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Parents and Appropriate Assessment:

Critical to the Education of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

By Ashley N. Greene-Woods and Natalie J. Delgado

It was 2010 and Jose, a 17-year-old deaf student in a western state, was earning A's and B's when his mother learned that he would not graduate. Jose's mother did not speak English. She had not attended any school meetings, and no one at the school had sought her out. Instead, the school had put her son, a boy of average intelligence, into special education. From kindergarten through high school, Jose had been in class with students who had intellectual disabilities, some of them severe. Only when it was time for graduation did his mother realize he was reading at the second- or third-grade level (Koehler & Whelan, 2015).

Professionals in deaf education can take heart that it was the Yakima Hearing and Speech Clinic that referred Jose's mother to a parent advocate, and it was the parent advocate who finally arranged a meeting with Jose's teachers. At the meeting, one of the teachers—who earlier had humiliated Jose by tearing up his paper before the class—admitted she had not known Jose was deaf (Koehler & Whelan, 2015). With graduation looming, a lawyer took Jose's case, a hearing was held, and a judge issued a scathing opinion: The school district had failed to provide Jose with a free and

Right: Greene-Woods teaches an ELA lesson and provides feedback on her deaf student's work.

Photos courtesy of Ashley N. Greene-Woods and Natalie J. Delgado

appropriate education and, therefore, the school district would pay the family $1 million and agree to teach Jose for an additional six years at a cost of $250,000 a year (Koehler & Whelan, 2015). The judge noted that the school had given Jose work below his grade level rather than adequately address his deafness (Ferolito, 2015). When the school district refused to accept the verdict, a Yakima county superior court judge lowered the six-year educational extension to four years but kept the $1 million award to Jose and his mother (Ferolito, 2015).

As those involved in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children, we can only respond to Jose's case with sadness and anger. We know that when deaf and hard of hearing children are isolated in classes with only students who are intellectually disabled, the result can be a tragedy. Such classrooms are not always suitable for deaf and hard of hearing children and their unique needs. We know that hearing aids alone do not guarantee deaf and hard of hearing children full access to communication, and amplification does not guarantee deaf and hard of hearing children full participation in academic life. We know that despite the financial award and four extra years of private teaching, Jose will never be compensated for the priceless early years of his education that are now lost forever.

There were so many missteps in Jose's case, according to news accounts: the director of special education had signed off on Jose's Individualized Education Program (IEP) when she had not been present during its development. Jose's hearing loss was never addressed by the school; in fact, the school attempted to blame Jose for his lack of accommodation by saying he was "at fault for not using effective hearing aids" (Koehler & Whelan, 2015). Jose had been situated—"warehoused," the newspaper headline said—with less than effective hearing aids in classes for intellectually disabled children (Ferolito, 2015). We may never know the specifics of why Jose was failed by his school system. Was it the evaluation? Was it the implementation? Was it indifference? We do know that sometimes evaluations are inaccurate for deaf and hard of

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Above: A deaf high school student works on an autobiographical piece. **Below right:** Each deaf or hard of hearing child is at the center of controversial discussions, such as which classroom placements are appropriate, which language is appropriate, and how amplification should be encouraged.

hearing children, and we do know that Jose's mother had not been part of the process that determined her son's education.

Evaluators and Parents Critical for Deaf Children

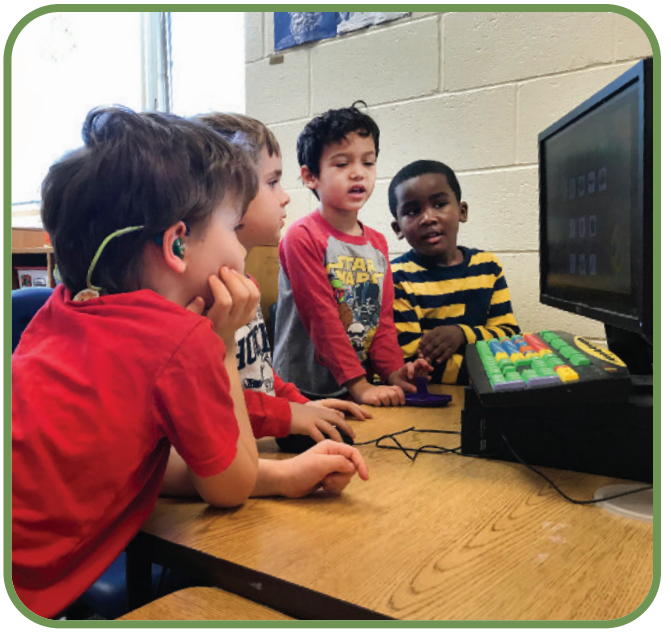
Jose's situation presents an extreme example of what can happen to deaf and hard of hearing children in our nation's schools when assessment data is either inaccurate or ignored and parental input is absent. Presenting a unique challenge to the educational system, each deaf or hard of hearing child is at the center of controversial discussions, such as which classroom placements are appropriate, which language is appropriate, and how amplification should be encouraged. As Jose's situation illustrates, these decisions are some of the most important in a child's life.

Evaluations of students' placement, language, and use of technology decisions require the work of specialized professionals who administer evaluations developed by other specialized professionals. Each should have certification in his or her field, and certification should be evidence of qualification. Those who are involved in assessment impact the results. If an evaluator cannot communicate with the child he or she is evaluating, the resulting evaluation may be suspect. Even if the evaluator uses a sign language interpreter, information can get lost. In fact, only 25 states have minimum requirements for public school interpreters (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, n.d.). This lack of nationwide standards means that a wide range of skills exists among educational interpreters. In fact, so few educational interpreters are qualified and certified that they are often referred to as "unicorns" among deaf educators.

Compounding the difficulty is the unique relationship of deaf and hard of hearing children to the English language. Many of these children achieve ongoing access to English for the first time when they arrive at school. This linguistic barrier is exacerbated when tests are administered by evaluators who are unfamiliar with deaf and hard of hearing students and their unique linguistic and cultural needs. Then these assessments are documented in the child's IEP, a legal document that is used for decision making about the child's school, classroom placement, goals, communication, and experience. In order to ensure the information in the IEP is an accurate reflection of the child's abilities, it is critical that deaf and hard of hearing students are served by skilled evaluators who are familiar with their linguistic and educational needs.

A Bill of Rights published by the National Association of the Deaf stresses the importance of having professionals who are knowledgeable about language acquisition for deaf and hard of hearing children present on the evaluation teams (National Association of the Deaf, 2016). When the assessor is unfamiliar with sign language and thus cannot assess the qualifications of the interpreter, there is no way to be certain that communication occurs and that the resulting evaluation is valid.

Parents need to be involved in every aspect of their child's education not only because they bring important information to the process but also because they can question and even provide insight into the assessments, and they provide oversight to the assessors. Often the most important members of the IEP team, in which evaluation results are discussed and a course of learning is decided, are the child's parents. Parents have the right to participate in developing their child's IEP. They have the right to question or suggest changes in placement, services, interpreters, and assistive technology. They have the right to request further evaluation. If parents disagree with an IEP team or its decisions, they have the right to appeal. School



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professionals only get so much time with each child, whereas parents are with their children throughout their first years and, therefore, can be more aware of their emotional and mental needs.

The presence of parents can mitigate against the sort of costly mistake that occurred with Jose. In Jose's case, the price of the school's failure to accommodate a deaf child was excruciating in terms of the financial obligations of the district and, even more important, in terms of the child and his academic and emotional well-being. According to his attorneys, Jose's intensive tutoring brought his reading, writing, and math skills to a high school level. He has learned sign language, and he hoped to enter postsecondary education (Koehler & Whelan, 2015). However, there is no way to know how many "Joses" are still in our schools or to measure how many of the nation's deaf and hard of hearing children have been affected by minor misplacements or even misdiagnoses. Still, accurate assessment, rooted in cultural as well as in academic understanding of the deaf or hard of hearing child, and parental involvement in every child's education can mitigate a situation like Jose's from ever occurring again.

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ASSESSING THE DEAF OR HARD OF HEARING CHILD:

Four Key Points

By Ashley N. Greene-Woods and Natalie J. Delgado

Imagine yourself a 6-year-old in elementary school, pencil tapping on a strange table in a small room with a person you haven't met before. Your interpreter is sitting by this strange person, but your interpreter is acting more formal than usual and saying, "You can do this yourself." The strange person pulls out books and flashcards, then asks you to answer questions about pictures. You begin to feel anxious because you're not a great signer, and you're not great with English either. In fact, you have just begun to acquire formal language.

Access to language is perhaps the most important aspect of the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Nevertheless, parents must remember that these students, unless they have other disabilities, should be working on grade level with their hearing peers. Assessment can make a big difference. As they discuss assessment for deaf and hard of hearing students, parents should consider the following:

1. **Deaf and hard of hearing children should be assessed in each of the languages they use.** Ideally, the assessor would be qualified to provide the assessments in each of the child's languages—English, American Sign Language, Spanish, or whatever language is used in the child's home. If an interpreter is used, the interpreter should understand how the assessment process works and the role of the interpreter.

2. **Deaf and hard of hearing children should be administered more than one language assessment**. Sometimes it is hard to tell if language deprivation, developmental delay, or even just cultural difference has rendered the assessment invalid. A variety of language assessments can help narrow this issue.

3. **Deaf and hard of hearing children's language assessment should be considered in tandem with their language background**. If the child uses home signs, gestures, or pointing, the evaluator needs to be mindful of the fact that their assessments may look different from a child who was raised with full language access from birth and, therefore, speaks or signs fluently. Language is not only the primary tool of a child's expression but impacts the way that child understands the world. Evaluators need to be sure that they can understand the child and his or her frame of reference.

4. **Deaf and hard of hearing children's parents should be important advocates on the assessment team**. In many cases, the professionals who assess children are not afforded the luxury of spending quality one-on-one time with the child to learn his or her individual needs. Parents alone may know these. At times, evaluators may miss something that the parent thinks is important. Parents must be there to disagree or raise questions.