

Strand 1: Educational Environments

The Bedrock of Deaf Education in North America

Center Schools

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The story of Deaf education in North America is close to 200 years old and is still unfolding. Many center schools for deaf students continue to serve both as the bedrock of Deaf education and as a wellspring for communities of deaf and hard of hearing learners that share a language and a culture.

Around the world, although schools for the deaf likely exhibit commonalities, I devote much of my attention to schools for the deaf and hard of hearing in the United States. As a recent past president of the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf, I am intimately involved with the current state of schools and programs for the deaf and hard of hearing students in North America.

From the 1817 opening of what is now the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, center schools for the Deaf have been major contributors to the educational, social, and cultural lives of Deaf individuals in North America. These schools have both shaped the lives of deaf individuals and been shaped by them. Arguably the most influential early American educator of deaf students was Laurent Clerc, a graduate of the Paris Institution for the Deaf and the first teacher of the Deaf in America. An educator who taught for more than forty years in the United States, Clerc modified the French Methodical Sign System to reflect English and adapted a curriculum

and a model for teaching English grammar. He trained most of the first administrators of schools for the deaf, as well as many of the first teachers, who later passed on his techniques (Moore, 2010).

Although Clerc was the most widely known, other Deaf leaders were also pioneers in the field. Gannon (1981) has reported that deaf professionals have founded twenty-four schools for the deaf in the United States. Such initiatives were not limited to the United States. For example, a Deaf man from Scotland, a Deaf man from England, and a Deaf nun from Ireland each established a school for the deaf in Australia, the first three such institutions in that country (Power, 2009), and a Deaf man from China established the first school for the deaf in Singapore (Mangrubang, 2009). Perhaps the greatest achievement in the history of the education of the deaf was that of Dr. Andrew Foster, a Deaf African American missionary who established thirty-one schools for the deaf in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, and South Africa (Kiyaga & Moore, 2009).

When American schools were segregated during the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s, schools for the deaf were also unfortunately segregated. For almost 100 years, black deaf children attended classes on separate campuses or in separate buildings on the same campus as the school for the deaf white students. When schools for the deaf became integrated, these separate buildings and campuses were either closed or incorporated into the rest of the school. Although the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision outlawed segregation in 1954, many schools for white deaf students were slow to integrate black students. In 1978, the Louisiana School for the Deaf was perhaps the last school for white deaf students to integrate black students.

The early schools for the deaf were leaders in educational innovation and concentrated to a great extent on preparing students for the world of work. Perhaps because American industrialization occurred in the early 19th century in New England, especially in Connecticut and Massachusetts, the American School for the Deaf, almost from its beginning and along with some public schools for hearing children, was one of the first schools in the United States to provide vocational training.

Deaf communities developed around center schools, which consisted of teachers, administrators, dormitory supervisors, and maintenance workers from the school, joined by school graduates and other Deaf individuals employed outside of the school. By 1870 Deaf teachers accounted for 42.5%

of the teaching staff at center schools for the deaf (Jones, 1918). The situation began to change shortly after that, when the percentage of deaf teachers declined rapidly. This was partly due to an increasing emphasis on oral-only instruction, as emphasized by the 1880 conference of Milan, which favored pure oral instruction and the suppression of sign language.

A second contributing factor was Alexander G. Bell's *Memoir on the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* (1883). Bell argued that the system of residential schools brought together Deaf people who intermarried and consequently increased the numbers of Deaf children. He was concerned about the existence of periodicals and organizations of the Deaf and advocated the closing of residential schools; he also discouraged the use of sign language.

Within a short period of time, some schools converted to oral-only instruction. Most, however, instituted a system whereby all children would be instructed orally in the elementary grades or up to approximately 12 years of age, after which some would be taught through a manual or combined oral-manual system. There were several variations. For example, some schools would divide children into oral-only classes or into manual or oral-manual classes. Outside of class, the children used sign language to interact socially.

The result was a reduction in the number of Deaf teachers and a limiting of the roles they played. Typically, Deaf teachers were not allowed to teach in elementary grades and, in many cases, in academic classes. They were limited, for the most part, to teaching vocational classes and children with disabilities. Often they did not have an opportunity to function as role models for younger children. By 1917 Deaf teachers accounted for only 14.5% of the teaching staff (Jones, 1918).

For long spans of time, North American Deaf and hard of hearing teachers and professionals suffered from discrimination. Although they were limited in the types of classes they could teach and were denied access to administrative positions, they still played significant and unique roles not available to other Deaf people around the world. It was through them that a common dialect of American Sign Language (ASL) was disseminated.

Even under these circumstances and although hearing administrators, many of whom were opposed to sign language, dominated the schools and controlled middle-class employment, deaf children at center schools were enculturated into the Deaf community and learned American Sign Language

(Padden, 1980; Padden & Humphries, 1988). This was due in great part to the influence of graduates of Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University). Many students would come to Gallaudet from residential schools, marry deaf students from other residential schools, and then go to yet other residential schools across the United States and Canada as teachers and dormitory supervisors. As previously noted, they spread a common dialect of ASL from Gallaudet, acted as role models, played leadership roles in Deaf communities, and established effective communication networks across the continent. Despite the absence of a Deaf superintendent of a school for the deaf from 1900 to the 1970s (Moores, 2010), the Deaf community functioned effectively within a very complex environment.

The population explosion that began in 1945 at the end of World War II and the demographic shift from a more rural to an urban/suburban character had a profound impact on center schools and their residential programming. Despite the increase in the school-age population and the subsequent increase in the numbers of deaf children, very few new schools for the deaf were established. The number of attendees remained consistent, but the percentage of deaf children educated in center schools declined. Over time people have come to live primarily in heavily populated areas. In addition transportation has improved, especially as a result of the interstate highway system, which has made everything more accessible. In the past, deaf students, especially in the larger states, would arrive at school late in the summer and stay in residence, with perhaps a visit home over a winter break. They would then stay in school until the beginning of summer. In essence, the schools functioned in loco parentis. This is not the case at present since students within a certain radius commute to school, and even those who live in distant communities go home regularly on weekends. In fact, in some geographically large states children fly home and back to school on a regular basis.

In 1975, the greatest special education law ever in the United States, PL 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act), was enacted. However, this law, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has disenfranchised deaf and hard of hearing children everywhere. Special education administrators without training and expertise in deaf education have misapplied the least restrictive environment (LRE) provision to thousands of deaf and hard of hearing children, who, as a result, were placed into neighborhood schools with minimal educational support.

Instead of learning directly from their teachers and peers, deaf and hard of hearing children had to watch interpreters who were often uncertified or unskilled—every day. Socially, these students were virtually isolated in their schools, where they had very little if any meaningful interaction with their hearing peers. Many have also suffered from the “Velcro syndrome,” as they must stay very close to their own interpreter for the entire school day. The interpreter is the child’s interpreter, teacher, teacher’s aide, counselor, and friend all rolled into one person.

After 35 years of this “mainstreaming” law, little is known about the achievement scores of deaf students in neighborhood schools. Also, anecdotal evidence increasingly indicates that many deaf and hard of hearing students who attend these schools throughout the elementary years later migrate to center schools during their middle school or high school years. More often than not, they show significant delays in academic and social development.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the first linguistic analyses of American Sign Language and the signed languages of other countries were published. This research, coupled with the growing recognition of cultural and linguistic minority groups in the United States during the 1960s, brought on the Total Communication movement of the 1970s and the bilingual education (ASL and English) movement of the 1990s. Most center schools today emphasize early language acquisition through their infant and toddler programs, and this remains the single most critical factor for predicting student achievement. Students who use digital hearing aids or cochlear implants have now become commonplace at center schools.

Beginning in the 1960s, during the civil rights movement in the United States, educational opportunities and, consequently, professional opportunities opened up for deaf professionals. It is a little-known fact that, even at Gallaudet University, deaf students were not allowed into its graduate school, and there were few opportunities elsewhere. Federal legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 began to level the playing field, and it was not long before Deaf professionals began to move into positions of authority in center schools and elsewhere. The Deaf President Now (DPN) movement in 1988 resulted in the first deaf president at Gallaudet University. Today, the three past presidents of Gallaudet University have been deaf, and deaf educators play leading roles in other leading postsecondary institutions such as the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) and

California State University at Northridge. The DPN movement also paved the way for a growing number of deaf and hard of hearing superintendents of center schools.

With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, student achievement data of all deaf and hard of hearing students in all educational settings have slowly begun to emerge as the leading indicator of their “student success.” As of 1960 deaf education was essentially a separate entity. The curriculum (especially through the elementary school years) primarily addressed the development of speech and English skills, and relatively little attention was paid to content areas such as math, science, and social studies. This began to change with the passage of PL 94-142 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 1997, when access to the general curriculum was mandated for all children with disabilities. Today, many deaf and hard of hearing students are outperforming their hearing counterparts in statewide assessment tests. Furthermore, graduates of center schools successfully move on to colleges and universities, technical schools, or the world of work.

Today, center schools provide a language-rich environment where deaf students are sociocommunal members of their language community and learn directly from their teachers and their peers. Students are also afforded opportunities for full participation in student government, journalism, athletics, theater, and other artistic or recreational pursuits.

More and more schools now provide outreach services, as well as technical assistance to outside organizations and agencies. They are an integral part of the state delivery system from birth through adulthood. This includes state and local agencies and relationships with public schools. As a statewide resource, schools contribute to the well-being of deaf individuals not only at their campus but also statewide. Some schools provide speech and hearing testing and academic, psychological, and neuropsychological evaluations.

Center schools have utilized cutting-edge visual technologies such as closed captioning, videophones, pagers (cell phones), interactive white boards, and visual paging systems that are not often found in neighborhood schools. These visual technologies greatly enhance learning for deaf and hard of hearing students, as well as for hearing students everywhere.

In spite of the current, oppressive special education laws, many American center schools by and large continue to thrive. Perhaps American novelist and educator George Dennison said it best: “We might stop thinking of school

as a place and begin to believe it is basically relationships.” Center schools continue to be places where students learn to forge relationships with their teachers and peers. They then utilize their skills to develop new relationships in different communities: their neighborhood, workplace, marketplace, and cyberspace.

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