The children are singing. Can you hear them?

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by

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The birds sing, sing, sing, but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn
The cats meow, meow, meow but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn
The dogs bark, bark, bark but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn
The cows moo, moo, moo but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn.

Author Unknown

Everyday, millions of people worldwide awake to silence. They don't hear the sounds of mom making breakfast and coffee being made. They don't hear the sound of the neighbors' dog barking as the paper boy rides by on his bike. They aren't awaken by the steady shrill of the alarm clock. These people are deaf and they can barely hear the sound of their own voices, if at all. This is a world inhabited by 14 million Americans but remains unfamiliar to the rest of the population and there is little interaction between their world and ours. In fact, little effort is made for members of either world to communicate.

Almost from birth, or the moment of deafness, the newborn or infant is whisked away to this ostracized climate. Rarely do they come in contact with other children their age who are not deaf or hard of hearing. They generally attend schools which only educate deaf children and they are only able to play with children who are like themselves. Because of this isolation, the hearing community as a whole knows little about this other culture and very few have been able to interact or communicate with a deaf or hard-of-hearing person. For these reasons, I felt that it would be worth while to
raise the awareness of a segment of the hearing community in order to facilitate interaction between the two groups.

I actually became interested in this field of study last summer while I was doing my Jepson internship. I was interning in the Office of the City Manager of Richmond under Manager Robert Bobb and his assistant Joyce Wilson. As I had anticipated, due to the summer months, there were periods when there was little action in the office. During one such lull, I ventured up to the Media/Public Relations Department to see what was going on. I had been considering that type of work as a potential career, although I really knew little about it. During my visit, I mentioned that my task was coming to an end and I had hit a streak of boredom. I was instantly recruited to write three articles for *Virginia Town and City* magazine.

One of the articles was about a fire fighter, Billy Dew, who had taken the initiative to implement a sign language program into the Richmond Fire Department. His efforts came as the result of a sign language class he had taken at J. Sergeant Reynolds Community College where he came in contact with two deaf children who want to be firefighters when they grow up. When he invited the children to visit his station, he was confronted with a problem. The children could not communicate with the other firefighters in the station. This prompted him to wonder what happens when deaf people are involved in emergency situations if they can't communicate to those people attempting to help them. Dew did some research and found that such circumstances do occur and the results have not been good. He spoke of one in particular:

"Three years ago, when Richmond firefighters arrived on the scene of a fire, a woman came running out of the house waiving her arms
frantically in the air. The firefighters assumed that she was in shock and pushed her aside while they set about the task of extinguishing the fire. Little did they know that the woman was deaf and was trying to tell the firefighters the location of her nephew in the house. He died in the blaze.” (Netsel, 1993)

It was incidents such as this that prompted Dew to fight the bureaucratic red tape to make it mandatory for all firefighters to learn some basic signs that would likely be used during emergencies. Dew’s ideas were accepted and as a result, all firefighters are required to watch a video and every emergency fire vehicle is equipped with a sign language manual.

While writing this article, I became motivated to further my sign language education. Although I had taken a class at my church during high school, my level of knowledge was fairly basic. I began to teach myself sign language and when the time came to do my senior project, I felt that my efforts could be put to good use. I wondered why it had taken me 21 years to become interested in the subject and I realized that I had very little contact with the deaf or hard-of-hearing in the past. I could not remember attending school with anyone who was hearing impaired. I knew that there was a substantial deaf population, but never had I been in a classroom with a deaf child.

I began to do research on the education of hearing impaired children and found that most are sent to special schools for deaf or hard of hearing children. The effort to mainstream these children into the public school system has been increasing but continues to be a struggle. The biggest problem being the communication gap between the hearing and the deaf. What would it take to close this gap? Before a major influx of
hearing impaired children into the public school system occurs, there needs to be a
greater effort to educate the hearing population about the deaf culture and their
language. This education needs to begin in the elementary schools.

This is exactly what the goal of my project was: to increase the knowledge about
the deaf and hard-of-hearing to students at an early age, preferably to the early
elementary school age children. By doing so, not only did I hope to lay the foundation
for future sign language programs in all Richmond schools, but I also hoped to foster
the acceptance of the deaf community into the youngest generation in our society.

In order to accomplish this, my tasks included researching the issue of
mainstreaming and existing sign language programs, devising a pilot program in an
area elementary school in order to introduce sign language to the target age group,
producing a proposed manual that could be used in the school system to teach young
children sign language, and conducting interviews with educators, principals,
Department of Education representatives and other relevant people. The end result
was to attempt to motivate those involved: the teachers, principals, school system, etc.,
to continue with my project by further educating the students as to the differences
between themselves and the deaf community and to continue with the sign language
program.

The Research:

Even though the immediate goal of my project is not to mainstream deaf
children into all public schools, I hope to help pave the road towards this long range
goal by lowering the potential resistance to such changes. In order to establish the
boundaries for my project, it was necessary to gain a better understanding of what
efforts had been made up until this point in the realm of mainstreaming. What I found
was that a solid foundation was already in the process of being constructed.

Efforts to integrate deaf children into public schools actually began in the early nineteenth century in England by T. Arrowsmith. The practice was also widespread for a time in Germany, especially Prussia. "In the middle of the nineteenth century, the integration movement was so strong in France that it was predicted that all residential schools for the deaf would be closed." (Moores and Meadow-Orlans, pg. 118)

These early integration movements faded and eventually disappeared. The reason why is rather obvious due to the intent of the movement. It was believed that by placing deaf children into hearing environments, the deaf children would "absorb the language of the larger community more easily than if they were segregated in residential institutions with other deaf children and used manual languages of communication." (Moores and Meadow-Orlans, pg. 119) Of course this did not happen, especially since no effort was made to modify curricula or to provide special instructional support to deaf children.

Although no such movement occurred in the United States during this time, there were several isolated attempts at integration. One of the more successful programs was implemented by D. Bartlett called the "family school." Bartlett accepted both hearing children and deaf children into his school and he followed a natural language approach which required all children to use both the regular English alphabet as well as sign language. Despite the success of the program, the school did not survive its founder. (Moores and Meadow-Orlans, pg. 119)

During the twentieth century, a system for the placement of deaf children into schools was implemented. This system remained fairly static until the 1970's. There were three discrete subsystems: Public residential schools, public day schools, and private residential schools. Many of the public residential schools had begun as private
entities but had grown to rely so much on state funding that they evolved into public schools. All of the public day schools were situated in large urban areas and were supported by local boards of education. The few private residential schools that did exist had a large impact on the education of deaf children. Most of the research on the deaf was conducted at these schools. However, none of these elite schools provided deaf children with an education that enabled them to comfortably assimilate into society.

Leading up to and including the 1960's several factors entered the scene which forced the attention of many to the challenge of educating the deaf. First, the largest known worldwide rubella epidemic occurred. Second, there was a postwar increase in the American school-age population up through 1965. This was largely due to the baby boom and finally, there was an increase in the urbanization and suburbanization of the population which attracted countless immigrants to America. These factors led to a huge increase in the number of deaf children in the United States, many of whom desired placement into the public school system. It was during this time, the late 60's and early 70's, that the first widespread movement towards mainstreaming occurred in the United States.

What exactly does it mean to “mainstream”? In the most general terms, it means the inclusion of handicapped pupils in regular classes. However, mainstreaming isn’t fully operative until “all children, exceptional and otherwise, begin school in classes together and continue their education together. Individualization as needed is carried out mainly in the regular class setting, and almost always in the context of the regular school.” (Birch, pg. 5) The question as to why mainstreaming is so important has been answered by both research and by the parents of deaf children. Some of the reasons are as follows: (Birch, pg. 1)
* Experience has shown that many hearing impaired children achieve and socialize best when educated along with hearing children.
* Parents have objected to separation or exclusion of their handicapped children from regular public schools.
* State and federal courts, acting on expert testimony, have held that special education for exceptional children should be supplied in regular classes as the most desirable option.
* Legislatures have enacted state laws which provide favorable financial conditions for school districts which integrate their handicapped pupils.
* Deaf children must be allowed into the public classroom according to the recent Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Child’s Bill of Rights.

According to Jack W. Birch in his book Hearing Impaired Children in the Mainstream, there are five key arrangements which are important factors in eliminating the fears of both the teachers and students and in developing successful classrooms which contain both hearing and deaf students: (Birch, pg. v)

1. Regular class teachers are assigned hearing impaired pupils only with the teacher's prior knowledge and consent. They take part in making the decision and regular class teachers have options.
2. In-service instruction is made readily available for all faculty and staff before mainstreaming is started.
3. The hearing impaired pupils who attend regular classes have academic skills and achievements in keeping with those found in the rest of the class.
4. The regular teacher and pupils are oriented and assisted sufficiently
regarding communication with the hearing impaired pupils so that it does not constitute a major problem.

5. Both continuing and emergency assistance is available. The special education teacher (and others as needed) team with the regular teacher on a schedule they establish together.

Once these ground rules for a mainstreaming are established, the schools must decide upon a method of teaching the deaf or hard-of-hearing students. There are often discrepancies over such decisions. However, there are two common perspectives which are often taken. The first states that “the hearing impaired children should attend regular schools in regular classes for the earliest years. They should be on the regular class rolls. The necessary special education such as auditory training and language development should be brought to them in those regular grades. Only under very exceptional circumstances should the hearing impaired children leave the regular classes and then only for short periods.” (Birch, pg. 3)

The second view is that “hearing impaired children should begin their formal education by spending all or most of their time in special programs conducted by special educators. The goal of the special educators should be to move the hearing impaired children into regular classes in a series of steps, individualized for each child in order to maximize success in various curricular areas.” (Birch, pg. 3) Although these two perspective take hold very different definitions of mainstreaming, both involve the eventual integration of deaf students into regular classrooms. I feel that both programs are beneficial to the students and each has its pluses and minuses.

Another difference that arose during my research of mainstreaming programs was the communication methods used in the classroom. The two types that were
identified were oral communication and total communication. The oral communication method “requires the pupil to use residual hearing and to learn lipreading and oral speech as the means of communication in face-to-face situations.” The total communication method also teaches the student residual hearing and lipreading, but also “requires that the pupil learn proficiency in communication by the manual alphabet and by sign language.” (Orlansky, pg. 17) I have found that the majority of existing mainstreaming programs tend to adopt the second, total communication, method. This method makes it easier for the deaf student to communicate, for it allows them to use their own means of communication rather than having to rely on the communication method of the rest of society.

Because the deaf have difficulty understanding the spoken word and not all deaf people can lip read, it is only fair that they are able to be educated in their own language, sign language. The problem lies in the fact that most people, including most educators, are unfamiliar with sign language. This is where I decided to focus my efforts. I believe that if we can educate our society about the deaf and hard-of-hearing and teach basic sign language in the school systems, then it will be easier to mainstream deaf children into those school systems.

The Project:

The first step that I took to begin my task was to contact Billy Dew. I had mentioned to him last summer that I had been considering getting involved in the deaf community for my senior project and he had seemed enthusiastic at the time. When we spoke in December while I was working on the proposal for my project he was eager to offer his help.
When I returned in January, we worked together to compile our resources. He had a great deal of literature that was relevant to my task as well as several contacts in the community. By February, I was beginning to gather the signs that I felt would be appropriate to put in my manual geared towards early elementary aged children and I started my research on mainstreaming. I also began to search for a site to hold my pilot project. I was looking for an elementary school that did not have an existing sign language program or any deaf students.

While visiting Short Pump Middle School for another group project, I asked the principal, Lynn Thorpe, for site suggestions. She referred me to Shady Grove Elementary. The principal of Shady Grove, Tom Fernald, was very receptive of my idea and agreed to work with me: “There is a definite need for a program like this and I think the kids would really enjoy it!” However, after countless attempts to coordinate schedules, time began to run short and we were unable to find an appropriate date that fit his, Billy’s and my schedules. With only two weeks left I turned to the Department of Education in City Hall, only to find that it takes six weeks to four months to get authorization for such a project. Feeling defeated, I stopped into the Department of Exceptional Education which is also located in City Hall. It was there that I met Mary Hawk, a Program Specialist. Mrs. Hawk deals with deaf children in the educational system on a regular basis and she loved my idea. She informed me that authorization wasn’t necessary after all and she referred me to several principals at potential sites including Greg Muzik, the principal at Robert E. Lee Elementary.

Mr. Muzik was extremely receptive of my proposal and he arranged for me to hold my pilot project in a second grade class room the following week. After working out the details with Lynn Gick, the teacher of the class, I was ready to roll. Billy Dew had agreed to teach the class as he had done on several other occasions.
On Monday, April 18, Billy and I entered the classroom which was filled with 26 enthusiastic little faces. Billy was dressed in his firefighter uniform and he instantly put the class at ease. He began by explaining why we were there and what his job was. He went right into an exercise which demonstrated how important our different senses are for doing things that may appear unrelated to that sense. He blindfolded a little boy and asked him walk to him without bumping into the obstacles that Billy had placed in front of him. His point was that “just as we need our eyes to walk, we need our ears to talk”. He then went on to explain that because it is difficult for deaf people to talk, they use their hands and facial expressions to communicate.

Although Billy tried to stick to my manual, due to time constraints only selected signs were taught. Because this was the first exposure that many of the children had to sign language, Billy tried to keep the signs fun enough so that they would remember then. Some of the signs included: apple, boy/girl, dog, cat, tree, firefighter, police officer, and several zoo and barn animals. Dew constantly asked the children to repeat the signs that they had learned and most of the children continued to remember them. I felt confident that the children enjoyed learning sign language and understood why it is important. Many asked questions that showed that they were beginning to grasp what it means to be deaf. Questions like “When you talk to a deaf person, how do they answer you?” Other students seemed to have a higher understanding of the deaf culture and of sign language. Several children wanted to show Billy signs they had learned other places and they made comments such as “When you talk to deaf people, they can read your lips.” I was extremely happy to find that many of the students had already come in contact with either sign language or the deaf culture at such an early age.
When the time had come to leave, the children seemed sad to have the program come to an end. I observed many of the students practicing the signs with their friends and they asked us to come back. Ms. Gick stated that she would continue to teach the children from my manual on a regular basis and Billy and I offered to return for another lesson.

Despite the late planning, the pilot project was a huge success. Everyone had fun and at the same time, I felt that my theory was well supported. However, if I could do it over, I would try to conduct more that one class. Children at this age level are extremely receptive to learning new information and they did not seem to be too young to understand our purpose. I have no doubt that if deaf children were placed into this or any other classroom the children would not hesitate to accept the children despite their handicap and they would try their best to communicate with them.

Discussion:

As mentioned, my goal was not to implement a mainstreaming program, but to plant the seed in the educational system that may one day grow into such a fruitful venture. The need to mainstream is evident by the number of programs around the world that are being implemented already. One of the largest problems arising in many of these programs is the isolation that occurs for the deaf student due to their inability to communicate with the hearing students, teachers, and administration and vice versa. Hopefully, when programs such as mine are introduced into the school system, even before deaf children are integrated into a school, such resistance will be weeded out.

I found that everyone I spoke with was in agreement with this theory. I tried to speak with people who might be involved with setting up programs such as mine into
the school system including: Billy Dew (who would represent the hearing-impaired community), Lynn Gick (the second grade teacher), Lynn Thorpe (the middle school principal), Tom Fernald (the elementary school principal), and Mary Hawk (from the Department of Exceptional Education). Their agreement was evident by their willingness to help me with my project.

Many of these people were familiar with similar programs which have been very successful. The Chesterfield County school system is already teaching sign language on the upper levels to the children whether or not a deaf student is in the class. Even though I was not able to speak directly with the person in charge of that program, I did speak with Linda Hobgood who is the parent of a 12 year old girl and a 14 year old boy who are being educated in the Chesterfield schools. Mrs. Hobgood was in full support of the new sign language program which is available to her middle school aged children. As the program currently exists, students are able to learn sign language if they choose to during their regularly scheduled study hall. Although this is a beginning, I feel that the children should be exposed to sign language at a much earlier level. Because other programs such as Chesterfield’s have been received so well by both the students and the teachers, I don’t feel that a program like mine will face a great deal of opposition.

**Leadership?**

Not once during the context of this paper have I mentioned the word “leadership”. Although I must admit it has been rather refreshing, my project really did allow me to apply a great deal of what I’ve learned over the last two years to a real life situation. Even though I utilized information and skills acquired from virtually every Jepson class, three in particular really stand out.
The first was the necessity for me to act as a change agent. To begin to implement a change in something as large as a school system was extremely challenging and full of roadblocks. It took persistence in order to find a way into the system. I realized that it isn't always best to start at the upper echelons when trying to implement a change. In my case, I found that the principals of the individual schools were far more accommodating than the Department of Education. Without the help of Mary Hawk at that critical moment, the pilot project may not have been accomplished. Because of her help and the help of many others, I was enabled to enter an organization and lay the groundwork for a major change in the curriculum. Solely from the feedback that I received from the 45 minute pilot project, I was able to act as the potential catalyst in the change process.

The second class which I was able to constantly draw upon was Motivation. In order to make people receptive of my project, I needed to make them understand how so many people, both deaf and hearing, would benefit from such a program. I really didn't have any difficulties motivating Billy to lend me his expertise, although I did let him guest D.J. on my radio show. The most prevalent form of motivation that I found to play a major role in all the people that I worked with was intrinsic motivation. Everyone seemed to realize that implementing a sign language program is a humane way of improving our society.

This intrinsic motivation is highly related to the third class that really influenced my project: Community Organizations. Having taken both this class and Foundations of Leadership with Dr. Couto, I was very in tune with the concept of servant leadership. In both of these classes, the concept of service to others has been a reoccurring theme that has become ingrained in my personal leadership style. In fact, this was the basic motivating factor behind choosing my seminar topic. I feel that whether they realized
it or not the people that I worked with understood that I was attempting to provide a service for them that they, in turn, may continue to build upon. The end result will be a service to both the deaf and hard-of-hearing culture as well as society as a whole. When the time comes where deaf children can enter a normal classroom and feel comfortable in the environment enough so that they may receive an education that is equal to that of a hearing child then, and only then, will we reach enough cultural overlap to be able to refer to our society as a "Bicultural Community," (see appendix A) or one in which the deaf culture and the hearing culture overlap. (Moores and Meadow-Orlans, pg. 81)

Although my project may have only been a drop in the bicultural-bucket, I hope to have at least activated a few small waves to occur. Even if Ms. Gick's second grade classroom continues on with my manual, or if a similar program is created at Robert E. Lee Elementary, than my goal has been reached. Maybe then the deaf children will be able to join in by signing songs like "Old McDonald" and "B.I.N.G.O." rather than:

The dogs bark, bark, bark but I hear them not at all,
Darn, Darn, Darn
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