

## A Look Back

### Celebrating 100 Years of Knowledge: A Review and Future Perspective

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Today, with new information continuously being added to the knowledge base, and with research and practice redefining previous contributions to the literature of the field of visual impairment and blindness, we professionals in the field enjoy a well-developed, yet still evolving, dynamic body of knowledge.

To fully appreciate the value of the currently available literature of our field, and to anticipate its future richness, one must go back to its origins. I was afforded such an opportunity in preparation for this year's celebration of the 100th volume year of the *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* (JVIB; 1977–present) and its predecessors, *Outlook for the Blind* (1907–1942), *Outlook for the Blind* and *The Teachers Forum* (1943–1951), and *New Outlook for the Blind* (1951–1976).

As I began exploring each of the 99 volumes that comprise the archives of the journal housed in the M. C. Migel Library at the American Foundation for the Blind, I was immediately awestruck by the fact that each issue was a virtual time capsule. According to Webster's Dictionary, a time capsule is defined as "a container holding historical records or objects representative of current culture that is deposited for preservation until discovery by some future age." Time capsules are intriguing because they provide a bridge between past and present cultures. Furthermore, if the past serves as a prologue to what lies ahead, the contents of the journal—both past and present—hold further value because they can be used as a window to the future. Actively anticipating our future while also considering our past is an exercise that this essay asserts is both possible and beneficial.

Typically, when a 100-year-old time capsule is opened, "new" discoveries are not expected. However, as I turned the pages of the journal's 100-year catalog, I discovered within the "old" literature—admittedly read with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight—fresh insights and renewed perspectives. These findings allowed me, a grey-haired professional, to better understand and appreciate the art and science of our profession as it has evolved, and as the journal has so steadily chronicled.

#### CRITICAL ISSUES THEN AND NOW

Our literary predecessors accurately identified critical issues as evidenced in the very first issue of the journal, in which articles were published on employment, literacy, public attitudes, social and school integration, and prevention of blindness—the same targets that continue to occupy our attention today. It is remarkable that a century ago our professional ancestors so accurately identified these issues and had such keen insight on their importance. The popular buzzword *transition*, which denotes bridging the services necessary when one goes from "learning to earning" (a phrase borrowed from 1907), was not recently coined—its literary date of birth was 100 years earlier than I expected.

The following quotations demonstrate both the extent to which linguistic expression has changed over the course of the century and how societal attitudes have progressed regarding many issues of importance to the field of visual impairment and blindness.

On integration, Helen Keller wrote:

We do not believe that the blind should be segregated from the seeing, gathered together in a sort of Zion City.... America is a democracy, a multi-monarchy, and the city of the blind is everywhere. Each community should take care of its own blind, provide employment for them, and

enable them to work side by side with the seeing. (Keller, 1907; pp. 11–12)

Finally, on individualization, George Oliphant, head of the Georgia School for the Blind, wrote:

The factors which should determine what every child, and therefore every blind child, should study may be determined by: 1) Individual characteristics; 2) Individual life interests; 3) Individual needs. (Oliphant, 1917; p. 8)

Although substantial progress has been made, clearly much remains to be done to resolve the critical issues confronting our field and the population we serve—including literacy, employment, and public attitudes—that were raised decades ago. That more was not accomplished in these areas, especially after a century’s worth of attention and effort, merits some justified disappointment. Perhaps this “Look Back” will motivate individuals to intensify current efforts and accelerate progress in these vital areas.

Looking ahead to the future, questions arise. Will the literature published in the journal 100 years from now reflect resolution of these vital concerns, or is it possible that they will remain unresolved into the next century? The “time capsule” of the research we professionals in the field are now preparing and contributing to the journal will be available to readers and researchers 50 to 100 or more years into the future. Will retrospective scrutiny validate our current theory and the efficacy of our programs? Only time will tell.

#### EARLY MISTAKES CORRECTED

Our professional predecessors occasionally went off in a mistaken direction, but, over time, they corrected any errors they made. Our ancestors, in some instances, embraced theories and practices found later to be invalid. These include the sight-saving move-

ment; facial vision (that is, the idea of people with visual impairments possessing a sixth sense); and the incorrect belief that poor nutrition was the cause of retrolental fibroplasia rather than concentrated exposure to oxygen, as was later determined and reported in the journal in 1946.

The research reported in the journal that elucidated these “wrongs” must be credited. With proper investigation, the lack of validity of various theories and practices was discovered. Mistaken concepts were summarily discounted and replaced with sound theory and practice. Such is the beauty of a dynamic professional body of knowledge. Research and field testing, and its sustained exercise, keeps it fit and healthy.

A sampling from the early literature illustrates the necessity and benefit of professional inquiry and the extent to which it was responsible for the evolution of our theoretical foundations and practice. For example, myopia among Native Americans was the subject of writing by L. Webster Fox in 1928:

Myopia is the outstanding handicap of our civilization. It may develop in such weakened individuals when subjected to undue continuous application of near work. Myopia is seldom an attribute of the aborigines, and we cannot but view with some degree of alarm its appearance among our Native American Indians since they have come within the influence of our civilization. (Fox, 1928; p. 34)

A New York State Commission Report that appeared in 1908 had some disturbing cautions about “congestion” in the eyes:

Among young children the foundation of subsequent eye disease is laid in schools. During the plastic development period of the child, the eyeball is easily influenced by excessive use or continuous application under unsanitary conditions. The vessels

of the eye grow congested, the supporting tissues become thinned and stretched, and myopia established and increases under the stress of school. (New York State Commission Report, 1908; p. 51)

The report continued to draw parallels between eye strain and proclivity for criminal activity:

Eye strain will disturb the mental processes producing mental inaptitude and backwardness in children. Their comprehension seems obtuse and slow and confusion of thought exists. Irritability, even to the verge of irascibility, may be the result of a constant nagging eye strain.... How far this may be carried toward producing mental imbalances, insanities, and criminal tendencies, alcohol and drug habits, remains to be proven. I think, however, that there is no room for doubting that truancy in school children can be traced to this cause, and frequently repeated, precipitate the individual into the life of the vagabond and the criminal. (New York State Commission Report, 1908; pp. 51–52)

Supernatural abilities were attributed to children who are blind in a leaflet that appeared in the journal in 1908:

Take care what you say before your child, for the blind are more attentive to all which it hears than the seeing child is, and for this reason retains it better. (Massachusetts Commission Leaflet, 1908; p.45)

Regarding students with multiple disabilities, the pervasive thought in 1915 was that such students should be removed from the classroom:

If the feeble-minded could be eliminated from among the blind, we could

all show far brighter results. It is a waste of time and effort to teach a child whose maximum intellectual level is 7 years to read.... Feeble-minded blind should be considered custodial cases to be cared for and protected by the state for as long as they live. (Irwin, 1915; pp. 29–32)

Many of the journal's early authors dispelled various myths using a subtle and keen sense of humor. Helen Keller admonished readers in 1907:

Like the seeing man, the blind man may be a philosopher, a mathematician, a linguist, a seer, a poet, a prophet. But believe me, if the light of genius burns within it, it will burn despite his infirmity, and not because of it. The lack of one sense or two—never helped a human being. We should be glad of the sixth or the 16th sense, with which our friends and the newspaper reporters, more generous than nature, are wont to endow us.... (Keller, 1907; p.12)

In 1910, George Oliphant employed humor in addressing the myth that color could be perceived tactilely. He wrote:

Color work in school must be omitted unless the blind pupil happens to be that fabulous "rara avis," a person able to distinguish colors by touch. In that event put him in a glass case at once and start a dime museum. (Oliphant, 1910; p.181)

Our professional duty is to continue to question current theories, assumptions, and accepted practices to ensure the services we provide are derived from the most solid foundation possible. Are we today, as our literature has documented in the past, unknowingly embracing theories or practices that will later be determined to be invalid? Will future readers be amused by today's choice of words as

modern readers have been by some of the language of yesterday?

**LANGUAGE REFLECTS SOCIETAL ATTITUDES**

The following, which appeared in the January 2006 issue of *JVIB*, are terms that have been recently coined: Global positioning system, liquid crystal display, and DAISY Digital Talking Book. What reaction would readers have had to these expressions 100 years ago? A century from now, will these phrases have become archaic? Authors write for readers who are cognizant of the language of the time in which they live, but, as demonstrated repeatedly during this centennial year of *JVIB*, writing published in the journal remains intact for posterity. Over the course of the past century, the body of knowledge of the field of visual impairment and blindness, and the language used to record it, underwent a profound transformation reflecting both the changes in societal attitudes about blindness and the maturation of our profession. Although the choice of words and the metaphors used by early authors mirrored the negative attitudes about blindness in society at the time, and clearly would be considered politically incorrect by today's standards, it is all the more striking to realize the degree to which positive changes have been made to our professional language in the 100-year lifespan of the journal. It should be noted that, although some of the early language employed is subject to criticism in this essay, the authors' intentions should not be questioned. Charles F. F. Campbell, the founding editor of *Outlook for the Blind*, characterized his professional peers as an "earnest group of men and women who are giving their lives to help the blind to help themselves" (Campbell, 1908; p. 29).

Common early metaphors that were used to describe *blindness* and *sight* were *darkness* and *light*, respectively. In 1907, Charles F. F. Campbell solicited ideas from the readership on names for the as yet unnamed journal. One

of the suggestions was "Lucifer." Dr. F. Park Lewis, who submitted this entry, upon reflection, withdrew his suggestion when realizing that Lucifer, in spite of being the heavenly "Angel of Light," had a reputation that was of somewhat ill repute.

Other phrases published in the early volumes of the journal included various stereotypical and negative words, metaphors, and statements including "Blindness thrusts an individual into darkness" (Dow, 1907; p.7); "The film and curtain of blindness hopelessly darken his world ... and darkness closed all around him" (Crichton-Browne, 1908; p.75); "A school for the sightless is not merely to enlighten intellectual darkness" (Keller, 1907; p.11); and "To be blind is more than to lack sight. It means wandering in darkness, of course, but it also means wandering in the gloom of tradition and tripping over stumbling blocks placed by society" (Utah, 1929). Epic concepts of good and evil prevailed in discussion of the loss of vision and what it meant to be blind:

What blindness means is something which only the Lord and the devil and those who endure it know anything about; in their blackest nightmare those with sight cannot even fairly imagine it.... (Hamilton, 1908; p. 10)

Deplorable as it may seem, blindness, like insanity and many other evils, is increasing in this country. (Hamilton, 1908; p. 10)

The blind baby righteously appeals to the most tender and holiest sympathies of which we are capable. (Foster, 1908; p. 30)

In addition, the early journal occasionally identified its authors as being either blind or sighted. For example, in 1908, the vision status of John B. Curtis was identified in an editorial: "It will interest those who do not

know Mr. Curtis that he, like many of the ablest leaders of the blind, is himself blind” (Campbell, 1908; p. 35). Likewise, in a 1927 edition of *Outlook*, Edward K. Campbell had an asterisk following his name. The footnote read, “\* Blind.” This practice was thankfully short-lived.

Themes of hopelessness, despair, and visual impairment as a tremendous burden to visually impaired people and their families often appeared in the journal:

What a bitter grief and disappointment it must be to be a mother to learn that her child will never see the light of day. My own mother accepted the hearty burden with a gentle spirit of resignation and I grew up under the shadow of it. (Finnegan, 1933)

The object of our nursery is not to save or prolong the lives of these children; it is primarily to alleviate their condition, and ... to temper ... the effects of the dispensation which has befallen them; ... that when the threshold of babyhood is crossed the child may have as fair a start in life as possible. (Foster, 1908)

Language used in 1908 to describe individuals with multiple disabilities provides an illustration of how far we have come in regard to terminology:

The defective (feeble-minded) doubly-afflicted blind among those of normal mind ... are slow in perception, lacking in truthfulness and reasoning and muscular power, of strong immoral tendencies, of unclean habits ... weak in will power and prone to uncontrollable fits of temper.... Therefore, when admitted to schools of the blind, they not only absorb undue energy from care takers and teachers, but also exert a deteriorating influence on the rest. (Allen, 1908; p. 77)

In this modern age of political correctness, terminology changes have not gone unnoticed by the field, and an article solely dedicated to terminology, entitled “The Debate Within: Authority and the Discourse of Blindness,” appeared this year in the journal (Lunsford, 2006), focusing on the words that should be used to describe blindness and blind people. One might assume that this article was published in the 1920s or 30s, when our predecessors were struggling to choose the right words to define their new profession and those they served. That the article was published in 2006 illustrates that the language used by those in the field will forever continue its evolutionary journey.

#### RELEVANCE OF EARLY LITERATURE

When returning to the early literature, the reader will experience many unexpected and positive outcomes. In becoming reacquainted with the early content, the reader will discover that the contributions of our literary elders are relevant to the challenges being faced by the field today. We must therefore find ways to make this archival, yet highly relevant, literature available to professionals being trained and those currently providing services.

Our knowledge of the Battle of the Dots, for example, was most likely based on a historical summary. When reading in the archives the original testimony in chronological sequence of those who engaged in the infamous battle, it was possible to fully appreciate and understand the historic process, the delicate issues involved, and the intentions of the key players. When one compares the early Battle of the Dots with the current debate surrounding the adoption of Unified English Braille, it is easy to recognize we are reliving issues that have remained controversial throughout the past 100 years.

#### COMING FULL CIRCLE

Performing genealogical searches for the roots of a family tree or going home for a

family reunion, we make new or reestablish former connections that faded due to time and distance. As a result of these positive and enlightening experiences, our personal batteries are recharged. Similarly, the opportunity to visit the archives of the journal has acquainted and, in some cases, reintroduced me to the professional lineage of the field of visual impairment and blindness. It has given me a broader appreciation and respect for our ancestral literature and those who contributed to it. I am impressed with their contributions; moreover, I am inspired to build upon and refine the body of knowledge of the field into the next century.

In the first editorial of the first issue of the journal, Charles F. F. Campbell, the founding editor of the journal, issued a charge to the readership that is as relevant today as it was in 1907, perhaps even more so: "Come, let us reason together."

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