

McGregor, Robert P. (1893) Deaf Teachers, Proceedings of the World's Congress of the Deaf and the Report of the Fourth Convention of the National Association of the Deaf, Chicago, 1893 July 18-22, 163 - 166. [from: <http://books.google.com/books/reader?id=ic3GTN69IH4C&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&pg=GBS.PA163>]

## DEAF TEACHERS.

BY ROBERT P. M'GREGOR, COLUMBUS, OHIO.

From the very inception of deaf-mute education in this country, the peculiar fitness of the deaf for the position of teachers has been recognized.

The first deaf teacher of the dumb in America was Laurent Clerc, a Frenchman brought over by the Rev. Thos. H. Gallaudet, the founder of the first school for the deaf, as an assistant. Mr. Clerc enjoys the unique distinction of being the only deaf mute ever imported under contract to instruct the deaf. In these days he would be excluded by the "contract-labor law," but happily we have no need now to import such teachers, as we are able to supply the world with the best educated and most accomplished deaf teachers to be found anywhere.

Indeed, there are some who think we enjoy an elegant superfluity of deaf teachers, and that it is about time to get rid of them as fast as possible. There are even persons claiming to be friends of the deaf who look askance at the deaf teacher, and regard him as the stumbling block in the way of the advancement of the deaf (of themselves, most likely) in these days!

The pioneer deaf teachers were not very well educated, although some of them were men of great natural abilities and force of character. This was owing to the limited time allowed them in which to finish their education—three, five and seven years being the limit—and to the idea then prevailing, now fortunately dispelled, that the deaf could advance only so far and no farther.

The standard of deaf-mute education then was very low, but the deaf teachers were usually far above the average of their class, and although they could not, except in very rare and exceptional cases, compare favorably in intellectual training with the average hearing teacher, their ability to do good work in certain grades was acknowledged; but they were paid only about half the salaries accorded the hearing teachers.

In those early days great care was taken to employ only men (hearing) of great intellectual or literary attainments in the work of educating the deaf; the theory holding that it required great learning, much acumen and almost phenomenal philosophical insight to penetrate the hidden recesses of the deaf-mute mind, and drag it forth into the light; hence the deaf teacher was used only in a sort of menial capacity to smooth the road for the "Professor" and perform the rougher part of the work.

The hearing and the deaf teacher occupied about the same relative position as the plumber and his helper, and enjoyed about the same relative pay. You may, however, have observed that very often the "helper" does all the work, while the plumber does all the looking on and takes the credit if the job is a good one, but throws all the blame upon the helper if it is bad.

Within the last twenty-five or thirty years, while the average hearing teacher has not advanced any in intellectual attainments (indeed, it would be difficult to do so) over his compeers of the first period of our history, the deaf teacher has been making steady strides forward and upward, until to-day he stands on a *perfect level* with his hearing contemporaries in literary and scientific attainments.

In 1853, at the Third Convention of the Instructors of the Deaf of the U. S., held at Columbus, Ohio, in discussing the vexed question of salaries, Dr. I. L. Puet, of New York, gave expression to the following:

"So soon as the education of the deaf could be carried to such a degree of perfection that they could perform the same services as instructors as their hearing and speaking colleagues, and be equally safe guides in the acquisition of idiomatic English, all disparity in salaries would cease to exist."

That was forty years ago.

To-day, and for many a long day, that "degree of perfection" has been reached. Has the prediction in regard to salaries been verified?

Except as to two or three schools in our broad land, I am compelled to answer, no!

Now the contention is not that the "degree of perfection" lies in the way, but the "law of supply and demand!"

Then the idea of a deaf teacher carrying a class beyond the third or fourth year was ridiculed. Now we see the deaf teacher in many of our schools occupying the very highest positions, and putting the finishing touches to an education that was formerly thought to be far beyond his own reach.

But salaries remain proportionately the same.

The "helper" has become a master plumber, but his wages are still those of a "helper."

The editors of nearly all our institution papers are deaf teachers, and if you will look over the volumes of the histories of the institutions of this country, recently issued by the Volta Bureau, you will discover that a great many of them have the names of deaf teachers attached to them as their authors and compilers; and, furthermore, you will discover that they compare favorably with those written by hearing teachers or superintendents. In fact, you will not be able to distinguish which were written by the hearing if you are not acquainted with the names of the authors.

Formerly the deaf teacher was not considered competent to expound the Scriptures or to "lecture" to the pupils, and that was given as one reason why he should not receive the same salary as the hearing teacher. Now he is expected to and does perform his full share, and often more too, of such work. Yet he does not get his full share of the salary!

With increased erudition, intellectual ability and capacity for superior work, has there come increased appreciation of the deaf teacher?

To a certain extent, yes; for that is all that has prevented his total extinction, but not to the extent that we wish or have a right to expect.

At present, in order to hold his own, the deaf teacher must be not only the equal of his hearing contemporary in mental training, tact, skill, morals, versa-

tility and physical adaptation to the work, but also, in some of these qualities, his *superior*, in order to overcome the supposed handicap of his deafness.

This is not right, to be sure, and it is a blot upon the profession for which we are not responsible, but there are a great many things in this world which are not just right. The deaf teacher must take things as he finds them, and do the best he can to meet the unjust conditions imposed upon him.

In 1857 there were 115 teachers of the deaf in this country, 47 or 40.1 per cent. of whom were deaf. In 1870 the proportion was the same, but in 1880 it had fallen to 31.1 per cent. At present there are 706 teachers, 166 or 23.5 per cent. of whom are deaf.

Thus we are confronted with the fact that while the deaf teacher has been steadily advancing upward, the demand for his services has as steadily been lowering in an inverse ratio.

The Oralist, whose particular antipathy is the deaf teacher, will, no doubt, rub his hands in glee at this favorable showing for his side, but I have no hesitation in saying that it will be a sad day for the deaf of America and the world at large when the deaf teacher is entirely eliminated as a factor in the education of the deaf, for that end will only be reached when the blessed system that has elevated the deaf of this country to their present exalted standard has been swept from existence by the pure oral method, which is responsible for the low intellectual condition of the deaf of Germany, Austria and Italy, and which is fast dragging them down to a similar condition in France.

Let us most earnestly pray God that this consummation may be forever deferred.

It is my deliberate opinion, and the opinion of 99-100 of the educated deaf, that no greater calamity can befall future generations of the deaf of this country than that the pure oral method should supersede or displace the combined system. I say this although I am what is called a semi-mute, and do not underrate the value of speech for the deaf. I speak not for myself alone, but for the great majority of the deaf, both from experience and observation.

It is the unanimous opinion of all the deaf whom I have interviewed upon the subject, and I have questioned hundreds of them, that they have derived more real benefit from the instructions of their deaf teachers than from those of their hearing ones.

There be those who will say that this does not prove anything; that the deaf are no judges of what is good for them, thereby stultifying their own work; but if the deaf cannot judge, who can?

It may be truthfully said that there are none who have the true interests of the deaf more at heart than the deaf teacher himself, and the reason why he can and does do better work is his thorough knowledge of deaf children, his own experience in overcoming the difficulties that all deaf children have to encounter, his sympathy with them and his patience, inborn from his own experience.

The hearing teacher is as necessary in a school for the deaf as the deaf teacher. The one has some advantages that the other does not possess, and the other is graced with advantages that counterbalance his defects. The one

is the complement of the other, and no school for the deaf is complete in its equipment that is supplied with only one or the other.

Each should receive the same recognition, be accorded the same honor, and be paid the same salary for work in the same grade.

The Chair: According to the programme, Mr. W. L. Hill, of Massachusetts, is now in order, but as he is not present and has sent no paper, we shall pass on to the consideration of "Business Opportunities Open to the Deaf," on which Mr. Palmer will discuss in signs, and Rev. Mr. Chamberlain, of New York, will read orally.