

# Scissors, paste, sign language: Study to show deaf children's enculturation

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At Meisei Gakuen, a deaf school in Tokyo, a teacher signs to students and Professor Joe Tobin about using stakes to support radish plants in the school garden.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Learning to be a member of a culture is a primary developmental task for all young children. For most, it happens at home. But for deaf children around the world – more than 90 percent of them live with hearing parents and siblings – their assimilation into deaf culture, the world of sign, and their national culture is likely to begin in early-childhood programs.

A multidisciplinary research team of ASU faculty, doctoral students and alumni has won major support from the Spencer Foundation to better understand this acculturation process. Gathering video ethnography data

in deaf kindergarten classrooms in Japan, France and the United States, the researchers aim to uncover the links between teaching approaches in signing classrooms and how children come to perceive themselves as members of deaf culture and of their wider culture: community and society.

Co-principal investigators for the three-year project are Joseph Tobin, an educational anthropologist and early childhood education specialist who holds the Nadine Mathis Basha Professor of Early Childhood Education in the College of Arts and Sciences' School of Social Transformation; Thomas Horejes, assistant professor of sociology at Gallaudet University; and Joseph Valente, assistant professor of early childhood education at the Pennsylvania State University.

Horejes and Valenti are alumni of ASU doctoral programs in justice studies and education, respectively.

Rounding out the team are Professor Tobin's dissertation advisees Akiko Hayashi, Patrick Graham, and Jennifer Hensley, graduate students in ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College.

Horejes, Valente, and Graham are deaf. Horejes and Graham use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate. Hensley is an ASL-English interpreter.

In addition to bringing to the project a range of academic perspectives and insiders' knowledge of the deaf world, the researchers are breaking new ground in other ways. It's the first study of the enculturation practices of early schooling for the deaf to use a cross-cultural, comparative, ethnographic approach. It's also the first to include videos – both as a research tool and as a final product – capturing typical days in kindergarten classrooms in schools for the deaf.

See this 30-second video clip of a typical day at the Phoenix Day School for the Deaf:

“Early childhood education programs in schools for the deaf have been largely invisible to all but their students and staff,” Tobin says. “Even parents of [deaf children](#) often lack a clear sense of what goes on in their children’s classrooms or how they communicate and interact at school. The ‘voices’ of deaf teachers and students have been under-utilized and underrepresented in research as well as in policy formation.

“Our study tries to open up space for dialogue among the stakeholders in deaf education,” Tobin says.

The research team’s methods are an adaptation of the video ethnography approach developed by Tobin and his colleagues in the projects “Preschool in Three Cultures,” “Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited” and “Immigrant Parents’ and Teachers’ Perspectives on Early Childhood Education.”

During spring break, the team videotaped a typical day in a kindergarten classroom at the Maryland School for the Deaf, and in June will do the same in a signing classroom in Toulouse, France. Last fall the researchers videotaped at Meisei Gakuen, a deaf school in Tokyo.

The 12 hours of tape from each school are edited down to a 20-minute video, selecting scenes to provoke discussion of key issues in deaf education, to give a sense of the kids’ daily routines, and to capture revealing or gripping moments, like a child making an intellectual breakthrough or a child experiencing frustration or new successes in attempts to communicate.

The edited videos will function as a rich and provocative cue for interviews with a widening circle of stakeholders.

First, the classroom teachers are asked to provide context and insight into their pedagogical choices. Then the children are asked for their reactions and reflections. Next, the video is the basis for focus-group discussions with the other teachers and director in the same school; then with parents at this school; then with teachers, directors, parents and children in five or more other schools for the deaf in each country; then to these categories of stakeholders in the other two countries; and finally to deaf education experts in each country.

Ultimately it is the reflections of stakeholders to the videos, rather than the videos themselves, that are the primary data of the study.

France, Japan and the United States present an ideal mix of common and divergent political, economic, social and cultural features, Tobin says. All three are highly urbanized, economically developed and have social service and insurance reimbursement systems that allow for both deaf education programs and for cochlear implants and other assistive technologies.

“All have kindergartens for the deaf and in each of these countries,” Tobin says. “There is a lively and often acrimonious national debate about the best approach to deaf education, sign language and deaf culture.

“But the three diverge markedly in their views of the nation-state, language and language policy, citizenship, cultural identity, multiculturalism, and the public and private spheres,” Tobin says. “They also have very different educational systems, disability laws and services, forms of signing, and forms of deaf support and advocacy organizations.”

## **Influencing the future**

The investigation is timely, as deaf culture and deaf education adapt to the spread of the cochlear implant and other technological changes. In all three countries involved in the study the percentage of deaf infants and toddlers given cochlear implants has grown exponentially over the last decade, and an increasing percentage of parents are opting for speech-only programs for their deaf children.

Some proponents of technological interventions believe advances in digital hearing-aids and cochlear implants will soon eradicate deafness and, therefore, the need for signing and deaf schools. Some deaf culture advocates see this shift as an ethnicidal, linguicidal threat. But many scholars of deaf education, including some who are strong proponents of deaf culture and of sign, see more potential than threat in cochlear implants and other new technologies, arguing that deaf culture – like other cultures – is continuously adapting to change and remaking itself.

“In the midst of these debates, we wanted to provide a platform for deaf children and their parents and teachers to express their positions about schooling, language, disability and cultural identity,” Tobin says.

“Analyzing the perspectives of each of these stakeholders can shed light – not just heat – on the discussion, and a nuanced understanding of what’s at stake.”

“Joe Tobin and his team are doing pioneering work at the interface of educational anthropology, disability studies, and the emerging field of Deaf Cultural Studies,” says Mary Margaret Fonow, director of the School of Social Transformation, who has received approval for the school to move ahead in planning new undergraduate and graduate degrees in disability studies at ASU. “By contributing to the ongoing evolution of deaf educational ideas and practice, they’re expanding the repertoire of the possible – and ensuring that kids have the chance to develop to their full potential.”

Provided by Arizona State University

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