“Ask Us, and Not the Interpreter”: A Critical Pedagogy Inquiry on Deaf-Led Empowerment in Filipino Sign Language Teaching

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Abstract

This autoethnographic reflection explores the author’s journey of learning Filipino Sign Language from her Deaf students and how Deaf-led actions led to conscientization and empowerment. Inquiry through critical pedagogy revealed shared self-doubts about abilities and a fear of challenging dominant negative narratives about Deaf people. The article illustrates how Deaf inclusion is fundamentally an inclusion of human rights in education, making it Deaf-centered. It also highlights the importance of creating a safe space for healing from the impact of linguistic and cultural oppression, which becomes an empowering process. This study recommends concrete actions to sustain linguistic and cultural justice for Deaf learners in education.

Context

Recognition of the rights of Deaf people has come a long way in the Philippines. While their natural sign language, now known as Filipino Sign Language (FSL), was first documented in 1590 by Jesuit priests in their interactions with Deaf people from Dulac, Leyte, in the eastern Philippines (Chirino, 1604/1904), it was only in 2018 that a law was passed recognizing the rights of Deaf people and mandating the use of FSL as the primary medium of instruction and communication in education, the justice system, and employment settings (Filipino Sign Language Act, 2018). Earlier laws were silent on Deaf rights and focused on encouraging government agencies and private organizations to comply. This changed with the FSL Law of 2018, which clearly mandates that decisions and interventions to change and facilitate the improvement of the Philippine Deaf situation must respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of Filipino Deaf people as a linguistic and cultural minority. This articulation reflects a Deaf-centered understanding of inclusion, where the law acknowledges that in any endeavor involving Deaf people, it is imperative that their perspectives, their lived experiences, and their insights on improving practices are recognized and integrated into planning, decision-making, problem-solving, and action-taking. In essence, Deaf people must be able to fully participate in conversations and decisions, especially those affecting their lives and the lives of other Deaf people—what they say matters.

However, such inclusion was nonexistent in 1991. That year, De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, Philippines, opened a Deaf vocational program for two reasons. First, historically, the saint after whom our school was named had taught a deaf boy in the 1600s (Salm, 1987), and it was only fitting to continue his legacy. Second, as explained to me by my Deaf program head, many unemployed Deaf high school graduates lacked sufficient employable skills, and vocational training was seen as a solution to this social problem. This marked the first Deaf program in the history of De La Salle Philippines,[1] an institution whose educational legacy in the country dates back to 1901. Benilde’s initiative was shaped by historical

responsibility and by the pressing social issue of unemployment. It opened opportunities to nurture the growth of youth and adults in the Filipino Deaf community and its allies. In the process, Deaf-led and Deaf-centered innovations and advocacies emerged and evolved, helping to defend, promote, and fulfill the rights of Deaf people, particularly the inclusion of their linguistic and cultural identity in education.

As one of the pioneers of this program, I look back on the beginnings of my journey toward advancing Deaf rights in education. This autoethnography focuses on my reflection on the shared journey with my first Deaf students, whose sincerity and bravery shaped my transformation. This experience awakened me to the realities of their oppression. Through conscientization, I began learning their language directly from them, which opened access to deeper conversations. These conversations helped me realize that their shared experiences of exclusion were neither incidental nor coincidental, but rather the result of negative beliefs about Deaf people that had been accepted as truth. In reality, these were prejudices that justified patterns of discrimination at home, in school, and in society.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate, through the lens of critical pedagogy, the following: first, to describe experiences that reflect my participation in discrimination practices against Deaf students. Second, to analyze the realizations and actions that emerged from the practice of critical pedagogy (e.g., conscientization, dialogue, Deaf-led problem-solving, and praxis), which empowered both the author (me) and the Deaf students, as an ally and as advocates, respectively. Third, to identify concrete ways to advance Deaf-centered and Deaf-led teaching that sustains linguistic and cultural justice for Deaf learners and supports their authentic empowerment in education.

Discussion

Discrimination: Outcomes of Audism and Dehumanization

Bauman (2004) describes discrimination against Deaf people in three ways: “The notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears; a system of advantage based on hearing ability; and a metaphysical orientation that links human identity with speech” (p. 245). The ability to speak and hear is often equated with evidence of ability and capacity, such that those with hearing loss are viewed as inferior. The emphasis on the non-functioning, impaired, or “broken” aspects of their hearing, often associated with the medical view, reflects a metaphysical orientation that positions Deaf people as less fully human. As a result, Deaf people are frequently viewed from a deficit perspective. This is a dehumanizing act. When individuals are viewed through a deficit lens, they are deprived of their “human qualities, personality, or dignity” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), which gives rise to discrimination. For Paolo Freire (2000), dehumanization is

> any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person . . . . Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. (p. 55)

Without my awareness, my interaction with my Deaf students reflected these dynamics. In certain instances, entirely unaware, I was condoning the same dehumanizing beliefs through my actions.

Signing and Speaking the English Word Order

I was six months into my job as a junior mental health counselor for hearing college students when my program administrator instructed me to learn sign language because we would be accepting Deaf students the following year. I learned to sign from a hearing sign language interpreter who provided classes for hearing people like me. I was confident that I would not have difficulty communicating with my Deaf students, as I had completed my sign language classes and had been recognized as the best student in my class. I did not anticipate any challenges with my abilities, and as a designated mental health counselor, I felt ready to teach and guide them to become the best versions of themselves.

But on day one, I failed. I could not understand them, and they could not understand me. I attempted to communicate using choppy spoken words while signing, and at the same time, they responded with quick movements of their hands synchronized with body movements and facial expressions. My mind went blank. I frowned and signed "again," and they replied with slower movements of their hands and fingers, their faces showing frustration, and sometimes a blank expression, as if simply going through the motions to complete a strained conversation. I did try to communicate with my students. I signed and spoke simultaneously, not realizing I was further widening the gap in our communication. Simultaneous communication was widely used in Deaf education by hearing teachers who used manually coded English, borrowing signs from the Deaf community's natural sign language but following the grammatical rules and word order of English (Tevenal & Villanueva, 2009). To visually represent English, the speaker signs following its exact word order while simultaneously speaking so that lip movements can be seen. I believed this was the only way to communicate with Deaf individuals. At the time, I did not know that there was a natural sign language used by Deaf people, what we now know as Filipino Sign Language (FSL), and that it thrived within the Deaf community, "who collectively identify as a linguistic and cultural community which uses Filipino Sign Language and actively supports its goals and values" (FSL Act, 2018). Deaf individuals are recognized as having their own linguistic and cultural identity and shared aspirations, identified as a community with a capital "D" in Deaf. On the other hand, the word deaf (lowercase) is used as an adjective to describe individuals "who are unable to fully use their hearing to process information. They may or may not be signers or identify themselves with the Deaf community" (FSL Act, 2018). This group may include persons who are hard of hearing, use assistive devices such as hearing aids or cochlear implants, and rely on speech and speech reading to communicate. It may also include those who are isolated and use gestural, non-standard signs (FSL Act, 2018). As the law explains, "all Filipino Deaf people are generally deaf, while not all deaf Filipinos are Deaf."

As I watched them converse, I witnessed raw emotions attuned to what was being expressed, whether brief or extended, through coordinated movements of the hands and body, along with the expressive use of the eyes and eyebrows that stretched, contracted, and shifted with meaning. There were pauses, as well as extended sequences of thought, with participants taking turns or sometimes responding

simultaneously in ways that were both coordinated and organized. I had been told that these were merely uncoordinated gestures and pantomime that did not follow a precise flow of thought. While I did not fully understand them, it did not appear so. I knew they understood each other, and I was the one left out. However, when communicating with hearing people, they would slow down, sign with more rigid and segmented movements as if emphasizing specific points, and follow what seemed to be a straight structure, often attempting to mouth equivalent words.

I was misunderstanding their expressed thoughts because I was interpreting their signs through English word order or signing them in an exact English form. While I could identify the individual vocabulary, I could not grasp the overall meaning because they were using their own language, the one I did not yet understand. I responded using signed English, and they, in turn, tried to pick up bits of vocabulary, but the main message remained unclear. This communication method creates discrepancies in information and reduces Deaf learners’ access to comprehensible input. In a study of Tevenal and Villanueva (2009), deaf and hearing participants’ access to information was compared under simultaneous communication conditions. The findings showed that hearing people accessed information accurately, whereas Deaf learners’ access to the same information was compromised. Similarly, in my interactions with my Deaf students, our shared understanding was limited. However, unlike me, a hearing person, their ability to find other ways to access and comprehend information was also constrained. Conversations, which should serve as learning opportunities, and structured classroom environments designed to optimize student learning, often depended on hearing people in families, schools, and society. Those who are proficient in spoken language but have limited proficiency in the natural sign language of the Deaf put Deaf learners at a consistent disadvantage. A system designed to support human development at home, in school, and in society that is only accessible to members of the majority (i.e., hearing people) perpetuates institutional audism. This occurs when prejudices and discriminations in individual interactions are reinforced through policies and practices that privilege dominant groups while oppressing minority groups (Gertz & Boudreault, 2016). At the time, I was not aware of this. Yet I was a perpetuator of institutional audism.

Talking Directly to the Sign Language Interpreter

To communicate and carry out my job responsibilities, I changed my strategy. I stopped making efforts to communicate directly and instead relied on my interpreter to do the “talking” for both my students and me. At the time, I did not realize that my actions were discriminatory. Due to my limited proficiency in their language, I retreated further from attempting to communicate on my own. I lost my confidence and began to see myself as a failure. My sense of self-worth was so low to the point that I believed only my sign language teacher could help me overcome these challenges. I asked my teacher to serve as my interpreter to help me do my job as a counselor and trainer of self-development workshops, as well as to understand my students through the voice of my interpreter. For a while, it seemed to work—or so I thought. I was able to do my job of giving self-development activities over several months, and with the support of my interpreter, I became comfortable listening to and communicating with my students. However, my attention was primarily on the interpreter. Although I looked at my students when I talked, when it was their turn to sign, my attention frequently shifted back to the interpreter. I asked questions

or responded while looking at the interpreter. When I noticed an unfamiliar sign, I would ask the interpreter for clarification. I believed I was being respectful, but my behavior made my students invisible. Not being seen when one is present is a dehumanizing experience.

Dinner Table Syndrome

In one of my sharing sessions about their family experiences, I relied on my interpreter to understand their concerns, and a common theme emerged: they felt unloved and unworthy. For many years, they had struggled to communicate in ways that would allow them to be understood. Yet, in many instances, they felt that the same effort was not given to them, so they, too, could understand family conversations, particularly those that occurred during mealtimes. This experience has been identified as "Dinner Table Syndrome," in which hearing individuals take turns quickly, guided by auditory cues, while Deaf individuals are excluded from the flow of conversations (Hauser et al., 2010; Meek, 2020). My Deaf students shared that in these situations, they were often left behind in conversations and were asked to wait until others had finished talking, or they were given only brief, fragmented explanations through choppy signing or speech.

Hearing families of deaf children often lack awareness and guidance regarding the importance of providing a fully accessible language, such as sign language. Instead, they rely primarily on spoken language to communicate. As a result, both the quality and quantity of communication are reduced, since deaf children's auditory pathways are wholly or partially inaccessible (Swisher, 1989). Spoken language remains largely incomprehensible, language development is impaired, communication becomes limited, and overall quality of life is diminished (Hall, 2017). Over time, this lack of communication can damage a child's self-esteem and, in due time, the child becomes a passive learner rather than an active one (Snoddon & Underwood, 2017).

Empowerment: Critical Pedagogy

Critical Pedagogy provides a process to guide individuals who experience discrimination and oppression to understand themselves critically and question the beliefs that maintain their oppressive conditions (Freire, 2000; O'Connell, 2023). Another key process is dialogue with community members, through which individuals recognize each other's personhood, develop empathy, and move toward problem-solving and action that lead to liberation (Harris & Roter, 2024). True liberation is founded on love and cannot authentically happen without it. According to Freire, without profound love, a teacher cannot support the liberation of their students (as cited in Harris & Roter, 2024).

My Conscientization Process

I found myself reflecting on my own struggles as a child, recognizing the impact of my Deaf students' pain as somewhat similar to mine: rejection, isolation, and feelings of unworthiness flooded me. It was also in that moment when Jose, an older Deaf adult whom I did not yet know but who was a leader in the Deaf community, looked at me and signed:

> You are like the parents of these students. You know very little sign. They have problems, but will they ever go to you? NO! Because they know you will not understand. And you will never understand because the interpreter is always around to help you. If you want to help them, then you must try to do it on your own. If you do not know the signs, fingerspell them and ask us, not the interpreter. Next time, YOU TALK TO US and not the interpreter. (Benitez, 1991)

This message was both a warning and a call for help, and it affected me deeply. Deaf people can be straightforward, blunt, or candid in expressing their thoughts and emotions. Hearing people who are not used to this form of communication may react negatively and perceive such directness as rude (Waech, 2007; Townsend, 2014). This often leads to what has been described as "fragility," a reactive response of hurt or anger by any person who represents the dominant group, in this case the hearing person, whose good intentions are identified as discriminatory or oppressive. To appease this reaction, "the focus then goes to consoling or disarming this person in power who 'meant well' but did not know better" (Thoutenhoofd et al., 2024, p. 66–67). This shifts the focus away from the discrimination itself and its negative impact on Deaf individuals. This becomes another form of discrimination against deaf people, where only the concerns of "hurt" hearing individuals matter.

I responded differently. Although I felt ashamed, I accepted the truth. As a counselor, my role is to help my Deaf students learn how to overcome the barriers that stop them from growing. In that situation, I realized that I was the barrier. I was shocked and do not recall how I handled that situation. But, in my later reflection, I came to realize two things. First, while my pain may have been similar in nature, it could never match the magnitude of what my Deaf students experienced in a world that speaks to them but does not truly listen to who they are or what they want to express. We both suffered from forms of internal oppression. However, mine was an outcome of individual experiences, whereas theirs was an outcome of audism. Second, I was contributing to that pain. The longer I delayed addressing my own internal limitations, the greater the barrier I created for their access to opportunities to learn, a chance that my hearing students could access freely. This, again, is an example of institutional audism.

Jose's message became a moment of conscientization that prompted deeper self-inquiry, helping me to reflect on my actions critically. While I struggled to communicate with my Deaf students, I continued to participate fully in social and professional interactions and activities, benefitting from both direct and incidental learning opportunities. However, my failure to communicate with them directly prevented them from freely participating in the activities and interactions I was responsible for facilitating. Still, I was unable to change this at the time because of my limited signing skills. As Jose had emphasized, "*They have problems, but do you think they will ever go to you? NO! Because they know you will not understand. And you will never understand because the interpreter is always around to help you.*" My failure to learn to communicate directly in sign language became a barrier to their learning.

In doing so, I was creating the same situation and, in the process, reinforcing the belief that they were not equals. Jose was asking for a direct line of communication, for his peers to be respected and understood, and to learn from self-development opportunities through direct dialogue. This situation would have been different if I had been conducting the same activities with hearing students. Without realizing it, my actions were a concrete act of injustice. While my Deaf students were capable of expressing themselves, they were unable to do so fully because of my limitations to communicate, disregarding their right over my own needs. I created a barrier and justified it by accepting my perceived inability to communicate with them. While the interpreter helped bridge that gap, I realized that my habit of talking to and looking at the interpreter instead of my Deaf students made them feel invisible. My Deaf learners were excluded as a result of the barriers I created. I had created an oppressive space, supported by my own need for comfort and healing, at their expense.

Authentic Dialogue and Praxis With Myself and My Deaf Teachers: The Beginnings of Deaf-Centered Practices

Realizing this, I accepted the call to action, "ask us, not the interpreter." I began meeting with my students without the interpreter. For three months, I faced my self-doubts and fears by learning directly from my Deaf students the language they used, some of which resembled what I had learned from my hearing interpreter, and some of which was entirely different. Although they were my students, during those three months, they guided me into their world, and I immersed myself in it following their lead. The self-doubts and fears I carried, while they were my own, were set aside. This was no longer about me; it was about their right to learn. I worked double time to learn their language because I was the counselor responsible for supporting them. I needed to learn quickly from my Deaf teachers so I could do my job. The first step was to remove the barrier that limited their access to opportunities for growth—my deficit beliefs about them, my dehumanizing practices, and my limited sign language skills.

Soon, deep conversations began, filled with tears, laughter, and the stories in between. I began to understand. When I did not understand, I approached the moment with curiosity and asked them directly. I paraphrased back what I understood to confirm the meaning, showing that I was listening. When I was not part of the conversation, I observed carefully and took a mental note in my mind of what it meant and asked them again for clarification. I did this as part of building trust, showing honesty about what I did or did not understand. Over time, they recognized that I understood them most of the time, and our interactions were filled with learning opportunities for both sides. We became both teachers and students in the classroom and in social situations. These opportunities included shared activities, such as nature walks, creating artworks, and ongoing sharing of their insights as part of their self-development activities. Through these interactions, my understanding of their inner worlds as individuals and as a group deepened.

Fig. 1: A 1992 weekend retreat with the first Deaf students of the Benilde Deaf program, who later became the first Deaf teachers of the Benilde Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP)

My Deaf Students' Conscientization Process

Then the big question came: How could they become friends with the hearing students in their academic department? While they all participated in educational and social events, meaningful conversations rarely took place. Interactions were limited to nods or simple hand gestures for greetings or goodbyes, with little opportunity for genuine peer conversations beyond their Deaf circle. On the other hand, some hearing students asked me the same question: How could they become friends with their Deaf schoolmates? I found myself in the middle, with both groups asking how friendships could be built between these two worlds. In one of those moments of deep conversations, I turned the question back to my Deaf students. Their answer was clear: hearing students needed to learn their language. When I asked how this could happen, there was silence. They were unaware of their own immense power to change the situation, just as they had done for me. I encouraged them to do what they had done for me: teach them. Their initial responses showed a sign of protest: “I’m a student, not a teacher.” “I’m shy!” “I don’t know how.” Their responses eventually turned to “how can we be their teachers? We are deaf.” At that moment, the impact of discrimination on their self-perception was brought out in the open.

My Deaf Teachers' Authentic Dialogue and Praxis: The Beginnings of Deaf-Led Teaching

I told them that I had learned from them, and that I had learned well. It became evidence that their self-doubts about their capabilities were not true. The first step toward their realization was seeing proof of their own ability. I saw this as the necessary step to reduce their self-doubts and to build evidence with their own actions. Convinced, the journey toward Deaf-led teaching began.

Fig. 2: My Deaf students were the first Deaf teachers of the Benilde Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP).
Top row: James Andrabado, Mari-len Martin, Florisa Punsalan, Jesus San Jose, George Lintag, Jose Austria
Bottom row: Juancho Mataranas, Kathleen Joyce Tan, Nina Joy Castillo, Jennifer Lim, Jeng Ramirez, Ma. Teresa Montes, Annalyn Torralba

The journey began with a shared vision. They reflected on the characteristics of their best teachers by creating lists and sharing their stories of joy and inspiration. They agreed on common qualities they felt helped them succeed, including effective sign language communication. These qualities became their standard of excellence and the basis of their practice sessions. They created instructional materials, including cue cards and hand-made resources, and conducted trial runs. My Deaf teachers took turns acting as both students and teachers, demonstrating lessons and giving feedback to one another. I supported the process by inviting hearing students to sign up, and eventually, a class was created. As the opening approached, we met, and my Deaf teachers expressed concerns: "What if they don't learn from us? What if we do wrong and they complain about what we taught them?" In these moments of self-doubt, they needed reassurance. I looked at them and said, "You taught me, remember?" They accepted this and, with great excitement, we opened our first class. They had their sign language sessions for their hearing peers, and at the end of each session, I facilitated reflective discussions with them. These sessions invited them to discover more about themselves as they worked toward the standards they had set, problem-solving challenges they faced and affirming one another's strengths.

During this early Deaf-led sign language teaching, I learned about Visual-Gestural Communication (VGC) from a Deaf artist, Dennis Balan, and Rosalie Macaraig-Ricasa, a sign linguist and ally. They taught me about Deaf culture and that there was a natural sign language within the Deaf community. I invited them to support my Deaf students in their efforts to teach hearing students. We conducted the first VGC weekend workshop, and the Deaf teachers and their students participated. The students, with their Deaf teachers, were introduced to the foundational elements of natural sign language. The VGC workshop empowered the Deaf teachers, while hearing students learned about “non-verbal cues such as iconic gestures which describe certain actions, facial expressions to convey emotions and rhetorical questions, body language, pointing at certain objects or colors, and pantomime within a visual frame from the head to the chest” (Carver & Kemp, 1995, p. 6). Gestures and movements are not merely representations of thought; in signed languages, they may develop into grammatical forms, functioning either as lexical signs or as morphemes (Wilcox, 2004). Students learned quickly, and friendships were built. The formal classes served only as a starting point. The most meaningful learning occurred through social interactions and shared activities among the students. Additional opportunities were opened to support a shared purpose while continuing the primary goal of their self-development: building evidence of their abilities and expanding their ability to learn. They created their own Deaf stories, produced plays, organized bazaars, and hosted ongoing sign language classes.

Fig. 3: The Deaf teachers with their first batch of Sign Language students after the first Visual-Gestural Communication (VGC) workshop, led by Deaf artist Dennis Balan (in blue), and beside him, Dr. Rosalie Ricasa. The author is at the center (in golden yellow). Jeng Ramirez (standing in front of the author) served as the first coordinator of the Sign Language Learning Program.

Originally conceived as an opportunity to build friendships with hearing students, the program became a powerful tool for Deaf empowerment. It challenged the oppressive beliefs that only hearing teachers or interpreters could teach sign language. This initiative became a trailblazing step toward respecting, promoting, and fulfilling the rights of Deaf people. The outcome became a living legacy that advocates for the rights of Deaf people to preserve, promote, and teach Filipino Sign Language themselves. This work challenged dominant narratives that define Deaf people as merely non-hearing or "lesser" versions of hearing people. Instead, it affirmed that Deaf people are defined by their language, culture, and humanity, not by hearing loss. This experience led to the establishment of the institution's long-standing program, originally known as the Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP), now the Filipino Sign Language Learning Program (FSLLP). It has sustained over three generations of Deaf-led teaching of FSL. This is a testament that even before the law formally recognized the linguistic and cultural rights of Deaf people, Benilde's Deaf program, together with its Deaf students and allies, was already protecting, promoting, and fulfilling those rights.

The pioneer coordinator of the SLLP was one of the first teachers, my student Jennifer Ramirez.

Conclusion and Recommendations

My institution opened the Deaf program 35 years ago in response to the recognized needs of Deaf learners based on our institutional history and the social issue of Deaf unemployment. These were the ingredients of what we understood as Deaf-centered education at the time. However, their linguistic and cultural rights were never a factor in deaf-centered education, as we were not aware of their significance. Our efforts were guided by the institutional mission of recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of our learners and the belief that education is transformative. Reflecting further on this journey, it is clear that what was missing was a recognition of the linguistic and cultural rights of Deaf people, an understanding of the extent and impact of discrimination experienced by Deaf learners individually, and awareness of the systemic oppression they have experienced across relationships and systems.

To recognize these crucial characteristics of the shared Deaf experience and to support their empowerment, I offer the following recommendations. First, hearing individuals involved in Deaf education must examine and clarify their beliefs about Deaf people. They must undergo conscientization and actively collaborate to analyze and question dehumanizing practices in their interactions with students and colleagues, as well as the ways in which environments contribute to oppression. Second, to be true allies, they must use their privilege to advocate for change, particularly ensuring the full participation of Deaf individuals in all initiatives for transformation. Third, Deaf adults must be fully present in the lives of Deaf children in schools as teachers and other personnel. They serve as linguistic and cultural models to these children. Fourth, Deaf teachers should be assigned to teach sign language courses. They should take the lead in planning and implementing their courses and actively participate in improving these courses. To support their advancement, Deaf teachers must have full access to professional development opportunities. Fifth, hearing teachers who work with Deaf learners must be proficient in sign language and avoid using simultaneous communication or English word order when

signing. Sixth, Deaf adults must be supported in fully participating in decision-making and implementation within language-rich, accessible learning environments at home and in school. Deaf children must have consistent access to high-quality sign language input through regular interaction with Deaf individuals in both formal and informal settings.

This autoethnographic reflection explored my journey of awakening, as I came to realize that my beliefs and actions contributed to the dehumanization and disempowerment of my Deaf students. Even when I was not doing so intentionally, my lack of awareness and understanding contributed to the perpetuation of audism. I occupied a position of authority as a member of the hearing majority, as well as by my position as an educator within the system that my Deaf students were part of. This position gave me privileges that enabled easy access to learning and communication. However, it placed my Deaf students at a disadvantage because I had not made the effort to learn their language or understand their lived experiences. Although I was not aware of it at the time, the shared journey of empowerment that my students and I experienced reflected the principles of critical pedagogy, inspired by the authenticity and leadership of my Deaf students, who led us to become both teachers and students to one another.

Notes

1. De La Salle Philippines (DLSP) is a member of Lasallian Global Network of schools, whose mission is to create educational communities that demonstrate commitment to young people, especially those who are poor, by providing them with access to a human and Christian education that enables them to participate in the transformation of society. Benilde is one of the 17 schools under DLSP.

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