teased each other a little, communicated how they felt and joined in with a larger group of their friends. Micki also taught a couple of her other friends how to begin to talk to Julian. This, simply put, would never happen in an isolated, self-contained educational program for students with severe disabilities.

But, leaving his middle school friends was bittersweet: pleasing to be closer to home with students from his neighbourhood; sad to say good-bye to friends. Julian's special education teacher summed up her feelings, "We will really miss Julian, but we're not his home community." A banner was posted next to Julian's popcorn stand on his last day and his friends signed their

thoughts and hopes for Julian. One student wrote, "I will miss you always." Students and faculty came up to Julian and shook his hands for the last time.

Pathways for Others

When Julian's support team advocated, dreamed, and planned more integration for Julian, opportunities opened up for other students as well. Julian's interpreter expressed that initially, middle school teachers were not sure how students from the special education class would fit into general education. As time went on, the same teachers were disappointed if no students with disabilities were included in their rooms. As the consultant for the E.S.D. stated, "The idea of integration started and there was no stopping it." The occupational therapist for the middle school said that Julian and the special education teacher have "set the way for a lot of other kids" and helped the school to know that they are all a community. Staff on the team used Julian's vision to touch other students, "What we try to do for one, we try to do for all the kids we touch." Julian's mother believes that her son is now opening the way for other students with severe disabilities to attend the high school.

By knowing Julian and the team of teachers, family and friends who supported his inclusion at high school we have learned that dreams and visions should never be seen as finished or accomplished: real dreams and vision only grow deeper and more meaningful as you begin to live them. We also found out that while dreaming is important, the hard work of developing new partnerships is equally important. Coming to understand that we all belong to each other in some way helps make the hard work worthwhile in the end.