

RETHINKING DEAF EDUCATION: A MUST FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

SUMMARY

In a report to the President and the Congress of the United States in 1988, the Commission on the Education of the Deaf began their report with the following:

"The present status of education for persons who are deaf in the United States is unsatisfactory, unacceptably so."

The 143 page report listed 52 recommendations from prevention and early identification to technology. Within these recommendations surface issues that either directly or indirectly relate to current practices, approaches, and values found in programs serving deaf and hard-of-hearing children.

The following are some of those issues:

- Changes in student enrollment, educational legislation, and student placement have greatly influenced the elementary and secondary educational systems serving students who are deaf.
- An increasing number of older students may be entering special schools after spending their primary grades in local school settings.
- Only about 50 percent of deaf students who are placed in local school settings experience any degree of academic integration.
- Students who are members of minority groups are less likely to be fully mainstreamed.
- Most children who are prelingually deaf experience serious difficulties and delays in acquiring English language skills.
- A child without a strong language and communication base faces barriers that often lead to further educational difficulties.
- Since reading ability is highly correlated with prior English language knowledge, many students who are deaf also have difficulty becoming proficient readers.
- The educational system has not been successful in assisting the majority of students who are deaf to achieve reading skills commensurate with those of their hearing peers.

Because of dissatisfaction with the stagnant state of deaf education up to the early '70's, various individuals set out to challenge the status quo in a variety of ways:

- Total Communication movement
- Parent advocacy - establishment of a national parent group
- Signed English, Cued Speech, and Auditory Verbal methods
- Placement of deaf teachers in preschool and elementary classes
- Development of the interpreting profession
 - educational interpreting
 - legal interpreting

- Day classes and day school populations out number residential program populations
- Education of Handicapped Children's Act, 1975
- Educational leadership roles being filled by deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals
- Research studies and linguistic studies
 - early childhood studies by Schlesinger, Meadows, Ertig
 - *Unlocking the Curriculum* publication
 - *The Deaf Child*, R. Conrad
- Telecommunication technology

The establishment of TRIPOD in 1982, a non-profit organization, is an outgrowth of the dissatisfaction with the quality of education for deaf and hard-of-hearing students and an expansion of educational principles and practices that are applied to all children. TRIPOD was started by parents of a deaf child, an educator, and a deaf individual. The organization is run by a Board of Directors which raises funds yearly to maintain the organization. Four million dollars have been raised in ten years. This year's budget is \$700,000. TRIPOD's initial program, established in 1983, was the GRAPEVINE -- a toll-free 800 number for parents, professionals and support personnel to call for unbiased information on deafness. In 1984, the preschool/kindergarten program began with four children. 1986 saw the beginning of an elementary program. The parent-infant/toddler program began in 1987 and the Fall of 1990 brought the opening of the middle school program (6th grade) with 7th and 8th grades to be added in subsequent years. I currently am working on a feasibility study to possibly establish a model regional high school program on the campus of California State University, Northridge to open in the Fall of 1994. Thus, the educational philosophy of integration of deaf and hearing children would be maintained from infancy through the college years.

TRIPOD was established on the following principles:

- Parents are supported in fulfilling their parenting role and not encouraged to be educators.
- The educational pedagogy in the parent-infant/toddler and preschool/kindergarten programs is Montessori.
- Deaf role models as teachers and aides are part of every educational level.
- Team-teaching approach is used in every classroom (deaf and hearing or regular educator and teacher of the deaf).
- Family Sign Class is an integral part of parent education.
- Bilingualism and biculturalism is an integral part of the educational program.
- Regular public school curriculum is followed in the elementary and middle school levels with modifications occurring only with communication strategies.
- Complete integration of deaf and hearing children at all educational levels.
- Total Communication philosophy is maintained.

In order to put into practice a number of these principles, TRIPOD established a private/public partnership with a public school district (Burbank) which serves approximately 12,000 students -- preschool through high school. In this partnership, the public school system not only provided the classrooms, school books and materials, but also reduced the numbers of regular students in a class (30 to 20) in order to add deaf and hard-of-hearing students to the class. The school system also permitted a team-teaching approach (two teachers in classroom).

Our initial observations of the students at the different levels are:

Parent-Infant/Toddler

- Parents are dealing with their deaf and hard-of-hearing children as children first and hearing-impaired second.
- Hearing parents get first-hand experience and early acceptance of deafness due to deaf parents as part of the program.
- Parents talk more to the joys of their child rearing experiences rather than the negative.

Preschool/Kindergarten

- Children exhibit strong sense of self and have great self-esteem.
- Children spend more time on task than deaf peers in other educational programs.
- Deaf and hearing children exhibit flexibility in code switching.
- Speech and auditory training is viewed as a fun and natural experience and speech intelligibility is no better or no worse than those children in programs which place a heavy emphasis on speech, aural/oral skills, etc.
- Cognitive development is very sophisticated in comparison to deaf and hard-of-hearing children in traditional deaf education programs.
- Language development and usage skills are comparable to hearing-impaired children who are 2 to 3 years older chronologically.

Elementary and Middle School

- Hearing children have developed sign skills as well as close relationships with the deaf students.
- In cooperative learning situation within the classroom, hearing and deaf children interact comfortable so that the classroom teacher no longer needs to be the communication and information facilitator.
- Hearing children in the combination classrooms have not regressed academically due to having team teaching situations and deaf children in the program.
- TRIPOD students are functioning well within the grade norms for reading comprehension in all grades, based upon their performance on the California Test of Basic Skills. (Reading comprehension is considered the most critical measure for predicting achievement in deaf children).

Granted that not all deaf and hard-of-hearing children can be fully integrated in regular education programs. there is still a need for special day classes, school and residential programs. However, for children who are in the "current mainstream programs", a better approach has to be found and defined. The TRIPOD model takes the mainstreaming concept which makes the deaf and hard-of-hearing child an observer or outsider in the "mainstream of education" and INFUSES the same individual into the center of an educational environment of participation, ownership, and true friendships. Thus, allowing communication to flow, information to be exchanged and acquired and the human potential realized.

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