Student Research for Action

From 2003 – 2006, WKCD had the opportunity to help students and teachers nationwide initiate and conduct ambitious student “action research” projects targeting critical education and community issues. **The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** provided the financial support for this three-year initiative.

Deaf Students Teach Restaurants to Serve with Respect



ST. PAUL, MN—When six-foot tall basketball player Aaron Klein, 15, steps up to the McDonald's counter to order a Big Mac, he gestures at his ear, shakes his head, and points at the roll of receipt paper in the cash register. The cashier stares in confusion, then prints out a long blank receipt and hands over a pen. As recent immigrant from Asia, the cashier has difficulty reading his English words—but she perseveres and Aaron gets the sandwich he requested.

In the next line over, Jenny Williamson, 18, is pointing at the items for sale on the lighted board. Alex Jacobsen, 16, theatrically mimes licking an ice cream cone. Their cashier laughs nervously and repeats, "Can I take your order?" several times. Customers waiting in line behind them make impatient noises.

Cross-cultural communication is a challenge for everyone. Add disability and a second-language to the mix, in a time-pressured fast food line, and interesting surprises are bound to occur. "I tried to order a #10 meal at McDonald's once, and got ten burgers on a tray instead," Jenny signs in American Sign Language.

These scenarios, and those like them, are the subjects of study by these three students at Minnesota North Star Academy. The three students are a team, and winners of a Student Research for Action Grant from What Kids Can Do and the Bill and Melinda T. Gates Foundation. For their project, "How to Make a Restaurant More Deaf-Friendly," they conducted

in-depth survey research on the experiences of deaf customers in fast food restaurants. Now, they are developing a training guide and video to educate restaurant employees about sensitive and respectful communication with deaf patrons. With the support of national restaurant chain TGIFriday's, they hope to have a nationwide impact.

Changing perceptions



"Deaf want hearing to try to communicate with us. Nobody expects restaurants to sign. It's the awareness that we're seeking. To have respect, and to use the resources you have—paper, pencil, pointing—and most of all, to take the time to try to understand us," Alex, 15, signs. Simple things like communicating directly with the customer, providing a pen and paper, and making sure the restaurant has good lighting are other steps to ensuring equal access.

"It's a win-win situation for restaurants and for deaf customers. They get money from us, because we frequent their restaurant, and we get good service," Jenny signs.

The social change potential of this project is an energizing force behind their work. "I think in general, hearing people look at deaf as handicapped or disabled," Alex signs. "Maybe they think we are also a bit slow cognitively as well. So they look at us as a disabled group—they might think we're mentally retarded. Hearing assume that because they hear, their way is right, or "better than." We want them to realize that we are just the same; it is only the ears that are different. Look at Stephen Hawking—he could not speak, but he is so bright and intelligent!"

Aaron adds, "Once we make a video and do a pamphlet, we're really hoping that all the TGIF restaurants get it. We'd like to have more restaurants in the United States get it, too. So really, it's a nationwide effort. And that way, if I fly somewhere and I have lousy service, I want to be able to give them training too—not just here locally!"

Studying the experiences of deaf customers



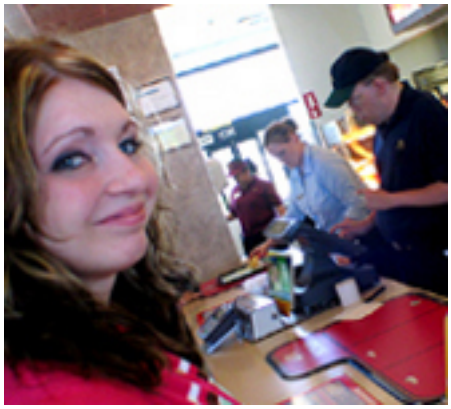
Indeed, the students found that deaf people's experiences in restaurants are similar across the country. Their research began on the web, compiling data from deaf community restaurant review sites. Then, they traveled to Deaf Awareness Fairs and Deaf Expos to hand out narrative surveys, accompanied by energetic teacher Susan Outlaw. To Outlaw, who holds a doctorate in Linguistics, it was "important that they learn to do sophisticated research and analysis, and to put the scientific method into practice. Learning to do survey work and determine the difference between objective and subjective thinking is an essential skill."

The project team rose to the challenge. They made sure to seek responses from as diverse a range of people as possible, and threw out any surveys that were not answered by a profoundly deaf person. In all, they collected 116 complete surveys. "In examining surveys, we looked at gender differences and age breakdowns so that we didn't make any unfair assumptions," Aaron signed. "Respect is the biggest issue we've found in all of our stories."

"We noticed that there are differences between men and women in assertiveness in what they're speaking and gesturing," Jenny signed. "Age differences, as well: the 0-18 year olds, and the oldest people, were the least satisfied. They tend to have more struggles or problems in restaurants. Probably because their writing isn't as clear."

This kind of critical analysis led the students to identify specific issues that pose problems for deaf patrons, determine their root causes, and be able to suggest objective solutions.

Teaching tolerance and flexibility



The training points the students propose are based on common sense—and the special knowledge that the Minnesota North Star Academy students have, by virtue of navigating their own worlds. "One example is if a deaf person writes down, look at what they write down, real specific," Jenny signed. "If they point to the menu, make sure you look. Be assertive to look, don't be scared to look at what they're pointing at. Don't wait for us to speak, cause some deaf people don't speak. Don't force us to have to bend and maneuver to make sure you see it. If a hearing person is with a group, don't ask that person to order for everybody, or only look at that person. I'd feel rejected at that point, left out."

A lifetime of being treated differently provides the insights that Jenny, Aaron, and Alex bring to the guidelines they are writing. Each has stories of being taunted, mocked, and laughed at by peers or in hearing environments—stories that have required them to endure struggle and develop strength of character. Now, they are teaching skills of tolerance, flexibility, and basic etiquette for dealing with difference.

At the same time as they guide others, says Susan Outlaw, the students are learning deep lessons. "They are learning to understand how another person's mind might be different; how perspectives might vary. They've been taught by the dominant culture that hearing people are superior in all ways. So for example, it was a huge surprise to learn that some hearing people cannot read. It is eye-opening to realize that they have skills and knowledge that other people do not have."

Gaining confidence



Outlaw has seen students' confidence increase as well. "They've learned a lot about how to answer people's questions, and how to figure out where people are coming from," she says. "Now, they are watching carefully to see what the interpreter voices, and how the respondent responds, and check if communication is happening as it should."

As Jenny, Aaron and Alex create tools for good communication between hearing and deaf people, their work is bringing them media attention. Deaf schools around the country are paying attention, and they've been featured on Minnesota cable television.

Alex signs, "When I went to the physical therapist the other day the therapist came up and said, I saw you on the news! And I just said, Yeah, that's me. Everyone in the office was saying Good job! I was really surprised—a lot of hearing people say this, and were interested in what we are doing."

Aaron, who works as a basketball referee, chimes in, "Some of the little kids that I ref for saw me on TV and they're like, 'You're the deaf tall guy on TV!' I just kind of smile and nod. It seems the news has gotten people's attention! My mom went to church yesterday, and people in the pastorate were cheering that deaf students were doing a good job and making an impact. Now if we go into restaurants they might get scared or whatnot, or they might try to serve us really well. It's good to have that attention. We want that attention for the project."

Click below to download (in PDF format):

The deaf-friendly restaurant survey

Questions for in-depth interviews

A checklist for how deaf-friendly a restaurant is