

DEAF CHILDREN IN UTAH SCHOOL DISTRICTS

This section of the paper was prepared by Nancy Abraham, Administrator, Division of Internal Support Services, State Board of Education. It is included in its entirety in this section of this study as submitted to the writer.

Introduction

My assignment with regard to this study was to look at deaf children in Utah school districts from an educational, child development point of view to determine how well they are functioning in the regular school program. In order to accomplish this, I talked with district office staff, itinerant teachers and regular classroom teachers; observed children working in the regular classroom with itinerant teachers and volunteers, and on the playground; and examined school records. Because of time and staff limitations, this was done in only two districts with about thirty youngsters and involved approximately eighty hours of observation and interpretation.

This part of the study was intended to be of a much larger scope. However, when I began looking at individual children, I found so many different questions arising from initial observations that, in many cases, I had a need to observe the same youngsters on several occasions rather than just one. I also found it very hard to understand most of the youngsters, so it was difficult to do any informal types of assessments. The academic standing of the hearing-impaired youngsters, along with their mostly low social standing, gave me cause to wonder about their self-concepts and how happy they are in the public schools. Thus, the study was reduced to a small

number and should be regarded as a preliminary to a larger, more intensive study.

District Philosophy

The first thing I looked at was district philosophy regarding educating their deaf youngsters. The districts surveyed believed in oral education for the deaf, but with some qualifications--i.e., if children could not learn to talk by fifth or sixth grade, there was some feeling (not unanimous) that they should be taught to sign. The general feeling was that children who needed to learn sign language should be taught in the School for the Deaf. The strong support of oral education seemed to arise from the feelings of district people that spoken language is necessary for a person to function adequately in society and that, if a child learns to sign early, he will not develop his language skills to full potential. They also felt that, if they taught signing in the public schools, they would need interpreters for the child in order for her/him to be understood. This was not a practical alternative, in their opinion, hence the recommendation that children who needed this type of communication skill be taught at the School for the Deaf.

General philosophy also included the concept of "mainstreaming" children. The feeling seemed to be very strong that, even if the child were performing below grade level with services that were not really adequate, he would be better off in a regular classroom with normal children than in a special setting, even though there he could receive intensive instruction related to his own needs.

District people whom I interviewed expressed the feeling that they were doing a good job with the children. They said that, in most cases, they were able to meet the needs of deaf children. However, there were youngsters with such severe problems that district people admitted their inadequacies and frustrations. In these cases, usually the parents were insisting that their children remain in the public schools against the recommendations of the district staff.

I found the district people to be very strong in their beliefs that deaf children should be served well. They seemed to know the children and their problems and were doing everything they felt they could to meet their needs. They were optimistic regarding their ability to provide good programs and felt that they were doing so.

Teachers whom I interviewed were not that positive. Some were very quick to defend the district's programs, but others felt that they were not able to meet the needs of these special children. They said that they themselves did not have adequate training to teach hard-of-hearing youngsters and that their class loads and curriculum design made it an impossible task. These teachers felt that the severely hearing-impaired children were indeed vegetating in the regular classroom.

Most special education and itinerant teachers did not seem to share these feelings. They expressed the opinions that the children were doing well and were receiving (in most cases) adequate services, and that the normal classroom was where they belonged.

As I observed and interviewed children, I noticed many things related to the intellectual growth and status and social development of these children.

Intellectual Growth and Status

I did not observe any child who was performing satisfactorily at the grade level in which he was placed. Most were from two to three years behind their peers in most areas. The degree to which the hearing-impaired child could function in the normal classroom seemed to be closely related to the degree of hearing and speech he/she had.

The youngsters who were profoundly deaf and who could not make themselves understood were not able to benefit from any of the classroom activities such as teacher lectures, reading groups, discussion groups, oral instruction, movies, filmstrips, etc. During such activities, they seemed to be either bored or frustrated. There were exceptions, however, such as when an adult with translation skills was available to help them to understand what was going on. At these times, there was more interest and participation shown by the children.

Records were kept by the school administration and by the teachers. Some records had been sent with the child from the School for the Deaf. The records that I observed from the School for the Deaf contained much subjective data related to the child's adjustment and performance level with fairly adequate medical workups, but not very much by way of objective measurements that could be used by the public schools in the placement of the children. It was difficult to determine how well the scores really reflected the child's ability or performance. There was wide variance among tests given by different people and also between test scores and teacher evaluations of student performance. For instance, in the case of one second-grader the math score in the school records placed him in the

zero percentile, but the teacher said that he was good in math; and the reading test placed him in the 90th percentile, but the teacher said that he couldn't read.

It appeared that work turned in to the teacher as the child's work and graded high was often the work of another student or that of a parent. Test scores from the School for the Deaf were often higher than the school scores. Scores from the itinerant teachers seemed to be more accurate (according to my observations) than were any of the other scores.

Generalizing from this information, it would seem that there needs to be a more independent, reliable measure taken of these youngsters in order to adequately assess their present status and plan for their future.

Social Development

The social development of hearing-impaired youngsters in the public schools is a prime factor for consideration when assessing how successfully they are adjusting to the normal classroom situation. I did observe some social interaction--i.e., hearing students anxious to help the hearing-impaired student to understand a teacher's directions and to do his/her work; hearing students making efforts to communicate with the hearing-impaired student; and hearing students associating with these youngsters on the playground. However, this type of interaction was limited. Mostly, the hearing-impaired children were isolated on the playground unless there were other hearing-impaired children in the school. If there were, they sought out and associated with each other. In one school, where there were several deaf children, they tended to associate with each other rather than with hearing children.

To generalize my perceptions of the social integration of the hearing-impaired or deaf child, I would say that with few exceptions the hearing-impaired child is not a socially accepted member of the group and that, while he may have one or two hearing friends, these are either youngsters at the low end of the social scale who are also isolates, or the friendship is mostly a patronizing type of relationship with the hearing child serving as a helper to the non-hearing child. I also observed some aggressive efforts of hearing-impaired youngsters trying to include themselves in the playground activities. These efforts were mostly met with rebuffs and physical abuse from the "normal" children.

I would also generalize that the hearing-impaired children I observed were happier and better adjusted if they had other hearing-impaired children to associate with.

Conclusions

As a result of the observations described above, the following preliminary conclusions have been drawn:

1. Educators in the public schools strongly support the concept of oral education for deaf youngsters. They do not feel that total communication can or should be taught in the public schools.
2. Most people involved with hearing-impaired youngsters in the school districts feel that they are meeting the needs of the children and believe that "mainstreaming" is the best solution to the problems of the deaf.
3. Teachers in the regular classroom handling hearing-impaired children along with their normal class load were not, as a whole, as sure as others that they were able to meet the needs of these

special children in the regular classroom. They expressed concern with such things as overloaded classrooms, lack of training in special education, and inappropriate curriculum for deaf children.

4. Although the hearing-impaired children I observed were experiencing varying degrees of success in the regular classroom setting, I did not observe any who were performing at the grade level in which they were placed.
5. Records and test scores were kept by the school districts but did not really substantiate the placement of a particular child in the public school setting or on a particular grade level. Records and test scores sent by the School for the Deaf were highly suggestive and not a very useful tool to use for placement of a child.
6. The social acceptance of the hearing-impaired youngsters seemed to be directly related to their ability to speak and hear. If they could communicate on a fairly high level, their acceptance by their peer group was much better than if they could not communicate well.
7. Deaf children seemed to seek each other out if there were more than one of them in a school, and they appeared to be much happier if there were other youngsters like themselves with whom to associate.
8. Some hearing-impaired children are doing fairly well in the public schools, although as a group they are behind their peers intellectually and socially. However, the deaf children without language and with severe hearing losses are profiting very little from the regular classroom experience. These children are experiencing much more frustration than success.

Recommendations

Based upon these observations and conclusions, which are in and of themselves insufficient to make generalizations about the total deaf community and should not be considered proof or evidence of the current status of deaf education, I would like to make the following recommendations:

1. That a complete study of the deaf youngsters in the State be made that would include the following components:
 - a. A measure of reading level and a diagnosis of reading deficiencies,
 - b. A measure of arithmetic level and a diagnosis of arithmetic deficiencies,
 - c. A self-concept measurement,
 - d. A social-maturity measurement,
 - e. A speaking vocabulary measurement, and
 - f. A comprehension measurement.
2. That, based on the results of this study, a plan be developed to more adequately meet the needs of all deaf children, but particularly the needs of those who cannot learn to speak. This plan should include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following:
 - a. Comprehensive diagnostic evaluation of each child to determine his strengths and weaknesses and the proper placement for him-- public school or the School for the Deaf. (These evaluators should probably be independent of either the School for the Deaf or the public school system.)
 - b. Up-to-date records be kept by school districts on all youngsters. These records would include all pertinent information

to be used in the placement and monitoring of each child and would be reviewed periodically with the child's parents.

- c. Education of the parents regarding the needs of their particular child and the possible effects of placing the child in the public schools against the recommendation of those who have evaluated the child.