*“I have been a stranger in strange land.”*

*-Exodus 2:22*

A Sign is Given: Advancing the Cause of the Deaf

Growing up, I didn’t consider my brother to be in battle with hearing loss. Though you could bang pots behind him and he would not know it, he was always just my brother. We made it work in our own way; often I spoke for him, and only rarely abused this power to ask for extra cookies whether he wanted them or not. We developed our own language, and were the best partners in life. Today someone who did not know his background would never guess he was deaf, thanks to healings of his health and the help of a brilliant speech therapist.

More recently, I have been doing research into Deaf culture and have been attempting to learn Sign, and during this research on my own and for my presentation I came to see my brother’s case as a rare one, and have been blown away by the complexity of the issue. The following analysis I trust will shed light on my findings, and growth in this matter.

To begin, my takeaway from all this research has been that as hard as we might try as teachers, sometimes we are not the best equipped to help a given student. Despite our best intentions to accommodate and include all, there may be times when we must pass the torch on to those better suited. In the case of deaf students, a strong argument can be made for admission to a specialized Deaf school. Ultimately, the goal of the teacher is the learning and wellbeing of the student, not our ability to teach them. If they would do better elsewhere, it is okay to recognize this.

That said, if it is determined students who are deaf or hard of hearing student will be in one’s class, there are many ways to include them and their culture. In this manner it is helpful to think of the deaf student as not just a student with a disability, but also as an ESL learner from another culture. My ‘Ah-ha’ moment came for me when I came across an article by the Canadian Association of the Deaf which highlighted how deafness is only perceived as a loss by the hearing community, whereas the child whom is deaf from birth will see that as normal. My classmate Arnaud explained that he is colorblind, and did not realize till later in life that green and brown crayons were different colors and other people could tell them apart by more than just their labels, which he relied on. Other species can hear different frequencies than we can, and see different colors. It is only when we fail to account for those with less hearing ability that these things become issues.

As far as perspectives are concerned, there are mainly two: Integration or non-integration. This depends on the desires of the student, and the student’s family. If integration is desired, hearing-aids and cochlear implants, the imposition of oral training and speech-language therapy, lip reading and English based education can be very beneficial, as they were for my brother. However, with wholly and irreversibly deaf students, such an approach becomes contentious, and could be depriving the student of their language and culture, and not to mention be isolating. In any case, the role of the teacher is to help in any way they can.

That said, the challenges posed to deaf students, their teachers, and classmates are both real and undeniable. Most saliently, instruction in class is often verbal, which must be addressed. Communication between teacher and student is not the only issue though, as group work and socializing may also be adversely affected. This in turn may make it difficult for relationships to be built both between the student who is deaf or hard of hearing and the teacher, as well as with peers. Teachers must remain cognizant of the needs of such students throughout the day, in terms of such matters as where to stand, as well being mindful of the safety of these children.

As for how to help, the methods are many. One thing to keep in mind when thinking about strategies for inclusion is the admonishment, “Whoever has ears, let them hear”. These strategies are for the hearing, as the deaf child is often powerless to advocate on their own behalf. In the same way that it is much easier for the hearing person to learn sign than it is for the deaf person to learn to speak, the learning of the deaf student is the responsibility of the teacher and fellow students, not just the deaf or hard of hearing student.

Some teaching strategies teachers can employ are captions on videos, visuals, using Sign language in addition to English instruction, and placing the student close to the front and away from noises. Other things to keep in mind are the need to speak clearly and explain new words whenever they arise, always trying to write out directions, and attempting to include the student who is deaf or hard of hearing in activities. If possible, set up a meeting with the child’s parents to discuss strategies used at home; the parents will have been working with this much longer and will know the student’s unique needs best. Likewise, involve the student in their own learning, and ask how to best help them. Finally, technology can often be of assistance, through the use of FM transmitters to hearing aids and amplification.

Ultimately, there is no one solution to meet every difficulty. In some instances, the teacher will have little control, while in others a teacher can help immensely. And like all other students, each student who is deaf will learn differently than all others. What matters is that the teacher has empathy for the exceptional student and fosters a community of inclusion in the classroom. From there, the specific accommodations are a natural extension of the desire to see the best result for each and every student.