

September 2020

Reverse Integration: Centering Deaf Children to Enrich Everyone

Bryan K. Eldredge
Utah Valley University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/saslj>



Part of the [American Sign Language Commons](#), and the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eldredge, Bryan K. (2020) "Reverse Integration: Centering Deaf Children to Enrich Everyone," *Society for American Sign Language Journal*: Vol. 4 : No. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/saslj/vol4/iss2/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Society for American Sign Language Journal by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

A commentary on Supalla et al., (2012) article, “American Sign Language for Everyone”

Reverse Integration: Centering Deaf Children to Enrich Everyone

Bryan K. Eldredge
Utah Valley University

Thirty-odd years ago, I first met a few culturally deaf persons, and my life took a dramatic turn. I ended up acquiring American Sign Language (ASL), marrying a deaf woman, working as an interpreter, and then becoming a university professor engaged in a lifelong endeavor to better understand humanity through the study of deaf people. From my encounters with deaf people, I made two distinct observations: first, deaf people’s world differed from mine in subtle but significant ways. The second and more profound observation was that deaf people’s view of themselves was different than I had imagined possible. Previously, I held the common assumption of deaf people as “broken” hearing people. Seeing that they saw themselves as normal made me wonder how my own experiences generated my worldview and ask myriad other questions about the limits of my imagination.

It is somewhat ironic that it is the potential to influence hearing people like me that makes “American Sign Language for Everyone: Considerations for Universal Design and Deaf Youth Identity” by Supalla et al. (2012) so powerful. It is a call for deaf education reform and for the language rights of deaf students, but it uniquely situates that reform in reframing deaf students from outsiders, mainstreamed into hearing classrooms with or without interpreters, “to champions of language *that potentially benefits all of greater society to which they belong*” (Supalla et al., 2012, p. 2; emphasis added).

The authors’ starting point is that the special education model cannot provide an environment that allows deaf students to gain English literacy in the way that is most efficient; specifically, deaf students best master English literacy when ASL is the language of instruction (Chamberlain & Mayberry, 2000). Deaf students are forever peripheral in hearing classrooms because reading instruction there assumes that students can hear (p. 4). Given this, the authors ask:

Should Western countries advocate *inclusion* whereby all individuals learn how to sign and it is no longer confined to special education to what is currently considered by society as a *disability* group? (p. 2; emphasis in original)

Supalla et al. conclude that universal design (UD) provides a new paradigm that will prioritize sign-language proliferation (p. 3). The application of UD here produces a language-rich environment for deaf students on the promise that ASL benefits *both deaf and hearing children beyond the classroom*.

This opening of signing environments to deaf children is critical to deaf studies because “[t]he fight for bilingual education has been central to Deaf activism from the 1980s to the present” (Bauman, 2008, p. 17). In its early stages, deaf studies sought to prove the legitimacy of ASL and the culture of the people who used it. Having accomplished that, deaf studies had to consider in what ways it was still relevant. Deaf people have a language and a culture, but that makes them just like lots of other groups (Humphries, 2008). The second wave of research focused on variation and variable power relations within the deaf community, and the field has now moved on to ask “what it is about Deaf Culture that is valuable to human diversity” (Bauman, 2008, p. 3).

Supalla et al.’s article is valuable to society generally because it shows how language ideologies and the policies that they engender sustain power differentials. The work’s great contribution is its presentation of a way around the incompatibility of the language ideologies that educational legislation and policy embody with deaf people’s own ideologies. The authors identify and explain the incompatibility of special education and the needs of deaf children and presents UD as a viable resolution. They point out that “[i]ndividualization serves as a hallmark of special education” (Supalla et al., 2012, p. 4) and that this essential design feature puts special education at odds with deaf students’ needs. Deaf students need signing to be central rather than peripheral. Special education’s best attempts to integrate deaf students via interpretation, note taking, and similar services cannot constitute authentic modes of communication. Integration’s denial of authentic forms of social discourse for deaf students amounts to systematic discrimination, the exact opposite of what integration hopes to achieve.

Yet putting deaf students together smacks of segregation and is antithetical to integration, which is taken as an *a priori* good (de Meulder & Haualand, 2019). In response, Supalla et al. use UD to reconceptualize integration as “conventional integration” (p. 5), to be contrasted with what they term “reverse integration.” This proposal is transformative.

In reverse integration, hearing children integrate into schools for the deaf, where ASL is the primary language. The authors explain:

UD provides an opportunity to expand our current paradigm of inclusion or integration to be one where deaf students are at the center of their educational environment along with their hearing peers (and the hearing students are enriched in the process along with their deaf peers). (p. 5)

The authors note examples prior to the 2012 publication where some charter schools for deaf students, Gallaudet University, and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf have all admitted hearing students. Since then, some public schools have experimented with the notion. The Utah Schools for the Deaf have allowed some hearing children to attend their preschool.¹ Associate Superintendent for the Deaf Michelle Tanner notes that, in a classic irony, parents of hearing children are lined up to get their kids into the program, while parents of deaf children are reticent (M. Tanner, October 26, 2020).

Reverse integration is significant to deaf studies because it brings together theoretical and pragmatic considerations. Sign-language spread has long been a theoretical deaf-world aim, but it is pragmatically difficult outside the few shared-signing communities where deafness is unusually common. Using UD to institute reverse integration jumps the track from segregation's one-way benefits—that is, deaf children learn English best through ASL—to a two-way argument: Hearing *and* deaf children benefit from learning together in ASL.

Deaf children benefit from a curriculum that places them and their language in a central position, using it to teach literacy. An ASL-centered curriculum promises what all true education (as opposed to rehabilitation) offers: literacy, greater access to society, better employment opportunities, and a voice in society.

Immersing hearing children in ASL via reverse integration promises additional benefits to deaf populations. Most obviously, ASL will become widespread in the community, used by retail workers, potential employers, educators, health professionals, and so forth. Deaf people will move more easily in the community at large and will face less discrimination, an effect already seen to a degree when the explosion of ASL classes in the U.S. and Canada produced more hearing signers (p. 7). Additionally, increased enrollments in signing schools will open teaching positions to deaf adults who can serve as language models.

Reverse integration becomes practical through the application of UD principles because it provides a way to respect integrationist values. Indeed, reverse integration closely mirrors the dual language immersion (DLI) programs that place native English speakers into K–12 schools using another language (Spanish, Chinese, Russian, etc.) as the primary language of instruction. Reverse integration offers the same value as DLI programs, including cognitive, social, and economic gains, but with ASL, the benefits can be greater.

In learning a signed language, students get medium-specific benefits. Supalla et al. cite the example of fishermen from Martha's Vineyard who used signing to communicate from boat to boat, where spoken language was inaudible. Other hearing people find the signing medium valuable too. Australian aborigines sign in a variety of settings, including while hunting, where speech is taboo; during initiations; in times of mourning; and in situations where evil spirits might overhear speech (Power, 2013). And hearing parents who use baby sign with their infants find it indispensable for chastising children discretely, as in church and behind the gaze of others.

Supalla et al. also note that hearing students immersed in ASL may better adjust to hearing loss common with aging (p. 7). I suggest another practical benefit of ASL over other languages. Inevitably, some of these students will produce deaf children. At least four of my former ASL students had deaf babies. When they signed up for ASL, they had no idea that they were preparing homes for the next generation of deaf children.

Clearly, reverse integration offers benefits to hearing students. But perhaps the greatest benefit from the creation of a shared signing space can be enjoyed by everyone in a society. Supalla et al. explain:

If hearing students learn ASL in schools, through increased natural interaction with their deaf peers, deaf students would more likely feel that they are equal to their hearing counterparts. Hearing students learning ASL in school serves as an equalizer and parallels deaf students learning English through the school system. (p. 8)

A society that more fully includes all of its members holds promise for all.

¹ Utah law does not allow them to attend K–12 classes.

Kusters (2014) notes that the mixture of languages used in shared-signing communities, such as Adamorobe, Ghana, constitute a form of deaf gain, contributing to human diversity and to the diversity among human communities. Bauman and Murray (2014) refer to this kind of deaf gain as “deaf contribute” (p. xxviii). Supalla et al.’s reverse integration model promises deaf gain of this sort by creating a unique form of shared-signing communities, further adding to the diversity of human communities. But it simultaneously offers a different type of deaf gain that benefits individuals. Bauman and Murray refer to this individual deaf gain as “benefit” (p. xxiv). Signing schools create a nexus where each group’s bilingual needs are met: Deaf children get access to English literacy, and hearing children get a second language and a chance to see the potential for ways of being they have never imagined, a mixture of *contribute* and *benefit*.

Of shared-signing communities, Kusters notes, “What sets these communities apart is that deafness and deaf people are inherent in the habitus of these communities, the shared sign language part of their linguistic mosaics” (2014, p. 301). It was a lack of these elements in my own habitus that made my introduction to deaf people so startling. Reverse integration aims to avoid a spoken-language-centered habitus like mine by creating shared-signing communities full of authentic communication that morphs from personal benefit to societal betterment.

References

- Bauman, H-D (Ed.). (2008). *Open your eyes: Deaf studies talking*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Bauman, H-D, & Murray, J. J. (2014). *Deaf gain: Raising the stakes for human diversity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Chamberlain, C., & Mayberry, R. I. (2000). Theorizing about the relation between American Sign Language and reading. In *Language acquisition by eye* (pp. 221–259). Lawrence Erlbaum.
- de Meulder, M. & Haualand, H. (2019). Sign language interpreting services: A quick fix for inclusion? *Translation and Interpreting Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1075/tis.18008.dem>
- Humphries, T. (2008). Talking culture and culture talking. In *Open your eyes: Deaf studies talking* (pp. 35–41). University of Minnesota Press.
- Kusters, A. (2014). Language ideologies in the shared signing community of Adamorobe. *Language in Society*, 43(2), 139–158.
- Power, D. (2013). Australian aboriginal deaf people and Aboriginal sign language. *Sign Language Studies*, 13(2), 264–277.
- Supalla, S. J., Small, A., & Cripps, J. S. (2012). *American Sign Language for everyone: Considerations for universal design and deaf youth identity*. Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research and Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf.