Understanding deaf culture

Meghan Flanagan, Communicative Disorders

The goal of this project was to gain a broad understanding of the customs and values of Deaf Culture. As an aspiring speech-language pathologist, I will undoubtedly work with individuals who are hard-of-hearing and deaf. Knowing how important their culture is to them and what it is all about will help me to support them more adequately. Learning basic ASL signs will benefit me, not only with my profession, but also in daily life. Just like learning a foreign language, learning signs will enable me to communicate with a broader scope of people and promote positive language skills. Through this project, I have learned about a wide array of topics related to Deaf Culture and deepened my appreciation for cultures other than my own.

Goals and Future Directions

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Meghan Flanagan is a senior at the University of Rhode Island, majoring in Communicative Disorders. She will be completing the Honors Program and her Bachelor’s of Science degree this May. She will then be going on to work on her Master’s degree in Speech-Language Pathology, also at the University of Rhode Island. Through completing the Honors project, she has been able to expand her knowledge related to her field and grow an understanding and appreciation for Deaf Culture.

Deaf Culture

Deaf Culture provides a community for individuals with similar beliefs and values to communicate with one another using a shared language. It is unique in that it has its own fully developed language known as American Sign Language (ASL).

deaf v.s. Deaf

Medical Perspective
- Believe deaf people can’t.
- Describe sign language as inferior to spoken language
- Regard the “normal hearing person” as the best role model
- Neither accept nor support a separate “deaf culture”

Cultural Perspective
- Believe deaf people can...
- View sign language as equal to spoken language
- Regard successful deaf adults as positive role models for deaf children
- Respect, value, and support language and culture of deaf people

American Sign Language

American sign language is a verbal language that incorporates all of the linguistic components of a spoken language such as syntax, idioms, and dialect variation. It allows the deaf community to have a distinct sense of humor along with their own traditions, literature, and theater.

Myths and Misconceptions

Myth: 1. Deaf people can’t talk
2. Deafness only affects old people
3. Deaf people can’t listen to music
4. Sign language is universal
5. Deaf people are less intelligent than hearing people
6. Teaching your child sign language will prevent them from learning to speak
7. Deaf people would rather be hearing

Busted: 1. Some deaf people can speak very well
2. Deafness can occur at any age
3. Music is multisensory and can be experienced in different ways
4. Different countries have their own sign language
5. Deaf people are just as intelligent as hearing people
6. Teaching sign language to a child enhances their language skills and does not delay their speech
7. Most deaf people are proud to be deaf

ASL is the 6th most used and leading minority language in the U.S. behind:
- English
- Spanish
- Italian
- German
- French

One in eight people in the United States (13 percent, or 30 million) aged 12 years or older has hearing loss in both ears, based on standard hearing examinations.

Sources:
“Mitos del Gimnasio (Gimnasio) y Su Rastín De Se.” Diabetes. 30 June 2015.
“Stereotypes and Misconceptions About Deaf People.” Deaf Education: Global Perspectives.