What Really Matters in the Early Literacy Development of Deaf Children?

- Dr. Connie Mayer, Associate Professor/York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada **WAS** available from 4/7/08 until 4/27/08 to answer questions and share ideas concerning her research and its implications for parents of children who are deaf/hard of hearing, their teachers and other professionals who work with them.
- You are encouraged to read the research summary below and review the attached discussion.

**Abstract:** With much earlier identification of hearing loss come expectations that increasing numbers of deaf children will develop literacy abilities comparable to their hearing age peers. To date, despite claims in the literature for parallel development between hearing and deaf learners with respect to early literacy learning, it remains the case that many deaf children do not go on to develop age-appropriate reading and writing abilities. Using written language examples from both deaf and hearing children and drawing on the developmental models of E. Ferreiro (1990) and D. Olson (1994), the discussion focuses on the ways in which deaf children draw apart from hearing children in the third stage of early literacy development, in the critical move from emergent to conventional literacy. Reasons for, and the significance of, this deviation are explored, with an eye to proposing implications for pedagogy and research, as we reconsider what really matters in the early literacy development of deaf children.

**Paragraph 1:** The early years are very important for all learners in developing language and literacy, and lay the groundwork for future success in learning to read and write (Ramey & Ramey, 2006). Therefore it makes sense that we should think more carefully about early literacy development in deaf children if we want to improve the reading and writing levels of older deaf learners.

**Paragraph 2:** It has been suggested that in the early stages of learning to read and write, deaf and hearing children follow similar routes (for a review see Williams, 2004). But despite these arguments for a parallel start, outcomes have remained disappointing. It is still the case that fifty percent of D/HH students graduate from secondary school with a fourth grade reading level or less (Traxler, 2000), and 30 percent leave school functionally illiterate (Marschark, Lang & Albertini, 2002). In other words, if the start is similar, why is the outcome so different? Is there some important way in which young deaf literacy learners differ from their hearing peers? Does this difference help explain why many deaf children struggle to read at grade level?

**Paragraph 3:** To think about this question, I use the four levels suggested by Ferreiro (1990) to consider the early literacy development of deaf children. In this analysis I compare written language samples from young deaf and hearing writers in order to think about the writing of deaf children in relation to what is typically seen in the development of hearing children. Samples are taken from data collected in two previous studies (Mayer, 1999; New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2005). All of the children in both studies used sign, or some combination of speech and sign as their primary means of communication.

**Paragraph 4:** In Levels 1 and 2, the writing of deaf and hearing children looks very similar. However, differences become apparent at Level 3 when hearing children begin to make use of alphabetic principles,
or what Ferriero (1990) calls the “phonetization of the written representation” (p.20). This is the stage when hearing children make use of letter-sound relationships to invent spellings. They use their knowledge of the spoken language to talk their way into text. Just like deaf children, hearing children who have problems at this stage often face greater difficulty in learning to read and write.

**Paragraph 5:** I am arguing that two factors are especially important for success for both deaf and hearing children at this third level. The first is knowledge of the face to face form (spoken or signed) of the language to be written (e.g., English). “Sounding out is based on the assumption that children know the meanings of the words [the language] they are decoding. Phonics works only if the string of produced letter sounds approximates a recognizable word” (Juel, 2006, p.423). The second is control of strategies to make sense of the relationships between face to face language and print. These are the strategies that children use to sort out how they are going to go about writing down what they say and/or sign. The most critical of these is phonological awareness. It is the primary means by which hearing students make the systematic connection between talk and text, and the only variable which has shown a causal relationship in the development of early literacy (Phillips & Torgensen, 2006). As such, it cannot be ignored in any discussion of how young deaf children learn to read and write – even though this can be problematic for children with hearing loss. Therefore it is important to think about ways in which deaf children can develop phonological awareness via routes other than, or in addition to audition (e.g., visual phonics, speechreading, fingerspelling etc.).

**Paragraph 6:** Implications for planning effective early literacy programs for deaf children are also explored, focusing on those teaching approaches that need renewed or continued emphasis (e.g., to make learning meaningful), those that require less attention (e.g., print concepts), and most importantly, those that need to be implemented but often are not (e.g., phonological awareness).

**References:**


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