



Literacy: It All Connects

Well, What Do You Expect?



LAURENT CLERC
NATIONAL DEAF EDUCATION CENTER



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by David R. Schleper, *Perspectives in Education and Deafness*, a publication of the Clerc Center

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<i>Good ASL storytellers paint pictures in the air as they read to children who are deaf.</i>	Recently I found some old notes I had taken during a guest presentation in graduate school, The lecturer was a distinguished gentleman with a reputation as an expert in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children.
<i>Let children follow both the English print and the ASL interpretation, making sense of both.</i>	During the course of the lecture, he listed two sets of skills. On the left side of a line down the center of my notebook page I had written, " What Deaf Students Are Good At. " On the right, " What Deaf Kids Have Problems With. "
<i>Beyond word-for-word ASL translation, add details to convey a clear sense of the story.</i>	The left-hand column lists things like math computation, expressing concrete ideas, and arts and crafts. The "problems" list includes such skills as solving word problems, use of the passive voice, and grasping complex ideas.
<i>Make connections between the story and the lives of children you are reading to.</i>	I don't remember much else about that lecture in graduate school, although I'm sure no one stood up to object to the list, which is offensive stereotyping at best. Of deeper concern is the underlying message, the message conveyed by so much of the professional literature: don't expect very much of deaf children.
<i>Group gaze involves all of the students; individual gaze directs questions or comments to particular children.</i>	

About a year ago I got a call from the mother of a deaf boy. Her son is a fifth grader in a public school program in the Midwest. The mother told me that at a recent IEP meeting, she expressed concern about her son's test scores, which showed him reading at a high third/low fourth grade level. I hastened to point out how unreliable standardized test scores are for measuring real reading. "What does your son like to read?" I asked, hoping to get a better picture.

The mother mentioned Matt Christopher and other authors her son enjoyed reading. But her real concern, she explained, was that when she asked about his low SAT score, the special education superintendent said, "Oh, you should be happy! That's really good for a deaf kid."

The superintendent went on to explain that the average deaf student graduates from high school with a third grade reading level, and to point out that her son was already beyond that. The mother was, of course, appalled, since her expectations for her son are the same as for her hearing daughter, as they should be.

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Standards and Achievement

That phone call made me think about the way we set up expectations for deaf and hard of hearing children. Has the "third grade" formula become the standard by which we measure their progress? When deaf students reach a second grade equivalent, that is not too bad. If they manage to hit the third grade level--fine! We can relax; they're just like everybody else. And if they go on to achieve a little bit more--terrific! It's a great success.

Why do we accept such mediocrity?

Barbara Flores describes what may happen with children who are bilingual, as are most deaf students, when adults expect too little. "... teaching is organized at low levels of cognition based on the (mis)assumption that 'these' children need more direct instruction on the separate parts in order to understand the complexity of the whole. Unfortunately, this ... results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. Students are confused and do not become proficient language users, not because of their inability to learn, but rather because they do not have opportunities to practice the whole process. "

The Whole Language Roadmap

True whole language teaching is, of course, exactly the opposite. But do most teachers really understand what whole language is about? it contains one element far more important than the use of real literature, or the writing process, or theme cycles, or any other strategy common to whole language classrooms. What is required is an underlying belief in children and what they can accomplish.

A positive attitude is the core of whole language. it recognizes differences among students--such as their use of American Sign Language-- not as detriments but rather as factors that add richness to the exploration of language.

Ken Goodman, a strong supporter of whole language, observed, "it is important to start where the students are, to treat the language they have with respect. Schools have a tendency to treat difference as deficiency. Whole language treats differences as something to be expected, and builds on that. That's why it works so well with Native Americans, bilingual kids, black kids in urban and rural settings. "

Kathleen Whitesell studied the instructional practices of a deaf teacher who had a reputation for producing good students, children who enjoyed reading and understood it as a process of making sense. Whitesell was interested in knowing why the teacher was so successful. The answer was in her attitude: she expected the deaf children in her class to become literate. It was as simple and complex as that.

That's why I'm an advocate for whole language philosophy. I'm in favor of the rigor and discipline imposed by true whole language practitioners, and bothered by the hodgepodge of eclecticism found in too many classes for deaf children. True whole language is a philosophy of high expectations.

What do I expect of my students? A lot. I expect them to get excited about words. Cheryl-Lynn, for example, was thrilled to point out the similarity between "tower" and "power. " Or Jarret, who discovered an then taught his friends how to remember spellings of words like "tsunami. " According to Jarrett, it's simple: T + SUN + AMI (the name of our teaching assistant.)

I expect them to appreciate the power of the written word. Like Billy, for example, who rather than follow his teacher's humdrum assignment, wrote to the local TV station to complain about the quality of their sign interpretation of the news.


I expect them to get deeply involved in what they read, like joy and Shana, who decried passionately the injustice of the U.S. colonial period, when girls were rarely sent to school. or like Joel, who during our study of slavery and the Underground Railroad, told me about a nightmare in which he relived the experiences of the people we were reading about.

I expect them to take hold of language and use it as their own personal tool kit, continuing to read and write and learn long after the last school bell has rung. And as a whole language teacher, I know I'm going to get it.

References

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The Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center is comprised of two federally mandated demonstration schools for students from birth through age 21 who are deaf. Located on the campus of Gallaudet University, these schools work in collaboration with a national network of exemplary programs and professionals to identify, research, develop, evaluate, and disseminate innovative curricula, materials, educational strategies, and technologies for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The Clerc Center also provides training and technical assistance to families and programs throughout the United States, and serves as a model individualized educational program, working in close partnership with its students and their families.

Working for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children Throughout the United States



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