

Fostering Equity and Inclusion at the Clerc Center and Gallaudet University: Three Perspectives

By Lisa Montalvo, Taiyabah Naeem, and Lia Bengtson

Lisa Montalvo,

NCC, LPC, has worked as a counselor and therapist for nearly 20 years both in school and mental health settings. For the last 12 years, she has worked at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf in Washington, D.C. Montalvo is very much involved in the Deaf Hispanic, Latino, and Latinx communities and provides support and resources to individual community members.

Taiyabah (Tai)

Naeem, MS, is a project manager at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. A former high school science teacher, she has taught high school chemistry and medical terminology at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf. Naeem grew up in Toronto, Canada, and attended mainstreamed schools. She earned her bachelor's degree in biology and chemistry from Gallaudet and her master's degree in deaf education from McDaniel College in Westminster, Md.

In February 2019, a counselor, a project manager, and a teacher from the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center were chosen as inclusive excellence ambassadors to the Gallaudet University Division of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. As inclusive excellence ambassadors, Lisa Montalvo, Taiyabah Naeem, and Lia Bengtson believe the division's motto that in diversity there is strength and beauty; and they are committed to strengthening diversity—with its strength and beauty—in the Gallaudet community.

Researchers have found that students of color on predominantly white campuses struggle with underrepresentation, social isolation, academic hurdles, and racial stereotyping from both their peers and their teachers (New, 2016; Foundation for Art & Healing, n.d.). Assimilation into the larger culture without devaluing one's own culture is a challenge for these students. It is also a challenge for students who may experience similar difficulty due to their ethnicity, national origin, economic or social deprivation, sexual orientation, or intersectionality.

A prime issue is communication. For deaf and hard of hearing students who are new to the United States, communication with their families may be difficult. While learning American Sign Language (ASL) is a challenge for many hearing families, it presents an especially significant challenge for many immigrant families as the adults, like their children, are learning English. ASL classes, parent support groups, classroom accommodations, and resources are usually geared toward those whose families already know English; for non-English speakers, they may be hard or even impossible to find. For this reason, providing a diverse professional staff in schools and programs that serve deaf and hard of hearing students may be especially important. These individuals—administrators, teachers, and staff—can have an outsized impact on students. When students can connect with knowledgeable professionals from their own communities, understanding and personal bonds may form more easily. The guidance that these individuals offer students can mean the difference between success and struggle in the next important phase of their lives.

In this article, co-authors Montalvo, Naeem, and Bengtson each reflect on the ways in which they have been able to support deaf and hard of hearing students and allow others to see the importance of having diverse professionals in our school community.

Photos by Matthew Vita



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Helping Parents Trust the School More

By Lisa Montalvo, School Counselor

“When everyone at school is speaking one language, and a lot of your classmates’ parents also speak it, and you go home and see that your community is different—there is a sense of shame attached to that. It really takes growing up to treasure the specialness of being different.”

~ Sonia Sotomayor

My family did not know that I was deaf until I was 2 years old. It was devastating news. They had no idea how to raise a deaf child. We lived in Philadelphia then, and they sought help at Temple University. My family’s language was Spanish, but at Temple the professionals told my family not to speak Spanish to me. They wanted my parents and me to use English and for us to learn ASL, too. They felt that trying to teach me Spanish, English, and ASL at the same time would be confusing. Unfortunately, my father told my mom that they would not learn ASL. He felt that speech and speech therapy with the help of hearing aids were the best options for his deaf daughter. Both of my parents felt that talking with hearing people would give me a better education.

My parents came from Puerto Rico, but I did not know anything about Puerto Rican culture as a small child. My family knew another Puerto Rican family with a deaf

Lia Bengtson, MA, has taught social studies to middle school students at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School in Washington, D.C., for seven years. She earned her bachelor’s degree in elementary education and cultural anthropology from Beloit College in Beloit, Wis., and her master’s degree in deaf education from Gallaudet University. Bengtson is one of the founding members of the Social Justice Committee at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center.

Montalvo, Naeem, and Bengtson welcome questions and comments about this article at Lisa.Montalvo@gallaudet.edu, Taiyabah.Naeem@gallaudet.edu, and Lia.Bengtson@gallaudet.edu, respectively.

Above, left: Inclusive excellence ambassadors Naeem, Bengtson, and Montalvo discuss ways of supporting deaf and hard of hearing students and professionals in the school community.

daughter. Her name was Noemi. I was 5 years old, and Noemi was a teenager. I was always excited to see her; I could relate to her so easily. Noemi knew signs, but my mother, who still wanted me to rely solely on speech to communicate, told her not to sign to me. We signed anyway. We would sneak away and hide. Noemi taught me fingerspelling and signs. Looking back, I realize that my special friendship with Noemi was the start of my identity development. We didn't talk about identity or culture; we didn't know our heritage. We just enjoyed each other in the special way that two people from the same culture sometimes do. We shared a communication and a connection that was beneath the surface. We didn't question it; we simply knew it was there.

I only began thinking about my identity as an adult when I began working as a school counselor at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD), the high school on the Gallaudet University campus. MSSD has a diverse student population. I remember sitting down for a counseling session with one of my students who was Hispanic/Latino/Latinx*. The student had expressed frustration that her family wanted her to come home after school every day, and, as a result, she missed the opportunity to participate in after-school activities. This interaction caused me to reflect on my own upbringing. My family also wanted me at home when I could be there, and I had also found it frustrating. However, I now realize that our culture—the Hispanic/Latino/Latinx culture—places a strong value on family. We tend to have large, close-knit families, and we tend to gather with them often. It is not uncommon for three generations to live in the same household or at least have homes near each other. Even as adults, we pay attention to our parents, and grandparents often play an important role in their grandchildren's upbringing. After my session with this student, I realized how important it is to interact with Hispanic/Latino/Latinx students and to encourage exploration and learning about our culture.

MSSD sent several students to various events and conferences to help them learn more about our culture and connect with other deaf and hard of hearing Hispanic/Latino/Latinx community members. Our students came back with a stronger sense of identity and feeling more proud of themselves as Hispanic/Latino/Latinx individuals. Gallaudet has a Latinx Student Union and a Manos Unidas, and our students participate in some of their activities.

As I am a Latina myself, I am able to help the parents of my students understand that they may not need to hold quite so tightly to their growing children. I can help put them at ease, and once they are at ease, they may see how important it is to



Above: Lisa Montalvo

let their deaf or hard of hearing child grow and learn. Parents have responded positively to finding out that I am on campus for their children. When one family found out that I am Puerto Rican, they were near tears. “God blessed you, my angel,” they said in Spanish. They trusted MSSD more because at least one of its adult professionals came from their own culture. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, whom we call a “Nuyoricana” as she is a Puerto Rican who was born in New York, is one of my role-models. She wrote a children’s book called *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You*. Sotomayor’s advice is simply to encourage children to “just ask” if they see someone different from themselves.

This advice applies to my students at MSSD and to deaf and hard of hearing students around the United States who may be unsure of their identities, their family’s culture, or their background; it’s okay to ask.

From my experience working with students, I realized that my parents did their best. They expressed how proud they were of me, and they expressed some regrets; they’ve said that they wish they could have done some things differently. I am grateful for them. They are the reason I became a counselor and am able to share my experiences as a deaf Puerto Rican.

**“Hispanic/Latino/Latinx” is used throughout this article to allow for inclusivity. “Hispanic” refers to native speakers of Spanish or those individuals who have Spanish-speaking ancestry. “Latino” refers to individuals who are from or descended from people from Latin America. “Latinx” is a gender-neutral term used to refer to people of Latin American cultural or racial identity in the United States; it encompasses those who identify outside of the gender binary, such as transgender people or those who are gender-fluid.*

References

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Taking Charge, Building Pride

By Taiyabah Naeem, Project Manager

“The bravest are the ones who know they have the power but don’t abuse it. Instead, they use their power to help empower others.”

~ Tanveer Ahmed Naeem (the author’s father)

“*Pani pina, meri pyari beti,*” my mom would tell me. Her words translate to, “Drink water, my sweet daughter,” and in Pakistan, this is a way to acknowledge a beloved little child in the Urdu language. I was deaf and could not hear her, but I could read her lips and I understood.

I was the only deaf child in my Punjabi Muslim Pakistani family in Toronto, Canada. My parents, whose languages were Urdu, Punjabi, and English, did not know I was deaf until I was 2 years old. They learned this from medical doctors, and they were immediately told that they should not teach me in Urdu or Punjabi. Further, they were not to teach me in ASL, and they were to keep me away from schools for deaf students.

I was to be educated only in English, the dominant language of the hearing Canadian community, and to go to our neighborhood school in which spoken language was dominant and all of the students were hearing. This advice had lifelong negative repercussions, not just for me but for my parents, their parents, my younger brothers, and now for my parents’ grandchildren. However, this was the early 1980s and my parents simply believed the doctors. They stopped using their traditional languages at home. Instead, they morphed themselves into being as “English” as possible. This must have been a terrible hardship for them, and it shut off much of our culture to me. I was the oldest child and when English became the language of our home, my brothers were denied our parents’ languages as well. Today, I know my parents did their best, but they still wish they had never listened to the doctors.

Despite being denied its language, we participated in our culture in other ways, dressing up in beautiful traditional suits

and attending Pakistani events that were filled with wonderful music and delicious, spicy food. I appreciated and loved the beauty of these events, and I know that I was blessed to be raised in such an environment. While English surrounded us, my parents and I were exposed to other languages, too—Urdu, Punjabi, and French. There was no way to completely escape that part of ourselves no matter how hard my parents tried.

I knew that my family and I also faced a lot of barriers and challenges, including racism, as individuals in North America who came from a South Asian country. I was always aware that something about my culture and my skin color made me different from other North Americans, and the difference was not regarded in a positive way.

I did not learn ASL until I was 24 years old. That’s when I arrived at Gallaudet University and began to pick up this language that I wish I had known all my life. At Gallaudet, I also began to understand that I had been denied another culture in addition to that of my parents: Deaf culture. Being at Gallaudet and learning ASL opened up a whole wonderful world for me. I no longer felt alone or misunderstood. I met so many inspiring people—deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing—including children of deaf adults (CODAs).

However, as a person from South Asia, I lived in brown skin, and the others around me usually did not. It had been ingrained in me that to succeed in life, I had to behave and act as “westernized” as possible. Somehow I

had conflated the comparative lightness of everyone else’s skin with what it meant to be westernized, so while I perfected my English and my ASL and eventually became successful in my academic and professional life, I felt a deep void that I could not explain. I began to recognize and understand the cause of this void when I began teaching science at MSSD, the high school on Gallaudet’s campus. At MSSD, I was privileged to work in a diverse environment. For the first time, I was engaged with students of color from various backgrounds. Some of them were Hispanic and some were Asian, including a few from South Asia like me; they were students who also struggled to balance their Deaf identities and what it means to be a brown person in the North American Deaf community.

At one point, an Indian teacher and I met with the South Asian students. We established an ongoing dialogue, and it was during these dialogues that I began to realize that I carried shame related to my ethnic background. In South Asia—India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and other countries—most people have brown skin. This is the color of my parents’ skin and of my own. My shame



Above: Taiyabah Naeem

was conflated with being from another country. It intensified when I would see my mother criticized for speaking broken English with an accent when she tried to advocate for me in schools and hospitals, and when I would see my father appealing his western peers, neighbors, and friends to ensure we were on good terms with them because speaking up for ourselves might mean we would risk losing our jobs and our livelihood and face retaliation. I felt shame when I was bullied by hearing peers for not understanding English when the truth was that I couldn't hear people when they were speaking English to me and when people criticized my signing or speaking abilities. I was ashamed of being deaf, of being brown, and of being of Pakistani descent. Work and counseling transformed that shame into pride, though I still experience it vicariously; it sweeps over me like a wave when South Asian and other minority students describe their painful experiences in the countries from which they fled, only to come to the United States and be told that they should change or shorten their names because they sound "odd" or that they are "too complicated" or when I see adults making fun of South Asians. That shame continues to seep into my life in various ways in both the deaf and hearing worlds.

Last year, I was on a panel for the Metro South Asian Deaf Association (MSADA) that represents deaf and hard of hearing people from South Asian countries. I had the opportunity to listen to others share their life experiences and what it means to be a deaf or hard of hearing person of color in an environment that is primarily made up of individuals who are not of color. Together, we united a group of South Asian deaf youths to discuss their lives and experiences, beginning with recognizing and accepting their real names and their life experiences both in the United States and in their parents' places of birth. This experience was inspiring and increased my passion to make a difference in the lives of those who are underrepresented and from traditionally underserved backgrounds. I felt such pride when I finally had an opportunity to work with a deaf South Asian manager and another teacher, both of whom are women, and together we took charge of various curriculum and teaching projects at the Clerc Center. I also felt pride when I attended the MSADA gala at Gallaudet in October 2018. I saw people that looked like me wearing gorgeous traditional outfits all in one place and signing beautifully. I remember wanting to cry out of sheer happiness. I had finally found my people—they were South Asian, deaf, brown, and just like me.

Deaf and hard of hearing children of color throughout the nation need to know that they are not alone and that they can be proud of who they are and achieve success.

It's one thing to be a person of color. It's another thing to be a Deaf person of color who continues to journey in a world that is designed to support hearing people and place them in a position of privilege because they have "better English" or because they "know more" and have "been here longer." A system that was designed to support this particular group intentionally or unintentionally shames and oppresses other marginalized groups; unfortunately, it permeates our communities today, including the Deaf community. That cycle cannot be broken unless we continue to speak up, fight, and advocate for equality—especially for our deaf and hard of

hearing children from diverse backgrounds.

We need role models in our educational system, more deaf and hard of hearing people of color as teachers, professionals, educators, and administrators to lead these children and instill hope, respect, and pride for their heritage and cultural backgrounds all while making a difference in the Deaf community. Deaf and hard of hearing teachers and educators of color also need to have the opportunities and ongoing support throughout their professional lives. This means having all of us, as human beings of all colors and backgrounds, attend conferences and gatherings to discuss these deeply painful and complex issues.

As a member of the Deaf community, I believe that there is room to heal, move forward, and learn from each other's experiences. Deaf and hard of hearing children of color throughout the nation need to know that they are not alone and

that they can be proud of who they are and achieve success. However, the first step begins with us as adults trying to understand their pain and to create a path to help them lead the way.

Cruelty lies in the fact that my parents were robbed of the opportunity to pass along their language to their children. It also lies in the fact that this happens to many deaf South Asian children. I will never forget the pain in the eyes of a MSSD student of South Asian descent when he signed to me, "That is not my real name. My real name is the one that my parents from India gave me. I don't want to change my name to fit other people's lives because it's easier for them. I want them to accept me for who I am and where I am from." I also had a young Pakistani deaf girl say to me, "I may be deaf, brown, and wearing a hijab, but I am worthy of love and respect, too."

Hope lies in the fact that organizations exist for deaf and hard of hearing individuals from South Asian communities, and we are committed to working for equality and justice. Together, we will succeed.

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Teaching Through a Social Justice Perspective

By Lia Bengtson, Social Studies Teacher

A historian must pick and choose among facts, deciding which ones to put into his or her work, which ones to leave out, and which ones to place at the center of the story. Every historian's own ideas and beliefs go into the way he or she writes history. In turn, the way history is written can shape the ideas and beliefs of the people who read it.

- Howard Zinn; adapted by Rebecca Stefoff,
A Young People's History of the United States

For the first 13 years of my education, I never had a teacher of color. As a hearing, Korea-born, transnational adoptee who grew up in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minn., I had many friends who were also adopted from South Korea, but the schools I went to and the neighborhoods I lived in were predominantly white. The standard educational curriculum I experienced—from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s—reflected little to none of my identity or experiences.

When I got to college, I had my first taste of being a participant in my own learning. For the first time, I was allowed to question, investigate, and learn about matters that I chose. As a double major in elementary education and cultural anthropology at Beloit College in Beloit, Wis., I had the opportunity to delve into concepts of whiteness and white privilege through my anthropology classes—to explore how society and history have been dominated by the limited perspective of the dominant culture that we refer to as “white,” and how less dominant voices have too often been ignored or erased.

Now I teach social studies to middle school students at Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) on the campus of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. I also serve as an inclusive excellence ambassador for the Clerc Center. I am able to use my position to help create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment, primarily

through the way I believe is most important: working with our nation's youth.

By focusing social studies education on social justice and teaching history from diverse perspectives, my students gain the tools to build a more equitable society. My ultimate goal as a teacher is to equip my students to become independent, critical thinkers. As deaf and hard of hearing students, they are largely marginalized within our society; 75 percent are students of color, and these students are perhaps further marginalized. Their history is all but ignored in standard textbooks. Helping them to understand, like Howard Zinn, whose quote begins this article, that history is inherently biased gives them a tool to see how our national narrative relates to them. To be informed thinkers, I tell them, we must examine who wrote the texts we read and from what perspective a story is being told (e.g., those who conquer and those who are conquered will have decidedly different experiences, tell dramatically different stories, and write vastly different texts).

It is crucial to provide my students with a variety of experiences and perspectives that can demonstrate the relevance of history to their lives. I am so fortunate that my school is located in our nation's capital, where I can provide a range of these experiences to my students (e.g., when we

were focusing on world religions, I had my students research one of the five major world religions and then provided them with the opportunity to interview a person of that religion either in person or via videophone).

One year, my students established an electronic pen pals partnership with the Bajaj Institute of Learning, a Deaf school in India, and we exchanged a number of videos with students there. The Bajaj Institute is one of a few deaf schools in India that uses Indian Sign Language in its instruction, and the exchange provided a great way to expose my students to a different sign language as well as introduce them to the geography, religion, and culture of India. On opposite sides of the world, we videotaped our students—who were all about

the same age—asking and responding to questions such as: *What is your favorite food? Does your family sign? What is your favorite sport? What do you do on the weekends?* At the end of the semester, we exchanged a box full of handmade cards, small gifts, and favorite snacks. The Indian students sent us ties, which are part of their school uniform, and hand-stitched pouches.

For the past two years, KDES's middle school has



Above: Lia Bengtson

participated in the Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools. With the help of resources from the Zinn Education Project, which provides free teaching materials for middle schools and high schools, I have also been able to engage my students in social justice-oriented activities and projects. The Zinn Education Project provides materials that introduce students to a more accurate and complex understanding of U.S. history and emphasizes the role of working people, women, people of color, and organized social movements not found in the traditional curriculum (Zinn Education Project, 2019).

This year, my class is focused on U.S. history, and my goal is to provide my students with the opportunity to learn the history of the United States from diverse perspectives—perspectives that I was not privy to as a child. I attend events hosted by the D.C. Area Educators for Social Justice, which partners with Teaching for Change and the Zinn Education Project. Through these workshops, I have found great resources that focus on anti-bias, multi-perspective education.

As I have increasingly integrated this content into my

teaching, I have found my students to be very responsive. They are open-minded, curious, and willing to learn from one another. The positive response from my students, combined with my own early lack of access to a curriculum that reflected a diversity of experience, gives me the drive to continue my efforts to foster openness and diversity in my classroom while deepening my students' critical-thinking skills. Further, when students grasp that historical events have relevance to their lives, they are empowered to be reflective about what they read. The goal is to help them become active participants in their own learning and voices in their own future, which is, of course, our country's future history.

Reference

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GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY

REGIONAL CENTERS

Through partnerships with the Gallaudet University Regional Centers' (GURCs) host institutions, the regional centers share Gallaudet's undergraduate and graduate programs and the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center's resources and expertise through training programs, workshops and conferences, youth programs, technical assistance, and consultation.

For more information, please contact national.outreach@gallaudet.edu.

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