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Deborah L. Gough
Northern Illinois University

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A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

Deborah L. Gough, Ed.D.
Northern Illinois University
DeKalb, Illinois

Abstract

This study was conducted in an effort to gain an understanding of the experiences of hearing-impaired students participating in a year-long transition program, specifically addressing students' own perceptions of personal change.

Ten hearing-impaired students volunteered to participate as informants in this qualitative study. A series of in-depth interviews was conducted throughout the course of the transition program. Videotapes and transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed to assess patterns or themes of experiences and change common to the informants.

A number of themes or dimensions of change occurring over time were found to be consistent for all informants, including issues of identity, personal values, family and social relationships, communication, plans and expectations for the future, and perceptions of change. Segments from interviews are presented, and implications are discussed for the issues of transition program development, as well as enhancement of psychosocial development.

Adolescents face many challenges in the realms of identity resolution, interpersonal relationships, and future planning for academic and vocational goals. Essential to these young adults in meeting the challenges are support from their social network, a broad base of knowledge to call upon for appropriate decision making, and access to information and resources in life planning. Some young persons are well prepared to deal with this transition into adulthood, while others confront substantial barriers in their development. One such group of adolescents is comprised of those who are hearing-impaired or deaf.

The isolation of life in a silent world often cuts off access to information readily available to others, and leads to limited awareness of social and cultural norms and expectations. Those limitations extend into personal and social relationships, and range from childhood play to the psychologically

intimate relationships of adulthood. Hearing-impaired adolescents attempting to define an identity are often unprepared for these tasks due to a lack of adult role models, limited life experiences and, in many cases, inadequate decision making skills.

Compounding the difficulties and delays in psychosocial development of hearing-impaired youth, the employment outlook for disabled teens has been markedly discouraging. In 1987 the President's Committee on the Employment of the Handicapped predicted that of the 650,000 persons with disabilities leaving the school system each year, "Only 21% will be fully employed, 40% underemployed and at poverty level, 26% on welfare" (Johnson and Atkins, 1987, p.15). With the addition of the hearing loss, the outlook may prove even more discouraging.

The concept of the "transition program" was introduced in response to the psychosocial and vocational issues just described. The general goal of such a transition program is to assist the disabled student in "bridging the gap" from secondary education to work (or to a post-secondary or training program setting). The areas addressed typically include: vocational and academic exploration and counseling, enhancement of independent living skills, and skills related to effective personal and social interaction.

This transition is indeed a complex process for the young persons involved, and also for the educational and rehabilitation agencies charged with the task of providing adequate programming.

The success or failure, and indeed the general understanding and interpretation of transition programs has been measured in terms of student/client success in the work world and in continuing education. These successes or failures are documented through employment records, salary rates, grade point averages and educational degrees awarded. Rarely are the students called upon to describe personal, individual perceptions of their experiences in a transition program. Regardless of move-

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

ment from high school to college/career, there occurs within each individual, and within the group of students in a particular transition program, a change. This change lies within the individual. It is a change that is perhaps not measured quantitatively in a pre-test/post-test manner. Perhaps it is more evident in the alterations of one's perceptions of self and others, or in one's increasing level of independence of thought and action.

Procedures

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of the process of "transition" from the perspective of the hearing-impaired student participants. The informants' perceptions and interpretations of their experiences were elicited by a series of interviews and observations of informants in their "normal" daily activities. Analysis of transcribed videotaped interviews assessed students' perceptions of personal change in the areas of personal, social and vocational skills.

Subjects, Program and Setting

Informants in this study were students participating in the Program for Hearing Impaired (PHI) located on the campus of Northern Illinois University (N.I.U.). PHI is a one-year residential transition program established in 1960 in cooperation with the Department of Communicative Disorders and the Illinois Department of Rehabilitation Services. The overall goal of PHI is to "bridge the gap" between high school and the subsequent educational or vocational objectives chosen by the students.

Students enrolled in PHI are hearing-impaired persons aged 16-24 who are engaged in the process of changing and moving from a secondary education experience to an employment opportunity, a trade or technical school, community college, or a four-year institution of higher learning.

The transition program is divided into three "tracks": (1) a Pre-Vocational Program for students preparing for entry into an occupation; (2) a College Preparatory Program; and (3) a Cooperative Alternative Secondary Program (CASP). The CASP track is an alternative program through which a student can satisfy the requirements for earning a high school diploma through the courses taught at PHI. The selection of an appropriate track is based on the student's goals and preferences as well as the diagnostic information developed during the summer assessment program.

In addition to the educational component of

PHI, students are assisted in obtaining part-time employment on or near the N.I.U. campus in order to gain experience and understanding of the work world. While enrolled in the nine-month program, students are housed in the residence halls at Northern Illinois University.

Qualitative Research

Most of the studies of transition programs and their effects on the students have involved the application of quantifiable measures of academic, vocational, and social development (Allen, Rawlings, & Schildroth, 1989; Bullis, 1989; Lumpkin, 1988; Watson, 1987). Some studies have employed structured questionnaires, psychometric assessments, and analyses of students' academic and employment records. The process of transition has also been evaluated from the perspective of professionals (teachers, counselors, rehabilitation personnel) and parents. There has been a lack of research leading to an understanding of the students' own perceptions, specifically via qualitative research methods such as in-depth, open-ended interviews.

Since the purpose of this study was to understand the process of transition as perceived by the informants, qualitative methodology had immediate appeal. A qualitative approach is deemed appropriate when trying to understand a specific culture, and the experience of living in that culture. As Kirk and Miller (1986) have stated, qualitative methods are best utilized "...where meanings rather than frequencies assume paramount significance" (p. 5). Central to the qualitative approach is the notion that persons make interpretations about their world, then act on the basis of these beliefs. "Language, whether in oral or written form, is central to most qualitative research because of the emphasis on symbolic understanding and communication. Qualitative data take the form of narrative rather than numbers" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p. 156).

The Informants

"Studies that depend primarily on in-depth interviewing of people with severe disabilities approach the world from the perspective of the informant. This kind of research requires articulate research subjects" (Biklen & Moseley, 1988, p. 156).

The term "informant" was used in the sense that it is defined in Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, as "a native speaker engaged to repeat words, phrases, and sentences in his own language

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

or dialect as a model for imitation and a source of information." Similarly, the informants in this study were indeed native speakers, who were encouraged to "speak" in their own, most natural language. Finally, the informants were the major source of information, becoming "teacher" to the researcher.

In attempting to find "articulate" informants, the director of PHI and the staff counselor suggested a number of students who would be most capable of understanding the basic goals of the research project, and who possessed sufficient language skills to comprehend in-depth interview questions and express their ideas adequately. From this list of volunteers ten students were selected.

The ten informants (5 female, 5 male) represented a cross-section of the PHI population (5 college prep. students, 4 pre-vocational, and 1 student in the CASP program) whose ages ranged from 19 to 26 years. Of the group, seven had additional disabilities including: visual problems, behavior disorder, learning disability, Tourette's Syndrome, cerebral palsy, Charcot-Marie Tooth Syndrome (a degenerative disease of the peripheral nervous system), and a variety of unspecified underlying neurological disorders.

All ten informants had a "severe to profound bilateral" hearing loss. Eight of the students were hearing-impaired at birth, while two others suffered their hearing loss by age 4, technically before the acquisition of meaningful language. Several students experienced a progressive hearing loss and will lose even more of their residual hearing in the future.

Data Collection

The study of the hearing-impaired students in this transition program was conducted primarily through a series of three videotaped interviews and observation. The majority of these interviews took place within the PHI facility where stationary videotape equipment was available.

Videotapes and audiotapes were transcribed using the informant's verbatim language style as well as behavioral description. Each of the ten informants was interviewed on three occasions during their year at PHI (July, October, and April). A major concern was effective communication in the interview setting. "The dependence of the qualitative researcher on language, and the image of the ideal informant... as an articulate person... may call for some creative tactics in the face of the informant who cannot verbally inform" (Biklen &

Moseley, 1988, p. 161).

Communication in the interview setting varied in style depending on the needs and preferences of the informants. The mode of communication ranged from verbal English exchange to Pidgin Sign English (PSE), to American Sign Language (ASL).

Data Analysis

As with most qualitative studies, this project was indeed labor-intensive, because it demanded a great deal of time to be spent in the informants' environment in order to gain their trust and to understand the informants' world. The researcher's own subjective experiences were considered a research instrument, or lens, through which to view and interpret informants' experiences and perceptions. Finally, the number of interviews conducted generated a massive amount of data—approximately 30 hours of videotape and 362 pages of transcripts and interview summaries—to be analyzed.

The actual process of data analysis required many readings of the transcripts, noting themes relevant to the informants. After viewing, transcribing, and analyzing the interviews, several distinct dimensions, or areas of similar experiences and change, were identified in terms of the informants' perceptions of themselves, others, and their surroundings. These dimensions were compared over the period of the year at PHI for each informant, and among informants. These dimensions included issues of identity, family and social relationships, communication, future, personal values, students' perceptions of change, and the informants' evaluations of PHI.

Results

In an attempt to provide a brief overview of the identified dimensions of change among the informants, as well as a general sense of the types of experiences and directions of change, Figure 1 was developed. Each of the seven themes found to be consistent for the informants is presented, including brief descriptions from each of the three sets of interviews. In some instances, little or no information was available on a specific theme. For example, in the area of personal values, the informants demonstrated no significant differences from interview #1 to interview #2. On the theme of Students' Perceptions of Change, this question was not applicable in the first set of interviews. (See Figure 1.)

**A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS:
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

Figure 1

	Dimensions of Change		
	Interview #1	Interview #2	Interview #3
Identity	Poorly defined Limited opportunity to associate with peers Denial of deafness	Some recognition of similarities/differences	Integration of deafness into identity
Family and Social Relationships	Generally weakened or lacking intimate relationships Isolated	Trying out new roles both with friends and family	More independent, mature relations with family Increased choice in selection of friends
Communication	Variety of communication Reluctance to use phone/TDD Some students possessed minimal or no sign skills	TDD class Enrollment in sign language classes Practice interacting with hearing persons	Improved sign skills Increased confidence in all forms of communication Less reluctant to use phone or TDD
Future	No plans Unrealistic, undecided, or unclear goals	Career exploration Job experiences	Specific plans with alternatives Applications to colleges Jobs/job interviews arranged
Values	Individual relationship with God Parents as most important person Highlight of last year	No significant change noted	PHI staff as valuable persons Highlight of PHI year
Students' Perceptions of Change	(Not applicable at this point)	Homesickness diminishing	Maturity Increased socializing Assertiveness Independence from family
Value of PHI	Expectations: Help in finding a job Help in selecting a college Improved academic skills	Mixed feelings about jobs at PHI, classes Postponing college selections	PHI was helpful in: finding friends independent living enhanced self-concept planning for future

**A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS:
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

Identity

In the initial interview, the informants were asked how they chose to describe themselves in terms of their hearing abilities (i.e., deaf, hard-of-hearing, hearing-impaired, etc.). While some were able to easily identify a term, others seemed to struggle with the implications of calling themselves "deaf." While all ten informants met the audiological definition of deafness, most described themselves as "hard-of-hearing."

[I am] Hard-of-hearing. I remember one time my mother filling out a paper for me to come here. She put "deaf" on there, and I got after my mother, said, "I'm not deaf. What are you saying?" So, I changed it to hard-of-hearing. I liked that a lot better. Don't tell them I'm deaf!

I think I'm hard-of-hearing. That's the way I feel.

Oh yes, compared to some of the kids here, I hear real good. Some people hear better than I do. I...grew up hearing.

I'm hearing-impaired. It doesn't bother me. The reason for that is because I am considered as a deaf person because I have a hearing loss, but I'm not deaf. But I'm not deaf, see? Another reason I'm considered deaf is because I went to a deaf school...I know a lot about deaf people. I have a hearing loss, I wear a hearing aid, so I'm considered as a deaf person.

Since the majority of the informants had limited experience with other deaf persons, the idea of identifying with the deaf population was foreign, perhaps undesirable.

I'm deaf now. I wish I wasn't deaf. I wouldn't have to go through all this...I don't like to be grouped with deaf because other people will think I'm the same...I'm hearing. I feel like I'm hearing...I don't feel comfortable with deaf people.

In the development of identity the availability of role models and peer groups is essential. Growing up with a severe hearing impairment mandated special educational programming for this group. Eight of the informants attended mainstreamed schools throughout the elementary and high school years, and many were the only deaf child in their school, and their community. As a result, the typical school day described by informants included

several hours riding on the bus, and therefore an absence of after-school activities and a lack of friends.

I went to seven different schools...[my high school] is way out. It's a long way...I had to ride two buses, and I had to miss first and eighth hour. It was rough.

But when you go home you feel different. When you're in school, you have your friends there, you go to their house after school. But I didn't have that. Plus, I'm supposed to graduate when I'm eighteen. I graduated...and I'm twenty...It made me feel so uncomfortable.

...I hated going an hour drive home. I would get home at 5:00 at night...I couldn't be with my friends during the week. There wasn't enough time.

Because when I first came to high school, I was different because I have a hearing problem, you know? After a while I decided I can't do anything. I can't make them accept me, or whatever. Sometimes I just tell them a deaf people joke, and they laugh and I laugh. Then after a while I began playing football, but the coach won't let me because I have a hearing problem, so if I tell them a joke and they like it, we probably might become friends. They said, "Well, just forget it." So I did try to forget about it and after a while we got along better.

For students who identified themselves as hard-of-hearing, this year at PHI was their first experience living and socializing with a large number of deaf persons. There was an inevitable impact on students' perceptions of deafness, and how these perceptions related to their own identity.

I think I have done pretty well communicating with people...I have accepted my hearing loss. Try to accept the way I am. Before I came here, I was with hearing people all my life. It is a big change for me now. I am with different people; hearing, hard-of-hearing, deaf...It is kind of hard. At first, I really didn't want to associate with deaf and hard-of-hearing people, but after talking to people, they are just like me. At first I wanted nothing to do with them. I changed my attitude. (Before) I tried to be like hearing...I have learned a lot about people. I know myself, one person thinks hard-of-hearing

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

and deaf people are retarded people. I said, "Look who's talking!" He would rather associate with hearing people. It makes me wonder. I mean people could be smart *and* deaf. It doesn't make a difference.

I'm part of two worlds, the deaf world and the hearing world.

While attending PHI, the informants gained an awareness of the meanings of deafness, including a sense of cultural deafness. At the end of the year, most of the students had begun to integrate their disability into their sense of who they are, and within what group or community they wish to belong. The informants seemed to gain a clearer sense of identity, becoming more accepting of other deaf persons and themselves instead of rejecting the label of deafness and denying any similarity to "deaf people" as a group.

Family and Social Relationships

The students involved in this project came from varying backgrounds and family structures; however, there appeared to be a common thread of isolation, of feeling out of place in every area of life. As will be described in the section on "Communication," even within their families, relationships are altered, perhaps weakened, due to the lack of adequate communication and inadequate adjustment to the child's disability. In their school experiences, again students reported being lonely, not understanding the teacher, and feeling generally left out. Socially, finding and maintaining friendships had proven very difficult. Many informants were the only hearing-impaired child in their families, in their schools, and in their communities. After-school activities were generally not available since there were often long bus rides to homes far from school. In high school, the majority of the informants had not received their driver's license, or had no access to personal transportation. This basically ruled out involvement in school organizations or sports. Instead, students described interests and hobbies that were solitary in nature.

Well, they (family) won't let me do things. They say, "No, can't do it."...People try to walk all over you because you're handicapped. [At school]...nobody really talked to me because they think I can't understand them. I don't trust them people. I don't trust anybody.

I don't want to go home [for Christmas]

because I'll be the baby again. I hate that! There's nothing at home. Here, I can learn, there's lots to do. At home all they talk about is marriage, husband. I'm not ready for that yet. Here I think about apartments, job, life enjoyment.

Well, when I was at home I didn't have too many friends, because they don't like me too much...I was pretty much by myself. I didn't mind that. They were up to nothing anyway. They always started something mean, so I just said, "Leave them alone."

I only have a couple close friends. I thought they were really my friends, but sometimes they seemed two-faced, but I hang on to them because they are the only ones I got.

I like to read...draw, do leather work...I have a lot of hobbies. I have to because growing up, I had to have *something* to do... Where I grew up, there was only one other hearing-impaired [person], and he wouldn't talk to me much...I was alone a lot. (On the subject of family) It's difficult...for one thing, you stay on the bottom, you know? Of course they accept you, you accept them because they're family, but you don't really communicate. The stuff your brothers and sister would normally tell you, you don't know because you can't hear it. Then too, sometimes, you know, older brothers...take you along in their group and stuff, but no...

Throughout the year at PHI, the informants were involved for the first time, in a non-hearing community. While two students had attended a residential deaf school for several years, most of the informants found PHI to be a new, novel experience. During the program, most students began socializing, became more outgoing, and developed confidence in themselves as contributing members of a community. Those who had previously seemed wary of interacting with other deaf persons found themselves developing friendships more easily than they had anticipated.

At first...I don't really want to be with a lot of hearing-impaired...Now I like my hearing-impaired friends...[I will miss] my friends, my roommate. We talk about everything.

Often students agreed with Tina's statement, "I'd rather have both Deaf and hearing together, that's what I like." Chris also supported this idea.

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

"I want to hang around hard-of-hearing, hearing-impaired, hearing people, both." Having had the opportunity to experience their "difference" as a point of unity and acceptance in a community allowed the students to understand themselves and develop a clearer identity and place in the world. Matt stated, "I'm part of two worlds: the deaf and the hearing world. So, I will be ready for it."

Communication

There exists at PHI a wide range of communication modes, and numerous opportunities for students to develop skills and strategies for communicating with hearing and hearing-impaired persons. Students involved in this study come to the program with varying styles of communication. Although all informants were severely or profoundly deaf from birth, infancy or toddlerhood, only one reported being fluent in American Sign Language. One informant was comfortable with Signed English, and the other informants had little or no sign language skills. Many enrolled in the sign classes taught at PHI, and reported an improvement in their sign skills by the end of the year.

For the informants not utilizing sign language, communication has proven difficult and frustrating. They relied upon their residual hearing and speechreading to comprehend what others say. All of the informants used voice to express their ideas. Conversely, communication with deaf persons using ASL was a challenge for them.

Before I came here I knew nothing!...It's hard because deaf students sign and don't talk. If they're hearing, they talk and don't sign.

I have a hard time sometimes, so I have a paper, I write on it...But you know, ASL and English, I'm confused!

I don't sign very well because I didn't learn sign until I was...about 15, maybe 16.

Perhaps the most powerful impact of poor communication was evident within the students' families. Of all ten informants, none reported having parents or siblings who could sign, even though all the informants indicated their comprehension was greatly enhanced by the addition of sign to voiced communications.

I cannot understand what my mom is saying. She has a soft voice as it is. It would drive me nuts. When I ask her to repeat it, I would

move towards her and then she would yell. She told me to move closer, and then when I do, she yells! She just doesn't think I understand. She says when it's hectic, it's hard for her to remember.

Last New Years my family was home all together and we were talking with my parents, and I felt left out because I could not understand what they were saying...I cannot hear what is going on...I felt so alone.

Yeah, especially at dinner time. My mom and my brother and sister talk really fast. And I feel like, "Where am I?" They already forgot about me. I say something about it to my mom, and she says, "Oh, I forgot." And I say, "Mom...[He dangles his hearing aid in front of her.] I have to keep reminding them.

Through sign language classes, socializing with students using a variety of sign language systems, and working at jobs with hearing persons, PHI students have the opportunity to improve communication skills. New strategies are learned by observing others, and the supportive environment provides a safe ground to try communicating more effectively.

But she [the residence hall adviser] said, "Get ready. Here's the number. You can call for yourself." I thought, "Me? Call myself? O.K." I go to the dorm and called for myself. I found out it wasn't really that hard. I have used it [telephone] myself, but I always asked people, "Do it for me."

When I went home for spring break, I returned something [to a store.] We went to the store and my mom said, "I'll do it." But I said, "No, I'm getting old enough to do it myself." I gave it to the lady and wrote her a note. My mom was standing there watching, and she was really surprised I could do it...

Future

One of the major emphases of the Program for Hearing Impaired is to assist their students in developing a plan for the future, both immediate and long-range. Upon entering the program, the informants had no specific plans for the future, or in some cases, had career goals that seemed unrealistic and unattainable. One student, for example, stated he wanted to become "the new king of rock and roll," while others often reported plans to

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

“work in something with computers.”

The attitude about the future appeared to be one of uncertainty, perhaps fear as indicated by this informant.

Yeah, I think the best thing to do is wait until the future comes. If I keep thinking about the future, probably I would feel bad that it won't be what I'm expecting. Maybe I thought of having a big house like my dad, a car, a wife, and children. A really good job, like a vice president of a company. Then I realize that the future came and I'm single, have an apartment that's messy, no car but I have a bike, a job that's very basic like working at McDonald's. That could happen.

Throughout the course of the program, students were involved in work experiences, a career exploration class, and weekly counseling sessions, on both an individual and group basis. By the last interview, all ten participants had specific short-term plans, and goals seemed to be consistent for all ten participants. At times students expressed confusion and concerns about the future; however, by the end of the program, their plans were established, and some direction and sense of purpose came into view.

I think a lot about positiveness. I think once in a while negative, but most of the time positive. I think positive and smile... Yes, hopefully it (the future) will be good.

The challenges of independent living don't bother me... you have to do it eventually anyway, so I don't worry about that kind of thing... I believe whatever I do, I'll be a success at it. I'm not one of those people who, if they don't succeed a certain goal, they just go and give up.

Values

Attempting to capture a sense of the informant's values systems proved challenging for several reasons: language styles at times made questions difficult to formulate, some students appeared to have little awareness of their own values, and when informants did have some sense of personal values, they had difficulty articulating those concepts.

On the subject of religion, there was a diversity of responses. There also seemed to be confusion in separating belief in God and religion, and attending a church. Even though a couple of students attended church regularly at home, none of the

informants attended church services while at PHI.

At first I was kind of mad [at God] because I got all these problems, nerve problems. I wish I could be normal.

Well, I had religious training..., but I felt that God was against me [points to his ears].

...I think He [God] is wonderful... I talk to him... He's the only one in the whole world who understands my world.

At the end of the year at PHI, the informants described their values:

Some students say, “I'm thinking about getting me a condo... and then work, work, work, getting rich. All they think about is making money... I think the most important thing is family, happy, laughing, all that kind of stuff.

In a matter of importance would be my family, relatives, and then school and friends.

But I think family comes first... I think it (success) means doing good for yourself; making something of yourself. Enjoy what you're doing. Not being rich and famous, but being the best I can be.

The most important thing is to have a good career job. Job is something you work for three months and then you quit. I don't need that. I need a good career. It's important to me to have a lot of money and get the things that I want.

Overall, there did not appear to be significant changes in informants' value systems during the course of the PHI experience. Development did occur in their abilities to identify and describe these values or beliefs, however.

Students' Perception of Change

Near the end of the year, in the final interview, students were asked to identify any ways in which they viewed themselves as “different” from the person they were at the beginning of PHI. All ten informants were able to identify one or more changes in personal values, attitudes, and patterns of socialization. Some informants were able to make connections between personal change and related changes in family relationships, communication abilities, and plans for the future.

I feel... more motivated. I really feel ready to work at college.... I'm not homesick anymore.

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

I'm more mature, I know, more responsible.

I think I have matured *a lot* when I look at my... friends.

I'm learning to be more assertive...more independent.

I'm learning not to be so nice. Be nice, but learn to say "no," not let people walk on me.

I've been trying to make my own decisions, my own thinking for me.

I learned to communicate a little better since I've been here. Well, anyway I've learning a lot. I've learned how to deal with people...

Value of PHI

As a part of the final interviews, students were asked to evaluate PHI in terms of how they benefited (or did not benefit) educationally, socially, personally, etc.

PHI is a very good program... The teachers want to help you learn. They do care... I think I have been pretty successful at trying to conquer problems, trying to meet new people, to stick with a job.

Interacting with people was great, and I mean a lot of my friends kept saying, "Oh, I can't wait to come back in the fall so I can meet some girls." We had a good time. The most beneficial thing about PHI is the interacting with people. I've never interacting with a group of people on one floor before. I've never been in the dorm in college. Never been on a university before. I can name ten pages full of stuff I have learned from.

...most deaf students probably learned a lot and they are more ready to face the real world. I would probably say they should come to PHI because they can help you and teach you how to take care of yourself in the future. They will help you find a good college for you. They will help you find a major. Stuff like that. I just think if you went there, you would be better off.

I wish I could stay in the program. It helped me not feel lonely anymore. Really, you know, it maked me realize I'm not alone. They can help you out, one another. They're always there. I like that. How can a person get along without friends?

One informant, when asked what she would tell other hearing-impaired high school students about PHI, stated:

You will have problems, [at PHI] same as at home, the same everywhere you go. You need to learn to solve the problems for yourself, not let your parents do it. You have to learn to think for yourself... It feels good. It takes time.

Finally, when students were asked in the final interview to describe their thoughts and feelings about leaving PHI, all ten individuals, regardless of their patterns of socializing and opinions about the program, offered very similar responses. Typically, students experienced excitement and anticipation about the future, as well as a sadness at leaving all the friends they had made there.

When I graduate, I'm going to say, "See you later! I'm going to miss you, I love you, and I still remember you.

Well, I'm happy. I'm ready to leave. I'm gonna miss everybody. I want to thank everybody for what they done for me, to help me. But, I'm ready to move on to something else now. I need to move on.

Discussion

In addition to sharing the severe disability of deafness, the informants in this study shared a common experience of substantive personal change over the course of a relatively brief, 10-month transition program. The majority of this change related directly to the pervasive sense of community support established by PHI staff in this multi-dimensional program. In the areas of academics, employment, independent living and residence hall programming, the staff work to provide an atmosphere of acceptance and support for students, as well as presenting new challenges in a number of settings, from using the phone to order a pizza, to applying and interviewing for a job on their own.

At the beginning of the program, many informants rejected the notion of involvement in a "deaf program." They described themselves as "hard-of-hearing," and not like "deaf people." Most of these students had never experienced genuine acceptance into a community, deaf or otherwise. Their previous experiences were rooted in isolation from family, peers, and society in general. By avoiding the "deaf world," refusing any association with

A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS: THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

deafness and pursuing an "as if" identification with the hearing world, these individuals often became strangers in both worlds, lacking a group with whom to truly identify. Little sense of community membership was experienced by the informants, and therefore the support (in some cases, even the challenge) to venture out was often lacking. While this community of hearing-impaired peers at PHI may have proven unfamiliar, even intimidating initially, in most cases, informants eventually found a sense of acceptance and security.

From this base of support and challenge, students found themselves more able to take risks, especially in new leadership roles at PHI and on their jobs, and with hearing persons. These sorties into the "hearing world" took place on the job, requesting schedule changes or promotions, on the university campus, and with families and home communities. One informant described an occasion during the Christmas holidays when she went to a store to return a sweater, something she had previously depended on her mother to do for her. In the residence hall, students learned to make their own phone calls, often by arranging for an interpreter, instead of asking the R.A. to "call for me." All these challenges, no matter how small, served to build the students' sense of personal strength, leading to higher levels of independence in behavior and decision making. Using an Ericksonian framework to interpret the meaning of these personal changes, the majority of informants entered PHI with an unresolved sense of identity. Societal expectations at this age generally include the individual's contribution to society, specifically via work, and the ability to make concrete decisions. For this particular group (hearing-impaired students), the task of identity development is often entered into with inadequate resources and incomplete resolution of previous developmental tasks. In order to facilitate movement through developmental stages, Knefelkamp suggests that college-aged students require more than "a smorgasbord of opportunities" (Knefelkamp, Widick & Parker, 1978). These students need to be specifically invited. There is a need for encouragement and support to experiment, to learn from failures without self-blame. Finally, a secure environment must be established in which students can express themselves and try new roles, and where students' ideas and feelings are acknowledged and deemed valid.

By the end of the program, it appeared most

informants had arrived at some integration of deafness into an identity and were preparing to move on to Erickson's stage of intimacy. Their newly developed sense of independence and increased ability to communicate and interact with others helped pave the way for the tasks of developing more mature relations and committing to those relationships.

The changes students experienced appear to be interrelated. For example, enhanced communication led to increased socialization and more positive self concept. These led to more optimistic views of the future, resulting in specific, challenging career plans. Relationships with families changed as students developed assertiveness and independence. In general, informants described themselves, at the end of the program, as more mature, motivated, and able to make their own decisions. An overall sense of a more pro-active attitude became apparent.

When asked directly if the informants perceived any changes within themselves after completing PHI, all agreed that change had occurred. Some were unable to articulate these changes, while others seemed unaware of changes that were quite obvious to the researcher. Those areas of change described by some informants included increased capabilities and personal strength, more maturity and self-assuredness.

Perhaps this pervasive enhancement of maturity, independence and self-concept, occurring without the informants' awareness of the process, serves as testimony to the power and effectiveness of the PHI community experience combined with employment opportunity and academic skills training programming. Indeed, academic skills were enhanced in preparation for college, training program, or job. The essential support and challenge, however, were very apparent throughout all elements of PHI. This program far exceeded the charge to "bridge the gap" between school and work, providing a secure base for students to approach and resolve developmental tasks in search of a meaningful, mature adulthood, and facilitating an awareness of the value of community involvement.

The information gathered from these informants suggests implications for a number of programs providing services to deaf children and young adults. Educators at all levels could assist their students in gaining information and experience common to their hearing peers, thus assisting in psychosocial development. Transition programs

**A TRANSITION PROGRAM FOR HEARING-IMPAIRED STUDENTS:
THEIR PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

could also benefit from the success achieved by students at PHI. The unique, multifaceted nature of the program and its philosophy of student support and challenge may serve as a model program for hearing-impaired youths in transition. Finally, parents with deaf children may benefit from the experiences and issues discussed in this study. The core issue of communication in the family has presented major obstacles, some of which could be addressed, perhaps resolved, with the assistance of these students' perspectives. The informants in this

study, in sharing their perspectives and experiences in transition, have shed some light on this process of change and development, and have provided insight that may help remove or lower these obstacles for deaf persons and their families. By reducing the sense of isolation within the family, school, and society, deaf persons may face developmental tasks and challenges of the future with more adequate resources within themselves, their families, and from the world around them.

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