Negotiation of Deaf Culture: Alternative Realities in the Classroom

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Abstract
In a 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
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Negotiation of Deaf Culture: Alternative Realities in the Classroom

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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 reality, deaf students are often advised to opt for medical implants that allow for artificial stimulation 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 paradigm 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.

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.

Do NOT a cure for deafness, not guarantee of English comprehension

Increasingly preferred as substitute for American Sign Language (ASL) for children born deaf.

Parental/Educator Dilemma: Inventing a cochlear implant at birth risks 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 implant a realistic possibility for more families with deaf individuals.

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 aspuses, 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 ethnocny 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.

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 human 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 (2005)

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 thematic manner

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

Why is Deafness a ‘Culture’?

Common experience of being deaf and sharing a common language of American Sign Language (ASL) is 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 minority projects an identity (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 in association with being handicapped

Closed corpus of shared literature, symbology, and media forms a cultural forum of expression

Deafness in Numerical Context

• In 1.100 babies are born deaf in the United States (Walker, 2008)

• 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Richardson, 2014)

• 40% of deaf and hard of hearing students are from diverse ethnic cultures (Fletcher-Carrat, 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)

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 in function ‘destitute’ the difficulty.”—Pulman (1988)

• Facilitates 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 Worlds on whether or not deafness is a disability, part of debate in education for as long as 1800s (See Historical Timeline).

Hearing as a Dilemma

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

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

ASL as a Cultural Phenomenon

Deaf students and individuals (English versus ASL)

“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 aspuses, family, friends, and value their differences from hearing society.”—Richardson (2014)

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Classroom Accommodations

Culturally Deaf Methods

• Expansion of Deaf school system and Deaf cultural organizations

• Personal Cultural Frameworks: negotiation of education, 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-Carrat, 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.

Social Methods

• Increased hearing 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

Deafness of Cultural Deaf vs. Medical Intervention is omnipresent, including in public schooling environments

Cultural that families with deaf students be provided with the ability to make informed decisions about how to proceed with the development of their children’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.

References


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