

# “Passing as Normal”: Living and Coping With the Stigma of Deafness

Noel Patrick O’Connell

This autoethnography presents a narrative account of the author’s experience of living and coping with the stigma of deafness. First, the autoethnographic stories explore the author’s experience of face-to-face encounters with hearing people in which he attempts to pass himself off as normal. The stories illustrate how stigma played a central role in the framing of social interactions inside and outside of school. Second, the article draws on Erving Goffman’s theories on stigma and identity management in an attempt to illuminate an understanding of what the author was coming to terms with. Finally, the author offers his own reflections on the stories including details of some life-changing moments that provided the impetus to transform the stigma of deafness into a positive attribute.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, deaf people, passing, stigma, sign language

## Introduction

The term *deaf* carries certain connotations that depart from the “ordinary and natural.” The social construction of normalcy—the ordinary and natural—dictate that hearing, speaking, talking, and listening are normal, acceptable, and desirable (Baynton, 2006). Anything outside of these attributes deviate from society’s norms and values. The linking attribute is Goffman’s (1963) theory on stigma, “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” which has the effect of reducing the stigmatized person, in the eyes of others, “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). As deaf people possess “sensory limitations of hearing impairment” (Perry, 1996, p. 239), they are at risk of encountering stigma in their daily lives. As a deaf person, I experienced stigma as an ever-present component of my life.

Having been a target of stigmatizing attitudes and behaviors, I experienced low self-confidence and negative social reactions from hearing people. In consequence, I engaged in various strategies to manage the stigma and pass myself as normal.

In 1967, I lost my hearing and, in that moment, my life was drastically altered (O’Connell, 2015). I was four years old when it happened. No longer seen as normal, I became someone with a lifelong medical condition, a view that would later color my outlook on life. A year later, in September 1968, I enrolled in a school for deaf children. For the next thirteen years, I remained there as a boarder and learned sign language from other deaf children. A strange school policy dictated that sign language was outlawed and children caught breaking this rule were physically punished (O’Connell & Deegan, 2014). Everyone knew about this rule and every new entrant into the school would know it too. I became familiar with a whole range of deaf-related, stigmatized labels—“abnormal,” “hard of hearing,” “hearing impaired,” “deaf and dumb,” “handicapped,” and “disabled”—most of which were assigned to my identity. Throughout childhood, I was schooled in an oralism program that stigmatized sign language (Baynton, 2006).

This article presents autoethnographic stories that deal with the kind of stigma I experienced both inside and outside of school. The first story shows how stigma played a central role in the framing of classroom interactions. It is structured in a way that the narrative appears like a stage play where various scenes are played out and culminates in a public “singing” performance. As children, we perform in front of an “audience” of teacher–students who arrive in the classroom to observe us using our vocals. What the narrative does is problematize the interactional interplay between a hearing teacher and deaf children and shows how the public performance gave me the illusion of success. The second story deals with my failed attempt to pass myself off as a hearing person which effectively destroys that illusion. The setting is a public space. The event occurred in the early 1980s, a time when I

was a young man starting out in the world. These stories are contextualized using Goffman's (1959, 1963) theories on stigma and impression management (passing) to help illuminate an understanding of how, why, and where I came to terms with living with stigma.

Autoethnography offers a way to explore these issues in depth because the linkage between self and culture through stories and reflective analysis can be best utilized out of a desire to understand how culture contributed to the stigmatizing of deafness. Many autoethnographies are narratives of stigma (Ellis, 1998) and this autoethnography fits the model offered by Perry's (1996) study of the stigma of hearing loss. Perry's first-person account combined with Goffman's theories on stigma enhances our understanding of what I was coming to terms with. Finally, I offer my own reflections to show how I managed to "convert the stigma from a feature of personal identity to a basis of social identity" (Brewer, 1991, p. 481).

### **Classroom Encounters**

At half past nine in the morning, we rise from our chairs for prayer time. Walled inside the square-sized, high-ceilinged classroom, we stand before our desk hands joined together mouthing ghostly prayer words. On this mild October morning in 1973, I am ten years old among seven deaf children in a classroom that sits on the second floor of an allboys residential school building. Our teacher, Mr. Martin, is a slender man of twenty-five years. He stands on the wooden podium breathing prayer words into a microphone hanging from his neck. The twist in his mouth tells me nothing about what he says. I am deaf and can only take an educated guess at his instructions. My teacher is powerful enough in his position but without an understanding of sign language. Slim build with long straight black hair that falls all the way to the neck, he is enthusiastic about teaching speech. On his handsome facial features are set a pair of dark brown eyes, and his neatly trimmed beard gives the impression

of a lean masculinity. Today, Mr. Martin sports a fawn tweed jacket with frayed leather patches at the elbow over a black polo neck jumper and dark brown slacks.

The classroom cream-coated walls glisten in the autumn sunlight filtering through high oblong windows. I feel the warm sun on my back. On my right there is an assortment of drawings and art and craftwork sprayed on cream-colored wooden shelves. After prayers, we sit on wooden castiron chairs. To avoid breaking rules, I keep my arms straight. I know not to sign, only to keep my hands down and under my legs. We are not allowed to sign and Mr. Martin's eyes are sharp, rotating, scanning, and darting for the slightest movement. We sit in front of a u-shaped desk fitted with twelve microphones and amplifiers. In this semi-circular configuration, everyone has front row seats. When Mr. Martin scribbles words like "no signing in this classroom" we are reminded of why Kevin was punished yesterday. Kevin was unfortunate to get caught signing to another boy. He did not receive three slaps on each hand with a wooden ruler but instead was ordered to stand beside Mr. Martin and face us all. My teacher then went into animated verve placing his hands in the air as if climbing a tree and then scratching his armpits. He pointed at Kevin and said, ". . . sign . . . like . . . monkey . . ."

Mr. Martin does the hearing aid inspection, going round to everyone, checking to see the thing is switched on. Grudgingly I slowly lift my jumper chest-level and show a small metallic piece sitting snugly inside a pouch strapped in a harness around my shirt. Mr. Martin examines the switch and volume control. I find my cheeks go hot with embarrassment. The hearing aid is the size of a deck of cards. It is connected to an ear piece fitted snugly inside my ears. The hearing aid contains a microphone, volume control, and an on and off switch at the top end. At the rear end is battery compartment which can be flipped open at the press of a button. Mr. Martin passes by Oliver and stands on the platform. Oliver does not wear a

hearing aid. I am not sure why he is in this school. As soon as I pull my jumper down, Tim nudges my right elbow. “Did you know he is going to teach us to sing?” he signs, his gray eyes dart back and forth under a thick mop of dark brown hair. His cheeks are the color of red apples. Cautiously, I put my hand under the table and fingerspell words. “Sing? How?”

Tim looks across the desk at Oliver who nods agreement. Oliver knows what is going on as he is always furtively relaying class instructions to the rest of us. “What’s wrong?” Jimmy asks.

Jimmy is a small, stocky freckled-faced boy and built like a teenager. Whenever he engages in horse play with the boys, his ginger hair becomes tousled almost obscuring his pale gray eyes. When my teacher turns around to face us, all hands shoot down. Mr. Martin starts talking to us like we are hearing children. “We . . . you . . . see . . . ”

In all that time, his hands are inside his pockets. He doesn’t take them out but to use his index finger to stab at air as if making an important point. When Mr. Martin turns to the blackboard, Jason waves his hand frantically in the air to get Oliver’s attention.

“What did he say? What did he say?” Jason’s facial features are smooth, rounded, and unassuming, his straight dark brown hair grown thick enough to develop natural waves and curls and his dark blue eyes cheerless and sad. “What does he want us to do?” Michael asks.

Michael has a skinhead haircut and sticking out ears, a long, thin face, and pointed nose. The forehead creases into a frown whenever Mr. Martin stands close to him. Oliver sheds light into our teacher’s spoken instructions. “He is going to teach us to sing. Visitors are arriving in class next March to watch us sing.”

“What?” Tim looks aghast and makes quick, rapid-burst hand movement. “I don’t believe this!” Conor, the joker of the class, wonders how we are going to learn to sing. He points at

Mr. Murphy's back and makes a screwing motion around his temple. Cautiously he lifts his hands in the air, his fingers flexing like wires, and hands rotate forward to provide thrust. "He's mad! That is what's wrong. We have a crazy teacher."

Conor's black hair is parted loosely in the middle and drawn back from a wide forehead. Physically slender, his small face wears an expression of sullen distaste but whenever he breaks into a smile his front buck teeth stick out. His blue eyes stare cross-eyed through black square-rimmed glasses. Sometimes he signs behind my teacher's back just to see how far he could go without getting noticed. As soon as Mr. Martin turns around his hands would disappear under the table. So far, he has managed to escape the ruler.

In the classroom where we are not allowed to sign, Mr. Martin gets mad with me again. This time he clips my ear sending a shock of pain right through my ear lobe. Stunned at the sudden invasion, I reach up with my hand to shield myself but Mr. Martin pays no attention. Oliver makes discrete signs telling me that my teacher thought I was daydreaming again. By now orange and paper hats and brim and thin strips of paper are sprayed on walled wooden shelves. Kevin waves at my teacher to get his attention and points to the face appearing at the glass in the door. When Mr. Martin disappears out the door, Jason waves at Oliver and makes rapid burst of signs. "I thought we were getting singing lessons!"

Conor rises from his chair, walks toward Oliver and offers his fist for a microphone and everyone convulses in laughter. Oliver playfully pushes Conor's hand away from him and tells us that he was in Mr. Fitzgerald's class last year when he learned to sing. "We will have visitors," he says. "They will arrive here to watch us. Have to practice singing before they arrive." "Why?" Tim wants to know. "How can we learn to sing?" "Not in front of other people," Kevin says. "I don't care who is coming," Jimmy says. "I just don't want singing

lessons!” Conor grins and looks at me. “This is like a nightmare coming true!” I say, feeling my face and neck go hot with anxiety.

On a cold day in January, we have “Clementine” for our first singing lesson. *In a cavern, by a canyon . . .* I don’t know how I am going to get through this song. Kevin appears to be halting and breathless in his efforts to sing and Mr. Martin stays with him for longer than he does with the rest of us. Kevin is struggling to articulate words of the song. *In a cavern, by a canyon, Excavating . . .* Leaning toward the microphone, he opens and closes his mouth, his forehead matted in sweat. Mr. Martin looks like someone whose patience is wearing thin while Kevin puffs his cheeks like a boy blowing birthday candles. *In a cavern, by a canyon, Excavating for a mine; lived a miner, forty-niner . . .* Time stands still as time does in a struggle like this. I know in my heart he is not going to make it. I know we are in this for the long haul. Kevin fails many times more. The misery on his face is like crumpled paper. Watching him, I feel more wretched than any other day. *In a cavern, by a canyon, Excavating for a mine; lived a miner, forty-niner, and his daughter Clementine.* Mr. Martin beckons at Kevin to keep going. *Oh, My Darling, Oh, My Darling Clementine.*

With one grandstand effort he stirs himself, chest heaving and weaving, neck constricting and contracting. I watch him through watery eyes. Never in an instant does he enjoy doing this; he vocalizes to the point of exhaustion. *Oh, My Darling, Oh, My Darling Clementine, Thou art lost and gone forever, Dreadful sorry Clementine.* Mr. Martin’s face lights up with a smile. The relentless repetition goes on and on. Day after day class begins and ends like clockwork. Day after day Mr. Martin gets the whole class to repeat the next two lines. He does this individually at first and then encourages a collective effort. Before long, Mr. Martin shakes his head at Conor. “No, no, no . . . again . . .”

Conor blinks furiously against tears as he grows tired from the exertion. Oliver discretely signs to Jimmy telling him our teacher insists he stick only with the second verse. Then Jimmy looks around the room as if in a trance. The classroom is probably the last place he wants to be right now but there is no escape; he must do it all over again. Perhaps he is thinking about how to take flight. Jimmy leans slightly toward the microphone. He knows he must try harder and vocalize without making a single mistake. *Oh my Darling, Oh my Darling, Oh my Darling Clementine; Thou art lost and gone forever, Dreadful sorry, Clementine.*

It is a cold March day and there are only five of us in class: Tim, Kevin, Michael, Conor, and myself. Jimmy and Oliver have been transferred upstairs to the “partially deaf” class. Mr. Martin explains why they have been moved from our class. “. . . speaks . . . upstairs . . . clever boys . . .” It’s 9.30 in the morning and Mr. Martin begins class with instructions on the blackboard. He tells Conor to make sure he stretches his lips wide for *EIEIO*. Conor rests his limp arms over the desk, eyes screwed at the teacher’s mouth. He leans forward to the microphone and begins vocalizing “Old McDonald.” Mr. Martin cocks his ear in anticipation. Soon Conor pauses to catch his breath. Humor seems to have dissipated his face. Tim taps my elbow and, lowering his hand under the table, finger spells “Sick.” There is something poignant in the way Conor leans before the microphone but then the look of determination is back on his face. Soon Mr. Martin raises his hand. “Stop!” He has had enough.

When my teacher turns round and writes on the board, Conor wears a hard expression on his face, eyes staring at Mr. Martin’s back. Hands on chest, he does a mock imitation of the teacher singing and pouting his lips: “Ohhhhhhh.” Then he stretches his lips wide and narrow: “My Darling . . . Ooooh My Darling.” Tim cocks his ear at Conor in a show of listening and I

cover my mouth to stifle laughter. Now Michael is hunched over the desk, mouth almost touching the microphone. Through square spectacles, he waits for Mr. Martin to give the signal and he begins the lines from “Old McDonald.” Michael gulps in air and our teacher feeds him with something like encouragement. With each passing minute, Mr. Martin’s face grows more strained. It looks as if he can’t take it anymore. Eventually he says “Stop!” and turns his attention to Tim. Tim smiles weakly. I know my turn will come tomorrow morning. I can’t imagine it will not be.

Bright and early the next morning, my vocals are put to the test. Writing on the blackboard, Mr. Martin explains that my voice must be deep enough to sing: “Tom, Tom, the piper’s son.” After some time, my poorly timed pronunciation causes blood to rush to my head; my cheeks burn with embarrassment. I know Mr. Martin doesn’t like getting angry with us; he is only tough because he needs to be. It’s not his style; he doesn’t take pleasure in punishing us for singing. Later Mr. Martin writes our names on the board listing songs beside our names. Kevin is told to memorize the first verse of “Old MacDonald.” Pout your lips for O and stretch them for E. Michael is on “Ba Ba Black Sheep.” Don’t confuse b with p. Say *dame*, not *am*. Ever since we started on Clementine, Tim has been mouthing words from “Three Blind Mice.” Conor performs “Two Little Blackbirds.” Mr. Martin tells me to use the blade of my tongue for letters t, d, s, and y. He goes around the class placing a white sheet of paper on our desk. Our song is written on paper lest we forget our lines. It is half past ten in the morning, half an hour before we begin the performance. Yet our teacher does another disappearing act. Once he is gone to meet the school principal, excited hands flutter in air. Soon Mr. Martin reappears at the doorway and our hands disappear under the desk. He is followed by the school principal, a huge frame of a man dressed in black soutane and a long black robe. Around the waist is a cincture, a six-inch wide black piece of cloth with two separate pieces hanging down the side. Like the priest at mass, there is a white collar at the

neck, only narrower in width. Brother Arthur stands on the platform beside our teacher dwarfing him in height. He addresses the class. “. . . prepared . . . be here.” The shock of white hair on his head and creased forehead and the arched bushy eyebrows give the impression of a serious countenance. Somewhere along the way, he pauses perhaps in mid-sentence before continuing, his mouth opening and closing with increase fervor. Finally he says “Good luck” and disappears out the room.

After closing the door, Mr. Martin prances around the platform in an excited manner. I’m sitting in my chair neatly donned in dark gray cardigan and brown slacks. Fidgeting nervously with the lead attached to my hearing aid, I look down and stare down at my dark brown shoes. I start to feel a tightening sensation rising inside my chest. My hands tremble at the possibility of failure. Yesterday I couldn’t eat anything and that day I sat in class, reading and vocalizing, my stomach doing somersaults. Although I’ve memorized every word in the song, I worried I’d forget my lines. Behind us, twelve empty chairs are lined up for our guests. When they arrive at the door, they will feel a touch of botany in the room. The classroom is filled with plants and flowers. Visitors will notice shelves filled with an assortment of hand-made crafts, art, knitted rugs, posters, and cozy pillows and a collection of creative and aesthetically arranged objects. For me these are nervous moments. I can’t fathom how Mr. Martin is beside himself with delight. There’s not a single thread of nerves written on his face. Sitting on his swivel chair, he smiles with no hint of nervous tension. Suddenly, Kevin waves his hand to get his attention. He points to the face appearing at the glass door letting him know the guests have arrived. Mr. Martin opens the door and invites them inside.

Faceless faces of women and men appear from the doorway. Serious, respectable looking people carrying briefcases and handbags are all in queue, snaking inside the classroom. Nervous moments! These people are casually dressed; thick sweaters, open-necked shirts, and black square-rimmed glasses. I recognize a face, a familiar face of a lady with dark

brown hair and blue smiling eyes, showing brilliant white teeth. Dressed in navy blouse and skirt, she gives a slight wave of her hand as she follows the line. The friendliest face in the group, she makes her way to her seat behind me. As she disappears out of sight, a perfumery smell reaches my nostrils telling me she is close by, almost touching.

All these colors and bodies are moving along in a throng, going around the concourse of the classroom. Soon they stand shoulder to shoulder, chairs behind them. They wait for the signal from Mr. Martin. Our teacher closes the door and beckons to the visitors to take their seats. All these bodies are moving in unison looking so self-sufficient. I wonder who they are and instinctively turn round. As I look over my right shoulder, my heart jumps at sight of the lady watching me. She is smiling and nodding, mouthing a gentle “hello.” Sensing her encouraging goodwill, I raise my hand to sign but retreat and quickly turn back. With everyone in the room seated, Mr. Martin spends time addressing the faces behind us. Before long, he takes in deep gulps of air, eyes darting left and right. Then he raises his eyebrows. “Are we ready . . . ?”

Mr. Martin nods at Kevin and, as it happens, Kevin doesn’t blink. Instead he leans forward, eyes staring straight ahead, mouthing ghostly words. As the hype of the atmosphere seeps inside me, I begin to cower under the pressure of what’s to come. The room swims before my eyes. Many hands are beating against each other in applause for Kevin. The big cheer! Behind him a man and woman lean toward each other passing comment, their lips barely visible to my naked eye. I imagine my own performance as every muscle fiber in my stomach contracts in nervous tension. I can’t quite get it out of my mind. The classroom world stands still and, in the blur of daylight, Michael leans toward the microphone.

By the time Conor begins “Two little blackbirds,” the air is filled with cigarette smoke. Conor stretches his arms in the usual way, one hand on the microphone, the other a few

inches from the amplifiers. Once more, the classroom holds its breath and I wonder if the audience will applaud Conor just as they did Kevin and Michael. A short time later, Tim's eyes are fixated straight ahead full of concentrated determination. On the wall the clock reads 12.20 p.m., an hour and twenty minutes gone. I can see the side of Tim's face and the corner of his lips quivering before the microphone.

I am reminded of yesterday, the time we filed out of the room at the end of class. On the way out, Tim tapped my shoulder for attention, a show of concern on his face. "What is raspy?" he asked, fingers spelling R-A-S-P-Y. "What does it mean?" he asked looking worried. "My parents wrote a letter. They told me what Mr. Martin had said. My voice is 'raspy' and 'throaty.' I don't understand. It's not good. I thought it was okay." I told him I had never seen these words before and did I know what they meant. There was something strange about the words and couldn't imagine what they looked like. "You mean your parents haven't got the report yet?" Tim asked, eyes widening in a show of surprise. "No," I said, feeling quite uncomfortable at the thought of my parents reading a report about my voice. "Not yet," I added unsure of what to say next. "Maybe I'll know when I go home for the summer holidays. I'll write and let you know." Inside the classroom, as Tim stares straight ahead, I get the sense of unreality deepening inside me like a bad dream. Soon Mr. Martin nods in my direction and the room becomes a blanket of stillness. Blood rushes to my face. So many staring eyes around the room bearing into my soul! I tentatively take hold of the microphone in my right hand and slide my left hand under my leg. I can count in two hands the number of times I've vocalized "Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son." Just as Tim and Conor did a moment ago, I take deep breaths, sucking in small gulps of air, and letting it slowly dissipate through my mouth. So many lines to go now! I start to breathe, just a little to voice meaningless words, my ears tingling from the sound coursing through the ear piece. Meaningless ghostly words! My head aches and temples pump blood. I yearn to be a shadow that nobody notices, as I

push on and keep going. Soon I begin to falter and, for a second, I hold my breath. *Breath in, breath out!* I have never thought of what I'd do when I get to the last line. For some reason the name Clementine comes to mind. I think of the girl in the song, seeing her asleep and wonder if she will ever wake up again. As I go from line to line, I cling to my memory of the words of the song and the story of Clementine.

I look up and stare at the boys. I turn to Mr. Martin seeing the look of warm satisfaction on his bearded face. I watch the audience join hands in applause. Later my teacher talks through our performance, pointing at some of us, particularly lingering at Kevin. Then he looks at me as if about to say something but hesitates and turns his face the other way. The tension in my body begins to dissipate and I have the feeling of being liberated. The drama has come to a close and the audience rise to their feet. Just as they had done before, they snake through the concourse of the classroom. One by one they slowly file out the door, smiling and waving. Last out, the blue-eyed lady stands at the doorway, face turned toward us. Smiling she touches her forehead fleetingly, her eyebrows arched in an expression of surprise. She gives a wave of her hand, mouthing "well done" and, as she disappears out the door, I realize the performance, the speaking, "raspy," and "throaty" singing, is not over yet. Not by a long shot. It will go on and on and on just as the story of Clementine will stay with me for the rest of my days.

### **Stigma and Passing**

In 2014, after I finished writing the story, I became keenly aware that I had only a very sketchy idea about where I was going with the narrative. I had not intended to write about stigma but to simply write about the events as I remembered them. I wrote the story because the classroom experience affected me deeply enough to go through a process emotional recall (Ellis, 2004). This means the act of remembering caused me to (re)experience a whole range

of emotions including shame, frustration, anger, despair, and sadness. I found it difficult to write the narrative mainly because of the shame I felt in having been put through the ritual of repetitions, corrections, and adjustments in vocalization for so long. This resonates with what Heller (1982) writes about shame; the eyes of others become “the stimulus which triggers the feeling response” and the expression of shame “arouses the desire to run away, to sink in to the earth, to disappear.” Although the shame effect made writing difficult, I wrote it regardless and kept going to the very end. Eventually, I managed to produce a story in which scenes are played out in linear fashion. I employed literary techniques in the form of plot, discovery, scene-setting, characterization, description, and dialogue all bound up in unities of time, place, and action. My aim was to bring alive visual elements of the embodied “deaf experience.” To reflect the visual rhythm of sign language communication, I produced “thick description” of a whole range of bodily movements. In effect, I created “a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete” (Langellier, 1999, p. 208) and gives a sense of the embodied, subjective deaf experience.

The story is organized chronologically and presented in episodic sequence. Although the time period in which the events occurred was actually two school years between 1972 and 1973, the narrative was condensed to reflect a shorter time period of seven months. This helped make the narrative work. I was particularly concerned with how impossible it was to recall everything that happened over forty years ago. What was especially problematic was the details of conversations that took place in the classroom. To address these issues, I wrote as much detail as I could remember and constructed dialogue to the best of my recollection. I did not, for example, put much store into my teacher’s comments. The gaps in the comments were constructed to give readers a sense of the chaos in the lipreading experience. This resonates with Johnson, Liddle, and Erting’s (1989) assertion that “competent lipreading requires prior knowledge of the language” (p. 4) without which it takes years of sweat, toil,

and tears to master the skill, often to the exclusion of a substantial portion of curriculum material. I also employed the present-tense narrative style to invoke in readers a sense of “being there” with me in the classroom and “being here” in the text (Spry, 2001). “Being there” gives the sense of “this is what happened” and “this is how it happened” in the classroom. “Being here” in the text encapsulates the experience of “what it is like” in the classroom *now* rather than *then* looking back (Geertz, 1988, p. 143).

After spending much time inside the head of a ten year old boy, I found it daunting the idea of stepping outside the story and analyzing it using the autoethnographer’s critical lens. I agonized over the meaning of the story. For it to be “contextualised to be fully understood . . . as a legitimate response to tension faced within the classroom and social context” (Russell, 2011, p. 7), I turned to autoethnography to achieve understanding of my life experience and circumstances. Autoethnography is useful for this study because it “depicts people struggling to overcome adversity” and shows how they “make choices in difficult and uncertain situations” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006). As Starr (2010) points out, autethnography is “a valuable tool in examining the complex, diverse and sometimes messy world of education” (p. 2). In that sense, it captures what I wanted to do for this article, namely, to raise issues implicating the interplay between identity and difference.

In 2014, I was introduced to Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* and later linked his theories with the story. Reading his work helped me identify with the stigma that Goffman explored in his work. I became sensitized to the definition of stigma. The reactions of my teacher and of other children in the classroom helped me come to the conclusion that I experienced stigma because I possessed a stigmatized identity. Stigma, the assignment of negative worth on the basis of devalued characteristics (e.g., deafness and sign language), has been an ever-present component of my life. It was an important underlying factor in my attempt to pass as normal. My shame

feelings motivated a desire to appear like a hearing person. This was particularly strong in the context of my face-to-face encounters with hearing people.

It is important to point out that I did not experience stigma when communicating with other deaf children but only in my interactions with my teacher. In his presence, I yearned to prove that I was normal. In my mind, the only route to normality was to engage in identity management, to behave like hearing people, to talk like them, and to act like them in everyday situations. Reading Goffman helped me understand why I wanted to use concealment and selective disclosure strategies to present myself as “normal.” Goffman’s theories on impression management suggest that subtleties in my story can be further unraveled through a study of the complex and fluid nature of social interaction where different aspects of identities come to the fore in different classroom situations. This can be contextualized using the following questions: Why did we, as children, act this way and not according to the teacher’s wish? What was the motivation behind this concealment strategy?

These questions can be addressed in a discussion of Goffman’s (1959) theories on “presentation of the self” where actors perform public roles “front stage” in front of an audience and private roles “back stage” where they can be themselves and not have to perform public roles. My story shows evidence of supporting his concept of a front stage and back stage. Front stage (or in front of the teacher), we act out “public” roles with the intention of displaying behavior—the acts of singing, speaking, listening, hearing, and talking—that is in line with the expectations of the teacher and an audience of onlookers. Conversely, our dependence on sign language coupled with the chaos surrounding front stage communication necessitated a back stage, a space in which to perform culture through sign language behind the teacher’s back. This is a key theme in the story where children exercised a form of resistance and agency to overcome barriers to class instruction (O’Connell & Deegan, 2014).

Goffman (1963) refers to the act of concealing a spoiled identity as “passing for normal” (p. 87). In his view, passing is more concerned with information control: “to tell or not to tell, to let on or not to let on, to lie or not to lie, and in each case, to whom, when and where.” Goffman (1963) adds that anyone attempting to pass as normal experience a high level of anxiety “in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment” (p. 87). Passing, for me, was a source of much emotional and physical anxiety. Anxiety surfaces when conflicting emotions arise about my dependence on sign language for survival and my desire to give the impression of normality. However, my teacher did not share these emotions; there was not “a single thread of nerves” written on his face. Following the performance, he showed a “warm [look of] satisfaction on his face.” When the blue-eyed lady mouthed “well done” to the class, I had a feeling that our performance was a success that I had actually managed to pass myself as normal. I carried this belief with me into adulthood, thinking that no one could possibly notice characteristics that attracted the general label of stigma. Upon leaving residential school and when facing into the outside world, I could not have foreseen that this illusion would be cruelly shattered.

### **Contextualization**

To unravel some of the subtleties in the nature of my classroom experience, I offer another autoethnographic story. I present this story in the form of a vignette about a time when I was a nineteen year old youth trying to find his way around the world. The story is based in the autumn of 1982. At the time, I was setting out in the outside world with the belief that I shouldn't go through life without at least putting to the test what I had learnt in school. My intention was to study the ways of hearing people and imitate how they acted, socialized, and interacted with each other. To gain their respect and acceptance of me as a normal person, I believed I ought to see the world through their eyes. The plan was to behave and think like them, to act like them, talk, and “hear” like them. I allowed my hair grow long enough for the

hearing aid become concealed behind my ear. I believe this would help hide a stigma that would otherwise have been visible to others. I was happy that the hearing aid was concealed. Then I made up my mind to abandon sign language and try to speak without moving my hand.

Somewhere in Dublin city, the “Employment Office” sits dead in the cold misty air. It is autumn 1982. I am new at this, my residential school life just finished, and I am trying to think like a hearing person. Before being interviewed by the Employment Officer, I am entering the smoke-filled lobby area. As I report myself to the receptionist, I am imagining my future. Like all school-graduates, I am on the cusp of a learning curve. My search for employment brings me to this place. The whole area is teeming with people sitting on seats waiting for their call. Some are filling out application forms or generally looking at the job notice boards. I am a stranger to them and they are to me. I think how there is little hope of getting work particularly that my school exam results were unfavorable. A short time later, I find myself sitting on a chair at counter four directly across a bespectacled man. He is dressed casually in light blue shirt and navy tie. The man says something to the effect of “How can I help you?” and I instinctively hand him the appointment letter about some training opportunities on offer at the office. As he reads the letter, he writes notes on a sheet of paper. While I explain to him the purpose of my appointment, the spectacted man glances at me. Soon he stops writing and stares at me with a quizzical look on his face and I realize he has been listening to me the whole time. After I finished speaking, he studies me intensely as if trying to figure out what to say next. His stare makes me self-conscious. My throat is tightening and stomach muscles knotting with tension.

The way his forehead furrows, I can tell he is curious about my voice. When he speaks, words like “speech,” “help,” “talk” fall on his lips. I begin to realize he is not talking about

training opportunities. To be sure I ask him to repeat himself but a little show of impatience spreads across his face. “I have trouble understanding you,” I say, swallowing hard to loosen the tightness rising in my vocal chords. I wait for his reaction expecting some kind of recognition but all I get are blank stares. I have seen this before, the blank looks on people’s faces whenever I speak to them. When he finally speaks, he is waving his pen pointedly to my face. I am not able to give details of what he said, so I interrupt him. “Could you please take a moment to write on paper what you just said?” I ask. There is a squint in his eyes. The grimace on his mouth tells me I am making no sense at all. I must be vocalizing in a hesitant, faltering, and stuttering way. I feel clumsy and awkward unable to contain the panic rising inside me. As nothing seems to work, I hand him a pen and sheet of paper. Reluctantly he scribbles notes and, as soon as he hands back the paper, the penny drops. “You have a speech defect” he writes. “I know a good speech therapist. She may be able to help you. Would you like me to contact her for you?”

Unable to respond, I find my whole mind is taken up with the words *speech defect*. I am at a loss for words, my mind in disarray. Right up till the very last moment of our meeting, I didn’t believe it would really happen to me. I look up at the huge blank face staring at me, eyes smiling through dark square-rimmed glasses, acting like as if there was nothing wrong with what he said. It makes no sense to talk to him. I calmly rise from the chair and walk out as fast as I can, going through the throng of people mingling in the smoke-filled lobby area. Am I glad to get away! It suddenly occurs to me that I can’t explain all those years of sweat, toil, and tears in an oralism classroom. Outside I hunch my shoulders to shield myself from the drizzle. Walking toward Bewley’s Café, I start to wonder why I attract stares from people. I am in a daze, hardly able see where I am going. Once inside the café, I sit at a table feeling as if I received a blow to the body. I can hardly believe an ineluctable journey is about to take

place: Is this to be another badge of shame that I have to wear in my heart? Is this a burden I must carry for the rest of my life?

My encounter at the “Employment Office” resulted in what Ellis (1998) calls minor bodily stigma. Minor bodily stigma, including impaired speech caused by hearing loss, has the potential to “produce distress and anxiety regarding how others perceive and attribute meaning to them and how these characteristics influence self-presentation, social location and subsequent action” (Ellis, 1998, p. 517). The man’s comment about my speech humiliated me and threatened my dignity as a human being. To have my speech branded as “defective” after being put through such a long and arduous normalizing ritual in school shocked me to the core of my being. Although in the minor category, the stigma was powerful enough to affect me deeply.

What strongly underpins this story is my own sense of powerlessness in the face of such discreet and seemingly caring actions. At the time, there seemed little that I could do beyond reacting against the comment. I could have given him a piece of my mind but I was so hung upon the word “speech defect,” it never occurred to me to challenge the man’s prejudicial attitude. I remember sitting in the café afterward trying to come to terms with what happened to me. I reflected on what I had been doing to myself in trying to pass myself as a hearing person. My choices had left me cruelly exposed as a consequence. I had drawn on my experience of stigma in school and used this as a way of presenting a persona that contradicted my original identity. Until I started to speak or had my hearing aid in full view, I allowed people assume I was just like them. Similar to Perry (1996), I attempted to conceal my hearing aid behind my ear in the hope that no one would notice. While wearing hearing aids, I became increasingly self-conscious of this “visible sign of stigma” particularly when facing a “normal” people without hearing aids (Perry, 1996, p. 255). This fear manifested itself out of my own self-consciousness of the stigma of deafness which later compelled me

to withdraw almost completely from social contact with hearing people. I maintained relationships with deaf people and socialized with them at social events. At the same time, I made a pledge to retrieve all those lost years in the classroom by going through a period of self-education. I read as many books as I could get my hands on and continued to harbor a desire to enter university. Although sign language interpreters were unheard of in those days, I kept this dream alive inside me full of hope that I would one day see my goal fulfilled.

## **Reflections**

In the mid-1990s, when interpreters became available, I entered university for the first time and became an undergraduate student of literature. To move to another place and start my studies, I had to forsake contact with deaf people and sign language and, as a result, suffered from this selfimposed social distancing for a number of years. In 2004, I embarked on a master's degree in deaf studies at University of Bristol, England. I entered the world of social science research out of a personal desire and intellectual inclination to conduct an ethnographic study on deaf people experience of education. Deaf studies is a field of academic and intellectual inquiry that “encompasses the study of the language, culture, and community of Deaf people” (Sutton-Spence & West, 2011, p. 422). Deaf studies is also “an emancipatory discipline” (O'Brien & Emery, 2014, p. 35) that acknowledges the uniqueness of sign languages and deaf identities. Here researchers place a study of deaf people at the center of analysis, focusing on their contribution to society and humanity. Once I started on the postgraduate journey, I found there was much to gain from the experience. I built a catalog of books on deaf people which gave me a real sense of purpose and pride. It was pleasant to be in the company of researchers, lecturers, and students as there was always someone to kick an idea around with and discuss identity politics that helped me revise my ideas around stigma. I studied the ways in which deaf people generated and cultivated their own organized way of life that reflected their customs, values, and traditions.

There was time to reflect on all that deaf people had done, endured, and encountered. Meeting deaf studies scholars and postgraduates helped me reflect back on my encounters with stigma. I learned that stigma occurred not just through the words of other people but also through their actions. I remembered how I was the invisible man (Ellison, 1952), or at least how I felt invisible, when people attempted to communicate with me through someone else because it helped “ease their own discomfort” (Perry, 1996, p. 253). I learned from other deaf people that I was not alone in meeting those who refused to share the burden of conversation by being uncommunicative. I discovered that we shared similar experiences about people who responded to us with blank looks reflected when we spoke to them. We shared stories about people who, at the sight of a deaf person, tended to freeze and take flight in another direction. Sometimes people passed by with their head down or hurriedly turned the other way to avoid potential awkwardness. Deaf studies did not teach me to respond to the way hearing people reacted to my stigmatized identity. Instead I learned why hearing people behaved in the way they did. Schlesinger and Meadow (1972), for example, argues that hearing people tend to go into “shock-withdrawalparalysis” in the presence of deaf people. Rather than communicate with them directly, they go into shock and turn to another hearing person for support.

Deaf studies also helped me come to terms with the fact that I could never manage to “live up to the expectations of others” (Perry, 1996, p. 251). In my attempt to pass myself as a hearing person, I was always “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). I was a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. Passing had exacted a heavy toll on my mind because, for so long, I had been rejecting my own self (Brueggemann, 1999). I experienced persistent anxieties and became uneasy about myself as a person. I knew this was not how I wanted to live my life. This was not how I should feel about myself. During my studies, I experienced an “epiphany” (Denzin, 2014) that lifted me to a new dimension and helped me gain a real

sense of confidence in my life. Instead of rejecting stigma, I embraced it like an old friend and nurtured it inside me as something to use and learn from the experience. I took ownership of my identity and now wear it like a badge of honor rather than hide it where no one notices. By the time I graduated in 2008, I was irrevocably changed.

### **Letter to Teacher**

A year later, in 2009, I wrote a letter to “Mr. Martin” and explained how the classroom experience had affected me deeply. In the letter, I expressed anger, telling him that I had missed out on so much education as a result of the speech drills that took place in the classroom for a number of years. The letter was quite long. After I finished writing, I looked at the pages and felt defiant. I sealed the letter and addressed the envelope. Of course, I never sent it. Instead I kept it in the drawer because things started to become clearer. In my mind, I made my peace with my teacher without him knowing what I had done. Later, I re-read the letter “with less anger in my eyes” (Medford, 2006, p. 857) feeling glad I had not sent it. I believed my teacher did not deserve to bear the brunt of my anger. Although he did not always give us scope for spontaneous self-expression, he was in a difficult position. Regardless of whether he agreed with it or not, he probably had little choice but to follow school policy on sign language. I did not intend to write this article as a narrative of blame. The purpose was to gain self-understanding and understanding of others. Spry (2001) rightly points out that blame is “not critical reflection” but instead it “truncates knowledge construction and scholarly inquiry” (p. 55). After I read the letter, I ripped the pages apart and, in the process, liberated the mind, body, and soul from the constraints of the past.

### **Epilogue**

Sometime later, I happened to look through my belongings and found a shoebox full of old photographs and school reports. These findings emphasized what I had learnt in deaf studies

research that my story is part of a larger narrative. The idea of using archival contents for autoethnographic research was proposed by Muncey (2010) who suggests that intimate sources of family history and archival documents can help test the autoethnographer's memory of past experiences. While sorting through items found in the shoebox, I came across school reports that proved useful and informative. I immediately recognized the value in these finds. I chanced upon a report that "Mr. Martin" had sent to my parents, an evocative source about my vocals. Fragments of memories came flooding back. I thought about Tim and the words "raspy" and "throaty" came to mind. As I began reading, my eagerness turned to trepidation. The report showed something that caught my eye. I recognized the words of the song about a lost girl, gone but not forgotten. The words of the song were there reminding me of where I was all those years ago. In this fleeting moment, I was transported back in time: ". . . good voice but poor vocalization." "Inclined to sign and gesture" and "needed to be reminded to speak clearly at times. Enjoys the songs, carols, hymns we do in class . . ."

I came across another comment in the report that made me take notice: "improving steadily . . . takes quite an interest in the class library and is more inclined to read a book on his own. His latest is the 'Noddy' series by Enid Blyton, particularly the current one 'Noddy and the Aeroplane.'" I was astonished to learn that, as a ten year old boy, I was reading books geared for pre-school children. It took me some time to get my head around the idea but I recovered quickly and put the shock of the disclosure into a glass-halffull perspective. I came to the conclusion that I was schooled by a teacher who had no experience of sign language. Without the language, it was well-nigh impossible to get an education.

As a university student, I engaged sign language interpreters throughout my studies. Sign language opened many doors into the academic world without which I would have been seriously disadvantaged. Since I graduated from university, my faith in sign language was restored. I have now reframed it as part of my identity. I have a particular affinity with the

language and am no longer ashamed to admit that I think in it everyday and sometimes dream in it at night. I am a sign language person at heart and always will be till the day I die.

### **Coda**

Elsewhere I stated that my story is part of a larger historical narrative. It is constructed as having a history of oralism which has its origin in modernist ideas about pedagogy and teaching methods (Valente, 2011). Oralism emerged long before the nineteenth century and was officially endorsed at the International Congress for the Education of the Deaf held in Milan, Italy, in September 1880. Conference delegates passed resolutions approving the prohibition of signed languages. As an educational ideology, oralism lost much credibility following a proliferation of research findings that reveal the extent of deaf children's underperformance and literacy problems (O'Brien & Emery, 2014).

One hypothesis offered for educational shortfall is the delay in language acquisition during deaf children's formative years. This is compounded by the fact that between 90% and 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Valente, 2011). Tensions arose when the opinions of deaf people concerning educational failure were consistently ignored, discounted, or trivialized. There was a strong consensus among hearing educators that deaf people had little or nothing to contribute to policy debates. Such debates tended to focus on finding the most appropriate teaching methods. This, in effect, diverted attention from the heart of the problem raised by deaf people: language. Instead of looking at the question of language, hearing educators looked for a solution to inappropriate teaching methods. The legacy of these opposing schools of thought has had implications for the social, historical, educational, and political relations between deaf and hearing people (O'Brien & Emery, 2014; Sutton-Spence & West, 2011).

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1. Pseudonyms are used in the story.

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