

Alone In The Crowd . . .

By Christine Wixtrom

"Let the deaf student join the mainstream!" So goes the cry, based on the assumption that placement at a regular school benefits students more than placement at a special school. Those who advocate "mainstreaming" hope that the deaf student, if educated in "regular" schools, will be able to blend in successfully with hearing peers and feel like a "normal" student. With this expectation, hearing impaired students are being directed away from schools for the deaf and plunged into mainstream education. But is this recommendation based on false hope? Is it realistic to imagine that an individual who cannot hear will become an involved, socially alive student, able to thrive in the natural flow of the mainstream? Or will he inevitably feel like "a goldfish swimming in a bowl, watching the outside action,"* glassed in, shut out, circling wearily in isolation?

Take a look at some hypothetical scenes from inside a high school where a deaf student has been "mainstreamed." Imagine that this student is the perfect candidate for the mainstream experiment. Deafened in his early teens, his communication skills are above average. He already possesses good speech, language and reading skills. In fact, he is singularly intelligent, a voracious reader, and at or above grade level in all content subject. He is outgoing, friendly and eager to become a part of the social mainstream—he even has ambitions for involvement in student government! His attitude toward the public school is positive, and his parents are behind him all the way. Support services (such as interpreters and notetakers) are offered in order to provide equal access to academic opportunities. Most of the teachers are willing to have a deaf student integrated into their regular classes. Free (non-credit) sign language classes are available on campus, for interested students. Some teachers even arrange to have brief sign language lessons presented a couple of times a week within their regular classes, in order to give the hearing students opportunities to learn to communicate with their deaf classmate.

The stage is set. The school environment is favorable, and the student is capable. He enrolls in school and the experiment begins. He is "mainstreamed." But is he in the mainstream? Consider scenes from a typical day.

It's a Monday in May, near the end of the school year. The classroom door is open, and the hearing students are pouring in, greeting their friends and talking excitedly about their weekend experiences. The deaf student slips in silently, sits down alone and buries his head in a book as he waits for class to begin. He cannot hear the buzz of activity and conversation around him. He was not a part of the weekend ac-

tivities. No one speaks to him. He looks up as a girl he likes comes up the row to her seat and drops her books down on the desk. He ventures to speak softly to her, not noticing that she is already talking and joking with a guy across the room. The deaf student finally captures her glance and asks his question, but the girl doesn't understand what he says. (His speech is slightly impaired, and the room is noisy.) After two more repetitions of "How was your weekend?" he is rewarded with a perfunctory "On, fine!" before she turns around and gets wrapped up in a detailed, secret exchange with her best girlfriend, who sits right behind her. They giggle and talk, glancing up once in a while to catch the eye of the boy across the room. The deaf student rearranges the papers on his desk.

Finally, the teacher begins to lecture, and the lively conversational exchanges become subdued. The hearing students settle into pseudo-attentive postures, reverting to subtle, subversive communications with those around them. The deaf student, in his front row, corner seat, turns his eyes on the interpreter. He keeps his focus there, working to grasp visually what the other students are effortlessly half-listening to. The teacher questions a student in the back of the room. Her hearing friends whisper help. Their encouragement boosts her confidence and she boldly answers the teacher. Satisfied, the teacher moves on to question someone else. The first student joins those whispering to the boy who's now on the spot. He picks up the quiet cues and impresses the instructor with his evident mastery of the subject. A peer support system of companionable cooperation helps keep everyone afloat. However, only those with sensitive hearing and social support can tap into this interwoven network of surreptitious assistance. When a pointed question is directed to the deaf student, he is on his own. No student schemes bring him into the "we" of class camaraderie. Instead, when he speaks, the students suddenly stop talking and stare. But he is oblivious to the awkward silence in the room. He is verbally stumbling, searching for an answer that will pacify the teacher, and yet not be too specific. He strains to minimize the risk of opening himself up for the embarrassment of saying something that has already been said, or something that misses the mark entirely. While he is still speaking, the bell rings and the other students pack up and start moving out the back door. The deaf student, his eyes on the teacher, doesn't notice the interpreter's signal that the bell has already sounded. The teacher smiles uncomfortably and cuts him off to give last-minute instructions as the students pour out the door.

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Between classes, the students race the bells for time to find their friends, catch up on the news, share secrets, common gripes and adolescent enthusiasms for music, social and sports events. Meanwhile, the deaf student quietly makes his way through the thronging crowd to his locker. Unable to hear the gossip, shouting and excited conversations all around him, he just reaches in for the necessary books, slams his locker shut and squeezes along the paths to the next class. He arrives early and sits down among a sea of empty seats to wait for the bell. At the last second, right before the signal sounds, the hearing students tear away from their friends and reluctantly scramble into class.

Today there is a film. The curtains are drawn, the room gives in to blackness and the film rolls. Under cover of darkness, the class comes alive with secret messages and whispered communications. But not for the hearing impaired student. Enveloped in the deeper silence that darkness imposes on the deaf, he keeps the narrow beam of his flashlight focused on the static sentences in the film booklet.

After the film, the teacher asks the students to work together in small groups to discuss assigned topics. Immediately, the hearing students call out to each other and rush to sit with their friends. The teacher tells one group to crack their circle of desks and let the deaf student edge in. As the instructor moves to another part of the classroom, the students lean together and start discussing girls, guys, dates, parties and inside gossip. Through the interpreter, the deaf student "listens" eagerly, hungry for crumbs of information about social goings-on, even though he knows he is outside it all, neither a subject of conversation nor a participant in it.

In the next class, the first five minutes are set aside for the class to practice sign language. The deaf student has been hoping that the sign lessons would provide at least a sparse stock of signs that students could use with him. The presenter demonstrates how to form the signs. A few students follow along, hesitantly imitating these gestures which seem so strange to them. But most of the students just take advantage of a little more time to pass notes, whisper together and strengthen established friendships. Although they have had almost a year of exposure to signing, the deaf student is still waiting for the day when someone, sometime, will approach him for a few words of simple conversation.

Suddenly, a rapid series of pulsing bells blasts into the classroom. Glad for an excuse to get out of class, the students quickly join the mass of people streaming out of all the doorways for the fire drill. The various classes mingle together and the mass of students swarms onto a nearby field. Students find their friends and cluster to chat while they wait for the end of the drill. In the middle of the milling crowd, in a sea of communication, the deaf student thirsts for a drop of conversation. He tries talking with a few people, but when they speak, he cannot understand their words. Impatiently, they turn away, leaving the deaf student to stand alone in awkward silence. When the drill ends, he hurries

back to the room, relieved. The other students return reluctantly to their seats.

As class begins, the teacher asks the students how they feel about something controversial that had happened recently. Hands wave all over the room—everyone has an opinion on the issue. Everyone, that is, except the deaf student. This is the first time he has heard about it. Students keep up a friendly banter, energetically debating points, asking questions, explaining their ideas and sometimes talking all at once. (When this happens, the interpreter can only convey snatches of the debate, by asking the deaf student to choose which of the many speakers he would most like to "hear.") The students are arranged in a circle, so that they can see each other when they speak. But the deaf student makes eye contact only with the interpreter, afraid that if he looks away, he'll lose the drift of what people are saying and miss something important. Indeed, even while paying attention and trying to keep up, he still falls behind, gets lost, misses the jokes, wonders who said what and has to struggle valiantly just to keep track of the conversational ball. While everyone else enjoys the stimulation of group interaction, the deaf student must "listen" through the interpreter, "hearing" everything second-hand and after the fact. He is hesitant about jumping into the discussion, for fear of being off the track or demonstrating poor timing. Besides, it is difficult to collect his own thoughts while straining to follow what others are saying.

Much of his frustration results directly from the need to use interpreters in the public school environment. In a school for the deaf, teachers and students would speak with him directly through visual communication. But here, the sound-based communications must be translated to a visual form for him. While interpreting is useful in this context, the process has many limitations. As fleeting bits of information are interpreted, an idea—expressed eloquently by the speaker—may lose all beauty in the translation. Information which is difficult to understand when listening directly to the teacher can be nearly impossible to grasp when it must be conveyed through an interpreter. In addition, the time lag (after words are spoken) interferes with smooth communication. Despite such limitations, interpreting is a necessary service for the hearing impaired student in the regular school environment. Through interpreters, the deaf student receives academic information presented in lectures and discussions. But when using interpreters, he often finds himself more of a spectator than a participant.

The lunch bell rings. On the quad, under the trees and in the cafeteria, students flock together with their friends. Kids cram into cars for a great time going out to lunch. But the deaf student hasn't been invited to join any of these companionable gatherings. After he finishes his lunch, he looks for something to do. The special lunchtime lectures that are offered on campus several times a month are always popular, but none is being presented today. (Besides, there are no in-

terpreters available during the noon break.) If it were Tuesday or Thursday, he could go to the lunchtime sign language sessions and hope that someone would show up. He has become used to the fact that while the lectures on science, psychology and business may attract two hundred students, the sign language sessions draw only few students, who attend irregularly. Learning a new way to communicate is not a high priority for most students. They are busy with other things. Many of them are active in clubs. There they can get to know each other as they work together on projects, get involved with issues, try out their talents and just have fun. Today, the deaf student wanders into one of the club meetings and watches from the sidelines. He cannot hear what they are saying. He tries to read their lips but can't even surmise the topic they are discussing. Giving up, he goes to the library to lose himself in a book until released from lunchtime loneliness by another bell.

Before the next class begins, the interpreter informs the deaf student that the cluster of boys in the hall are talking about the girls they have dated. The deaf student, wishing he was in their place, can only count the number of girls that have smiled at him, or said "Hi." Unable to communicate with the hearing students, he must content himself with a superficial level of contact with his peers. Because of the communication problems between deaf and hearing people, even making small talk is a frustrating and often unsuccessful struggle. If only he could communicate comfortably with everyone in sign language—maybe then he could make friends. But as things are, he must settle for less. The best he can do is eavesdrop on the social lives of his hearing peers. He continues to "listen in" as the interpreter conveys other hallway conversations. Some students are talking about the TV show they'd seen the night before (it wasn't captioned,

so the deaf student didn't watch it). Another group is discussing the candidates for student government positions (the deaf student has skipped the meeting because he wouldn't have been able to understand what anyone was saying). Others are outlining their plans to get together after school (the deaf student plans which book he'll read in his room at home).

As class starts, the teacher returns papers she has corrected. The deaf student hopes he won't be singled out again as "different." At the first of the year, he had been one of two students in a class who received the same poor grade on a test. The teacher had suggested to the hearing student that he work harder; then he had asked the deaf student if he wanted to move to a less demanding class. It seemed that people suspected that he might be "dumb" as well as deaf. Perhaps it was the same assumption that led another teacher to react with amazement when the deaf student earned an "A" grade on the first exam in his class. Thankfully, today his paper is returned without incident, and the rest of the period passes uneventfully.

During the afternoon, there is a rally in the gym. The deaf student arrives early, choosing a seat on one of the lower bleachers, where he will be close enough to see the speakers and the interpreter. Students stream in through doors on both sides of the building. It isn't long before the bleachers are jam-packed with talking, laughing, cheering students. The building is fairly bursting with spirited shouting, dynamic energy, and animated conversations. But no one talks with the deaf student. Set apart by silence, he cannot enter the world of words around him. Only an observer, behind a quiet barrier, he is alone in the crowd.

*Hurwitz, T. Alan, "Growing Up In Mainstreamed Education: Reflections of a Deaf Person," *The Deaf American*, 1983, Vol. 35, No. 8, pp. 15-18.