

## Literacy, Culture & Language: A Vision for Cultural Literacy Practices Through Black American Sign Language

Mary Johnson and Larry Love, University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Abstract:* By using Black American Sign Language (ASL) as a vessel, Johnson and Love seek to reimagine inclusive literacy practices that recognize multiple literacies and dismantle power relations by asking whose cultural literacies have been deemed more and less valuable through literacy practices.

---

*“Well...as a mom we always want what’s best for our children. And I believe that because the limited resources that are now offered in our school system is hindering my baby. She’s not gonna be able to compete with other kids at her level, because it’s holding her back. Um, she use to sign more often, because she was in the community, and involved within her middle school and her elementary school. But, now that she’s away from it because they mainstreamed her into a regular class, she’s not getting the time to utilize her sign language. Her teachers do not know how to sign. So there’s no benefit in school at all for her to use her language, which is her only form of language. Her spoken language-anybody else would not understand it. It’s a voice that only a mother could love. You know, a stranger would not understand anything she said. But if she was around Deaf culture at all times during her educational process, she would better be able to be more confident, and have more self-esteem. And know that it’s OK that you don’t speak the same way that the majority speak or the hearing world speaks.” - Black Mother in the D: Detroit Deaf Education*

Although students go to school to acquire literacy, many also lose literacy. As we see above, the mainstreaming of Black Mother in the D’s daughter contributed to her loss of American Sign Language (ASL). This begs for a (re)imagining of what counts as inclusive

literacy practices. In this manuscript, we use Black ASL as a tool to rethink inclusive education beyond access to the general education classroom and to reimagine a vision for inclusive education that frames cultural literacy as a limitless tool for education, a tool that results in rich, hybrid expansions of language and literacy as expressions of students' cultures.

Many believe that language is the most powerful form of communication (Hill, 2012): humans use language to share memories, struggles, and visions for the future. Furthermore, language serves a fundamental role in engaging in one's community, maintaining one's culture, and more importantly in transmitting knowledge. The way people communicate varies across time and place. Traditionally, however, people have relied heavily on the use of spoken language to fulfill their communicative needs. While the use of spoken language appears to dominate how people communicate, various cultural groups have been known to communicate more heavily via hand gestures, the use of click systems, facial expressions, and symbols (e.g., Native tribal groups, African-American painters, military branches, religious leaders, and elder prayer warriors).

As educators, we do not have the capacity to bring the vast range of literacies into the classroom. We do, however, have the capacity to recognize that students are immersed in many rich literacies that often go undetected or are actively resisted in school. Awareness of students' cultural literacies opens up a critical space for advancing more inclusive classrooms that validate, affirm, and draw on the cultural literacies they bring to the classroom. Hill (2012) defines cultural literacy as "knowledge of history, contributions and perspectives of differential cultural groups, including one's own group, necessary for understanding of reading, writing and other media." Unfortunately, schools sometimes operate with narrow definitions of literacy that result in a sorting game that designates some students as literate and others as illiterate or struggling with literacy. Traditionally, literacy has been described in strictly technical terms, as sets of skills used for reading fluency and comprehension (Perry, 2012). In doing so, those from many culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may find themselves at the periphery of school-based literacy communities and instructional practices. Sometimes students are described in deficit terms (e.g., illiterate, disabled, unmotivated, language deficient), which further

marginalizes them from participating and contributing to literacy instruction alongside their peers in general education classrooms.

Here, we use Black ASL a powerful case in point. Attention to cultural literacies such as Black ASL can help teachers reimagine inclusive literacy practices as an expansion of language rather than an elimination of non-standard language and literacies that dismantles power imbalances by asking whose cultural literacies are deemed valuable in the classroom. We present Black ASL as a tool for educators to pause and reflect on the ways their practice can both constrain and expand limitless forms of literacy in the lives of youth. We do this by first asking teachers to think about ASL as a form of literacy, then stretching this consideration by sharing the rich (and often ignored) history of Black ASL to highlight how the boxes we draw around “what counts as literacy” limit and threaten cultural literacies. We then provide more examples of ways of thinking about literacy and end with a call to action for expanding cultural literacies in praxis.

### **American Sign Language**

ASL is as concise and versatile as any spoken language with its own grammatical structure and phonological, syntactical, pragmatic, and semantic properties (Byrne, 2013). Similar to English words that can be deconstructed into consonants and vowels, ASL can be broken down into parameters that consist of handshapes, movements, locations, and palm orientations (Bryne, 2013; Lane, 1992). ASL is used primarily in d/Deaf culture to share family and cultural traditions as well as knowledge among people who are Deaf. However, ASL has been deemed less valuable than spoken language due to language ideologies that shape notions of what counts as language (Alim, 2006; Hill, 1999).

The urgency to identify ASL as a language with linguistic structure grew out of frustration imposed by the dominant culture considering it “broken English with hand gestures” (Bryne, 2013, p. 6). In 1979, *The Signs of Language* was the first book to construct the grammar of ASL in depth (Bryne, 2013). This history gives context to the fact that only in the past 50+ years has ASL been considered as an “authentic” language with linguistic properties in academia (Bryne, 2013; Stokoe, 1960). The lack of recognition of ASL and

its cultural literacy features persist in educational discourse and policy today. As a nation, we have yet to legally recognize ASL as a language in all 50 states. In 2004, the National Deaf Education Center reported that at least 40 states have recognized ASL as a foreign language: Wilcox and Wilcox (1997) stated that when a language is legally considered “foreign” if it can be taught in schools to receive credit. More specifically, they argue that foreign language study involves learning about the values, worldviews, and ways of life of a cultural group.

However, regions vary on what grade level students can receive credit for learning ASL. For example, in some states the legislation affects elementary through university. In others, ASL may be offered only in post-secondary schools or only in elementary and secondary schools (Hill, 2012). There is currently no collective understanding of how ASL can be effectively integrated into school curriculums and education reform discourse across all levels of education in America.

Despite these findings, ASL has been incorporated in various schools and classrooms due to inclusive education initiatives (Stokoe, 2007). Murray (2013) reported that ASL is the fourth-most studied language other than English at colleges across the country. In addition, in 2009 the Illinois General Assembly passed legislation declaring ASL a fully developed language and encouraged schools to accept its coursework for foreign language credit. Nonetheless, there have been pockets of initiatives for ASL education from students, educators, community members, and policy makers across the nation (McCaskill, et al., 2011; Stokoe, 2005). However, as we begin to unravel the complexity of ASL and how it can be useful for cultural literacy practices in the classroom, it is important to acknowledge the variety of the language itself.

### **Black ASL**

Black ASL and “traditional” ASL are two different forms of language. Although the two languages share linguistic and cultural similarities (e.g., hand gestures, body language, dominant hand usage), it is still important to acknowledge how Black ASL’s cultural history informs how the language is used in schools and communities today. In their

seminal text *The Treasure of Black ASL: Its History and Structure*, McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, and Hill (2011) document the uniqueness, beauty, structure, and history of Black ASL in the South, which was where the most racial segregation occurred in the education of Black and White Deaf children. The researchers interviewed Black Deaf people who attended school in North Carolina, Maryland, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana in the 1950s and those who attended Southern integrated Deaf schools in the 1980s. Utilizing these methods, the authors sought to illuminate Black Deaf people's lived experiences largely ignored in ASL academic research.

McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley and Hill also discovered that many of the participants shared common experiences through the creation and maintenance of Black ASL. In alignment with Hairston and Smith's (1983) research, they revealed that there is a Black way of signing used by Black Deaf people in their own homes, churches, communities, and various social gatherings that bind them. Some of the differences between Black ASL and traditional ASL include two handed vs. one-handed signs, role shifting, forehead location, repetition, and size of signing space, thus traditional ASL users and hearing people do not often recognize Black ASL as a valuable form of signing. More specifically, the lack of recognition of Black ASL is a form of cultural and linguistic hegemony rooted in White supremacy (Stapleton, 2014). Despite these struggles, Black ASL is still utilized to formulate a sense of community, belonging, and history in Black Deaf culture for knowledge transmission, socialization, community building, and, more importantly, a celebration of Black Deaf culture (McCaskill, Lucas Bayley & Hill, 2011).

Nonetheless, Black ASL is an example of why we must unravel our views of "traditional" forms of cultural literacy and initiate an ideological shift of how we imagine literacy practices in schools. As we continue to unravel whose cultural literacy has been deemed (less) valuable, we can begin to illuminate non-dominant forms of language in our education systems. Furthermore, this mindset shift invites educators, students, community members, and leaders to view language as a cultural literacy tool that is *limitless*.

## Language Is Limitless

Inclusive cultural literacy practices are central to our understanding that “language is limitless.” The practices we utilize in the classroom send a clear message of what matters in our complex society. In the vignette shared at the beginning of this paper, a Black mother from Detroit expressed her frustrations and concerns about her child’s linguistic experiences in school. The mother’s fear and frustration were rooted in her child’s experiences of being excluded and deemed less valuable through classroom practices. Nonetheless, these concerns are not unique to parents of children who are Deaf. These lived experiences of frustration, resistance, and hope are common to people from non-dominant cultures (Stapleton, 2014). As a result, parents, educators, and community members from non-dominant groups often fight to reimagine a society that acknowledges their cultural tools (e.g., language) as valuable and essential to cultural literacy practices. Similar to the mother in the vignette, we, too, can demand a new vision for inclusive schooling in the U. S.

Furthermore, education researchers across the nation have joined non-dominant stakeholders in their resistance by conducting research and developing curriculum that reconstructs our understanding of “valuable” cultural literacy tools (Alim, 2006; Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Hill, 2011). Alim’s (2011) scholarship, for example, has helped to broaden our understanding of cultural literacy by highlighting how hip-hop can be used as a literacy tool in the classroom. Hip-hop studies have often been utilized to illuminate literacy counter-narratives for black and brown students. Alim’s research on global *ill*-literacies examined how hip-hop cultural practices ignite a variety of cultural, social, linguistic, and educational processes that impact youth. His research has been used across the nation to rethink teaching practices in urban schools.

In addition, there are community leaders and youth workers who have developed community-based spaces that illuminate cultural literacy tools utilized by marginalized groups. Programs such as ASL Slam, Battle of the Books, and Urban Word are spaces created in the last 15 years to honor innovative expressions of Deaf cultural literacy. More specifically, students, educators, and community leaders have celebrated these programs as an example of community-school inclusion. Today, educators can continue to

reimagine and uplift cultural literacy practices that have been historically deemed less valuable in education (e.g., Black ASL). In doing so, we take on the task of being lifelong learners and educators.

### **Cultural Literacy: Action Items**

We provided the following recommendations for educators that want to take action in building on and supporting limitless cultural literacies:

- *Build on students' funds of knowledge.* All students enter learning environments with distinct skills and knowledge that inform how they engage in learning. By drawing on these capacities, educators invite all students to participate and demonstrate the literacies they own. Furthermore, fostering ongoing communication and partnerships with both students and their families affords literacy educators opportunities to gain insight on issues relevant and important in the lives of their students in order to intentionally craft curricular activities that affirm and validate the cultural literacies of those who have been limited by standard language and literacy.
- *Engage students in action research.* Another promising approach to build on the cultural literacies of students is utilizing a participatory action research framework. For example, Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) opens the door for students to be active and informed agents in their own learning. Additionally, it requires that literacy educators move beyond banking models of instruction advocating that knowledge is deposited into students. Instead, such an approach positions teachers as facilitators supporting capable others. This can be a strong instructional technique as it allows for multiple means of demonstrating learning.
- *Practice collegial collaboration.* Through forming a culture of collaboration teachers are able to engage in critical reflection that allows them to evaluate and modify their instruction. Teachers are also able to dialogue about promising

instructional techniques, pedagogy, and challenges they face during the delivery of instruction. Because students engage differently across environments and usually have stronger relationships with some teachers, these collaborative relationships allow teachers to share knowledge about students with the goal of increasing their academic engagement and growth.

## **Conclusion**

We have used Black ASL to urge a (re)imagining of what it means to be inclusive as it pertains specifically to literacy practices. Privileging standard forms of language and literacy limits all youth, especially non-dominant youth of color, from drawing from their cultural repertoires and engaging in other forms of literacy. By framing cultural literacies as a keystone to the inclusive literacy classroom, it is our hope that we move beyond asking the question “whose cultural literacies are deemed valuable” to an understanding that “when they enter, we all enter” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.167).

## **References**

Alim, H. S. (2006). *Roc the mic right: The language of hip hop culture*. New York: Routledge.

Alim, H. S. (2011). Global ill-literacies hip hop cultures, youth identities, and the politics of literacy. *Review of Research in Education*, 35(1), 120-146.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X10383208>

Byrne, A. P. J. (2013). *American Sign Language (ASL) literacy and ASL literature: A critical appraisal* (Doctoral dissertation, York University, Toronto). Retrieved from <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/>

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics.

*University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139-167 Retrieved from the Women's Studies International database. (Accession No. MRB-WRI0026308)

Duncan-Andrade, J.(2007) Urban youth and the counter-narration of inequality. *Transforming Anthropology*, 15(1), 26-37. <https://doi.org/tran.2007.15.1.26>.

Hairston, E., & Smith, L. (1983). *Black and deaf in America: Are we that different?* Silver Spring, MD: T. J. Publishers.

Hill, J. C. (2012). *Language attitudes in the American deaf community*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Hill, J. H. (1999). Language, race and White public space. *American Anthropologist*, 100(3), 680-689. Retrieved from the MasterFILE Premier database. (Accession No. 1602064)

Lane, H. (1992). *The mask of benevolence: Disabling the deaf community*. New York: Knopf.

McCaskill, C., Lucas, C., Bayley, R., & Hill, J. (2011). *The hidden treasure of Black ASL: Its history and structure*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press

Murray, J. J. (2013). Insights into deaf history [Review of the book *Overcoming the past, determining its consequences, and finding solutions for the present*, edited by M. Zaurov & K.-B. Gunther]. *Sign Language Studies*, 14(1), 125-129. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sls.2013.0020>

Perry, K. H. (2012). What is literacy?--A critical overview of sociocultural perspectives. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 8(1), 50-71. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ1008156)

Stapleton, L. D. (2014). *The unexpected talented tenth: Black d/Deaf students thriving within the margins* (Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University, Ames). Retrieved from <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/>

Stokoe, W. C. (1960). *Sign language structure: An outline of the visual communication systems of the American Deaf*. Buffalo: University of Buffalo.

Stokoe, W. C. (2005). Sign language structure: An outline of the visual communication systems of the American deaf. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, 10(1), 3-37. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (Accession No. EJ727730)