

Strength in Numbers



Being alone is hard! We often hear the term "Critical Mass" and its value with students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), not only when budgeting for services, but to help students recognize that they are not alone. Similarly, teachers of the deaf or hard of hearing and others who support students with hearing loss educationally derive significant benefits from having a DHH professional 'community.'

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Critical mass. A past Hands & Voices article titled "How Many are Enough? Defining 'Critical Mass' " defines critical mass as the number of students in a classroom, program or school that share a common communication mode and characteristics that are sufficient to support direct interaction opportunities.

Critical Mass helps build a stronger identity, provides role models, and enhances self-esteem and a better concept of self. In today's mainstreaming environment, more than 88% of students who are DHH attend school in their home district. The number of DHH students who receive special services is approximately 1% of total students. If you are not in a big school, it is possible that a child with hearing loss may be the only one in the entire district.

Changed landscape. My nearly 25-year career as a teacher, interpreter and consultant working with children with hearing loss has provided me many experiences working with families, children and adults who are deaf or hard of hearing. I have witnessed the changing landscape in service delivery from self-contained classrooms to the itinerant model. This change not only impacted the critical mass of students and their families, and how they gain support, but also impacted teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing. These teachers and professionals lose their own critical mass of peers who help provide them stronger identity, role models, self-esteem and concept of self. While a student may be the only student in the district with a hearing loss, an itinerant DHH teacher may be the only teacher of the deaf in an entire region, sometimes with drive times of an hour or more to see a single student. With teachers being spread so thin and being so isolated it is very difficult for professionals to gain the support they need to have strong confidence in what they are doing and to keep up with current best practices.

Who does one go to for answers? The day-to-day challenges and questions related to the needs of children with hearing loss, even for veteran teachers, yields new questions and new needs each day. If you are alone in the mainstream as an itinerant teacher, you most likely do not have easy access to a professional critical mass that can support you and provide those answers. Even those who have support may not have the time or easy access to the resources and community you need. The need for ongoing support for professionals in the field related to school issues is undeniable.

4 IDEAS for how you can access or create a professional critical mass, helping you to build a stronger identity, access role models, enhance your self-esteem and a better concept of self.

1. Email the staff in your school/district/region.... and celebrate!

Of course, the best way to create professional critical mass is to connect face-to-face, but these days, everyone is accessible

These resources already exist and require no prep and little to no organization and allow you to connect whenever you want and need to. They can be easy to incorporate into your schedule and can truly meet this need.

via Zoom or another virtual platform. If you have a network of professionals around you, then send an email out to get everyone together! Use this time to debrief, network and share. But don't make it only business. Make sure there's some fun mixed there, too. Celebrate the end of the year, a big success, or that even that the sun is out!

2. Get on Facebook.

Check out the group [Professionals Working with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students](#). This Facebook group is not only Teachers of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, but also SLPs, Audiologists, program coordinators, OTs, Interpreters - you name it! It is very active and a great way to get input on questions, get resources, and just hear and see what others are doing in the field.



3. Try the Marco Polo app

Many DHH professionals are using the app Marco Polo to connect with each other. Marco Polo is a video instant messaging app. Wondering about certain signs? Marco Polo is also a great way to "ask around" when trying to know how to sign something. Marco Polo is free and available on both [Google Play](#) and in [iTunes](#). Learn more about Marco Polo [HERE](#).



Marco Polo

4. Enroll in the [Professional Academy](#) through The Online Itinerant.

Okay, DISCLAIMER: This option is my favorite because.... well, I founded it. I founded The Professional Academy to accomplish a few goals: 1. To provide stand-out professional development for professionals who work with deaf and hard of hearing students and 2. To create an active, live community of professionals who have a passion for advancing, uplifting and empowering deaf and hard of hearing students - who, in my opinion, are the most amazing, fun, underappreciated, and misunderstood (on a needs level) population of students that exists.



This February, the Professional Academy will launch a weekly Power Hour, providing 1 hour of networking, brainstorming, and resource sharing each week.

The Professional Academy offers a professional community that you can access through monthly online get-togethers, trainings or the members only Facebook group. Everything is easy to access and available when you need them, even if you are on the road.

To kick off the new year, you can now purchase a 6-month rolling membership for only \$99.00. [JOIN THE PROFESSIONAL ACADEMY NOW.](#)

However you look at it, you need a community. A tribe. A critical mass.

As you kick off the new year, what will YOU do to build your identity and support a stronger concept of self?



Stefanie Kessen has more than 25 years in the field of Deaf Education, as a Teacher of the Deaf, interpreter, and Education Specialist for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students. She founded The Online Itinerant in 2018 because she recognized that the key to changing the lives of the children was to support the adults who love and work with them. Currently, The Online Itinerant works with Supporting Success to offer professional development, parent support, and sign language classes, as well as an active community for all!!

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