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People of the Eye Need Deaf Education Not Special Education

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Abstract

This conceptual paper focuses on language by eye to explain the argument that deaf education should not be placed within special education. This argument is based on two theoretical frameworks, Person-Environment (P-E) fit and deaf didactics of education. It highlights eight issues that are different between deaf and special education, including that deaf education should begin at identification and include early intervention. Next, family language support is necessary to provide access to visual strategies as well as sign language in the extremely early stages of early intervention. Then Deaf Adult role models, including deaf mentors, are valuable to help families facilitate effective P-E fit. There is a need for language to be assessed beginning between three to six months after identification to determine if the child is acquiring typical developmental milestones. Parents now must confront Placement decisions, and they need complete information to be able to make these decisions effectively to maximize the P-E fit for their child. Given a new language was introduced to the family, it is critical to help the family maintain effective involvement with the deaf child. Deaf peers are needed so that the P-E fit for social emotional development is provided. The eighth context is LRE, not to be interpreted as a Least Restrictive Environment, but rather as a Language Rich Environment. These issues require changes in teacher education programs to teach visual strategies and to prepare these teachers to use visual strategies in sign language. Four models of deaf-centric deaf education are also proposed, all including direct communication with at least one member in the classroom. If direct communication is not the norm, then suggestions are made regarding including educational interpreters as well as Certified Deaf Interpreters. Limitation and future research are included.

Keywords

Deaf Education, Special Education, Teachers of the Deaf, Deaf-Centric Education, Person-Environmental Fit, Didactics of Education

1. Introduction

The claim of many (Chamberlain et al., 1999; Lane et al., 2011; McKee, 2001) is that deaf people are people of the eye. Here we use this idea to claim that all deaf people rely on their eyes more so than hearing people. This conceptual paper outlines a new vision for Deaf Education separate from special education. But you say, Marschark et al. (2013) challenged this view and said that not all deaf people are people of the eye. Marschark et al. (2017) followed up their earlier claim and clarified that deaf learners do not always focus on visual learning styles. However, our claim argues that all of the diverse deaf people in the world are visual in one way or another; lipreading for those using spoken language only, sign supported speech for those needing visual support for speech, Visual Phonics to teach reading, Cueing as a way to English, Simultaneous Communication and many more ways of being deaf that rely on visual input including augmentative and alternative communication devices. Agrawal and Peiris (2021) summarized data from eye tracking studies and found that deaf and hearing people focus on different parts of the face, with deaf people more focused on the eyes and hearing people more focused on the nose. This visual focus was found to provide information about the environment and to manage attention. This idea includes deaf people with additional disabilities as well as those who do not have additional disabilities. The rationale for this claim is that the brain's neuroanatomy changes because there is only one fully functioning major sensory input. Therefore, the visual system takes over some tasks; for example, all deaf people, regardless of if they sign or not, have wider peripheral fields of view (Dye & Bavelier, 2010). Our claim here is not that all deaf people are visual learners, but that they use their visual sensorium to move through the world (Valente et al., 2011). So, this claim includes all deaf individuals.

Here are two theoretical frames used to support this claim. These frameworks are not deaf-centric but can be used to frame the argument that deaf education requires alternative strategies when compared to special education. The first framework is the didactic principles of theory and practice in education (Riskulova & Yuldoshova, 2020) while the second framework is Person-Environment Fit (P-E fit; van Vianen, 2018). Below are these two frameworks expanded.

The didactic principles combine theoretical knowledge with practical applications (Riskulova & Yuldoshova, 2020). Learning is based on these interrelationships and occurs only when the students understand the material. The teacher's responsibility is to actively engage the students while the students must demonstrate a desire to learn. Here education is the main source of personality development, so for Riskulova and Yuldoshova (2020) education and child development are inseparable. For this learning to occur, teaching must include visual materials that are relevant to the content, the learner's age level, and the learner's knowledge level. These visual materials can be demonstrations, visual symbols like maps or graphs, and for hearing students' audiovisual information. Didactics focus on the "what" and "why" while the methodology focuses on the "how" and "what" to

teach (p. 789). The main principles include mental activity, the connection of theory to practice, demonstrations, comprehension, science and the application of knowledge, as well as the consolidation of these theories with their practice.

P-E fit is predicted by the bidirectional interactions between the individual and their context. This theory derives from Lewin's (1951; as cited in van Vianen, 2018) belief that the person's (P) and the environmental (E) interaction is thought of as $B = f(P \times E)$. This formula is the essential assumption of the theory that the interaction predicts more than the P or the E alone. This function is optimal when the fit is well matched (the deaf infant is provided multimodal multilingual input at identification of being deaf). There is a deficit when the fit is either too low (low expectations for deaf students) or too high (arriving at school with 50 to 300 concrete words (Cupples et al., 2018) when your peers have several thousand). Notice that both theories place child development at the heart of learning.

Let us circle back and define multimodal multilingual education. This view of education includes more than the traditional visual and verbal modes of learning. It includes linguistic (either in sign or spoken languages), visual mode (images, diagrams, pictures), audio (if accessible), gestures, the spatial layout of physical arrangements (either in print or the environment) and a sociocultural focus (Scott et al., 2023). It also includes translanguaging (using all the child's modes and languages; Scott & Cohen, 2023) and the use of universal design (Taylor et al., 2023). This newer model tends to be used rather than the older bimodal bilingual model of deaf education as it is more inclusive and provides educators with more options to teach all children.

Given this claim (that all deaf people rely on a visual sensorium) and the two theoretical frameworks (didactics of education and P-E fit), the argument here is that Deaf education requires different foci than special education. In many ways, special education is an attempt to provide universal education for all children, including those with special needs (Kauffman et al., 2018; Rees, 2025). Special education has both positives and negatives, but these disabled students who qualify for these programs under IDEA arrive at school with basic social language 99% of the time due to early neuroplasticity in the brain (Newport et al., 2022). In contrast, many deaf children with hearing parents who do not sign arrive at school with limited basic social language, even with early identification and early intervention (Rudge et al., 2022; Wolsey et al., 2018; Yoshinaga-Itano et al., 2017). This difference between these disabilities means that one must begin Deaf education when the child is identified as deaf with Early Intervention and help parents learn how to provide language to their deaf child (Caselli et al., 2021). The other categories under IDEA have different needs and require different interventions. Therefore, one needs different systems in place to maximize Deaf education as the disability often is not within the child but within the environment (e.g., Bajan et al., 2026), calling into play the P-E fit and the need to adapt to the child, rather than expecting the child to adapt to the environment (Gottlieb, 2007). Below we discuss these differences from the perspective of the deaf infant and later that deaf child.

2. Positionality

Before we continue, we acknowledge the positionalities we bring to the field of Deaf education. The first author is a Deaf white woman who is a native ASL user, current doctoral student, taught P-12 DHH students across educational settings, teaches and supervises pre-and in-service TODs, investigates mentorship of pre-service TODs, and has research interests in the areas of early language and literacy development of DHH children, ASL/English bilingualism, as well as curriculum development and instruction in deaf education. The second author is a hearing European American with a background in developmental psychology who has been immersed in ASL and Deaf culture throughout her career and has extensive experience and knowledge with research in cognition, Deaf culture, and language acquisition.

3. What Is So Different between Deaf Education and Special Education?

As noted above, deaf children need **Early Intervention** when identified as being deaf (Hall, 2017) to prevent devastating delays in language acquisition. EHDI stresses that children need to be identified as deaf at 1 month, diagnosed at 3 months, and receive early intervention by 6 months (Clark et al., 2020b) and the current thinking is that this process is better if these occur earlier at 1-2-3 months. However, many Early Intervention programs are not providing the needed support for typical language acquisition (Bajan et al., 2026; Clark et al., 2020a) and delays in language acquisition are occurring even with early intervention.

The paragraph above highlights two critical needs for Deaf education; Early Intervention (White, 2021) and Family language support (Lillo-Martin et al., 2023). Typically, families and children share the same language. However, this issue is a major difference in Deaf education because early language is best set for visual language, most likely not the family's language. When these two systems (Early Intervention and Family language support) work together as in the Family ASL program (Lillo-Martin et al., 2023) or as found in Caselli et al., (2021) children have outcomes later like those in Finton et al.'s (2025) study, as mentioned where visual language by six months and multimodal multilingual language practices by three years shows effective outcomes later. Formalizing the two theories of the deaf didactic of education and P-E fit into a separate Deaf education practice would increase the likelihood of those outcomes as found in Finton et al. (2025). Additional support from the Department of Education for training Early Interventionists and language providers who understand multimodal multilingual strategies, including translanguaging (Wolbers et al., 2023), and visual strategies such as those found in the book *58-In-Mind* (Golos et al., 2024), would provide these families who were unaware of how to raise a deaf child (Gale & Martin, 2024) the necessary skills to raise healthy deaf children who entered kindergarten ready to learn academic language.

Another important strategy for this early time is the use of Deaf Mentors and

Deaf Adults in helping families learn how to interact with their visual deaf child (Gale, 2026; Gale et al., 2026). Deaf adult role models provide parents with visual strategies that aid hearing parents in providing the best P-E fit for their deaf infant. Parents fear and grief that their child will not be a productive, healthy, happy adult are relieved and now language acquisition can occur at typical rates (Simms et al., 2013). This issue leads to the next critical step of Deaf Education assessment.

Most parents still select spoken language to use with their deaf infant (Bajan et al., 2026; Clark et al., 2023). Frequently these children are working with a speech language specialist who tells the parents that their child is progressing well. Then when the child arrives at kindergarten, they find that they are delayed in their language acquisition (Clark et al., 2020a). A vital part of Early Intervention needs to be Language Assessment. The Visual Communication and Sign Language (VCSL; Simms et al., 2013) and the Spoken Language Checklist (SLC; Clark et al., 2021) are parallel teacher/parent friendly checklists that can be used at home or more formal assessments to determine if young children are achieving typical language acquisition. As noted in Bajan et al. (2026) and Clark et al. (2023), there is a serious gap in language acquisition. Unfortunately, LEAD-K (2024), Payne-Tsoupros (2019) has attempted to make these assessments part of the Early Intervention Policy in several states, but they are not yet highly effective.

Placement decisions are difficult decisions to make, and the current law gives parents the right to make these decisions. Payne-Tsoupros (2019) argues that consideration should be given to the rights of the deaf child in these life-altering contexts. Again, here P-E fit comes into play, and parents need to be provided with complete information about all choices. As noted earlier, most parents choose spoken language in conjunction with hearing technologies for their deaf child. Given the advice from these more medically focused providers, they also tend to select spoken language pre-schools and early school placements. If their child's language assessment shows that they are doing well in spoken language, one can expect a positive P-E fit. However, this fit needs to be carefully monitored to be sure that it is positive. If the family had selected a multimodal multilingual approach and now the child is using spoken language at age typical levels, a move to a spoken language placement could be the best fit. The research shows that early sign language with later cochlear implants leads to effective spoken language as the early neurological structures have been established for language through early sign (Cheng, 2026). Now both P-E fit and didactics of education come into play, as the educational content needs to match the child's knowledge levels. These measures should be carefully monitored within a Deaf education system that can switch placements when needed for the best fits with these theoretical frameworks.

Family Involvement in all these decisions is critical. Parents are asked to make decisions on language *choice* rather than language *opportunities* (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007). They run into the myths about Deaf education (Kurz & Kurz, 2022) and are frequently told that their child will never speak if they are exposed to sign language. If families had a Deaf Mentor and interacted with Deaf Adults,

they would know that these myths are not true. They would also know the benefits of multimodal multilingual language exposure. This family involvement would also provide them with deaf peers for their deaf child.

Deaf Peers are critically important and are part of the Language Rich Environment (LRE) in Deaf education. Within this version of LRE, Deaf adults and signing peers are a natural part of the educational system. Later, several different LREs with a Deaf-centric education will be presented that eliminate the isolation of one deaf child in a mainstream classroom.

Teacher Preparation for Deaf Education

Given P-E fit and the didactics of education, creating Deaf education separate from special education will require that Deaf education teacher preparation programs focus on teaching visual strategies and be grounded in the new research on how deaf learners are different (Bélanger et al., 2018; Dye & Bavelier, 2010; Emmorey & Lee, 2021; Sampson et al., 2026). Kurz et al. (2021) published a book on guidelines for this type of teacher preparation program. The key goals and anticipated outcomes of their volume are:

- to increase the number of multilingual Deaf education teacher preparation programs;
- to increase the number of fluent language and cultural models for Deaf children in varying educational environments;
- to increase the number of high-quality teachers with competencies in multilingual strategies;
- to increase collaboration between teacher training programs; and
- to increase research and professional development focused on multilingual pedagogies.

Kurz et al. (2021b) also highlight issues that need to be resolved to change and provide Deaf Education (adopted from Kurz et al., 2021a; GU Press). They propose eight issues, listed below.

1) Classroom resources, instructional practices, and communication policies need to change from being oriented toward the use and development of spoken and written English (Simms & Thumann, 2007) to being multimodal multilingual.

2) The growing awareness of audism in Deaf education, especially from educational professionals, that prohibits Deaf students from advancing in signing environments needs to be addressed. For example, schools prioritize auditory services over American Sign Language (ASL) immersion services.

3) There must be a clear and current definition of what multimodal multilingual Deaf education means.

4) There must be consistency within and across educational settings that adopt a multimodal multilingual philosophy.

5) There must be consistency across Deaf education teacher preparation programs on key competencies, such as sign language proficiency, comparative linguistics of ASL and English, and ASL and English multimodal multilingual methodologies and strategies.

6) Deaf and signing-fluent hearing teachers who can serve as fluent language models need to be supported by training grants from the Department of Education.

7) The percentages of faculty and instructors in teacher training programs who are BIPOC need to be increased, again through training grants from the Department of Education.

8) ASL curriculums need to be supported by grants from the Institute of Educational Sciences to provide needed resources for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (i.e., ASL CIA).

To correct these issues as noted by Kurz et al. (2021a), again the Department of Education will need to provide training grants to those Deaf education programs adopting these ideas and curriculums.

Another issue that needs to be taught in Deaf education is how to manage split attention (e.g., Marschark et al., 2005; Mather & Clark, 2012; Pelz et al., 2008). When deaf students are not provided direct instruction from the teacher but through an educational interpreter, they must decide how to split their attention. Do I look at the teacher, any power point being used, or the educational interpreter? While watching a video in spoken English, they will need to pay attention to the captions. Now the decision of where the captions are on the screen is out of their control, and it may interfere with their ability to watch the video and the captions. Split attention is an issue typically not taught explicitly in our pedagogy courses but should be as it has a large impact on how information is available for learning to a deaf child. For deaf children in mainstream classrooms, this decision is complex, and the default is often to pay attention to the interpreter. In a Deaf-centric classroom, these issues would be discussed by the teacher and the interpreter team that includes a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) and that team could manage how to use space in the best interest of the student. Now we discuss how this team functions in a Deaf-centric classroom space.

Changes in Educational Interpreting

Most D/deaf students (88%) receive their special education services in the general classroom setting, often with accommodations and related services, such as educational interpreters (Gallaudet Research Institute (GRI), 2014; USDOE et al., 2023). When signing D/deaf students receive their educational services in the general education classroom, an educational interpreter is frequently included to provide access to instruction and communication. The interpreter provides translation of spoken language into signed language and vice versa. The signing student does not have direct access to classroom communication or instruction; rather, all the information is mediated through an interpreter, as are any student contributions.

Educational interpreters are required to have an undergraduate degree and (in most cases) interpreter certification. In 2019, there were 7,362 educational interpreters providing P-12 services in schools (USDOE et al., 2023). Skill levels of educational interpreters affect the quality of the interpreted content and communi-

cation. Interpreters' skills consistently fall between *advanced beginner* and *intermediate* on the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment (EIPA; Boys Town National Research Hospital, 2018), an assessment in which interpreters sign and voice academic content for a K-12 student. Regardless, even more experienced interpreters omitted classroom information with the most skilled interpreters able to only communicate 40% of the classroom content (Schick et al., 1999, 2006).

Given these facts, Deaf-centric education in public schools would include changes in how educational interpreters are trained and how they function in the classroom. In an educational setting not using direct communication, the instructional team consists of the Teacher of the Deaf (TOD), an educational interpreter, and a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI). Responsibilities are differentiated to respect professional scopes of practice. The TOD retains primary responsibility for instructional design, delivery of visual and multimodal content aligned with each student's knowledge level, ongoing assessment of comprehension, and provision of instructional clarification or reteaching. The TOD leads checks for understanding and consolidating learning. The educational interpreter's core role retains the accurate, impartial facilitation of communication between spoken and signed languages, consistent with professional standards such as those of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and National Association of Interpreters in Education. The interpreter may observe and flag apparent comprehension difficulties for the team but does not independently assess mastery or deliver new instructional content. The CDI contributes specialized visual-language expertise and language modeling. Under the TOD's instructional direction, the CDI can help rephrase or expand explanations in ways that connect to a student's current level of understanding and can support management of visual space and split attention. Like the educational interpreter, the CDI operates within interpreting boundaries and does not assume independent instructional authority. When this team-based checking for comprehension becomes the norm, students will ask questions themselves as that behavior has been modeled for them. Team training emphasizes shared use of visual didactic strategies, real-time comprehension monitoring led by the TOD, and clear protocols so that interpreters remain facilitators rather than de facto instructors.

Managing split attention becomes one of the major concerns of this team within a Deaf-centric classroom that is not using direct communication. As most deaf students now attend regional types of day classes, it is important to rethink how we use TODs, Educational Interpreters, and now this new idea of adding a CDI to the mix. One major change could be that the Educational Interpreter shadows the TOD to reduce the need for split attention. More of this plan will be discussed below.

Changes in Classroom Design

P-E fit evaluates how effective the individual functions with their environment (van Vianen, 2018) and is not only about the fit through the didactics of learning, but also the physical layout and overt physical behaviors of others. The typical hearing classroom has rows of desks, which is not a good fit for deaf learners.

Schools for the deaf and post-secondary ASL classrooms, set up their classrooms as one large U so that everyone can see each other. This visual arrangement is necessary to keep deaf students engaged in learning.

This requirement means that teachers and peers need to understand HOW to get the attention of the deaf child. Deaf individuals use flashing lights to get the attention of a classroom full of deaf individuals. They use a light shoulder tap to get an individual's attention or a large wave to get an individual's attention from a distance. Remember, calling a student's name is not going to function the same way for a deaf child as it does for hearing children.

Within this U-shaped classroom, it is possible for the teaching team of TODs, educational interpreters, and CDI to position themselves in critical places. The TOD and the Educational Interpreter need to be able to see each other. Now both the TOD and the Educational Interpreter can be in the field of view of a power point that the TOD is explaining. Then we can manage turn taking to also include the deaf student within the ongoing classroom conversations.

In Deaf-centric classrooms, one raises one's hand to get a turn and waits for the TOD to recognize you. In this way, everyone in the classroom knows who will be speaking next. Now, if the chairs are in a U-shaped format, the CDI could move behind the students and point out whose hand is raised and interpret for the Deaf student. This format allows the Deaf student to contribute to the ongoing discussion as they are in the field of view of at least one member of the team who can then help them get a turn.

Another physical change needs to occur when presenting visual information to the classroom on a power point or a projector. The TOD or other presenter needs to give the students time to read the power point prior to the TOD starting to talk about the content on that slide. If the TOD immediately starts to speak, the deaf student and the interpreter do not have time to read the power point. Again, this issue relates to split attention and that the Deaf student only can process one piece of information at a time, unlike the hearing student who can look at the power point while listening to the TOD.

Sitting up a classroom to be inclusive of a Deaf child requires re-thinking how the visual system works in contrast to the auditory system. Split attention becomes an issue that must be addressed and can easily be solved if one is intentional about addressing the topic.

4. Summary

To recap the differences in deaf-centric education, we arrive at the list of eight characteristics that included; early intervention starting at identification, family language support, deaf mentors and deaf adults interactions, language assessment placement decisions, family involvement, deaf peers, and a deaf version of LRE which expands to Language Rich Environment. For effective family involvement is it critical that parents have more information when they are making decisions? See Table 1 on the specific changes discussed here as well as a few more issues

that often occur in Deaf education. The table presents each component, the barriers associated with it, recommendations to resolve those issues, and which stakeholder is responsible for implementing them.

Table 1. Deaf education is a different framework.

Component	Barriers/Problems with IDEA	Recommended Practices	Responsible stakeholder
Environment modifications (i.e., that being deaf requires the Environment to fit the Child for effective P-E fit)	Negative Beliefs and Attitudes about deaf people Trying to make the deaf individual fit the hearing world (i.e., passing for hearing)	Accept being deaf as having a difference and not having a problem Assess the child's skills and create a matching environment for effective P-E fit Provide multimodal multilingual early intervention	Medical Professionals Early Interventionist EHDI IFSP
Early intervention	Loss to follow-up Lack of qualified service providers	UNHS, state EI preparation programs, face-to-face and/or online meetings	State EI programs NCHAM
Family language support	Limited ASL online courses Negative Beliefs and Attitudes about Sign Language	State EI preparation programs, Deaf mentors, Hands and Voices Projects like Family ASL Summer Camps for Families	State EI programs, DOE outreach in some states, Schools for the Deaf like Oklahoma Online sign programs
Meaningful contact with D/deaf adults	Availability of Deaf mentors	Deaf Mentors in-home language Deaf Adult culture modeling	Hands and Voices Local Deaf Communities Schools for the Deaf Mentor Program
Language assessment	Lack of normed assessments for deaf children in sign language	LEAD-K measures, Deaf Child Bill of Rights, available language assessment checklists	DOE outreach Language specialists ASL specialists
Funding	Decentralized Budges Bureaucratic Delays Policy Restrictions	IDEA Section 504 EHDI	Federal and State Education PART C of IDEA
Placement decisions	Based on Parent Choice without full knowledge	Multimodal Multilingual programs Providing balanced information of both sign and spoken language options	Focus on needs to the child—based on assessment Provide a P-E fit that asks the E to accommodate the P
Family participation	Parent knowledge of available services, scheduling conflicts Lack of effective role models to show effective P-E fit	Welcoming Deaf Communities that are introduced by Deaf Mentors and Deaf Adults Early sign programs that include the child as well as family members (i.e., Family SASL)	EHDI Deaf Community Referrals by early medical providers

Continued

Dispute resolution	Parent knowledge of available services	IDEA mediation, local hearing, state hearing, court	Deaf Advocates who attend IEP meetings Lawyers
Coordination of services	Many different service providers	Participant navigator (often called a patient or clinical trial navigator)	Community health prevention and treatment services
Teacher proficiency	Closure of Teacher of the Deaf Programs Leading to a lack of teachers who understand visual learners Lack of State Licensing Requirements regarding proficiency in sign and spoken languages Hiring Practices that accept non-trained TOD	Open multimodal multilingual TOD preparation programs Require language proficiency in all languages used by deaf children Professional Development for both In-Service and Pre-Service teachers Assessment development with norms for deaf children	Department of Education-OSEP TOD preparation grants Teacher of the Deaf preparation programs that prepare teachers regarding the differences between a deaf child and others with special needs Research in development Sign Language Curriculums Grant funding to develop Curriculum, Instructions, and Assessment (ASL-CIA)
Interpreter proficiency	Lack of training specifically for Educational Interpreters Professional Development for School Personnel to understand how to work with these interpreters Hiring practices for these educational interpreters which are often called communication facilitators	Creation of Educational Interpreter programs Professional Development training for mainstream teachers who will work with Educational Interpreters Adopting Classroom Arrangements that facilitate deaf visual learning and encourage peer development (i.e., the traditional U shape in deaf classrooms) Inclusion of CDI collaboration with interpreters and teachers	State and Federal Departments of Education
Access to peers	Lack of knowledgeable peers due to the Low incidence of DHH students (i.e., in mainstream classrooms) Peers who are not provided information about how to interact with their deaf peers Training for students to overcome negative beliefs and attitudes about deaf individuals	Schools for the Deaf Public Schools with Deaf Programs embedded Blended schools where there are two teachers (a signer and a speaker) and all students learn both ASL and English (in the US) In rural areas, with few students a deaf teacher aid to work with students, teachers, and administrators	State Department of Education Federal Oversight of effectiveness of deaf student outcomes

Continued

Curriculum design based on current research and translated into effective practices	Use of hearing curriculum to teach deaf students Lack of secondary prevention to reduce/eliminate language delay/deprivation when a child enters the public school system Focus on traditional methods (i.e., the Science of Reading) that have been shown to have negative effects on deaf student learning Use of etic research applied to an emic population (i.e., outsider researchers doing research on deaf insiders)	Qualified evaluators to assess P-E fit Curricula designed for DHH (*Foundations for Literacy, Bedrock, BCG, SIWI*) based on research Understanding of the etiology of language delay/deprivation to create effective intervention strategies to maximize the P-E fit of each child for highest levels of educational outcomes.	Creation of Translation Centers that collaborate with researchers to develop effective new curriculums based on the newest research Focus on Primary Prevention based on the newest research that shows that Multimodal multilingual language acquisition eliminates most language deprivation Deaf didactics approach with visual support, and visual organizers, for P-E fit Deaf mentors for teachers' professional development

These changes lead to changes in the training of TODs as well as of Educational Interpreters. In addition, it is suggested that training of these two types of professionals include working together in addition to a CDI as part of a team in all the Deaf-centric education models discussed next.

Finally, all the Deaf-centric education models need to consider not only the cognitive and academic P-E fits but also the physical environment and how it can be reorganized to fit the deaf child while still benefiting the other hearing students. Next, several suggestions for models that can be used as Deaf-centric educational settings are discussed.

5. Deaf-Centric Framework

Due to modality-related differences in D/deaf learners' language uptake and processing, we propose a Deaf-centric framework based on P-E fit and the Deaf didactics of education that includes the eight items in the summary as well as the two new training models, in lieu of an adapting hearing-centric frameworks, to meet the unique needs of D/deaf students (Grote et al., 2018; Hauser et al., 2010; Humphries, 2013; Potier & Givens, 2023; Scott et al., 2023). This approach reframes IDEA (n.d.) from a "deficit remediation and rehabilitation" model toward a "strengths-based sociocultural development" model where D/deaf learners' cognitive and linguistic differences are viewed as "assets, not detriments" (Humphries, 2013; Potier & Givens, 2023: p. 112). This framework embeds the perspective of Deaf Gain, which reframes the term *deaf* "as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity" (Bauman & Murray, 2009: p. 3) and focuses on sign language and the visual sensory system for more effective outcomes. Given this criticism of the current system, it seems logical that potential models also be included. These in-

clude the notion of making Deaf-centric education the 14th component of IDEA with its own funding source, FAPE, and the Deaf-centric LRE of a Language Rich Environment.

Policy Pathways: IDEA Eligibility and a Parallel Linguistic-Minority Option

We propose two complementary pathways that can operate in tandem rather than as mutually exclusive options. First, Deaf-centric education should be formalized as a distinct component or specialized category under IDEA, potentially functioning as an additional or refined pathway alongside the existing 13 disability categories. This additional category would maintain full IDEA eligibility, FAPE procedural safeguards, and related-service entitlements for students who meet the disability criteria. Under this pathway, placement decisions would continue to be individualized and would explicitly recognize a Language Rich Environment, defined here as one that provides direct access to language models, Deaf peers, multimodal multilingual strategies, and visual didactics as the least restrictive environment. For many deaf students, this model best supports their communication, academic, and social emotional needs, consistent with IDEA's special factors considerations for communication and language (34 C.F.R § 300.324).

Second, and in parallel, a non-disability "Deaf linguistic minority" or bilingual Deaf education pathway could be established at the federal and state levels. This option would not require a disability classification and would function similarly to existing language-minority supports. It would include dedicated funding for ASL-fluent instruction, Deaf role models, specialized programs, and early language access, with accountability focused on preventing language deprivation and measuring ASL and English outcomes. Students could access either pathway (or both) based on individual needs, family choice, and assessment data without losing rights under IDEA or Section 504. In both pathways, the statutory least restrictive environment requirement continues to apply: education with nondisabled peers remains the default to the maximum extent appropriate, but a Language Rich Environment can constitute the LRE when it is the setting that maximizes the student's language access and educational benefit.

Gold Standard: Early Intervention using a Multimodal Multilanguage Framework at a School for the Deaf

This model is closest to the current Deaf School model. LEAD-K (2024) provides a framework to begin education early with the focus on the child's needs first and then supporting the family in their ability to provide those needed services. Here the P-E fit is not on the legal rights of the parents to choose, but on the needs of the child for effective development (Payne-Tsoupros, 2019) where the rights of the child and the rights of the parents are considered separately. Here a Deaf-centric education would start at identification of the child being deaf, and the requirements of this Early Intervention would be for the team to consider the child's language needs. Deaf Schools are the agencies that provide Early Intervention and can provide multimodal multilingual learning environments that include family language support. Deaf Schools include both Deaf and Hearing adult sign-

ing models that can aid in this family language support. LEAD-K also sets up legislation for frequent language assessment, which can be effectively conducted at the school. Here, placement decisions would be based first on the child's needs and then the needs of the parents (Payne-Tsoupros, 2019). Parents would be provided with a balanced and complete developmental evaluation to help them decide among the many opportunities that are available for their deaf child (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007). This environment would include fully accessible languages for the child, while allowing parents to learn alongside their deaf child (Lillo-Martin et al., 2023). Not only Deaf adults are language models in this context, but the child also has deaf peers.

Teachers of the Deaf would have learned the visual strategies so effective and nicely summarized in *58-IN-MIND* (Golos et al., 2024). These multimodal multilingual TODs provide not only education, but models of how to be a successful deaf adult. In this Gold Standard, interpreters are only needed for visitors and those learning to sign. All education is direct, from the multimodal multilingual TOD to the deaf child.

Exposure to this P-E-fit has been examined in recent research. Finton et al. (2025) tracked ASL fluency and academic achievement over four years among a large sample of students (approximately 797) at a bilingual ASL-English school for the Deaf. It was discovered that Deaf children with hearing caregivers who entered the program before age 3 (i.e., received early intervention and immersive access) reliably achieved academic outcomes in reading, writing, math, and science that were comparable to those of Deaf children with Deaf caregivers. Later entry was associated with lower average outcomes. These findings illustrate the potential of early, intensive, multimodal multilingual environments with Deaf adult models and peers. We therefore propose the full School for the Deaf model described above as a Gold Standard candidate for maximizing academic P-E fit, while acknowledging that Finton et al. (2025) results come from one specialized residential/day program and that broader replication is needed. Finton et al.'s (2025) study provided many hours of language immersion, with Deaf adult role models, and peers for social engagement and development. Additional recent research supports Finton et al., including the work of the University of Connecticut team on Family ASL (e.g., Lillo-Martin et al., 2023) and the work of the team at Boston University (e.g., Berger et al., 2024) who are finding that families who are learning sign language as a family are seeing effective language acquisition in their children. This evidence is increasing in many research centers and leads us to label this model the Gold Standard.

Regardless, we understand that Deaf education has many moving parts including parent choice, deaf children in rural areas, and the resources available for low incidence groups. Therefore, we propose additional models that could be implemented depending on parental choice, school location, and resources but still using a Deaf-centric framework.

Model 1: Part-time boarding student

If families want to have their child experience at least part of this Gold Standard, a new model of attending the State Schools for the Deaf part-time and then returning to the local school could be developed. Many parents are leery about sending their children away to school but may feel more comfortable sending them for two days out of the week. After these two days, they would return to the local school for the remaining three days.

This model would be highly effective for students who are showing serious language delays. The rationale here is that children will have longer periods of intense language exposure with the two days of living at the Deaf school. ASL exposure would happen not only in the classroom, but with peers after school, eating with signing individuals, and finally living in the dorms in the evening. There are costs for this model that include busing that would have to be covered to bring these children to the Deaf school.

For families who elect this option, anticipated benefits include establishing close collaboration between the Deaf school and the home school's teachers so the child's program remains continuous, as well as professional development on visual strategies that could benefit all students at the home school. These outcomes are anticipated based on the logic of more intensive periods of ASL exposure and immersion (classroom, peer, dining, and residential settings), and P-E fit; they remain to be evaluated and associated costs such as transportation would also require study.

Model 2: Blended Deaf and Hearing Classrooms

A second model is blended education with both deaf and hearing students in one classroom. This model has been proposed since the 1990s (Kirchner, 1994) and beyond (Kreimeyer et al., 2000) with moderate success. The model includes the use of visual strategies that would benefit all students to increase engagement with two teachers with one of them at least knowing ASL. For example, the use of a U-shaped classroom or pods of desks can facilitate the blending of the deaf and hearing students in the classroom. This model encourages social emotional development, which can be extremely difficult for deaf students. This model could also take advantage of the professional development discussed in the first model. In addition, the model could include the team of the regular teacher, the TOD, the Educational Interpreter, and the CDI; this team can blend in the visual strategies taught in these new Deaf-centric TOD programs which can be beneficial to all members of the classroom.

Model 3: Deaf Teacher Aid Role Model

The model with the least change is to hire a deaf teacher's aid to help within the classroom. Providing a Deaf adult as a classroom aide or role model is the model requiring the least structural change. Anecdotal reports and the logic of P-E fit and Deaf didactics suggest anticipated benefits such as reduced behavioral issues, a stronger visual-learning culture for all students, and improved social interactions. Systematic evaluation of these anticipated effects is a priority for future research.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This conceptual paper is based on the theory that P-E fit is critical and the deaf didactic of education with a focus on visual strategies will lead to a Deaf-centric learning environment beginning at identification and including eight components not explicitly focused on in special education, including Early Intervention, Family language support, Deaf Mentors and Deaf Adult role models, Language assessments, Placement decisions, Family involvement, deaf peers, and LRE that is a Language Rich Environment rather than the traditional least restrictive environment. As a conceptual review of Deaf education, it leaves many remaining issues that need to be evaluated and lead to future research which are the limitations of this conceptual paper. Limitations relate to how these ideas can be supported within the current laws and funding mechanisms for free and public education. Again, in conceptualizing how these ideas need to be implemented, the following issues and questions needed to be addressed.

Keep IDEA (n.d.) eligibility fully available as one pathway for students with additional disabilities. Continue strengthening existing IDEA "Special Factors" requirements so that communication/language needs, opportunities for direct instruction and peer interaction in the child's language/mode, and academic/social needs drive decisions and explicitly recognize language-rich environments (including specialized Deaf programs) as the LRE for many students.

Create a parallel federal/state "Deaf linguistic minority" or bilingual Deaf education pathway that does not require disability classification, including:

- Dedicated funding (new categorical stream or expanded language-minority-style support) for ASL-fluent instruction, Deaf teachers/role models, specialized programs/schools, and early language access;
- Guaranteed language rights and accountability focused on preventing language deprivation and measuring ASL + English outcomes; and
- Strengthen workforce standards requiring demonstrated ASL proficiency for educators serving these students.

Supportive policy infrastructure, including Federal guidance and incentives for dual-enrollment or co-enrollment models and regional Deaf education hubs, should be investigated. This model would require additional research comparing outcomes under traditional special education frameworks and the current proposals. Additionally, protection and strengthening of schools for the Deaf will allow research to evaluate if these models can replicate the Finton et al. (2025) findings; then separate projects need to evaluate the effectiveness of the other models as well to determine the "dose" that is needed to achieve effective outcomes for deaf children.

7. Conclusion

This proposal is a conceptual paper with suggestions to move deaf education from the traditional hearing curriculum to a deaf-centric focus. It points out some ways that deaf education is different from special education. It proposes new training programs for both TODs and educational interpreters as well as a new way to team

that adds a CDI to this TOD/Educational Interpreter pair. It proposes that deaf education becomes its own independent component of IDEA (n.d.) with funding from the federal and state governments to provide FAPE but also a Deaf-centric LRE that focuses on language and providing rich visual strategies.

A Gold Standard is proposed that is like the current Schools for the Deaf but changes them to the new model of being Deaf-centric with eight changes that included components that are currently more difficult to access from one stop. Then understanding parent choice, rural schools, and schools that do not have the budget to provide these supports, several alternative formats are provided that can still maintain the Deaf-centric focus. Policies like LEAD-K and the Georgia's Deaf Child Bill of Rights (2010) can move to a Deaf-centric policy for Deaf education. For example, The Deaf Child Bill of Rights includes the following:

In considering the child's needs, the school system shall expressly consider the following: (1) The child's individual communication mode or language; (2) The availability to the child of a sufficient number of age, cognitive, and language peers of similar abilities; (3) The availability to the child of deaf or hard-of-hearing adult models of the child's communication mode or language; (4) The provision of appropriate, direct, and ongoing language access to teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing and interpreters and other specialists who are proficient in the child's primary communication mode or language; and (5) The provision of communication-accessible academic instruction, school services, and extracurricular activities (Georgia Department of Education, 2010: p. 1).

This bill is another example like that of Payne-Tsoupros (2019) that focuses on P-E fit and placing the child's needs first. We have been failing many deaf children by not intervening early enough with language access using a multimodal multilingual framework, so this move to a Deaf-centric child P-E fit has evidence that shows its effectiveness. Maybe it is time to place the child first and create the environment that will maximize their potential.

In summary, this conceptual framework is due to modality-related differences in D/deaf learners' language uptake and processing. Therefore, we propose a deaf-centric framework based on deaf didactics, in lieu of an adapted hearing-centric framework, to meet the unique needs of D/deaf students (Grote et al., 2018; Hauser et al., 2010; Humphries, 2013; Potier & Givens, 2023; Scott et al., 2023).

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Bencak: writing, conceptualization, editing; Clark: conceptualizaion, writing, editing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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