



Deaf culture all day every day at the BC School for the Deaf

by Leslie Dyson

A visit to Jenn Zuvic's classroom at the BC School for the Deaf (BCSD) revealed Grade 4 and 5 students creating short videos for a national literary competition.

Ano, Grade 5, speaking through interpreter Caroline Tetreault, said he was using his American Sign Language (ASL) skills to create an expressive poem using just four hand shapes.

The students were also using software to edit video footage of themselves standing in front of a green screen telling stories based on real or historical events.

There are 100 Deaf and hard of hearing students in the provincial K-12 program running at two sites: South Slope Elementary and Burnaby South Secondary. Students come from all over the province although most live in the Lower Mainland. Up to 35 students from more distant communities can be accommodated at a nearby residence.

Principal Gordon Li said the educators, support staff, and parents, as well as the school district and Ministry of Education support a proposal to create an environment where Deaf culture can thrive. That means using the new B.C. curriculum and First Nations

Principles of Learning to protect and promote ASL.

Deaf schools are declining across the country, said Li, due to medical advances (cochlear implants) and technical improvements (FM and loop systems, etc.). However, as good as these strategies are, they don't work for everyone.

Deaf culture, like First Nations cultures, has a distinct language that includes poetry, humour, legends, sign play, and regional accents and dialects. ASL is the language used in North America. There are unique traditions, rules of behaviour, and values. Culture is transmitted by peers, elders, and teachers.

Deaf students often arrive at school with a two-year lag in language development and some have faced alienation and discrimination.

The goal is to have every student graduate, added Li. "I know we can be way more successful. We have to work with our kids and find Deaf-friendly ways to help them graduate."

Li said the staff held a "dreaming out loud" workshop last fall to help the students and support Deaf culture.

The vision calls for moving away from books and texts. ASL is a visual medium so students are presenting what they know in videos. A green screen has been set up to allow them to create movies with backgrounds using iMovie software. The school has a Youtube channel (BCSD Technology) where visitors can see books being presented in ASL, an acknowledgement of First Nations' unceded territory, and a student music video of *Can't Stop the Feeling*.

The proposal also calls for engaging more Deaf community elders, establishing learning opportunities with successful Deaf professionals, and greater use of technical tools to support ASL and create ASL learning materials. Some will have spoken English recorded over the images to assist hearing viewers.

"This could become a model school for a redesigned curriculum," said Li. "Much work can be done in this area."

"A lot is lost through translation into English," said Vice-Principal Margaret Paris. Assessment seems to be superficial. "We've seen students with a full comprehension of ASL but a Grade 2 reading level. We think they can't understand when they struggle with English."

ASL has a grammatical structure similar to French. There are many examples of interpreters signing while someone speaks English, but signed English is not very helpful for ASL first-language speakers.

ASL is more symbolic and includes facial grammar to indicate questions or statements. "It's very complex," said Tetreault. If you're telling a story about a conversation between two people, you become each person by turning your body to indicate one speaker or another,

she explained.

Grade 3 to 6 teacher Shelena Marsh, has been signing since high school. "French wasn't working for me," she said, "but I'm still learning every day." She has been at the elementary school for four years but was teaching at the secondary level for two years before that.

On this particular day, Marsh was directing her energetic students into preparing for a play based on Jan Brett's book *The Mitten*. She laughed and said, "They thrive on being ridiculous." A video of the dress rehearsal taken a few days earlier was hilarious. "But the world doesn't always match the kids," she added.

Marsh said she's cognizant of the fact that as a hearing person, "I will never face the same challenges that my kids feel. But I have two support staff in my class. When a child is crying out of frustration, it takes a Deaf person to really understand that."

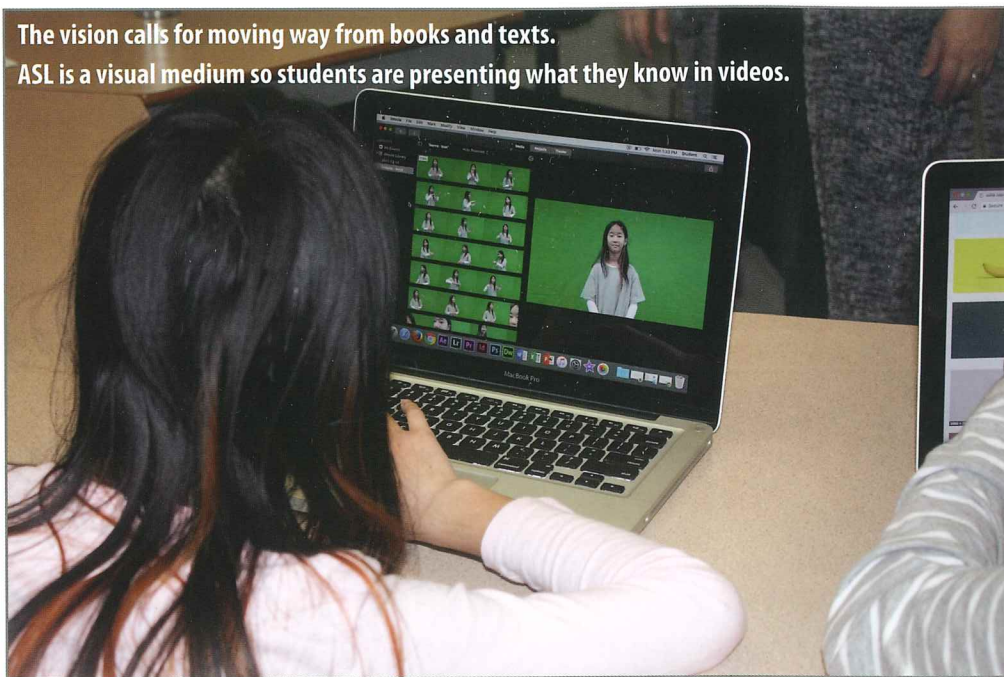
For many parents, the first time they learn about Deaf culture is when they have a Deaf child. It can be stressful and some go through a grieving process.

Debra Moffatt, a mother of four who lives in Prince George, has an 18-year-old son who is hard of hearing.

"Ninety-five per cent of Deaf and

"As much as our family has tried to learn ASL, we're not well wired to learning a new language let alone a visual one. It's hard to know what he's saying, but it's wonderful to see him talking to others and his pride and confidence. It's not a hearing loss, but [rather] a Deaf gain. He would not be the confident, respected, and respectful person he is if we didn't make the big decision (for the Prince George student at attend school at Burnaby's BCSD)."

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hard of hearing children are born to hearing families,” she said. “He fooled us up to the age of five by watching what our tongues were doing.”

Noah did well in elementary school using his lip- and face-reading skills and an FM hearing system.

When he got his hearing aids he was excited by all the new information he was receiving. “No one suggested he could learn sign language and we didn’t view him as Deaf,” Moffatt said.

“He was always outgoing and easy going but we saw him visibly change in secondary school. There were signs in elementary school too, but it really came to a head in Grade 8.”

Noah was the target of bullying by a couple of students. He was excluded from conversations, his FM system was thrown in the garbage, and he was put in a chokehold. But Noah’s reactions got him branded as a hot head and he ended up suspended from school.

He then took online distance education for a couple of years. He also participated in a camp

experience every fall for Deaf and hard of hearing children in northern B.C. That’s where the Moffatt family learned about the BCSD. They made a decision that Noah should have access to ASL and Deaf culture.

In February 2015, Noah moved into the residence. “Sending our son away was a difficult decision,” Moffatt said. Noah is away from home from Sunday evening to Friday afternoon. He escorts a younger buddy who also flies to Prince George on weekends. Travel costs and accommodations are covered by the ministries of Education, Children and Youth Services, and Citizenship and Immigration.

Moffatt pointed out that it’s not easy for hard of hearing people. “They feel like they’re living in this neither space. Not Deaf, not hearing. But if you asked my son – other than family – he feels like he belongs in the Deaf world.”

Recently, Noah told his family he hates his hearing aids. He hasn’t worn them for eight months.

Moffatt said, “Now, as he starts to feel less hearing and more Deaf, we

need to find ways to accommodate and support him. We have to walk up and tap him on the shoulder, or flick his light switch, or text him.

“We knew the school could give him things we couldn’t. But there’s tears just talking about it. Being a parent five days a week from a distance sucks. And it’s hard staying in touch with school from a distance. I can’t go to the PAC meeting.

“It’s difficult because it’s a culture where I’m an outsider. As much as our family has tried to learn ASL, we’re not well wired to learning a new language let alone a visual one. It’s hard to know what he’s saying, but it’s wonderful to see him talking to others and his pride and confidence. It’s not a hearing loss, but [rather] a Deaf gain. He would not be the confident, respected, and respectful person he is if we didn’t make the big decision. As hard as it is, it’s the right thing.”

Moffatt is working on her masters’ degree at Royal Rhodes University and is doing an autoethnographic thesis about the journey of a parent accompanying a hard of hearing child’s move to a new culture.

Every teacher at BCSD has a Master’s degree in Deaf education. There are spaces open and the staff and parents are developing communication strategies to draw more Deaf and hard of hearing children to the school so they too can experience the benefits of belonging to a unique, vibrant, and welcoming community.

“It’s Deaf Culture all day every day,” said Marsh. 

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being funded by government. This sends a clear and unmistakable message about how our government values school and system leadership. We believe that items negotiated at the provincial level should come with provincial funding so that districts are not pressured to find total compensation enhancements within their existing dollars.

As school leaders we are hard-wired to take care of the needs of those around us before we take

care of our own. We look after staff needs, student needs, and often the needs of our student's family members. After 30 years, the time has come to understand and act on a neglected aspect of our work: our legitimate needs being met – or ignored – have a direct system impact. Negotiation agency could provide the greatest good for the greatest number of our members, sharpen their focus on the purpose of their work, and motivate our best teach-

er-leaders to aspire to school leadership.

As we investigate negotiation agency as a possibility, we are committed to ensuring that our members are kept apprised of our progress. In addition, we will be using a variety of ways to communicate with our members to ensure that we are pursuing a pathway that they support.

I encourage you to read Kit's comments on this same subject on pages 18-19. 

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