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# Negotiation of Deaf Culture: Alternative Realities in the Classroom

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# Negotiation of Deaf Culture: Alternative Realities in the Classroom

## **Abstract**

In an increasingly globalized world, family members of deaf individuals increasingly are faced with a dilemma between identification with Deaf culture or pursuing biomedical intervention in order help deaf children hear sounds artificially. The importance of this dilemma is critical at the earliest age of deaf individuals' lives, not only in early childhood, but in their school career as well. This poster attempts to not only inform about this issue, but argues for the expansion of programs at the school district level to offer equal resources and information about both options for families with deaf individuals. In so doing, it utilizes Deaf cultural media, historical and anthropological perspectives, and new research to challenge how educators view deafness and Deaf individuals.

## **Keywords**

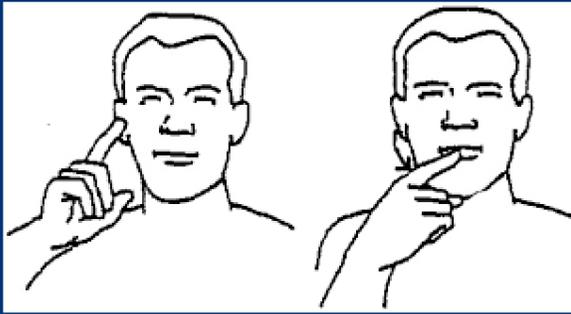
Deaf culture, classroom accommodation, cultural identity

## **Disciplines**

Accessibility | Disability and Equity in Education | Educational Methods | Gifted Education | Special Education and Teaching

## **Comments**

This paper was written for *EDUC 340: Teaching Students with Diverse Needs*, Fall 2014.



# Negotiation of Deaf Culture: Alternative Realities in the Classroom

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COLLEGE

## The Issue

- Deaf Culture has at times been repressed by an Oralist school of thought since the inception of modern public schooling in the United States.
- For educators, a dilemma exists whether or not to support deaf students identification with Deaf culture and sign language or medical implants that allow for artificial hearing.
- In public schooling, deaf students are often advised to opt for medical implants that allow for artificial simulation of hearing rather than learning American Sign Language (ASL). This way, they can be mainstreamed into the general education population.
- Those who embrace deaf culture fear that this pattern threatens the integrity of the cultural Deaf community. They argue that Deafness must be viewed in schools as a cultural minority worth protecting, rather than a disorder in need of a cure.



## Historical Timeline

- 1817:** First Permanent Deaf School in United States; the development of a Deaf community first found in American historical record
- 1843:** Horace Mann introduces Prussian school systems as part of reform. Includes advocating for a European 'oral' method for teaching deaf students
- 1880:** Milan Conference, successful campaign of oralist Alexander Graham Bell marks dominance of oral instruction for remainder of century
- 1970's:** Civil Rights Movement inspires revival of Deaf Culture, re-sparking debate for remainder of 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By 1980's, Deaf Culture gains wide-spread acceptance
- 2001:** No Child Left Behind passed. Oral instruction gains popularity as high stakes standardized testing becomes the norm and advances in cochlear implants increased their practicality

## Why is Deafness a 'Culture'?

- Common experience of being deaf and sharing a common language of American Sign Language (ASL) considered by many to be a formal "ethnicity." (Richardson, 2014)
- To be clear, only deaf individuals who communicate in ASL are considered to be culturally Deaf. It is this distinction that separates the proper noun from the adjective
- Hearing majority projects an identity (of disability) onto Deaf community, much like a migrant minority might be labeled automatically by white majority
- Term, "Audism," much like racism or sexism has been used by the Deaf community to describe discrimination and hearing people's superiority complex
- Deaf community views itself as a cultural minority, rather than a classification of the disabled or association with being handicapped
- Growing corpus of shared literature, symbology, and media forms a cultural forum of expression

## Deafness in Numerical Context

- 1 in 1,000 babies are born deaf in the United States (Walker, 2008)
- 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Richardson, 2014)
- 40% of deaf and hard of hearing students are from diverse ethnic cultures (Fletcher-Carter, 2010)
- This means that such transcultural students bring two diverse cultures to the classroom: Deaf and an additional national culture.
- The last Federal Census that accounted for the Deaf community was in 1930. Current figures of 10 million in the United States are only estimates (Richardson, 2014)

## Cochlear Implants: A Dilemma



*"To someone who has been deaf their entire lives the impact of this device is unimaginable. Just imagine not being able to hear all the sounds that we hear every day like the rustling of leaves and distant cars." –Anonymous\**

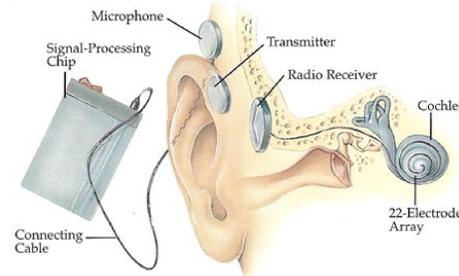
•Cochlear Implant is any device that circumvents damaged parts of the ear and stimulates the auditory nerve directly, thus making it possible for sound to be processed by the brain.

- Is NOT a cure for deafness, not guarantee of English comprehension
- Increasingly preferred as substitute for American Sign Language (ASL) for children born deaf.

•Parental/Educators' Dilemma: Inserting a cochlear implant at birth robs deaf individuals of the opportunity to choose to identify with Deaf culture, which is experienced through ASL.

•On the other hand, cochlear implants remove the need for ASL interpreters in deaf individuals daily routines, and allows deaf students to remain in general education classrooms

•Increase in affordability makes implants a realistic possibility for more families with deaf individuals.



\*From: <http://blog.lib.umn.edu/farre212/f11psy1001ds1415/2011/10/the-cochlear-implant-a-modern-miracle.html>

## Hearing vs. Deaf Worlds

*"This [paradox of the Deaf] is rather contradictory because since we have established a notion that difference exists, by definition, those who are different are disqualified from passing comment on what is normal – they have not experienced it . . . However, at the same time it is possible to 'overcome' the difficulty or to function 'despite' the difficulty." –Pullen (1988)*

•Facilities or infrastructure for supporting American Sign Language (ASL) must compete with pressure from Hearing World for moving towards cochlear implants (See above).

•Fundamentally different realities about the condition of deafness exist between the Hearing and Deaf cultural worlds on whether or not deafness is a disability, part of debate in education for as long as 1800's (See 'Historical Timeline')



## Deaf Cultural Pride

### "Deafness is not a Disability"



*"The deaf do not believe themselves to be disabled and do not perceive their existence as disabled persons do . . . The deaf welcome deaf spouses, family, friends, and value their differences from hearing society." – Richardson (2014)*

•Parents with deaf children must make a decision to except one of two seemingly contradictory realities

- Either their child is disabled and needs medical intervention, or he/she needs to be acculturated to the ethnically Deaf language (ASL) and culture

•Question of identity for deaf student/individual, who makes such a decision?

•How deaf students communicate becomes a cultural question for deaf students and individuals (English versus ASL)

•Deaf culture blended with national identities, which demands transcultural shifts in identity for deaf and hearing individuals who learn ASL



## Stereotyping the Deaf



•Deaf community faces discrimination from hearing community (Audism)

•Resisting projection of identity by hearing world requires constant dialog

•Many organizations that advocate for the Deaf community are run by hearing leadership.

- Deaf community relies on interpreters for interacting with hearing world not fluent in American Sign Language (ASL)

•English proficiency historically less than average hearing population

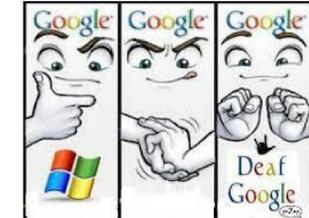
•Some don't have resources because of socio-economic status to be influential in policy-making process

•Parallel society established by Deaf community isolated from dialog with hearing majority

•Solution: Bilingual society in English and ASL for hearing and deaf communities

•Historical precedent: population of Martha's Vineyard once had large deaf community during 1870's. Deaf individuals were integrated into the local agrarian economy by use of ASL by general townspeople. Fell out of use during rise of oralist school of thought. (Pullen, 1988)

## ASL as a Cultural Phenomenon



*"If French is the language of lovers and German the language of commerce, then perhaps sign [ASL] is the language of humans connecting. You can't sign to someone if you're standing next to that person. . . so that you can take in the entirety of the person." –Walker (2008)*

•American Sign Language (ASL) is the preferred language of the Deaf community

•Visual-spatial signing language using both facial expressions and hand signing, rather than tying symbols to English phonics

•Relates a story in non-linear and theatric manner

•ASL represents different understanding of world, in images rather than words

## Classroom Accommodations

•Culturally Deaf Methods

•Expansion of Deaf school system and Deaf cultural organizations

•Personal Cultural Frameworks: negotiation of educator, deaf student, and 'cultural broker' who can bridge Deaf and national cultures . The goal of these negotiations is to map out clashing values and cultural issues that a Deaf student encounters in a general education classroom and design accommodations for them. (Fletcher-Carter, 2010)

•Provide information, resources, and support to parents of deaf students to help families make informed decisions about whether or not to implant their child with medical intervention or embrace Deaf culture.

•Include opportunities for Deaf students to express themselves with ASL in the classroom, including technological support.

•Societal Methods

•Increased financing for professional interpreters for Deaf students in general education schools

•Mandate ASL classes in all general education classes, in order to foster a social bilingualism (See 'Stereotyping the Deaf')

•Cochlear Implants remain a valid method of accommodating total hearing loss for deaf individual

## Implications

•Dilemma of Deaf Culture vs. Medical Intervention is omnipresent, including in public schooling environment

•Critical that families with deaf students be provided with the ability to make informed decision about how to proceed with the development of their child's communication skills.

•Both ASL based Deaf culture and cochlear implants need to be viewed as equally valid options for accommodating deaf students in the classroom.

•Deaf culture offers deaf students access to a community and self-worth that implants cannot provide through self-identification and networking with a larger community.

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