

Shifting Priorities, Technology-Centric Practices, and an Ever-Evolving Educational Experience for Our Children

By Catherine C. Valcourt-Pearce

Catherine “Cat” C. Valcourt-Pearce,

MS, has worked at Gallaudet University’s Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, in Washington, D.C., for 27 years. She is managing editor for the Clerc Center’s National Programs and Outreach as well as for its *Odyssey: New Directions in Deaf Education* magazine. She has also served as a freelance content advisor for four children’s books published by Enslow Publishers related to sign language and deafness and has had articles published in *Parenting Special Needs* magazine and *Scary Mommy*. She and her husband, Larry, are the proud parents of four young sons. Valcourt-Pearce welcomes questions and comments about this article at Catherine.Valcourt-Pearce@gallaudet.edu.

Since March 2020, when the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic hit, education in the United States has undergone significant change. As both a deaf professional in deaf education and as the parent of an OHKODA (only hearing kid of deaf adults) teenage son, a deafdisabled tween son, and deaf elementary-age fraternal twin sons, I have been in the unique position of viewing this transformation through multiple lenses. What I have seen has left me heartened and impressed—by the sheer amount of work and care across the board from the schools, the families, and the children themselves. These last couple of years have been incredibly challenging, but there have been some lasting changes that will serve us and our children well going forward, too.

As a Clerc Center Professional Ready ... Set ... Go!

As COVID-19 quickly spread across the United States, everything shut down here for a bit. No one knew what to expect. We were all told to stay home by the U.S. government while they tried to get a handle on what was happening and how to contain the spreading of COVID-19. Education for our children was put on pause. However, behind the scenes at Gallaudet University’s Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, for students ages birth to 21, things kicked into high gear, and I had a front-row seat.

Clerc Center administrators, teachers, and staff were working furiously to get our students back to daily learning. As an editor working closely with the Clerc Center’s creative team, I was involved in the effort to develop Clerc@Home, an online curriculum site for our demonstration schools, Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) and the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), that could be used by both teachers and families. The website featured useful ideas and strategies for our students. It also had a PowerSchool

Right: The Pearce/Valcourt-Pearce crew smiles for their annual family photo.

Photos courtesy of Cat C. Valcourt-Pearce



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over Zoom, as did parent-teacher meetings, Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, and virtual ASL classes. There were daily lunch gatherings so the students could socialize. A diverse group of guest readers did weekly age-appropriate read-alouds. KDES and MSSD Back to School Guides with guidelines for returning to on-campus living and learning were created in English and Spanish and frequently updated. There were also weekly newsletters, translated into multiple languages, that went out to our families.

For the teachers and staff, department meetings also switched to Zoom, as did all paraprofessional training and workshops. The Clerc Center's Equity, Diversity, and

Family/Parent Portal and technology support. Further, there were social-emotional supports added to help guide our families as they worked to center their children during this stressful time.

The Clerc Center also developed Learn@Home kits for KDES students which included instructional materials (e.g., markers, crayons, paints, paper, math materials, scissors, workbooks) that each student's family picked up from their school. Clerc Center students already had their school-provided iPads at home with them; to ensure they had access to instruction at home despite connectivity, MiFi devices were also sent home if needed. Classes resumed on Zoom, and students were able to maintain a daily schedule with teachers. The Clerc Center continued to mail home supplemental instructional materials to our students as at-home instruction was extended. While it wasn't an ideal situation, especially for students with additional needs, it was as close to "normal" as was possible during this period of time.

Speech-language sessions, library story time, physical education, STEAM activities, and even Field Day took place

Inclusion-related year-long diversity training with Andrea Sonnier, of Critical Consciousness School, had separate Zoom times for teachers and staff so that everyone had a chance to participate in small groups and to interact. Innovation projects were presented by our teachers and staff on Zoom. We did A LOT of Zoom!

One day flowed into the next, week after week, month after month, all of us giving our best effort, until the fall of 2021 when our students were finally able to return to on-campus learning (KDES and MSSD) and living (MSSD). When they did, masks were—and still are as we close out the 2021-2022 school year—required in the classrooms (although there have been periods of time when they were optional). Still, the students (and teachers!) are thrilled to be back in class, to socialize, to feel a sense of normalcy. Academically, like students in schools across the nation, our students are still playing catch-up. Social-emotionally, our students seem to be doing well all things considered.

As a Parent Keeping All the Balls in the Air

As parents, it's been a long journey these last two years for my husband and me. Our four sons have struggled, some more than others. There have been successes, and there has been some fallout from remote schooling. The long-term impact remains to be seen.

THE OHKODA ONE

Our outgoing, funny, eldest son spent a good part of his middle school years stuck in his bedroom at a desk or on his bed. Cole wasn't allowed to go out and socialize, as kids his age normally do, because to do that without a vaccine was to put his severely immunocompromised and medically fragile younger brother at risk of dying, not to mention getting himself and the rest of us sick. He saw only his closest two or three friends occasionally, as their families were very careful, too. Emotionally, this was a difficult period for Cole; he worried a lot, and that took a toll. He's become quite introverted and keeps his emotions "close to the vest." Part of this is age, and part of it is a result of pandemic schooling and semi-isolation. Cole is also incredibly addicted to his technology devices, and that is something hard to moderate when they are still a big part of in-person schooling now because of how student learning has transformed.

Academically, Cole also struggled. He had an exceedingly difficult time focusing, and he would be playing on his personal laptop and on his iPhone (which he was allowed to have since it was used in specific classes for school-related work) as well as attending classes on his school-issued Chromebook when we weren't able to monitor his work. Cole would approach the end of each quarter with a great deal of work still due, and we'd have to look over his shoulder to make sure all the assignments got in and were credited. As parents of four and as working parents, we were spread thin. We'd forget to check what was due in our son's portal because he could work independently, and by the time we did, it would be a lot. This process was painful for the three of us. Our son is still working on developing good time management skills and



Left: Cole built on skills such as self-motivation, time management, and independent learning while remote schooling mostly from his bedroom during the COVID-19 pandemic.

meeting deadlines. Thankfully, Cole is an intellectual and a quick study, and his learning hasn't suffered. In that area, he is doing well.

Overall, our son is doing much better now that he is back to school in person. He is wrapping up middle school and preparing for high school in the fall. I will say that remote schooling allowed Cole to develop and enhance his computer and research skills and encouraged independent work. These skills will continue to benefit him throughout his schooling and as he moves on into his future.

THE DEAFDISABLED ONE

Our tween "double rare" son is in a hearing K-12 school for children with moderate to severe disabilities; Cree has a rare syndrome and a rare genetic condition resulting in a host of medical and developmental issues. Remote schooling was exceptionally challenging for him, including parts of it spent in a hospital room. There are no deaf schools out there equipped to handle children with Cree's type and extent of disabilities and needs. There also aren't many resources out there to fit children like ours. Not only is he audilogically hard of hearing, but he also has cortical visual impairment (CVI; he can't see well and only if things are close to his face, and he also sees some colors better than others) and severe hypotonia (low muscle tone). For this son, remote schooling was definitely trial and error.

Like the Clerc Center, Cree's school also sent home an extensive learning kit complete with adaptive equipment, his Chromebook and charger, and lots of manipulatives and lesson "props" (e.g., rubber balls, dice, black background tray for vision help, Velcro days of the week words and others, light pointer, crayons, markers, counting cubes, yes/no buttons). The administrators, teachers, and staff worked incredibly hard to transform their lesson plans and get the students online,

which was tricky with so many students with such diverse needs and issues. I was truly impressed by their enormous effort and by some of their modified learning strategies—adaptive PE was AMAZING, and Cree loved the homemade instruments and music videos incorporated into the general classroom lessons and the music class as well as the Deaf culture/sign language classes and the adaptive art classes. The principal sent out weekly Wednesday messages that were always captioned for access and that included Spanish translations for those school families that needed it; they were so successful that she continued to do this throughout the 2021-2022 school year.

However, other parts of Cree's remote schooling were incredibly frustrating for my husband and me, especially as Deaf parents. The captioning on Cree's Chromebook was always lagging maybe a minute behind any dialogue, and we couldn't follow; sometimes the captions disappeared entirely. Also, the Chromebook sound was extremely low so even with Cree's hearing aids, he often couldn't hear people speaking. Even American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters didn't help in this situation, although we did have them most of the time, because the Internet connection was often wonky in our apartment building. Further, with Cree's CVI, our son couldn't see the Chromebook screen from his wheelchair so we spent a lot of remote schooling with him on his side on the floor and us lying down behind him so that he could get close enough to



Above: Cree often accessed Zoom classes on his school Chromebook on his side on a mat on the floor so he would be close enough to actually see the screen due to vision issues. **Left:** Family consultant/home health aide Jean Paul Attie helped Cree participate in remote school classes using techniques such as hand-over-hand for communication buttons, manipulatives, and other adaptive tools.



the screen to see it and, with our hand-over-hand help, do the activities and schoolwork. When Cree ended up in the hospital after major surgery in 2021, he did some hours of remote schooling from his hospital bed by placing his logged-in Chromebook on a high/low medical table with wheels. When he was discharged, we bought one of those tables for home and that helped with Cree's ability to sit in his wheelchair and attend remote school when he was ready; the high/low table brought the Chromebook much closer to his face. Thankfully, parent-school meetings and IEP meetings were set up on Google Meet, and we had ASL interpreters for those meetings as well as captions that worked much better.

As working parents, we would not have survived this period without the help of Cree's incredible home health aides from Celebrate Ability. There simply wasn't enough time in the day or hands in the apartment to manage it all. They took over much of Cree's schooling while we managed our twins' remote schooling, checked in periodically on Cole's remote schooling, and attended to our own work meetings and projects. These aides were invaluable.



Left: Zev, Kai, and their dad (Larry) work together on a science experiment—making play dough—by following pre-recorded directions on YouTube in the twins' Seesaw app. **Below:** Kai and Zev participate remotely in class with their KDES peers on Zoom.

very useful, with plentiful materials, and they were well-organized, and the periodic refill of materials from the Clerc Center went a long way in easing our stress about having to pay for school materials.

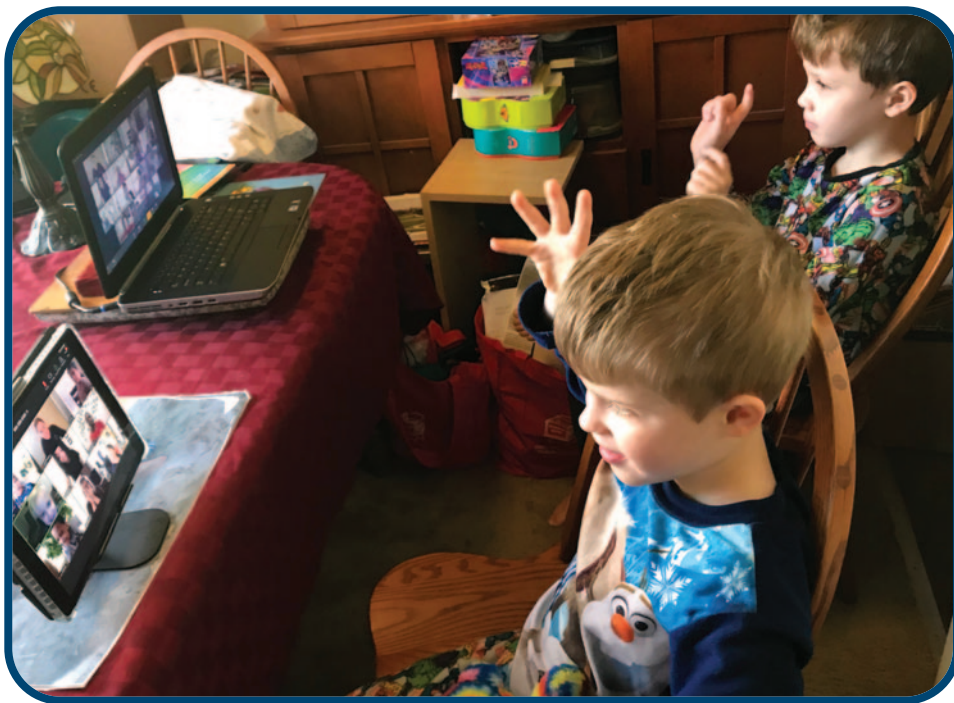
As a result of transforming in-person school lessons into remote ones, our young sons were able to expand on the development of soft skills such as patience, clarity of communication, attention to detail, and turn taking through Zoom, a platform they had never used before the pandemic. They also learned to competently use an iPad, including utilizing new apps such as Seesaw, Kids A-Z, Kahoot!, and IXL. They learned how to upload drawings and photos of artwork to Seesaw and how to respond to teachers' comments on the app. Their technology skills grew by leaps and bounds!

Challenges came in the form of sitting still for long periods of time, of frustration when something wasn't clear and they couldn't have that direct help from the teacher, of arguing or distracting each other because their work spaces were at the same table due to space limitations in the apartment with four remote-schooling children, and of having to attend to classes when they weren't feeling their best. One of our twins needs additional supports to focus, and that was sometimes hard to manage with our attention elsewhere out of necessity. School meetings, though, with KDES teachers about either of our sons were always with a sense of relief. They were always in ASL

Academically, we honestly don't know how much Cree was impacted by remote schooling. His disabilities are such that he can't explain anything. However, he is definitely happier to be back in school with his teachers and peers. Social-emotionally, we have seen much joy as well. He loved being at home with his family, and he still does, but he loves the stimulation of being at school and out in the community, too.

THE DEAF TWINS

Our twins, Zev and Kai, were KDES students, and it was fascinating to me as both professional and parent to see how they were able to benefit from the newly created Clerc@Home website materials that I'd had a part in editing and the reformatted lessons on which our Clerc Center teachers and staff had worked so hard. The Learn@Home kits were



directly with the teacher(s), as were IEP meetings. We never had to worry about struggling through those meetings communication-wise.

Socially, our twins didn't suffer. They are each other's best friend, and they always had an age-appropriate playmate in each other. They missed their KDES friends and teachers, but Zev and Kai got to see them daily during the week on screen and that seemed to be sufficient for them. As their deaf and hard of hearing friends aren't in our residential area anyway, they didn't miss going out to play with them. We kept information about the COVID-19 pandemic and current events to a minimum. As a result, they came out of that period of time relatively unscathed—although with a new technology addiction and a slightly OCD aversion to germs.

Academically, though, Zev and Kai are playing catch-up like other K-12 kids all across the nation. They are behind in reading and writing, and that isn't a surprise to us. Zoom learning isn't in-person, hands-on learning no matter how hard the school community worked. Some things are simply better learned in the classroom. There is time; they will get there.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

As we begin to come out the other side of the pandemic, I have a huge respect and new appreciation for the Clerc Center community; for Maryland's Montgomery County Public Schools administrators, teachers, and staff; for home health aide support and Celebrate Ability staff; and for all those across the United States (and the world) who are simply doing their best. Families were hit hard. School communities were hit hard. Businesses and workers were hit hard. No one escaped this pandemic untouched, some more than others.

None of the last two years has been easy. Transformation of any kind rarely is, and certainly not of the magnitude of which we've experienced. Not all remote learning strategies were successful; some of our most fragile children really lost out, and we are going to need to figure out how to best support them so that they can continue to thrive.

However, some of our children did really well with parts of remote learning. Some thrived in the quiet of their home environment and developed independence in learning. Some



Left and below: Zev proudly displays a tree painting he made in virtual art class, while Kai shows off his project for remote STEAM Day.

very useful skills were built upon and have now become enmeshed into our daily lives. One notable transformation in our on-site classrooms is how thoroughly embedded technology now is (e.g., iPads are used for many projects and in many situations) and how our students have adapted to routinely using it together in teams or groups and alone, and that's an important and marketable skill for later on.

As I look to the future—as a parent and a professional—and with the ever-evolving nature of education and student learning, I wonder what is next on the horizon. I look forward to the innovations and transformations ahead!

