hearing people who feel they have the best interests of deaf children at heart—but is this enough?

In examining the various debates on the education of deaf children, we shall be entering a domain in which hearing people have had a major influence on the lives of deaf people, and the absence, or denial, of the Deaf perspective in these debates must be regarded as one of the more significant features. At the end of the unit we will return to the views of deaf people by looking at a study of young deaf people and their own accounts of their education.

2 The failure of deaf education

Before going on to consider the debates and discussions in the education of deaf children, we should examine one of the main factors in the debate, the perceived failure of the education of deaf children in conventional academic terms.

In the mid-1970s Conrad and his associates embarked on a study to look at the attainments of deaf school-leavers (Conrad, 1979a). (This study is reported in Reader Two, Article 5.4.) To do this they tested all children receiving special educational provision because of hearing loss, who were of school-leaving age (in practice, those between 15 and 16½ years) at the time of testing. Some were excluded because they had other disabilities or their deafness was of late onset, leaving a sample of 468. The study investigated a number of areas including reading ability, lip-reading and speech intelligibility. All the school-leavers were examined on a standard test of reading ability and the results were reported in terms of median scores. The median score is the score in which half the children score higher, and half score lower. Thus the median reading age of the whole sample was 9.0 years, meaning that half of the sample could read better than an average 9-year-old, and half could not read as well. As an approximate guide, a minimum reading age of 11 years is generally held to be necessary to read tabloid newspapers.

If we consider first those children whose reading age was the same or better than their chronological (actual) age, for the least deaf children this was only 8 per cent, but for the deaf group it dropped to 2.4 per cent (5 out of 205). We shall refer again to these five teenagers in Section 3.6.1. If we look at those children who had virtually no reading comprehension at all and were functionally illiterate, we find this included 25 per cent of the less deaf group and 50 per cent of the deaf group. Thus for those children with substantial losses, half were leaving school unable to read.

In Unit 1 some of the inherent difficulties in lip-reading were described. Yet because much of the explicit teaching of deaf children was designed to develop their lip-reading skills, Conrad also examined the lip-reading ability of the deaf students. A comparison group of seventy-five hearing children was taken and white noise was passed through headphones to make them
effectively deaf. In fact, they would have been deafer than the deaf students. An adaptation of the Donaldson test was used in which the speaker makes a statement, and the subject has to indicate to which of six to nine pictures the statement refers. The ability to understand speech through lip-reading was exactly the same for the two groups. The 10 years of training and practice in lip-reading of the deaf students led to no objectively verifiable effect. Alternatively, it may be that a good understanding of spoken English is as important for lip-reading as specific training.

The third main area assessed by Conrad was that of speech intelligibility. Head teachers were asked to give their evaluation of this, based on their knowledge of the school-leaver, rather than on a particular sample of speech. They were asked to attempt to do it from the point of view of inexperienced listeners. Clearly, teachers of deaf children are much more likely to find the speech of their own pupils intelligible and thus, despite the instructions, any bias will be in favour of greater intelligibility.

Taking the children in schools for the deaf, the following ratings were obtained:

- Wholly intelligible: 14%
- Fairly easy to understand: 20%
- About half understood: 18%
- Very hard to understand: 25%
- Effectively unintelligible: 23%

Thus there would be little difficulty in holding a spoken conversation with about one-third of the children, but it would be extremely difficult to do so with almost half of them. It is not surprising that the least deaf children had the more intelligible speech.

While the results of the study were not surprising to educators working with young deaf children at that time, the documenting of the attainments of such a large group had a major impact, and it is one of the most often quoted references on the education of deaf children. The study took place some years ago and there are those who would maintain that things have changed with better technical support and so forth. However, no later studies have demonstrated adequately that there is an improvement. More recent work on reading (Wood et al., 1986a) and speech intelligibility (Markides, 1983a) show much the same results. Also, such results are not unique to the UK and are confirmed by research throughout the Western World, including the USA, Holland, Denmark and Sweden.

A recent major study from the USA begins with the words:

The education of deaf students in the United States is not as it should be. It has been documented time upon time that deaf children lag substantially behind their hearing age mates in virtually all measures of academic achievement.

(Johnson et al., 1989)
4 Activity 1
You may or may not have been surprised by these results. We would like you to note your reaction, and also reflect on the following questions:

- What are the goals of the education of deaf children as established by this study?
- What should be the goals of the education of deaf children?

If you are deaf, consider this from your own point of view and also that of hearing people—perhaps the hearing parent of a deaf child. If you are hearing, consider the views that deaf people might have, and their feelings about Conrad's work.

Comment
It is clear that it is implicit in the measures taken by Conrad that the purpose of the education of deaf children is to prepare them for a hearing world. (We are not ascribing this view to Conrad himself, he has used measures that were generally acceptable to argue a particular case about the failure of deaf education.)

The questions to be posed by this unit are:

- Why are the attainments of deaf children so low?
- How has a system of education, which has been the subject of so much discussion and research, and which has been significantly researched, come to fail so dramatically?

How you answered the question ‘What should be the goals of the education of deaf children?’ in Activity 1 will colour your reading of this unit.

3 Language and communication in the education of deaf children

3.1 Oralism
The work of Conrad, and the accounts of their education by deaf young people, all took place under the aegis of the oralist philosophy which maintains that spoken language should be the medium of education and that sign language should be prohibited.

Reading
From Reader Two, you should now read

Article 5.5, "A Critical Examination of Different Approaches to Communication in the Education of Deaf Children" by Wendy Lynas, Alan Huntington and Ivan Tucker

This is a modern statement of the oralist position.