



Looking to the Past, Examining the Present, and Finding Hope for the Future of Deaf Education

By Laurene E. Simms

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Today, we celebrate more than 200 years of deaf education. To understand the future, we must look back and study the history of deaf education while examining its current status. We often look at the first example of deaf education as being in Hartford, Connecticut, way back in 1817, but the truth is deaf education began long before that. When Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet encountered Alice Cogswell in 1814, deaf education took place there. Prior to that, we had Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts, where for almost two centuries (1700s-early 1900s) deaf and hard of hearing people interacted; deaf education took place there. Also, let's not forget the education that took place among Native Americans and African Americans who were deaf or hard of hearing.

The theme of this issue of *Odyssey* is "The Future of Deaf Education: Practices Impacting Positive Change." We've

experienced a multitude of obstacles, challenges, and frustrations throughout history. We can use the patterns in what has succeeded, and what hasn't, in deaf education to determine what will happen going forward. With that said, I see three positive changes for the future.

First, there is a notable growth in the number of deaf and hard of hearing professionals and researchers who are invested in deaf education. They've applied a deaf-centric epistemology to their work, a crucial aspect developed through their own Deaf lens and their struggles and successes. After all, take a look at Laurent Clerc, who partook in deaf education in France long before anything formalized ever began in the United States. When Clerc, who would become the first deaf teacher of deaf and hard of hearing children and the

first deaf teacher trainer in the United States, came to America in 1817, he had this same deaf-centric epistemology emerging from similar life experiences as

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modern-day deaf and hard of hearing people. We need to return to Clerc's days and examine how he approached deaf education. We need to start from square one, this time with deaf and hard of hearing professionals leading the way just as Clerc did.

Another positive change I see is the increase in deaf and hard of hearing people who are self-educated and use sign language. We need to analyze how they have become fluent in reading, writing, and signing. With this increase, why are their accomplishments not fully integrated into research or studies on deaf education? Clear identification of how deaf and hard of hearing people have become literate in reading, writing, and signing must take place. After all, fluent signing is not magic nor a secret; it emerges from ongoing interaction in

signing at school, at home, and with friends during the early years. Successful reading is not magic nor a secret either; it requires reading, reading, and reading. Immersion in both signing and reading is how deaf and hard of hearing people can become literate.

Finally, the third positive change I see is the proliferation of allyship. I see increasing numbers of allies working with deaf and hard of hearing professionals and researchers. They are at long last respecting our lived experiences. Historically, hearing professionals have studied deaf and hard of hearing people and then explained what they thought was best for us. Again, we should look at how Clerc profoundly changed deaf education in the United States. Clerc knew what was best based on his own experiences as a deaf person, but he also

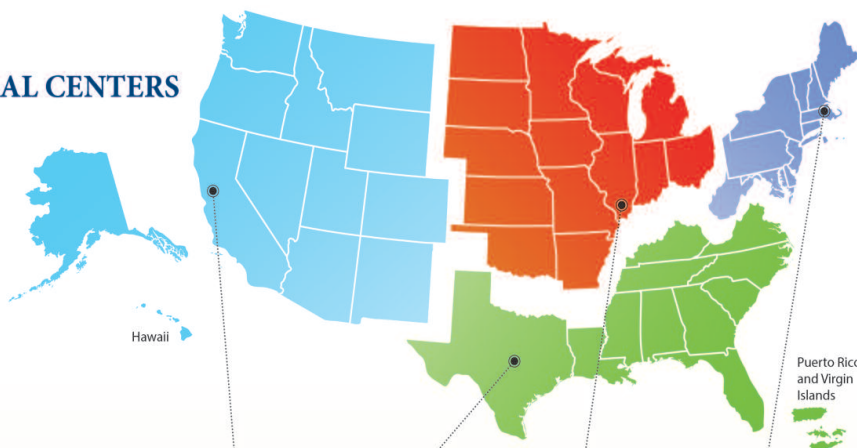
had an ally—one who was hearing and listened to what he had to say: Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. Let's not forget the other ally: Mason Cogswell, Alice's hearing father who helped bring Clerc to the United States. We are now returning to that allyship among families, educators, and professionals who sincerely listen to deaf and hard of hearing people.

These three positive changes—deaf and hard of hearing professionals and researchers working through a deaf-centric lens; the increase in literacy in reading, writing, and signing; and allyship among hearing people—are what we can look forward to in the future. By looking to the past and examining today, we can see what exists for the future ... and find our hope.



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