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graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand with a Master of Arts Degree in Applied Drama and Theatre in 2008. She has worked in various organisations working with disabled youth and the arts. She has recently returned from completing the Sauvé Scholars Programme in Montreal, an international Fellowship for young visionary change makers from across the globe. There she launched the *WordPlay Symposium*, an Arts and Literacy Symposium, bringing community artists and educators in Montreal together to collaborate in innovative teaching practices to teach literacy to special needs students. Simangele is currently an Associate Lecturer in the South African Sign Language Department at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Visual Literacy – New ways to see Deaf Education

This article will explore an innovative way in which Visual Theatre can be used to overcome educational barriers. This is accomplished by establishing access to literacy and quality education for Deaf children. According to the Deaf Federation of South Africa, one out of three Deaf people are functionally illiterate.¹ To put this overwhelming statistic into context, the average Deaf grade 12 learner has the reading comprehension of a hearing 8 year old, and by adulthood, these learners are unsuccessfully integrated into mainstream society as a result of their disempowering educational experiences.

The medical view of disability describes deafness as an illness whereby the deaf are impaired in the physiological ability to hear. The social attitude embodied in this medical classification results in unfair social discrimination. It is this “health-related inability”² that reinforces the idea that the deaf community is disabled. This negative attitude is still prevalent within the greater hearing society, as deafness is seen as a condition categorised by a sense of ‘lack’ in health and language. There are, however, deaf people who consciously do not identify themselves according to the societal definitions of deafness. These deaf people proudly group themselves according to a shared signed language and recognise the culture associated with the deaf collective. They identify themselves as a community that is a linguistic and cultural minority.³ They identify themselves according to a social model that is based on the belief that the circumstances and discrimination faced are socially constructed phenomena that have little to do with the impairments of disabled people.

The identification of the Deaf⁴ community also has ramifications on the education of Deaf learners. The education of the Deaf learners is mainly under the jurisdiction of the hearing society, which adopts the medical view of “deafness-as-disability”⁵. Deaf learners are mainly seen as disabled within the education system rather than part of a cultural and linguistic minority. As a result, there are many complex factors that affect the education of Deaf learners that include, South African Sign Language (SASL) not being recognised as a Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT), and only a few teachers being fluent in SASL.⁶ These have negative effects on both educators and learners.

Sign languages fulfil the same communicative functions and possess the same grammatical complexity inherent in any natural language. The difference lies in the mode of communication:

hearing society utilises an oral-aural mode of communication where messages are produced orally and are interpreted aurally, while the Deaf community communicate through a visual-gestural mode where messages are produced using manual signs and facial expressions and interpreted visually. These differences act as a barrier in education between the hearing educators and the Deaf learners. There have been efforts made over the years by the hearing society to 'overcome' this language barrier but these have not been truly successful. In the South African context, schools tend to employ Total Communication as a

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LOLT, which is a mixture of signs that are supported by a spoken language in an *ad hoc* way.⁷ Although the learners are receiving an education, the quality of education must be questioned, as this LOLT is inaccessible and confusing to the Deaf learners because it is neither based on SASL nor does it follow the same grammatical rules as spoken language.

A different solution must be sought that addresses the need to provide an alternative literacy education to Deaf learners while not compromising the LOLT that is not text based as it puts the Deaf learners at a disadvantage. One method that can be used is from developmental psychologist Howard Gardner (1993), who introduced the notion of Multiple Intelligences with its references to the addition of multimodal creativity in education. According to Gardner, learners have multiple intelligences that range from:

- Linguistic
- Logical-mathematical
- Musical
- Bodily-kinaesthetic
- Spatial
- Interpersonal, and
- Intrapersonal intelligences

Gardner saw these intelligences as rarely operating independent of one another and tending to complement one another as people developed skills or solved problems. He encouraged educators to approach education with creative and non-traditional methods. One such method that can be applied to Deaf education is drama and theatre, as it is a bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence that integrates both mental and physical activities to solve problems. Many traditional theatre practitioners still prefer using text-based theatre approach, but this is a barrier for the Deaf, as their literacy levels are not on a par with the hearing. One of the pioneers of non-traditional form of theatre which relies on neither spoken nor signed language to convey narrative is Visual Theatre.⁸ Alternative mediums such as gesture, puppetry, masks and projection are used. These mediums, when present in drama and theatre, are useful in facilitating dialogue between Deaf and hearing performers.⁹ They have the potential to facilitate education between Deaf learners and hearing educators as they are not text based, but rely on visual images.

In addition to Gardner's philosophy, is Brazilian theatre maker Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed". It is a theory on utilising theatre to liberate an individual from personal oppression, and could also be beneficial in Deaf education. One of his earlier forms of emancipatory theatre was "Newspaper Theatre"¹⁰, where he provided illiterate audience members with visual performance skills to transform

daily news or articles into theatrical scenes as a way to help them to access literacy. From this theory, Boal later devised the term “Spect-Actor” to describe an actor who observes and actively participates in the theatre action. For Boal, the Spect-Actor had the privilege of simultaneously engaging in two different worlds: the real world and the theatre world. In Deaf education, the Deaf learner has the opportunity to be both the spectator as well as actively engage in the actions of the drama, rather than being the mere spectator in the education process.

In order for Boal to transform the spectators into Spect-Actors, he established a series of processes within the theatre action to achieve this. Boal promoted the language of the body by familiarising the spectators with their bodies through participating in various theatre games without the use of spoken language. From the subsequent games, the spectators become more like actors and began relying more on producing images using their bodies to create dramatic action.¹¹ Boal’s processes of creating a Spect-Actor resonate with this article’s claims that drama and theatre can be used as effective and accessible

educational methods between Deaf learners and hearing teachers. Boal’s drama and theatre techniques are less reliant on a spoken or signed language than on the language of the body, which is a gestural language collectively understood by Deaf and hearing in the expression of dramatic action. It is within the context of the drama and theatre that the body will create meanings on many levels.¹² In the educational context, the body is then the primary visual carrier of meaning of educational content between the Deaf learner and hearing educator. Visual Theatre is the ideal form of theatre, as it is the most visual of forms of theatre.

As a linguistic power struggle continues between the Deaf and hearing community regarding the education of Deaf learners, an innovative approach needs to be introduced. Non-traditional drama and theatre and Visual Theatre is proposed as an integrated educational approach in breaking the linguistic barrier between the Deaf and hearing. The meanings derived from the visual images between the bodies amongst the learner and educators are collectively understood in the education process. In the playful way of Visual Theatre, literacy can now be accessible to the Deaf learner in a visually appealing way that will not rely fully on SASL or spoken language.

NOTES

- 1 DeafSA, 2006
- 2 Shapiro, 1999:87
- 3 Ladd, 2003
- 4 Wrigley, 1996: Culturally Deaf individuals and community are referred to with a capital “D”. Deafness with a small “d” refers to the simple fact of audiological impairment and is distinct from self-identification.
- 5 Lane, 1999:19
- 6 Magongwa, 2010
- 7 Magongwa, 2010
- 8 QuestFest, 2012
- 9 Mabena, 2008
- 10 Boal, 1979
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Fleishman, 1996

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