



Deaf Education Backgrounder

A Note to Students:

Deaf education is a rich topic. It is also tied to many other narratives about the past, such as the development of public education, the growth of the state, and the history of religion. As such, this brief backgrounder should be viewed as **an introduction**.

Early Education of Deaf Children

References to deaf people can be found in the writings of many ancient scholars, including the ancient Greeks and early Christians like St. Augustine (b. 354; d. 430). It was not until the 15th and 16th centuries (1400 and 1500s), however, that we can find many traces about the education of deaf people. During this period individuals in many European nations attempted to educate small groups of deaf children. Pedro Ponce de León (b. 1520; d. 1584), for example, was a Benedictine monk in Spain who taught two young deaf noblemen to read and write. While these early efforts to educate deaf children are important milestones, we must not overstate their significance by assuming, as some have done in the past, that deaf individuals could not communicate or contribute to their societies before they were formally educated. Instead, the real significance of the work of early teachers, like Pedro Ponce de León, was their impact on the larger hearing community, which found the wide-spread notion that deaf individuals were incapable of being educated was incorrect.

While the idea that deaf people could be educated did spread in the 15th and 16th centuries, educational opportunities for deaf children remained very limited. Another major step forward in the history of deaf education occurred in 18th century in France. It was here that Abbé Charles-Michel de L'Épée (b. 1712; d. 1789), a French Catholic priest, founded the first deaf public school in Europe- The Royal Institute for the Deaf and Dumb- in Paris in 1760. While the founding of the school was significant in and of itself, Abbé L'Épée made a further contribution to deaf education as his school developed a system of “methodical signs.” This

should not be confused with the use of signs to communicate. Deaf people had naturally been using signs to communicate their meaning for centuries. Abbé L'Épée's innovation was that he developed a system of signs for instruction in the French language. This allowed deaf and hearing communities to communicate more clearly and, as a result, the “French System” of signs rapidly spread.

The Development of Public Education, Special Education, and Deaf Education in Canada

While there have been schools of one sort or another for centuries, early schools had little resemblance to modern public schools. In comparison, they were few and far between, often small in size, and largely focused upon educating the elite members of society whose future occupation required education (e.g., large land owners, doctors). This likely seems strange. However, it is important to remember that for much of Canada's history the majority of the population was made up of farmers and because farming involved all members of the family, child labour (as opposed to schooling) was a normal part of life in Canada.

This situation began to change in the 19th century (1800s). While the reasons for this are still debated by historians, a combination of factors- including fear of the spread of American culture, growing pressure to further democratize government by making more people citizens, and the belief that economic changes would lead more young people to pursue non-farming careers- generated support for public schooling. The development of these schools was often contested, as many local tax payers disliked the idea of paying for them, but from the 1840s onward the idea of mandatory public schooling spread. So, for example, by 1871 Ontario required all children from seven to twelve years old to attend school for four months of the year. As attendance grew, however, schools struggled with the question of how best to educate their increasingly diverse student body. There were some, for example,

who wanted all public schools to offer an education similar to that provided in the older private schools (often called grammar schools). Others, felt that this sort of education, which had been developed for those who would need to go on to higher education, would be of little use to most students. Instead, they felt public schools should adopt a vocational focus, teaching basic skills- the “3 Rs”- while also teaching practical subjects like agriculture and mechanical drawing. In the end, many provinces would adopt hybrid systems that “streamed” or “tracked” students, with some taking an “academic” program and others more vocational ones.

In these early days of public education deaf children in most provinces were segregated in special institutions. In Québec, there was the Institution catholique des sourds-muets (Catholic Institution for Deaf and Dumb Males) established in 1848, the Institution des sourdes-muettes (Institution for Deaf and Dumb Females) founded in 1851, and the Mackay Institution for Protestant Deaf-Mutes (begun by Thomas Widd in 1869 and named after Mackay in 1877). In Ontario, there was the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville (opened in 1870 as the Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb). In the Atlantic Provinces, there was the Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, established in 1856 in Halifax, while the Western Provinces hosted the Manitoba School for the Deaf (founded in 1888), the Jericho Hill Provincial School for the Deaf in Vancouver (founded 1922), and the R.J.D. Williams Provincial School for the Deaf in Saskatoon (founded in 1931).

While some deaf students were able to pursue a more academic education while at school, the typical curriculum would be seen as vocational by today’s standards. At the Mackay Institution for example, Thomas Widd’s earliest pupils received eight hours of instruction, six days a week. Under Widd’s guidance, the boys not only practised sign-language and writing, but also engaged in carpentry, gardening, and learned how to use printing presses. The girls, meanwhile, learned to cook and undertook a range of domestic work, including dress-making, sewing, and mending.

While there have been complaints of abuse by some former pupils of a few of these schools, many, arguably most, deaf students remember their time at these institutions fondly. Further evidence of the positive influence of these schools can be found in the protests that occurred within local Deaf communities whenever one

of these schools was threatened with closure. In the end, many of these positive memories seem to revolve around two things: learning to communicate with others and developing a sense of belonging through being part of a larger Deaf culture. Ironically, both of these benefits would become the source of conflict in the late 19th and 20th centuries (late 1800s through the 1900s).

The Milan Congress of 1880 and the Manualist/Oralist Debate

Running from September 6th to 11th, the Milan International Conference brought together educators from seven nations to debate what methods were most appropriate for educating deaf students. In the end, this discussion pitted proponents of sign-language, such as Edward Miner Gallaudet (President of Gallaudet College for the Deaf in the United-States), against “oralists,” such as Alexander Graham Bell, who argued that deaf students should learn to read lips and to speak. Simplifying somewhat, oralists tended to argue that learning only sign language tended to segregate deaf people and thereby denied them the opportunity to participate fully in society. Manualists usually responded to this by first pointing out that many deaf individuals could not learn to speak well or to read lips fluently. Thus, the idea of deaf individuals participating easily within the larger hearing society was something of a non-starter. Second, they argued that sign-language was a language. While it could not be understood by everyone, the same was true of any other minority language. In the end, the Congress voted in favour of the “articulation method” (oralism), though it should be noted that of the 164 delegates only one (James Denison) was deaf.

The immediate impact of the Milan Congress in Canada varied from institution to institution. Widd, for example, argued in favor of a hybrid approach, offering students at his school the opportunity to learn both the manual and articulation methods. Over time, however, most of the deaf public schools would move towards the teaching of articulation (lip-reading and speech). In the case of the Mackay Institute, this occurred in 1934 when the school’s Board decided that the use of signs should be abandoned because it “sets apart or excludes the deaf from normal conversation”. The focus on oralism often led to a sense of hierarchy within deaf schools, with those who could lip-read and speak seeing themselves as superior. It should be noted, how-

ever, that many organizations within local Deaf communities opposed the move away from sign language and many parents and students found the focus on lip-reading and speech frustrating. For example, Julius Wiggins, a deaf boy who attended the oralist Ontario School for the Deaf, but later transferred to Toronto's Central Technical School in the late 1940s recalled that lip-reading was of little use to him at Central Tech:

We were taught the usual subject, but found that trying to understand our teachers was fruitless. None of them made much effort on our behalf. Instead of using the blackboard they spoke from their desks and as none of them tried to enunciate or speak visibly we could not lip-read...I felt entirely at sea and complained bitterly to father.

Segregation, Special Education, and the Education of Deaf Children in the Early 20th Century

During the late 19th early 20th centuries (late 1800s to early 1900s) there was also considerable debate about the segregation of deaf students in special schools, which were often located at a great distance from their families. In some instances, this debate pitted parents, who wished to see their children more often, against Deaf communities, which saw residential schools as important institutions that helped students to develop their identities as Deaf individuals. This concern about the segregation of deaf students was also tied, however, to larger trends within special education, especially the rise and fall of eugenics and the idea of I.Q.

The word “eugenics” is derived from a Greek term meaning “well born”. The term was first used by Sir Francis Galton, in the United Kingdom in 1883. At the core of the eugenics movement was the idea, driven by early experiments into genetics, that particular character traits were strongly or purely hereditary. So, for example, many eugenicists believed that mental illness, mental retardation, and criminality, were purely hereditary. This meant, according to eugenicists, that if a mentally ill person reproduced, their offspring would inherit this trait. The eugenics movement in Canada had a significant impact on public policy in a number of areas in the early 1900s. In terms of education, Dr. Helen MacMurchy, one of Canada's leading eugenicists, argued forcefully that:

Recent research has shown that, in about seven-

ty-five percent of mental defectives, the cause of that mental defect is hereditary, descending from one or both of the parents, or from their direct ancestors...Hence, while it is our duty to be kind to the mentally-defective, to protect them from wrong, insult, injury, and injustice, to do our very best for them by training, education, and opportunity, we are wronging them if we go on allowing them to become parents, as we have done in the past.

Dr. MacMurchy, and her supporters, further argued that placing “feeble-minded” children in regular school classes was a waste of resources. Instead, they proposed the development of special education, or “auxiliary” classes, where these students could be given an education focused upon the teaching of vocational skills, life skills, and the instilling of morals.

The eugenicists' call for special education was taken up in many areas in the early 1900s. Toronto, for example, had only four part-time auxiliary classes in 1910, but by the 1920s it had a comprehensive system of special education. A key factor in the spread of this system was the idea of “I.Q.” and its use within systems of education. The concept of “I.Q.” or “Intelligence Quotient” came from psychology. It has a long and complex history that cannot be fully examined here; the key idea, however, was that in the early 1900s psychologists claimed that it was possible to accurately measure someone's intelligence using an I.Q. test and, just as importantly, that intelligence was fixed or unchanging (so someone with low intelligence would always have low intelligence). These claims not only fit with the beliefs of eugenicists, but I.Q. tests also offered them a convenient, relatively quick, and apparently scientific way of sorting students. Much like special education, I.Q. testing spread rapidly within Education.

The eugenics movement within education quickly lost steam, however and fears about the “feeble-minded” generally died out by the 1920s. This change in attitude was in no small part assisted by changes within educational psychology, where many psychologists starting to question the claims of early proponents of I.Q. In fact, by the 1920s and 1930s, the idea of intelligence as fixed was being replaced by the idea of specific “learning difficulties”. This theory claimed that a specific instance of difficulty, such as problems learning to read, may not be a sign of low-intelligence, but is instead the result of a specific, curable, problem. The development

of this idea within educational psychology led to important shifts within special education. In particular, it became increasingly common for students to return to “regular” classes after spending some time in special education.

In regards to deaf education, eugenic fears about heredity led to concern about marriage involving deaf individuals - particularly when such marriages were with other deaf individuals. This fear was in fact so pronounced that some individuals worried that deaf individuals would become their own separate race. While this fear was contested by many individuals, including Thomas Widd, these concerns provided additional support for those who wished to see deaf students educated in public schools, and also strengthened the argument of oralists, such as Alexander Graham Bell, who felt that the use of sign-language segregated deaf individuals from the hearing. As a result, some educational jurisdictions began to integrate a larger number of deaf students into the regular school system. Often this was done by first teaching the students “articulation” (lip-reading and speech) and then pushing them to attend “regular” classes with hearing pupils. Even deaf schools were not immune to this pressure. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries many of these schools abandoned the teaching of signs, with some schools even going so far as to physically segregate students who had already learned sign language from those who had not, out of a fear that students’ attempts to learn to speak and lip-read would be undermined if they made any use of sign-language.

As already mentioned oralism was opposed by many deaf individuals and organization, that challenged the view of deafness as a “handicap”, as something that is to be overcome, and argued instead that Deaf people should be viewed as having a culture. The conflict between these two conceptions of Deafness continued to influence education throughout the 20th century and evidence of it can even be seen today, both within schools and also in the debate surrounding the use of cochlear implants to provide hearing to some deaf individuals.

Connecting the Education of Deaf Children to Other Narratives

While the education of deaf children is significant in and of itself, historians have recognized that this history is tied to, and influenced by, changes in other areas of society, including, but not limited to, changes within education and the development of state. While it is not possible to examine such connections here students are strongly encouraged to consider, discuss, and investigate them as they continue to learn about the education of deaf children.