What Does Culture Have to Do with the Education of Students Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing?

Claire Ramsey

In everyday discourse, we expect *culture* to point to a particular group and its features (e.g., Mexican culture, Russian culture, clothing, cuisine, and kinship patterns). However, the narrowness of everyday definitions of culture has become especially apparent in education (Sleeter 2001; Kalyanpur and Harry 1999) since some children's "cultural" backgrounds are associated with their schooling outcomes, positive or negative. Ogbu's (1987) treatment of this topic, while almost two decades old, is not out of date. Yet learning about national holidays, special foods, manners of dress, and folklore does not provide a helpful account of culture as it might interact with schooling. Indeed, such well-intentioned approaches frequently trivialize culture.

Although definitions of culture are problematic, the potential impact of culture on general education is a well-grounded topic, bolstered by a body of strategic and practical knowledge (e.g., Banks 1996). Special education as a broad field has also received attention from scholars of culture (e.g., Harry 1992; Kalyanpur and Harry 1999). In the United States, deaf education presents a more elaborate set of cultural problems, in part, because at least two sources of culture exist for deaf children—the culture of their families and the culture of American Deaf people. Cultural transmission is unusual in the case of deaf children. In fact, although some would argue that I am misinformed, the cultural status of most deaf infants is unclear because most are raised in families with

no access to Deaf people or their culture. Additionally, impaired hearing, even mild cases, can lead to early development that unfolds without adequate language exposure. As a result, transmission of the family's culture to a deaf child may be incomplete. Many deaf children become expert border dwellers as they grow up, with knowledge of their family's cultural ways, as well as those of Deaf people. Many will, at some moment in the future, find that they are comfortably and culturally Deaf and align themselves with the adult Deaf ASL-signing community as their primary cultural identity. Still, the facts about interactions of culture with deaf education do not help us understand exactly why culture should be of concern in deaf education. As a colleague once said to me, "It's a disability. There's nothing cultural about it. We just try to fix it." Educational questions about culture are unresolved, even though it is becoming apparent that Deaf cultural ways, especially ways of using language, contribute to learning, (e.g., Ramsey and Padden 1998; Humphries and MacDougall 2000). Claims about the role of Deaf culture in the education of deaf children have rarely been elaborate enough to move us away from trait-based visions of culture. My argument here is that seriously thinking about culture in deaf education requires starting at the beginning, with a generic understanding of ways that this impressive human achievement provides a context for learning.

I know from my life experience that developing and holding a rich definition of culture, one that might help me see culture in schooling, does not come easily. Indeed, my persistence on this topic is driven by my personal history and curiosity as well as the many views of culture I have examined and rejected. I am a baby boomer child of the 1960s. In my first year of college, I enrolled in a Chicano studies course, which had a powerful impact on me, in part, because I was a very romantic, idealistic girl. But in the course, people with lives strikingly different from my own told their stories. I learned about genuine injustices that I had not understood before from those who had first-hand knowledge. I met people who could lay claim to a cultural heritage, many with active links to an exotic "foreign" homeland. I tried to examine my own heritage within the framework of 1960s radicalism. Like many Anglo people, I did not think I had any culture. What I could fashion from sets of family facts was very unsatisfactory. I learned that I could look backwards to slave owners, scoundrels who claimed Cherokee blood in order to get land in Indian Country, and a diluted gene pool. (My isolated, rural Norwegian ancestors intermarried and regularly produced severely developmentally disabled people.) None of the above, including a living *mormor*, my

Norwegian grandmother, added up to anything that I would call culture. None of it was romantic enough to satisfy my need for an authentic culture. I concluded that I was just a slice of Wonder Bread with no culture. I did not belong to any group.

LEAVING THE CHIMPANZEES AND BONOBOS: CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Why would I claim that something like culture is an impressive achievement? How has culture made a difference for human beings? Simply, the evolution and transmission of culture is the reason for our cognitive and linguistic successes. The ability to create and transmit culture allows individuals in each generation to save time, energy, and risk by making use of the already existing knowledge and skills of the human beings who went before us (Tomasello 1999).

On the African continent, between six million and 250,000 years ago, our primate ancestors split off from the ancestors of chimpanzees and bonobos. All primates had the capacity for cultural transmission, but our forebears apparently developed the ability to take advantage of it in a new and specific way. The fact that even six million years did not provide sufficient time for the genetic changes that would have been necessary for us to become so symbolically and materially capable indicates that we created something to speed up our development as thinking, symbol-manipulating creatures who passed our innovations to subsequent generations. The simple passage of time, even millions of years, could not have created among human beings the adaptations that have made us so skilled at recognizing and solving the problems that come with living in the world. The only way to explain how we managed the needed changes is through the development of a special capacity. Tomasello (1999) argues that the key development was the rapid evolution of the ability to accumulate culture, to participate in its ongoing invention and then transmit it to others. No material object, social practice, or symbol system was invented once and for all by an individual or group of individuals at a single moment in time. Rather, over time, between generations, creations arose, were modified, and passed on.

Tomasello posits three critical features in the evolution of culture. First, cognitive resources were pooled. A primitive invention was learned and used by others. Then it was improved upon, adopted by others, and passed on to another generation, who improved upon it, used it, and passed it on.

Many heads were better than one. (There is no doubt that other primates are creative in the wild. Their creations do not get modified, however, and to our knowledge, they do not accumulate or get passed on to new generations.) Second, the accumulation of new resources was faithfully transmitted to others, who adopted it. This created a stabilizing or "ratchet" effect (Tomasello 1999, 5), which prevented innovations from getting lost due to "slippage," or through forgetting. (Some cultural innovations are lost or rejected because they are not useful or because a better innovation replaces them.)

Cultural transmission is possible because we have an advantage. Early in life (at about age of nine months), infants begin to see that other people are like themselves, that they are like other people, that all of us have intentions and mental lives, and that all of us are members of social networks of others like us. Babies demonstrate this when they begin trying to get other people to share attention. (Current theory of mind research examines this phenomenon. Indeed, the fluent conventional use of language depends on the knowledge that people share intentions and mental lives [Moeller 2002; De Villiers 2000]). Tomasello's (1999) hypothesis is that the ability to see the world through the perspective of others is what bolsters and makes possible the pooling of resources and the transmission of innovations.

In order to delineate the time course of cultural evolution and its transmission, three kinds of time come into play. First, during the long evolutionary time span of humans (6 million to 250,000 years ago), we developed the ability to exploit cultural transmission. During the historical time spans of social groups, we rapidly accumulated symbolic and material cultural artifacts (250,000 years ago to present time, into the future). Developmental time in individual children (or ontogenesis) allows for the development of agency and knowledge of others in a cultural world and is an ongoing achievement in each new generation. Tomasello summarizes the three kinds of time by noting, "Human beings have the cognitive skills that result from biological inheritance working in phylogenetic time; they use these skills to exploit cultural resources that have evolved over historic time; and they do this during ontogenetic time" (1999, 48).

"FISH IN THE WATER OF CULTURE"

These are the simple evolutionary, historical, and developmental processes that have contributed to and continue to contribute to our special

ability to think and learn as human beings. This is the way educators must view culture in order to avoid resorting to stereotypes and trait lists. In all cultures, adults actively and regularly instruct the young. To participate in learning, all human children learn to detect the adult's goal, the strategies being used to approach the goal, and how to make these goals and strategies their own. All of us depend on our "dual inheritance" (Boyd and Richerson 1985; Durham 1991) that makes us both biological and cultural creatures. Biologically, we are not that different from our primate relatives. Our big advantage is that during development, we notice and exploit the reality that others are intentional beings, just like we are. This realization allows for continuing processes of collaboration among people to create culture in the form of material objects, ideas, and practices with accumulated histories (Tomasello 1999). Additionally, because learning is embedded in culture (in both historical and ontogenetic time), developing children learn how to use the artifacts that forebears, past and present, have created. In individual developing children, cultural resources—our historical accumulation—engage with developing intellects to create a unique human being with a miraculous set of linguistic and cognitive abilities. If we are looking for a definition of culture in this foundational sense, we cannot do much better than Tomasello's metaphor—we are "fish in the water of culture."

HOW DID DEAF PEOPLE GET TO BE CULTURAL?

In the early 1980s, I was a graduate student at Gallaudet University. By that time, I had grown out of my 60s cultural romanticism; but like a lot of people, I had only gotten as far as "exotic traits." I remember with great affection a group of classmates, Deaf and hearing, who stuck around after anthropology class because we had discussed ourselves into a corner. We were very confused about the troublesome idea of Deaf culture and kept talking in circles. We knew enough to acknowledge that ASL offered a helpful hint that there was culture in there somewhere; but beyond that, we made little progress. Not completely frivolously, one of the Deaf students said, "OK, if it's a culture, then where are the Deaf ethnic restaurants? What do Deaf native costumes look like? Is Gallaudet like the Deaf homeland?" My Deaf classmates were all from hearing families, and all learned ASL well beyond infancy. They felt Deaf but, like I did in my Chicano studies class, longed for a list of traits that would document their authentic cultural connection to other Deaf people. Like

me, they needed a richer way of thinking about culture, especially how groups of Deaf people might have become cultural.

Here the three kinds of time are illuminating. Like all of us who have received the benefits of a long span of evolutionary time, Deaf people have the full human linguistic and cognitive inheritance that comes with our biology. Additionally, culture comes into being "wherever people engage in joint activity over time" (Cole 1996, 301). Like all groups, Deaf people have a social history during which they created and improved upon innovations that took account of their lack of hearing and pooled their cognitive resources. Passing these innovations on ensured that individuals in following generations would not have to individually figure out the world into which they were born. No individual deaf infant has to invent a language that does not depend on hearing. No modern deaf infant has to devise technology to use the telecommunications system. Rather, each generation can use the cultural artifacts of the group; understand that others are intentional agents; and share a world full of objects, symbols, and social practices that previous members created for their use. Last, like all of us during our developmental time, deaf babies have the capacity to recognize the agency and mental lives of others and to acquire the symbol systems developed by their ancestors.

DEAF CHILDREN IN THE CULTURAL WORLD

Typically, children grow up "in the midst of the very best tools and symbols their forebears have invented for negotiating the rigors of their physical and social worlds" (Tomasello 1999, 199). To use the artifacts as they were meant to be used and to participate in the social practices in the ways they were meant to be participated in, the child needs to place herself in the position of adults who use those artifacts and participate in social practices. She needs to comprehend how "we" (that is, the people like her) use those artifacts and practices. The gift of cultural inheritance prepares us to engage in certain types of social interactions, but it is participating in the interactions themselves that does the work. Just being prepared to interact is not enough. Participation is often, although not always, mediated through language. So, our biological and cultural histories ensure that children acquire and master most of their native human language early and quickly, within five or six years. But the circumstances of deaf children's development (with some exceptions) do not match the broader biological and cultural design. It is an unavoidable fact that,

through no fault of their own, most deaf children have a late start at language acquisition. Acquisition of language is designed to begin at birth; indeed, late first-language acquisition is so atypical that is it virtually impossible to find (Mayberry 1993). This has consequences for all areas of deaf children's lives, but especially threatens their schooling. In our industrialized, information-steeped society, schooling is organized on the assumption that children enter their years of formal education with native command of their first language (i.e., "ready to learn").

It is unfortunate that the notion of culture has become clouded in deaf education. Discussions of culture sometimes disintegrate into pointless arguments about whether or not there IS a Deaf culture, whether ASL is a real language or not, who owns deaf children, what is the relative value of residential schools, and what is the "best" medium of instruction. This is not the way to think about either culture or Deaf culture if the goal is to determine how culture can be helpful to deaf children. Cole's garden metaphor offers a concrete way to think about culture and its role in human development generally as well as an objective way to consider the culturally rooted developmental difficulties that underscore deaf children's struggles in school. Cole describes a familiar kindergarten project, planting a seed in damp soil, keeping it in the dark until it sprouts, then placing it in the light to grow. If you leave the sprouting seed in the dark, the seed will stop developing and die; it cannot grow without sunlight. "Like a seed in soil, the human child must be provided with sufficient support to maintain life; it must be kept warm enough and fed, or it will die" (1996, 200).

While nasturtiums come prespecified to sprout leaves, human babies come with the need to live in a cultural world and the ability to acquire language. Babies born deaf also have this inborn capacity, but in most deaf babies, language does not take root. Because they cannot hear spoken language, the cultural medium that nourishes spoken language, which works perfectly for hearing babies, is not completely helpful for deaf babies. Babies who cannot hear spoken language require a somewhat different growing medium to acquire human language. (We also know that babies who have their sense of hearing boosted with technological devices will also need a growing medium that is fine-tuned to their needs, since they cannot take complete advantage of the medium that is designed for those with perfectly intact hearing.) In a "signed language growing medium," culturally designed support rests on several centuries of problem-solving undertaken by people who also could not make use of spoken language. To our knowledge, only cultures of Deaf people provide this specific kind

of support. Indeed, this is the truly unique feature of Deaf culture, and the one most worth educational consideration.

It is a mistake to think that deaf babies do not get culturally designed support in the "spoken language" medium. Of course, they do. But they simply cannot take advantage of it to use their inborn language capacity. The deaf child is included in numerous social interactions culturally mediated by spoken language—families eat together, babies go with others on errands or to church, they are toilet trained. As Cole notes, "They live in a world that is suffused with meaning, although they lack access to the specifically linguistic behavior that fills the gaps between actions" (1996, 202). Even so, like all children, deaf children have active minds that develop ways to represent the world. This is enough to allow a kind of participation with others in many activities; it is a myth that deaf children begin their educations with no communication ability and no knowledge of the world. But communication is not always language, and partial knowledge and access are not enough for typical language acquisition to occur. Language acquisition requires full access and participation. Unfortunately, children who do not have full access to their family's language used in culturally organized contexts will not develop it, even if they can communicate and participate in some of the actions that occur in these contexts.

CULTURE, DEAF CULTURE, AND EDUCATION

In evolutionary time, we got lucky. Over historical time, social groups made inventions and innovations and passed them on. This is what has made us who we are intellectually and made us very different from our closest primate relatives. But evolutionary and historical time are not right in front of us. Like geological time, these very long spans are difficult to imagine. What is in front of us are deaf children in their immediate time frame—their developmental time. Like all children, they should be able to depend on the pooled resources of others; and for most of their needs, they can. They enjoy the invention of devices that keep houses warm or cool, provide warm bath water and bubbles, cook food, produce entertainment, and print picture books. And they participate more or less willingly in social practices that keep them loved and adored, cared for, immunized against a variety of diseases, and treated for crooked teeth. Many even have access to devices that amplify sound or send pulses of electrical energy into their nervous systems. As cultural beings, deaf children are not completely unique. But there is one area where the resources accumulated

over the history of the hearing cultural world are not as effective for deaf children as they are for hearing children. Obviously that is spoken language. And in most societies, the shared spoken language(s) is the key to gaining access to other highly valued social innovations, like learning in formal schooling.

We can hypothesize about whether or not a lack of ability to hear has ever been in the evolutionary, historical, or developmental plan. But it does not matter. The fact is that there are people who cannot hear, there always have been, and they have invented a variety of cultural solutions and transmitted them to others. We can state unconditionally that late, random, or degraded access to language is not in the plan. Partial or ambiguous access to language does not fill the requirements for participating in culture, nor does receiving basic skills instruction second-hand through an interpreter (Ramsey 2001). And living without the accumulated cultural inventions that boosted the intellects of previous generations is simply not in the plan either.

DEFINITIONS OF CULTURE

Recently, I had a chance to consider a new millennium definition of culture that was conveyed to me by hearing undergraduates at a midwestern university. The university offers a four-course series of ASL classes. About half of the eighty students per semester who enroll in the courses do so to satisfy their "foreign language" requirement. In these courses, readings about Deaf culture are included on the assumption that learning a language entails learning about its culture. In the case of a minority language like ASL, sensitivity to the culture of Deaf people is required. The same is required for students of Spanish, Lakota, and all the other modern language courses at the university. To my surprise, and, I think, to the Deaf instructors' surprise, a large group of ASL students took an oppositional stance to the Deaf culture readings. They doubted the authenticity of a culture of Deaf people. Why, they asked, wasn't it good enough for Deaf people to just be deaf? Why did they have to come up with this idea of culture? Don't they like hearing people? Why can't they be like us, just "normal people"? Why go around inventing a culture to set themselves apart? It was as if even talking about the culture and lives of Deaf people took something away from the hearing students and threatened their own cultural connections. We managed to resolve this situation, but the fact that it arose taught me again that narrow definitions of culture

are not only overly romantic and useless, but dangerous and intolerant. The cost of narrow, trait-based, ethnic identity definitions of culture may be quite high for those of us who are not just "normal people."

The garden metaphor definition of culture as a growing medium, calibrated over time to meet the needs of people in social groups, offers a more useful way to think about culture as it interacts with schooling. To acknowledge that culture, in the foundational definition that I have offered here, is to acknowledge that deaf children have the same inheritance that the rest of us are born with, and that they are born ready to develop according to the human program. They only need full access to the material and symbolic culture and the social practices that will support the specific developmental plan that comes with not hearing. This definition frees us from the overly romantic notion of culture, from confusing lists of traits and learning styles, and from discussions of culture as contests over which culture produces "normal people." In addition, the foundational definition of culture as an evolutionary, historical, and individual accomplishment and tool tells us what culture is not. Culture does not exist in a vacuum, does not have claws to snatch people, or snares to trap them. Culture emerges when people engage in joint activities, and all cultures take on life and adapt to changes in the world because people need and use them. And, like fish in water, most of the time we are unaware of our own culture until we are suddenly without it. I never thought of myself as a *gringa* until I started to spend time in Mexico. To my surprise, it turns out that I am one. And I never thought of myself as a hearing person until I learned ASL and started hanging out with Deaf people. Again, I learned that I am a hearing person, even though for half of my life, I did not know that category even existed.

Since teaching and learning occur through the medium of language, in activities created over time in the cultural setting of schools, the cultural solutions of Deaf people have a role in education. Hearing teachers and parents are not destined to be foreigners to Deaf culture. The language socialization, language use, and instructional discourse patterns of Deaf people are critical places to look for ways to make contact with deaf students and help them learn. Many of these patterns rest on knowledge of ASL. But good teaching practices that reach deaf children and serve their learning needs can be adopted by ASL-signing hearing people (see Ramsey and Padden 1998; Humphries and MacDougall 2000). Deaf culture does not isolate deaf children from the "real" world, where the normal people live. It will more likely, in fact, do the opposite. All people who are truly

bilingual, even those who are forced by circumstances to be bilingual, know a great deal about both of their languages and how to use them. Bilingual Deaf people know more about English, even spoken English, than we think they do. Many Deaf adults continue to learn English after they leave high school (Ramsey 2000). A strength of American Deaf culture is its rich content about hearing people, English, reading, and how to approach and cross the porous boundary that separates Deaf from hearing people. The hearing undergraduates who took issue with Deaf culture were wrong in their assumption that culture creates separations. For marginalized groups, culture offers the information they need to comprehend and participate in the range of worlds they must enter, including their own and that of the powerful "others." Rather than assume that deaf children must be molded into hearing children, it is much more helpful to seek Deaf cultural knowledge about how the world is and how to make sense of it. Stripping culture down to its foundations is the best way to help all of us—the romantics, the trait-list makers, the doubters, and the teachers—understand why we cannot ignore its powerful presence in schools.

What does culture have to do with the education of students who are deaf or hard of hearing? Watch a skilled Deaf teacher teach English idiomatic expressions to another Deaf person, child or adult. Ask Deaf adults about their favorite teachers, and you will hear about at least one Deaf teacher who explained something about English in a clear way, who taught strategies for reading comprehension, or who explained how to use a library. Irrational rumors to the contrary, the culture of Deaf people does not want to trap deaf children—only to offer them strategies so they can learn, use, and improve upon the innovations of history to make living in the world possible. Look for Deaf innovations to the problems of learning and development as well as information on language structures, discourse patterns, teaching strategies, the values about English, and hearing people and the larger culture, and that is where you will find Deaf culture's role in education.

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