ADDRESSING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF HARD OF HEARING STUDENTS IN DIVERSE SCHOOL SETTINGS

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Author:
Lauren Senko

Faculty Sponsor:
Jean Slobodzian
Department of Special Education,
Language and Literacy

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ABSTRACT

Whether placed in classes with hearing or deaf students, hard of hearing individuals often struggle to thrive academically and socially because of the inappropriateness or lack of accommodations offered for their specific needs. Because hard of hearing individuals often constitute a minority within any educational setting, their unique needs are often overlooked or misunderstood. An ethnographic study was conducted at different academic settings serving the hard of hearing elementary-aged student population. Observations at culturally dedicated schools and public mainstream environments revealed a variety of empowering and supportive techniques offered to elementary-aged hard of hearing students in each of the placements. Hence, the results of this study are encouraging for both parents and educators in that they acknowledge ways in which educators can support the unique needs of hard of hearing students and thus ensure a socially just and successful classroom environment for all.

INTRODUCTION

In America, we live in a dichotomous society. Individuals are often described within frames of separate and distinct categories. For example, people are classified as either: short or tall, fat or thin, able or disabled. These comparative groups disregard variations that lie in between. Most people with normal hearing tend to pigeonhole those with hearing loss into such a broad category by using the label *deaf*. However, of the 28 million individuals in the United States with reported hearing loss, "it is important to note that about 94 to 96% of people with hearing impairment are functionally hard of hearing rather than deaf' (Flexer, 1999). This majority of individuals form the often overlooked, underserved group known as the *hard of hearing* (Meyer, 2003).

       The National Association of the Deaf characterizes hard of hearing individuals as those with a mild to moderate hearing loss. People who are hard of hearing rely on their residual hearing for communicative purposes (www.nad.org). In other words, the main distinction between deaf and hard of hearing individuals is that those who are hard of hearing often prefer auditory rather than visual access to communication (Israelite, Ower, and Goldstein, 2002; Ross, 1996). Implications for education loom large, for while the struggles and needs of hard of hearing students diverge from those of deaf students, they are undoubtedly still as great (Meyer, 2003). Many parents and professionals assume that the use of hearing aids or other technology transforms hard of hearing individuals into functionally hearing individuals, which in turn results in an underestimation of this population's need for accommodations (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003). Furthermore, acquisition of a variety of positive coping skills such as speechreading and good one-on-one interactions often tends to mask the daily frustrations that hard of hearing people encounter during conversations and classroom discussions (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, Sass-Lehrer, 2003). It would never be the intention of faculty or staff members purposefully to deprive hard of hearing individuals of the appropriate accommodations; however, often by misunderstanding or perhaps benign neglect, faculty and staff substitute "oppressive niceness" (Slobodzian and Lugg, 2006) for the appropriate accommodations, leaving these students feeling underserved and invisible (Candlish, 1996).

The challenge lies in recognizing the differing needs of various hard of hearing students. It is incumbent upon schools to provide the appropriate modification(s) for each and every hard of hearing student attending school in that district (Meyer, 2003). In a study conducted by Israelite, Ower, and Goldstein (2002), a hard of hearing (HH) student offered a possible solution: "For all HH students, I think that first they could be placed in a HH class" (p. 144). However, there is no such program available in the United States that is devoted solely to serving the needs of hard of hearing individuals, nor am I advocating such a program. What is available, however, is a continuum of academic placements (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002).

This paper reviews an ethnographic study of several schools that served the needs of hard of hearing students. It focuses on a variety of programs that empowered students who were hard of hearing.

The primary academic placements currently provided for hard of hearing students include:

- o *Culturally dedicated schools*, which focus specifically and only on educating students who are deaf and hard of hearing (Slobodzian, 2004; Slobodzian and Lugg, 2006). In the field of deaf education, these schools can either be residential or commuter (day) programs. The mode of communication serves as the criteria for creating a division into three main categories of culturally dedicated schools (Slobodzian, 2004; Slobodzian and Lugg, 2006):
    - o *Oral* programs, in which English, both spoken and written, is the primary and only language used by teachers and students (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002).
    - o *Total Communication programs,* in which a signed system accompanies English voicing for through-the-air conversations and English is used for written communication (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002).
    - o *Bilingual-Bicultural* or *Bi-Bi programs,* in which American Sign Language (ASL) is used during through-the-air conversations and English is used for written communication. (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002).

- o *Mainstream/Inclusion settings* occur in public schools and are further sub-divided into three categories:
    - o *Resource rooms* are classrooms within a public school in which deaf and hard of hearing students are segregated into a separate classroom to receive instruction from a teacher of the deaf for all or part of the day (Marschark and Spencer, 2003).
    - o *Self-contained classrooms* separate deaf and hard of hearing students from their hearing peers so that they may receive multidisciplinary instruction from a teacher of the deaf throughout the day (Ramsey, 1997).
    - o *Inclusive settings* place deaf and hard of hearing students within general education classes for selected academic subjects or all day, either with or without interpreting support (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002; Antia, Stinson, and Gaustad, 2002).

METHODOLOGY

Observation Sites

Observations were conducted at four different placements, all of which were situated in the northeastern region of the United States, over a period of eight months. A brief description of the duration and nature of observations made at each of the four sites is provided below (all names of schools and participants are pseudonyms):

- o *Spring Lake School* is a culturally dedicated school serving students in preschool through eighth grades. The school's mission is in part to encourage students to express themselves using a variety of modes ranging from ASL to spoken, signed, and written English and to build a strong self-concept in order readily to participate in the hearing and/or Deaf communities. One full day was spent in a fifth-grade classroom at Spring Lake School. The class consisted of eight deaf and hard of hearing students, a hearing teacher and a Deaf teacher's assistant.

o *Mountain Way School* is a culturally dedicated program housed on two different campuses. These schools subscribe to a "Bi-Bi" educational philosophy, in which emphasis is placed on ASL as the primary mode of communication and English as the secondary. Students receive instruction on the Deaf and American cultures and are given exposure to a variety of both Deaf and hard of hearing role models. Both sites were included in this study:

  o The *Freepoint campus* is the larger of the two, offering educational programs for deaf and hard of hearing students, ages 0-21. In addition, Freepoint offers both Special Needs and Dual Language programs. A full day was spent at Freepoint, observing preschool, kindergarten, second grade, and fifth grade classrooms as well as conducting interviews with the supervisors of both the Early Childhood and Elementary Education Programs.

  o The *Southfield campus* has two programs for preschool through elementary students, one of which serves deaf and hard of hearing children, while the other serves hearing children. Both programs use ASL as the primary mode of communication. A full day was spent at Southfield, in which kindergarten, first, second, fourth, and fifth grade classrooms as well as gym class and story time were observed.

o *Central Place School* is a public elementary school program in which deaf and hard of hearing students are taught in the same building as their hearing peers. Three full days were spent observing in both the Resource Room and general education classes, while a fourth visit was made for the purpose of interviewing some of the participants. The Resource Room personnel, consisting of a head teacher, two aides (one of whom was culturally Deaf) and three educational interpreters participated in the interviews.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 56 students were observed at the four program sites. In order accurately to represent the heterogeneity of the hard of hearing population, students of diverse ethnic, gender, racial, cultural, intellectual, and socioeconomic backgrounds were all included in this study. The graph below represents a breakdown of the total number of deaf and hard of hearing students at each school site visited:

"TOTAL NUMBER OF D/HH STUDENTS AT SCHOOL SITES"
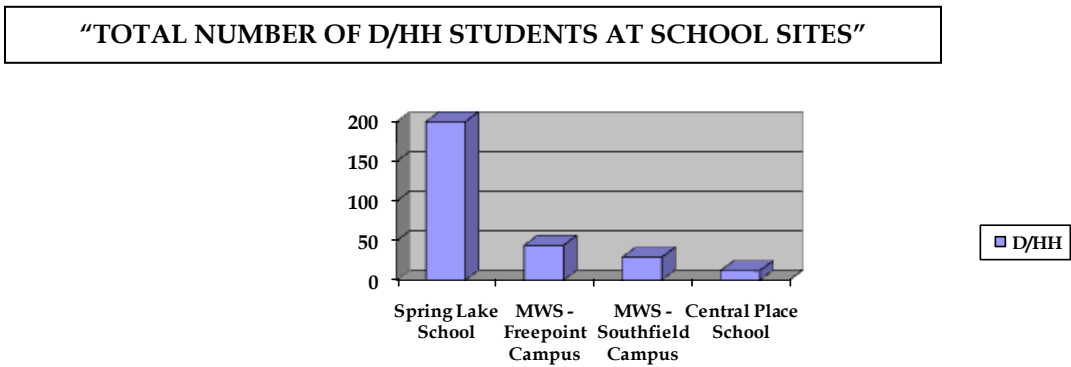
The graph that follows depicts a breakdown of the deaf and hard of hearing students who identified themselves directly at each placement:

"STUDENTS OBSERVED AT SCHOOL SITES"
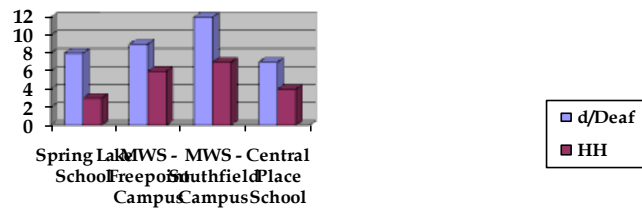
Interestingly, the numbers are the reverse of those of the population of deaf and hard of hearing people in the United States. While the majority of individuals with hearing loss in the United States are hard of hearing, at each of these school sites they constituted a minority population. This is primarily because most hard of hearing children are not placed in specialized programs serving the needs of deaf students such as those included in this study, but instead are placed in public schools along with hearing peers (Davis, 1977; Antia, Reed, and Kreimeyer, 2005). The one public school included in this study (Central Place School) was unusual because it had a longstanding program that served deaf students as well as hard of hearing students.

DATA ANALYSIS

A Grounded Theory Analytic Approach was used to analyze all data in this study (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Data collected onsite were written up in the form of field notes, which were coded first to conceptualize all incidents (i.e. substantive coding) and then to forge connections among all subcategories within a given concept (i.e. axial coding). Ultimately, an emergent theory was recognized and substantiated with examples and supporting details. Additionally, regularly scheduled recursive and analytic dialogues were held with Professor Jean Slobodzian, who served as faculty advisor on this research project. Finally, a reflective journal was kept in which reactions and/or feelings about the on-site visits and the overall research experience were recorded.

DOMINANT CATEGORIES

Educators of deaf and hard of hearing students consider all of these academic placements exemplary. Each has earned its reputation thanks to the variety of accommodations it offers both groups of students. Each school carefully met the needs of its specific hard of hearing population. Data analysis led to an important conclusion: No one school program is a "perfect fit" for *all* hard of hearing individuals. Further analysis demonstrated that three critical criteria must be considered by parents and professionals when choosing the best program for a child who is hard of hearing:

  o *Access to communication*
  o *Socialization / membership*
  o *Academic support services*

Discussion of each of these appears in the next section of the paper.

FINDINGS

Clearly, "the recognition of an individual's needs and unique status must transcend any categorical attempt to define or describe him" (Davis, 1977, p. 8). Hence, there is no educational prescription to ensure the academic success of all hard of hearing individuals. However, an academic program that

provides HH students with access to communication, induces membership within the school community, and offers the necessary academic support endows them with the greatest potential to achieve academic success. Therefore, these three factors should be among the most prominent aspects considered when deciding upon the "best" academic placement for any particular hard of hearing child.

Access to Communication
Although individuals who are hard of hearing may physically hear sounds in most situations, more often than not, they do not understand what they hear (Grushkin, 2003). This disconnect between the ability to hear and to construct meaning may result from a variety of communicative barriers affecting access to communication. For example, the poor acoustics of most classrooms coupled with noise and distance can make it extremely difficult for hard of hearing students to understand what their peers and teacher are saying (Meyer, 2003).

Furthermore, the diverse needs of the hard of hearing population may complicate the choice of the most effective communication approach for each individual. This decision cannot be based solely on the extent of the child's hearing loss, although commonly this is the case; instead, a variety of factors should be considered (Yoshinaga-Itano and Sedey, 2000), including etiology, age of onset of hearing loss, academic difficulties, social maturity, and the communication mode(s) used within the child's home environment (Davis, 1977; Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002). Prior to selecting an approach, because of the complexity of the situation and the different communication modes available, parents should educate themselves on the choices to decide what program best suits the needs of their child (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003). Parents must then choose an academic program that uses this form of communication in order to avoid the problems mentioned above.

Since communication provides a channel by which to transmit information and also lays the foundation for successful relationships (Vangelisti, Daly, and Friedrich, 1999), communication accessibility is essential in the classroom. Hence, one must consider mode of communication and communication accessibility are essential to consider when determining the "best" placement for each hard of hearing individual. Although the data from this study offer many examples of empowering and supportive techniques that facilitate communication accessibility at each of the three academic settings studied, a select few are mentioned below:

- *Spring Lake School*
  In accordance with the school's educational mission, teachers and staff provide students with a rich communicative environment. While ASL is incorporated into the instructional and social aspects of school life, speech communication programs are also used to meet each individual's needs and capabilities.

  During a Social Studies class, the teacher of the deaf provided the students with a map of the U.S., asking them to label the states of the Midwestern region. Throughout the lesson, she implemented code switching, switching between ASL and spoken English, depending upon the situation (Valli and Lucas, 2000). For instance, when discussing Illinois, she used ASL to point out that one of their vocabulary words, *ill*, was embedded in the state name. By contrast, the teacher used spoken English with sign support to discuss the phonetic pronunciation of Missouri. At Spring Lake School, this teacher of the deaf carefully maintained a communicative environment open and accessible to all students.

- *Mountain Way School*
  This anecdote exemplifies the strides taken by teachers to make communication accessible to all students, especially for the hard of hearing: In a fifth grade Social Studies classroom, students were watching a movie about the Mississippi River. Not only did the teacher ensure that the move was close captioned, which accommodated the deaf students, she also left the sound on for the hard of hearing. Furthermore, she stopped the movie several times to provide additional commentary and assist comprehension.

o *Central Place School*
In order to improve access to communication, the teacher of the deaf at Central Place used dialogue journals, in which the student would write a daily message, to which the teacher would respond. In addition, she also provided the students with many ways to comprehend a concept or idea. For example, during a vocabulary lesson, students experienced difficulty grasping the meaning of the word "scuba," so, she wrote a brief definition that she accompanied by drawing a picture on the white board, acted out the use of the equipment, and provided a personal story about scuba diving, all virtually simultaneously. The teacher addressed the diverse communicative needs of the hard of hearing in her classroom and presented information in a variety of ways to accommodate the needs of all her students.

These examples reveal how each of the programs provides hard of hearing individuals with increased accessibility to communication. At Spring Lake School, both ASL and spoken English were used in the classroom. By doing so, hard of hearing students received a broader menu of options for communication, which reduced their potential frustrations and increased their sense of empowerment (Silver, 2003). At Mountain Way School, in addition to services beneficial to both deaf and hard of hearing students such as closed captioning, teachers took the specific needs of the hard of hearing into consideration by providing visual *and* auditory access to information. In the Resource Room at Central Place School, dialogue journals, which facilitate written communication between teacher and students, provided children with an important way to share their feelings and thoughts (Bailes, Searls, Slobodzian, and Stanton, 1986). It also fostered trust and understanding between students and teachers and reminded students of the power of writing (Bailes, Searls, Slobodzian, and Stanton, 1986).

Socialization / Membership
Hard of hearing individuals reside in a world of "guess and check" in which they hear "enough to be distracted by noise, yet not enough for it to be meaningful;…the strain of extracting significance from sounds that may be as loud as life yet out of focus" (Wright, 1969, p. 58). As a result, hard of hearing people tend to think of themselves as hearing in some situations and deaf in others (Silver, 2003). Thus, socialization may pose a major issue for hard of hearing individuals who find themselves isolated in certain situations (Ross, 1996). Thus, parents should consider opportunities for socialization, when determining the "best fit" for any hard of hearing individual.

Furthermore, social growth in the elementary school years is essential for all students. Therefore, it is critical that hard of hearing students feel that they are *members* of their classroom communities (Antia, Stinson, and Gaustad, 2003). Selected examples of empowering and supportive techniques that promote full membership in the classroom in the three academic settings are provided below:

o *Spring Lake School*
The presence of hard of hearing faculty, and staff provided role models for hard of hearing students at Spring Lake School. As the mission statement of Spring Lake School explains, these role models promote a positive self-concept for students as well as the social skills needed to participate in both the hearing and Deaf communities.
    Hard of hearing students may also achieve full membership in the classroom through group work. For example, during Social Studies, students were arranged in heterogeneous groupings and encouraged to work with one another to identify the states of the Midwest without referring to their textbooks or notes.

o *Mountain Way School*
As I mentioned earlier, Bilingual-Bicultural programs, such as that of Mountain Way School, educate students in the language of both the local Deaf community (e.g. ASL) and that of the local hearing community (e.g. ASL). Children also learn about the cultures of both communities. For example, at Mountain Way School deaf and hard of hearing students mix early with their hearing peers. One of the preschool classes consisted of two hearing students, one hard of

hearing student, and two deaf students. The hard of hearing child had the opportunity to socialize and interact with individuals of two different cultures.

o *Central Place School*
Central Place School aims to raise awareness among its students about what it is like to have a hearing loss. During Deaf Awareness week, posters such as the following were displayed throughout the school with messages created by the students in the Resource Room: "Signing helps even hard of hearing students in noisy places like the playground."

General education teachers collaborated with the teacher of the deaf on an "ASL Time" when deaf and hard of hearing students could share selected signs with their hearing peers. This experience empowered hard of hearing students to be more comfortable using speech with their hearing peers. When asked by their hearing peers to provide signs for words such as *school*, *sports*, and *rain*, the hard of hearing students were able to process this information auditorily and provide their peers with the corresponding sign. Hence, they felt confident using both languages and empowered to bridge the gaps between hearing and deaf people.

Clearly, these programs increased opportunities for socializing and including hard of hearing students. At Spring Lake School, role models provided hard of hearing students with individuals who understood their idiosyncratic and complex experience (Silver, 2003). Additionally, cooperative group work provided HH students with opportunities for socialization, maximized their strengths and encouraged all members to contribute to the activity (Kronowitz, 2008). At Mountain Way School, the "Bi-Bi" philosophy supported students as they were exposed to linguistic and cultural aspects of both Deaf and hearing worlds. Since HH individuals often interact with members of both communities, it is important that they become well versed in both cultures (Marschark, Lang, and Albertini, 2002). Furthermore, efforts at Central Place School engendered feelings of belonging in HH students, both in the classroom and the greater school community (Antia, Stinson, and Gaustad, 2002).

Academic Support Services
Degree of hearing loss often directly correlates to the extent of academic support one receives (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003). Those students who have mild to moderate losses, the majority of hard of hearing individuals, are often overlooked and underserved (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003). In addition, professionals often deem hearing aids and cochlear implants and preferential seating as sufficient accommodations for hard of hearing children. As a result, these students often do not receive necessary educational services (Davis, 1977; Ross, 2003). Furthermore, the lack of monitoring and deficit of personnel trained to help hard of hearing students gives rise to underachievement (Davis, 1977; Seaver and DesGeorges, 2003).

To remedy this situation, educators must better accommodate hard of hearing students in their classrooms and students, advocate for themselves. Appropriate academic support services are key when selecting the "best" placement for any hard of hearing student. Examples of empowering and supportive classroom techniques available in each of the three academic settings in this study are delineated below:

o *Spring Lake School*
The use of technology to engage students in learning stood out here. For example, the SmartBoard, an interactive white board, can be used with computers to display PowerPoint presentations, maps, and books, while one writes on the "white board" screen. After each presentation, notes could be printed out and distributed to the students. The SmartBoard encouraged equal participation by presenting information auditorily and visually, which also supported the education of hard of hearing students.

o *Mountain Way School*
At Southfield, the smaller of the two Mountain Way campuses, the supervisor explained that each student's progress was regularly monitored and adjusted. For example, hard of hearing

students who were to be transitioned out of Southfield within a year or two to a mainstream placement attended Southfield four days a week and a mainstream program on the fifth. At the Southfield campus, once the students completed fifth grade they graduated from the program; based on their academic and social success in "Bi-Bi" programs, hard of hearing students might then be sent to mainstream programs for middle school. Furthermore, at the beginning of each year, each student was carefully placed with other students with whom she or he would thrive academically.

- o *Central Place School*
  In the Resource Room, students were offered one-on-one support from the teacher of the deaf and qualified paraprofessionals. Students were then placed in Reading and Math groups with one to two other students and received one-on-one tutoring for the remaining subjects.
  In the general education setting, hard of hearing students were accompanied by an educational interpreter. General education teachers were part of an "inclusion team" and worked with the teacher of the deaf and educational interpreters to provide appropriate accommodations for each hard of hearing child in their general education classes.

The above examples reveal the variety of academic support services available to hard of hearing individuals. Teachers at Spring Lake School used SmartBoard technology to present material both visually and aurally. Students at both campuses of Mountain Way School receive special needs and speech and audiology services as well as careful monitoring of their academic progress. In the Resource Room at Central Place School, students were arranged in small groupings because hard of hearing children communicate more effectively one-on-one (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003).

DISCUSSION

The unique academic and social needs of hard of hearing students are overlooked in many educational settings (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003). As a result, these students may not reach their potential (Davis, 1977; Seaver and DesGeorges, 2003). It is encouraging when hard of hearing students receive support in such critical areas as Access to Communication, Socialization and Membership, and Academic Support Services. HH students need both assistive technology to be able to hear and the appropriate educational placement to help them realize their potential (Grushkin, 2003). Furthermore, hard of hearing individuals who experience *membership* will feel that they belong to their school and classroom communities. Educators must become aware of the accommodations and support services each hard of hearing child requires and make sure these accommodations are provided.

Hard of hearing children were "called *forgotten* a quarter century ago, and more recently *overlooked*" (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, and Sass-Lehrer, 2003, p. 39), but as more educators follow the lead of schools such as those in this study, these negative labels will be replaced by such positive ones as *high achieving* and *well served*. Providing hard of hearing students with the necessary tools to a bright and successful future must be a goal of education in the twenty-first century.

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