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Academic Rigor

By James E. Tucker

The field of K-12 deaf education today continues to be fractured by ideological camps. A newcomer to the field quickly learns that the controversies related to language, communication, and instructional approaches continue to rage after almost 200 years of contentious debate. Much attention is given to auditory and speech development as well as sign language development. Emphasizing academic rigor is often lost in this fog of polemic war between dueling philosophies. Also missing is the importance of the students' attainment of linguistic, cognitive, and social competence.

When deaf education is mentioned, there is too much emphasis on *deaf* and not enough emphasis on *education*. Deaf and hard of hearing students everywhere deserve academic rigor. They deserve demanding academic instruction that leads to fluency in English reading and writing as well as acquired knowledge of mathematics, sciences, and social studies.

Googling "deaf education" brings out much material related to audiology, English speech and language, American Sign Language, hearing levels, cochlear implants, dormitories, and 'manualism vs. oralism.' Connecting deaf students to academic rigor seems a rare concept in the field of deaf education and on the Internet. When the subject of curriculum comes up, often the curriculum is described as being 'adapted' for deaf students. 'Adapt' is a euphemism for 'watered down curricula.'

No wonder many deaf students continue to be shortchanged. If their respective academic programs do not focus on or demand academic rigor, then deaf students will continue to flounder. Students everywhere, whether they are deaf or hearing, deserve teachers who know their content area and are passionate about teaching. Students also deserve to be nurtured, inspired, and challenged by their teachers.

The field of deaf education is approaching its 200th anniversary in the Western

Above and right: Students need to read and write extensively and daily from a young age and all through school.

Photos by John T. Consoli



Hemisphere. The American School for the Deaf was established in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817, and from this first school the field grew into a national system of schools for the deaf and public school programs. After almost 200 years, one would believe that the field should have already perfected the instruction of students who happen to be deaf or hard of hearing. However, achievement test scores, by and large, still show deaf students lagging behind their hearing peers.

Success stories of deaf individuals are plenty. There are deaf doctors, lawyers, engineers, filmmakers, carpenters, computer programmers, writers, teachers, and entrepreneurs. If there are so many success stories, then why do we have too many students reading and writing below grade level? Can the field of deaf education work together to increase academic rigor for all students?

The path to academic rigor begins with the child's parents and the quality of resources and support available to the family from early on. First, early language acquisition and family involvement are a must for infants and toddlers. Children need to meet cognitive and language benchmarks throughout the first five years of their lives. High expectations for the child's academic achievement is the next step in pursuing academic rigor. And, finally, a quality curriculum. Students need to read and read and read. There

is no substitute for reading. Students need to write and write and write. There is no substitute for writing. Interacting daily with the English text is a must, even more so for deaf students.

If pre-kindergarten students are delayed in language fluency or have cognitive delays, will they be able to handle academic rigor as they progress through their elementary years and beyond? The field must believe they can catch up with specialized instruction and intervention, hard work, and with full, clear, and direct linguistic access to academic instruction.

The State of Maryland and states across the nation have adopted the Common Core State Standards. This has raised the bar for academic rigor for all students, including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Young students are naturally curious about the world around them, and it is up to parents and teachers to work together to cultivate this curiosity into a lifetime quest for knowledge in all academic disciplines.

Academic rigor is the way. The only way.

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KDES Welcomes OSERS Assistant Secretary Michael Yudin

On January 7, 2014, the Clerc Center hosted a visit from Michael Yudin, assistant secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) at the U.S. Department of Education. Accompanying him were staff members Annette Reichman, with the Office of Special Institutions, and Liz Shook, with the Office of Planning and Policy.

Yudin was appointed by President Barack Obama. In his position, he is responsible for the oversight of Gallaudet University and all of its programs, including the Clerc Center and its demonstration schools. His office also has oversight responsibilities over the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and various special education programs and rehabilitative services throughout the country.

Yudin spent the entire morning touring classrooms at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) and meeting with students and teachers. The highlights of his visit included:

- observation of the Early Childhood Education programs;
- visits to the kindergarten, first, and second grade classes, during which Yudin observed American Sign Language and English literacy lessons and viewed student artwork;
- interaction with students and teachers in grades three through five; and
- lunch and conversation with middle school students in the KDES cafeteria.

Yudin praised the work and dedication he observed. Prior to his departure, he wrote “Always Aim High!” on an I Love You-shaped leaf and posted it to the “AIM HIGH tree” bulletin board near the KDES front entrance. The mark he left on the bulletin board represents the impression the Clerc Center made on him and his staff.

Senator Harkin Visits the Clerc Center for the 24th Jr. NAD Biennial Conference

In November of 2013, the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) hosted approximately 100 students from 26 schools and programs for deaf and hard of hearing students from throughout the country. They came to Washington, D.C., to participate in the 24th biennial conference of the Junior National Association of the Deaf (Jr. NAD).

The conference exposed the delegates to different aspects of the Washington, D.C., politics and advocacy scene. One of the highlights included a legislative day on Capitol Hill and an opportunity to meet and have a Question and Answer session with the champion of the Americans with Disabilities Act legislation, Senator Tom Harkin from Iowa.

Harkin met with the conference participants for the hour-long Question and Answer session. When one of the students asked Harkin who his role model was, he replied that it was his deaf

brother, Frank, who fought all his life to be independent. He remembered Frank saying, “How come because I am deaf, people think they need to tell me what to do? I want to decide for myself.”

Harkin encouraged the delegates to put their newly learned advocacy skills to work. He urged them not only to support the Cinema Act but also to encourage their parents and friends to contact their legislators about the United States joining the 130 other countries that have already ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities treaty.

“The Jr. NAD conference was a wonderful experience. I became more aware of my potential to bring change to the Deaf community through my chapter and collaborate with other individuals with the drive to make improvements for the betterment of all deaf people,” said MSSD observer Emmanuel Njoku, who emceed the Question and Answer session.

The legislative day began with a presentation held in the Gold Room in the Rayburn



House Office Building. NAD president Chris Wagner shared with the delegates a history of the Jr. NAD and explained how its chapters are organized and run. He made a strong plea to the delegates to strengthen the participation of deaf and hard of hearing students in the work of the Jr. NAD and to help build up the number of chapters.

Claudia Gordon, who is deaf a trustee at Gallaudet University, and a former associate director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, told stories about how she had to advocate for herself as a student at Howard University to have interpreter access to University-sponsored activities and not just in the classrooms.

Following the presentations, the delegates walked across the Capitol Hill grounds to the Hart Senate Office Building. Once there, they divided up into state groups and visited the offices of their state senators to meet with legislative aides to share their advocacy for the Cinema Act.

Zachary Bridgett, president of the MSSD Jr. NAD chapter, led one of the groups at a meeting with Maryland senator Ben Cardin's chief counsel, William Van Horne, to discuss the Cinema Act proposed by NAD. The students shared with Van Horne their experiences with movie theater captioning devices and why they thought that captioning on the screen was the more accessible and user-friendly option.

The Florida School for the Deaf and the Blind will host the next Jr. NAD conference in 2015.



Clerc Center Strategic Plan 2020 Provides Road Map for Next Five Years

In the spring of 2014, the Clerc Center unveiled the national service portion of its new strategic plan which will guide its work through the year 2020. Providing the foundation of this strategic plan are these identified three priority areas:

- Professional development
- Family-school/agency partnerships
- Collaboration

Those priorities were identified during the Clerc Center's National Priority Setting Meeting which took place in February of 2013 in Washington, D.C. At this meeting, a diverse group of 23 professionals and parents from across the country convened for two days and discussed challenges that, if addressed by the Clerc Center, would have a positive impact on the success of current and future generations of deaf and hard of hearing children.

Each of the three priority areas of the Clerc Center Strategic Plan 2020 (CCSP 2020) contains objectives and corresponding strategies that were based on data and findings from a number of national sources. These included dialogue during the National Priority Setting Meeting; collection and analysis of public input from 2010-2012; evaluation feedback on select trainings and products; and current research, practice, and resources in the priority areas. These strategies were carefully selected based on their potential impact in each priority area.

"By design, the CCSP 2020 addresses priorities that are rooted in extensive public input," said Ed Bosso, vice president of the Clerc Center. "I believe the strategies contained within the CCSP 2020 will have a positive impact on the families, professionals, and ultimately the deaf and hard of hearing students we serve."

To learn more about the CCSP 2020, visit www.gallaudet.edu/clerc_center/strategicplan.