Characteristics of the deaf, Deaf, Hard of Hearing population

For those who work within the field of Deaf Education it is important to acknowledge the diversity of the students as d/Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals before one even begins to consider the interaction of deafness and additional disabilities. The overwhelming umbrella of ‘people with hearing loss’ is so diverse it is important to define this population in terms of 3 personal identities, deaf, Deaf and hard of hearing (HOH); as well as their subsequent communication methods.

What does ‘deaf’ mean? Deaf, specifically with a lowercase ‘d,’ refers to a audio-logical hearing loss. This hearing loss can range from mild through profound; ranging from the ability to both use and understand spoken language depending upon hearing loss level and type. Within the medical field, a hearing loss level labeled mild to moderately severe is considered hard of hearing, while severe to profound is considered deaf. Little “d” deaf, can also be an identity itself for people with hearing loss who do not use sign language and/or do not identify, assimilate, socialize with Deaf culture/Deaf a community (Ladd 2003).

What does ‘Deaf’ mean? Deaf, specifically with ‘D’ refers to a linguistic and cultural identity marker that deaf people involved in Deaf culture and the Deaf community use to identify themselves (Ladd 2003). Deaf individuals do not view their deafness as a disability but rather as a unifying factor to their culture that they are proud of. Deaf does not refer to hearing loss level, and both deaf and hard of hearing people can identify as Deaf (Ladd 2003).

What does ‘hard of hearing’ mean? Hard of hearing (HOH) refers to two things. First, HOH is a hearing loss. By medical measures, hard of hearing is a hearing loss ranging from mild through moderately severe. Hard of Hearing can also be an identifier. People who are either audio-logically hard of hearing or deaf can identify as hard of hearing. This identity typically refers to people who are ‘on the fence,’ so to say, between the Hearing and the Deaf communities, they use spoken language instead of/or in addition to signed language (Ladd 2003).

Hearing loss: hearing loss is a medical label used to describe a hearing level that is not within the normal hearing range. Normal hearing range is from -10-15 decibles (db). Slight hearing loss is from 16-25 db. Mild loss range is from 26-40. Moderate loss range is from 41-55 db. Moderately severe range is from 56-70 db. Severe loss range is from 71-90 db. Profound loss is 91+db (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association). Medical professionals label ‘hard of hearing’ to be any type of hearing loss ranging from less than moderately severe; while ‘deafness’ is the range from severe to profound. Hearing loss can be congenital or acquired; depending on the age of the individual at the onset of deafness and without proper intervention developmental milestones may not be reached.

Method of Communication: for individuals with hearing loss two different methods of communication may be used.

Manual/signed language: manual communication systems are visual representations of spoken languages. Sign Exact English, also known as SEE, is a manually coded version of English using signs and hand shapes to represent the English language. Cued-Speech is a manually coded representation of English that uses specific hand shapes around the mouth and face to signify specific phonemes of the spoken English language. American Sign Language (ASL) is a signed language, completely separate from English, with its own signs, grammar and syntax. Manual/signed languages are used by d/Deaf/HOH people on a daily basis. This communication mode does not require the use of hearing devices, or voicing.

Oral/spoken language: spoken language is the norm for communication. Most people use some sort of spoken language to communicate on a daily basis. For d/Deaf/HOH people there is a great variety of people who use this method. Spoken language communication on the part of people with a hearing loss usually requires the additional use of a combination of hearing aids, cochlear implants, speech reading and voicing.

Culture: in regards to hearing levels, the world consists of two cultures: Deaf culture and Hearing culture. Deaf culture is a linguistic minority formed by people with a hearing loss. People involved in Deaf culture do not view their deafness as a disability, but rather as a culturally identifying factor. Deaf culture has a language, an identifiable population marked by a particular difference, customs, traditions, social groups, clubs, history and even objects, such as flashing/vibrating alarms, etc. (Ladd 2003). Deaf people are proud to be Deaf. Hearing culture is everything else that is not Deaf culture.

Disability: in regards to the medical and pathological perspective of deafness; to have a hearing loss is to be disabled. Though those culturally Deaf individuals may not identify as disabled, plenty of other deaf/HOH people do.

The purpose of defining the population is so that a better understanding of d/Deaf/HOH individuals can be garnered. From this understanding additional disabilities can be examined. And from that, we can examine the unique attributes of the interaction between the two. The realm of d/Deaf students with additional disabilities is a world of the interaction between deafness and other conditions. This creates a unique population of individuals that teachers and parents may encounter. For teachers this information is valuable, whether it be in mainstream setting with one d/Deaf student or in a Deaf school where there are many deaf children. For parents, this information can help them to understand their children's experience, identity, communication needs and their overall potential for success.