A RURAL SCHOOL EDUCATOR BUILDS

student learners

THROUGH ACCESS TO CURRICULUM, SELF-ADVOCACY, AND CONNECTIONS TO THE DEAF COMMUNITY

By Megan Mathisen

Megan Mathisen received her bachelor's degree in deaf education from MacMurray College in Jacksonville, Illinois. She teaches deaf and hard of hearing children at St. Anne Grade School, in St. Anne, Illinois, as part of the Kankakee Area of Special Education. Having taught at Phoenix Day School for the Deaf in Arizona for two years, Mathisen moved back to Illinois to be closer to her family. She welcomes questions and comments about this article at *mathisenm@sags.k12.il.us*.

In a small town 65 miles south of Chicago, where there are no Walmart stores, no McDonald's restaurants, no chain stores at all, a deaf teacher and an educational interpreter work together to maximize educational access for three deaf and hard of hearing students. The school is St. Anne Grade School; I am the deaf teacher, and my students are two boys in second grade and one boy in fifth grade. I teach them in a split class of reading and language. For nearly two-thirds of each school day, the boys, accompanied by their sign language interpreter, are in mainstream classes where each works with his respective peers and the general educational curriculum. For my students—as for all St. Anne students—this curriculum is geared towards the state's ever-present Common Core Standards.

When the boys come to my class, I work with them to discover and ameliorate areas where they need help. At the beginning of the school year, it was clear that they had reading and language delays. Now, however, my second grade boys are on grade level; my fifth grader is using the third grade curriculum, but we also focus on the fifth grade Common Core Standards.

For all three boys, the goal is the same—to catch them up, or keep them on par, with their peers. We've used reading strategies to help them not only in literature but in all subjects. For example, I use the strategy of predict/infer, whereby students are asked to infer information from the story they are reading as well as to predict what might happen next. I select a story that their hearing classmates are reading

Photos courtesy of Megan Mathisen

Right: The students learn about responsibility and respect during character counts from social worker Heather Oosterhoff in their deaf and hard of hearing class via interpreter Jenna Saathoff.

from the Houghton Mifflin second and third grade curriculum, and I work with my students in American Sign Language (ASL), breaking down the story into its simplest components for ease of understanding. For example, to illustrate one of the reading strategies, I modified a story from *http://resource.deyogroup.com/330/sdr_predictinglessonplan.pdf* and asked my students to "Picture Walk." Here is the story:

> *Bobby and Kimmy put on their snowsuits. They got their hats, boots, and scarves. They went outside and began to roll the snow into three large balls. They put the largest ball on the bottom and stacked the snowballs on top of each other. They went to look for two sticks.*

Then I found questions that require students to apply predictive and inferential thinking. Here are some of them:

- What season is it in this story? How do you know?
- Why do you think they need two sticks?
- What are the children doing?

Clearly, answering each of these questions requires that students understand the story and exercise their ability to think reflectively, creatively, and inferentially. Teaching my fifth grader, with his lagging performance scores in reading, is a little more complex as I strive to bring him up to grade level. Sometimes a warm-up activity is necessary. For example, I once used a SMART Board and asked students to sort pictures into their respective categories, such as *musical instruments*, *animals that fly*, *mammals*, and *reptiles*. Then they did a worksheet that required their comprehension skills as they read a short story in their workbook, "Around the Swamp," classifying and categorizing common and specialized words, such as *trees*, *snakes*, *birds*, *nocturnal animals*, and *fish*.

My students are also learning the most daunting, most important skill of all—to advocate for themselves. Instead of imploring the teacher with their eyes and facial expressions, they are guided to think, grasp, and understand the material presented, and to ask questions if they do not. For example, my students stumbled while trying to identify sentences as "fact" or

"opinion." They looked at me with their faces blank and their eyes wide—the deer-in-headlights stare—so we made up our own sentences, making statements that applied to our own class, sharing experiences, and identifying each sentence as fact or opinion. When the students used the interpreter, the teacher, and each other to craft sentences, they not only became delighted but, after a little daily practice, they noted correctly which sentences were fact and which were opinion. One of our students even walked to the principal's office and explained which sentences out of several "Nature Walk" stories were fact and which were opinion.

I sometimes teach by modeling. I model the importance of self-advocacy by showing how to proactively work with the interpreter, both in the classroom and in school-wide assemblies. I model the importance of informing the interpreter if I do not understand, and I model asking the general education teacher for clarification.

It is important to teach beyond academics, and we try to expose our students to the rewards that can only be reaped in a vibrant Deaf community. Technology makes this at least partly possible. My students now have access to video relay services (VRS) to place calls. Recently our classroom was equipped with an iPad, and the first thing we did was download the reading and educational apps. We then installed, with the help of Purple VRS, an app that allows us to interact with other deaf individuals and an interpreter when necessary to relay our calls. The first call we made was to a Purple representative, who let us know when students would be able to place their first VRS call to Santa Claus. (It was December and our goal was to tell Santa what they wanted for Christmas, of course.) We have also tried to attract deaf performers to St. Anne to interact with my students and broaden their educational experience.

Thanks to the Internet, my students have seen other deaf role models. They have seen deaf storytellers and poets on YouTube. Hopefully in the future they will gain more meaningful experiences as they meet more deaf adults in the wider community.

Before I arrived, my students had limited access to the academic curriculum. Isolated in a rural area with limited access to communication, using primarily gestures and oral language to communicate with their families or hearing friends, their English skills were weak. Even when they wanted to share a personal experience or an idea, they struggled for words. "Mom, dad, me, store," one might say. "Me scare. Saw rain," another might volunteer. In class, I found my three young boys remained dependent on modeled academic and social language as well as guided writing and other developmental strategies.

They are improving now, both socially and academically. This is perhaps partly because my students and I have overcome some of the obstacles that many deaf students encounter in rural areas. Academically, two of them strive to remain on grade level while one tries to improve his ranking, and all three experience greater access to the curriculum of their hearing peers. Socially, all have been exposed to other deaf individuals and to ASL literature through VRS and the Internet, and, of course, through direct interaction with each other. Lastly, they have an adult deaf role model—me—their teacher, who is able to model, explain, and understand in a way that is unique to those who are deaf like we are.

While learning these new concepts and strategies, my students learn to question what they read, apply their own thoughts, evaluate, and summarize. Through differentiated instruction that allows a hands-on approach, they are taught the value of taking responsibility for their learning. This is the skill that I hope will be instilled in them for the rest of their individual educational journeys and the knowledge that will last each of them a lifetime.