A New Controversial Approach to Literacy: SignWriting: Will It Work?

by Alexandra Hahn

A controversial way to read, write and take one's sign language, SignWriting (or SW) is an alphabet, or a list of symbols, that can be used to write one's sign language. Like the Roman alphabet, it uses to write many different spoken languages, such as Danish, German, French, Spanish and English. SignWriting can also be used to write many different sign languages. After all, if many spoken languages can have written versions, why not sign languages?

Resistance Against SignWriting: Why It is Controversial

Yet, within the Deaf community, SignWriting has been controversial from the first time it was invented in 1974: either dismissed, laughed at or ignored.

"Historically, new ideas that create "social change" are always met with resistance in the beginning," and SignWriting is no exception," points out Valerie Smith, creator of SignWriting.

Another reason people think SignWriting "should not be accepted

1) Signed languages are not supposed to be written.

2) Deaf people will become isolated and never learn to read and write English.

3) You have no right to write our language.

4) It is a foreign language.

"I learn it, no one else can read it, so why bother?"

5) I had trouble enough learning to read and write English, why should I learn something new now as an adult?

6) I refuse to learn SignWriting unless other Deaf people take it first.

Yet, as SignWriting continues to evolve, it is gathering greater acceptance, and its many uses, including a possible education tool for Deaf and hard of hearing students, is slowly beginning to be used by others.

"There are two major problems that need to be addressed," said a Deaf hearing adult graffiti in his reactions to SW.

- Deaf Children: Their Reactions

You say we're not people. You say that we can't hear and so it's all okay. They're drawn in to it, get excited about it, and want to do this school work harder and longer periods. According to mail teachers, they tend to take about six months to learn the basics of SignWriting, a relatively short time in their long academic education. They also learn it more quickly than adults, being younger, unbiased, and more linguistically flexible.

Research is currently being undertaken to determine whether SignWriting helps, or doesn't help, these children's ability to read and write English and, perhaps more importantly, their self-esteem.

- Middle School Students: Reactions

The middle school students initially were more skeptical when I showed them some samples of SW to them. I didn't get as much enthusiasm as I expected.

"But that's hard to learn," "Why should I learn SignWriting?"

I already know the language, there's no reason for me to learn it."

"I'm not interested in it, it's not for me."

"I don't want to do it." "I don't want to do that, it's too hard." "I didn't stop them, though I was tempted."

I introduced them to the basics of SignWriting, to the sign language word processor program. They were more interested then and took to understanding and writing using SignWriting. Some had individual signs, some all signs, some entire signs, some whole paragraphs, some entire sentences.

Typical of young adolescents, their comments were somewhat uncoordinated, as if they had done with friends over the weekend, their boyfriends, and school special education teachers.

"Well, I do a lot of it."

The only command words I heard were "permission to use the computer keyboard with confidence," and satisfaction... "I can do a lot of it, I can use the computer keyboard with confidence."

- The Future May Hold

"What the future may hold."

"SignWriting, based on my observations and current research:"

"Using a yet-to-be-tapped resource, SignWriting, deaf and hard of hearing students will not only become better signers, but also better readers and writers, plus they will attain membership in the growing Deaf and hard of hearing community."

"Younger Children's Ability to Read SW"

"Two of the younger students (8 & 10) took to these SW words with some reluctance, but quickly."