

A Note from the President

By Samuel J. Supalla



Is the Signed Language Interpreter Delivery System Robbing Deaf People?

I chose the title of this President's Note decidedly, posing a question to help us all think more critically. I recently became aware of a particular crisis when I attended the Articulating Deaf Experiences conference on November 6th – 9th in Rochester, New York. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) sponsored the event, and there I learned about a slow decline in student applications and enrollment at this institution. This trend is confirmed over the last several years according to the [NTID Annual Report](#), as written in 2018 as part of meeting the Education of the Deaf Act's requirement. As we all know, schools for the deaf around the country have experienced dramatic student enrollment declines with some closing down. Over 80% of all deaf students in the United States are currently placed in a regular public school for their education. One scholar wrote that signed language interpreting has become synonymous with integration. Interpreted education has become a powerful force all of its own. This explains, in large part, what is happening in American society right now.

Due to policy constraints, I see great pressure for deaf students from Kindergarten through 12th grade to study and learn alongside non-disabled students who can hear and speak. Deaf students are provided with signed language interpreting services as if this will help make 'integration' work for this population. I cannot help but scratch my head over the fact that hearing students who only know Spanish would *not* be provided interpreters, for example. These students will need to learn English as a second language and participate in typical educational programming. The fact that deaf students do not enjoy access to English suggests a different course for policy. This is especially true concerning how educators can best address deaf students' needs as signers. The importance of signing schools cannot be further emphasized. Included here is the provision of a special reading methodology that will help deaf students become fluent readers of English as a second language.

The widespread practice of providing signed language interpreting services for deaf students is a poorly conceived notion. It does not matter if educational interpreters use ASL and 'help' deaf students with communication needs, when the speaking schools themselves remain restrictive through their curriculum and teaching practices. I understand that deaf students may be provided with itinerant teachers of the deaf if needed, but that is not the appropriate way of addressing their educational needs.

Deaf people and their allies in the hearing society need to take the term 'integration' back and define what it truly means for deaf students. The current definition for integration applies to people who can hear only. Deaf students continue to be excluded regardless of the fact that they may be present in a regular public school. Special education deserves a hard look at its conceptualization of education for students with disabilities and needs for alignment with the Education of the Deaf Act. Reframing deaf education into signed language education is an important course of action to undertake. This will help elevate the educational role of ASL as it holds the key to deaf students' cognition for learning and measurement purposes, which includes the creation of a normatively rare database.

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On the bright side, some scholars have proposed innovative practices for how deaf students should be educated properly and effectively. Theoretical considerations are also getting better and stronger all the time. Providing directions for policy is of urgency. As President, I find it timely to form a committee and recruit scholars to help write a white paper on what education should look like for deaf students. I will do just that in the months to come. Please feel free to read the following highly recommended articles that have helped shaped my President's Note writing:

[Short-term Memory Span: Insights from Sign Language](#) by Mrim Boutla, Ted Supalla, Elissa Newport, and Daphne Bavelier (2004)

[The Power of Spoken Language in Schools and Deaf Students Who Sign](#) by Jody Cripps and Samuel Supalla (2012)

[Literacy and Linguistic Development in Bilingual Deaf Children: Implications of the “And” for Phonological Processing](#) by Lynn McQuarrie and Rauno Parrila (2014)

[The Expansion of Sign Language Education](#) by Carol Padden (2003)

[Why Doesn't Everyone Here Speak Sign Language? Questions of Language Policy, Ideology, and Economics](#) by Jennifer Rayman (2009)

[Equity in Education: Signed Language and the Courts](#) by Kristin Snoddon (2009)

[A Sketch on Reading Methodology for Deaf Children](#) by Samuel Supalla (2017, pp. 35 – 55)

[Reading, Special Education, and Deaf Children](#) by Samuel Supalla and Andrew Byrne (2018, pp. 36 – 53)



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