CAPTIONED FILMS FOR THE DEAF: BRIEF

by

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Captioned Films for the Deaf

Remarks prepared for the hearing before a Special Subcommittee of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate on S. 2511, a bill to provide for an increased program of Captioned Films for the Deaf. August 7, 1962.

With two years of actual film distribution now completed, the Captioned Films for the Deaf program presently serves 680 groups of deaf persons with subtitled motion pictures. The films are viewed by an audience averaging some 18,500 persons monthly. This represents less than 10 percent of a total deaf population estimated at 250,000.

To serve these people, the Office of Education has acquired more than 100 captioned films with from 1 to 15 prints each. A total of 344 prints are in circulation. This growth, from an initial gift of 29 prints from the American School for the Deaf, has been accomplished on a budget which started at $15,000 in 1960 and reached the authorized maximum of $250,000 for the first time in 1962.

Demand for captioned films far outruns the present supply. Evidence in support of this statement is seen in the fact that practically all available prints are booked from one to two years in advance. The booking and shipping office at the Indiana School for the Deaf, Indianapolis, is forced to postpone or turn down many requests for film simply because of the limited size of the library.

Even more significantly, schools for the deaf, unable to make effective use of audiovisual materials provided for normally hearing children, stand in dire need of captioned teaching films. The seriousness of this situation is highlighted in preliminary conclusions from a national survey of visual education in American schools for the deaf conducted by Gallaudet College under the National Defense Education Act. The investigator says in part:

About half of the schools for the deaf and more than half of the day classes for the deaf have no facilities for producing their own visual aids. Even where such facilities exist, they tend to be rudimentary. At the same time, the most frequent comment by the administrators who feel that their schools do not make sufficient use of visual aids is that their teachers lack the necessary training.

Yet “42 percent of the schools and 36 percent of the day classes make no provision for in-service training.”

The report continues, showing, with reference to equipment, that most schools and classes are equipped to some degree and that the captioned films service of the Federal Government is the most frequent source of visual aid materials. It is pointed out, however, that the 200 or more day classes make little use of these films. On this point the report concludes: “The need for more publicity about this service among the classes is evident.”
Actually, the real need is probably not for more publicity, but for more materials of an educational nature that will be of greater use in both schools and day classes. This need is further emphasized by the fact that 40 percent of the schools for the deaf use captioned films, only at infrequent intervals. As for uncaptioned film courses such as are used with hearing children, “80 percent of the schools and classes indicate no plan at all to try this medium.”

To comprehend the importance of visual aids in the education of the deaf, one must understand the double handicap inflicted by deafness occurring at birth or in infancy. Not only is the deaf child deprived of hearing ordinary sounds, he is deprived of all knowledge of language. Words and sentences, the basic coinage of communication, do not exist for him.

When the normal child, or even the blind or otherwise physically handicapped child, reaches school age he has a vocabulary of several thousand words. He can organize these words as sentences to express his thoughts and desires. For him to relate these meaningful sounds to the patterns of print, be it clear type or Braille, is an experience that rapidly flourishes into skills which bring him into contact with the full range of his culture.

Contrast with this the plight of the deaf child. At five or six, he does not know the name of any single thing—not one—not even his own name. He cannot form the simplest sentence. After a year in school, he may know 50 to 100 words. After 10 to 12 years in school, he will typically have a third or fourth grade reading ability.

But the severity of this educational retardation can be lessened. By expanding the deaf child’s experiences through the use of films and by helping him to verbalize these experiences through printed captions, modern technology can bridge part of the communication gulf which separates the deaf from an adequate education. The introduction of these techniques is long overdue.

Deafness being a more serious educational handicap than blindness, one might suppose that the Federal Government would do more to support special means for educating the deaf than it does for educating the blind. The reverse, however, is true. The Federal program of talking books for the blind operates under an act which places no limit on the budget. In fiscal year 1962, the books for the blind program expended approximately $1,800,000 in serving an estimated total blind population of 350,000. The disparity between this and the current $250,000 budget for captioned films becomes even more apparent when considered in light of the fact that book publishers waive all royalty rights on books used for the talking books program; whereas, full length films normally carry a royalty of $600 per print for a 5-year lease. Similarly, educational films costing $60 per print include a royalty item which may run 75 percent of the purchase price.

In view of the severe educational problems of the deaf, and the acute need to provide better educational materials with strong visual impact, the importance of enlarging the captioned films program is amply clear. Not only is there a need to provide more films, but to explore new techniques for more effective use. In some areas, there is need to produce films that will meet special problems peculiar to those who do not hear. Training of people who are engaged in teaching and training the deaf in order that they will make better use of filmed materials is also needed. There is need, also, to study uses of television, teaching machines, and programmed learning with the deaf.