

## The Unwritten Curriculum: Teaching Deaf Students in the '90s\*

**David A. Stewart**

Michigan State University  
East Lansing, Michigan

---

### Introduction

My first rendezvous with deaf students<sup>1</sup> at the post-secondary level came in the mid-seventies at a time when I was contemplating my own career and hadn't a clue what Deaf culture was all about. Until then, I had spent my entire life immersed in a hearing and speaking society, but I was not a lost and deaf soul because of this. I didn't see this as a search for an identity -- I had spent too many years preparing myself to assume full responsibility for all I did, and all that would happen to me. I wasn't about to start apologizing or looking for my antithesis. It was obvious to all that I wasn't a part of the Deaf community and to sign SCHOOL ME BEFORE? WHY IMPORTANT TO YOU? was about as far into ASL<sup>2</sup> as I was able to go. But there I was tutoring deaf students, many my own age and many for whom Deaf language<sup>3</sup> was at that core of their linguistic repertoire.

The deaf students who I tutored took great pains to render their thoughts into a form of language that I could understand. This was the irony of the situation. We sat at the table because of their call for help in subject matter in which I excelled. But after each session it was hard to tell who was most grateful for the lesson. The students put me on a fast track to the Deaf community and while I studiously devoured all opportunities to learn more about who these Deaf people were I wasn't so sure that I was having an impact on improving their ability to learn the material at hand.

It wasn't until a few years later, that a Deaf associate at the school for the deaf where I was then teaching pulled me aside and provided a few insights. She welcomed me to the Deaf world. She laughed at how naive I was when I first started out and confided that she and other Deaf people never held me as a confidant. I only became one of them after I had endeavored to learn Deaf signs and to assimilate Deaf culture. I asked her if that meant that most Deaf people distrusted non-deaf people and she said that was usually the case if the non-deaf person made no effort to understand the Deaf way of life. She then named a few non-deaf teachers who she said were good to the Deaf community. The element these teachers all had in common was not fluency in ASL as none of them were. Nor was it involvement in Deaf community activities -- they all had their own lives and were not expected to partake in the social events of the Deaf community. The common element was simply good teaching. They all shared wide respect from their peers for their commitment to helping deaf children learn. They empathized with the Deaf community but they were not experts of Deaf culture. Teaching was their area of expertise.

Why are we here? Presumably because we want to teach and to teach well. We may not be innocent of clamoring for the extrinsic rewards of teaching. Salary, vacation time, hours of employment

---

\* This presentation was made in June, 1994 in Atlanta, Georgia at *Tools for Language: Deaf Students at the Postsecondary Level*, a PEC-sponsored mini-conference.

are important but intrinsically we want to have a positive effect on a deaf person's education. So what's all this talk about Deaf culture and using ASL? As we carve out the last few years of the 20th Century, culture-speak is becoming intertwined with many aspects of teaching. Teaching can no longer occur untouched by the linguistic, ethnic, or physical characteristics of the students. Our students may be deaf but acknowledging their hearing loss no longer suffices as an adjustment to their learning styles. Good teachers are knowledgeable about their students place in society. They acknowledge their own limitations, strive to improve, and make the changes necessary to continue to be effective teachers. The purpose of this paper is to take a broad look at the cultural mosaic that deaf students bring to the classroom and identify some strategies that teachers can take to be sensitive to this multitude of cultures.

### **Who Are the Deaf Students?**

The term "Deaf" is taking a foothold in our consciousness. Most of us will define a Deaf person as being someone with a hearing loss who is also part of a culture that uses a sign language. Events and entities associated with the Deaf population are similarly named which give us such terminology as Deaf community, Deaf culture, Deaf folklore, Deaf sports, and Deaf way. Conversely, for the sake of this paper, "deaf" takes on a generic audiological definition in its reference to the condition of having some degree of hearing loss.

The reader is referred elsewhere to learn more about the people and culture associated with the Deaf community.<sup>4</sup> My goal in this paper is not to debate the social and psychological parameters defining Deaf culture or the social and linguistic foundations that urge us to use ASL as an instructional tool. I assume the legitimacy of their role in the education of deaf students. My present concern is the extent to which teachers must embrace Deaf culture and ASL. But before we get to that discussion there are a few misconceptions that must be corrected.

Is any deaf person who uses ASL also a Deaf person? Are all students enrolled in a program for deaf students also Deaf? Must a deaf student be Deaf? To some people the answer to all of these questions is yes. Such a narrow stance does little justice to improving our understanding of the diversity within the deaf population. There are many deaf people who are fluent in ASL but have little to do with the Deaf community. They are comfortable in their interactions with people who are not deaf and who speak. Many students enrolled in a deaf program may be there because there are no other educational options for them (COED, 1988). Some of these students might be more accurately identified as hard hearing while others might be profoundly deaf but still use English as their first language. For these students the best educational practices might be those that allow them to use their English skills to attain higher academic levels.

Recognizing deaf students for the individuals they are is an important step towards appreciation of their cultural and linguistic makeup. The following funding principles can be used to help teachers recognize and accept diversity as found in the population of deaf students.

- Teachers' and others' understanding of the culture of deaf people (Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened, etc.) is evolutionary and it is not always possible to generalize from one group of deaf people to another,
- It is the thoughts and actions of Deaf people that provide the definition of what it means to be "Deaf."
- There are many options to succeeding in America as deaf person.
- The greatest support that teachers can give to deaf students learning to define who they are is to be there for them while taking care not to impose their own perspectives.
- Exposure to Deaf culture is important, however exposure to other cultures and providing deaf students with the opportunity to assimilate norms and values associated with the culture of the home or the dominant society is not a denial that students are deaf.
- Teachers need to foster an appreciation for cultural and individual diversity for themselves and their students.
- Teachers must maintain honesty and open-mindedness so as not to abuse their position which allows them to impart cultural norms and values.
- Teachers need to be proactive in their efforts to increase the representation of culturally diverse groups in the education process.

Who are the deaf students? We will just let each one in their own way answer that question for us.

### **The Multicultural Deaf Student**

Post-secondary education needs to consider the ethnic and linguistic diversity of their deaf students (Nash, 1991). African American, Hispanic, Asian Pacific and other minority deaf students demand that education institutions retain a staff that is sensitive to their culture:

Compared to their White peers, minority deaf students are not only less likely to attend postsecondary programs, but they are also more likely to attend rehabilitation vocational rather than academic programs. . . . Many minority deaf students appear to be uncomfortable at predominantly White colleges and lack role models on the staff and faculty. A paucity of sensitivity training packages for campus personnel seems to compound this problem. (Schroedel & Ashmore, 1993, p. 23)

This lack of sensitivity is not limited to multicultural deaf students. A vast majority of colleges and universities and educational institutions in general are inadequately addressing the challenge that diverse students bring to the school (Grossman, 1995).

In addressing the educational needs of multicultural deaf students educators must avoid the mistake of lumping all students together under the category of deaf. This same mentality often pervades the field in its approach to educating school-age students with multiple disabilities. What often happens, for example, is that students who have a moderate hearing loss and are autistic will invariably find themselves being served by a teacher certified in the area of deaf who lacks the knowledge and skills related to teaching autistic children. Such situations typically do not benefit the students as the teacher is unable to establish a viable educational plan that addresses the educational challenges posed by disabilities

other than deafness. Likewise, a degree of hearing loss is not a sufficient rationale for categorizing the learning capabilities of a student.

Yet, the advent of a strong “Deaf way” movement has contributed to how multicultural deaf students are identified:

African American and Hispanic deaf students often are encouraged by both hearing and deaf people to be “Deaf first,” to be part of the “Deaf culture.” Ways of behaving that they share with their African American and Hispanic brothers and sisters are often rejected in schools for Deaf children. To succeed, African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and Hispanic deaf students . . . have been encouraged by the system to develop . . . a “strategy of racelessness” (Fischgrund & Akamatsu, 1993, p. 173)

However, a sociocultural identity that emphasizes “Deaf first” does not insure that all deaf people are treated alike. Not long ago, many African American deaf students attended segregated residential programs which set them apart, in the eyes of the Deaf community, from those who attended the more prestigious schools for deaf children (Bowe, 1971). Multicultural deaf students today may find themselves in school programs in which they represent the dominant ethnic population but where their cultural values are nevertheless denigrated. As a result, “multicultural deaf people are tugged at by a variety of forces, forces that segregate them in subtle ways from both the mainstream deaf community and heir ethnic or racial community” (Fischgrund & Akamatsu, 1993, p. 173).

Compounding this problem is the potential impact of the sociocultural environment. The identities deaf people choose are shaped by the social context in which they interact. An African American Deaf university student relates this process as he explains the path of his own social identification:

Where I grew up in Jamaica I always saw myself as a deaf person because there were so many Black people living there. Later, when I moved to Canada, I began to see that I am a Black person, which is how I identified myself. This is because there are a lot of white people living in Canada. Now that I am at Gallaudet University, I see myself as a Black Deaf person. (Stewart, 1991, p. 69)

For this person and others the ability to move freely between two or more cultures should allow for greater access to the benefits that the various social institutions (e.g., education, family, religion) associated with each culture have to offer. Thus, our goal is not to change the environment to accommodate the educational and cultural needs of each deaf student. Rather, we must strive to establish an environment where learning is unhindered by ingrained social prejudice and monocultured instructional strategies.

## **Teachers and the Deaf Student**

Many teachers are not prepared to deal with cultural diversity as defined by a population of deaf people. Diversity as we see it in programs for deaf children is limited to degrees of hearing loss or to the differences in levels of language development. To some extent, these are manageable traits. We deal with the hearing loss through the provision of hearing aids, speech training, sign language, and other accommodations. Language development is also our forte as we weigh the advantages of traditional and whole language instructions, specifically designed reading materials, and in general reach out to a long list of resources addressing the language development of deaf children.

But Deaf culture? What do we do now? Is that something that we as teachers need to be concerned about if we are to be effective? What about ASL? After years of an English dominated curriculum, is there a need to change now? At least at the elementary and secondary levels the law says we do. Public Law 94-142 and the 1990 amendments to the act require that educational services be culturally appropriate for students with disabilities. There is, however, no legal definition of cultural appropriateness (Grossman, 1995). Each state and even each school system is allowed to design effective instructional approaches that are culturally appropriate. But what's effective with one group might not be effective with another group of children (Grossman, 1995).

Still there is a sense of urgency in the field as there is a growing tide of linguistic strife in schools where the instructional use of sign language dominates. The Deaf community and others are demanding that ASL be an option in schools (Stewart, 1993). More and more deaf students feel alienated in learning environments where English is the only language to which they are exposed. They perceive their teachers as having a lack of respect for their language and hence for their culture. They are waiting for teachers to respond to the linguistic and cultural diversity of their classrooms.

## **Opening the Doors for Deaf Culture in the Classroom**

Below are some steps that teachers can take to become more sensitive to multicultural makeup of their classrooms. The emphasis in this section is on becoming sensitive to Deaf culture and its linguistic anchor, ASL.

- Facilitate open discussions of Deaf culture and ASL. There is no need for teachers to be on the defensive or to feel that they are inadequate if they lack knowledge about Deaf culture. Acknowledging the presence of Deaf culture and going on with the business of teaching is a superior approach to denying its presence. But teachers must actively pursue more knowledge about this unique culture and discussing it with their students and colleagues is one way of doing this. Discussions should aim to (a) increase understanding of cultural characteristics such as the role of ASL community and in the school, the process by which deaf people are socialized into the Deaf community (e.g., Padden & Humphries, 1988; Stewart, 1991), Deaf cultural values and how they relate to the values of society in general, (b) decrease prejudices through mutual respect for differences, and (c) learn how knowledge of Deaf culture and ASL can improve

instructional effectiveness. During discussions, participants should be encouraged to look for parallels between cultures while de-emphasizing the notion that one culture is superior to another.

- Actively incorporate Deaf culture into the classroom. Cultural pluralism is not new as efforts have been made to include cultural aspects associated with African American, Hispanic, Native American and other cultures into the curriculum. Discussions of culture should avoid treating a specific culture as a special topic opting instead for ongoing discussions of cultural characteristics and issues throughout the curriculum. This is not to suggest that certain aspects of the curriculum must be brushed aside to make room for Deaf culture. Nor does it mean that teachers must become experts overnight on Deaf culture and attain immediate fluency in the use of ASL. No one believes this can happen but respect for Deaf culture can happen and it should happen quickly. Aspects of Deaf culture that can be incorporated at a post-secondary level include Deaf folklore, story-telling in ASL and on videotapes as opposed to English and print, information about Deaf leaders, and deaf students' self-analysis of their position in various sociocultural contexts. Incorporating Deaf culture also means using Deaf professionals in all aspects of education and not simply as guest speakers.
- Recognize individuality. Let a deaf person define who she or he is. Let's step beyond the deceit engendered by stereotyping. Educators are prone to judge their students and prescribe remedies for what they perceive to be shortcomings in a deaf person based on global assessment of deaf people in general.
- Encourage collaboration among deaf and non-deaf teachers in academic work. A teacher can only go so far. Infusion of multicultural content into the curriculum is only one component of a total approach to appreciating cultural diversity. The purpose of bringing deaf and non-deaf teachers together is to encourage a mutual exchanging of information. The spotlight is not on the deaf teacher, it is on knowledge and skills that can be used to improve teaching.

### **Teaching Without Demons**

In the education of deaf students at the postsecondary level most teachers are non-deaf; they have normal hearing. While we wish that this fact would not make any difference in the way a person teaches, we know too well that for some people it does (Stewart & Donald, 1984). This truth is revealed in many ways in teachers who say that they are skeptical about the value of learning about Deaf culture. They perceive such learning as contributing little or no benefit to their teaching. It is revealed in teachers who are adamant that they could never learn ASL no matter how long they were to study it. They persist in teaching as usual with little regard to the effectiveness of their language and communication behavior. It is revealed in teachers who are fearful of Deaf people assuming too large of a role in the education of deaf students. They cling to a business as usual approach so as to minimize the challenges to their authoritative knowledge of how deaf people can best be taught.

But Deaf instructors are not immune from criticism. Being Deaf and fluent in ASL is no guarantee of effective teaching in the same manner that a non-deaf teacher is not necessarily a good teacher of non-deaf children. All teachers must reflect upon their teaching, dealing with their weaknesses and

building upon their strengths. Reflection should center on prejudices and insecurities, goals and support. It should be guided by questions with answers that only the teacher would know. Do you think you can make a positive difference in a deaf student's learning? Do you think learning about Deaf culture and ASL will require too much of your time? Do you treat your colleagues, deaf and non-deaf, as equals? Such self-reflections will help teachers rid themselves of those mental demons that plague their efforts to teach effectively.

## **Conclusion**

If we are to accept diversity in the way we educate deaf students then we must not make our understanding of diversity predicated on special events. Postsecondary teaching must refrain from the grade school approach to learning about diversity with such mundane efforts as a celebration of famous deaf people. nor can efforts toward cultural appreciation be satisfied with an annual guest appearance in classrooms by a Deaf storyteller. The acquisition of knowledge and skills relating to Deaf culture and ASL demands an ongoing commitment from those instructors who teach deaf people. Therefore, it is imperative that we become proactive in our efforts to bring cultural and linguistic aspects of the Deaf community into our postsecondary institutions. This effort must eventually become a part of the norm for postsecondary teachers.

## **References**

- Bowe, F. (1971). Non-white deaf persons: Educational, psychological, and occupational considerations. American Annals of the Deaf, 116, 357-361.
- Commission on Education of the Deaf. (1988). Toward equality: Education of the deaf. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Fischgrund, J. & Akamatsu, C. T. (1993). Rethinking the education of ethnic/multicultural deaf people: Stretching the boundaries. In K. Christensen & G. Delgado (Eds.), Multicultural issues in deafness (pp. 169-178). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Grossman, G. (1995). Special education in a diverse society. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Lucas, C. (Ed.). (1989). The sociolinguistics of the deaf community. New York: Academic.
- Nash, K. (1991). Programs and services for the postsecondary deaf: Strategic planning considerations for the 1990's. Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, 25(2), 29-35.
- Padden, C. & Humphries, T. (1988). Deaf in America: Voices from a culture. Cambridge, MA: Harvard, University.
- Schein, J. (1989). At home among strangers. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University.
- Schroedel, J. & Ashmore, D. (1992). Developing future priorities for postsecondary education of deaf and hard-of-hearing students: A summary of key topics. In D. Ashmore & W. Barnes (Eds.),

Proceedings of the fifth biennial regional conference on postsecondary education for deaf and hard-of-hearing persons. (pp. 19-35). Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee, Postsecondary Education Consortium.

Stewart, D. (1991). Deaf sport: The impact of sports within the Deaf community. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University.

Stewart, D. (1993). Bi-Bi to MCE? American Annals of the Deaf, 138, 331-337.

Stewart, D. & Donald, M. (1984). Deaf teachers to teach deaf students. Education Canada, 24, 16-21.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The term “deaf “ is used in a generic sense to include hard of hearing and Deaf persons.

<sup>2</sup> ASL stands for American Sign Language, the recognized language of Deaf communities in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Until ASL became popularized in the Deaf community, Deaf people would refer to their language as Deaf language or Deaf signs.

<sup>4</sup> For in depth exploration of the Deaf community and American Sign Language, see, for example, Lucas, 1989; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Schein, 1989; and Stewart, 1991.