

Deaf older students as language role models

Derek Rodger and **Sally Roberts** describe how the storytelling initiative, Secret Storyteller, develops Deaf children's BSL receptive and expressive skills

After attending a training course on the enjoyment of reading in the early years, an initiative, called the Secret Storyteller was set up at Heathlands. The initial aim was to provide a variety of 'surprise' BSL signers for the children to broaden their exposure to different styles and delivery. Initially, we started by asking staff to sign up to be a secret storyteller, which was filmed and was surprisingly very popular. It is great as we now have a lot of BSL stories that can be revisited with the children, and they enjoyed the new addition hands and faces; we noticed the children's attendance, concentration and engagement swiftly improved. It became evident that the positive 'book behaviour' of the early years children grew. Repeated role play and the 'acting out' of being the storyteller have become common features of child initiated play. This includes explanations of the book cover, questioning of their peer audience about illustrations and story detail, as well as developing an awareness that print carries meaning. Key words or repeated phrases are sometimes picked out from the text and included in the child's delivery with the expectation of audience participation! The children have grown in confidence and previously cautious individuals have been observed 'having a go' at storytelling to their peers. In addition, children were encouraged to draw the front cover of the book without adult support or intervention. These are all kept and individual progression can be seen in terms of emergent writing development and representational drawing skills. Over time a child may have progressed from simple mark making to correct letter formation and an awareness of word size, spacing and direction. Illustrations take on more recognisable detail and children are able to explain their work.

At the weekly sign and play afternoons, parents were also encouraged to take part and did so willingly in the knowledge that, although nerve wracking the first time, the satisfaction that prevailed in knowing that the children enjoyed their signed story was tangible. Even the visiting deaf children at two years old sat, watched and absorbed these visually stimulating storytelling experiences.

The Learning Culture focus group student leaders heard about this initiative and were so keen to get involved. Our student leadership structure consists of focus groups to engage students in different aspects of school life. These are led by student leaders, and each group is accompanied by a teacher providing guidance and support. The following areas are focused on:

- student council
- health and well-being
- learning culture
- ECO (Eco school)
- sport

The Learning Culture group also knew there would be some secondary students who would enjoy this, so they got involved and arranged for students to visit on a weekly basis over a period of time. This was a very valuable opportunity for those who want to develop their BSL skills and confidence. A chat was arranged before their 'performance' to ascertain the bare essentials and what to aim for when signing a story to small children: engage with them first of all by asking names and providing friendly comments; show and discuss the book cover illustrations and bring them to life with clear straightforward signs, facial expressions and body language; and acknowledge simple key vocabulary in the text that might be repeated, but avoid direct signed translation of the written word at this stage

Some of the older students found this a more natural venture than others. Storytelling is a 'performance' and for the others this would take them from their comfort zones. However, with the support and guidance of their peers and staff, they developed the confidence to try again and build on what they had learnt previously. That impetus to 'go again' is to be acknowledged and admired. No secret storyteller has ever left the classroom without a smile on their face and feeling worthy inside.

The more experienced student leaders focused on developing their peer mentoring skills by leading activities around school such as games clubs etc. They played a very important role in encouraging, nurturing and developing students' skills as part of their peer mentoring work. One student was recommended to develop her BSL skills following a language and literacy assessment. Building on the success of the initiative, we arranged for the student to develop her BSL receptive and productive skills by doing a 30-minute BSL storytelling session once every half term with one of the student leaders supporting her. This enabled the student leader to develop her peer mentoring skills. In addition, this leader had high levels of empathy and communication skills, which had been critical in giving the student mutual support and advice on developing her BSL skills. We received significant appreciative feedback from the nursery staff who were positive about the progress the student had made in developing her confidence and BSL skills and delighted that their children had enjoyed the experience.

This story-telling initiative is important because of the language development process involved in using older students as language models to support younger students with developing their language. It is believed that by giving deaf children exposure to a variety of Deaf language role models, they will make gains in developing their expressive and receptive language skills. Research shows that a Deaf role model is likely to have a positive effect

and contribution on the language development of younger Deaf children (Watkins et al, 1998).

Many Deaf children have never met Deaf adults and are often curious when they see other Deaf children, so it is important to create opportunities for Deaf children to meet a variety of Deaf people. Increasingly, more Deaf people are working in various roles in deaf education (Davies, 1991; Svartholm, 1993; Ahlgren & Hyltenstam, 1994). However, there is still a paucity of Deaf Teachers of the Deaf in the United Kingdom. Consequently, this can have a negative effect on Deaf students, as they will not be exposed to a range of appropriate role models and subsequently be inspired by them. For example, it was found that in school contexts minority students performed better academically if they were taught by minority teachers (Meier & Stewart, 1992). Possible explanations included reduced negativity around identity issues, increased student comfort levels in the classroom, and the perception on the part of students that the minority teachers were strong role models (Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004).

Deaf adults make a very important contribution to the identity development of deaf children. Like many other ethnic groups, the Deaf community has its own language and culture. Providing opportunities for Deaf children to meet Deaf adults is very important for them to grow, nurture and accept their own identity. More importantly, Deaf children know they are not the only ones who are

Deaf in the world, which assists them with accepting who they are, moving away from negative views about Deafness, and developing a positive sense of identity. ■



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Do you work with deaf learners in a sixth form, in an FE college, with apprentices or do you have several Post 16s on your case list?



How many QToDs are working with this age group?

There is almost no data about QToDs working with this age group, such as employment status, types of learners, working patterns, etc.

So will you please respond so that we can start collecting information?

Please contact me, Jill Bussien (member of the BATOD National Executive Council), on JillBussien@gmail.com

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