

Building Allies and Sharing Best Practices: Cultural Perspectives of Deaf People and ASL Can Benefit All

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Abstract

Societal views of Deaf people typically stem from a medical or deficit perspective, which then informs educational practices. In contrast, educational settings that embrace a cultural perspective provide visual language and strategies that can benefit all students. This article will address three common myths about American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf people, and share research-supported pedagogical practices and recommendations on how to be an ally on behalf of Deaf people.

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A greater focus on developmentally appropriate practice, including culturally responsive practices, have led educators to adapt curricula to meet the varying knowledge, beliefs, experiences, and contexts of children (e.g., NAEYC, 2020). However, misunderstandings and myths about some children’s capabilities and culture persist. For example, for multilingual language learners, there has been a misunderstanding that “learning two languages during the early childhood years will overwhelm, confuse, and/or delay acquisition of English” (Espinosa, 2013, p. 5). Misunderstandings and myths apply to Deaf children’s capabilities and culture as well, particularly in language learning (Humphries et al., 2012).

In this article, we first present varying perspectives on educating Deaf children. Then, we share three common myths and facts about Deaf children’s language and literacy development. Finally, we present research-supported practices that educators can implement to counter these common myths and be(come) a hearing ally. This includes incorporating American Sign Language (ASL) to benefit all students, and how educators can promote positive perceptions about Deaf people in their classrooms. For the remainder of this article, we will use the term “Deaf” as an inclusive term to refer to individuals of varying hearing levels (see Table 1), diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities (e.g., race, culture, gender).

Varying Perspectives on Educating Deaf Children

As schools embrace more inclusive environments, it is becoming common for public school teachers to have a Deaf student in their classroom (Office of Research Support and International Affairs, 2015), and those students may or may not use technologies such as cochlear implants or hearing aids. Just like all

students, Deaf students often have diverse backgrounds, strengths, and needs. However, educators may not realize that they also vary in hearing level (i.e., mild to profound) and home languages (i.e., sign or spoken languages). They also vary in their language and literacy skills, with some having significant delays and others achieving grade-level (or above) expectations. A Deaf child with any of these characteristics could join a general or special education classroom, and teachers must consider how to plan and implement effective practices that will benefit Deaf learners as well as other students in their classrooms. In addition, even if they never have a Deaf student, educators can become an ally and share knowledge about Deaf culture and ASL as a part of a culturally responsive curriculum.

Practices, beliefs, and recommendations for teaching Deaf students or about Deaf people are just as varied depending on the guiding beliefs and theoretical perspectives (Humphries et al., 2012). The more typical societal views of Deaf people are from a medical or deficit perspective, which focuses primarily on their hearing; how to fix or mold them to fit into a hearing world (Lane et al., 1996). Decisions about their education are often informed, in turn, by this perspective. For instance, recommendations typically stem from best practices for hearing children, such as developing spoken language and/or learning literacy through sound-based approaches (e.g., Wang et al., 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). In fact, sign language is not used with the majority of Deaf children (Office of Research Support and International Affairs, 2015). Despite being a popular practice with very young hearing children (baby sign), some still argue that sign language can delay spoken language development (e.g., Geers et al., 2017).

In contrast, educators aligning with a cultural perspective do not view being Deaf as a deficit; rather, they value Deaf Culture and recognize how Deaf people contribute to society. This concept is known as Deaf Gain (Bauman & Murray, 2014), and it recognizes Deaf individuals as visual beings with their own language and culture, including a rich history of art, theater, sports, and language (ASL in the United States; see Table 1 for this and other related terms). From this perspective, researchers and theorists suggest that a visual language, like ASL, and visual strategies, benefit all children. These are the same strategies and language Deaf adults use with their own Deaf child(ren) and/or students in the classroom, helping children make connections between ASL and English (e.g., Moses et al., 2018). Researchers also recommend access to Deaf peers and Deaf adult role models, including Deaf professionals, from the early years and on (Gale, 2020; Moses et al., 2018; Cawthon et al., 2016). Children with a range of hearing levels, including hearing children, can learn from interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse role models (Cawthon et al., 2016; García-Fernández, 2014).

Table 1

Terms commonly used by the Deaf Community (adapted from NAD, n.d.)

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|------------------------------------|---|
| ASL | American Sign Language is used by the Deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada. (Other countries have their own sign language(s).) |
| Deaf | Capital “D” refers to members of the Deaf community who use sign language (e.g., ASL, Black ASL) as their preferred language of choice; including people with multiple identities and varying hearing levels who identify as part of the Deaf community. While “person first” language is acceptable, it is also acceptable to call someone “Deaf.” This term is sometimes used as an all-encompassing term to include Deaf, deaf, Hard of Hearing, DeafBlind and DeafDisabled populations. |
| Hard of Hearing¹ | A person with a mild-to-moderate level of hearing who identifies as hard of hearing and may or may not choose to have cultural affiliation with the Deaf community. |
| deaf | Lowercase “d” deaf used to define a medical condition designating the inability to hear. |
| Hearing | A person recognized as a member of the hearing community at large, someone who typically is able to hear. |
| Hearing level | The cultural description of what level someone can hear, contrasts the medical term “hearing loss,” which is perceived as a negative term (profound level of hearing vs a profound hearing loss). |
| Inappropriate terms | The terms “hearing impaired,” “deaf-mute,” and “deaf and dumb” are not acceptable terms to describe someone who is deaf or hard of hearing. |

However, a recent survey of educators of both hearing and Deaf children revealed that such linguistic and cultural models are not usually incorporated into educational settings, such as early childhood programs (Golos et al., 2018). This may be due to educators focusing more on sound-based approaches to learning (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). These are missed opportunities to build upon Deaf children’s visual strengths and connect to cultural needs. Teachers with or without Deaf students can invite Deaf adults into the classroom, incorporate ASL, and use visual strategies to benefit all students. Before implementing these practices, teachers should first consider what research shows and clarify misconceptions about Deaf individuals’ learning and development.

Myths and Facts: Language and Literacy Development in Deaf Children

Although signing with hearing babies is quite popular, myths persist about the importance of sign language for Deaf children. Here are three prominent myths related to Deaf people, ASL, and language and literacy development as well as evidence to counter them.

Myth 1: If Deaf Children Learn Sign Language, They Will Not Learn How to Speak Well

There is a long-standing debate in Deaf education about the value of sign language that dates back to the late 1800s (Burke, 2018; Traynor, 2016). More recently, Roberta Cordano, J.D. (2016), the current president of Gallaudet University—the world’s first and only liberal arts university for Deaf students—addressed this myth. She pointed to the research showing that learning sign language does *not* negatively affect language or academic skills, including spoken language development (e.g., Allen et al., 2014;

Mayberry et al., 2011). On the contrary, early exposure to ASL encourages Deaf children, including those with cochlear implants, to excel in many domains (Dammeyer, 2014; Davidson et al., 2014). Even hearing children's language and literacy skills can improve from learning sign language (Moses et al., 2015; Brereton, 2008; Daniels, 2004).

Yet, sign language continues to be undervalued. There is a critical period for language acquisition (Penicaud et al., 2013; Petitto, 2009), and children who are exposed to a fully accessible language from birth can develop both first and second languages on an expected timeline (Skotara et al., 2012). For Deaf children, a fully accessible language is usually a visual one, such as ASL. Without it, children may experience severe delays socially, linguistically, and academically (Huber & Kipman, 2011; Mayberry, et al., 2011). Many families, however, are advised to focus on spoken-language development only and that their children can learn sign language later if they are unsuccessful with spoken language (Geers et al., 2017; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).

If, however, families and teachers wait to see if the Deaf child will succeed with spoken language before exposing them to ASL, the child may miss the critical window for language acquisition (Allen et al., 2014; Petitto, 2009). Speech may never be accessible for some Deaf children. Even Deaf children with cochlear implants may not have complete access to spoken language and may not be able to function independently without support (Punch & Hyde, 2011; Schafer & Cokely, 2016). Without the foundation of a fully accessible language, they may experience "language deprivation" (Glickman & Hall, 2018; Gulati, 2019; Hall et al., 2017). Early exposure to ASL can help mitigate the impact of language deprivation, and there is no harm in doing so (Lange et al., 2013). Teachers should not hesitate to incorporate ASL into the classroom (Hall et al., 2019).

Myth 2: The Definition of Sign Language Includes All Manual Communication Systems

Often, people use the term "sign language" to encompass both natural sign languages, such as ASL, and manual communication systems (e.g., Signed English) (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Geers et al., 2017). However, there is a significant difference. ASL is a natural language with its own syntax and grammar that is distinct from spoken English and is based on principles of visual communication (Perlmutter, 2001). When people talk and sign at the same time or use signing that follows the structure of English word order, they are not modeling a language but manual representations of spoken English. These systems or modes have little meaning to students unfamiliar with spoken English, and they do not receive a complete message in either ASL or English when these systems are used (Tevenal & Villanueva, 2009). Yet, using ASL (rather than manual communication) can increase student learning and engagement (Schick & Gale, 1995). As Hall et al. (2019) describe, "We are not aware of anyone who would argue that such communication systems confer the same benefits of a natural sign language" (p. 270).

Hall and colleagues (2019) also write that claims made in studies like Geers and colleagues (e.g., 2011; 2017) and Fitzpatrick and colleagues (2016) should be read with caution. For example, researchers collapsed all forms of sign into one definition when assessing participants' language use. This does not accurately portray their authentic exposure to sign language nor their sign language use and/or abilities.

Furthermore, unless evaluators are knowledgeable of ASL structure, they cannot accurately assess or make data-informed decisions about children's sign language or other academic skills (Simms et al., 2013).

Myth 3: Deaf Children's Language and Literacy Skills Will Be Delayed if They Do Not Have Access to Spoken Language

There is a long history of Deaf children graduating from high school with severe delays in literacy skills (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). Some have attributed this to the lack of access to spoken language (e.g., Geers et al., 2017). This helps to explain why current practice for Deaf children most often relies on one route to literacy, through spoken language (i.e., listening and speaking) connected to print. More often than not, the push is to use sound-based approaches for teaching literacy (Wang et al., 2008).

An alternative explanation for delayed literacy skills relates to language deprivation, as described earlier. In fact, when Deaf children are exposed to ASL from birth, they can develop critical early literacy skills prior to conventional reading and continue to develop literacy skills on or above grade level (Caselli et al., 2021; Hrastinski & Wilbur, 2016; Scott & Hoffmeister, 2017). Deaf children with cochlear implants who had higher ASL skills also had higher language and literacy skills, compared with children with cochlear implants who had little to no ASL skills (Allen, 2015; Dammeyer, 2014; Davidson et al., 2014).

Thus, adults should not wait to engage with ASL and print with Deaf children, even if they are just beginning to learn to sign. They can use strategies to help Deaf or hearing children make connections between ASL and spoken or written language (Lange et al., 2013). They also can utilize supplementary methods (e.g., gesture, acting out stories) and materials (e.g., literacy-related apps or DVDs in ASL; see Appendix) to expose children to different types of text while they are learning to sign (Snoddon, 2015).

Countering Myths by Be(com)ing a Hearing Ally

Research in Deaf education offers suggestions for strategies and activities that align with a cultural perspective and the guiding principles of hearing allyship (<http://www.hearingallyship.org/>). Much like considering other aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, and gender, any educator can be an ally for Deaf people and foster future allies in their students (e.g., Brown & Ostrove, 2013), especially those who interact with Deaf students in inclusive settings. The following suggestions are evidence-based practices educators can use to integrate ASL and visual strategies into classrooms for all students and also foster understanding and positive perceptions about Deaf people (Bauman & Murray, 2014; Cawthon et al., 2016; Freel et al., 2011; García-Fernández, 2014; Holcomb, 2013).

Incorporating ASL and Visual Strategies Benefits All Students

As already highlighted, all students, including Deaf students with cochlear implants and hearing students (Most et al., 2009), can benefit from visual supports to access the world around them. For example, they may use alternative pathways to literacy such as ASL instead of, or in addition to sound, to access English print (McQuarrie & Abbott, 2013; Mayberry et al., 2011). In fact, researchers have found increased scores

in children's vocabulary and reading when teachers incorporated ASL into literacy instruction with hearing children either live (e.g., Brereton, 2008; Daniels, 2004) or through media (Moses et al., 2015). These findings suggest that using a visual language like ASL can uniquely support all children, including those who struggle with sound-based approaches or cannot access sound.

Thus, all teachers may enhance student learning by incorporating ASL and visual strategies. Teachers do not have to be fluent in ASL to begin to incorporate effective strategies into homes or classrooms. The following examples are drawn from research on Deaf adults' engagement with Deaf children at home (Berke, 2013) and school (Stone et al., 2015; Allen, 2015; Allen et al., 2014; Ramsey & Padden, 1998), reinforcing that all students can benefit from using ASL and the following strategies:

- Incorporate ASL in the classroom. For example, if a teacher has a word wall, they can show the ASL sign and/or fingerspelled word with English print (along with print in other languages; see Fig. 1). This also models respect for and equity for both languages while providing visual learners with additional support for word learning.
- Wait for the student. Deaf students and visual learners may need to attend to a book or other object and then look at the adult either before or afterward. This sequential (rather than simultaneous) joint attention allows children to explore and make connections between the language and the object.
- Use chaining or sandwiching. Each strategy is particularly effective to target vocabulary when reading books with students. Adults define the word, point to a written word, sign the word, fingerspell the word, and then show the printed word again (i.e., chaining; see Figure 2) or sign the word, define the word, fingerspell the word, and sign the word (i.e., sandwiching). Teachers can use multiple combinations of these strategies as they are defining new words.
- Encourage shared reading opportunities. Shared reading is associated with positive literacy outcomes. Adding ASL can only increase the benefit for all students by providing multiple routes to literacy (see Appendix for stories in ASL). While it is important for all students to have exposure to books, for Deaf students, it is especially important to have access to shared reading in ASL (see Figure 3).

If educators do have a Deaf student in their classroom, in addition to the above, consider the following:

- Provide access to fluent models of ASL and equal access to communication and education (e.g., closed captioning on all media materials).
- Have and effectively utilize an ASL interpreter. Encourage the school to ensure that the interpreter is highly qualified and certified. Interact directly with Deaf students even in the presence of an interpreter. (For more information about working with an interpreter, see Moses et al., 2018).
- Acknowledge that Deaf students need time to read or view visual information (e.g., on a screen or board) before shifting their gaze back to the teacher/interpreter. Also consider that there might be a time delay between the teacher's spoken word and the interpreter's interpretation.



Fig. 1: This is an example of a vocabulary word displayed in picture, English print, and fingerspelling.



Fig. 2: Graduate students modeling chaining with preschool children (Captured here is the process of transitioning between fingerspelling the letter “i” and “g” after pointing to the printed word and signing “pig”).



Fig. 3: A Deaf adult and Deaf child share a book together in ASL.

Promoting Positive Perceptions About Deaf People

Perceptions of others and one's own identity develop quite early in life. These perceptions are constantly being molded throughout their schooling. Therefore, the experiences children have influence how they come to perceive themselves, others, and the world around them (Cawthon et al, 2016; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Leigh, 2009; García-Fernández, 2014). For educators and families, it is never too early to start building self-awareness or future allies to Deaf people, and these practices should continue throughout schooling. Yet, cultural perspectives of Deaf people are rarely included within the curriculum for Deaf or hearing children. To do this, consider the following:

- Have high expectations. Understand Deaf students (and some hearing students) as “visual learners” with multiple intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, culture, hearing level) and showcase all that Deaf people can achieve.
- Encourage others (i.e., educators, students, families, administrators) to learn ASL (see Appendix for free resources).
- Provide opportunities for interactions with Deaf and hearing peers. Social interactions are equally as important as interacting in academic language.
- Reach out to members of the Deaf community with diverse backgrounds (i.e., race, gender, culture, hearing level, languages). Invite them into the classroom, to share their experiences living as a Deaf individual, and best educational practices. For example, they can sign stories in ASL as well as suggest ways to improve lighting, seating, and space for visual learners.
- Incorporate both informational resources and stories, such as books and media in ASL with Deaf people/characters, that portray positive messages about Deaf people from varying backgrounds throughout the curriculum and environment (e.g., Moses et al., 2018; See Appendix). Make sure to “call out” that they are Deaf.
- Review materials ahead of time and consider the messages conveyed as many books/media do not portray Deaf people from a cultural perspective (see Moses et al., 2018, for a review of books and media with Deaf characters)
- Help educators, administrators, and particularly families with Deaf children find accurate information about language, literacy, and identity development. Assist them in connecting with people and resources from the Deaf community.

Teachers also can provide ongoing interactions with Deaf adults and Deaf peers from diverse race, gender, and cultural backgrounds (Bat-Chava, 2010; García-Fernández, 2014).

Conclusion

Educators can shift from a deficit viewpoint to a cultural perspective by focusing on what Deaf people can do rather than what they physically cannot do. Regardless of whether educators ever have Deaf students in their classroom, *all* students can benefit from learning about ASL and Deaf people from a cultural perspective. Educators and families can align with a cultural perspective by valuing who Deaf people are as visual beings, including their cultures (i.e., Deaf and additional family cultures) and

languages (i.e., ASL, English and other spoken, written or signed languages in the home) (Bauman & Murray, 2014). Then, their strategies, activities, and materials may be used to build upon a Deaf student's assets by way of visual strategies. Deaf adults given this foundation learn the various ways of "being" Deaf in a hearing environment and pass down these culturally based solutions for effective living (Holcomb, 2013).

With exposure to diverse Deaf role models, ASL, and visual strategies, Deaf and hearing students' language and literacy skills can improve (Allen et al., 2014; Cawthon et al., 2016; Freel et al., 2011). In addition, Deaf students may grow to embrace their strengths and develop a stronger sense of self-worth (Cawthon et al., 2016). Hearing students may grow to have a deeper understanding of the Deaf cultural perspective, value Deaf people as visual beings and, eventually, become allies.

Note

1. We recognize there may be more than one definition of Hard of Hearing. As such, children might be labeled hard of hearing based on hearing level rather than their preferred identity.

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Appendix A

Recommended Resources for Best Practices

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| <i>To learn more about research and professional resources, check out the following:</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Visual Language and Visual Learning (VL2) research briefs from Gallaudet University are an excellent resource to learn more about ASL and visual strategies: http://vl2.gallaudet.edu/research/research-briefs/ |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The National Association of the Deaf has offered advocacy efforts and materials, including position statements for over 130 years: https://www.nad.org/about-us/position-statements/ |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deaf Education teacher preparation programs offered across the country. For contact information, visit: http://www.deafed.net/Knowledge/PageText.asp?hdnPageId=120. |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center offers professional development workshops and resources for educators: http://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/learning-opportunities/on-site-training.html |
| <i>These are multimedia materials available for free to teach ASL, early literacy skills and/or include Deaf role models:</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bravo Family offer free beginning courses in ASL: https://dcmp.org/series/5-bravo-beginning-asl-videocourse |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ASL nook is a Deaf family modeling storytelling and teaching ASL: www.aslnook.com |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands Land includes a series of interactive, researched-based video clips to teach ASL Rhyme and Rhythms, developed by an all Deaf team: www.handsland.com |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter's Picture comprises of free interactive, research-tested children's series and app that fosters language, literacy and knowledge of Deaf culture through ASL: https://app.peterspicture.com/ <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VL2 Storybook Apps provide stories in ASL and English https://vl2storybookapps.com/ • Signed Stories app provides stories in ASL and English https://www.signedstories.com/apps |
| <i>To build on the information shared in this article about best practices for teaching and interacting with Deaf children, check out these free resources:</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best practices for reading with Deaf children: http://www3.gallaudet.edu/clerc-center/learning-opportunities/online-learning/fifteen-principles-for-reading-to-deaf-children.html |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These websites provide information on how to create Deaf-friendly space: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ https://www.gallaudet.edu/campus-design-and-planning/deafspace ○ http://www.raisingandeducatingdeafchildren.org/2018/04/02/organizing-classrooms-for-deaf-and-hard-of-hearing-learners/ |



Debbie Golos is an Associate Professor of Deaf Education and Coordinator of the Deaf Education Teacher Preparation Program in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Minnesota. She formerly taught 6th grade reading and writing at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont. Her areas of focus for research and teaching are on preventing language deprivation by fostering language, literacy, and identity development for Deaf and Hard of Hearing children through American Sign Language utilizing educational media and literature. She is currently exploring how mindfulness activities in early childhood can promote children's and teachers' well-being.



Annie Moses is Director of Periodicals / Editor in Chief at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). She worked at the university level to prepare future early childhood educators for over 15 years. Her research and publications focus on young children's literacy and language development and aspects of early childhood settings that influence their development. This includes investigating the role of media in the lives of developing readers and writers, and another that examines early literacy activities, instruction and assessments utilized in early childhood settings.



Elaine Gale is an Assistant Professor and Coordinator of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Teacher Preparation Program at Hunter College, City University of New York (CUNY). She is Chair of the Deaf Leadership International Alliance (DLIA); infusing diverse deaf adults throughout early intervention programs from decision-making to service provision. Her research examines joint attention, theory of mind, and sign language development. Currently, she is co-principal investigator for "Family ASL: Bimodal Bilingual Acquisition by Deaf Children of Hearing Parents" supported by the National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders (NIDCD) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).



Michele Berke currently works at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont as the Principal for the Early Childhood Education department. Her experience includes directing Gallaudet University's western regional office, coordinating a US Department of Education funded development of an ASL Assessment tool, and teaching college-level Linguistics of ASL courses. She completed her doctoral studies in Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences from the University of Colorado in Boulder. Her research explored the shared reading practices of Deaf and hearing mothers and their pre-school children. In addition, Michele holds DHH teaching credentials in multiple subjects and is an educational specialist in California.