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# Lessons Learned:

## A Retired Principal Returning to University Teaching Offers Advice for New Teachers

*By Candi Mascia Reed*

As I re-enter the university classroom and look back over 40 years of work in deaf education, I've come to see respect for diversity and inclusion as part of a longtime set of values that good teachers bring and have always brought to their classrooms. I had left teaching at the university level to become the principal of a Total Communication program in northern New Jersey. After 16 wonderful years, I wanted to return to the college campus and share what I know with the next generation of teachers.

When I entered a career that would prove challenging and remarkable, there was no educational verbiage about inclusion, social-emotional student growth, ethnic or cultural diversity, or deaf and hard of hearing students with disabilities; and certainly there was no discussion of embracing high expectations for our students. Since that time, it is not only the language that has changed but the very landscape of the classroom—and changed dramatically. Among the changes that teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students face are:

- **More deaf and hard of hearing students from other countries**—This demographic change is one of the biggest. Students from other countries often arrive with little to no formal education and no skills in either speaking or signing. They might not have experienced early intervention, educational interpreting services, technology, or other services we usually take for granted in the United States. Further, communication is not just difficult in the classroom; often parents and caregivers speak or understand little to no English. Their deaf children often find themselves significantly language deprived.

*Photos by Matthew Vita*



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**Left:** Teachers are increasingly incorporating technology such as SMART Boards® into their classrooms. Here, students with disabilities participate in adaptive physical education (PE) while viewing a video made by the school's PE teacher.

- **More deaf and hard of hearing students with disabilities**—Teachers work with students whose disabilities range from mild to profound, from having slight learning disabilities to significant cognitive disabilities. Teachers learn how to address curriculum standards and implement assessment practices to address the needs of their students with special needs. In concert with others, they find and implement effective and meaningful accommodations and modifications; they craft assessments that measure meaningful progress through grade-level curriculum. Deaf and hard of hearing students with disabilities deserve our attention. Classroom culture, values, and beliefs need to emphasize the same high expectations as teachers have for the general population of deaf and hard of hearing students.

- **Curriculum changes**—No longer are teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing and their students relegated to basement classrooms. Gone are the days when no

curriculum existed for deaf and hard of hearing students, and the only classroom books were written specifically and rigidly “for deaf children.” Most importantly, the advent of the Common Core State Standards and federal, local, and school district academic accountability for all students has dominated the educational landscape for the past dozen years.

- **Assessment practices**—Whether our deaf and hard of hearing students find themselves in general educational environments or special education, whether they are educated with each other or in concert with hearing peers, documentation of their progress and the systemic analysis of data are now required; assessments—formative and summative—occur throughout the year. Teachers understand and accept the heightened accountability for both students and teachers, and accept, embrace, and work with those requirements from local, state, and federal initiatives.



**Left:** Classroom teachers are teaching students from more diverse backgrounds and cultures in today's schools. **Below:** Today's teachers work collegially, collaboratively, and with other education professionals.

- **Role of the teacher**—Today's teachers may be itinerant, collaborative, consultant, or co-teaching with a general education professional. Teachers learn to understand students' backgrounds, meet with parents, learn any new curriculum, and sometimes, with administrator permission, invite parents and caregivers into the classroom and show them their ongoing work with their student. No longer does a teacher find him- or herself alone day after day in a single classroom. Today's teachers work collegially, collaboratively, and in the service of their students with other education professionals. The old expression that "Teachers go into their classrooms and close the door" is no longer true. Today's teachers open the door, invite folks in, learn from other teachers and professionals—and teach them as well. Further, teachers keep learning. They learn all they can about instructional approaches and interventions, resources, and materials. They increase their knowledge of second language acquisition and development and theories and practices, and they keep informed on current research and practices in the field. Some teachers take special education courses, and some hone their communication skills in American Sign Language (ASL), an English-based signing system, or spoken and written English.



- **Technology**—Developments in technology have changed all aspects of education for deaf and hard of hearing students. Teachers can avail themselves of a wide-range of technology resources for instructional practice. Online and web-based activities help increase student knowledge more interactively. E-books and literacy websites help students develop their reading and writing skills as well as self-assess their literacy skills and development. There has

been an increase in the availability of online stories with deaf and hard of hearing characters and engaging SMART Board® technology; a proliferation of interactive online learning programs can be adapted to the needs of deaf and hard of hearing students in emerging, developing, and maturing levels.

It is unfortunately true that the low incidence of the deaf and hard of hearing population sometimes precludes the hiring of additional staff or securing of unique resources and materials to provide additional services needed for our students, especially those from other countries. Yet technology has improved, and if a teacher finds that his or her class is predominantly from one ethnic speaking background, many technological aids exist to translate from their language to English or ASL in real time. Often teachers can work with others in their building to use technology to improve the signing literacy, English written literacy, or English-speaking capabilities of those students.

### Keeping up with Changes Keeping Important Stuff the Same

One aspect of teaching has not changed: the values and beliefs teachers have and their effect on every classroom. My doctoral dissertation on identifying shared characteristics of effective writing literacy programs demonstrated that a shared culture, values, and beliefs were paramount to providing effective writing literacy education for students. The study was conducted in 2009 at three schools for deaf and hard of hearing students, each school identifying itself as using different communication modalities (oral/aural, Total Communication, or ASL). Looking at aspects of each school's writing literacy program, I found—and still find—a shared school culture, values, and beliefs about literacy to be one of several predominant themes. Each school's specific communication mode was not a variable in the study. (See "Characteristics of an Effective Writing Literacy Program," Reed, 2012.)

As the years went on and I became more comfortable in my role as a school administrator, I found that the particular theme of school culture resonated across a broad spectrum of school topics. School culture, with its implicit set of values and beliefs, affected everyone—me, my teachers, students, staff, and families. It also affected all aspects of student learning: literacy, curriculum development, assessment, professional collegiality, treatment of students and families from other countries, and the needs of

deaf and hard of hearing students with disabilities.

Today, administrators and teachers create, implement, and embrace their school cultures, values, and beliefs while teachers create an individual classroom culture as well. Ideally, this means not only supporting a school culture of educational practices and rituals but also supporting a culture that welcomes diversity in a range of areas, including student race, ethnicity, and gender as well as family socio-economic background and education. In our profession, it also means accepting and working in a positive way within the great communication debates of deaf education.

Another aspect of teaching that has not changed is our determination to improve academic outcomes and close the literacy gap between our deaf and hard of hearing students and their hearing peers. This gap haunted our profession 40 years ago when I was in the classroom. It haunted our profession 16 years ago when I served as an administrator working with talented staff designing, implementing, and creating learning environments, assessments, and resources. It haunts our profession still.

Today, a culture of support exists for each deaf or hard of

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hearing student regardless of disability; high expectations are established as a result of the belief in each child's ability to succeed. You feel it when you walk into their classroom. There's an indescribable presence, an intensity yet a lightness of mood. Students feel care, comfort, and welcome. They sense a commitment from the teacher before the teacher expects excellence from them. The teacher demonstrates a love of learning before students are expected to learn. The teaching is flexible and nonthreatening. The feeling is safe and expectant.

Today's teachers work creatively to generate powerful learning environments. They don't just think outside the box, they move the box—and the primary beneficiaries are our deaf and hard of hearing students.

#### Reference

Reed, C. M. (2012). Characteristics of an effective writing literacy program. *Odyssey: New Directions in Deaf Education*, 13, 64-68.



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