go, class, go

using Dr. Seuss in early reading instruction

By Tamby Allman

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As I walk into the school building, one of my former students greets me with a question: "Did you see the new movie, *The Cat in the Hat?*" "Not yet," I reply. "Why not?" he asks. "Remember, before, we read many Dr. Seuss books? In first grade? F-U-N!"

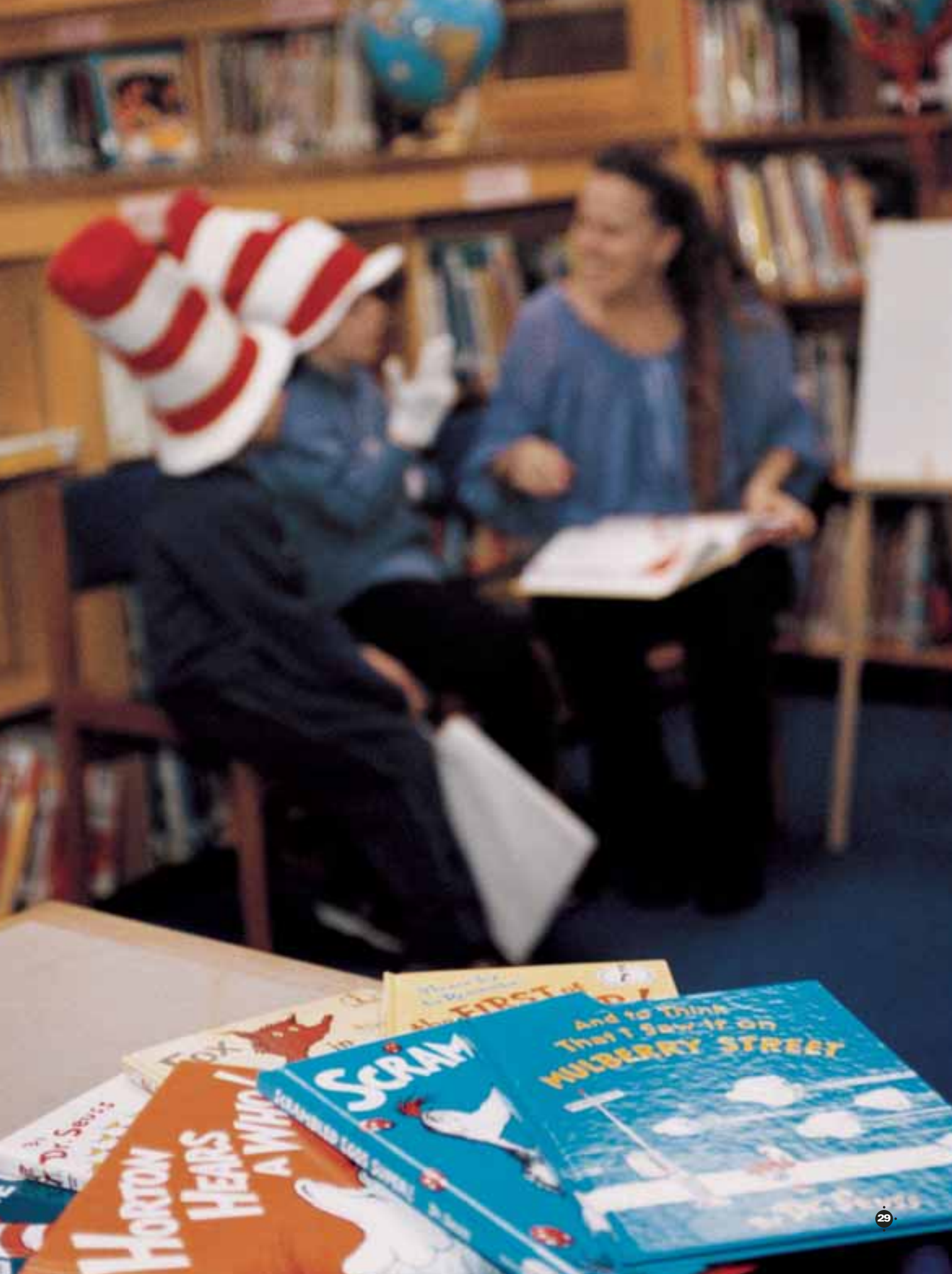
As more and more reading programs make the move from the basal reading series to authentic text, teachers are asking the same question: How do I choose appropriate books for my class?

Teachers of students who are deaf or hard of hearing are no exception. A few years ago, I was beginning my own hunt for a good book list. My class was small, but the language abilities and literacy levels of the children varied greatly. I had two kindergartners and five first-graders: one girl and six boys. Three of the children had deaf parents. Most of the children knew the alphabet, could write their names, could read color words and number words, and were beginning to develop some sight words. During guided reading, they would read stage 1 level books such as *I Like Green* (Cartwright, 2000). These books have about 10 pages, and the sentences usually follow a pattern like this:

> *I like green, green peas and green grass where I play. I like green, green frogs and green palm trees that sway. I like green, green grapes and green leaves on a tree. But I wish that green, green spinach wasn't waiting on a plate for me.*

Right: Children, deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing, enjoy the patterning of language as they read Dr. Seuss.

Photography by John T. Consoli


Dr. Seuss
Horton Hears a Who!
SCRAM!
And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street

One day at lunch, I told some colleagues I was looking for beginner-level books to help my students move to more fluent reading and increase their growing sight word vocabulary. When I said I was thinking about trying the Dr. Seuss books, the reaction was mixed. So much of the joy of Dr. Seuss was the use of rhymes and nonsense words, my colleagues said. The books probably weren't an ideal choice for my deaf readers.

This worried me, too, but something told me Dr. Seuss would work. I'd seen my students picking the books off the shelves of the library, and I knew that many of them already had Dr. Seuss books, videos, and toys at home. In other words, the books met the most important criterion for authentic texts: They appealed to the children.

I decided to start with *The Eye Book* (1968), one of a series in which the senses and the parts of the body get the "seussical" treatment. It would make a nice transition from books such as *I Like Green* because the sentences followed a pattern and the pictures matched the text.

An Eye for Language

The Eye Book beautifully demonstrates many of the differences between English and ASL. For example, there's the line "I see him. And he sees me." In ASL, the pronoun *him* is implied in the directionality of the sign "I-see-him" or "He-sees-me" with the sign "see-him" or "see-me." In English we use different pronouns, *him* and *me*, and the root of the verb *see* remains the same in both sentences. In class, we played with this language in the form of "Who do you see?" A student would choose someone and sign "I see-her" or "She see-me," then we would write the English coding of what had been signed.

The rhyming words that had seemed so worrisome in the staff lunchroom integrated perfectly into lessons in word studies. The children sorted sight words like *pink* and *wink* and *bed* and *red* into "word families" (Morris, 1992). They enjoyed discovering the similar spelling patterns and began fingerspelling certain words to one another more often. Their favorites, I soon learned, were "N-O" and "G-O!" and "S-O?" They also began to show that they could generalize spelling rules: "If I know how to spell *red*, then I can figure out how to spell *bed*." It was particularly easy when the sign sometimes provided a clue to the initial letter, as in *red*.

Dr. Seuss was also a great introduction to "making words" as suggested by Patricia Cunningham and Richard Allington (Cunningham & Allington, 2003; Cunningham & Cunningham, 1992). In a "making words" activity, students manipulate a small set of letters in order to discover similar letter patterns in different words. I found that Dr. Seuss's *Hop on Pop* (1963) lent itself especially well to this activity, with frequently recurring words like *all*, *tall*, *small*, *ball*, *fall*, and *wall*.

One issue that continually occurs in early writing is that deaf children often can't "sound out" an unknown word in the same way hearing children can. Spelling becomes a roadblock to writing, and precious writing and instruction time gets lost as the teacher manually spells individual words for each student during writing time. "Making words" helped students internalize word families. For example, some students wanted to write about riding a sled in the first snow of the season, but they didn't know how to spell *sled*. I said, "Like red, s-l ?" One responded, "I know! E-d. Yeah. S-l-e-d," and the writing project was on its way.

A powerful strategy for increasing fluency and modeling reading with expression is repeated reading (Tierney, Readence, & Dishner, 1995). Repeated reading simply means reading a passage several times so that skills are developed to the level of automaticity. Word

recognition and fluency increase and, more important, transfer to other reading passages. The problem with repeated reading is that students often don't want to read a passage more than once. But that wasn't the case with Dr. Seuss. Even "struggling readers" felt the rhythm and experienced fluency as we read together, "Left foot, right foot, feet, feet, feet. How many, many feet you meet" in *The Foot Book* (1968). Looking at videotapes of the class, it strikes me that reading Dr. Seuss became more like performing before an audience than simply "reading." It was clear that these beginning readers were becoming more confident as they sternly read, "Stop! You must not hop on Pop," then broke into a chorus of giggles.

March 2 is the birthday of Theodor Geisel, the remarkable man who wrote as Dr. Seuss, and when our school celebrated, my students and I joined in the fun. We decorated our classroom door with characters from Dr. Seuss and listened to the librarian read some of our favorite Dr. Seuss books, like *The Cat in the Hat* (1957). Our class participated with the other first graders in crafts projects related to the books and learned fun facts about Mr. Geisel. And, of course, we made green eggs and ham!

Integrating Technology

Using Dr. Seuss in early reading instruction provides many opportunities to incorporate digital technology. Besides Dr. Seuss CD-ROMs, several Dr. Seuss Internet sites are available. Seussville, at www.seussville.com/seussville/games, includes printable games like Tic-Tac-Toe, word searches, and connect-the-dots using numbers. The site also includes interactive games like One Fish, Two Fish, and Concentration. Other sites with on-line games include www.eseuss.com and www.unclefed.com/FunStuff/kids/Dr.Seuss.html.

For teachers, several sites offer lesson plans and book ideas. One, http://atozteacher.stuff.com/lessons/drseuss.shtml, lists each Dr. Seuss book and notes numerous teaching ideas for each book. For example, for *The Foot Book*, students can create a class "Foot Book," using their own feet to "paint" footprints.

Your school library may own Dr. Seuss books on videotape or DVD. They are all captioned. Unfortunately, in "regular education" settings, teachers or librarians often assume that if a film is captioned, then the student who is deaf or hard of hearing will have equal access to the information presented. But as I learned with my class, the captions often go by too fast for these students, even when the material is specifically for younger children. For me, this experience underscored the importance of integrating captioned materials into the classroom curriculum slowly and thoughtfully in any school setting where students who are deaf or hard of hearing are present.

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