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THE EDUCATION OF THE DEAF: PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE*

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This is a very happy occasion for me as a refugee from 38 years of federal service, the last few of which have been quite bleak as compared to the excitement and progress under people-oriented administrations of earlier years.

When I speak of the past in education of the deaf, my years of reference have a 1929 floor which was the year I enrolled at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf to prepare for admission to Gallaudet College. That was my first contact with deaf students and teachers of the deaf. With a background of a diploma from a very high-ranking high school which I had virtually completed before I became deaf, I was amazed at the low levels of expectancy, of challenge to deaf youth of 1929.

There I was in a class preparing for Gallaudet entrance examinations studying *Black Beauty*, the *King of the Golden River*, and similar elementary level story books through which I had moved at the fourth or fifth grade level in public school as a normally hearing child. This same pattern of low level challenge to college aspiring deaf students existed in other subject areas.

Several weeks passed before my apprehension about what I would face at Gallaudet was eased. The excellent teachers took time to explain that Gallaudet recruited nationally. Therefore, it must compensate for the varying levels of effectiveness in the 75 public residential schools for the deaf over the country. Moreover, the pre-lingual deaf were behind the normally hearing in language skills. Accordingly, Gallaudet had to make a long distance estimate of each applicant's potential to cope with a liberal arts curriculum. Ergo, the oversimplification I faced seemed justified to the college administration in an era when travel was much less speedy than it is today; when long distance telephone calls were relatively

much more costly; when the Gallaudet budget was sharply leaner; when state vocational opportunity, and supplemental security income funds were not available; and when the war of methods – oral vs. manual was in its hey-day. Nevertheless, unanswered questions remained and even grew as I learned to communicate manually, thus discovering in my deaf associates much high levels of intelligence than their limited language skills seemed to indicate.

Three rewarding years on the Gallaudet campus reinforced these initial concerns. Surrounded by over 125 brilliant deaf women and men from all over the country, the lack of adequate challenge was everywhere. Lights in these college students' rooms went out at 9:30 at night necessitating moving to the central foyer or turning on oil or gasoline lamps in their rooms to continue studying or just visiting. The textbooks in science classes were those I had used in high school. The same experiments I had done myself after rapid instruction given once by the physics teacher in high school were performed in college by the teacher. He also distributed in advance for the final exam about 20-25 questions from which he would select probably 8-10 for answering in the traditional blue books in Chapel Hall.

These example of low expectancy, of lack of challenge, are facts, although they may sound like fiction. They are representative of the views of the general run of teachers of the deaf as recently as a quarter century ago. One of them, an experienced teacher in the primary grades, once asked my wife if she wrote my speeches for me. This question illuminates dramatically the serious shortcomings in the training and orientation of teachers of the deaf. It brings to sharp focus the inevitable outcome of low expectancy and lack of challenge, specifically the albatross of paternalism that has stifled deaf

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children, youth, and, yes, adults for generations. Paternalism is still a vicious problem for deaf people in educational circles. There is still much too much in many too many places: the voiced opinions that the deaf can't do this, the deaf can't do that. This continues in the face of frequent and highly visible examples of deaf people who are doing this, who are doing that, and very successfully, thank you. This fact nicely illustrates the comment of a long forgotten writer that Abraham Lincoln was great, not because he was born in a log cabin, but in spite of it.

In my 50 years of involvement in services to deaf people, the widespread failure of the expensive educational program for this special population of normal intelligence has resisted change until the past two decades. I believe that the beginning of this change occurred in the National Leadership Training Program at California State University at Northridge where future heads of schools for the deaf were in close daily contact with deaf fellow students. These future school superintendents learned from sources higher than textbooks or ideological lectures, specifically deaf leaders of the deaf. They learned that a methodology of teaching the deaf, oralism, which largely ignored the primary strength of deaf people, their normal intelligence, in favor of its inherent psychological incredibility was the probable main cause of the disordered language of prelingual deaf people.

The Maryland School for the Deaf got the message and courageously pioneered total communication which has since swept the country. The word "courageously" is used advisedly, for the poor logic of the established system was known to many, but none spoke out before. One cannot say that courage was lacking elsewhere. It was more likely a question of timing in a state school whose board of trustees was able to agree that something else needed to be done in the face of the continuing and pervasive language problems of prelingually deaf persons.

And so today we have practically universal adherence to total communication throughout the country. In the words of Mary E. Switzer, great champion of deaf people, on our way to talk with Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark, she remarked in effect that the methodology battle was ridiculous in view of the pressing need for deaf children to have every possible

cue (lipreading, speech, signs, writing, amplification) in order to understand what was being discussed. Total communication is just that. Moreover, it is for deaf people the equal opportunity that the Constitution of the United States guarantees them.

In these remarks I have moved from examples of the deprivation and low expectancy of by-gone years to the great promise of total communication. Certainly, thinking people will agree that the current circumstances of deaf people are infinitely better than when oralism was in sway. Consequently, we can say with conviction that their future will be relatively brighter as skills in total communication improve, both in sending and in receiving. The National Association of the Deaf Communicative Skills Program is a parallel force that is increasing sharply the capability of the community at large to communicate with deaf people.

We need also at this time to examine my remark about the inherent psychological incredibility of oralism, a methodology which figuratively puts the cart before the horse. My rationale cites basic factors which function simultaneously.

One factor is that English is an inside language. Much of it is not readily visible. Spanish in contrast is an outside language with only 5 vowel sounds. Accordingly, Spanish children are likely to respond to oralism more effectively than English language children. Such cues as are visible in English speech are very fleeting and frequently depend upon the text for meaning. Moreover, we have the serious problem of look-alikes, such as "b" and "p" and "d" and "t". In total communication, in contrast, the cues are fully visible manually and much less fleeting.

A second factor is the common core of teaching speech to deaf children, specifically the elements of speech which are in themselves meaningless. Drilling on the elements and combining them into words that are easy to lipread but of little significance to the child goes on for months and years. Infinitely more sensible to me is the launching of instruction through the meaningful manual cues of total communication with speech development to follow when the child has some base with which to react. I reject the plaint that if signs are permitted speech will suffer. No research supports this and experience shows otherwise. In brief, I believe that

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deaf children will respond to and retain better when they know from total communication what is expected of them.

A third factor is the widespread agreement that human rate of capability to assimilate symbols is at its peak between 2 and 6 years of age and thereafter declines. Many deaf youngsters are not exposed to formal instruction until they are six years old as state schools may have a six year level entrance requirement. The establishment of pre-schools for deaf babies is a very important movement that is clearly coping in metropolitan areas with the problem of early exposure. We can expect that as the United States gets back to concern for all of the people that the untapped wonders of television will reach into the home to train parents and very young deaf children directly. The volunteers comprising Telephone Pioneers of America are even now testing in hospitals the hearing of high risk newborn babies to promote early discovery and consequent implementation of effective instruction in communication. All of

this stimulates optimism that we are at long last on the road to reducing appreciably the language problems of prelingually deaf persons since early discovery implies early training in response to the symbols of language.

In closing, please let me assure you that I, and the mass who think as I have stated, are very pro-speech. However, we are first pro-language. We are aware that language is the main goal, that speech is one method of language manifestation, that signs are another method, and that all are attainable and conditions for effective living for most deaf people. We are deeply concerned that the methodology conform to the logic of human development. We are firm in our believe that total communication is the way to improve language and secure better speech among deaf people, the way to their better emotional and mental health, the way to their capabilities for higher level training and consequently, the way to more challenging and satisfying employment and community involvement.



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