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Academic Rigor

By James E. Tucker

The field of K-12 deaf education today continues to be fractured by ideological camps. A newcomer to the field quickly learns that the controversies related to language, communication, and instructional approaches continue to rage after almost 200 years of contentious debate. Much attention is given to auditory and speech development as well as sign language development. Emphasizing academic rigor is often lost in this fog of polemic war between dueling philosophies. Also missing is the importance of the students' attainment of linguistic, cognitive, and social competence.

When deaf education is mentioned, there is too much emphasis on *deaf* and not enough emphasis on *education*. Deaf and hard of hearing students everywhere deserve academic rigor. They deserve demanding academic instruction that leads to fluency in English reading and writing as well as acquired knowledge of mathematics, sciences, and social studies.

Googling "deaf education" brings out much material related to audiology, English speech and language, American Sign Language, hearing levels, cochlear implants, dormitories, and 'manualism vs. oralism.' Connecting deaf students to academic rigor seems a rare concept in the field of deaf education and on the Internet. When the subject of curriculum comes up, often the curriculum is described as being 'adapted' for deaf students. 'Adapt' is a euphemism for 'watered down curricula.'

No wonder many deaf students continue to be shortchanged. If their respective academic programs do not focus on or demand academic rigor, then deaf students will continue to flounder. Students everywhere, whether they are deaf or hearing, deserve teachers who know their content area and are passionate about teaching. Students also deserve to be nurtured, inspired, and challenged by their teachers.

The field of deaf education is approaching its 200th anniversary in the Western

Above and right: Students need to read and write extensively and daily from a young age and all through school.

Photos by John T. Consoli



Hemisphere. The American School for the Deaf was established in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817, and from this first school the field grew into a national system of schools for the deaf and public school programs. After almost 200 years, one would believe that the field should have already perfected the instruction of students who happen to be deaf or hard of hearing. However, achievement test scores, by and large, still show deaf students lagging behind their hearing peers.

Success stories of deaf individuals are plenty. There are deaf doctors, lawyers, engineers, filmmakers, carpenters, computer programmers, writers, teachers, and entrepreneurs. If there are so many success stories, then why do we have too many students reading and writing below grade level? Can the field of deaf education work together to increase academic rigor for all students?

The path to academic rigor begins with the child's parents and the quality of resources and support available to the family from early on. First, early language acquisition and family involvement are a must for infants and toddlers. Children need to meet cognitive and language benchmarks throughout the first five years of their lives. High expectations for the child's academic achievement is the next step in pursuing academic rigor. And, finally, a quality curriculum. Students need to read and read and read. There

is no substitute for reading. Students need to write and write and write. There is no substitute for writing. Interacting daily with the English text is a must, even more so for deaf students.

If pre-kindergarten students are delayed in language fluency or have cognitive delays, will they be able to handle academic rigor as they progress through their elementary years and beyond? The field must believe they can catch up with specialized instruction and intervention, hard work, and with full, clear, and direct linguistic access to academic instruction.

The State of Maryland and states across the nation have adopted the Common Core State Standards. This has raised the bar for academic rigor for all students, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Young students are naturally curious about the world around them, and it is up to parents and teachers to work together to cultivate this curiosity into a lifetime quest for knowledge in all academic disciplines.

Academic rigor is the way. The only way.

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