

# Perspectives

For Teachers of the Hearing Impaired

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Cover: A student surrounded by nature is inspired to write. Outdoor education can affect students this way, as the article beginning on page 10 clearly demonstrates. Photograph by Lidi Aid.

Production by Darshan Bigelson Graphics



## Research Reports

*Perspectives for Teachers of the Hearing Impaired* welcomes articles on practical applications of research and on research-based discussions of issues confronting educators of hearing impaired students. Manuscripts should be typed double-spaced and should not exceed 1,500 words. Author's guidelines are available.

### Black Deaf Teachers— Short Supply

By James Woodward

Despite the fact that 18 percent of all surveyed deaf students in the United States are black, almost all of their teachers are white. (1)\* In the South, the proportion of black deaf students jumps to 28 percent. Considering these large percentages, it is surprising that there has been little research focusing on black deaf teachers.

Several researchers have pointed out the need for culturally appropriate role models for hearing impaired children. (2,3) They have particularly noted the lack of adequate role models for black deaf students. Although black deaf individuals share certain social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics with members of both the black hearing community and the white deaf community, there are often prominent social, cultural, and linguistic differences between the black deaf community and either of those groups. (3,4) Black deaf students, in other words, may have trouble understanding or identifying with white deaf teachers or black hearing teachers.

\*See References.

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Most of what has been previously reported on black deaf teachers was not based on complete statistical analyses. Researchers Anderson and Bowe estimated in 1972

### Black deaf students may have trouble understanding or identifying with white deaf teachers or black hearing teachers.

that there were fewer than 20 black deaf teachers in the United States. (5) Researchers Corbett and Jensema, in one of the largest studies of teachers of deaf stu-

dents, reported in 1981 on the frequency of teachers by ethnic background and hearing status. (6) Three percent of the teachers were black and 14 percent were hearing impaired. These researchers did not, however, report on the number of teachers who were both black and hearing impaired.

#### Examining the Data

In an attempt to determine the current number of black deaf teachers, I reanalyzed the 1981 data on teachers' hearing status and ethnic backgrounds and analyzed new data from a recent survey of classroom teachers.

In the earlier study, Corbett and Jensema gathered data from 4,887 classroom teachers in 868 different programs for hearing impaired students during the 1978-79 academic

### Some Southern Black Signs

How would you interpret the following signs?

Definition A is the English interpretation of the sign found in most sign language textbooks. Definition B indicates the meaning of the same sign for many Southern black deaf people.



- A. Mother
- B. Pregnant (black deaf signer, Georgia)



- A. License
- B. Dollar (black deaf signer, Louisiana)

year. For the purpose of my analysis, I excluded 43 hearing teachers and 4 deaf teachers who did not report their ethnic background. Among the remaining 4,840 teachers, only ten were black deaf teachers. Most of these black deaf teachers were postlingually deaf and taught in the South.

The Gallaudet Research Institute's Center for Assessment and Demographic Studies recently conducted a survey of teachers to determine the types of communication they use in the classroom. Data were collected from 1,947 classroom teachers, randomly selected from programs participating in the Annual Survey of Hearing Impaired Children and Youth during the 1984-85 academic year. Of all the teachers surveyed, only three identified themselves as being

both black and deaf. The proportion of black deaf teachers to the total number of teachers was similar in this study to that found by Corbett and Jensema in 1981.

In order to further verify these findings, I telephoned 73 public residential schools for deaf students in the United States asking for the numbers of black deaf teachers currently teaching in these programs. These 73 schools, which account for two-thirds of the number of deaf teachers in the United States, reported only 14 black deaf teachers, most of whom teach in the South. (7) It is likely that many of these 14 teachers were among the black deaf teachers accounted for in Corbett and Jensema's data.

#### What It All Means

The extremely small number of black deaf teachers may have important implications for the education of black deaf students. There are significant linguistic differences that may be impeding communication between these students and their teachers. Communication problems, in turn, may be having an adverse effect on academic performance.

In a number of areas in the United States, especially the South, black deaf people as a group tend to sign very differently from white deaf people. (4) Since most white hearing people, black hearing people, and deaf people with late onset of hearing loss learn signs formally in the classroom, they are never exposed to black deaf signs, which are not included in sign language textbooks. This lack of exposure has created some problems in communication. (3,4) Differences in the

signs of black deaf students are also often stereotyped by outsiders as deficits rather than as ethnic and regional dialect variation. (4)

More research is needed to determine if the lack of adequate cultural role models for black deaf students is influencing their self-image and academic performance.

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The above sign is used by some black deaf signers in Georgia to mean "wrong." Depending on their exposure to different signs, these signers might or might not understand the more widely used sign of a Y handshake on the chin.

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