

Issues in Education of Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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Special education in the United States began with the opening of the American Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb (now the American School for the Deaf) on April 15, 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut. The first teacher of students who were deaf was a deaf man named Laurent Clerc. The school provided an education for students from Connecticut as well as some of the other New England states and also assisted in the establishment of other schools for students who were deaf throughout the country. The school provided training in English grammar, reading, writing, mathematics, religion, and rules of conduct (Moores, 2001). It was also one of the first schools to provide vocational education. All instruction was conducted in sign language.

Prior to the opening of the school and ever since, there have been a variety of points of view about how individuals who are deaf should learn to communicate. Debate about whether to use natural sign language, speech, signs in English word order, created sign systems, or how to integrate speech, speech reading and auditory training with sign has been consistent and ongoing. Professionals in the field of deafness, family members and individuals with a hearing loss consistently have been reconciling the differences in each of these perspectives and determining how to proceed.

A second long-standing and often debated matter is how people who are deaf should be perceived and treated? While hearing loss has always been part of the human condition, people who can hear have demonstrated divergent reactions to deafness. Many pursued a cure for deafness. Others believed that deaf individuals were inferior to their hearing peers and were in need of salvation. Some have felt pity and taken care of them. Some have viewed deafness from a perspective of social/cultural difference and treated individuals who were deaf as equals. The unique talents and contributions that many deaf people have made to society have inspired others.

While the questions of how to promote the communication skills of individuals who are deaf and how deafness is viewed may be considered as the most controversial subjects in the field, there are a variety of other issues that have consumed the attention of education professionals and families. From this brief introduction it is clear that the field of education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing has a long history filled with diverse viewpoints and many unanswered questions. The purpose of this paper is to identify and briefly describe topics central to this field. This information is provided as background knowledge and/or stimuli for discussion. As noted in the foreword, persons who desire to comment or identify additional issues are encouraged to go to: <http://vision.unco.edu/nclid/async-dh/board.html> to add your ideas.

Heterogeneity of the Population – The population of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing is very diverse. Hearing losses range from mild through profound. Many individuals are born with a

hearing loss, yet a large percentage acquire their hearing loss between the ages of 0 to 3. Approximately 45 percent use speech and residual hearing as their primary mode of communication, 49 percent use speech and sign, and about 6 percent use sign only (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2001). Roughly, 33 percent have a disability in addition to a hearing loss. The majority of students attend regular schools, while about 20 percent attend special schools. The racial/ethnic backgrounds of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing also vary in a manner similar to the racial/ethnic backgrounds of individuals who are hearing.

Emotional Perspectives – As far back as recorded history allows us to examine, the topic of how best to educate individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing has been a controversial, and emotionally laden topic. This is still true today. As noted in the introduction, disagreement about what mode of communication to use, where to educate child who is deaf or hard of hearing, and what are the best methods to use to teach children with a hearing loss have been ongoing sources of controversy. While it can be wonderful to interact with passionate and dedicated professionals, families, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, it can also be exhausting to debate divergent views. Understanding the differences of perspective and the heterogeneity of the population can assist us in working through the strong emotions that occasionally accompany an individual's message.

Early Identification and Newborn Hearing Screening – The technology to assist in the identification of a hearing loss in infants is improving rapidly. Universal newborn hearing screening allows families and professionals to identify infants with a hearing loss before these children leave the hospital. Currently, 36 states plus the District of Columbia have mandated a routine hearing screen for all infants before they are discharged from the hospital (Yoshinaga-Itano, 2000). A variety of studies have demonstrated the benefits of early identification and intervention on early language, academic, and social-emotional development (e.g., Calderon & Naidu, 2000; Moeller, 2000; Yoshinaga-Itano, Sedey, Coulter & Mehl, 1998).

Early Intervention – Children who are deaf or hard of hearing are at a high risk for delays in communication and language development, poor academic achievement, delays in critical thinking skills and problems with social and emotional development because of the central role that language plays in these essential areas. As a result, most professionals in the field feel strongly that early intervention enhances the development of children with a hearing loss (e.g., Arhart & Yoshinaga-Itano, 1999) based on the work of researchers who have demonstrated that early-identified children who are deaf or hard of hearing have significantly better language, speech, and social-emotional outcomes than children and families who do not receive the services (e.g., Calderon & Naidu, 2000; Moeller, 2000; Yoshinaga-Itano, Sedey, Coulter & Mehl, 1998).

Family Involvement – The inability of children who are deaf or hard of hearing to understand their parents' spoken communication hinders the parent – child relationship (Marschark, 1997). Researchers suggest that positive parent-child interaction is a very good predictor of linguistic development (Calderon & Naidu, 2000; Moeller, 2000; Pressman, Pipp-Siegel, Yoshinaga-Itano & Deas, 1999). Consequently, it is beneficial to help parents to develop skills that will form the foundation of good communication with their children.

Communication – Communication refers to the process of sharing ideas and information. It is a process that is essential, and many say innate, for all human beings (Owens, 2001). One of the most difficult decisions that a family with a child who is deaf or hard of hearing makes is choosing a communication method. Yet, researchers suggest that early communication development is positively related to language learning, and in turn a variety of other important developmental areas (Calderon & Naidu, 2000). The question of which communication method to use began as an oral versus manual controversy. Yet, over time this matter has evolved to include questions such as the use of invented sign systems, whether or not to simultaneously speak and sign, the use or lack of use of technology, and whether or not to allow students to view the lips of people speaking to them.

Critical Mass – Having a sufficient number of students who are deaf or hard of hearing, an adequate number of teachers and support personnel who have training and experience in working with students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and appropriate curricular resources focused on the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing are considered important for establishing effective educational programs for students with a hearing loss (Luetke-Stahlman & Luckner, 1991). With the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), critical mass has been operationally redefined to mean students who are deaf or hard of hearing should be educated in their local public schools with their hearing peers. This shift in perspective has not met with universal acceptance (Siegel, 2000).

Friendships – People of every age view friendships as a vital part of their lives. The concept of friendship means having someone to spend time with, to learn from, to teach, to nurture and to be nurtured by. While families provide much that friends cannot, companions of the same or similar age broaden the experiences of children and youth, helping them stretch and grow beyond the family. Communication problems and differences in modes of communication often adversely impact the ability of students who are deaf or hard of hearing to develop friendships (Luckner, Schauermaun & Robb, 1994).

Literacy – There is no single definition of literacy. However, when most people talk about literacy they refer to the ability of an individual to read and write. Researchers in these areas have consistently demonstrated that many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are able to acquire the skills to access and use print. Conversely, many students who are deaf or hard of hearing have significant problems in this area (Traxler, 2000). These challenges impact students' ability to master content subject material, learn independently, and use technology.

Placement – The opening of the American School for the Deaf was followed by the inception of other residential schools for deaf students across the United States. Many of those schools were established in areas away from the major population centers. For more than a century residential schools and a few day schools were the only educational options available for students who were deaf. In 1975, Public Law 94-142: The Education of All Handicapped Children Act was passed, and a variety of educational options for children with a hearing loss became available. The pros and cons of each option continue to be debated. Currently, the U.S. Department of Education defines six educational placements for students with disabilities. This range of options is needed because individual children require different

levels of support based on their unique needs. Currently, the majority of students who are deaf or hard of hearing receive all or part of their education in general education classrooms (Holden-Pitt & Diz, 1998). Whether called mainstreaming or inclusion, integration of students who are deaf or hard of hearing has been a source of controversy (Nowell & Innes, 1997). While many people see the advantages of receiving an education in the general education classroom, many professionals, families and deaf adults are concerned that this type of placement can not meet the educational, social, emotional, or cultural needs of all students who are deaf or hard of hearing (Snider, 1995).

Educational Outcomes - There are many successful individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing who are performing on or above grade level (Luckner & Muir, 2001). Yet, the overall performance of students who are deaf or hard of hearing is typically far below this. Traxler (2000), in a summary of achievement data for the 9th edition of the Stanford Achievement Test for students who are deaf or hard of hearing indicated that the median grade level for 18 year-old students in reading comprehension was just below the 4th grade. She also reported median grade level scores of 4th grade for vocabulary, 5th grade for problem solving and just below 6th grade in mathematics for 18 year-old students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Similar disappointing academic achievement results were noted by Schildroth and Hotto (1993), who indicated that students who are deaf or hard of hearing achieved an average grade level of 4.5 in reading by age 17, and by Allen (1986) who found that students who are deaf or hard of hearing had a median grade level range of 2.9 to 3.2 for reading comprehension and 7.0 to 7.5 for arithmetic computation in their last year of high school.

Career Outcomes - The impact of limited academic progress is most evident when the occupational outcomes for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing are examined. Currently, large numbers of youth who are deaf or hard of hearing receive Supplemental Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) (Danek & Busby, 1999) without being involved in any productive activity (Bullis, Bull, Johnson, & Peters, 1995; Bullis, Davis, Bull, & Johnson, 1997; Lam, 1994). While the exact figures vary from study to study, collectively researchers report that the manner in which students who are deaf or hard of hearing are prepared for the world of work is unsatisfactory. For example, in a national follow-up study, Macleod-Gallinger (1992) reported that 53 percent of the respondents were unemployed one year after graduation. However, the picture improved considerably over time with almost 19 percent of respondents who were deaf or hard of hearing reporting that they were unemployed 10 years after graduation.

Curriculum Focus – Individuals' perspectives of hearing loss influence what they think should be taught to students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Currently, there is general consensus that, to the greatest extent possible, the curriculum for students who are deaf or hard of hearing should be the same as that of hearing students (Moore, 2001). Yet, the question of what specialized skills should also be included in deaf students' plan of study needs to be answered. Specific areas of study that are often included in students' programs of study include: receptive and expressive language development, speech development, auditory training, Deaf culture, emotional development, social skills training, sexuality education, independent learning skills, reading strategy instruction, self-advocacy training, daily living skills, career awareness, and infusion of multicultural issues. The ongoing question that

needs to be asked is what should be eliminated from the curriculum to accommodate the addition of these specialized skills?

Cultural Identity – The Deaf community is a unique part of American society (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Like most communities, patterns of beliefs, values, behaviors, social customs, and knowledge that represent characteristics of the community are described to define the culture. Membership in the Deaf community, like most communities, varies from place to place. Factors that are often noted include: (1) being deaf, (2) using American Sign Language as a primary means of communicating, and (3) attending a residential school for the deaf (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Many children who are deaf are exposed to two languages and two cultures. Frequently the first language and the culture are not the same as their parents.

Cochlear Implants – A cochlear implant is an electronic device that is used to stimulate the auditory nerve fibers of an individual who is deaf. A great deal of controversy exists about cochlear implants. Some view this procedure as a wonderful technological advancement, while others see it as an invasive procedure designed to change a deaf person into a hearing person (Schirmer, 2001).

Adaptations – There is a national movement for higher educational standards and greater accountability for all students. Simultaneously, the number of students who are deaf or hard of hearing who receive significant proportions of their education in general education classrooms has increased (Holden-Pitt & Diaz, 1998). Specific adaptations need to be implemented in those general education settings so that students who are deaf or hard of hearing are able to learn, participate, and demonstrate what they are capable of doing. The Colorado Department of Education (1995) suggested that there are two types of adaptations. The first is called accommodations. Accommodations do not significantly change the instructional level, content, or performance criteria. Changes in process are made to provide a student with equal access to learning and results. The second type of adaptation is called a modification. Modifications substantially change what students are expected to learn and demonstrate. Modifications change the course objectives, assessment content, grading process, and possibly the type of diploma earned. Examples of adaptations that can be used with students who are deaf or hard of hearing can be found in Luckner and Denzin (1998).

Quantity and Quality of Personnel – A necessary prerequisite for the provision of quality educational services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing is to have an appropriate number of qualified teachers available to serve them. A variety of sources indicate that the current and projected demand for teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing exceeds the available supply. The need for properly trained and licensed teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing exists in all geographical regions of the United States (American Association for Employment in Education, 2002).

Administrative Support – Support from principals and special education administrators for teachers and families has strong direct and indirect effects on the quality of education that a child receives (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). Administrators set the tone of a school's culture, influence how services for students with a hearing loss are provided, mediate disputes, shape attitudes about family involvement in a child's education, and determine the types of professional development

that are provided for teachers.

Well Functioning Teams – The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) mandates team decision making for assessment, placement and transition planning processes. Yet, researchers suggest that true collaboration and consultation among professionals and families is rare (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1996; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). For increased collaborative decision making and problem solving to occur, greater attention needs to be provided to help professionals and families learn to communicate and develop reliable partnerships.

Transition Services – The transition from school to postsecondary education or the world of work, as well as managing adult responsibilities and living independently, represent a major challenge for many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing (Danek & Busby, 1999). Students are required to leave a relatively supportive educational system, which usually includes trained special education professionals and specialized services, for the dynamic and unsheltered world of adult living, which typically does not provide the same level of services or support. To better meet the challenges of everyday adult living, professionals, and families along with adult service providers, state agency representatives, community members, and faculty at postsecondary institutions need to work together to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate transition plans that help individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing lead personally fulfilling lives (Luckner, 2002).

Technology – Technology changes daily. As such, so does the manner in which technology can enhance the lives of individuals who are hearing as well as individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The types of technology that are of specific interest to professionals, families, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing include hearing aids, telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD), closed captioning, real-time captioning, soundfields, FM systems, speech and speech reading computer programs, computer assisted notetaking, cochlear implants, and the Internet. In May of 2000 a grant from the federal government was awarded to the Association of College Educators – Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing (ACE-D/HH) (Johnson & Dilka, 2000). One product of that grant has been the development of the Deaf Education Web site (www.deafed.net), which has more than 4,500 individuals (i.e., preservice and existing teachers, parents, adults who are deaf or hard of hearing, administrators, and university faculty) who have become registered users of the site and as such have access to a nation-wide database of instructional resources and collaborative opportunities.

Social Security Disincentive to Work - Many individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing make use of social security income (SSI) and social security disability insurance (SSDI) to help them get settled. These programs provide supplemental income as well as medicaid and medicare benefits. Unfortunately, large numbers of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing receive SSI or SSDI, do not work, and are uninvolved in any productive activity (Danek & Busby, 1999).

Discrimination - Negative attitudes and discrimination toward individuals with disabilities in general, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in particular, are deeply rooted and difficult to change. The primary reasons for this include limited experience interacting with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing and prejudices and fear on the part of the hearing population (Foster, 1987).

Furthermore, there is ample evidence that many workers who are deaf or hard of hearing experience difficulties such as communication stress, social isolation, and unsupportive supervisors, which isolate them from resources within their work organizations that could accelerate their career advancement (Geyer & Schroedel, 1998).

Conclusion

Education of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing has existed for centuries in the United States. Unfortunately, the ongoing debate about how as well as where to educate students with a hearing loss often has overshadowed the great work that has been accomplished by professionals, families, and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing themselves. The purpose of this paper has been to highlight issues that are specific to the field of education of individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The goal is to help parents, professionals and individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing make choices that lead to fulfilling lives. While there have been a large number of successful individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, there also have been far too many persons with a hearing loss who have not received a quality education, shared positive relationships, or had satisfying careers. Hopefully, the future will be filled with less controversy and increased successes. Hopefully, there will be a heightened understanding that all human beings, whether they have a hearing loss or not, are diverse, complex and have specific needs that must be met for optimum development to occur. Hopefully, each of us will work in partnership to make this a better world for people who are deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing to live and succeed

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