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ABSTRACT

This paper represents the first phase of a five-year study that will attempt to develop a culturally sensitive, comprehensive set of identification procedures to ensure that more gifted Deaf students are given opportunities to develop their potential. It discusses the overemphasis on language facility in the identification of giftedness and the resulting under-identification of gifted Deaf students. Deafness as a cultural difference is highlighted and case studies are presented that outline the educational and personal experiences of five individuals whose adult achievements would classify them as gifted people. The most significant theme that emerges from the case studies is a reluctance on the part of the participants to be double-labeled as gifted when many of them have struggled to attain a sense of identity as a Deaf person. They emphasize that giftedness is not simply an innate potential, instead, a result of the opportunities they have received compared to other Deaf people. Most of the individuals acknowledged the importance of a supportive home environment in helping them to attain their levels of performance. Identity with the Deaf community was also seen as a critical factor in their successes. (Contains 11 references.) (CR)

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Constructing a culturally sensitive education for gifted deaf students

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Constructing a culturally sensitive education for gifted deaf students

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Introduction

One of the most persistent problems facing the field of gifted education relates to the identification of giftedness in minority groups. In response to this issue, the literature over the last two decades has emphasised the need for multiple means of identification and appropriate curricula. In practice, however, use of standard English tends to be used as a de facto measure of intelligence. Such emphasis on language facility continues to discriminate against students from cultural minority groups. This situation is exacerbated for students with learning or physical disabilities who are often overlooked because of the preoccupation with their so-called deficits rather than their intellectual strengths. Traditionally, deaf people have been classified as a disability group but as many of the educational problems they face are more closely related to their communication skills, it may be more appropriate to examine their needs alongside other language minority groups. In fact, there is a strong movement that argues for the Deaf* to be recognised as a discrete cultural group. (* Note that the term, Deaf, is capitalised when it is used to refer to the specific cultural group; small caps are used when the word is used generally.) Anecdotes from deaf people are numerous about their teachers' inability to sign to them or children being forbidden to sign to one another. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine an atmosphere that is conducive to creativity, imagination and discovery of students' giftedness.

Deafness as Cultural Difference

As recently as thirty years ago, the Deaf were presented as a population without a language (Furth, 1966). However, as a result of the work of modern linguists, Sign Languages are now recognised as legitimate languages in their own right. In Australia, Auslan-the language of the Australian Deaf community-was given this recognition in the White Paper, *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (Dawkins, 1991).

The Deaf have also been widely regarded as a disability group and the term, hearing impaired, is one of the most recent terms that has been employed to describe a range of conditions from mild hearing loss to profound deafness. Many members of the Deaf community, however, object strongly to this deficiency model and prefer the term, Deaf, as they do not consider themselves 'impaired' (Power, 1992). The Deaf community does not view deafness as a condition to be pitied and cured as is the view held by the 'medical condition' construct that has characterised much of deaf education in the past. According to Butow (1994), it is no longer appropriate to use the terminology that has been used historically now that there has been a shift from the welfare focus to a human rights focus.

Power (1992) has suggested that the notion of 'a handicapping society' defining the Deaf is evident in such inequalities as the disproportionate funding for cochlear implant programs compared to funding for Telephone Typewriter services and poorly supported aboriginal ear health programs. Further evidence of the attitudinal handicap adopted by the wider society towards the Deaf community is the assumption that deafness is a condition to be cured either by technology or by education in a listening-speaking environment so that the deaf person becomes as indistinguishable as possible from a hearing person.

Deafness has been variously portrayed as "the wall of silence", socially and emotionally isolating, and leading to psychological imbalance. In the media, deafness is depicted in aged people as a source of confusion and jokes in conversation and in children as leading to social isolation, immaturity and frustration. Only in recent times have deaf role models been presented positively in film and theatre but, even then, the images are largely related to us through the hearing actors.

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Identifying Giftedness in Deaf Populations

The identification of giftedness in deaf children is closely tied to their ability to communicate and many deaf students experience difficulty in mastering the skills of English—a second language to many of them. Studies conducted in the 1960s in the U.S. and Canada demonstrate that the vast majority of persons, born deaf, do not acquire functional language competence even after many years of schooling (Furth, 1966). These studies showed that between the ages of 10 and 16 the deaf, on average, did not advance even one full grade in reading ability. A comparison of 1974 and 1983 academic achievement scores of deaf students has shown that this disadvantage has not changed (Schildroth & Karchmer cited in Lane, 1988). Evidence for this view is presented by Holdcomb, Coryell and Rosenfield (1992) in their discussion of the 1988 report to the President of the United States. The U.S. Commission on Education of the Deaf reported that the status of education of the Deaf was unacceptable and characterised by inappropriate priorities and inadequate resources. McLoughlin (1982), for example, reported that only one third of the hearing impaired population in the United States had high school diplomas compared to 75% of all black students who complete high school.

Teachers of the deaf are accustomed to identifying language and reading problems in deaf children and programs for the deaf are often geared towards remediation. The effect of labelling children as deaf results in the tendency to focus on disability so that a child with even outstanding abilities may be overlooked in the preoccupation with the child's deafness.

As with other cultural groups, there exists a need for flexible identification procedures for giftedness in Deaf populations. Such procedures need to be culturally sensitive to the way the Deaf community views itself and linguistically sensitive to the special language situation created by the primary orientation of the Deaf community towards signed communication. Clearly, an identification procedure that relies solely, or heavily, on IQ testing will fail to detect the gifted potential of many Deaf students. Research thus far has focused on non-verbal IQ measures (Baker, 1985), nominations by parents, teachers, peers and self (Yewchuk & Bibby, 1989) and the use of characteristics lists (Timms, 1982). A more promising and broader approach to giftedness was adopted by Tubb (1990) who utilised Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences in her work with gifted Deaf students. This paper represents the first phase of a five-year study that will attempt to develop a culturally-sensitive, comprehensive set of identification procedures to ensure that many more of our gifted Deaf students are given opportunities to develop their potential.

Case Studies

The following case studies outline the educational and personal experiences of a small number of Deaf people whose adult achievements thus far would classify them as gifted people. The people whose stories are described herein were interviewed by the researchers with the assistance of interpreters in order to ascertain their views toward giftedness in general and their own educational experiences in particular.

Alice

Alice is a young woman who describes herself as third generation Deaf. She attended a school for the Deaf from the age of three to sixteen. She describes her home life as being extremely warm and supportive with both parents supporting her intellectual development through discussion, reading and so on. On completing school, Alice worked briefly at a bank and for the first time, experienced the prejudice of hearing people. She resolved her crisis of confidence by leaving that position and currently attends university in addition to working with the Deaf community.

In describing her school experiences, Alice felt very positive about the socialisation that she found in a

school for the Deaf. She reports that she and the other Deaf students developed their own signs and the camaraderie was welcome. There were the usual frictions that occur among people everywhere, but as one member of a Deaf school community, Alice had a strong sense of identity with her peers.

However, Alice was less positive about the quality of the education she received and commented on the repetitive and boring nature of the work which left her unchallenged and unextended. In essence, the teachers expected less of Deaf students, despite the fact that the school catered specifically for Deaf students. She emphasises that many of the students were disadvantaged by the lower expectations that many of the teachers had of their ability:

We didn't really learn how to think or to criticise or to do things like that. It's unfortunate because I started with some good teachers and then I got hopeless teachers again so it sort of went up and down. So that meant that it blocked out education and development. If we had have had good teachers all the way through we would have done brilliantly. I would have been far better than what I'm doing now I feel.

Alice also commented on the poor communication skills of her teachers and the variation in the teachers' interest levels in their students and their laxity in discipline. However, it appears that Alice's potential was recognised by at least one teacher as she was accelerated from Year 5 to Year 6 and later to Year 7.

When asked about education for Deaf children, Alice suggested that more Deaf people should be involved. She also commented on what she thought would be a preferable model for educating Deaf students:

I think bilingual schools are excellent because they teach children in a natural environment using a natural language, AUSLAN and at the same time they can teach them English, change things to English so that the child can sign things and then you can say, "This is how you say it in English" and sometimes you might get stuck and think, "How do I write this in English?" so I think that it's excellent to have both so you're not putting down sign language, you're encouraging that as a natural language. But at English time you get to do the writing and teaching what that means and you can change that so that children understand this is what it means in English so that you can interpret between the two. For me it became a natural thing for me. I would sign things in AUSLAN but then when it came to writing I would make the change into English. It's an automatic process....When I'm writing I never think in sign language, I always think in English when I'm writing.

When asked whether she thought of herself as a gifted Deaf person, Alice expressed a certain discomfort with the label "gifted". However, she admitted that she had always known that her abilities were superior to most of her peers, particularly in the area of English literacy. Alice clearly associates giftedness with opportunities received rather than an innate potential. Thus, in describing her own accomplishments, she emphasises the support and encouragement that she had received compared to the limited opportunities of her Deaf peers:

I never think of myself as a gifted person or being gifted; I don't think of myself like that. I would see myself as a normal Deaf person. When I look at myself I feel that I'm just more fortunate than other Deaf people because of my background, my family background was excellent. Growing up we had lots of conversation, open discussions. I learnt a lot from my parents ... compared with others who had a difficult life or a sad life. I've just been more fortunate and that's how I see myself.

Stephen

Stephen was born deaf to hearing parents and reports no contact with other Deaf people until his completion of high school. He attended his local primary and high schools and in each institution was the only Deaf student. He did not learn Auslan until the age of 18 when he met other Deaf people and became aware of the Deaf community. Stephen graduated from university in 1993 after successfully completing an Arts degree and a Diploma of Education. Although he received some interpretation services, he largely completed his university studies without the benefit of such assistance. Stephen is

currently working as a teacher of the Deaf in a support unit attached to a primary school.

As indicated, Stephen's schooling experiences occurred in a regular setting where he was the only Deaf student. He reports a number of close friendships with other students at school. However, when he attended university he lacked similar support from a network of friends. As Stephen states:

like when I left high school, most of my friends had gone off to work and I came here not knowing anybody and I had high expectations of making lots of friends and that sort of thing. But it was really difficult because a lot of the times you are in noisy places and that was really hard for me because I just simply couldn't follow the conversations and make a contribution or participate in group conversations and being able to have an input. That sort of thing doesn't do your self-esteem very good....because I didn't have a real good social life, that affected how I felt towards doing well in my academic achievements. Not having any social life made me pretty frustrated and discouraged.

Stephen felt that his relationships with teachers at school were adequate but he regrets the lack of a role model at that time. Although he cannot cite specific examples from school, he feels he may have achieved more highly had he been taught Auslan at school and been educated by teachers who were more attuned to the special needs of Deaf children. In particular, he expresses the view that his teachers tended to have lower expectations of him because of his deafness.

As a result of his own schooling experiences and his observations as a student teacher, Stephen believes that an education that will allow Deaf students to attain their potential would commence with widespread use of Auslan. He states that it is only through the ability and opportunity to use Auslan that Deaf students can be totally involved in their educational environment. Such an approach would require the teaching of Auslan to Deaf students if they do not already possess that skill, the development of signing skills for teachers, and possibly the use of interpreters. The ability to communicate, Stephen feels, is a vital part of the Deaf student's self-esteem and identity:

I feel where there are Hearing Impaired Units then schools should make some effort to establish sign language classes so that they've got access to information so that a lot of students can learn sign language, and that will promote greater feelings of confidence and good feelings about themselves for the Deaf students too. The problem with integration now is that the Hearing Impaired Units are just tucked away in one part of the school and there's no real effort to establish communication with those Hearing Impaired students.

The importance of Deaf students having a sense of identity with the Deaf community is thus a vital part of their education, according to Stephen. He sees that the contribution he can make is as a role model:

when I go into the education system and I teach Deaf students, I act as a role model and in doing that it raises the expectations of the Deaf students themselves about what they can do and what they can't do.

The relationship between an individual's social and emotional needs and the realisation of their academic potential is significant from Stephen's perspective:

My experience is I think, mixing with other hearing people is not the best way to develop good feelings about myself so I think it's important for other Deaf children to grow up mixing with other Deaf children, developing their confidence and self-esteem about themselves and knowing where they fit in society.

Like Alice, Stephen does not view himself as a gifted person and resists such labelling. Nevertheless, his attainment in the light of very little support testifies to his potential. Stephen still sees himself as coming to terms with his membership of the deaf community and the need to reconstruct his identity in that culture; the label of gifted would simply serve to distance him from the cultural group with which he currently identifies.

Ruth is a deaf child of hearing parents. She currently works as a preschool teacher with Deaf children. Her parents tried a number of options in deaf education for Ruth when she was quite young. After initial resistance from teachers, her parents placed her in the local school. Ruth describes her mother's insistent attempts to gain her a place in the local school:

Most of the schools refused my parents and wouldn't accept me because I was deaf and they didn't have the resources or the teacher didn't have the qualification to teach deaf people. So my mother is a very strong woman and she applied at the local school and said, "Look you've got to accept my daughter or I'm going to go to the media." So the school said, "Okay we'll take her." So I was put into the school.

Ruth recalls that her childhood and school experiences were not happy times. She used to dream of having a great childhood and recounts how she believed that her deafness would be cured when she grew up.

The lack of itinerant support at the school proved to be a difficulty as much of the time that she would have been playing at home had to be devoted to speech therapy. Ruth's school years appear to have been years of frustration, where professionals, including her own family discouraged her from her ambitions of becoming a teacher because of her deafness. Fortunately one of her teachers actively encouraged her to pursue her ambition and Ruth gained entry to Griffith University where she qualified as a teacher of the deaf.

Ruth recounts that entering University was a significant step in realising her identity as a Deaf person:

At that time it was a very important time for me because that was the time when I met my first other deaf person and it was a real shock, a real culture shock, 'cause I had a strong hearing culture, I had hearing values and then I met this deaf person and I thought, "Why are those two people waving their hands like that?" It was a real good experience for me and I'm very thankful that I had that opportunity. So I started mixing with Deaf people. I started learning about the Deaf culture; I realised they've got a lot of answers to my identity. I grew up and I felt that I didn't have an identity. I didn't see myself as a deaf person who could achieve. I saw myself as someone who was sick, who couldn't really achieve in a hearing community; they were my answer; the Deaf community was my answer. So that's when I started becoming strongly involved in the education area

Greg

Greg was born with hearing as a member of a hearing family. At the age of six, he contracted a virus which resulted in deafness. Due to a lack of specialist facilities, Greg continued to attend a hearing school and, like Stephen, was the only deaf person in that environment. He received no support at primary school but did have contact with an itinerant support teacher at high school. After completing his Higher School Certificate, Greg worked full-time and completed a Bachelor of Arts degree on a part-time basis. He currently works as a Community Worker with the Deaf Society.

As indicated, Greg attended a primary school with hearing children and did not have the benefit of support for his deafness. He reports that being "mainstreamed" was a difficult experience for him. He enjoyed good relationships with peers at primary school but found himself more isolated at high school:

I had friends in primary school but when you arrived at high school and were put into different home classes it was very difficult to make new friends and to try and interact with people; some kids wouldn't try to bother communicating with me because they knew they'd have to look at me and it was difficult for me. Also there was lots of teasing; you know a deaf kid gets all the teasing and I ended up in lots of fights. Some people would say that that is normal adolescent behaviour but really it hurts at the same time too. I hated the teasing and I hated being deaf at that time.

Greg's relationships with teachers were also mixed. His memories of his primary school teachers centred on their lack of understanding as to the nature of his deafness. He reports one particular incident when he

was caned in front of the school assembly because he failed to line up when the bell was sounded! Although he enjoyed the extra support he received from the itinerant support teacher at high school, Greg sometimes found that his needs were not always met:

the support ... could have focussed on areas that I missed in the classroom, that was good, but sometimes it was a bit repetitive; they'd teach me something in class, I'd be taken out and the itinerant teacher would teach me the same thing again and I'd think, "Well, why am I doing this again?" but in the end I suppose it was worth it because it was for my benefit. Mainstreaming was a difficult process for me; I missed out on lots of different sources of information, classroom discussions. The teacher would always walk around the classroom and talk; hearing friends who tell jokes. I missed out on lots of information and that didn't really help me academically. I ended up in the bottom class for most subjects.

Greg believes that an education that is sensitive to meeting the needs of Deaf students should begin by recognising that they are people with potential who need positive role models:

They can achieve just about anything that hearing children can given the right opportunities and role models are the best way.

Greg also stresses the importance of the Deaf person's sense of identity and comfort with their deafness. This involves support that enables Deaf people to communicate with others, particularly the Deaf community, and that provides accurate information about deafness.

Greg does not use the term "gifted" to describe himself or his attainment. He attributes his achievements to his identification with a Deaf community that supports him and accepts him for himself and not as an impaired person. He states:

I identify myself as a Deaf person and I live within the Deaf community. With identity comes pride as well and in being Deaf I feel that I'm not different to any other person.

Greg, then, views giftedness as something that stems from the opportunities provided to people and not from innate potential. He stated that he felt he could have achieved more if he had "established his Deaf identity" earlier in life. Therefore, he believes that Deaf people are prevented from "being successful" through lack of support:

I've seen many deaf children who haven't succeeded in their life. I've seen that because of the communication system that they've been using through their life and they haven't had access to choices that really are available....I guess it really depends on what support you have when you're growing up.

Jan

Jan was born to hearing parents and was found to be deaf at the age of two after a prolonged illness. Her parents were both teachers who advocated strongly for their daughter being accepted into the local public school. On completion of her high schooling, Jan attended university, graduating as an Early Childhood teacher. She has worked as a teacher of the Deaf and currently works in after-school care.

Jan speaks positively about her experiences at school. She was a friendly, outgoing person who had no difficulty in making friends. Throughout primary school and early high school, she states that she was readily accepted by the other students. However, in late high school she suffered from self-doubts. It was the support of an itinerant teacher and her friends that enabled her to resolve this identity crisis:

[the itinerant teacher] helped me realise that I was an acceptable person, but I was still having quite big dilemmas and most of my friends were really good about it; they would push me over the bad times and they were much more accepting of me than I was of myself.

Jan coped well with school but believes that the teachers did not provide an adequate education for her;

she reports that they did not try to challenge her. At high school, she resented being withdrawn from classes to work with the itinerant teachers, particularly as she felt that they did not listen to her own beliefs about her needs. The one exception was an itinerant teacher who worked with her in the lunch-hour and took an interest in Jan's personal life. At university, she felt that she constantly had to prove that she was capable of being a teacher against prejudices of staff who believed "you have to be able to hear everything that's happening."

The most important element for education of the Deaf, from Jan's perspective, is the provision of classroom support. She states that if she had had the kind of support at school (note-taking) that she received at university, she would have excelled.

Jan recognises her achievements but again would not describe herself as gifted. This is primarily because she feels that she has not attained her true potential because she did not have the kind of school support that would have enabled her to attain excellence. At the same time, she acknowledges that her home environment was particularly important in the achievements she has accomplished.

Emerging Themes

The most significant theme that emerges from these interviews is a reluctance on the part of the interviewees to be double-labelled as gifted when many of them have struggled to attain a sense of identity as a Deaf person. They emphasise, therefore that giftedness is not something that is simply an innate potential. Instead, they emphasise the opportunities that they have received compared to other Deaf people. Most of the individuals acknowledged the importance of a supportive home environment in helping them attain their levels of performance.

Identity with the Deaf community was also seen as a critical factor in their successes. Nearly all the interviewees had experienced an identity crisis that had affected their ability to achieve. It was the successful resolution of such crises, through identification with the Deaf culture, that enabled them to attain their potential. Allied to this was the importance of positive socialisation experiences and a clear link between social and emotional well-being and academic attainment.

Conclusions

Although this study is still in its preliminary stages, there are important implications for an education that will enable gifted Deaf people to realise their potential. First and foremost, Deaf students must be given a sense of pride and identity in an educational environment that acknowledges their strengths and not one that focuses on supposed deficits. The importance of a bilingual approach with Auslan and English is strongly supported, particularly when we consider Alice, a highly articulate woman whose profound deafness prevents her from any oral speech. In order to attain the goal of bilingualism and biculturalism for Deaf students as an essential element for the discovery and nurture of giftedness, there will need to be extensive training of teachers in cultural sensitivity toward the Deaf.

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