THE MANUAL/ORAL CONTROVERSY

For at least a century, the education of deaf children has been polarized into two main camps, the manualists (those who sign) and the oralists (those who rely on speech and speechreading for communication). In addition, there is a third camp, those who use cued speech. Cued speech is not really speech at all, but a visual representation of English sounds. In relative terms, it is a new method that will be discussed later. If parents understand the history behind the controversy, they will have a better chance of being able to filter feelings from fact. “They [parents] need to learn the difference between opinion (emotionally based) and fact (researched).”

During the early 1800’s, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet went to England to learn a teaching method suitable for instructing deaf students. When he approached the Braidwood school, they were unwilling to share their instructional method. Braidwood’s methods were oral in nature, reliant on speech and speechreading. Fortunately a French priest, Roche-Ambroise Sicard, a brilliant teacher of the deaf, was on tour demonstrating his method while Gallaudet was in England. Gallaudet went to the demonstration and was impressed with Sicard’s sign language method. He brought Sicard’s methods and Laurent Clerc, a gifted deaf teacher to Connecticut.

These dedicated men established the Hartford school, later known as the American School for the Deaf in 1817. The method used in the School was sign language. During the next sixty-three years, sign language was the order of the day. About one half of all teachers of the deaf were deaf themselves and a number of deaf individuals established their own schools. During this golden era of signed deaf education, Congress established the National Deaf Mute College in 1864. Today, this institution is known as Gallaudet University. However, the trend toward using sign language to educate the deaf changed after the Conference of Milan.

The Conference of Milan was an international conference on the virtues of the two major instructional methods used to educate the deaf in that time period. The best educators in the world were in attendance. Although the United States traditionally used signed language to teach the deaf population, other countries used oral methods. Prior to Milan, there was always bickering between educators as to which method was superior, sign or speech. It is important also to remember that the participants of this battle royale cared deeply for the children under their care. However, their very human preferences and agendas have haunted all of us to this day. A parent respondent shared this insight “NO One has one right way to raise a deaf child, any more than anyone has one right way to raise a hearing child. The politics involved in deaf education are nauseating and who suffers the most in the end are the children themselves.”

In 1880, the two did battle at the Conference of Milan. The conclusion of the Conference was that the oral method was superior. This changed the course of teaching history for the next eighty years. Within ten years, the number of deaf teachers of the deaf dropped to one quarter of total teachers. Within the next twenty years the number of deaf teachers teaching deaf students fell to one fifth of the total. Regrettably, many talented deaf teachers went into retirement during this period of time. Milan affected members of the Deaf community profoundly, professionally and personally.

Signing in the classroom became a forbidden thing. Anecdotally, people have shared stories about being forced to sit on their hands. It was not uncommon for children to have their hands slapped for signing. The issue of corporal punishment, when seen in the light of earlier teaching practices, does not seem cruel. Children, both hearing and deaf, were disciplined this way when they disobeyed. However, upon reflection, these deaf children had poor communication with their teachers and no effective way of communicating among themselves. The fairness of harsh discipline under these circumstances is questionable. As a result of these attitudes and practices, signing was done in secret and ASL was often taught to the younger children by the older youths in the residential institutions.

Sign was forbidden because educators believed that if a profoundly deaf child signed, he would not learn how to speak since speaking is a difficult skill for a deaf child to learn. English is a truly difficult language to speechread. Many words look identical upon the lips. In order to speechread effectively the individual must have an excellent grasp of the English language. Most deaf people in the time period being discussed had never heard English and did not have a grasp of the language, yet they were expected to learn their lessons and learn to communicate without having the necessary tools to do so. For many deaf individuals, the frustration caused by this system and the poor scholastic results achieved by the system added fuel to a bitter situation.

Then in the early 1960s William Stokoe wrote and published Sign Language Structure. This work proclaimed that American Sign Language (ASL) was, indeed, a true language on a par with any spoken language. From this point forward, various forms of signed communication, were used more frequently in the in the classroom. In 1966, Dr. Orin Cornett designed Cued Speech. This method is not sign, nor is it really speech, but rather a visual way to present the phonology of the English language. Shortly thereafter all of the Manual Codes for English came into being. Total Communication also emerged about this time. The teaching trends begun in 1880 had finally begun to turn around.

Today, the attitudes towards teaching deaf children have changed drastically. Many professionals in the field of deafness suggest a tool box approach. Generally the professionals feel that some form of signing, preferably ASL, is useful to the deaf child. Quite a number advocate using the bilingual model. One professional writes: “What the U.S. desperately needs ASAP is a TRULY bilingual program for deaf kids in which ASL via signs and English via cues are given equal importance.”
Regrettably, the damage between the Deaf and hearing communities had been done. Trust between people and establishments take many years to heal. The deaf individuals of this era and their parents must not only deal with the basic challenge of finding a common way to communicate, but they must also deal with the ghosts of the past.