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
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...
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 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.
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


Deaf Community Cultural Wealth (DCCW) comprises six “capitals”—socially accumulated assets and resources that work in concert to support deaf children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and academic development. Each capital is significant because it constitutes an integral part of the formation of a whole, well-rounded deaf student with the skills and tools to flourish and succeed in school and in life. The capitals of DCCW include: linguistic, social, familial, aspirational, navigational, and resistant (adapted from Yosso, 2005). Here is a closer look:

1. **Linguistic capital**—The acquisition of a natural, fully accessible language is crucial for the development of complex cognitive skills and provides access to socialization for positive development and self-awareness. This is arguably the most critical aspect of development in childhood. Cognitive skills cannot be attained without linguistic capital. Even with the best assistive technology, many deaf children do not have full and natural access to spoken languages (Humphries et al., 2014). Naturally developed signed language is crucial to ensure maximum individual linguistic and cognitive development. Deaf-blind children access signed language through tactile input that is completely comprehensible and allows their cognitive skills to develop to the fullest extent possible.

2. **Social capital**—Everyone agrees that socialization is an integral part of human development. Having access to and gaining social capital through an educational environment of deaf professionals and deaf peers allows deaf students, including those with disabilities, opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions and exposure to everyday discourse. In supposedly inclusive hearing environments, academic and informal conversations and interactions are lost on deaf students. They can see them happening, but their opportunities to engage are limited or mediated through an interpreter or signing aide.

3. **Familial capital**—Familial capital involves the concept of a network of people who are caring, invested in, and supportive of the community and of the individuals within the community. Kinship typically refers to relationships of family, but it can also be fostered within and between families and friends. Feelings of kinship can be developed through participation in sports, school, and other social or community organizations. The sense of kinship develops as individuals experience a networked support system that provides the ability and opportunity to discuss one’s feelings, thoughts, and ideas in depth and to receive supporting feedback in return.

4. **Aspirational capital**—Aspirational capital allows students to dare to dream, to have hopes and goals “in the face of perceived and real barriers” (Yosso, 2005). Aspirational capital is an integral component for developing resiliency, which allows a child to persevere and resist socially and psychologically imposed roadblocks of the larger community. It enables children to go beyond their immediate, often barrier-filled circumstances. Despite good intentions, exclusively hearing educational environments for deaf students with disabilities have the potential to result in inherently low expectations, as studies show that teachers often have lower expectations for students with disabilities (Borders et al., 2015). This is a barrier that is rooted in our thinking about being deaf as well as about being deaf with disabilities, and it should not be a reason to squash a child’s dream.

5. **Navigational capital**—Navigational capital is the ability to maneuver through social institutions by, for, and of hearing people. Social institutions are designed for people who have been perceived as representing the norm. People who do not fit the norm develop a different skill set for navigating the same spaces. Imagine you are deaf. How would you navigate a school designed for hearing students? How would you handle people who yell to get your attention? How many bells would have to ring to tell you to come in from recess? How many teachers would raise their voices to tell you to get in line for lunch? Deaf students with well-developed navigational capital are more attuned to their environment and, whenever possible, help create an environment that capitalizes on their strengths.

6. **Resistant capital**—Resistant capital is the “knowledge and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005). Faced with negative messages about their identity, people with resistant capital are able to maintain their dignity and to create spaces that transform negative views of themselves into an understanding of their own potential. Unfortunately, education is a space that often teaches children to conform rather than how to apply transformational resistance. This is why it is important for us to consider how we can model and encourage resistant capital in our classrooms, programs, and schools. Deaf children with disabilities often don’t acquire resistant capital because they don’t have opportunities to socialize or be exposed to deaf peers and deaf adults who have such skills and knowledge. Deaf educators need to prepare deaf students with disabilities—and all deaf students—to understand and appreciate transformational resistance to support and promote diversity among their peers.
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