DEAF STUDENTS WITH multiple disabilities have a long history of limited opportunity, including limited access to educational opportunities available to their deaf peers. This article places the individual needs of deaf students with multiple disabilities in the context that guides much of deaf education—the importance of language acquisition. That emphasis provides a basis for placement and curriculum options for deaf students with multiple disabilities. The authors review the evolution of placement options, describe assumptions that should guide placement and curriculum decisions, and recommend practices for optimizing these students’ education. Descriptions of three service delivery models—multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary—are provided, as well as an overview of the effectiveness of person-centered planning for deaf students with multiple disabilities. Disability-specific resources are highlighted that relate to mental retardation, autism, visual impairments, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, emotional disorders, medical issues, and general resources.

As long as deaf children have been in the world, many of them have had multiple disabilities. School programs recognize that disabilities such as mental retardation, autism, and learning disability in deaf students significantly complicate these children’s education. Complexities related to specific disabilities in deaf children have largely stymied efforts to plan curriculum and place these children appropriately. Specifically, emphasizing categorical disabilities can sidetrack programs into overlooking individual needs and into teaching students with multiple disabilities on the basis of their disability labels. Such a categorical view of disabilities tends to emphasize characteristics of the group rather than individual needs. For example, Bunch (1987) recommended disability-focused placements for deaf students with multiple disabilities: programs for deaf students with mental retardation, and programs for deaf students with emotional disturbances.

Like placement, curriculum guides for deaf students with multiple disabilities historically have been based on specific disability categories (Cherow, 1985; Pickett & Duncan, 1988; Tweedie & Shroyer, 1982). While a categorical emphasis alone is not an adequate basis for educating children with multiple disabilities, category-specific resources do provide some helpful information for teachers (see Appendix, Disability-Specific Resources).

An emerging view on educating deaf students with multiple disabilities is
noncategorical. For example, T. W. Jones and J. K. Jones (in press) suggest curriculum models and placements for students with multiple disabilities that emphasize individual needs rather than specific disability labels. Consequently, the models they propose are inclusive rather than exclusionary in nature.

Attention to individual needs provides a more valid rationale for curriculum and placement than a focus on categorical disabilities (T. W. Jones, 1984). In the present article, we place such individual needs in the context that guides much of deaf education—the importance of language acquisition. We demonstrate how that emphasis provides a basis for placement and curriculum options for deaf students with multiple disabilities. We review the evolution of placement options for these complex students, describe assumptions that should guide placement and curriculum decisions, and recommend practices for optimizing the education of deaf students with multiple disabilities.

Language Acquisition
In order for any child to become a fully functioning member of society, that child must have a means of connecting with other individuals. In all societies, language provides this connection. Whether spoken, written, or signed, language opens the door for a myriad of possibilities for all individuals. Linguistic competence is often the first of many thresholds that must be crossed if one is to become a full and successful member of society. Language development is related to the quality of prelingual interaction (Swisher & Thompson, 1985).

Deaf children who have multiple disabilities need the same linguistic opportunities to become fully functioning members of society as other children, both hearing and deaf. If they are to experience the best possible linguistic interactions, deaf children with multiple disabilities need to be placed in educational settings with their deaf peers.

Placements
Although progress has been made, placement options for deaf students with multiple disabilities remain limited. Historically, placements for deaf children with multiple disabilities were frequently custodial in nature, with little focus on the individual child’s development or learning. In the last quarter of the 20th century, segregated, self-contained classes and programs, largely designed for hearing students, began serving deaf children with multiple disabilities. Disabilities other than deafness often guided placement decisions. The emphasis on an “accompanying disability” approach isolated groups of professionals, each focusing on different specific disabilities (T. W. Jones, 1984). Throughout this time, most schools for the Deaf barred access to their programs for students with multiple disabilities. Some continue this practice today. Consequently, a majority of this population is educated in special education programs serving hearing children. While programs designed for students with specific disabilities are not necessarily harmful, a sensitivity to deafness and the educational needs it entails is largely absent among special educators working with hearing students. The effectiveness of placing deaf students with multiple disabilities in such programs is questionable.

Traditionally, three models of service have been available to deaf students with multiple disabilities: multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (Orclove & Sobsey, 1996).
laborative. In contrast to other team models, the transdisciplinary model results in intervention that coordinates and integrates expertise so that intervention can be planned that has the most potential for effectiveness with complex children with multiple disabilities.

Assumptions for an Effective Program

Students with multiple disabilities have numerous professionals from a variety of disciplines working with them and their families. The success of any program depends on all program participants understanding and accepting certain fundamental principles. There are four assumptions we consider essential for planning curriculum and placement for deaf students with multiple disabilities:

1. **Every child can learn.** While this assumption may seem self-evident, teachers and programs may not believe it when facing a child whose disabilities are multiple and severe. Students with specific and significant needs are capable of learning, and learning well. The many professionals working with students with multiple disabilities plan for all children to learn. This conviction ensures a positive learning environment for every child.

2. Peer acceptance and social relations are essential for all students. The skills the majority of children with multiple disabilities need most—linguistic skills and social skills—are best learned from peers. In addition, all children learn for peer acceptance. Children who from an early age are included with peers of all ability levels gain invaluable linguistic and social skills that will affect their lives positively. Peer tutors, mentors, and models provide very powerful learning opportunities, not only for the child with multiple disabilities but for all children. Social skills help students integrate into the general school setting as well as the larger community setting and prepare the child for successful adulthood. Settings that can provide these learning opportunities enable many social and emotional gains that transcend the school setting.

3. Families are critical to success. Just as many different professionals working in isolation do not benefit the child optimally, no program is complete without the coordinated efforts of the child’s family. Families often know the child best, especially when communication issues arise. Valuing family input and knowledge not only empowers families but increases the effectiveness and knowledge base of the program as a whole. Providing assistance and strategies for home as well as other settings within the child’s community will enhance learning for a lifetime.

4. Service providers should implement and take advantage of the transdisciplinary model. Service delivery models for deaf students with multiple disabilities are important because, under such models, numerous service providers from different disciplines work with these students and their families. As we have already noted in the present article, most programs serving these students use multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary service models. The transdisciplinary model, however, is more applicable because of its emphasis on the sharing of skills and information across disciplines and on collaboration among service providers in general.

Proposed Practices

Rather than disability categories and labels, the individual characteristics and educational needs of each child should provide the basis for decisions concerning placement, curriculum, instructional methods, and other facets of the education experience (T. W. Jones, 1984). The individual child should be the focus. What are the strengths and learning abilities of each student? What motivates the child? What environments encourage and support learning? What instructional methods are successful and should become a regular part of the student’s plan? With the goal of looking at the student with multiple disabilities as an individual first, the professionals involved with the student can build on strengths, instead of focusing on deficits.

One way of focusing on the individual student is to use a person-centered planning approach. Unlike traditional models, the person-centered planning approach reveals the interests and preferences of the student rather than the resources available from service providers. The family also has a more vital role with this approach. Collaboration and community resources are highly integrated throughout person-centered planning.

The person-centered process for determining the curriculum for students with multiple disabilities is based on the principle that all students, regardless of disability, will have access to the general curriculum via an inclusion model. The determination of “how long, how much, or at what level” to provide the inclusion does not drive the process; rather it is determined by the development of the IEP. Specific approaches used in person-centered planning include:
An example of person-centered planning is the use of the McGill Action Planning System (MAPS). MAPS is a "group, problem-solving, cooperative collaborative team approach to planning" (Forest & Pearlport, 1992, p. 53). MAPS is not a part of or a replacement for the IEP; rather, it precedes the IEP. MAPS is a tool for planning all of the elements that will need to be incorporated into the IEP. MAPS is an important tool for the transdisciplinary team not only for planning purposes but for providing "the full picture" of the child and his or her environment. MAPS also places value and importance on family input and goals; this enables families to become more comfortable voicing their views early in the IEP development process. MAPS provides a vehicle through which people can articulate their vision of the future. The person's hopes and dreams—as well as his or her gifts, talents, and abilities—are highlighted.

Working with deaf students with multiple disabilities requires a teacher to be very knowledgeable about a wide variety of disabilities. In addition to possessing content knowledge, teachers working with students with multiple disabilities need to understand how different disabilities coexist and create a new set of challenges when paired with deafness. It is this unique opportunity to cross over many different learning styles and needs that often motivates the teacher working with this population. But working with children who have such a low-incidence condition often means that there are no curriculum materials specifically designed for students with multiple disabilities.

Teachers who work with deaf students with multiple disabilities must collaborate with other team members from other disability fields to adapt and design the best curriculum materials for each individual student. A noncategorical focus that works with each child individually to develop the best instructional model will enable students to reach their full potential throughout their lives. A person-centered plan enables the child, the family, and professionals to focus on the very specific individual characteristics of the child; it is initiated and driven by the child and family rather than by the educational system. The use of a transdisciplinary model that leads to development of an appropriate IEP will enhance the learning environment for all.

References
Appendix Disability-Specific Resources

**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder**
CHADD (Children and Adults With Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder), [http://www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)


**Autism and Emotional Disorders**
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

*Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities,* [http://www.poordline.com/focus.html](http://www.poordline.com/focus.html)


**Learning Disabilities**
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA), [http://www.ldamerica.org](http://www.ldamerica.org)


National Center for Learning Disabilities, [http://www.ld.org](http://www.ld.org)

**Mental Retardation**
Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities (for information on availability, contact the Council for Exceptional Children at [http://www.cec-sped.org](http://www.cec-sped.org))


**Visual Impairments**

**General References, All Categories**


Exceptional Children, [www.cec-sped.org](http://www.cec-sped.org)

Library resources for deafness and additional disabilities, [http://academic.gallaudet.edu/courses/edu/resource/edu727janelib.nsf](http://academic.gallaudet.edu/courses/edu/resource/edu727janelib.nsf)

National Information Center for Children and Youth With Disabilities (Nichey), [www.nichey.org](http://www.nichey.org)