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Why Not Sign? Classrooms as Sites of d/Deaf and Multilingual Literacy Development

by Dawnavyn M. James and Brianne R. Pitts



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My favorite part of the new school year routine is receiving my class roster. I (Dawnavyn) love scrolling through the names and “meeting” my students. Last year, when I clicked through the list and selected Greenly’s (a pseudonym) name, an alert popped up. The alert indicated that this student was d/Deaf. From that moment on, I knew that there were things I needed to do differently to support this student’s development. I share this story to set the scene. I am not an expert in American Sign Language (ASL) or a Deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) teacher. I am a general education kindergarten teacher who had the opportunity to watch how the use of ASL supported my d/Deaf students, reshaped what I thought a multilingual learner looked like, and taught me the power of collaborative visual literacies in the classroom.

Why Not Sign?

In 2021, the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) reported that more than 308,000 d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing multilingual learners attended American schools; only 75,000 of whom had individualized education plans (IEPs) that addressed their language development needs (NAD, n.d.). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1992), it is becoming more and more common for teachers to have d/Deaf

students in their classrooms, though very few educators have experience supporting d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing learners’ literacy development:

Because deafness is a low incidence disability, there is not widespread understanding of its educational implications, even among special educators. This lack of knowledge and skills in our education system contributes to the already substantial barriers to deaf students in receiving appropriate educational services.

This lack of understanding results in members of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities being lumped into a single category, “d/Deaf.” However, it is a term that can include individuals at many levels of hearing loss. Higgins & Lieberman (2016) explain, “deaf” refer[s] to the “audiological condition of hearing loss,” and “Deaf” refer[s] to membership in a cultural group.”

This article draws on terminology from the American Annals of the Deaf, describing d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing Multilingual Learners as “DMLs” (Pizzo & Chilvers, 2016). Their definition of DMLs is inclusive of “any d/Deaf or hard of hearing learner who uses a

combination of spoken languages, written languages, and/or signed languages and comes from a home where a language other than English is used” (Pizzo & Chilvers, 2016, p. 64). DML designation includes the vibrant and varied cultural perspectives of the entire d/Deaf community. Scholars suggest teachers use visual literacy strategies in elementary classrooms as one way of forwarding asset-based, “cultural perspectives” that include the contributions of d/Deaf society and value Deaf Cultures (Golos, Moses, Gale & Berke, 2021, p. 98).

Though frequently overlooked as “bilingual” learners, DMLs often learn English as a *second* language. Both linguistic and cultural minorities (Higgins & Lieberman, 2016), DMLs bring a wealth of knowledge and experiential learning to the classroom, and they can be supported through “visual language(s) like ASL, and visual strategies” (Golos et al. 2021, p. 98). While not used by all d/Deaf learners, scholars contend that American Sign Language (ASL) and visual literacy strategies have benefits for all children (Golos et al., 2021), providing “conceptual contributions” to the context and culture of literacy learning (Evans, 2004, p. 17).

The journey towards including DML strategies is personal. For both authors, teacher preparation classwork excluded a focus on DML students or their strengths and cultural capital. The absence of this training left us feeling underprepared to serve students (like Greenly). We argue that this lack of preparedness is aggravated by the lack of DML literature available outside specialized d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing journals. We further recognize that transitioning educators’ views of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing students from deficit orientation is possible and can be supported by drawing on visual linguistic practices, including, but not limited to ASL (Higgins and Lieberman, 2016). As evidence, we share Dawnavyn’s Kindergarten classroom experience teaching DMLs and discuss our efforts to incorporate ASL and visual literacy strategies for more equitable instruction.

DML Literacies in Elementary Schools

Scholarship focusing on DMLs’ early literacy development can be found in journals such as *Deafness &*

Education International, *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, and *American Annals of the Deaf*, which is published by Gallaudet University (Gallaudet, 2021). While prominent sources, journal articles are not easily accessible to classroom educators, resulting in a barrier for individuals serving DMLs.

The NAD identifies key challenges for DML learners, including “social interaction with peers and adults,” a critical element of language development. They also assert that providing DMLs “[c]onstant language input and joint activity for the development of cognitive processes is essential” (NAD, n.d.).

Golos et al. (2021) synthesized multiple findings from existing scholarship to confirm early exposure to sign language encourages improved academics for DMLs in multiple domains; furthermore, sign language exposure can improve hearing students’ literacy skills as well (Golos et al., 2021, p. 100). However, quantitative data on the impact of ASL/English bilingual education in public schools is lacking (Delana, Gentry, and Andrews, 2007) and requires more attention in research.

It was rare for Greenly’s teachers to communicate with them using signs. Former teachers depended solely on Greenly’s sign language interpreter when communicating. Even though Greenly’s support was there, and it was strong, I (Dawnavyn), too, wanted to support Greenly in all the ways that I could. When I told Brienne this story, I ended it with, “Why not sign?”

Why Us?

Collectively in our 22nd year of teaching, we had not previously considered the needs of DML literacy learners. Both former elementary teachers, we teach and research inclusive literacy strategies and multicultural and linguistic representation in texts, but knowledge of DMLs’ needs alluded us.

Throughout the article, you’ll read Dawnavyn’s journey (presented in italics) toward more inclusive DML

literacy instruction. Known to students as “Queen James,” she is a former kindergarten teacher from a large Missouri school district who taught multiple DML learners who were d/Deaf. Author two, Brianne, is an elementary teacher-turned-professor who was inspired by an ASL minor and DML advocate who worked to advance d/Deaf culture and DML students’ needs in her teacher education classroom.

After learning about the needs of our students and spending time getting to know them, we (the research team) started meeting regularly to share classroom experiences and DML materials in addition to reviewing the literature related to advancing DMLs’ access. The resulting conversations morphed into writing and research through kitchen-table-reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2014). Our brainstorming sessions helped interrogate our identities, positionalities, and the possibilities for DML-inclusive practices. We share what we gained from these discussions herein.

While we have learned an immense amount about serving DML students and using ASL in our classrooms, we recognize there are limitations in our experience as hearing educators who are *learning* about DML literacies. We are not experts, but we show up as learners on a journey towards asset-based, DML-inclusive strategies for literacy instruction. We invite members of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities to add on, critique, and extend our work in these efforts.

We offer thanks to the generous students, families, scholars, and colleagues who helped us see possibilities in inclusive DML strategies. We recognize that in order to change practices and make classrooms more inclusive of the multiple gifts of DML students, all educators, *especially* hearing educators, will need to (re)evaluate their literacy practices. We hope that the possibilities we share will encourage other (hearing and DML) educators to join in (re)imagining possibilities for inclusive literacy instruction.

In our classroom, a shift was possible because Greenly’s support eventually became our (mine and my hearing

students’) support too. Greenly’s DHH (Deaf and Hard of Hearing) teacher taught two ASL lessons to the entire class each week; their sign language interpreter helped us to be better communicators; Greenly’s family became a big part of our classroom family. We all learned from and alongside Greenly that year.

(Re)imagining DML Literacy Practice

ASL, or American Sign Language, can be a benefit for all our students (Golos et al., 2021), those who speak using ASL, those who struggle with communicating, those who speak a different language, and those who need to communicate *with* someone using ASL. ASL can also help teachers to manage the classroom, hone their instruction, and impact students’ literacy growth, regardless of linguistic status.

ASL changed how I taught and learned. Beyond using it to support our DML learners, other students picked up on the signs. For example, a hearing student struggling with articulation screamed out of frustration when he could not find words. One day, I saw someone was bothering him on the playground, and he signed, “stop.” Knowing the ASL sign allowed him to articulate his needs quickly and without having to rely on verbal language. Admittedly, I was surprised because I hadn’t realized he had been picking up on signs. This is one example of many. In fact, I saw the growth of all my students using ASL. Now, I know that in the future, even if I do not have DML students in my classrooms, I will still incorporate ASL to support children’s communication. I mean, why not sign?

In the following section, we’ve outlined five practical classroom suggestions for DML-inclusive literacy instruction. These suggestions include efforts to 1) Make Literacy Visual, 2) Build a Community of Practice, 3) Use Materials Created by and for Diverse DML Communities, 4) Acknowledge Differences Among and Between DMLs, and 5) Start Small and Simple. Following these suggestions, we discuss avenues for future research and additional resources for classroom teachers.

Make Literacy Visual

Visuals are vital when making classroom and literacy learning accessible for DML learners.

My classroom expectations shifted from simply “listening” to including “listening with ears and eyes” for all kindergarten learners. I post a visual schedule for students and ensure ASL alphabet posters are available to learn what letters look and sound like and how to sign them. These alphabet posters show the letter name, an image to support its common sound(s), and the ASL sign in various skin tones. Whenever students use the chart to find a particular letter, they always say and sign each letter, regardless of hearing status.

When working in small groups or independently, I give them smaller versions of the same visual charts showing the letter, picture, and ASL sign. They have these accessible for reading and writing time. Since introducing ASL ABCs, I have seen the kindergarteners putting it all together after lots of practice. They say things like, “I know how to sign that name,” or “I know what that letter looks like,” and then confidently fingerspell it. Anything I’ve written on the board, they practice spelling with their fingers, which has helped their writing. I’ll hear things like, “oh, I don’t know how to spell cat,” then observe the student sound it out, fingerspell it, and pause to write it down.

Fingerspelling, or when students use ASL to sign individual letters from the alphabet, has been shown to support one-to-one correspondence and help DMLs “build a bridge” between ASL and English (Higgins & Lieberman, 2016, p. 13). When learning CVC (Consonant, Vowel, Consonant) words, Dawnavyn’s students often fingerspelled them. Their classroom mantra, “let me sign it, let me say it,” became a part of their daily practice. Whether using spoken language or ASL, her students were more eager to “speak up” during conversations around text and were actively engaged in the process.

Students sharing the classroom with Greenly and Dawnavyn expanded their multimodal literacies

through written and spoken language acquisition. Dawnavyn’s kindergarteners left the year able to write their names, fingerspell their names, and use the sign names given by their DML classmates (these names are often visual and include a physical trait or letter sound).

The work that happened in Dawnavyn’s kindergarten spilled out into other learning opportunities. Sharing examples of Dawnavyn’s work with elementary DML learners has helped inspire Brienne’s college students to use more inclusive strategies. After student discussions and examples showing the flexibility of ASL and DML inclusive practices, students began highlighting opportunities to engage with multiple forms of visual literacy in their lesson plans. They made shifts (like adding captions to instructional videos and ASL signs or visual references alongside their words in slide projections), ultimately making their lessons more accessible. Additionally, when we read and assess pre-made lessons in our classroom texts, the students have begun to point out areas that may inhibit DML access.

Build a Community of Practice

We’ve learned from people who are d/Deaf/hard of hearing, those who educate deaf/hard of hearing learners, and those who use signs to communicate with others. From these colleagues and DMLs, Dawnavyn’s students learned how to sign their feelings and needs such as hunger or thirst, fingerspell their names, and sign celebrations like Halloween, Diwali, Thanksgiving, and Hanukkah. Their attempts to include sign language in daily conversations led to more inter-community signing, facilitating conversations amongst and between DML students and hearing students both in and out of the classroom.

While most educators do not have these resources, they can learn from the broader DML community to develop classroom practices. Small efforts can be made to develop a community through visual signs, which are commonplace in elementary schools. Using ASL, teachers and learners can select simple ASL signs (as used by their DML community) to build students’ vocabularies. Signs such as “yes,” “no,” “please,” “thank you,” “restroom,” “drink,” and “stop” help students

communicate and build a community that can engage with ASL in conversation. Then, when students address you in sign, the whole class can respond in ASL.

I've seen students' communication skills positively impacted by ASL integration. Now that they are more fluent with signs, watching them play at recess has been fun. At the beginning of the year, kindergarten recess was rough. Now, they use their signs to communicate. For example, I've witnessed children sign "stop," "I don't like that," or "thank you." Incorporating signing has strengthened communication and has simultaneously supported confidence in children's speech too. My students know they are heard, whether speaking using one language or signing another language.

Use Materials Created by and for Diverse DML Communities

Online sources can help provide visual access to DML students and teachers. Some favorites from Dawnvyn's kindergarteners included watching *ASL Storytelling* (Texas School for the Deaf Statewide Outreach Center, 2018), a YouTube channel made by the Texas School for the Deaf. Each video story featured an audio read-aloud, which was also signed for DML readers, building vocabulary for the entire class.

Cue speech posters from Cue College also came in handy to support kindergarten DMLs' "mouth shape, hand shape, and location" (Cue College, 2021). Available from cuecollege.org, Dawnvyn made sure the cued speech posters were visible to all. When in small groups and signing with phonemes (in cue speech), or in decodable words, like "Pat and Pam," DML students used the posters alongside their hearing peers. The visuals of the posters helped DML students to tell them apart. While not every DML learner favors these materials, some families find them supportive.

My DML students work 1:1 with a d/Deaf educator each morning, learning to cue those sounds. Now that they understand that letters make sounds, whenever they are

practicing in class, they need to be able to see those sounds. Through the interpreters and d/Deaf educators, I learned that, in general, DMLs need to be able to see whatever hearing kids can hear. With these posters, they learn the sound correlation with the letter, which will help their reading and writing when sounding out words.

Teachers new to exploring DML literacy strategies can educate themselves by reading books by, about, and for DML learners. Some favorites are shared in the companion bookmark (Image 1). We suggest consulting with ASL dictionaries such as those from the Gallaudet University Press (Gordon et al., 2014) and following DML educators who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing on social media. Some examples of educators and entrepreneurs who promote DML literacies in the classroom include: @whyisign, @adventuresindeafed, @signlanguagecenter, @ameliathearcheologist, @errybshop, and @raisingfrankandbilly among others.

As you learn from and along with your DML supportive community, it is vital to examine the language you use to represent DML students in your classroom. Educators can visit the NAD website (nad.org) for regularly-updated classroom resources, asset-based vocabulary lists, and more. Educators can support DMLs' cultural differences by selecting materials representing their students' intersectional identities. For example, rather than using ready-made ASL posters featuring all signs with white hands, the TheLostSheep.co (Etsy.com) sells multicultural ASL posters. The poster's illustrator, K. Herkert (2021) kindly allowed us to include example of his poster in this publication. These and other updated DML literacy tools can help create a more positive and inclusive learning community.

Acknowledge Differences Among and Between DMLs

There is no one-kind of DML student or family, or one way to be d/Deaf or hard of hearing. Like all multilingual students, you'll notice differences in signs amongst DMLs who have hearing parents and d/Deaf parents. Some DML students speak Black American Sign Language (BSL), Spanish Sign Language (SSL), or another native sign language, as some of approximately 300

types of sign language worldwide (Newsweek, 2019). There are “lazy signs” and slang signs, too. Just like oral language, ASL speakers’ signs can be very personal. We recognize the extensive diversity within the DML community and multiple forms of sign languages which underscores the importance of learning about each individual learner in your classroom.

At first, when teaching DML students, I worried they would feel like I was targeting them with ASL all over the classroom. I also worried about how hearing families would take to sign in the classroom. Would they be upset? Then I understood that while DML students communicate differently, the materials did not feel forced. I started sending home resources to all the families with what we did each week related to ASL. During conferences, many parents said, “my child comes home, and they’re signing.” It made me realize how ASL and learning from our DML students positively impacted all the families in my classroom.

Start Small and Simple

Educators at any grade level can learn to support DMLs by including multicultural examples of literacy materials that feature ASL as support. Educators can integrate simple signs for invitations to gather, share feelings, or as standard responses to classroom questions.

Another way to teach and learn signs can be using a “go word” each week. I used to say, “When I say the ‘go’ word, grab your writing notebooks and a pencil, and start your writing for today.” However, now, instead of saying, “when I say,” I say (and sign), “when I sign,” it forces all my students to wait for the directions and look for the sign “go word.” While they wait, I often sign the wrong word first to see if they are paying attention. Through this strategy alone, we’ve learned quite a few signs.

These interactive methods help to engage DMLs’ eyes, minds, and voices (regardless of language acquisition), and improves access for all. Dawnavyn found she would frequently sign while reading aloud; this practice led to

students’ valuing multiple languages and the process of learning itself.

I incorporate signing into read alouds. We read, Thank You, Omul! (Mora, 2019), and every time I said, “thank you,” I signed it. After the story, a student commented that everyone was learning a second language. Because of this, students who spoke another language (ASL, Spanish, or Urdu) seemed less isolated and more open to sharing. Another bilingual student told me he wanted me to speak with him as I speak with the DML students in sign. I said, “I had to learn how to speak like them. If you are willing to teach me, I am happy to speak like you.” When the students observe that I can learn to speak ASL, they want me to speak their languages. For all the students, learning ASL helps them see that we can value all languages. I say, “You just have to help me because I’m learning too.”

We recognize ASL is a vital tool for learning to communicate with DML students and others. While many educators with DML learners have the support of an ASL interpreter, we must rely on more than classroom interpreters to communicate. All educators are capable of developing skills to help students’ literacy development. It’s also ok not to be fluent in sign and to show your students you’re learning along with them.

Thankfully, the recognition of DMLs’ strengths and cultural assets is rising. The kindergartners were thrilled to learn there is even a recent deaf superhero in Marvel. DML inclusion, conversation, and practice have become their norm.

So, “Why Not Sign?”

The examples Dawnavyn shared include opportunities for:

1. Making Literacy Visual
2. Building a Community of Practice
3. Using Materials Created by and for Diverse DML Communities

4. Acknowledging Differences Among and Between DMLs,
5. Starting Small and Simple

Now it's your turn.

Want More?

For recent podcasts, book lists, academic texts, and television resources, see:

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