

**Amanda Howerton-Fox**, PhD, assistant professor of language and literacy education at Iona College in New Rochelle, N.Y., has worked as a teacher of deaf and hard of hearing students, as a teacher of students who are learning English as a second language, and as a professional development provider in the New York City area. She is a certified reading specialist and earned her doctorate in deaf education with a concentration in applied linguistics from Columbia University. Howerton-Fox's research focuses on bimodal language and literacy development and preparing teachers to work effectively with students whose languages or dialects have been historically undervalued by our nation's schools, including students who are deaf or hard of hearing and use American Sign Language.

St. Joseph's School for the Deaf in the Bronx, N.Y., has been undergoing significant changes in our approach and our curriculum, and including parents has been an informative and critical part of the process. For decades, we employed a Total Communication approach to educating our students. However, just over two years ago, the administration invited representatives from Gallaudet University's Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center to come and talk with the educational staff—including our teachers, teacher assistants, speech-language/audiology personnel, and mental health professionals—about the design and potential benefits of an ASL/English bimodal bilingual program.

# Supporting Families in Program Transition and the Hard Truths of Early Language: What Should We Say to Parents?

*By Amanda Howerton-Fox and Jodi L. Falk*

An initial six-hour training that focused primarily on theory and practice was followed by two years of consulting with the Clerc Center, addressing the design of effective bimodal bilingual early childhood programs for deaf and hard of hearing children from birth to 5 years old. During this same time, the administration hosted Dr. Amanda Howerton-Fox, a deaf education researcher from a nearby college and co-author of this article, in a series of professional development sessions for teachers and speech-language professionals on the linguistic foundations of a bimodal bilingual approach. This approach, which is

*Photos courtesy of St. Joseph's School for the Deaf*



supported by current research in bilingual education, emphasizes the importance of developing both signed and spoken language (perhaps exclusively in its written form) so that children can use their knowledge of both languages to support their overall language and literacy acquisition. The word *bimodal* highlights the inherent linguistic differences between languages that use the manual-visual modality and those that use the auditory-oral modality, as well as the importance of developing the listening and spoken language skills of students for whom that is an appropriate goal. As a result of the knowledge gained in these professional development sessions, the teachers asked that Howerton-Fox continue working with them to integrate linguistic competencies in American Sign Language (ASL) and English into the school's English Language Arts curriculum.

### St. Joseph's A Place for Families

St. Joseph's has a long tradition of communicating closely with and offering

**Above:** Howerton-Fox leads a parent workshop, giving parents the opportunity to ask questions related to their child's language development.

ongoing support to the families of our students, and as we adopted a new bimodal bilingual approach to educating students, we invested time and resources in sharing our plans with our students' parents via parent-teacher conferences and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings.

Always an integral part of our school, families of our students can often be seen on campus, taking classes, meeting for parent groups, or volunteering at some of the school's many special events, such as World Read Aloud Day and plantings for our children's garden. The school hosts two weekly groups: one for the families of students in the Parent Infant

**Jodi L. Falk**, PhD, has been the upper school educational supervisor for St. Joseph's School for the Deaf in the Bronx, N.Y., since 2007. Prior to this position, she was St. Joseph's parent-infant teacher, an early intervention service provider in Westchester County, N.Y., and a high school teacher for the New York City Department of Education. Falk received her bachelor's degree in speech-language pathology from Hofstra University and both her master's degree and her doctorate in the education of the deaf from Teachers College, Columbia University. Falk wears two hats in the field of deaf education: As an educational supervisor, she oversees every aspect of school programming, including curriculum, instruction, personnel performance, and student behavior management; academically, she teaches as an adjunct professor at Iona College and presents at conferences. Commencing August 2019, Falk will be the executive director at St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf in Brooklyn, N.Y.

**Right:** Howerton-Fox gives a TEDx presentation; some of her slides, “Why Bimodal Bilingual?” and “The Bilingual Brain.”

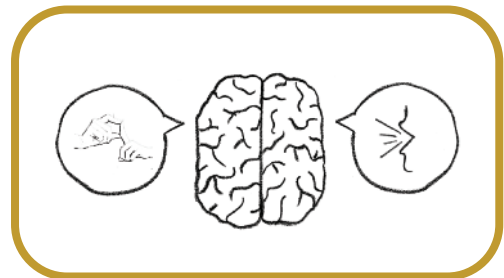


Program (birth to 3 years old) and the other for families of school-aged students (preschool to eighth grade). School social workers run the Parent Education programs. The programs are divided into sessions on education and sessions for social-emotional support. The educational sessions include classes in ASL and workshops on topics such as Deaf culture, the IEP process, behavior management, speech, language and literacy instruction, storytelling, and the use of technology. Guest presenters are invited as experts in their respective fields. Presenters have included local police officers, technology supervisors, educational supervisors, and members of the Deaf community. Mediated by social workers, the sessions offer families informational and social-emotional support as they explore topics related to raising their deaf or hard of hearing children.

As St. Joseph’s draws students from throughout the Bronx, a densely populated borough of New York City, distance and cost can present obstacles for attendance, so a taxi service is provided for those in the Parent Infant Program and a special bus service is available for parents to attend other meetings and activities. All sessions are multilingual—offered in English, ASL, and Spanish—and interpreters are provided for parents who speak other languages. St. Joseph’s also provides evening ASL classes for families and community members. Further, each family participates in a support group, and each family is assigned a social worker who advocates for them and helps them access community resources. An on-site food pantry and clothing collection is also available.

### A TEDx Talk A Need Exposed

Last spring, Howerton-Fox delivered a presentation on the importance of early exposure to sign language for all deaf and hard of hearing children—and the authors realized that our parents should be more aware of the rationale behind the changes taking place at St. Joseph’s. In “Language Beyond the Sound Barrier,” a TEDx presentation, Howerton-Fox covered the cognitive, linguistic, and social-emotional benefits of educating deaf and hard of hearing children bilingually in ASL and English as well as the importance of exposing the youngest deaf and hard of hearing children to visual language. Howerton-Fox and Jodi Falk, a St. Joseph’s educational supervisor who is also co-author of this article, began to plan workshops for parents that could be integrated into the already-scheduled parent support groups. We asked the question: *What is it that parents of deaf and hard of hearing children should know about language and literacy development—particularly bilingual ASL/English development—so that they can not only support their children at home but advocate for them at school and in society?* We reviewed materials we had previously gathered, including the content of Howerton-Fox’s TEDx talk, information from professional development sessions, and the survey responses of our faculty regarding their understanding of the



ASL/English approach. Instead of presenting this information in PowerPoint slides loaded with theoretical models and research citations, as it had been presented to the school’s faculty, we decided that the presentations should look more like a TEDx talk. We redesigned the slides so that they would be more meaningful to our audience of parents, the majority of whom speak English as a second language. We used fewer words, more visuals, and built in ample time for the parents to ask questions and engage in conversations that would allow them to connect the content of the presentation to their own firsthand experience.

We would use our first parent workshop from the fall to get a sense of what parents already understood about the differences between the Total Communication and bilingual approaches to deaf education and to introduce the following five arguments in support of the bimodal bilingual approach:

1. **Language supports language.** The ways in which bilingual learners use their knowledge of each language to

scaffold their learning of the other is well-documented in the literature (Garcia, 2009).

2. **Bilingualism is a gift.** Research in cognitive science has consistently shown that bilingual individuals have more cognitive flexibility and control in comparison to monolingual individuals (Costa & Sebastián-Gallés, 2015).
3. **Technology isn't perfect.** Cochlear implants have variable success rates, and the factors influencing success are not fully understood (Marschark, Sarchet, Rhoten, & Zupan, 2010).
4. **Early language is critical.** Decades of research indicate a critical period exists for human language development, after which language learning becomes much more difficult (Mayberry & Kluender, 2018).
5. **Membership in Deaf culture is empowering.** The benefits of participation in Deaf culture are not only linguistic but also psychological, social, and creative (Bauman & Murray, 2014).

We would focus a second parent workshop on the changes in the curriculum at St. Joseph's and discuss ways in which parents could support their children's learning at home. Thirteen parents attended the sessions. Ten parents spoke Spanish as a first language and communicated via a Spanish-English interpreter. One was bilingual in Spanish and English; one was bilingual in Arabic and English; and one was bilingual in English and Bembe, one of the languages of her native Zambia.

## The Dilemma of Early Language

### What Do We Tell Parents?

Overall, the workshops were very successful. Parents were grateful for the information and pleased to have access

to an expert to whom they could address their questions and concerns about their own children's language development. However, a moment of unexpected anxiety arose when the presentation turned to the critical importance of children developing language while they are still very young. As discomfort spread through the room, we thought about the parents who had children in middle school. For these parents, data that showed language delayed could mean language denied could not be helpful; it was too late for these parents. So strong was the reaction that we made an on-the-spot decision to stop talking about it; we cut short the discussion about how people's facility for language learning decreases with age and about the cognitive and social-emotional effects associated with the lack of early language in human development. Debra Arles, St. Joseph's executive director, who was observing the sessions, came to the front of the room to reassure the parents that they were doing the right things for their children, and that this new approach included a learning curve for everyone in the school, herself included. A few of the parents visibly relaxed upon hearing this.

## Send Us Your Thoughts

At St. Joseph's we remain committed to supporting parents, and we are conflicted about how to handle the data on the importance of early language learning. We believe strongly in the importance of giving parents accurate and complete information about language and literacy development, but we also understand that parents may interpret the data as a reflection on themselves and decisions they made long ago. Parents who feel negatively judged and deflated are not parents who are likely to become actively engaged in advocating for their children.

We would be grateful to hear the thoughts and experiences of the *Odyssey* readership on this critically important issue. Parents, teachers, and others involved in the education of deaf and hard of hearing children, please contact us via e-mail if you have a story or an insight to share. Help us to think about what we should tell parents, especially parents of older deaf children, about the importance of full language exposure during the earliest years of a child's life. Contact us most directly through e-mail: Howerton-Fox at [ahowertonfox@iona.edu](mailto:ahowertonfox@iona.edu) and Falk at [jodifalk@icloud.com](mailto:jodifalk@icloud.com).

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