

a dual identity for hard of hearing students

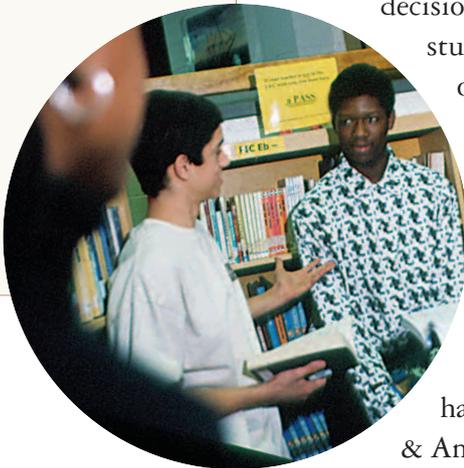
**good for the world,
good for the
deaf community,
critical for students**

By Donald A. Grushkin

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Prior to the 20th century, deaf and hard of hearing people were commonly educated together in schools for the deaf. It would seem that the hard of hearing/deaf distinction became more commonplace with the advent of electronic amplification. In my opinion, however, this distinction and the policy decisions deriving from it have had an adverse effect on the hard of hearing students in that they have been denied the opportunity to develop aspects of themselves that are congruent with, and rooted in, a deaf identity.

Research shows that hard of hearing people may have more in common with deaf people in their academic and personal lives than with hearing people. Like deaf people who have difficulty with a broad range of speech sounds, hard of hearing people tend to have difficulty hearing certain speech sounds, especially high-pitched fricatives (/f/, /v/, /sh/) and affricatives (/ch/, /j/) (Ross, Brackett, & Maxon, 1982). Likewise, certain syntactical structures are difficult for hard of hearing students, just as they are for deaf students (Scholes, Tanis, & Anderson, 1976; Stinson, 1978). These auditory perception problems translate into speech production problems, although they are fewer and less severe than are experienced by deaf people (Elfenbein, Hardin-Jones, & Davis, 1994), and syntactical production weaknesses (Brannon & Murry, 1966; Brown, 1984; Elfenbein et al., 1994; Levitt, McGarr, & Geffner, 1987). Further, although they may possess speech, some of their spoken language may be delayed or impaired (Kyllo, 1984; Wray, 1986).



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Hard of hearing people have been found to perform two to three years behind hearing students on standardized academic achievement tests (Brackett and Maxon, 1986), and are commonly held back from grade promotion by an average of one and a half grades (Kodman, 1963). Even for students with mild hearing losses of 15 to 25 dB, the average delay in vocabulary and other language skills has been found to be over one year (Quigley & Thomure, 1968; Reich, Hambleton, & Houldin, 1977).

It is well known that deaf students often experience difficulties developing appropriate socialization due to barriers in communicating with peers who do not sign. However, a number of studies (Elser, 1959; Kennedy & Bruininks, 1974; Kennedy, Northcott, McCauley, & Williams, 1976) have produced a paradoxical finding: students with more severe hearing loss have higher social acceptance scores than those with less severe loss. Ross (1990) offered a plausible explanation:

The effect of language complexity, dialectical or poorly articulated speech, distance from the speech source, and poor room acoustics... will often have a negative effect upon the ability of hard of hearing children to understand spoken messages. This apparently random and unpredictable behavior causes observers to expect communication behavior that is beyond hard of hearing children's ability. Although they may "hear" in almost all situations, they cannot "understand" in many of them... [as a result] children often consider [hard of hearing children] less than desirable playmates for reasons that neither group really comprehends.... (p. 14)

As a result of these factors, hard of hearing children in regular classes are commonly found to be less satisfied with their social situation and to have fewer friends than their hearing peers, and this is particularly true for teenagers (Moschella, 1992; Tvingstedt, 1993). Deficiencies in self-esteem have also been found for hard of hearing children and teens (Loeb & Sarigiani, 1986; Shaffer-Meyer, 1990).

While some hard of hearing (as well as deaf) individuals minimize the difficulties created by their hearing loss in their personal and professional lives through differing means, they



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appear to be the exceptions. In the majority of cases, a hearing loss, regardless of degree, has a significant impact on most, if not all, areas of a person's life.

Still, despite their commonalities with deaf people, hard of hearing people are usually encouraged to affiliate and identify with hearing people. This occurs overtly by discouraging hard of hearing people from utilizing lipreading in favor of direct auditory perception of speech (see Ross's article on page 14), and this occurs indirectly through placement in public schools rather than in schools for the deaf. As a result, Woodward and Allen (1993) maintain that hard of hearing and deaf people represent two different linguistic communities which should not be lumped together under a single category such as "hearing impaired."

Because hard of hearing people have some characteristics of hearing people, such as the ability to hear and speak to differing degrees, yet remain visually oriented people to a large degree like deaf people, I believe that hard of hearing people are potentially in possession of a "dual" or "composite" ethnicity, which encompasses both the hearing and the deaf ways of life (Grushkin, 1996; Grushkin, in press). That is, just as we cannot relegate persons of mixed racial background to a single racial category, so we cannot classify hard of hearing people as "hearing people who happen not to hear perfectly." Most hard of hearing and deaf people cannot—and should not try to—"pass" as either hearing people or deaf people (Goffman, 1963). Harvey (1989) states that for individuals to attempt to "pass" fully under any incomplete or "pseudo-identity" could lead to an ongoing dissatisfaction with themselves and their lives.

Bilingual and Bicultural Education: Advantageous for Hard of Hearing Students

One means of promoting dual ethnicity within hard of hearing people lies in allowing such students to be educated within an educational system that utilizes both American Sign Language and English in a bilingual/bicultural environment. It is only through prolonged contact with deaf and other hard of hearing peers and adults that young hard of hearing people can appreciate the benefits of the deaf community and learn to

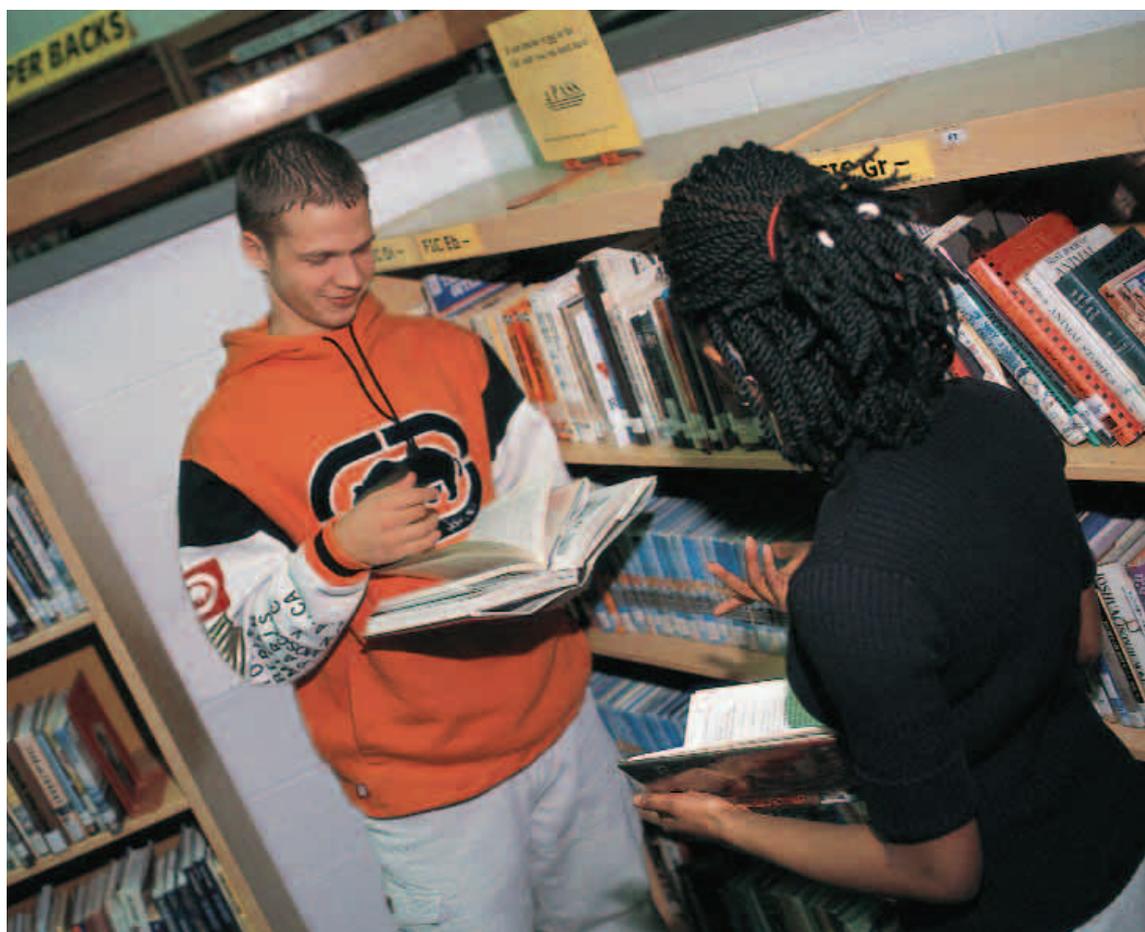
recognize the deaf side of their identity. Justification for educating hard of hearing people in bilingual/bicultural settings can be found in the work of Moschella (1992), Tvingstedt (1993), and even in the unlikely source of Ross (1990), who mentions that hard of hearing children appear to be bound by the literal meaning of words in the manner of someone undergoing the learning of a second language. This view is highly congruent with the position of advocates of bilingual/bicultural education for the deaf (Erting, 1992; Israelite, Ewoldt, & Hoffmeister, 1992; Johnson, Liddell, & Erting, 1989). In my dissertation study (Grushkin, 1996), I found bilingual/bicultural education to promote academic, linguistic, social, and identity development in hard of hearing participants.

To promote the development of a healthy dual-ethnicity for hard of hearing people, both hearing and deaf people need to commit to sponsoring this ideal. We—parents and educators—can adapt approaches used by parents of interracial children. First, we need to stimulate the children's interest and pride in their nondominant heritage (Benson, 1981). Because hard of hearing children in most cases have hearing parents, this means encouraging them to explore their deaf identity. Second, we need to communicate the values and traditions of both cultures to these children (Motoyoshi, 1990). Biculturality depends on positive attitudes and acceptance of both cultures.

Exploring a deaf identity means that hard of hearing children should be encouraged to develop contacts and friendships with other hard of hearing children, as well as with deaf children and adults. Contacts and friendships with other deaf and hard of hearing people are most easily fostered at schools and programs for deaf and hard of hearing students, but they may also develop as a result of planned

encounters through parent support groups and participation in conventions or workshops. Attending plays, camps, and social gatherings such as cookouts and sports events for deaf and hard of hearing children should be a regular part of the hard of hearing child's life. Parents and educators, while encouraging hard of hearing children to use their auditory skills, should also encourage the development of visual skills such as lipreading and sensitivity to visual cues—not the least of which is sign language.

For the deaf community, accepting hard of hearing children entails reevaluating the meaning of "deafness." Something of a trend toward rejecting the importance of speech seems to have evolved in the deaf community in recent years. However, if hard of hearing people are to feel included within deaf culture, speech much be recognized as part of the linguistic repertoire and identity of a hard of hearing person, however otherwise immersed in deaf culture she or he may be (Grushkin, 1996). Schools and programs for the deaf, especially those with a bilingual/bicultural philosophy, should make more effort to include and draw attention to issues of concern and interest to hard of hearing people within their deaf studies curricula. This means noting famous hard of hearing people in history and the modern world; teaching about the role of speaking and hearing





for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing people; and fostering understanding of the multiple identities and behaviors that an individual can develop. Schools for the deaf with a sizeable number of hard of hearing students could form support groups to help hard of hearing students adjust to and make sense of their dual ties to both cultures.

Educational policies encouraging the separation of hard of hearing people from deaf people have created two discrete linguistic and social communities. To a partial degree, these policies have contributed to the shrinking and closing of schools for the deaf around the country. The power of the deaf community is weakened because it does not have the force of numbers that would be afforded by hard of hearing people. Yet the interests of deaf people and hard of hearing people are the same in many ways, and if hard of hearing students were considered viable candidates for instruction among deaf students, school numbers could be bolstered.

Finally, on the individual level, hard of hearing people are currently in a state of cultural limbo; many are unsure of their place in society. If hard of hearing students were encouraged to develop a dual deaf/hearing identity, accepted by both cultures, and allowed to thrive as hard of hearing people, they would benefit greatly, as would the deaf community and society as a whole.

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