



**An Interview with
Deborah L. Wolter, Author of
Ears, Eyes, and Hands:
Reflections on Language,
Literacy, and Linguistics**



GU Press: *You clearly have a passion for ensuring equity and access in education. In your opinion, what is the best way to effect change in this area?*

Wolter: The first and foremost step is to distinguish equality from equity. Too often, our focus is on equality of education for all. However, children do not start out on equal terms. Some children are just learning to listen to books read aloud to them, some are learning English, some are hungry or worried, and some have disabilities. Instead of viewing these conditions as *deficits*, we can determine equitable support, differentiation, or accommodations for children to reach equal standards. Equity is not about “extra privilege” nor is it about “lowering standards”; it is about leveling the playing field so that all children can learn and thrive.

GU Press: *Privilege is a concept that is at the forefront of current political and social discussions. In your book, you discuss sociolinguistics and the ways people make assumptions based on language privilege. Can you explain what that means and how it relates to larger discussions related to access and equity?*

Wolter: Language, literacy, and linguistics are closely tied to our identities but do not always define us. Linguistics, a field of neutrality and objectivity, is the scientific study of the nature and structure of language and languages. Sociolinguistics is the study of the role of language in society. Politics, social class, economic power, religion, dialects, or gender have an effect on how we use language and are perceived by others. People make quick judgments about other people on the basis of how they speak—where they come from, where they might live and work, and even whether they are capable, intelligent, or literate. Judgment about which language and accents in our society is acceptable or unacceptable are entrenched within historical, social, and political contexts. Deaf and hard of hearing people, people with speech and language disorders, and second language learners are aware of how their own speech and languages are similar to or different from that of the others around them. In schools and in

societies as a whole, they are nudged to the margins, even without racial- or class-based inequities, taught with lower expectations, placed in special education classrooms, explicitly told they must not work as educators, or, as in my case, to simply get out of the way.

GU Press: *You discuss some of the negative attitudes you have experienced—both personally and professionally—due to being deaf. Can you elaborate on how those experiences shaped your outlook as an educator?*

Wolter: The chasm between my voice and what other people think is right for me is the underlying cause of the negative attitudes that I've experienced. For example, a teacher insisting that I sit in the first row right in front of an overhead projector is deciding what is right for me. However, I am more successful sitting along the side where I can see the projection, my teacher, and my peers. But since I was expected to sit in the front row, unsuccessfully, there became the negative attitudes toward me and I was sent to the principal's office for insubordination. Thus, it is crucial to listen to the voices of our children. Even our youngest children have capable voices. All children want to learn and grow. Once they begin to be heard, they are fully able to explain or demonstrate what their needs are.

GU Press: *You have worked in education for over 30 years. What is your advice for early-career educators who are striving to meet the needs of children of diverse backgrounds and abilities?*

Wolter: Teaching is demanding but immensely rewarding work. People who choose the field of education must accept, and even embrace, the diversity in our classrooms and schools. Nowadays, there are courses and professional development on diversity and educational equity that educators should try to attend. A college student once told me he wanted to teach fourth grade. I asked, why fourth grade? He said that was just his favorite grade. But after I reminded him that a fourth-grade classroom will contain students reading at a second-grade level *and* students reading at an eighth-grade level, he paused to think. I continued that a fourth-grade classroom would contain students who are just learning English, students who have physical disabilities, students with learning disabilities, students with trauma, and students who are impoverished. In a positive light, I added that the class could be delightfully multicultural, multilingual, and multi-ability instead of just "fourth grade." Ultimately, the college student decided to go into a different field, but this illustrates the importance of learning from and accepting *all* people as they are. And growing all together.

GU Press: *Based on your experience, both as an educator and as a deaf person, what is the best way for individuals to identify and correct their own unconscious attitudes and stereotypes?*

Wolter: We must recognize that our previous experiences, moods, attitudes, values, and current roles sometimes get in the way of our listening. And we must stay present with intense feelings and still give children a sense of emotional and physical safety. Everyone has a story. Even behaviors, disengagement, and silence carry unheard stories entrenched with apathy, resentment, and frustration. Some are heard, but many are not. We must value the space and time to pause and listen...and to listen fully.

