

A SHIFT TO THE MIDDLE:

Redefining the Community of Practice for Deaf Educators

By *Michella Maiorana-Basas*

Since its beginning, the education of deaf and hard of hearing individuals has been steeped in a debate around language (Lane, 2003). It was the 1880 International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, however, that marked a distinct turning point in our field. This event intensified what some informally refer to as the “language wars,” as professionals clashed in a debate on whether signed or spoken language should be used as the primary language of instruction and communication with deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Despite advances in educational research since that time, we have yet to find solutions to the challenge of improving the academic achievement of deaf and hard of hearing children. Marschark and Hauser (2008) point out that some of these challenges are likely a function of the language wars, along with only recently gained insights into the “cognitive underpinnings of language and learning” and the “divide between those who teach deaf children and those who conduct research.”

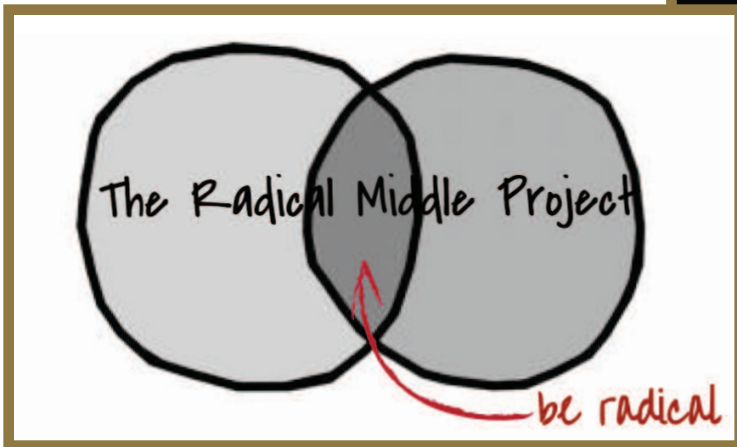
What we do know is that the language wars have (intentionally or not) created a condition in which many professionals feel compelled to choose a side: *Should we use ASL, spoken language, or something in between?* This creates a false barrier that is removed only when the professionals in the field of deaf education recognize that it is to our advantage—and the advantage of every deaf or hard of hearing child—to find a “radical middle” and unite our field.

Photos courtesy of Michella Maiorana-Basas

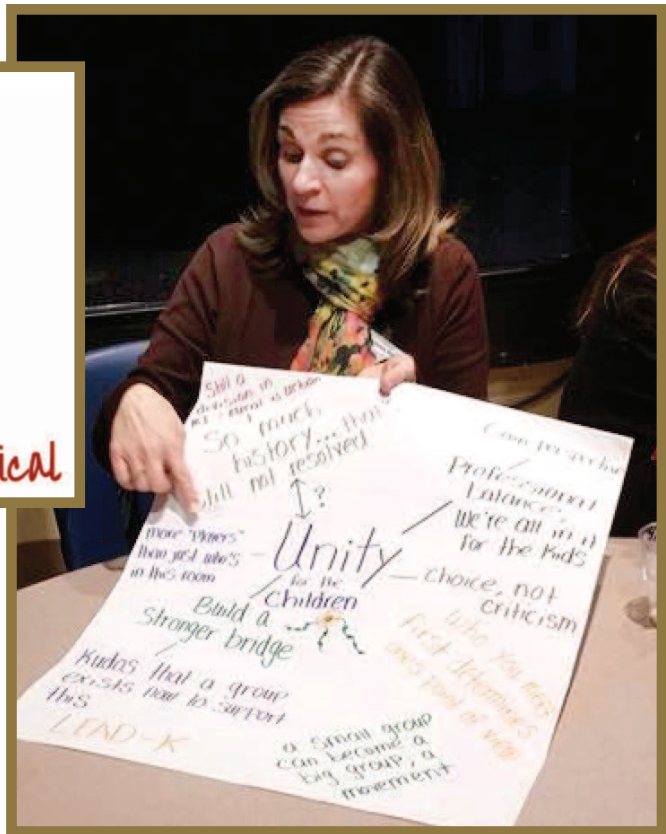
Michella

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PhD, assistant professor and coordinator of the undergraduate program in deaf education at Flagler College, in St. Augustine, Florida, has over 10 years of experience teaching in a K-12 bilingual setting for deaf and hard of hearing students and over 17 years of experience as a professional in deaf education. Her research focuses on content area reading practices of teachers in upper-grade classrooms in signing programs; she has dedicated her study and service to building philosophical bridges in deaf education. Maiorana-Basas welcomes questions and comments about this article at mmaiorana_basas@flagler.edu.



Above and right: The Radical Middle project logo; Chris Spike discusses her group's collaborative vision at a Radical Middle workshop in Flint, Michigan.



Unity in Deaf Education: Not a Novel Idea

The first attempts at philosophical unification began with Edward Miner Gallaudet, son of a deaf mother, supporter of signed communication, and founder of Gallaudet University, and Alexander Graham Bell, son of a deaf mother, inventor of the telephone, and founder of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Lang, 2003; Winefield, 1987). While these men approached language and education of deaf and hard of hearing individuals from very different perspectives, they found common cause in the need to establish a professional preparation program for teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing, and they made a sincere attempt to unify the field (Winefield, 1987). Their efforts faltered, however,

at the 1895 Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf held at the Michigan School for the Deaf in Flint. There Gallaudet and Bell officially abandoned their attempts at unity, solidifying the bifurcation that exists in the field of deaf education today (Aldersley, 1996; Winefield, 1987).

Toward One Community of Practice

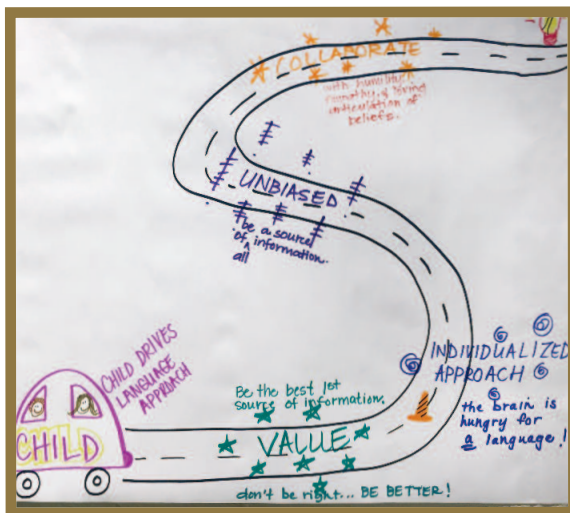
The first step on our path to unity is to recognize that all of us, regardless of beliefs, philosophy, or approach, are part of a single community of practice. This, however, is easier said than done as the seemingly endless debate about language has left an air of distrust among professionals, parents, and deaf and hard of hearing individuals. This distrust permeates our field through ways in which information is disseminated, ways in

which research is interpreted and applied, and ways in which guidance is provided to families of deaf and hard of hearing children.

Researchers (Hajek & Slaughter, 2014; Lederberg, Schick, & Spencer, 2013) have found that when parents sought advice regarding the communication and educational options available for their child, the philosophical stance of the professional on the issue of language was the driver for decision making. Further, Hajek and Slaughter (2014) indicated that the professionals often failed to discuss or fully explain children's educational options other than those in line with their philosophical beliefs.

A Personal History

During my own professional journey, I began to see myself as a "resident of a philosophical silo," and I began to



Left, below, and right: Posters were developed by collaborative groups of teachers, SLPs, and other professionals serving deaf and hard of hearing children at a professional development workshop in Flint, Michigan.

regret the impact that this had on my students, on my relationships with deaf and hard of hearing individuals, and on my relationships with the parents of the students I taught. Through professional and personal reflection, I made a deliberate choice to force myself into a mindset that accepted a different narrative.

Despite seeing the potential benefits and my own intellectual commitment, the act of transforming my thinking proved to be both difficult and uncomfortable. Part of that discomfort stemmed from a fear of being alienated from my friends and colleagues in my own philosophical camp. To find my way, I joined with a few colleagues to create a community of practice in which individuals from a diverse swath of communication approaches and professional experiences could engage. We called it “The Radical Middle project.”

How a Dinner Fed a Movement

The founding members of The Radical Middle project came to know one another through the National Leadership Consortium on Sensory Disabilities (NLCSD). As part of a federally funded grant through the Department of Education–Office of Special Education Programs, NLCSD

provides opportunities for doctoral students from a consortium of universities across the country to participate in a research-based enrichment program (Easterbrooks & Maiorana-Basas, 2015) in addition to their prescribed doctoral programs.

The first two cohorts of NLCSD fellows included scholars who equally represented bilingual approaches and philosophies, programs in which the language of instruction and communication was American Sign Language and English was taught primarily through reading and writing, and scholars who supported listening and spoken language approaches and philosophies, programs in which the language of instruction and

communication was spoken English and English was taught primarily through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Whether this was a purposeful selection or a

coincidence remains a mystery. Regardless of the intention, the different backgrounds and beliefs of these scholars created an opportunity. It allowed us to begin the process of fostering trust.

After several grueling semesters of managing doctoral coursework and collaborative work, five of us and a handful of other doctoral students from other programs and universities found ourselves convening in a hotel lobby during a 2011 conference. In that moment of interaction, we decided that after a year of working together through the NLCSD enrichment program and through our interactions at national conferences, we should shed our professional exteriors and get to know



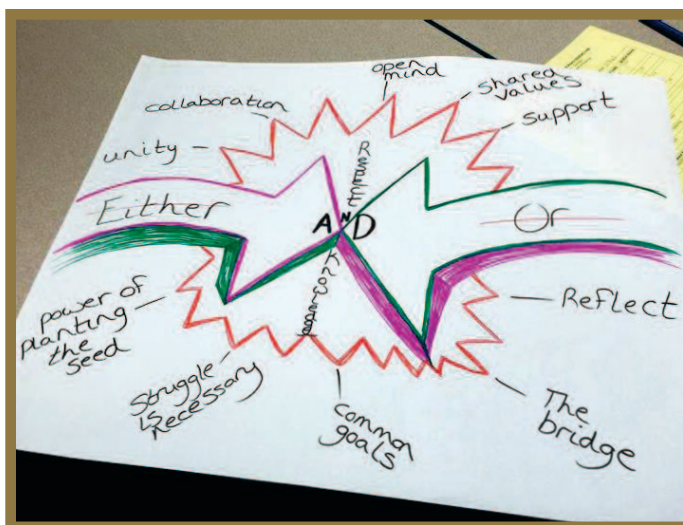
Visit Us Online

For more information about The Radical Middle project and updates on our live moderated discussion series, check us out at www.radicalmiddledhh.org; on Facebook at www.facebook.com/groups/TheRadicalMiddleDHH/; and on Twitter at @RadicalMidDHH, #bebetter, #iamtheradicalmiddle, #strongertogether, and #TRMDHH.

each other as human beings. We agreed to meet for dinner.

I do not know exactly what we expected, but the very action of breaking bread provided an opportunity for us to find the positive intent within our interactions. Our conversations lasted well into the night; we engaged in raw, honest dialogue for the first time. As the gathering concluded, a group of students who breathed the language of separate ideologies in deaf education managed to cross over “the great divide” of the language wars. We collectively agreed that the extreme polarization in deaf education was a barrier to progress and concluded that working together was not only possible but mandatory if we wanted to move forward and improve the field. We agreed to form a structured online community of practice. Our goal was to keep the conversation going; The Radical Middle project was officially born.

About a year into our development, we shared the ideas and concepts of The Radical Middle project with our colleagues and mentors in deaf education. We assumed that others saw the need and value of such a project and would be interested in at least exploring it in their professional practice. However, as we talked about our efforts and beliefs, we faced some decidedly negative reactions. These included the reactions of highly respected and experienced scholars, who responded with statements that included, “We are still arguing about this? I thought we solved this problem years ago ...” and “This argument is not new and not likely going away. You’d do well to keep your head down and focus on the work where you can really make a difference!” However, when we discussed The Radical Middle project with other



doctoral students, parents of deaf and hard of hearing children, and deaf and hard of hearing individuals, we were met with the opposite reaction. They did not disparage our ideas at all; in fact, they seemed hungry for this type of connection. We realized that many individuals supported this idea, providing a critical mass that would keep us focused and lead us to continue our discussions over more dinners and cups of coffee.

Despite seeing the potential benefits and my own intellectual commitment, the act of transforming my thinking proved to be both difficult and uncomfortable.

The Mission of The Radical Middle

The more we met, the stronger The Radical Middle project grew. We defined our goal:

To encourage scholars who are representative of a wide range of educational, cultural, and linguistic philosophies to learn and work together through research and collaborative scholarship, holding a common goal of doing what is best educationally, culturally, and linguistically for each deaf and hard of hearing child and his or her family. (Radical Middle DHH, 2015)

The Radical Middle project is about adopting a holistic approach to how scholars engage, design, and disseminate research with each other, with parents, with teachers, and with deaf and hard of hearing individuals. Our focus is on advancing professional development and bridging gaps between research and practice and research and families from a cross-philosophical perspective. We want to work together to investigate and establish evidence-based practices for educating deaf and hard of hearing children regardless of their preferred method of communicating.

Through this shared vision, the members of The Radical Middle project continue to pursue conversations with each other, maintaining respect for all members whatever our communication and educational philosophies. While The Radical Middle project is structured as a professional online community, parents, deaf and hard of hearing individuals, researchers, and experts are welcome, too, and their opinions and experiences are appreciated.

Online for Community

Deaf and hard of hearing children need and deserve a “continuous system of care” (Tucci, 2017), and sometimes this can only occur if there is an honest dialogue among a wide variety of

professionals. The Radical Middle project aims to be a part of that continuous system of care by fostering professional connections and building bridges across philosophical divides. To strengthen these bridges and connections, the members of The Radical Middle project are committed to providing support and guidance to each other when tensions surface in online and face-to-face dialogue.

In building our “radical” community of practice, we have certainly made many mistakes. However, despite our setbacks, we have successfully begun the process of talking and listening to one another. Through our online dialogues and national presentations, we have witnessed a shift in the way we approach one another. We engage in difficult—and sometimes emotional—conversations, and when our viewpoints are challenged, we work to overcome our natural defensive reaction. We are right where we are supposed to be: uncomfortable.

This discomfort is part of our professional struggle and perhaps part of our professional growth. Lane (2003) points out that one of the most important lessons we can learn from our history is that “controversy grows from ignorance.” As such, it is our job to endure the discomfort, to talk about it, and to move beyond our perceived disagreements so that we can learn from one another.

It is important to note that being part of The Radical Middle project is not about giving up personal or professional identity, being neutral about important issues, or compromising expertise. Being part of The Radical Middle is about intentionally seeking opportunities to increase understanding and learning from those who approach deaf education from a different perspective. It is not just the work of data analysis, research, and exploration of evidence-based strategies; it is the inner work required for healing in the field.

“Coming to the middle” is hard. However, the community of practice

that started as a handful of doctoral students is now a thriving online community of over 1,000 participants. We believe we must continue to make the conscious choice to discuss our differences and to stay receptive to collaborations that expand our perspective or, at the very least, help us understand other perspectives better. We plan to continue our work, and together we hope to learn, grow, and heal. We cannot afford to give up on unity like Gallaudet and Bell did. There is too much at stake—and our deaf and hard of hearing children are too important.

The Radical Middle project was conceived by the following founding members: Dr. Jennifer Beal, Dr. Joanna Cannon, Dr. Caroline Guardino, Dr. Michella Maiorana-Basas, Dr. Christina Rivera*, Dr. Uma Soman*, Dr. Jessica Trussell*, and Dr. Jenna Voss*. Our Board of Directors is made up of the above founding members (excluding Dr. Uma Soman) in addition to Mr. Michael Ballard and Mr. John Kirsh, who joined the initiative in February 2017.*

*NLCSD fellow

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STEPping Toward a Radical Middle

By Michella Maiorana-Basas

Language approach remains controversial for too many deaf educators. Perhaps no amount of research can determine the rightness or wrongness of any single approach as deaf and hard of hearing individuals—like all individuals—are far too diverse to have their education classified in such absolutes. Those of us who participate in The Radical Middle project find the barriers among professionals in deaf education to be artificial; we believe that we should shift our perspective and realize that the stakeholders in deaf education have more in common than not.

Here are the steps toward becoming part of The Radical Middle community of practice:

- 1. Recognize that everyone has beliefs that include bias.** To be an effective professional, we need to recognize how our bias impacts our interactions with parents, students, and other professionals.
- 2. Do not feel compelled to compromise your knowledge base or belief system.** Be confident in who you are as a professional and be willing to find a common thread with others. Remember that when you take a stand for something, it does not mean you are automatically against something else.
- 3. Challenge yourself to have an honest, judgment-free dialogue with someone who is your professional or philosophical counterpart.** Go to dinner. Have some coffee. Put yourself in an environment in which you can come together as human beings and not as professionals ensconced in already-decided and highly-defended roles.
- 4. Avoid making definitive statements.** Be humble and know that your truth is not everyone's truth.
- 5. Value diversity.** Encourage others to do the same.
- 6. Attack issues, not people.** We are stronger together, and in order to be strong, we need to find ways of building each other up. Attacking one another solves nothing and creates barriers to learning and growing.
- 7. Engage in self-analysis.** When engaging in dialogue, ask yourself the following: How does my comment help others understand my perspective? How does my comment foster productive discussion? How does my comment help us move forward? How could my comment lead to a solution?
- 8. Join The Radical Middle for our live discussion series,** The Art of Expertise: 10 Tips for Finding the Middle (visit www.radicalmiddledbh.org or www.facebook.com/groups/TheRadicalMiddleDHH/ for more information).
- 9. Follow The Radical Middle** on Twitter at @RadicalMidDHH for updates, announcements, and live tweeting events at professional conferences.
- 10. Do it for the children.** We know that when teachers and researchers collaborate, student achievement improves (Cooper, 2007), specifically in mathematics and reading (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015). What educational benefits are our deaf and hard of hearing students missing due to our reluctance to collaborate?

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