

Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Sign Language as a Communication Bridge between Children on the Autism Spectrum and Neurotypical Peers

Up to fifty percent of all people on the autism spectrum are non-verbal. Without the ability to use spoken language, many cannot communicate their feelings and needs to others, often leading to frustration and isolation. All people on the autism spectrum have something unique to offer the world, but due to communication barriers, often find it difficult to build relationships with others and share their ideas. In order to bridge the communication gap between non-verbal people with ASD and neurotypical peers, I am investigating the use of manual communication, specifically sign language, and its potential use in inclusive classroom settings. Non-verbal children with ASD may be able to learn and utilize alternate forms of communication such as the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and sign language to express themselves. A large amount of research shows that autistic children are able to acquire sign language and use learned signs to communicate their feelings. However, most neurotypical children do not know sign language, which creates another communication gap between autistic children and their neurotypical peers. In order to assess the plausibility of creating inclusive classrooms in which autistic and neurotypical children freely interact with the use of sign language, a literature review of sign language acquisition in children with ASD was conducted.

Autistic children gain many benefits from both the use of sign language and from having neurotypical peers as models and friends. These benefits include behavior improvements, better communication skills, and the facilitation of verbal language acquisition. With peer models in the classroom, autistic children can improve their peer imitation behaviors and may also engage in more social interactions. In order to further investigate the plausibility of an inclusive classroom in which sign language is taught and encouraged, an experiment would need to be

conducted in a classroom setting with a group of both autistic and neurotypical children.

Through my research, I attempted to lay the ground work for this type of classroom experiment by examining its possibility and designing a program that teachers can implement. With a thorough knowledge of sign language and the help of aids, teachers may be able to both teach sign language and encourage its use in the classroom.

Current autism research is largely focused on finding a cure, which ignores the 3.5 million people in the US living with autism spectrum disorder. Instead of trying to “fix” the autistic population, we need focus on creating environments that autistic people can feel comfortable in, environments that foster their success in daily living. By creating inclusive classrooms for young children on the spectrum, we may be able to diminish the stigma around mental and intellectual disability at a very young age and create positive attitudes about autism. Through language access in the form of sign language, children with ASD may be able to communicate with their peers and share their gifts with the world, allowing others to see that autistic people are not disabled, but rather differently abled and simply communicate in different ways. I hope that my research sheds light on the strengths that two marginalized groups possess: sign language from the deaf community and different ways of thinking and forming relationships from the autistic community. I also want to help teachers, administrators, and legislators create more inclusive spaces for children on the autism spectrum and through this endeavor demonstrate the unique benefits that all of humanity can gain by learning from and supporting differently-abled people.