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INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH SEMINAR ON THE REHABILITATION OF DEAF PERSONS AND THE WORLD CONGRESS OF THE DEAF: A CRITIQUE

MICHAEL RODDA, Ph.D.

The Seminar

This international seminar was arranged by the National Association of the Deaf and was financed by a grant from the Social and Rehabilitation Service of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. It met for one week in each of three centers, viz. Washington; Hot Springs, Arkansas; and New York. Its purpose was to bring together groups of specialists from different countries and disciplines, so that the results of research could be brought to bear upon and utilized in work with the deaf. To achieve this aim themes were scheduled and allowed for a concentrated presentation of papers and small group discussions on: (1) Community Service Patterns, (2) Involvement of Deaf People for Effective Community Service, (3) Improving Individual Involvement in Society through Language, (4) New concepts of language and deaf people, (5) Language power for deaf people, (6) Proper case services depend upon proper diagnosis and evaluation. (7) Discovering Potentials, (8) Improving the deaf persons capacities to meet the demands of living, (9) Vocational adjustment, (10) Deaf persons in the family circle, (11) Deaf persons in marriage, (12) Mental health needs of deaf people, and (13) Mental Health services for deaf people.

The Outcomes

Perhaps of the themes which ran through the conference the most basic one was the need for more research. Too often it was felt

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What evidence is there that the use of the simultaneous method prevents the development of oral skills? Must we always fall back, whatever the techniques we are using, on blaming the child and-or the teacher when failure occurs and never question our basic philosophical and educational premises?

The participants felt that when these basic premises had been questioned then, perhaps, they would be in a position to take action on another major conference issue which is marginally relevant to this theme. A motion was put to the conference and carried with very little opposition. It stated: "This seminar recommends that consideration be given to the admission of deaf teachers as teachers of deaf children of all ages, where this is not existing practice." The example of Britain was presented although it was pointed out that some people would claim the issue has been fully discussed in that country. In fact, what has been seriously considered in Britain is the use of deaf persons as oral teachers of deaf children. Opponents to this motion, while claiming that their aim is to integrate the deaf, at the basis of their own social structure practice discrimination. If they cannot accept the positive contributions which the deaf can make to all aspects of society, if they cannot get rid of a sense of protective paternalism, what right have they to say to the normally hearing that they must accept the deaf person as an equal and fellow member of their community?

Rehabilitation and vocational training are interlinked areas and so it is not surprising that a great deal of time at the conference was spent in discussion of the third theme; vocational guidance, placement and training. The seminar was set in the U.S.A. and despite the establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester, a great deal of attention was given to the need for providing opportunities for the deaf to obtain training in high-level skilled occupations as opposed to the academic and professional training available at Gallaudet College.

The majority opinion was that such institutes should originate in interdisciplinary diagnosis and family counseling and that they should provide pre- as well as vocational training, that they should train the deaf adolescent to be more adaptable to changing occupational structure, that they should aim to advance the level of occupational skill so that fewer of the deaf are under-employed and that, because of the complexity of modern industry, they should be linked with existing institutions serving the normally hearing. These aims are intrinsic not only to the N.T.I.D. but to ex-

perimental programs over-seas such as the City Literary and Technical Institute in London. It was strongly felt that the Americans had only progressed further in this field because of the availability of funds and the greater problem of unemployed deaf persons in the U.S.A.

The fourth theme concerned the development of community agencies for working with the deaf and the majority of the conferees favored the continued existence of clubs and institutes for the deaf. This is not to say that they were not critical of existing facilities, and paternalism and isolationism seem to be international problems. The need for properly trained staff was noted and it was strongly felt that the professional staff had to learn to take a much more non-directive approach. They had, if clubs are to develop into viable social institutions, to allow the deaf members much greater freedom to organize their own activities and deal with the non-professional aspects of the organization of and the services offered by clubs. At the same time the existence of adequately trained social workers in the clubs would enable viable social work to be developed. Such work could include educational and vocational classes for the younger deaf, supportive help for psychiatric patients released from hospitals and many others.

Whether or not they were linked to clubs or placed elsewhere, it was also emphasized that community services should become less casework and more group work orientated. It is perhaps a strange contradiction that whilst social work in most countries is organized round group institutions, viz. the clubs, it is essentially concerned with dealing with the individual on a personal basis. Most participants clearly formulated their desire to see trained group workers using group activities as a therapeutic tool. Apart from the particular contributions which this approach has to offer, it was felt that the use of these techniques would greatly ease the load on the individual social worker. Furthermore, the basic premises of group work are that the social experience offered in the group enables the individual to better adjust to the wider community and that helping others to work through their problems enables the individual to cope better with his own problems. In this way we could enable the deaf community to develop a more positive approach and base treatment on the pooled experience of its members.

discussion, re-evaluation and even in the short period of time since the termination of the seminar, some organizational changes. Immediate changes or innovations in employment opportunities in England, teacher training in Scotland and College Education in Norway have directly resulted from the seminar and the support given by its formal resolutions. While not prescriptive these examples are descriptive of some of the practical impact of the seminar.

The formal resolutions of the seminar cannot express in a few words the outcome of three weeks of discussion, the aim and the result of which was to clarify present available knowledge and to identify some of the omissions in the field and research literature. Within the areas covered by the study it is true to say that, whilst not achieving perfection, the seminar did represent a considerable step forward. The high quality of the papers and the theme summaries coupled with positive, intelligent and informed discussion conducted in an atmosphere free from professional or personal animosity by participants representing numerous disciplines led to greater insight and a considerable amount of interdisciplinary communication and progress. This, coupled with excellent editing, means that the proceedings of the seminar published in late 1969 is very quickly recognized as one of, if not the only, authoritative reference work on the rehabilitation of deaf persons.

The wisdom of organizing the seminar through the National Association of the Deaf, an organization consisting almost entirely of deaf persons, was clearly revealed during the seminar and its outcomes. The choice of this organization meant that approximately 25 per cent of the participants were themselves deaf. Whilst the selection criteria were as rigidly applied to the deaf as to the hearing participants the former brought a unique and often ignored contribution to the seminar through their personal experience of the handicap. This in turn resulted in a very apparent concern throughout with the practical aspects of rehabilitation in a hearing and rejecting society and prevented any tendency for the discussions to become too esoteric. In the subsequent publicity of the seminar and its proceedings, this concern with practicalities and its association with the authoritative voice of the National Association of the Deaf, gave the seminar a recognition not normally attributable to academic gatherings of this type.

Finally, another positive effect of the seminar concerns less measurable but equally important changes in the environment of

those centers in which it was held, viz. the Hot Springs Rehabilitation Center, the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Gallaudet College, and the centers represented by the participants. The educative process of one week and three weeks respectively of intensive seminars and discussion was felt by all to have deepened their knowledge and understanding. This increase in professional skills, resulting from the demanding process of subjecting personal views and concepts to intense scrutiny by experienced colleagues in an environment free from the normal demands on time of the working world, must be and is being reflected in rehabilitation services and program development.

The Defects

In its conception, its organization and its aims the seminar represented a neverbefore-tried experiment and like all such experiments it did not achieve perfection. Indeed, one would be suspicious if it had achieved perfection because this would indicate that its proceedings were so mundane as to have offered nothing to the participants or to the advancement of rehabilitation of the deaf. Nevertheless, it is important to be aware of the deficiencies which were found in the project so that through constructive criticism progress can be made.

One of the major criticisms of the conference was its failure to include, particularly from the U.S.A., a sufficient number of educators. Only two of the participants were practicing teachers trained as such, Felicie Affolter from Switzerland and Brother Walter from Belgium. Furthermore, both were very liberal in their thinking and had a very positive orientation towards rehabilitation and its interaction with education. Consequently, whilst the aim of the seminar was to convert, it did, perhaps, fail to initiate as effective a dialogue with educators as it might. A similar fault lay in the failure to include a representation from parents of deaf children. Whilst it could be argued that the technical nature and level of the conference precluded inviting parents, it seems probable that the benefits of having a small number of such persons would outweigh the disadvantages. Furthermore, many parents are either very knowledgeable about the philosophy of education and rehabilitation or would willingly accept that certain areas of discussion would be unintelligible to them.

The American participants were notable, with some outstanding exceptions such as Dr. J. D. Schein and Dr. Hilde S.

Schlesinger, by their failure to participate fully and secure maximum feedback from the seminar. The reason for this lay in their insistence on regarding their contribution as in simply reading an oftentimes not very well prepared paper. Thus, the majority flew to and departed from the appropriate center on the day for which they were scheduled to speak to the group and many attended the conference period for as little as two to three hours. This irritated the overseas participants because their invitation and acceptance had been contingent upon them agreeing to attend for the whole of the three week period, because it gave them very little or no opportunity to engage in intensive dialogues with the presenting speaker, because subsequent small group discussion foundered or switched topics given a lack of an inability to obtain certain factual information and because it reflected a condescending and impolite attitude which at times bordered on impertinence. The answer would seem to lie in imposing similar conditions on the national participants as were imposed on the overseas ones, except that the proportionately lower cost of travel might suggest a mandatory requirement to stay for one rather than for three weeks.

The conference program can be criticized for being too intensive. Whilst opinions varied, probably as a function of personal commitments, on whether three weeks was too long or too short, physical fatigue resulting from continuous travel and lack of time in which to relax was very noticeable in the final week. Most working days tended to run for about twelve hours and the conferees, after an exhaustive trans-atlantic crossing, traveled a further 10,000 miles during their stay. In consequence, it would seem that either a shorter program of the same intensity or a less intensive program covering the same or a longer period would be more appropriate.

The use of technological aids in the seminar was minimal and in the main ineffective. Speakers were often unknowledgeable about the advantages of these and even the use of tape-recorders in group discussion session was less than maximally effective because of the failure to standardize the tapes in terms of speed and the number of tracks used. In consequence, it was felt that future conferences would greatly benefit from having available a media consultant, an appropriate number of aides before and during the seminar and one or a number of media laboratories to assist and guide speakers, if necessary to prepare material for speakers and to make available high quality and well maintained equipment during the proceedings. The participants and the conference organizers also felt, and still

feel that it should be mandatory for speakers to make available prior copies of their lecture and failure to do so should result in their deletion from the program. The papers to be presented could then be duplicated and bound into a suitable folder instead of being distributed inefficiently and confusingly as and when available.

A parallel problem to the previous ones lay in the failure to appoint an editor of the proceedings of the seminar prior to its commencement. Thus, when an editor was ultimately appointed after the termination of the formal program he was unfamiliar with the conceptualization, the philosophy, the program, the positions taken during the discussion session of the seminar and with many of the participants involved. This greatly increased the magnitude of the task which faced him and all of the problems resulting from the above could have been avoided if he had been fully involved in all aspects of the project from its planning to its execution. Furthermore, communication problems were compounded by the failure to appoint interpreters of foreign languages to work with some of the foreign participants. It should be remembered that facility in reading and writing English does not always correlate with ability to speak and understand spoken English. Thus, one or two of the participants had problems in understanding or being understood and whilst good-will on all sides and the use of other languages as intermediaries helped, it was soon appreciated that communication could have been improved if either interpreters of French and German or interpreters of the national language of the foreign participants with poor spoken English had been planned for and available from the beginning of the seminar.

World Congress of the Deaf

The World Congress and International Conference of the Deaf are held under the auspices of the World Federation of the Deaf. The purpose and concept of the Congress are described in the statutes (article 14) as follows: "The International Conference will be held every four years, in the same place chosen for the General Assembly, immediately after or before this latter. The General Assembly and the International Conference shall be jointly called the World Congress of W.F.D. The International Conference is composed of: the members of national delegations, all the professional people, specialists and experts (physicians, experts of readaption for the deaf, educators, social workers, etc.) joining the WFD, governments' representatives, officers of organizations interested in the problems of the deaf and or other handicapped

people, officers of governmental organization. Each Conference shall choose the general theme for the next conference and shall set up a Scientific Section. The Chairmanship of the Conference shall be undertaken by the host country which shall take care of all organizing arrangements in close cooperation with the General Secretariat of WFD and following the provisions stated in the Internal Rules."

*Relationship of the International Seminar
on Rehabilitation of Deaf Persons
to the World Congress*

As indicated earlier the International Seminar on Rehabilitation of Deaf Persons was a unique experiment and it has clearly established a unique framework which could result in the 1975 World Congress undergoing considerable changes in format, structure, and organization. In turn the extension of the experiment into the World Congress of the Deaf would multiply considerably the returns obtained from the 1968 meeting.

Whilst size is not in itself a guarantee of wide dissemination of information, it is an important pre-requisite to such dissemination. Many of the criticisms of the earlier seminar would be easier to solve within the scope of the larger meeting. Thus the World Congress would mean that:

1) The larger size of the Congress would increase the number of participants and enable more educators to be included in the program.

2) The shorter more intensive program of study would make it easier for participants to agree to stay for the whole of the duration of the Congress.

3) The use of visual aids and educational media, the provision of interpreters, the appointment of a Congress editor, and the recording of session proceedings could be undertaken efficiently and economically within the framework of the larger conference.

Additionally, the increased size of the meeting could increase representation from national and international organizations and, in consequence, the authoritativeness of the participants would be increased on their return to their respective home communities. Whilst the arguments of a few individuals attending a program sponsored by the U.S. government can easily be ignored, the arguments of a number of individuals backed by the international

authority of the World Federation of the Deaf are much more difficult to put on one side.

Summary and Conclusions

The World Federation of the Deaf is the only authoritative international organization consisting jointly of hearing and deaf persons and lay and professional individuals. Sponsorship of the World Congress of the Deaf brings prestige and international recognition not only to the appropriate national agencies working with the deaf, but also to the sponsoring country.

The U. S. A. is in a unique position to gain this prestige by sponsoring through the National Association for the Deaf the 1975 World Congress. In so doing, it would also add considerably to the productivity of the highly successful 1968 International Seminar on the Rehabilitation of Deaf Persons and, because of this earlier meeting, it would be uniquely placed to make the 1975 World Congress an exciting innovative agent for change in the field of rehabilitation of the deaf.

The WFD has frequently expressed a desire to meet in America, but no member association of the WFD has been able to sponsor this meeting without a direct subsidy from their government, and heretofore the United States has not been able to offer such subsidy or grant. Without government support such a meeting cannot be arranged. The participants of the International Seminar and all interested organizations are very concerned to transmute this desire into reality. To do so will require a great deal of work and a great deal of support. They ask that the reader consider whether such a plan is worthy of his support and, if so, that he or she express a supporting view to colleagues and personnel working in any and all agencies concerned with education and rehabilitation of the deaf.

Constructive criticism does not and is not intended to negate the outstanding success and achievements of the seminar and the aim of the criticisms made in this critique is not to do this. Rather it is to seek to transmute excellence into perfection or near perfection. The seminar on the Vocational Rehabilitation of Deaf Persons was in its conception and its initiation unique. The seminar was enjoyable, stimulating and throughout provoking. Most of all it was inspiring and the person who chooses to work with the deaf is sterile from the day on which he loses his ideals. May we hope that 1975 will see a renewal of that inspiration?