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# Raising and Educating Deaf Children

## Foundations for Policy, Practice and Outcomes

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## Organizing Classrooms for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Learners



### The issue

The physical arrangement of a classroom influences the way students learn and behave. Classroom features such as seating arrangements, lighting, and organization of materials can influence students' behavior and attention to academic tasks. Deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students in particular, may have acute peripheral vision or heightened sense of visual cues, thus causing them to be more engaged or distracted by their environments. Consider such a student in a learning environment that has poor lighting, furniture that obstructs the line-of-sight, or seating near high traffic doors or windows. This classroom has several physical arrangement flaws that will negatively influence the student's ability to engage in the lesson.

DHH students may be prone to auditory distractions if they use hearing aids or cochlear implants to access spoken language. Classrooms with excessive background noise and reverberation make learning difficult, as access to spoken language is limited by these noises. Students who are distracted by noisy environments may have difficulty staying engaged in the lesson or class discussion. Both visual and auditory aspects of the classroom environment are particularly important to manage in classrooms for DHH students.

### What we know

There are ways we can evaluate and improve the classroom environment to minimize distractions to increase learning. Some of these include:

*Seating Arrangement:* Provide work areas that are designated for group work versus individual work. Clearly define these spaces so students know when they are seated at a table, this is group work time, and they are allowed to engage in sharing, conversation, and ideas. Individual spaces, such as single desks, are areas where students are to focus on the teacher or their own work.

*Positioning of the Teacher's Desk:* The bottom line with the teacher's desk is make it less accessible to everyone. The less time a teachers spend at their desks, the more engaged they will be with their students. Students should not need

materials or equipment from the teacher's desk. This space should be designated as an "individual" space, and located in an area that is in a corner, or back of the room, away from the core learning areas of the classroom.

*Organization of Materials:* In an organized classroom, less time is spent locating materials, thus more time is dedicated to teaching and learning. A chaotic or disorganized classroom can cause distractions for DHH students, potentially increasing disruptive behaviors and minimizing learning.

*Lighting:* Bright or dim environments can affect students' behaviors. A "too" bright classroom can create glare on shiny surfaces such as desks or whiteboards, making it hard for students to engage in the lesson. However, dim lighting is also problematic, because DHH students use their vision for signed communication and/or visual cues to support spoken language acquisition. Natural lighting supplemented with soft white lighting often provides a nice balance to allow access to both visual and spoken languages.

*Acoustics & Noise:* Understanding the background noise level in a classroom is crucial for DHH students who are accessing spoken language to learn. A noisy classroom can severely diminish a student's ability to focus on instruction. Acoustic modifications that can help control the noise level include putting sound absorbent materials in the classroom such as bulletin boards, plants with soil, tennis balls on the legs of chairs, and carpeting.

## What we don't know

DHH students are frequently served by itinerant teachers who typically pull students out for individual instruction. Itinerant teachers are often given spaces with poor physical conditions such as hallways, the corner of the classroom, a workroom, or crowded offices. Further investigation of how these physical environments affect student behavior and engagement may persuade school administrators to dedicate better working and learning spaces to itinerant teachers.

Although we have examined the impact of the classroom environment on student behaviors, we do not know how other environments influence DHH learners and workers. Examining environments such as early learning centers, itinerant teaching settings, and a variety of work spaces, can potentially lead to better understanding how to improve the learning and working environments for DHH individuals.

## Implications

The physical arrangement of a classroom impacts student behavior. There are modifications to the classroom environment that can minimize visual and auditory distractors. Many of these changes do not require money, only time (e.g., rearranging furniture for clear line of sight and clear pathways, or changing the seating arrangement). By examining the environments in which d/Dhh students work and learn, we can help to reduce distractions and increase learning.

Posted on April 2, 2018 by  
Caroline Guardino  
University of North Florida  
caroline.guardino {at} unf.edu

## Further reading

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