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Collaborating for Student Success: Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

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The profession of “teacher of the deaf” goes back many centuries, as hearing loss has always been with us – in fact, it is a far older profession than audiologist. Plato and Socrates documented the use of sign language in ancient Greece, while St. John of Beverly, a bishop living around 700 AD is credited as one of the first teachers of the deaf, followed in the next century by Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet. Teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing have been key supporters of students with hearing loss for decades, if not centuries, and their goal continues to be the same, to support and maximize communication, academic, socioemotional, and self-advocacy skills for students with hearing loss. There are currently three teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing education programs in Canada, at York University, University of British Columbia, and Mount Saint Vincent University; the program at York is the largest, with approximately 50 students at any given time. There has been a teacher education program in existence in Ontario since the 1960s, housed at the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville. In the late 1980s, the certification program was moved to York University. Since the York program (where I am a faculty member) is celebrating its 30th anniversary, this seems an opportune time to describe how teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing fit into our multidisciplinary teams and how their roles

have changed significantly over the years.

Education programs for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing across Canada differ somewhat in structure and focus. Still, all require applicants to hold teacher qualifications in regular education (in Ontario, this means registration with the Ontario College of Teachers). Therefore, teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing hold at least 2 university degrees and their qualifications to teach deaf and hard of hearing students, and many hold Masters of Education degrees. At York, obtaining the qualification requires either one full academic year (completing the program as a full-time student) or three years as a part-time program, consisting of 424 hours of coursework in audiology, language and literacy development, deaf studies, hearing technology, sign language, teaching in sign bilingual programs, and speech/auditory skills development, as well as 8 weeks of teaching practicum.

Role of the Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Early Intervention Programs

Home visiting programs for preschool children with hearing loss have been in existence in Ontario since the 1960s, provided through both the provincial schools for the deaf and through some of the larger school boards. These programs are funded separately from the provincial Infant Hearing Program, either through the Ministry of Education (in the provincial schools) or by the school boards themselves. In early intervention, teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing visit the family home and work with parents on amplification and language development (spoken or signed). Because they interact with the child and family in the child's home, this model provides teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing with unique insights into family challenges and successes. As expert observers of child behaviour, they can provide information on language and communication development that can help inform, for example, cochlear implant candidacy or flesh out the validation stage of fitting amplification technology. Because they often keep the same caseload of students for some time, they become very familiar with the child and family and can provide longitudinal data on child development.

Role of the Teacher of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing for School-Aged Students

There are no published data on the number of students with hearing loss in Canadian classrooms and their educational placements; however, with many years of experience teaching in the program, I can attest to the fact that the majority of our graduates go on to work as itinerant teachers of students in mainstreamed settings, or in preschool home visiting programs. There are very few school boards in Ontario which provide congregated classes of students with hearing loss. Therefore, itinerant teachers are responsible for seeing students both across geographical locations and across a vast spectrum of educational needs. Many years ago, services for students with hearing loss were funded by the Ministry of Education, and this funding was tied directly to the degree of hearing loss. This has not been true for many years, and therefore, educational services from a teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing are based on student need, not on the degree of hearing loss. This may range from direct service (where a teacher sees students of the deaf and hard of hearing several times a week) to "monitor" level services, where students are seen a few times of year (primarily for fitting and monitoring of classroom hearing technologies). The role of the teacher of the deaf and hard of hearing range from academic and language assessment, direct academic and communication support, provision of inservices and school staff support, fitting and

monitoring Hearing Assistance Technology, development of social skills and self-advocacy, transition planning (for example, transitioning from middle school to high school) and acting as a liaison with hearing health care professionals. One of the discussions that I have with my students is around the importance of building relationships with community hearing healthcare professionals so that communication can flow easily between home, school, and clinic.

Advocating for Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Several factors in health care and education have created new challenges for the deaf and hard of hearing teachers. In previous columns, I have discussed the need to advocate for educational audiologists in school boards, but we also need to advocate for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing. Universal newborn hearing screening and early intervention have led to positive academic and communication outcomes for so many students; however, it has become a challenge in many school districts to explain why teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing are still needed when students with hearing loss appear to be achieving as well as hearing students. School board administrators sometimes feel that the standard resource services available to all students (such as a school resource teacher) are enough to ensure students with hearing loss. In many school boards, there may only one or two teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing for the entire school board, leaving each teacher with several hundred students on their caseload, located in schools across the geographical expanse of the school board. Many years ago, many teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing were fluent in sign language; these days, a different skill set around hearing aids, cochlear implants, BAHAs, and classroom assistive hearing technologies is needed. School board administrators do not always understand that our students are a dead hearing aid battery away from having no curriculum access. Therefore, as teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing retire, they are not always replaced or are replaced by a part-time position. While larger school boards in urban areas often employ an entire department of teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, many areas of the province (such as in the North, in rural areas, in Indigenous communities, and Francophone communities) have very few specialized support services for students with hearing loss. As audiologists and speech-language pathologists, we want to ensure that the hard work we do to identify children early and give them a solid foundation for communication and academic success does not fall apart due to a lack of school services.