# Why Deaf Education Matters:

## Including Deaf Students with Disabilities

*By Flavia Fleischer, Rachel Friedman Narr, and Will Garrow*

***Annie**** *is a 5-year-old student with significant physical and cognitive disabilities, and she is deaf**. She attends a kindergarten class in her neighborhood school with hearing students with disabilities and a one-to-one assistant who signs. Annie's parents use sign language with her, and they've provided her with cochlear implants in the hopes that she will be able to access and acquire spoken language, too. Though she doesn't say many words that other people understand, Annie uses her voice and many sign approximations to make her needs and wants known. She is also learning to use a Picture Exchange Communication System with her signs to make her wants and needs clearer. She is engaged with and responsive to her environment.*

***Frankie**** *is a 10-year-old fourth grade student with Down syndrome, and he is hard of hearing. He uses spoken language to express himself; he has hearing aids but doesn't always use them. Frankie sits in his local school class and appears engaged; however, for several years he hasn't made much progress on his Individualized Education Program goals. He reads simple words and enjoys looking at pictures in books. Frankie doesn't have many friends, and his parents have been unimpressed with his progress. He receives itinerant services from a teacher of the deaf who serves him in a classroom for hearing students with moderate disabilities. The itinerant teacher of the deaf doesn't know much sign language.*

*Photos courtesy of Dana Rhinerson and Tanya Bliven*

**Flavia Fleischer**, PhD, is a professor and chair of Deaf Studies at the California State University, Northridge (CSUN). She started at CSUN in 2011 as department chair and is serving her third consecutive term in that position. Fleischer's professional interests center on American Sign Language (ASL), ASL linguistics, deaf education, and Deaf culture studies.

**Rachel Friedman Narr**, PhD, is a professor of deaf education at the California State University, Northridge (CSUN). She began her work at CSUN in 2003 and started the Deaf Education and Families Project in 2007. Her professional interests include teacher preparation, investment in public education, and outreach and education for families with children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

**Right:** Deaf elementary school students with disabilities work on literacy learning activities.

PHOTO CREDIT: DANA RHINERSON

Deaf education—having deaf students educated in an environment in which they are with other deaf students as well as deaf adults—matters. This environment allows for Deaf Community Cultural Wealth (DCCW), the knowledge, skills, and tools that a community passes down from one generation to the next, to be acquired by the deaf students (adapted from Yosso, 2005). Annie and Frankie—and every deaf student with a disability—are members of the Deaf community and thus should have access to the Deaf community with its generational DCCW. For deaf students, this usually comes most effectively through deaf education.

However, instead of educating deaf children through deaf education, educators and administrators measure deafness against other forms of disability, decide which is most severe, and use that decision to determine placement. The practice of determining a primary disability and addressing it within neighborhood public schools contradicts what we know about how deaf children learn. Without an environment that builds on their visual and/or spatial strengths, Annie and Frankie are not only missing easily accessible language that is critical; they are missing exposure to and interaction with other deaf individuals. In their "inclusive" classrooms, they interact only with hearing adults and children. The visual and/or spatial needs of deaf children are ignored.

## Not Just Language

## Deaf Community Cultural Wealth

DCCW, as framed by Fleischer, Garrow, and Friedman-Narr (2015), reflects not only the invaluable human right to an easily accessible language but also the critical cultural knowledge gleaned by deaf individuals through centuries of navigating and networking through environments that are designed for those who hear. DCCW allows deaf individuals to flourish in hearing-centered spaces, including schools and other organizations in our society.

Deaf school children, including those deaf children with disabilities who function in all-hearing environments, rarely have exposure or access to DCCW. They do not have access to

**Will Garrow**, PhD, is an associate professor of deaf studies at the California State University, Northridge, where he has taught since 2011. In his research and teaching, Garrow uses critical race theory to analyze different forms of social inequities to investigate and challenge the interrelated forms of oppression that the intersectional Deaf community faces.

The authors welcome questions and comments about this article at *Flavia.Fleischer@csun.edu*, *Rachel.Narr@csun.edu*, and *William.Garrow@csun.edu,* respectively.

peers and adults who are able to model, teach, and discuss with them how to navigate through society. As a result, they are less able to develop the essential tools that allow them to succeed in various environments, even those that have been labeled "inclusive."

For deaf children with disabilities and their families, access to DCCW is as important as it is for other deaf children. Too often we find deaf students with disabilities in placements determined by what mainstream educators determine to be "primary" disability, which can complicate the services students receive (Borders et al., 2015). When deaf students with disabilities are not in dedicated deaf education programs, they may not receive services that are appropriate for their innately visual and/or spatial ways of being (Humphries et al., 2014; Johnson, 2006; Lane, 1999).

It's not surprising that educational services for deaf students with disabilities have been characterized as scarce, problematic, and inappropriate (Szymanski et al., 2012). Jokinen (2018) encourages us to consider this issue using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. He states, "Truly inclusive education also means a transition from mainstream needs-based teaching to student needs-based learning" (UN General Assembly, n.d.). Student needs-based learning emphasizes navigating hearing environments through accessible information; it addresses how tiredness affects deaf students in hearing spaces (Bess & Hornsby, 2014), and it employs adults who possess DCCW and understand what it means to be a deaf learner.

**Student needs-based learning emphasizes navigating hearing environments through accessible information; it addresses how tiredness affects deaf students in hearing spaces (Bess & Hornsby, 2014), and it employs adults who … understand what it means to be a deaf learner.**

When a child has the confounding effects of insufficient access to language, educational programming is filled with obstacles. These include: initial challenges in identifying a disability, limited professionals with needed expertise, limited programs, and a pervasive "they don't fit here" mindset of professionals and administrators. Understanding and valuing DCCW accepts that dedicated deaf education classrooms are the most appropriate placement for deaf students with disabilities. Educators need to realize that education in sign language with deaf peers is the least restrictive environment for them. Allowing children like Annie and Frankie to be educated outside of the environment of deaf education arguably further disables them; educators have ignored how hard it is for students like them to gain information about their environments through audition.

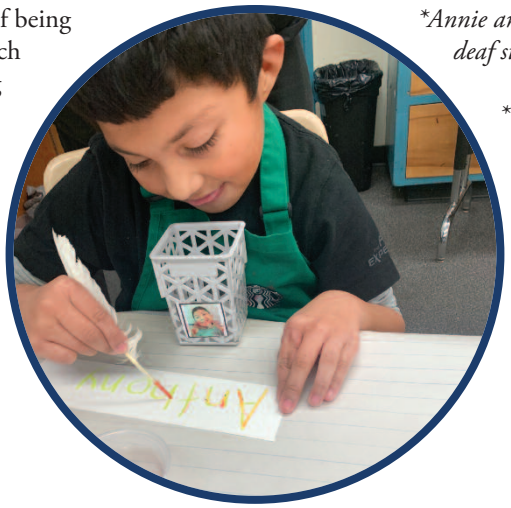
Teachers of the deaf do need more training and skill to feel better prepared to welcome students like Annie and Frankie into their classrooms (Musyoka, Gentry, & Meek, 2017). However, no longer should excuses such as, *"He's not an ASL user …," "His other disability is more severe than his deafness …," "He doesn't fit here …," or "We don't do Deaf Plus here …"* be accepted. Placements for deaf children should include self-contained classes for deaf students with disabilities or placement in all-deaf classes in which students are on grade level and learning their state's core curriculum as well as residential and day schools for the deaf.

Deaf students with disabilities represent 40 percent or more of the deaf student population (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013). Some of the more commonly identified disabilities include intellectual disabilities, learning, or health

**Below:** A deaf first grader with a disability practices sequencing. **Right:** Learning to write one's name is a beneficial academic skill and important life skill.


PHOTO CREDIT: LEFT, TANYA BLIVEN; ABOVE RIGHT, DANA RHINERSON

and low vision as well as the conditions of being autistic and deaf-blind (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013). We should be educating these children through a framework that centers on deaf education rather than a framework that centers on special education. We should allow families and students the opportunity to learn from and connect with deaf peers and deaf adults, and we should ensure deaf students with disabilities get the education—and the DCCW—to which they are entitled.



**Annie and Frankie are composites representative of deaf students the authors have known.*

***The term "deaf" in this article includes the various intersectional identities of individuals within the Deaf community. These include, but are not limited to, individuals of all ages who are D/deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, or deaf with disabilities (sometimes referred to as Deaf Plus).*

## References


Bess, F. H., & Hornsby, B. W. (2014). Commentary: Listening can be exhausting—Fatigue in children and adults with hearing loss. *Ear and Hearing, 35*(6), 592-599. *https://doi.org/10.1097/AUD.0000000000000099*

Borders, C. M., Meinzen-Derr, J., Wiley, S., Bauer, A., & Columbia Embury, D. (2015). Students who are deaf with additional disabilities: Does educational label impact language services? *Deafness & Education International, 17*(4), 204-218.

Fleischer, F., Garrow, W., & Friedman Narr, R. (2015). Developing deaf education: What really works in deaf education in the elementary classroom. In W. W. Murawski & K. L. Scott (Eds.), *What really works in elementary education* (pp. 286-302). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Gallaudet Research Institute. (2013). *Regional and national summary report of data from the 2011-2012 Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children and Youth*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University.

Humphries, T., Kushalnagaer, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D. J., Padden, C., & Rathmann, C. (2014). Ensuring language acquisition for deaf children: What linguists can do. *Language, 90*(2), e31-e52.

Johnson, R. (2006). Cultural constructs that impede discussions about variability in speech-based educational models for deaf children with cochlear implants. *Perspectiva, 24*, 29-80.

Jokinen, M. (2018). Inclusive education—A sustainable approach? *American Annals of the Deaf, 163*(1), 70-77.

Lane, H. (1999). *Mask of benevolence: Disabling the deaf community*. San Diego, CA: DawnSignPress.

Musyoka, M. M., Gentry, M. A., & Meek, D. R. (2017). Perceptions of teachers' preparedness to teach deaf and hard of hearing students with additional disabilities: A qualitative case study. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 29*(5), 827-848.

Szymanski, C. A., Brice, P. J., Lam, K. H., & Hotto, S. A. (2012). Deaf children with autism spectrum disorders. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 42*(10), 2027-2037.

UN General Assembly. *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Resolution/adopted by the General Assembly*, 24 January 2007. A/RES/61/106 available at *https://www.refworld.org/docid/45f973632.html* (accessed 22 January 2020)

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69-91. Retrieved from *http://www.wrightslaw.com*