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# ASL Is Just the Beginning:

## A PLEA FOR MULTICULTURAL DEAF EDUCATION

*By Akilah English*

In recent years, deaf and hard of hearing people have raised awareness about the importance of providing early intervention, support, and resources for deaf and hard of hearing children. Most critically, we emphasize the importance of using American Sign Language (ASL). With ASL, parents and educators can directly and freely capitalize on the child's vision to ensure he or she is exposed fully to language and avoids the pitfalls inherent in early language deprivation.

However, as we recognize the importance of using ASL to ensure an essential language foundation, we must also recognize that increasingly our deaf and hard of hearing students come from diverse ethnicities, cultures, and lifestyles. In fact, in recent years the numbers of students in schools for deaf and hard of hearing students that come from diverse ethnic groups has shot up exponentially (Nieto & Johnson, 2018). For students to reach their full creative and academic potential, the education they receive should reflect the diversity of their backgrounds (Lynch, 2017). This means we should initiate multicultural education in schools for deaf and hard of hearing students across the country. Multicultural education promotes the development of cultural competence and proficiency and allows students to understand and appreciate differences and values in their own and each other's cultures. When teachers do not include a multicultural educational approach, deaf and hard of hearing students miss their window of opportunity to understand and appreciate the differences between their own cultural practices and beliefs and those of their classmates.

James Banks, founding director of the University of Washington's Center for Multicultural Education in Seattle, Washington, and pioneer educator and researcher, notes that educational institutions, teacher preparation programs, and community organizations must recognize the need for multicultural education to ensure students develop cultural proficiency and that they value, accommodate, and respect diversity (Banks & Banks, 2004).

*Photos courtesy of the Marie Philip School at The Learning Center for the Deaf*



**Left:** Teachers should incorporate the works and perspectives of people of color into their curriculum.



Goals of multicultural education include:

- helping students gain greater self-understanding by viewing themselves from the perspective of other cultures,
- providing students with cultural and ethnic alternatives for academic support, and
- reducing the pain and discrimination that members of some ethnic and racial groups experience.

### In Every Classroom 5 Multicultural Dimensions

Most multicultural education theorists agree that the major goal of multicultural education is to restructure schools so that all students will acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in an ethnically and racially diverse nation and world (Banks, 1999). Banks

(1999) established five dimensions of multicultural education that extend throughout the curriculum. These dimensions can be incorporated into math and science classes as well as language arts classes. Incorporating the following critical dimensions enables teachers to create a multicultural environment for deaf and hard of hearing students in every classroom or program.

#### 1. CONTENT INTEGRATION

Content integration occurs when teachers use materials and examples from a variety of cultures to illustrate key concepts in the curriculum. According to Banks, many teachers often reject multiculturalism in biology, physics, or mathematics because they fail to see the relevancy in these subjects, but of course there is relevancy. Educators can ensure multicultural content in any subject through their use of examples without

eliminating or weakening curriculum standards.

Most schools for deaf and hard of hearing students have ASL specialists to integrate the teaching and use of ASL into the curriculum. However, too often the ASL focus is exclusively on the perspectives of European Americans and does not include information from the works or perspectives of people of color.

One of the most important ways in which the teaching of ASL reflects the perspective of European Americans is found in the use and teaching of sign language. Most ASL curricula recognize European signed languages, and they should also highlight the rich signed languages of deaf people of color. Deaf



students should be able to learn about these languages, too—how they developed, what they consist of, and how they are used today. For example, they should be able to develop a sophisticated understanding and appreciation of Black American Sign Language, Mexican Sign Language, Kenyan Sign Language, and other signed languages. In the process of learning about these languages, marginalized deaf and hard of hearing students of color could experience an intensified pride in their cultural identities.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION

Knowledge construction is something each of us does every day, and constructed knowledge, rather than knowledge itself, is what we find in textbooks—and this, of course, is heavily influenced by culture. Teachers need to be aware of this and help students to understand, investigate, and determine how cultural assumptions have influenced our frames of reference and perspectives within each discipline. This means that teachers should help students understand how knowledge is created and how it is influenced by the

attributes of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Understanding the role of cultural bias helps students become skilled critical thinkers and allows them to develop independence in their analysis and thought.

For example, years ago when I was working in the elementary department at a deaf school, a male student entered my classroom wearing a pink shirt. A female student scolded him, telling him that pink is for girls and blue is for boys. He was wrong, she said, for wearing pink. This was a perfect opportunity for me, as an educator, to have an in-depth discussion with my students on gender stereotypes. I approached the discussion on a concrete level in deference to my students' ages. I explained that the female student was not wrong—this expectation of boys stemmed from what she had seen in society, which is full of gendered expectations and standards. I pointed out that we see these gendered stereotypes everywhere—in movies, in books, on the Internet, and on TV. I used *The Paper Bag Princess*, by Robert Munsch, a book that addresses gender stereotypes through the eyes of a prince who is not pleased with a princess's appearance. We talked about gender

identities, social roles and expectations, and our own biases.

## 3. EQUITY PEDAGOGY

Equity pedagogy is when teachers use techniques and strategies that facilitate the academic achievement of students from marginalized groups. I have seen deaf and hard of hearing students from marginalized cultures benefit, for example, from the use of role playing and cooperative learning. Using equity pedagogy requires that we understand how students perceive social interactions with their teachers and their peers. We need to get to know our students, especially the marginalized students, and to find ways to include them in our classroom. We need to allow students to share their backgrounds, likes and dislikes, favorite hobbies, and other aspects of their lives. When students share this information, they develop a sense of belonging. They are more likely to feel that you, the educator, appreciate their presence.

When I was a teacher, some students had access to language and others did not. Students with language accessibility would raise their hands to answer questions without giving those with delayed language access a chance to answer. Wanting to create a classroom in which all my students had a chance to respond to my questions, I decided to employ strategies that would allow equity of the participants. Each time I asked a question, I would ask the students who typically raised their hands first to wait for others who were still processing their thoughts. Another strategy I came up with was having a can and filling it with students' names written on popsicle sticks. I told students they would be given an opportunity to respond when the popsicle stick with their name was drawn from the can. I also empowered the students with less access to language to ask their classmates for help. In the process, all students benefited; these strategies helped raise everyone's self-esteem.

#### 4. PREJUDICE REDUCTION

Prejudice reduction entails actively working to reduce students' prejudice against marginalized groups. Students in early childhood education are at a critical period both for acquiring language and for learning and internalizing prejudice towards others. The people and events they witness every day result in development of attitudes, ideologies, and perceptions. Preschoolers are concrete thinkers. They internalize the feelings of adults who may be demonstrating prejudice toward others or experiencing prejudice from others. They witness, demonstrate, and experience shame. They recognize physical characteristics such as race, gender, and physical disabilities, and they can connect these to the events of shame that they experience or witness.

Teachers may respond by providing positive verbal and nonverbal reinforcements for the students of color and by involving students from all racial and ethnic groups in cooperative learning activities that prompt them to develop and identify what is right or wrong from a social justice standpoint. Educators should be careful to provide accurate materials, discussing what is fair and unfair, and helping students to engage in social activism. They can design interventions to encourage students to acquire positive feelings towards marginalized groups.

#### 5. EMPOWER SCHOOL CULTURE

School culture must be structured to empower students from marginalized groups. Schools should be inclusive and considerate of the struggles and circumstances of marginalized families. Certain activities, such as grouping and labeling practices, the prominence and sometimes overemphasis on achievement through sports, and the interaction of the staff and the students across ethnic and racial lines should be examined.

**As educators,  
we need to  
recognize that  
ethnicity, language,  
and gender are  
contributing factors  
in how students  
receive their  
education.**

Questions we should ask ourselves include: Who are our students? Who are our teachers? Who are our leaders? Are diverse ethnic groups represented in our leadership? Is a zero tolerance policy for

bullying—especially bullying due to racial, religious, or other identities—established? Does the school welcome students, teachers, and staff members from different cultures?

Responding to these questions can help educators establish a school environment that is equitable and accessible. If the student body of the school is predominately white, teachers may focus on how to make members from nonwhite groups feel welcome and safe. If the school has large numbers of children from deaf families, teachers may want to consider how best to include students from hearing families who are still learning about the Deaf community and its culture.

Sometimes competition in the classroom or school can hurt an inclusive atmosphere. For example, one of the competitive events that I witnessed that negatively affected equality in the classroom was the seemingly benign spelling bee. As I watched a spelling bee unfold, I saw that

the students who had the luxury of practicing the words at home were spelling one word after another successfully. However, the students with less language accessibility at home, or who had parents or guardians who worked multiple shifts and were not home in the evening, or who were sleep-deprived due to having to be up all night to tend to their younger siblings struggled. I realized that spelling bees do not empower deaf and hard of hearing students who come from nonsigning or unstable home environments.

#### **At the Center of Success: Dialogue**

I believe one word is key to social justice in the classroom: *dialogue*. Dialogue allows understanding and the building of trust. Educators need to create a safe space in which they encourage students to ask questions and become active listeners. Educators should also be





able to answer a student's questions with appropriate and accurate information. We need to encourage students to express their thoughts and feelings through conversations, writing, drawing, creating dramatic plays, and the use of arts, music, and movement.

However, an educated dialogue entails use of language. Therefore, language acquisition—avoiding language deprivation in the early years—is critical. This means intense use and study of ASL in the earliest years of education while teachers and administrators reconstruct education so that deaf and hard of hearing students from all ethnic, racial, gender, and social class groups have an equal opportunity to learn. This means introducing appropriate content and supporting students in understanding how knowledge is constructed. It means implementing prejudice-reduction strategies so all deaf and hard of hearing students develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function in a diverse, tense, and problem-ridden world. It means working to build, sustain, and empower school cultures.

Banks notes that “because of the enormous problems within our nation and world, education cannot be neutral.” As educators, we need to recognize that ethnicity, language, and

**Above:** Educators should encourage students to express their thoughts and feelings in a multitude of ways.

gender are contributing factors in how students receive their education. We can establish a multicultural approach to education in our classroom. We can honor the ethnicities of all our students and ensure each of them acquires language. These are enormous goals, and it is up to us to achieve them.

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