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Supporting High School Students with Hearing Loss

In my last column, I talked about kindergarten registration and considerations for ensuring that students have a successful transition into school. By April, the end of the school year is beginning to be in sight and transition planning will soon be in full swing. It's not too early to think about how students can be off to a good start in September, and how we can do better. This column will

focus on the students at the other end of their educational journey, students in high school. If you have ever met (or been) a teenager, you will know that high school is a complicated time with lots of changes, lots of new life events, and lots of new expectations from adults, but it is also a time to think about who you are now and who you want to be in the future. For teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists, unfortunately, high school can also be a time when teenagers resist the use of personal hearing technology and/or FM systems, and no longer want to receive services from school support staff, even though high school is a time when support can be most needed. None of us want to be told what is best for us or what to do, but it is true that sometimes parents and school staff have information about potential consequences of student decisions that they themselves don't have or haven't considered. For me, my work with high school students is not about telling high school students what I think they need to do. It's about planting seeds and providing information for students to digest and think about to make informed decisions about their lives. In my experience, students with hearing loss often have very little understanding of their hearing loss and its implications, including how to read their own audiogram, describe hearing loss to someone who asks, and even the ins and outs of their own technology. Without accurate information, students cannot make informed choices. Providing the information does not necessarily that students will act on it right away (or at all) – seeds need time to grow, so patient is needed. What messages are important to convey to high school students to help plant these seeds and create food for thought?

FM Systems Are for More Than Just Academics

Too often, classroom teachers, parents, and students themselves see an FM system as something designed to help with academic achievement and that if a student is doing well (or well enough in the student's mind) academically, there is no need for it. Couple that with most students' reluctance to use the technology, and you have a situation where students are missing out on something that could be helpful for more than just better grades. Many students today have had a good start with early detection and early intervention and have solid language and literacy skills commensurate with hearing peers. They may demonstrate similar academic achievement as their hearing peers, and everyone wonders why the educational audiologist and teacher of the deaf are fussing. For me, the answer is that academic achievement often comes at a higher cost for our deaf and hard-of-hearing students – the cost is often measured in exhaustion, in extra time spent on homework, readings and assignments because information was missed in class, in self-esteem that good grades seem to come easier for other people than for them. As audiologists, we know a lot about listening fatigue, but do parents, teachers, and students also understand?

One of the experiences that I relate often to students and teachers is that of a high school student that I worked with many years ago. She was a very high achiever academically, As and A+s in all of her classes, who was resistant to the idea of using an FM system – why was I trying to fix something that wasn't broken? I convinced her to do a trial of an FM system for a couple of weeks (mostly to humour me and make me go away, I suspect). When I returned after 2 weeks use, she told me she'd joined an after-school club. Why was this such exciting news? She told me that before the FM system, she always had to go home from school and nap before starting her homework. With the FM system, she had enough energy at the end of the day to join a club and still be able to do her homework at night. Joining an after-school club or sport is something every student should be able to do, no high school student should be so exhausted by the end of the day that they need a nap. The cost for those As and A+s for her was exhaustion, missing out on fun with her friends, and feeling like a small child.

One of my favourite resources for demonstrating the impact of hearing loss is from the National Deaf Children's Society in the UK, it is a video called The Lost Joke. I'll wait while you go watch it. While we don't have technology for everything, we increasingly have remote microphone options that have broad applications outside the classroom as well as inside. Helping students analyze where some of their hearing challenges come from during the day can help them understand that their difficulties are not from a lack of effort, motivation, or competence and that help is available.

It's OK To Take Advantage of the Supports That are There for You

In education, it's hard to find good outcomes from the pandemic, but I think one crucial issue highlighted is the impact of student mental health. Many students who did not struggle at school before the pandemic are struggling now, from kindergarten to postsecondary education. Many school supports are available for our students, such as specialized support for educational audiologists and teachers of the deaf, as well as at their own school in the form of learning resource teachers, guidance counsellors, and program options. For example, one of these program-supports comes in the form of Learning Strategies courses that are available in most provinces. These courses are available to students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) that provide structured coursework on learning strategies, essentially how to be a successful student, taught by a high school learning resource teacher and count as a high school credit. Students and parents can find information on these options on school board websites, such as this resource for students in Nova Scotia, or this one for students in the Toronto District School Board. Frankly, I wish a course like this was available to me at my high school. The skills covered in a learning strategies course are crucial for all students, not just those with learning challenges.

Support from A Teacher of the Deaf

Individual Education Plans typically have a section for what is called "Alternative Curriculum". Sometimes this means that the student is learning a significantly different version of the curriculum from other students their age (for example, a grade 10 student with significant cognitive impairment reading at a grade 1 level). However, for deaf or hard of hearing students, an "alternative curriculum" can also refer to areas that are not part of the standard high school curriculum, such as self-advocacy, learning about hearing loss, and technology or speech articulation. Teachers of the deaf can develop IEP goals for students in these areas and provide an individualized (albeit less comprehensive) version of a learning strategies course. They can also support students academically with their coursework.

Teachers Of The Deaf And Educational Audiologists Can Help You Figure Out How To Navigate A Variety of Situations with Hearing Loss

As all high school students know, high school is about far more than just going to class. There are opportunities to participate in clubs, sports, co-op or work experience placements, transitional classes for college or university, and social activities (dances, prom, hanging out with your friends over lunch). Teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists have specialized knowledge to help students identify the problem and suggest strategies. Could there be technology or strategies that could help the young lady in The Lost Joke video? Educational audiologists and teachers of the deaf can help explore this.

Life After High School Will Present Challenges That You Haven't Thought About Yet

Teachers of the deaf and educational audiologists work in schools, their services are not available to students after high school (something that not all students know, by the way, I have had students email me from university wondering when their teacher of the deaf will be bringing their FM system). However, an important part of their jobs is ensuring that students have the information and strategies they need for life after high school. In fact, IEPs for high school students have a mandatory page on transitioning out of high school that school staff are required to plan and complete.

There are resources to help students and families transition into the world of postsecondary education or work, but finding Canadian resources via a general Internet search is not very easy or effective. For example, teachers of the deaf from the York Region School Board have an ongoing "project" called Life After High School, which consists of a yearly in-person event open to everyone which features presentations from college/university representatives and prior students, as well as a LAHS website. Assistive technologist Angela Harrison at McMaster University gave us some wonderful tips and advice for deaf and hard of hearing students in the article Supporting students Transitioning to Postsecondary Education: Advice from an Assistive Technologist. We can't expect students, parents, or school staff to be responsible for finding these resources themselves, though- as professionals, we need to provide assistance in accessing information that will help them navigate high school and beyond.