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# Roles and Responsibilities of Itinerant Specialist Teachers of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students

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**The roles and responsibilities of itinerant specialist teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students were examined. Data were collected through surveys of practicing teachers, interviews, and school observations. Questions focused on tasks itinerant teachers perform most often in their jobs, where they learned these tasks, and whether they would be interested in continuing education for a particular task. Tasks most frequently listed by respondents involved direct work with deaf and hard of hearing students followed by consultation with regular education teachers, developing individualized education plans, coordinating meetings and support services, providing information to parents, and managing equipment such as hearing aids and FM systems. Only 17% of the respondents said they learned these skills through teacher preparation programs, compared with 65% who learned on the job, and many expressed interest in taking workshops or courses in specific skill areas.**

The landscape of K–12 education has changed dramatically over the past 30 years, and teacher preparation and in-service training programs have often struggled to keep pace with many of the prevailing trends. One such trend is the mainstreaming[1] of students with disabilities and the concurrent goal of educational inclusion. Thirty years ago, most deaf and hard of hearing students were educated in separate schools or programs. More recently, due in large part to federal legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (IDEA), most attend "mainstream," or regular, schools. Initially this often meant placement in a separate class in a regular school, but today it more often means education within regular classes. Data on students ages 6 to 21 years with hearing impairments served under IDEA compared school placement from 1990–1991 with that for 1999–2000 (see *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*, U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In the 1990–1991 school year approximately 79% of deaf and hard of hearing students received their education in mainstream schools; by 1999–2000 this had

increased to 84%. Of these students, those in regular classes[2] increased from 34% to 48%, while the proportion in separate classes declined correspondingly, from 41% to 29%. The *Twenty-Sixth Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) showed continuation of this trend through 2002, with increases to 86% in mainstream schools and 50% in regular classes.

This shift in educational placement has required specialist teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students to redefine the nature of their work. In particular, these teachers must focus less on direct instruction and more on consultation and collaboration with general education teachers and other mainstream school personnel. These specialists have been called "itinerant teachers" because their student caseloads usually span several schools within one or more districts. Using the car as an office, they travel from school to school to meet with students, regular class teachers, and access service providers for 1 or more hours a week. Their roles vary depending on the needs of the student and the resources of the school. New medical interventions such as cochlear implants, and the broad array of support services (e.g., interpreters, speech-to-text programs, and sign coaches), require these teachers to constantly expand their knowledge and skills. In short, itinerant teachers wear many different hats, and must enter the classroom with a very deep "toolbox." They must also be able to adjust their roles and add to this toolbox on a regular basis.

The objective of the present study was to describe the roles and responsibilities of practicing itinerant specialist teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students (itinerant teachers) and determine where and how they learned the skills they use in their daily work. We have used the results of the study to develop recommendations for preparation and continuing education programs for itinerant teachers.

The remainder of the present article is organized into five sections: (a) a review of the literature, (b) research design and methods, (c) survey results, (d) interview and observation results, and (e) discussion, including suggestions for further research.

## Review of the Literature

In spite of the growth of mainstreaming and the related increase in the number of itinerant teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students, there is still relatively little research regarding this specialty area. In this section of the present article we review core studies of itinerant teaching, with the goal of describing what is known about this specialty, including tasks performed by itinerant teachers and challenges they experience in doing their jobs.

Hyde and Power (2004) describe three models of itinerant teacher work with students: team teaching (also known as coteaching), consultative support to the regular education teacher, and "pullout." These three models can be viewed as a continuum from most to least inclusive. Team teaching, in which the itinerant and regular class teachers share the instructional role within the regular class, is the most inclusive. The least inclusive is pullout, which involves the itinerant teacher taking the deaf or hard of hearing student out of the regular classroom for short periods to provide direct instruction in support of classroom work. The consultative model, in which the itinerant teacher visits the class and offers suggestions to the regular class teacher regarding inclusion of the deaf or hard of hearing student, falls somewhere in the middle.

Even though research has documented the benefits of coteaching (Kluwin, 1999; Luckner, 1999) and consultation (Luckner & Howell, 2002), pullout is still used most frequently (Luckner & Miller, 1994; Power & Hyde, 2003). One explanation is that pullout work most closely builds on itinerants' preservice training, which still tends to focus on separate instruction (Luckner, 1991; Luckner & Howell, 2002; Luckner & Miller, 1994; Hyde & Power, 2004). Other reasons include limited continuing education opportunities in coteaching and consultation, lack of knowledge of the general education curriculum and teaching practice, and time constraints on both itinerants and regular class teachers (Antia, 1999; Hyde & Power, 2004; Luckner & Howell, 2002; Yarger & Luckner, 1999).

Tasks performed by itinerant teachers include adapting instructional methods and materials, troubleshooting problems with hearing aids and FM systems, coordinating team meetings, giving workshops to mainstream teachers, communicating with parents, traveling among schools, developing educational plans, conducting assessments, and providing academic support to students (Hyde & Power, 2004; Luckner & Howell, 2002; Luckner & Miller, 1994; Yarger & Luckner, 1999). Essential skills identified by itinerants include organizational, mediation, advocacy, and collaborative skills; expertise in a range of subject areas; and the ability to negotiate their roles in the regular classroom (Konza & Paterson, 1996).

Interviews with 25 experienced itinerant teachers yielded topics that should be taught in preservice programs (Luckner & Howell, 2002). Examples include interpersonal skills, teaching deaf and hard of hearing students with multiple disabilities,

cochlear implants, consultation models and methods, organizational skills, the individualized education program (IEP) process, reading and language instruction, and strategies to help students understand their hearing loss and develop self-advocacy skills.

While direct work with students is still the main focus of itinerant work, advising and consulting with regular education teachers is receiving more attention (Hyde & Power, 2004; Luckner & Howell, 2002; Yarger & Luckner, 1999).

Luckner (1991) reports that successful consultation with regular class teachers requires an ability to schedule informal meetings with teachers to discuss student progress, establish mutual trust with other professionals, adapt instructional materials, suggest modifications to the class environment, and help general education teachers work with interpreters or note takers; he lists effective communication as the top-ranked competency for carrying out these tasks. In her study of the roles of special educators and classroom teachers, Antia (1999) concludes that special educators may find a balance between providing service to the deaf child and supporting the classroom teacher. She proposes that knowledge of the general class curriculum and teaching methods is essential, since without it specialists may have unrealistic expectations of general education teachers or make suggestions that do not match the teacher's style or the culture of the classroom.

Research has identified challenges to itinerant teaching. For example, studies have found that itinerants often experience isolation in their work (Konza & Paterson, 1996; Yarger & Luckner, 1999) and have heavy caseloads that reduce time to work with students or consult with classroom teachers (Antia, 1999). Hyde and Power (2004) connect isolation to the predominant pullout method of instruction, since this approach reduces opportunities for contact between the itinerant and other school professionals. Beginning itinerant teachers have expressed concern about not having enough time for their planning and coordination responsibilities, variations of policy and procedure across school districts, and the nonaccepting attitudes of regular education teachers toward deaf and hard of hearing students (Guteng, 2005).

A recurring concern raised by research on itinerant teaching is that most preparation programs for teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing prepare teachers to work in self-contained classrooms. This concern is supported by findings that some itinerant teachers feel their preparation program did not provide them with the skills or experiences needed for their work (Luckner & Howell, 2002; Luckner & Miller, 1994; Schmidt & Stipe, 1991). A review of the 2003 standards from the Council on Education of the Deaf, Office of Program Evaluation, illustrates this trend. For example, Manual I (*Standards for Programs Preparing Teachers of Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*) states that deaf and hard of hearing students may be educated in a range of settings, but the itinerant model is rarely mentioned and a list of specializations within the field does not include the itinerant or consulting teacher. Manual II (*Procedures for Evaluating Programs Preparing Teachers of Students Who Are Deaf and Hard of Hearing*) includes itinerant placements in a list of possible practicum sites but not in the list of graduate employment settings. In general, the specialized skills needed for itinerant teaching—even the position itself—are often overlooked.

## Research Design and Methods

The present study has a mixed-method design. The primary source of data was a survey of itinerant teachers regarding the nature of their work and areas in which they felt additional instruction and resources were needed. Respondents were asked to list up to 10 tasks they performed in the course of their work, rank-order these tasks by level of importance, and note where or how they learned these tasks. They were also asked whether the task should be included in educational preparation or continuing education programs. Finally, they were asked their level of interest in further study should continuing education or in-service materials become available on a particular topic or skill. Survey results were supplemented by qualitative data that included findings from a focus group with eight itinerant teachers, as well as field observations and individual interviews with two teachers in local schools.

## Data Sources

Surveys were collected in two formats. First, paper copies of surveys were distributed to itinerant teachers at state-level educational and support services conferences in Arizona, California, and New York during the 2005–2006 academic year. Additionally, paper copies of surveys with return envelopes were mailed to 33 itinerant teachers who had worked with or graduated from our teacher preparation program at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. A total of 87 completed paper surveys were returned. (See Appendix A to view the paper version of the survey.)

Second, in April 2006 an online version of the survey was developed and distributed electronically to members of itinerant teacher organizations in several states, with permission and

assistance from these organizations. The online survey was introduced to potential respondents via an e-mail in which the purpose of the study was explained; those who elected to complete the survey were asked to click on the link provided in the e-mail, which took them to the survey. Upon completion they clicked the "submit" bar, which returned the survey to our survey data bank. Many respondents also forwarded the survey to colleagues in other states. In total, 183 electronic surveys were received, for a combined total of 270. While the content is the same, the formatting of the electronic version is slightly different from that of the paper version due to constraints intrinsic to the online survey tool.

Field observations and interviews were conducted through a local organization providing educational support services, including itinerant teaching, to mainstreamed deaf and hard of hearing students. In spring 2006, a focus group was conducted with eight itinerant teachers from this organization. Topics focused on core work roles, tasks, and skills, as well as recommendations regarding preparation to enter this specialty. In the fall, school observations were completed with two itinerant teachers; one individual was accompanied for 2 days, and the other for 1 day. The range of activities and roles reflected in the daily work of each teacher was recorded in field notes. Both teachers were interviewed individually after the school visits to follow up on recorded activities and gather more general data on their experience.

## Survey Results

This section reports a descriptive summary of survey data, noting those tasks viewed by itinerants as the most important and where they acquired this knowledge or skill. Additionally, their recommendations for skill areas to include in teacher preparation or continuing education programs are described.

In total, 270 surveys were returned. Of these, 60 were removed prior to analysis because the respondent did not describe his or her current work as primarily itinerant teaching, or did not describe any of the tasks he or she did on the job. As a result, 210 returned surveys were included in the final data set for analysis.

Respondents who completed the reduced set of 210 surveys described themselves as practicing itinerant teachers. Their range of teaching experience was between less than 1 year and 39 years, with a mean of 16.3 years. While some specialized in work with students at specific grade levels, most had worked with a broader spectrum from preschool through high school, and taught a wide range of subjects. Responses were received from 20 states, with the largest numbers coming from New York (29), Georgia (28), California (27), Arizona (19), Texas (18), Iowa (14), and Colorado (11). States with fewer than 10 responses included Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, and Washington. (Information was unavailable for 20 respondents.) Not every respondent listed 10 tasks. Most listed at least three, and then the frequency of responses began to go down. For example, while all 210 respondents listed a first task and 209 listed a second, only 46 listed a ninth task and just 43 listed a tenth. In total, 1,304 tasks were available for analysis.

One of the challenges in analyzing the data was that respondents were asked to describe the tasks they performed in their own words, which resulted in a wide range of responses. While we could have offered a predetermined list of tasks based on prior research, we selected an open-ended approach to give respondents the widest latitude possible in describing their work. In doing so, we hoped to capture their experience in greater detail and to identify nuances that might not be as visible with a more structured approach. Paper survey responses were typed into the online survey form. All surveys were converted to an Excel database for coding and analysis. We independently reviewed a portion of responses and developed lists of possible code categories. We then met to discuss our ideas, and created the following list of seven code categories (not in rank order):

- Code 1: Work with students (Students)
- Code 2: Work with regular class teachers and other school personnel (Personnel)
- Code 3: Planning, assessment, and record keeping (Planning)
- Code 4: Coordination, liaison, meetings, and scheduling tasks (Coordination)
- Code 5: Work with parents (Parents)
- Code 6: Providing technical support (Technical)
- Code 7: Lists of skills and qualities needed in an itinerant (Skills)

Task responses were then coded for (assigned to) one or more categories. While most responses were coded for a single category, a smaller number of double-coded or triple-coded responses raised the total number of coded responses to 1,361. Multiple coding occurred when respondents described tasks that fit within two or more codes. For example, the response "I provide information to

teachers and parents about deafness" would be coded for both personnel and parents.

Five questions guided the analysis. First, which kinds of tasks did respondents list most often? Second, how did respondents rank-order the importance of the tasks they listed? Third, where did respondents learn these tasks? Fourth, did respondents feel that these tasks should be part of a teacher preparation or continuing education program? And fifth, if a workshop or course were offered about a task, would respondents be interested in taking or attending such a workshop or course? The remainder of this section of the present article is organized around answering these questions and providing descriptions of code categories, with examples of tasks coded for each category.

## Frequency of Task

When examined for frequency, the category Work With Students was by far the largest, containing almost twice as many comments as the next largest category. Figure 1 summarizes frequency for all categories, with each category shown as a percentage of the whole.

### *Code 1: Work With Students*

Since the Work With Students category was so large, responses were further assigned to one of five subcodes: (a) academic, (b) personal/social, (c) language arts, (d) communication, and (e) general comments. Figure 2 summarizes frequency of tasks listed in each of these categories as a percentage of the whole.

Tasks coded as academic focused on helping students succeed in class work. Most often this support was given during pullout sessions, in which the student was removed from the class for individual tutoring. Related activities such as lesson planning and materials development are also coded in this category. Examples of tasks and activities coded for this category, taken verbatim from the surveys, include:

- Learning strategies/study skills
- Lessons targeted to the student's needs or deficiency
- Preparing lesson plans

**Figure 1**
Frequency of Tasks by Category, as Percentages of the Whole

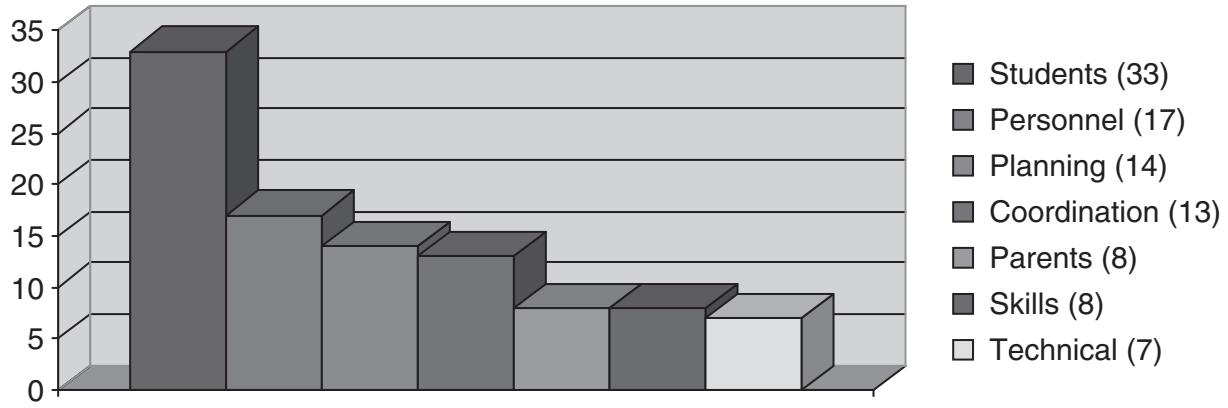
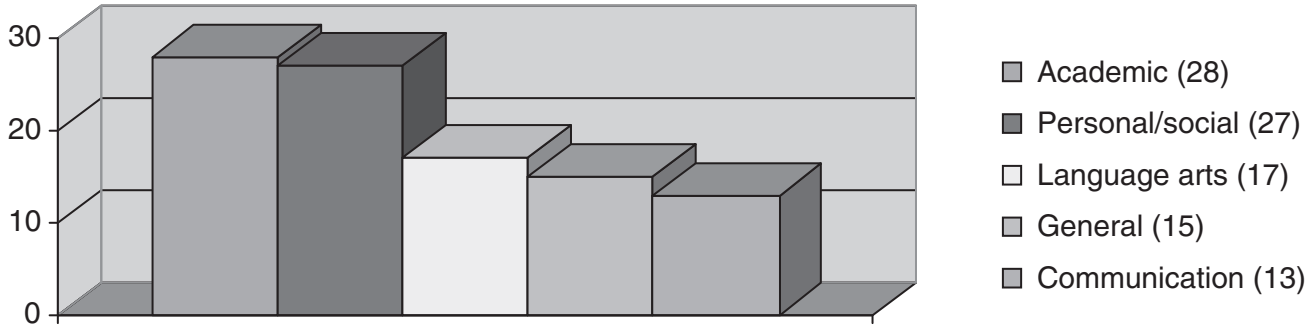



**Figure 2**
Frequency of Tasks Within Subcodes of the Category of Work With Students, as Percentage of the Whole



- Preteaching and reteaching academics in manner more easily understood by student

Supporting students' development of personal and social skills was the second largest subcategory of Work With Students. Examples include:

- Supporting/fostering self-advocacy in D/HH students
- Teach coping skills as a D/HH student + self esteem
- Teach students how to function independently in comparison to same-age peers
- Preparing students for after high school graduation
- Helping the students, if desired, to network/socialize with other D/HH kids

While language arts are taught as a regular school subject, respondents' comments suggested that deaf and hard of hearing students often need additional instruction in this area as a foundation for success in all academic subjects. Examples of these comments include:

- Improving reading skills and increasing vocabulary
- Teach students how to express their thoughts effectively through writing
- Preteach/teach/reteach vocabulary for mainstreamed classes

Respondents provided a range of support for students' communication skills. Most often this took the form of auditory or speech training, but a few cited teaching students sign language and helping them to work effectively with interpreters. Examples include:

- Teaching students how to read their audiograms & interact with audiologist
- Educate students to wear their amplification & let others know of their hearing needs
- Teaching kids the correct way to use an interpreter
- Teaching listening skills, following directions and attending skills in the classroom or conversation

The final subcode was created to hold comments describing work with students that were not explicit enough to be coded in one of the other four subcodes. Examples include:

- Keeping up with each student
- Using appropriate methods for teaching D/HH students
- Working 1:1 with students or in small groups

### *Code 2: Work With Regular Class Teachers and Other School Personnel*

The second category focused on providing support and consultation to school personnel. Regular class teachers were cited most often; respondents said they provided these colleagues with information and strategies to increase their effectiveness with the deaf and hard of hearing students in their classes. Some comments were broader, describing the need to educate school administrators, special education teachers, and other staff within the larger school setting about deafness and deaf learners. While much of this work was done through individual consultation and collaboration, developing and providing workshops was also frequently mentioned. A small but distinct subset of responses in this code category emphasized the need for itinerants to advocate on behalf of deaf and hard of hearing students with school personnel. Examples include:

- Providing regular class teachers with information regarding deafness & strategies for working with DHH students in the regular classroom
- Teacher in-service: information about the student's hearing impairment, type of amplification (use/maintenance), discuss support services and accommodations
- Planning/providing general ed. teachers with teaching strategies

### *Code 3: Planning, Assessment, and Record Keeping*

Tasks coded for the category Planning, Assessment, and Record Keeping focused on the paperwork and planning required by school, state, and federal regulations, including preparation and implementation of IEPs, assessments of progress and reporting, placement decisions, testing modifications, and general record keeping. Examples include

- Evaluation and assessment of the level of service needed by the student
- Developing IEP plans to reflect unique needs of students that are useful and measurable and are within the legal requirements
- Documentation keeper
- Assess the student's progress and modify current goals and objectives based upon evaluation of formal tests measures, informal inventories, and oral & written language samples

### *Code 4: Coordination, Liaison, Meetings, and Scheduling Tasks*

Responses regarding coordination, liaison, meetings, and scheduling tasks were related to coordinating, scheduling, and monitoring services for students, and included team meeting

attendance, time management, and functioning as a liaison among various people and departments within schools. Rapport with school staff was considered especially important. As one respondent wrote, "Having a sensitivity to each school's 'personality' and method of operation is very much a part of whether you will be welcomed or dreaded as you enter 'their' territory and try to help each student." Examples include:

- Scheduling services in multiple schools with multiple teachers
- Liaison between student, teachers, parents, administrators
- Coordinating services with outside agencies
- Supervising interpreters and providing support for them

### *Code 5: Work With Parents*

Respondents said they often provided support to the parents of the students in their caseload, including information about deafness, communication and educational options, updates on students' educational progress, and suggestions regarding technical support systems and services. Examples include:

- Encourage and support parents in requiring children to wear amplification and to provide an enriching home environment
- Helping parents advocate for their child
- Work with families (facilitate communication/language learning, support emotionally, provide introduction to deafness/Deaf culture, etc.)
- Encouraging parents to be active in child's progress, including teaching some sign language

### *Code 6: Providing Technical Support*

Tasks coded for technical support were explicitly tied to the use of technology, either by individual students or in the context of a larger support service network within the school and classroom. Respondents often said they were responsible for all tasks related to specialized equipment used by deaf and hard of hearing students. Examples include:

- Troubleshooting hearing aids and FM systems. Place specialized equipment in D/HH students' classroom and monitor the equipment through the year
- Follow up maintenance for amplification equipment; documenting usage, listening check, battery check, cleaning ear molds, and troubleshooting when necessary.
- Purchasing auditory equipment

### *Code 7: Lists of Skills and Qualities Needed in Itinerants*

The comments on skills and qualities were directed more at knowledge, qualities, and skills needed by itinerants than at activities and tasks performed. Also included are general comments regarding health and safety on the job and ongoing professional development activities as they relate to acquisition of knowledge and skills. Examples include:

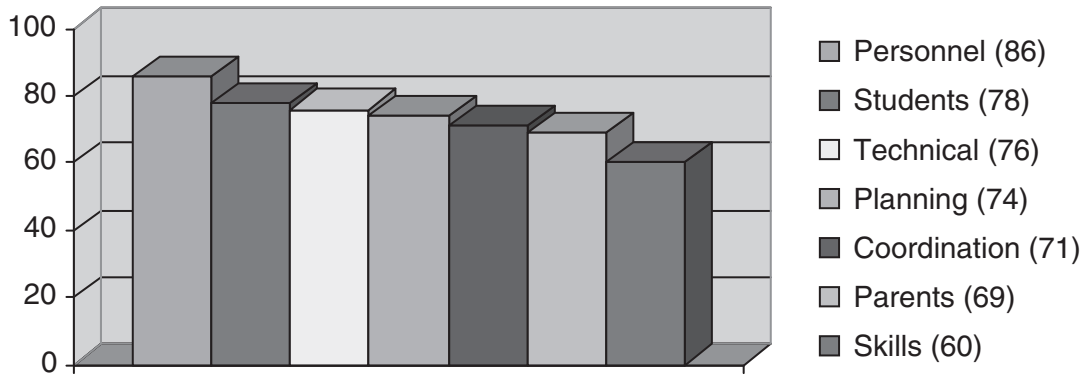
- Keeping up with technology and opportunities that would offer independence and social experience for the deaf and hh students
- Knowing about secondary disabilities
- To have a solid understanding of normal brain development and its relation to audition, how that impacts language acquisition and its effects on literacy development
- Taking care of myself—with constant travel and time pressure during the day, making sure you have time for lunch and some time to take a breath and regroup can easily get lost in the shuffle. When you find that "lunch" has become eating "Combos" off the front seat of the car while racing down the Thruway at 60 mph, it is time to re-evaluate your schedule

## Rank Order of Tasks

Respondents found it difficult to rank-order their tasks. Those who completed the paper version often assigned the same ranking to several tasks, and those who used the online version frequently noted in their additional comments that they felt that many if not most tasks were equally important. However, we did examine the data to see if some tasks were more often mentioned first by respondents, and found that, at 28%, Work With Regular Class Teachers and Other School Personnel was most often the first task listed when viewed as a percentage of all comments coded for this category, followed by Work With Students (20%). These two categories also reflected higher-ranking levels when this approach is expanded to include the first five task levels. Figure 3 shows these results.

Given respondents' difficulties with rank-ordering tasks, these results should be interpreted with caution. However, we can say that 86% of tasks related to work with school personnel were among the first five tasks listed in this category, 78% of tasks related to working with students were among the first five tasks listed in this category, and so forth.

**Figure 3**
Percentage of Tasks Listed in the Top Five, by Category



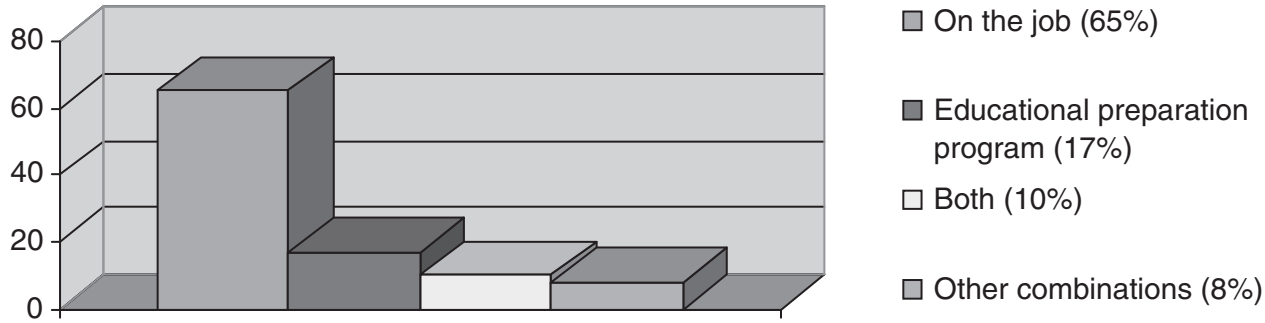

## Where Tasks Were Learned

For each skill or task listed, respondents were asked to identify where they learned it. Formatting of the paper survey was slightly different from that of the online version. For the paper survey, respondents were asked to consider whether they learned the task in their educational preparation program or on the job. However, since they were writing their answer, they could choose to indicate one, both, or a different learning venue altogether. In the online version, respondents could select "educational preparation program" or "on-the-job experience" by clicking the button next to it, or choose an open text box to indicate both or add a different learning venue.

Responses to this question were coded as one of the following: on-the-job (those who wrote or selected only this response), educational preparation program (those who wrote or selected only this response), both (those who wrote "both" or selected the open text box to indicate both on-the-job and educational preparation programs), and other combinations (those who wrote or selected the open text box to list only other learning venues *or* other venues in combination with work or educational preparation programs). Figure 4 summarizes results across all task categories. Table 1 provides a breakdown by category.

As illustrated in Figure 4, respondents learned more often through on-the-job experience than any other venue, including educational preparation programs. Table 1 confirms this result in that for all tasks listed, on-the-job experience was most frequently selected as the venue where skills or knowledge were acquired. However, when each venue is examined separately, it becomes clear that some tasks were mentioned more frequently than others within each venue. For example, tasks related to the categories Work With Students (27%) and Planning, Assessment, and Record Keeping (20%) were selected more often than other tasks within the educational preparation venue, while Coordination and Work With Parents were selected more often than other tasks within the on-the-job venue. Other learning venues listed by respondents included school-based in-service, conferences, the d/Deaf community, and independent learning. Table 2 presents the same information for subcodes of the Work With Students category.

**Figure 4**
Where Respondents Learned a Task



On-the-job experience was selected most often for all tasks except language arts, which had higher rates of selection for preparation programs. Other results from Table 2 indicate that on-the-job experience was selected most often for tasks associated with students' personal/social skill development, while both preparation programs and on-the-job-experience were frequently selected for academic tasks. Alternative venues such as those included in "other combinations" were frequently identified for tasks associated with students' communication skills.

## Inclusion of Tasks in Teacher Preparation and Continuing Education Programs

One of the goals of the present study was to identify areas for teacher preparation and continuing education program curricula. Again, formatting was slightly different for the paper and online versions of the survey. In the directions for completing the relevant question on the paper version, respondents were asked whether they thought the task "should be part of a teacher preparation and/or continuing education program," but space constraints limited the *heading* of the response column for this question to preparation programs. In the online version, respondents were asked to click a "Yes" or "No" button in response to the question, "Do you think this task should be part of a teacher preparation program and/or continuing education program?" Results are summarized for all task categories in Table 3 and for subcodes within the working with students category in Table 4.

Respondents overwhelmingly supported including all categories of skills and tasks in preparation and continuing education programs, with strongest support for tasks related to

**Table 1**
Breakdown by Task Category of Where or How Respondents Learned a Task (by Percentage)

| *Task category* | *On the job* | *Educational preparation program* | *Both* | *Other combinations* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Students | 53 | 27 | 10 | 10 |
| Personnel | 72 | 13 | 12 | 3 |
| Coordination | 86 | 3 | 4 | 7 |
| Planning | 58 | 20 | 15 | 7 |
| Parents | 83 | 5 | 7 | 5 |
| Technical | 66 | 13 | 14 | 7 |
| Skills | 60 | 16 | 81 | 6 |

**Table 2**
Breakdown of Where or How Respondents Learned Tasks for the Category of Work With Students (by Percentage)

| *Task* | *On the job* | *Educational preparation program* | *Both* | *Other combinations* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Academic | 47 | 30 | 15 | 8 |
| Personal/social | 72 | 15 | 4 | 9 |
| Communication | 44 | 31 | 7 | 18 |
| Language arts | 37 | 41 | 11 | 11 |
| General | 56 | 27 | 11 | 6 |

**Table 3**
Results on Whether Tasks Should Be Part of Preparation or Continuing Education Programs and Level of Interest in Continuing Education, Across All Task Categories

| *Task category* | *Percentage of respondents who support inclusion in preparation and/or continuing education programs* | *Percentage of respondents who expressed interest in taking a workshop or course* |
|---|---|---|
| Students | 99 | 80 |
| Personnel | 98 | 74 |
| Coordination | 89 | 61 |
| Planning | 98 | 69 |
| Parents | 96 | 69 |
| Technical | 98 | 79 |
| Skills | 90 | 74 |

**Table 4**
Results Within Category of Working With Students on Whether Tasks Should Be Part of Preparation or Continuing Education Programs, and Level of Interest in Continuing Education

| *Task* | *Percentage of respondents who support inclusion in preparation and/or continuing education programs* | *Percentage of respondents who expressed interest in taking a workshop or course* |
|---|---|---|
| Academic | 98 | 75 |
| Personal/social | 99 | 86 |
| Communication | 100 | 85 |
| Language arts | 100 | 82 |
| General | 97 | 75 |

working with students and personnel, planning and assessment, and technical support. Across the board, there was slightly less interest in taking workshops or courses. This not surprising since respondents often gained needed skills through on-the-job experience. Even so, 61% or more of the respondents expressed interest in courses or workshops across all task categories. Perhaps this is because many felt that they did not learn this skill in their preparation programs. One person summarized this sentiment in her additional comments:

> Everything that I do was learned by doing. I was never trained in itinerant teaching and wish I had been. In the past it seemed that itinerant teachers were sort of an afterthought. There are very few people who actually know what we do. I would love to attend trainings specifically for itinerant teachers.

Within the Work With Students category, there was also universally high support for including skills and tasks from all subcode categories in preparation and continuing education programs. Respondents were most interested in continuing education related to students' personal and social skills, language arts, and communication.

## Results From Observations and Interviews

Interview and observation data were coded and analyzed for recurring themes to describe how practicing itinerant teachers understand their roles, the tasks and skills they feel are most important, and their recommendations regarding resources that would be most helpful to them as they encounter new expectations and challenges in their work. For the present article, only results related to key tasks and skills are discussed, insofar as they supplement the survey data.

Both school observations and interviews support the survey results regarding core categories of itinerant teacher tasks and skills. Tasks observed during school visits included academic tutoring, classroom visits, meetings with school-based teams, mentoring in areas of personal and social skills, scheduling for student support, record keeping, speech and audiology training, and intensive work in language arts. Focus groups and individual interviews with teachers yielded additional information. The following quotes are a sampling of the kinds of detail collected through interviews, organized by the corresponding survey task category:

> *Work With Students.* I have deaf kids that will park their butts all the way in the back of the room and [I tell them] . . . "You don't have to be in the front seat, but within the first three seats in the front so you can see the interpreter, so you can hear the teacher, so you can see the blackboard 'cuz you wear glasses . . . you can't sit all the way in the back of the room and become invisible." [subcategory *communication*]
>
> Another thing is the whole language piece and the vocabulary piece and here is a perfect example. It was Groundhogs Day and I went into some classrooms and had a hard of hearing child in there; they are talking all about if the groundhog saw its shadow or not . . . So . . . when I took my student out, I said to her "So what is a shadow?" She had no idea. Now, this was probably first grade or second grade. [Most hearing] kids know what a shadow is, maybe no one ever taught them the word, but they just know what a shadow is. And my student had no idea. Well, luckily the sun was shining so I took her out the front door and we saw her shadow. We saw a shadow on the snow. And it was like, oh, now she can [understand this word] . . . so, that is just a dramatic example. [subcategory *language arts*]
>
> *Work With School Personnel.* Clearing up some of the misconceptions . . . I think people just assume when they see a hearing aid that the child can hear like their peers.
>
> Just to keep working with teachers [throughout the year] on that it is your student, treat them just like any other student . . . if nobody can chew gum, don't let your [deaf] kid chew gum . . . You know, our kids get away with so much and get treated so differently.
>
> *Coordination*. [I] look at the [note takers'] notes and say, "Okay, I was sitting in that class, does this reflect what I think the student should have, is this giving the student enough information?" So [I'm] checking the notes and giving feedback to the note taker so that she knows, because. . . . They're always asking me like "Are they [notes] adequate, is this what you need?"

Several general points emerged from the observations and interviews. First, these teachers used caution when advising regular class teachers regarding modifications to pedagogy. When focusing on needs specific to deaf and hard of hearing learners, they tried to focus on the use of technology, the physical environment of the classroom, and situations in which the deaf or hard of hearing student is completely unable to obtain access to information. Examples include asking the teacher to place the microphone closer to his or her mouth, minimize glaring light in the classroom, face the class when speaking, and write assignments on the board. Whenever possible, suggestions focused on changes

that helped everyone, for example, using Popsicle sticks with students' names on them as a means of calling on students since, as one teacher put it, "If you can sort of tie it into how it can help everyone . . . it really seems to motivate them [regular class teachers] a bit more."

Second, itinerants said they had more interaction with parents than the regular class teacher, because both itinerants and parents worked closely to develop and implement IEP goals. For example, when parents did not want their child removed from the class for remedial work, the itinerant pushed into the class to work with the deaf or hard of hearing child via small group activity.

Third, itinerants said they generally knew their students better than the general education teacher(s) did. This is not only because they worked with them individually, but also because they communicated directly with the student rather than through an interpreter or text-based access service. Further, the itinerants believed that close rapport with the student was essential to their job effectiveness. For example, one must know when students are struggling with an assignment and when they are trying to dodge the work. Similarly, working with a student on speech development requires a high level of trust and acceptance.

Fourth, both interviews and observations suggest that the dynamic nature of itinerant work makes the development of universal or fixed job descriptions impossible. The range of tasks performed by itinerant teachers is huge, reflecting a menu of possible options rather than a fixed list of prescribed activities. Based on the specific circumstances surrounding each student served (e.g., student characteristics, parent preferences, school culture), selections from this menu are used to generate individualized plans. The itinerant teacher has as many job descriptions as there are students in his or her caseload, and each description may change during the school year. Thus, one teacher said that she was the team leader for students on her caseload in one school, but in another school this role was filled by the audiologist because the school wanted a team leader who was in the building all day and available to address issues as they arose.

Not surprisingly, the itinerant teachers who were interviewed called flexibility the most important quality for their job. Examples given include being flexible in how you work with a student by incorporating various expectations, including those of the parents, even when they do not reflect your preferred approach; adapting to different school cultures, schedules, and personnel; and modifying schedules or planned tasks with a student based on extracurricular activities, last-minute assignments, or academic progress. They were also clear that itinerant work is not for everyone. In addition to possessing strong teaching skills, the itinerant teacher must enjoy working independently, without a "home base" location. He or she should thrive on change and welcome challenges that vary from school to school. The itinerant must be able to teach many subjects across a range of grades and fit into different school cultures. Finally, the itinerant teacher must be an effective team leader, communicator, and liaison among the various professionals who work together to ensure the academic success of deaf and hard of hearing students.

## Discussion

Overall, the results of the present study echo earlier research. Working with students was the most frequently mentioned task, and many of the other tasks identified through surveys, interviews, and school observations are the same as those found in earlier studies. The qualities and knowledge needed to be an itinerant teacher also reflect earlier research; examples include interpersonal and organizational skills, familiarity with laws on education and the IEP process, and strategies that teach students how to advocate for themselves. While pullout remains the predominant instructional model, this study confirms that consultation and workshop development are emerging as key skills for itinerants. For example, although working with students was the most frequently mentioned task in this study, working with regular education teachers and other school personnel appeared most often in the top five tasks listed.

The results of the present study also suggest that teacher preparation programs are not adequately preparing itinerant teachers. While many respondents were highly experienced and therefore had learned skills on the job, the gap between learning on the job and in preparation programs (67% to 17%) is too large. Moreover, the strong support of survey respondents for including all task areas in preparation programs, in combination with their interest in continuing education programs, indicates that itinerant teachers often feel underprepared for their work.

The survey results document areas where there is an especially high need for further training, both in preparation and continuing education programs. For example, the low percentage (13%) of respondents who learned skills for working with mainstream school personnel in their teacher preparation program, and the correspondingly high percentage (74%) who expressed interest in workshops or courses on this topic, make it a high priority. Even in lan-

guage arts (a subcode of the category Work With Students)—which respondents identified as most often covered in preparation programs—there were high levels of interest in continuing education, which suggests that itinerant teachers feel that there is more to learn in this area. We recommend that directors of programs preparing teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students consider adding to their undergraduate and graduate curricula those skill areas in which respondents said they received little formal training. They may also wish to add a continuing education component to their program, focused on topics of high interest to practicing teachers.

## Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to the present study. First, the open-ended survey format yielded a wide range of responses that had to be coded within a limited number of categories. This approach, following the principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), is by its nature a "bottom-up" process requiring interpretation of individual comments by the researcher. Most often used for analysis of data gathered through unstructured interviews, this method is more difficult to apply when one is faced with more than 1,300 individual and often general comments that could not readily be clarified by follow-up questions. As a result, code categories may overlap to a degree that is incompatible with the more structured process of descriptive statistics. At the same time, the approach did result in categories of tasks and activities consistent with findings from more traditional survey studies on itinerant teaching.

Second, analysis of survey data revealed several areas where questions were formatted in ways that constrained the full range of response choices. For example, when asked where or how they learned a reported task, respondents were not given a simple way to select both preparation programs and on-the-job experience. Rather, they had to use the open text box selection for this question (online) or write "both" (paper). While some did this, it nonetheless required an additional step and willingness to think outside the box (literally). Consequently, we recommend caution when interpreting the extremely high response rate for on-the-job learning.

Third, the qualitative portion of the present study is quite limited, and caution must be used when interpreting these results. As we noted earlier, readers are advised to view this section as supplemental, adding detail to the survey results and offering some contextual information regarding the daily work of itinerant teachers. Further observations and interviews would greatly enhance the validity and reliability of this part of the study.

## Suggestions for Further Research

We recommend additional survey studies to examine the percentage of their time itinerants currently spend in different task areas and to collect needed information regarding appropriate delivery venues for continuing education options. We also suggest more qualitative research, including school observations of itinerants at work. In particular, interactions between itinerant and regular education teachers should be explored to determine which consultative and collaborative strategies are most effective, and under what conditions. Given the debate regarding pullout versus push-in service models, experimental design studies are needed to document the efficacy of each of these instructional approaches. Since most itinerant teachers are hearing, both survey and interview studies should be done to explore the experience of itinerant teachers who are deaf or hard of hearing, and to document the challenges they face in these professional roles. Finally, the mainstreaming trend for students with disabilities includes many teaching specialties; a meta-analysis of practices, concerns, and continuing education needs regarding itinerant work across other low-incidence disabilities may yield curriculum suggestions that can be implemented via core course work for more than one specialty.

In conclusion, practice-based research is essential to development of high-quality professional preparation and continuing education for educators. The field of deaf education is changing rapidly due to social, political, and legal trends, as well as medical and technological advances in the field of deafness. We hope that an applied, mixed-method study such as the one we describe in the present article generates further discussion regarding emerging trends in the field of itinerant teaching as well as practical suggestions regarding critical areas of skill development that can be offered to these professionals via both preparation and continuing education programs.

## Notes

1. The term "mainstream" is used in the present article to describe the act of placement of a student with disabilities within a regular public school. The term "inclusion" describes administrative and instructional policies and practices designed to ensure that the student with special needs is able to fully participate in and benefit from placement in the educational mainstream. While mainstream placement is necessary for inclusion in regular schools, it does not guarantee inclusion.

2. "Beginning in 1990–91, states were instructed to report students in

regular class, resource room, and separate class placements based on the percent of time they received service OUTSIDE the regular class (<21, 21–60, and >60, respectively) instead of the percent of time they received special education" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, Table AB8, pp. A220–223).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## Appendix A

### Paper and Pencil Survey

Hello!

My name is Susan Foster. I teach at NTID/RIT in our MSSE program, which prepares teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students. As you know many if not most deaf/hh students now spend most of their time in mainstream classes, and depend heavily on the mainstream teacher and specialist (itinerant) teacher of the deaf/hh for instruction and support.

I'm trying to develop one or more courses and/or workshops that will provide beginning teachers with the skills and knowledge they need to be comprehensively skilled itinerant teachers of the deaf/hh and I believe your experience and advice is essential to developing a good course. These courses or workshops may also be offered for in-service and continuing professional development for current itinerant teachers.

If you could take about 10 minutes to help me, please complete the background information at the bottom of this page AND answer the questions on the back of this page. You can return the survey to me using the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope.

If you would be willing to be contacted for more of your ideas or for me to send you a report next year when I have completed the course outline, please put your name and e-mail address at the bottom of this page. You can also contact me directly at susan.foster@rit.edu. In the meantime, please feel free to visit our Project Access website at www.rit.edu/classact.

Thanks so much!

My primary job is (please circle):

Itinerant teacher  Resource room teacher  Separate class teacher  Other (please explain)

Grade(s) taught:  Subject(s) taught:

I have been teaching for approximately _____ years.

Please feel free to contact me for more ideas._____  Please send me a copy of your report. _____

Name: _____  E-mail: _____

Please turn over to complete the survey ⟶

As a practicing itinerant teacher of the deaf/hh, what do you think are the 5–10 most important tasks you do (for example, preparing educational plans, providing regular class teachers with information about being inclusive for deaf/hh students, tutoring, etc.)? For each skill or task, please note (a) whether you learned the skills for this task in your educational preparation program or through on-the-job experience, and (b) whether you think it should be part of a teacher preparation and/or continuing education program. If part of continuing education, would you sign up for a workshop or course on this topic if it were offered?

| Task & Rank # | How learned? | Should be part of teacher preparation program? | Would sign up for course? For workshop? |
|---|---|---|---|

Finally, when you have created your list please rank the relative importance of each skill/task, with "1" the most important. If several tasks are of the same level please use the same number for each.