

# NCSAViewpoint

## Cued Speech: Breaking the Paradigm

*By Sarina Roffé*

Robert Frost wrote a poem in which he talked about choosing the road less traveled as he went through the yellow wood. In many ways, using Cued Speech with a deaf child can be equated with the line from Frost's poem. It is the road least traveled, and is an effective route to achieving the goals of oralism.

For many years, traditional auditory/oral education was the standard for use with deaf children in America. It made perfect sense that deaf children be taught to speak and use hearing aids to maximize the use of residual hearing. To be sure, the standards of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf can be linked to the excellent speech we see in so many deaf adults today.

The 1970s brought about a drastic change in deaf education. Deaf adults denounced oral education, saying that they found it frustrating and that sign was their native language. Many complained bitterly about the lack of communication in the home and that they often felt left out. They demanded the use of sign language in deaf education. Urged by deaf adults coming out of schools for the deaf, many educators turned to total communication, the combined use of lip-reading, hearing aids, and sign language in English word order. There was a push toward sign language in the name of communication in the home and an increase in deaf culture.

As a hearing parent of a deaf child in the 70s, I could see both sides of the issue. I wanted Simon, my prelingually profoundly deaf son, to learn to speak and lip-read and use his hearing aids and residual hearing. But I also wanted to be able to freely communicate with my son for him to feel included in our family and to learn our culture and heritage as Sephardic Jews. I wondered if there was an alternative to the oral versus sign debate. With either choice, there was heavy pressure on the parents to do lessons and follow-up work at home.

Another more important issue was literacy. Decades of research into literacy among deaf children showed that the average prelingually profoundly deaf person at age 18 read at the level of an 8 or 9 year old hearing child. Simon was intelligent and I did not want deafness to limit his ability to achieve.

As the national debate continued, Cued Speech was gaining respect on the national front. Dr. R. Orin Cornett invented Cued Speech in 1966 at Gallaudet College in order to solve the literacy problems that had plagued deaf education for generations. Although he didn't know it at the time, Cued Speech would eventually break the paradigm, or pattern, for deaf education because it allowed deaf children to achieve in a way they never had before.

After studying current methods of teaching the deaf to read and by looking at writing samples, Dr. Cornett, a physicist and mathematician with no background in deafness, drew some basic conclusions. He compared how hearing children and deaf children learn to read. Hearing children learn a majority of their language from their parents. They speak and use the language of their parents before they learn to read. Writing samples showed Cornett that even the most successful prelingually profoundly deaf oral children had difficulty with English syntax and subject verb agreement.

Thus, Cornett concluded that the first step to reading is knowledge of the language. Cornett realized that deaf children were seeing English for the first time when they learned to read, a process which is reversed from how hearing children learn to read. Furthermore, everything taught in school is taught with the spoken language. Cornett believed that if the deaf child did not have a solid knowledge

of spoken language, the typical prelingually profoundly deaf child was doomed to slow, laborious learning.

He also realized that deaf children needed a system whereby they could see the natural spoken language of their parents through vision alone. Among other criteria, Cornett believed that the system had to be easy enough for hearing parents to learn in a reasonable period of time.

Cornett started with the idea that if all the phonemes of speech looked different from each other on the speaker's mouth just as they sound different from each other to hearing ears, a profoundly deaf child could learn language through vision almost as easily as the 'normal' child learns it from hearing.

Using his mathematical background to devise Cued Speech, Cornett developed the system using spoken language phonemics. Eight handshapes represent groups of consonant sounds and four positions around the face represent groups of vowel sounds, both of which are used in combination with lip-reading. The basic idea is that sounds that look alike on the hand must look different on the lips and sounds that look alike on the lips are clarified by the hand cues. The end result is that the deaf child can see differences in all of the sounds of basic spoken language. With the use of Cued Speech by the parents in the home, the deaf child would learn the spoken language first, and then learn to read it in the same sequence as hearing children.

An experimental Cued Speech program was started with a small group of deaf children at the National Child Research Center in Washington, D.C. The deaf children were mainstreamed with a group of hearing children in a preschool program where everyone cued. Two years later, the results were astounding. The deaf children, whose parents also cued at home, had the language skills of their hearing peers. As the children aged out of the program, each parent went home to their school district and asked for a Cued Speech program for their deaf child. One of those programs started in Montgomery County, Maryland in 1979.

It was about that time that I had grave concerns about Simon's progress and ability to succeed orally using traditional methods. I wanted him to be oral, but despite being aided at age eight months, his language development after three years of intense parent involvement, auditory training, use of hearing aids and intervention, was poor. At age 3 ½ he had the language of a 17-month-old, less than a 150-word vocabulary. We needed an alternative way to reach the goals set by the Alexander Graham Bell Association.

I was frustrated, my husband was frustrated, and worst of all, my very bright deaf son was frustrated. We had terrible discipline problems with him. Communication was an issue and I saw that we were simplifying what we said to make ourselves understood. For example, I pointed to the cereal boxes in the morning so he could show me which one he wanted. But the language of the names of different cereals was lost to Simon. Out of desperation, we had started to sign the year before to ease our communication issues in the home. To be sure, communication improved, but I was still frustrated, largely because English and sign are two different languages.

As a parent, I still wanted my deaf son to learn to lip-read, to speak, to read, to go to college and to succeed at being whatever he wanted to be. I also wanted him to learn Hebrew and the nuances of our Middle Eastern culture. I began to doubt that would ever happen until I started hearing about Cued Speech. I began to have hope.

We began cueing to Simon in 1979 when he was 3 ½. Simon was in the Montgomery County program the year it began and there were a few other children in the preschool. In the first six months we made a smooth transition from signing to cueing and Simon learned 500 new words.

Sad became angry, frustrated, upset, and disappointed. A sofa became a couch and then a davenport. The generic cereal became Rice Krispies, Corn Flakes, or Froot Loops. I could see the

wheels spinning in his head as he processed language and began to express himself. He learned about short, long, thick, thin, and bushy tails. With Cued Speech, we could easily sing nursery rhymes and other childhood songs.

By the end of the first year, Simon was talking in sentences and by the end of the second year, his test scores indicated he had the language of a six-year-old, a language gain of five years in less than two. Simon was talking a mile a minute, although we still had a far way to go on speech and articulation.

Simon was mainstreamed into kindergarten with a Cued Speech Transliterator. He continued to need speech therapy and resource room help from a teacher of the deaf for many years. At age seven, Simon was diagnosed with a second disability, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), which affected his ability to concentrate and use a Cued Speech Transliterator. After the ADD was treated, Simon moved from the bottom reading group to the top reading group in his first grade class.

Simon is also an excellent lip-reader, having topped 90 percent several times on the Hood lip-reading scale. In fact, research from McGill University showed that deaf kids who knew Cued Speech could lip-read without cues better than deaf children who were raised in the traditional oral method, largely because they had good language skills and knew what the lips were supposed to look like with cues.

Research completed in the late 80s and early 90s indicates that deaf children with whom Cued Speech is used read at or above the level of their hearing peers. Simon and the other children in Montgomery County were certainly proof that this was true. Over the years, Simon topped the Stanford Achievement several times and by the end of fifth grade, he tested in the 99<sup>th</sup> percentile rank on the California Achievement Tests. In 1990, out of 32 deaf children in Montgomery County's Cued Speech program, 30 were fully mainstreamed with support services.

Hearing parents can learn Cued Speech in 10 to 15 hours and in a few months be able to say anything they want in real time without thinking. Another advantage with Cued Speech is that deaf children can see differences in dialect and accents, since a person cues the way they talk. For me, I realized that this was a way that my deaf son could learn Hebrew.

With Cued Speech, communication in the home was never an issue. My daughter also cues fluently. We communicate freely, and when my hand is busy, Simon is able to lip-read. He took Hebrew for seven years before his bar mitzvah. During his teenage years, Simon began to learn American Sign Language, which he uses to communicate in the deaf world.

When Simon was in high school, we moved to New York City, where Simon was chosen as the student representative to the Citywide Commission on Deaf Education. He also served for two years as president of the National Council of Synagogue Youth-Our Way, a Jewish deaf youth group. Most recently, he served as a regional director of the National Cued Speech Association.

As a parent, I feel Cued Speech allowed our family to communicate freely with Simon, and for him to become an oral adult and reach his potential. He depends heavily on his hearing aids and on lip-reading when functioning in the hearing world. He graduated from New York University with a degree in finance in 1998. Today he owns and operates SDR Fund Management, his own investment company.

The free and natural use of spoken language, including its idiomatic expressions and nuances, is necessary for literacy. Until Cued Speech came into our lives, we never fully appreciated or expressed the richness of the English language to our deaf son.

When I present information publicly about Cued Speech, teachers and speech therapists often don't believe it is possible for a deaf child to learn spoken language in the same way hearing children do. They doubt that deaf children can read as well as hearing children and often call Cued Speech kids 'exceptions' to the rule. In fact, after over 30 years of Cued Speech use, we now know that deaf children can learn just as easily as hearing children and that their deafness does not have to limit them.

Although it was originally developed for use with severe and profoundly deaf children, Cued Speech is used today with hearing children with other disabilities, such as autism and dyslexia. In addition, it is often recommended for use with adventitiously deafened adults who need a supplement to lip-reading but don't want to learn sign language. Cued Speech is used today in about 15 countries and is available in 56 languages and major dialects.

Children raised with Cued Speech have broken the pattern of deaf education. They read at the same levels as their hearing peers, are excellent lip-readers, learn other languages, can distinguish between regional dialects and accents and for the most part, their deafness does not limit their ability to achieve.

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