

Chapter 26

Demystifying Deafness: Helpful Information for Classroom Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Most deaf children in the United States are not educated in specialized schools for the deaf but in public schools. This has had a detrimental effect on these students because many public-school teachers misunderstand deafness and are unable to adjust their teaching strategies to address the needs of this population. The mission of this chapter is to educate teachers on deafness and how to better teach and relate to a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. Specifically, this chapter will provide pertinent information for helping teachers better understand deaf and hard-of-hearing students as well as provide evidence-based practices and teaching tips that can be utilized in the classroom with this group.

INTRODUCTION

Most deaf children in the United States are not educated in residential schools for the deaf where administrators and teachers are familiar with deafness, how hearing-impaired children learn, and issues that affect literacy. Rather, they are predominantly educated in public schools (Ferrell et al., 2014; Schembri, & Lucas, 2015; Smith, 2013). This has had a detrimental impact on these students because many public-school teachers misunderstand deafness and are unable to adjust their teaching strategies to address the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing (Ferrell et al., 2014; Marschark & Hauser, 2012). These misunderstandings may also be due to a limited amount of exposure to and training for this population (Szymanski, Lutz, Shahan, & Gala, 2013).

The mission of this chapter is to educate teachers on deafness and how to better teach and relate to a child who is deaf or hard of hearing in the classroom. There has been much misunderstanding and contention between the different camps of professionals who work with deaf children and adults. This chapter will discuss the causes of deafness, the conflict deaf people may experience with identification,

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the numbers of deaf people in the United States, their relationships with family and friend groups, medical and cultural deafness, methods of communication, legislation, evidence-based practices, and tips for teachers who have students who are deaf or hard of hearing in their classrooms.

First, teachers and others should be familiar with the way that deaf people refer to themselves. If deaf people tend to relate more to the predominant culture and people who are not deaf, the “d” in the word “deaf” is not capitalized. The capitalized word “Deaf” refers to those individuals who follow the norms, behaviors, and customs of those within the Deaf Culture in America. These individuals value things such as eyes, hands, American Sign Language, the solidarity of the deaf community, information-sharing, their culture, and residential deaf schools. These schools are not thought of by deaf people as sad places where students who are deaf or hard of hearing are relegated because they cannot be educated in public schools, but rather as bastions of culture, language, and role models for deaf children (Mindess, 2014). For many children who are deaf, this is the place where they will meet lifelong friends and people they can look up to who are “Deaf.” For the purposes of this chapter, the lowercase word “deaf” will be used and considered to be all-inclusive.

Causes of Hearing Loss/Deafness

There are three major ways people can lose their hearing: a conductive loss, a sensorineural loss, or a combination of the two, referred to as a mixed hearing loss (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2016b; Hearing Loss Association of America, 2016b). A conductive loss is considered any damage to all three ear structures: the outer, middle, and inner ear (Cochlear, 2017). This can be due to congenital malformation or damage to any of the three ear bones, the middle or outer ear, or the ear canal. Ear wax, fluid, or a ruptured eardrum also can cause conductive hearing loss (Healthline, 2017).

According to Tye-Murray (2015), “Most sensorineural hearing loss results from a dearth or absence of hair cells in the cochlea” (p. 147). However, sensorineural hearing loss can also result from a problem with the cochlea or the auditory nerve. Causes of hearing loss/deafness can include exposure to loud sounds, chronic ear infections, and some antibiotics. Infections/illnesses that the mother transmitted while the baby was in utero or infections/illnesses that the child contracted can cause hearing loss. A premature birth can also cause sensorineural hearing loss. According to the Hearing Loss Association of America (2016b), “Despite being referred to as ‘nerve deafness,’ most sensorineural hearing loss is a result of damage to the inner ear (cochlea), not the hearing nerve” (para. 2).

A mixed hearing loss is when the individual has both a conductive loss and a sensorineural loss. An example is a child born with a sensorineural loss who then got an infection of the middle ear (Tye-Murray, 2015), thereby resulting in mixed hearing loss.

Number of Deaf People in the United States

It is a difficult undertaking to number those people in our society who are deaf. This is in large part due to the varied ways that the Census Bureau asks questions and records information (Mitchell, 2006). It is also largely in part due to how people label themselves. The range of those who label themselves as having a slight hearing loss to those who are profoundly deaf in the United States amounts to approximately 38 million people (Goman & Lin, 2016). This number includes those who lose their hearing later in life simply as a result of growing older (presbycusis). Out of the 38 million, those who are born deaf and have been socialized into, or later chose to be a member of, the American deaf community amount

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