Editorial

Literacy in the Classroom and Beyond

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A photograph taken in 1893 at the Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston, MA, shows pupils taking part in a literacy lesson. Ten girls and boys are sitting in a semicircle with their teacher, while another pupil stands by the blackboard on which a passage of text is written in elegant copperplate. The picture is a reminder that, right from the earliest days of deaf education providing pupils with access to literacy, has been seen as a core objective. The importance of literacy is reflected in the United Nations Development Programs' Human Development Index (HDI). This includes all the things you might expect such as measures of health, longevity, and standard of living in a particular country, but it also includes the literacy level. In many of the countries that appear at the bottom of the HDI rankings, the literacy level among the adult population is less than 50%, whereas it exceeds 95% in developed countries. The definition of literacy used for the purpose of the HDI is an ability to read a short, simple passage relating to everyday life. This is a modest requirement since, in order to read and write at the levels demanded in secondary education in developed countries, it is essential to be able to deal with abstract concepts and to integrate ideas across complex text.

As had often been reported within the pages of the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, many children who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH) find literacy an enormous challenge, and many leave formal education without having achieved a level of literacy that prepares them for the demands of a literate society. What is by no means clear is why many children who are DHH experience such difficulties.

Understanding the answer to this question is not only of academic interest but is also key to providing the best and most effective support for the development of reading and writing skills.

Studies of the development of literacy in a variety of populations and a variety of languages have shown that many different factors can affect the success with which children learn to read and write. These include individual differences in children's cognitive abilities, such as visual and auditory short-term memory, as well as their experiences both at home and school. The picture is complicated by the number of different skills that are required to read and write and by the fact that these skills change as children move from the early to the later stages of literacy. Add to this already-complex picture the fact that children who are DHH are very heterogeneous and also add to the mix the impact of recent changes such as the increasing access to newborn hearing screening and the increasing availability of cochlear implants—at least for those who have are fortunate to have access to the latest technological developments.

Understanding what promotes (and impedes) literacy for children who are DHH is a challenge, one that has been with us for decades if not centuries. At the same time, it is a challenge that will have to be overcome if DHH children are going to have educational opportunities and outcomes comparable to their hearing peers. Indeed, the dual goals of this Special Section, to be continued throughout this volume of the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, are the advancement of science and pedagogy associated with DHH children's literacy skills and also the promotion of skills that will continue have an impact throughout their entire lives.