

horizons

A painting of a young child with dark skin and hair, looking slightly to the left. The child is wearing a red collared shirt and a small, round, light-colored hearing aid in their right ear. A thin white cord extends from the hearing aid. The child's right hand is raised near their face, with fingers slightly curled. The background is dark and textured. The title 'horizons' is written in large, bold, red lowercase letters at the top. In the top right corner, 'Volume XLII Number 8' is written in small white text. In the bottom right corner, the text 'the sounds that others hear' is written vertically in white. Below this, 'SEPTEMBER 1968' and '20 CENTS' are printed in white. In the bottom left corner, there is a signature 'M. Rajagopal' and the word 'Singer' below it.

Volume XLII Number 8

the
sounds
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SEPTEMBER 1968

20 CENTS

M. Rajagopal
Singer



The

DEAF CHILDREN learn speech by watching teacher, feeling strength of breath on hand, speaking into an audiometer that informs them of their sounds' intensity.





NEW BUILDING in the Penang countryside was built to house Malaysia's famed Federation School for the Deaf.

sounds that others hear

by Fred Parrish

Photographs by Fred Parrish and Phillip Thomas

SCORES OF CHILDREN sat on the floor of the spacious room, their eyes glued to the television. Superman was masterminding another fantastic feat against the bad guys and the kids gave him their undivided attention. One little boy in the front row gestured eagerly, then turned to his friends and motioned them to join in the fun.

If you had walked into this room at that moment you might have noticed nothing different or unusual—nothing, that is, except a scattering of hearing aids. In fact, *every* child in the room was severely deaf: Not one of the 140 children could hear normally. Many could follow the program only by trying to read the lips of the actors, and most of the younger ones couldn't do even that. But considering their handicap, these are fortunate children. Here, in Malaysia's Federation School for the Deaf in Penang, they were learning to overcome their problem so that, in time, they could live nearly normal lives as useful and productive citizens.

"When a child with a hearing handicap comes to us," said the school's personable principal, Mrs. Yahaya Isa (Lee Kooi Jong), "he's retarded in the sense that he can't grasp ideas as quickly as a child with normal hearing. He's a slow learner. Our guiding belief is that children with partial hearing can and should be as agile with their minds as those with adequate hearing."

As we walked into the large building that is serving temporarily as the school auditorium, Mrs. Isa pointed out a little girl who was laboriously learning the astounding fact that "sound" is something normal people "hear." Mrs. Isa looked at me and asked: "How do you suppose you teach a child who can't hear about the tone of words

that mean so much to the normal person? How do you teach him about music? It's like—well, it's like trying to explain color to a person who is blind. The beautiful shades in the meaning of words, in the meaning of different tones of voice, and all music are lost to these children. There is no natural compensation for this loss. The child must be *taught* to compensate, by which we mean taught to develop abnormal sensitivity in the other senses—sight, touch, taste and smell."

There was a lot of activity at the school that Friday morning. On one side of a big room a teacher sat with a small group of children close to a round table with a rectangular mirror and an electronic instrument, an audiometer. One little boy, a seven-year-old ball of energy named Tan Kim Huat, sat on a low chair carefully adjusting a set of earphones like those worn by pilots. Taking a quick glance in the mirror, he looked up at his teacher, Mrs. Baharoum, who was holding a chart with letter combinations printed on it.

Even though Tan is hard of hearing his eyesight is perfect, and his big brown eyes gazed eagerly at the chart with the written words that had to be translated into sounds—those "things" that had been so hard to learn. He repeated them in rapid fashion, while watching his own lip and mouth movements in the mirror. The needle on the audiometer fluctuated with each sound. Tan's high-pitched voice carried all over the room.

"I'm afraid he's showing off a bit for you," said Mrs. Isa, seemingly apologetic but actually very proud. "He's usually not that loud."

At the other end of the room a group of older boys

The sounds that others hear

continued



try to imagine what it would be like if you couldn't hear yourself talk . . .

and girls sat around a table with their instructor, Othman Hashim, an American-trained specialist in special education. They were discussing the United States. The question was: "What city is famous for its skyscraper buildings?" A boy on the end, in a rather forced, hoarse voice, said "Dallas." "No, it isn't Dallas, but they do have tall buildings there," Othman said. Another student volunteered the answer "New York City," and the others agreed. The next question was, "What is Texas noted for?" The answer came from a number of students, some of them easier to understand than others: "Cowboys." "Cattle." "Oil wells."

Deaf children have a hard time speaking. Just try to imagine what it would be like if you couldn't hear yourself talk. Try to imagine how you would sound if you had no rhythm to your sentences, if one syllable of a word was said in a low tone, another syllable in a high tone. And what if you talked only in vowels with no consonants, those decisive clicking sounds that make speech intelligible but are so difficult for the deaf to understand? Try speaking without consonants, and you'll have an indication of what a deaf person must overcome.

"When the children come to us, most of them are like little savages," said Mrs. Isa. "They bite people and sometimes they bang their heads against the wall. They're frustrated. All their life they've been unable to communicate with anyone, even their parents. They couldn't tell parents about their problems, their joys, their hopes. Consequently they had learned nothing about social living, about right from wrong.

"Our job here is to educate them, to prepare them for life, to help them adjust to their handicap, to give them the opportunity to compete with others without too much of a burden. And to teach them that they might be discriminated against when they get into life's competition, and therefore, in order to be successful, they must be more industrious, more willing to do extra work, more polite and understanding. We want to teach them that they must learn more self-discipline so employers will give them the chance to prove they should be judged not by their handicap but by their work."

Schools and life are constructed for the normal child, and a child with less than ordinary hearing continually falls behind in his work. When a child is doing poorly



SCHOOL PRINCIPAL Mrs. Yahaya Isa isn't using sign language; she gestures to help get message across.





"I SAID IT! Can you?" a deaf boy asks his deaf friend, showing word on card. She says it, grabs card, and they yell with joy.



if you had no rhythm to your sentences . . . if you talked only in vowels

in school, there is a chance that a hearing loss is depriving him of the full import of ideas that others in his class are grasping because they grasp the subtleties of sound.

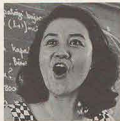
"When a child is referred to our school," said Mrs. Isa, "the first thing we do is find out how much learning loss he has suffered. If it is relatively minor and if his hearing can be corrected by a hearing aid, then we don't accept the child. Our program is for those children who have severe hearing problems. Modern scientific machines have enabled us to make more sophisticated tests than was possible before, and we know that even the most deaf child has what we call an 'island of hearing' even though it might be ever so slight according to normal standards."

Since there are many degrees of deafness—ranging from the child at the back of the room who has to turn his head slightly to hear the teacher to the child who can hear only sounds produced by sophisticated machines—the school accepts only children who cannot hear sounds below 60 decibels. This means that if a child can't hear someone talking in a normal conversational level one meter away, he probably has a severe enough hearing problem to qualify for admission to the school.

Malaysia has one of the most advanced programs for deaf children in Southeast Asia. Children enroll in the school at Penang at as early an age as possible. They live at the school and study regular school subjects while taking special courses in remedial speech and writing. As soon as a child is socially capable of maintaining himself in a normal school situation, he is transferred to a regular school where he studies just as any other student.

Some children never progress to this point. But even these children are taught practical skills that will enable them to return to their homes and contribute to their family. The school has a vocational arts program, and students are taught to support themselves.

"What I would like to see in the future," said Mrs. Isa, "is a national program for children with severe hearing problems that would send them to schools like ours from the ages two to five. They could learn the skills that would allow them to begin their first year at a normal school. This would mean a child could adjust to his handicap at the earliest possible age, help prevent frustrations that could be detrimental to the child in later life, and put him off to a good start by forcing him to compete as early



The sounds that others hear

continued



DORMITORY BEDS at the Federation School for the Deaf are made up in the morning by the children themselves, most of whom have no trouble sleeping well after a long day of studies and physical activity. In compensation for their handicap, most deaf children excel at sports—and one of the boys' favorite games at the Penang school is volleyball (far left).



as possible with others whom he will eventually be competing with for jobs. On top of all this, we must remember that a deaf child is still a child—and that while dealing with his deafness we must at the same time deal with physical, emotional and intellectual development."

She might have added their social development, because there's a lot of that at the federation school. The kids are considerate. After a short nap period, they were anxious to watch television and ran out of their dormitory—all except one little lad who was entangled in his little sheet. To him I'm sure it was a monstrous sheet. Another boy, one of his buddies I suppose, stopped, went back to the dormitory and helped the other little tyke. Together they tightened up the sheet and fought it into submission.

Malaysia's Federation School for the Deaf, though it is a state institution, is not run strictly as a charity. It charges fees. But they are nominal and are based on the parents' ability to pay. The lowest fee is M\$5 [US\$1.67] and the highest is M\$15 [US\$5]. Each student costs the country M\$120 a month [US\$40], the difference being paid by the Government or by individuals and firms that have taken an interest in the school.

The children range in age from 4 to 18. They leave at varying ages to attend normal schools, but most stay until

they're 16. After finishing normal school, some go out into the business world, some help with family enterprises. Many are successfully employed in drafting, baking, clerking, typing and clothesmaking.

I had finished the tour and had stopped to watch a class of older youngsters, some of whom would soon be leaving the school. Mrs. Isa told me that there is no formal system to help the deaf find jobs—or, more important, to convince prospective employers to employ someone with a physical handicap.

"Right now I help them as much as I can but it's mainly through personal contacts with businessmen," she said. "What we really need is an agency that is set up to help these people over their first big hurdle. They need that one first chance to prove they're an asset instead of a liability. We once had a young fellow here from the time he was just a youngster, and the older he got the more trouble we had with him. Since he was a champion athlete he had quite a following and he ran a gang that caused all kinds of mischief. But finally he adjusted. He went on to a normal school and, you know, when he got his first job, he sent me \$10 out of his first check as a token of his appreciation! I took the money and bought ice pops for the whole school!" ●