Picture a young girl living on the plains of North Dakota who spent many winter days reading the books that her parents ensured filled the family's bookshelves. That young girl was me and I remember one such book, the *Story of Helen Keller* by Lorena A. Hickok, having a profound impression upon me. It was a book that my sister had ordered through the local school Scholastic Book program. Like so many hand-me-down items that came my way as the younger sister, so did the book.

That very book is on display in my current office. The copyright is 1965. My sister's name is legible on the inside cover – she may have marked it as hers, but I claimed it for the rest of time. The tale helped to spark a future teacher's heart. I imagine that I was one of many young budding teachers who were inspired by the story of Helen Keller and Annie Sullivan, first by the book and then in the on-screen portrayals of these remarkable women. My focus was not on deafblindness as I read those pages or watched the film, but the ability to change a life by being a teacher. I wanted to be as good a teacher as Annie Sullivan.

While I was a third-grader reading the book about Helen Keller's life, the 1964-65 rubella epidemic was occurring across the country resulting in an unprecedented number of children born with deafblindness. As a result of the rubella epidemic, by the time I was in early middle school, the federal government had begun to fund the Centers and Services for Deaf-Blind Children Programs. These programs were the primary resource for direct services to children who were deafblind and for the training of personnel who served them (Heumann, 1994). By 1970, there were regional centers across the US.

As an undergraduate student set on being an elementary or special education teacher, it was by chance that I found the program to train as a teacher of students with visual impairments. If deafblindness was mentioned in my coursework, it was in a cursory manner that did not reignite the embers of the ageless story of the miracle worker. Formal training in deafblindness would come in graduate school at the University of Northern Colorado where a wise mentor, Carmella Gates, introduced us to the many aspects of dual sensory impairment. I left UNC knowing how to read an audiogram, the classifications of hearing loss, the need for early hearing screenings, and the importance of a communication system. I also knew that I would need help from other professional colleagues to truly build a program for a learner who was deafblind. Most importantly, I learned that as a TVI, learners who were deafblind were a part of my working caseload and that I had information to contribute to their education.

Within a few months of my May 1983 graduation, the Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1983 (PL 98-199) was signed into law. This legislation expanded the role of the federal program, authorizing support for technical assistance to state agencies to assure that children and youth with
deafblindness received a free, appropriate public education. New program trends emerged and single state projects were funded to provide technical assistance to the range of educational programs where students who were deafblind were receiving services (Freeman, 1984). In essence, the “state deafblind projects” were born.

Working in Alaska, my caseload included young students who were deafblind and I had the opportunity to work with Alaska’s Dual Sensory Impairment Project. When I returned to Colorado, I was employed by the Colorado Services for Children and Youth with Combined Vision and Hearing Loss and this project has been a major part of my work life for the past 16 years. As the project director, I work with a team of educators to plan and deliver professional development and customized technical assistance to children and youth with combined vision and hearing loss, their families, and service providers.

The state deaf-blind projects have been serving children who are deaf-blind for twenty-six years. The projects offer a network of persons knowledgeable in the education of deafblind students and services can include child-specific consultation and training support. Projects also work with families and can be instrumental in bringing children and their families into the larger national network of support. They are also responsible for identifying children as part of the annual National Child Count of Children and Youth Who Are Deaf-Blind. These projects offer an amazing supplement to our current preservice TVI programs. All personnel working with learners who are deafblind can benefit from these projects, but especially the TVI who will be working directly with students with combined vision and hearing loss. For a complete list of projects in each state visit the website of the National Consortium on Deaf-Blindness (http://nationaldb.org).

Across the miles and through the years, deafblindness has been a part of my teaching path. I am so grateful for that hand-me down book from so long ago and to the teachers in my own life that have helped me to understand the unique disability called deafblindness.


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