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Educators Empowering Families

By Christy M. Neria, Stephanie M. Young, and Delcina M. Colantuono

When an education department brought students who communicate through American Sign Language (ASL) and students who communicate through spoken language onto the same campus, educators focused on empowering families to advocate—whatever their choice of communication.

Recently, our district reconfigured our program for deaf and hard of hearing students, combining the Total Communication (TC) and Listening and Spoken Language (LSL) programs for elementary students and relocating students and staff into a single school. This prompted staff to reflect on and discuss the pedagogy unique to each program. We analyzed approaches to language, education, and advocacy for our students and families. We realized that while our programs reflected diverse principles and approaches, extensive commonalities exist. The primary commonality was the need for families in both programs to receive support for working with their children in language, whether the language was signed or spoken. We needed to help families learn how to provide and incorporate language into their daily routines, and we needed to advocate and teach our families how to advocate for themselves and for their children to maximize learning for everyone.

Advocacy means speaking out and taking action in pursuit of a cause (LaRocco & Bruns, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2011). In our program, the approach to advocacy is the same whether families choose to communicate with their children through speech and signs or through speech alone. Family involvement has always been valued. We included families in all stages of their students' educational journeys in order to equip them to advocate for their children. We realized that both programs had the same goals: *Teach,*

Photos courtesy of Christy M. Neria



Left, above, and below: Families enjoy a Dr. Seuss Read-A-Thon and family picnic.



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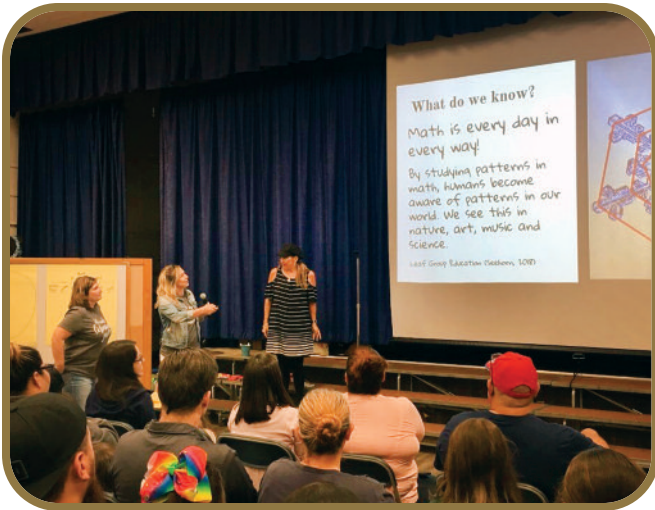
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Empower, (Actively) involve, and Make innovative projects. This gave us an acronym for our approach: TEAM. Here is a closer look:

- **T** stands for *teaching*. We teach all families, whatever their communication choice, to work to improve communication with their deaf or hard of hearing child.
- **E** stands for *empowering*. We want to empower our families through providing resources and materials that are specific to their situation and communication modality.
- **A** stands for *actively involve*. We want to be proactive in gleaning the participation of families in the educational environment for their children.
- **M** stands for *making innovative projects*. We want these projects to inspire family participation in their child's education.

T-TEACHING Begins with Parents

Literacy and learning begin at home as children naturally interact with their families (Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Neuman, 1999). Therefore, teaching—parents as well as students—is essential. We are trying to reach all parents, including those from different ethnic communities, those of low economic status, those who may be cognitively or socially disadvantaged, and those who are simply unaware of how to support their children through their education. We must explain to families the importance of communicating and sometimes coach parents and care providers on how to communicate effectively and work with their children in order to enhance their language development. Multitudes of teaching opportunities exist in the home, and both programs point these out to promote our



Left: Teachers give an introduction at Family Math Night.

Below: Families measure and cook during Family Math Night.

students' language development. Here are a few examples.

FOR ALL FAMILIES—TC AND LSL

The following strategies have been useful for both TC and LSL families:

- Setting up informal meetings with our support staff to answer parents' questions regarding their children's hearing loss and equipment
- Inviting families and parents into the classroom to participate in and observe specific language strategy opportunities
- Inviting parents onto campus to observe and participate in schoolwide activities (e.g., Read Across America, Poetry Night, Parent Literacy/Math Nights) during which teachers model language-learning strategies
- Using Individualized Education Program meetings and parent conferences to share tips for communicating, reading, and writing with children
- Providing opportunities for home-to-school connections (e.g., making shopping lists, cooking, writing letters to each other, hiding something and writing directions on where the child can find it, labeling the house with the names of things, watching a movie and having the child discuss his or her favorite part)
- Exploring hands-on science or math topics with families in the classroom, conducting experiments with materials that families may have at home (e.g., making baking soda volcanoes, building model rockets, creating geometric shapes with toothpicks and marshmallows)
- Sharing resources on advocacy so that parents and children can advocate for accommodations and their individual needs

FOR TC FAMILIES

Our TC program encourages parents to establish their children's language as ASL in order to support their learning and literacy, and to communicate with their children through signs—and for some children through signs and speech—to incorporate language into daily routines. Some of the ways we support parents in learning how to communicate include:

- Offering weekly classes in ASL to the entire family
- Sending home weekly videotexts of ASL vocabulary
- Responding to inquiries about ASL
- Exchanging photos through texting so teachers can see what experiences students have at home and use these experiences in the classroom to build literacy
- Encouraging parents to use ASL with their children during all waking hours to ensure full access to communication

FOR LSL FAMILIES

Our LSL program optimizes learning and academics through listening. One way to achieve this is through maximizing



inclusion in the mainstream environment in response to the child's individual needs as well as incorporating language-learning opportunities into daily routines. We include families through:

- Encouraging parents to have their child wear amplification during all waking hours to create an open line of communication
- Encouraging parents to talk to their child as if the child has typical hearing
- Teaching families to narrate daily happenings with their children
- Meeting families before and after school to coach and guide caregivers through the hierarchies of a child's development in the areas of listening, speech and language, auditory skills, cognitive skills, and social skills
- Inviting parents to Listening and Language Nights, during which tips are shared on how to facilitate listening, spoken language, and literacy through hands-on activities in which parents can meet and encourage each other and learn to assist their children in developing both academic and everyday vocabulary

E-MPOWERMENT

Helping Parents Know Their Impact

"Knowledge is power, and shared power ... is central to every partnership" (Turnbull et al., 2011). Sometimes families may not be aware of the information needed to help them support their children. Thus, it is important to ask them questions about their needs at home and offer them suggestions and resources. Resources are suggested that are unique to each child's needs, and both our TC and LSL programs emphasize the importance of sharing resources that align with the curriculum and support families in helping their children.

FOR ALL FAMILIES—TC AND LSL

Teaching and providing resources are important; however, involving families in events and in class activities is also critical in promoting advocacy. Giving the family opportunities to experience the content being learned in class, as well as providing opportunities for the students to show what they have mastered, supports family advocacy. These opportunities allow the student and the family to be a part of the school community. At each event, the importance of language—

whether visual or oral—is highlighted, and teachers model strategies in working with deaf and hard of hearing students.

Through both the TC and LSL programs, we encourage involvement with families through the following:

- Looking actively for opportunities to answer questions, support families, and listen to concerns
- Encouraging parents to attend special events (e.g., events demonstrating coding and robotic projects students create in class, showing classroom-made movies, field trips)
- Creating opportunities for families to interact at school (e.g., through the library, potlucks, music performances, talent shows, holiday programs, PTA, literacy/math/poetry nights)
- Creating opportunities for active involvement with students' hearing peers during inverse mainstreaming, art, and/or coding

FOR TC FAMILIES

Some of the resources our TC program has developed and uses include:

- Teacher-made ASL DVDs and suggested ASL YouTube links for families unable to attend ASL classes
- ASL apps and websites, and the ASLnook on YouTube

Giving the family opportunities to experience the content being learned in class, as well as providing opportunities for the students to show what they have mastered, supports family advocacy.

Below: Families build geometric shapes with toothpicks and marshmallows at Family Math Night.





Above: Families use pumpkins to promote descriptive language during Family Literacy Night.

Bottom right: During Epic Build/Open House, students share their projects.

- ASL/English and ASL/Spanish dictionaries provided to the students' homes
- Information concerning Deaf community events (e.g., ASL Expo, interpreted events)
- Games that help students practice skills with their families (e.g., memory game with vocabulary words/signs, links to software programs such as www.reflexmath.com)
- Recipes from cooking done at school (e.g., we print the recipes, send them home, and encourage families to replicate the process of preparation and cooking with their children)

FOR LSL FAMILIES

Some of the resources our LSL program has developed and uses include:

- Daily/weekly newsletters and classroom apps to reinforce the language and listening taught in the classroom and with exciting activities to do at home to support their child's listening and speaking skills and academics through active play (e.g., making slime, games, storytelling, cooking activities)
- Websites that families can use to support their child's

listening and speaking skills (e.g., Med-El, Cochlear, Advanced Bionics, Supporting Success for Students with Hearing Loss, AG Bell, Learning and Listening)

- Events and activities (e.g., Cochlear, AG Bell, student fundraising, Starky Hearing Foundation)
- Participation in the After School Program so families can see how they can help their child with their homework to meet their reading goals

(A-CTIVELY) INVOLVE AND M-AKE INNOVATIVE PROJECTS

... and Inspire Parents

Authentic engagement (Schlechty, 2002) is essential in order not only to help students solve problems and make meaning but also to encourage connections between school and family. By engaging students and families, all members of the TEAM may feel more invested in education and want to become more involved. One way to do this is by facilitating and developing curriculum that showcases student innovation while peaking families' interests enough so that they want to participate in the learning process.

FOR ALL FAMILIES—TC AND LSL

Here are some of our successful projects:

- Students create videos about themselves and their hearing loss to advocate for their needs (e.g., to introduce themselves to a new mainstream teacher)
- Students use coding software and create robotics projects
- Students make and perform in classroom movies based on what they learned in class (movies are sent home with



students, or showings occur at school)

- Students use and create QR codes and websites
- Students create videos based on vocabulary they are learning to practice at home
- Students participate in cumulative projects (e.g., dances, performances, plays) with their hearing peers
- Students make books about their study trips, daily routines, and home events
- Teachers share classwork, innovative learning activities, and pictures through group texts and/or communication applications (e.g., Class Dojo) so parents can communicate with their children more effectively

When Families Seem to Hesitate Strategies for Involvement

In both our TC and LSL programs, some families seem to hesitate to participate in their children's school life. Many reasons exist for this hesitation. Low participation sometimes correlates with a family's socioeconomic status or difference in the culture and language from that experienced at school. Some families may want to participate; however, they may feel intimidated or they may not have the resources or time to support their children in language and learning. When this happens, we actively seek out these families and prompt them to become involved in their children's learning community. As we approach these families, our team is careful not to simply take charge. We know that when the parents feel involved in the learning process, they are more likely to follow through. When they help develop learning strategies, they are more likely to use them with their children.

In order to include all families on our educational TEAM, teachers need to build trusting relationships. This means respecting, honoring, and being sensitive to family needs

(Turnbull et al., 2011). In order to demonstrate how we hold in high esteem the families with which we work, we try to do the following:

- Initiate additional meetings with families at times convenient to them
- Visit the homes (e.g., check on families at home, attend family events if invited, bring materials to provide support and explain the content)
- Make phone calls (e.g., explain content or events, provide updates, figure out transportation)
- Use FaceTime, Skype, or the Video Relay Service (e.g., to teach signs)
- Provide resources in multiple languages to help families follow daily routines, classroom newsletters (e.g., Spanish/English/ASL dictionaries, resource books from Cochlear, Oticon: Plugged In, MedEL: Will Wonder, We Learned to Listen, Neither Nor, El Deafo)
- Communicate with families through classroom apps and other messaging services that include translation (e.g., Class Dojo)
- Work with other professionals or individuals personally involved with the family (e.g., other family members or social workers) if given permission

As educators in our TC and LSL program work with families, we continue to look for new ways to advocate and support advocacy. We want to include all families—no matter their choice of communication—so as teachers and parents we can collectively support our students' language and learning as well as better the lives of all our deaf and hard of hearing students. After all, as Helen Keller so poignantly said, "Alone we can do so little, together we can do so much."

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