

**BENEFITS OF USING AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE  
IN AN UPPER ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM**

**A Research Proposal Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement  
For EDMA 5683**

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July 2012**

## **Abstract**

### **Benefits of American Sign Language Usage in an Upper Elementary Classroom**

This research paper is based on a qualitative study of the benefits of using American Sign Language in an Upper Elementary Classroom. The study was conducted in a fourth grade classroom and involved the participation of students and their teachers. The goal of this study is to determine if sign language is useful for classroom management and whether signing can build student-teacher rapport and make school more enjoyable for the students and teachers. I acted as the class' student-teacher for a four-month period and taught the students sign language through incorporating signing in the curriculum and in class management strategies. At the end of the four-month period, I surveyed the students and the class' teacher to collect feedback on their experience learning sign language. The results showed that a large majority of the students liked learning sign language, thought it made school more fun, and wanted to do more sign language in school. Teachers reported that using sign language was helpful in creating an interesting and enjoyable classroom environment and that signing was a useful tool to manage classroom procedures and behavior expectations.

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## Introduction

Managing a class can be challenging for teachers and can be the source of much frustration. A learning environment with disruptive students is one of the main causes of teacher burnout. Indeed, the average length of teachers' careers in the U.S. is only eleven years (Haberman, 2004). Given the role of classroom management in ensuring fulfilling careers, teachers are continually looking for new ways to creatively manage their classrooms to promote a better learning environment, both for the educator and the students. While seating arrangements, incentive programs, and positive reinforcement are some of the more known strategies that teachers use, it is becoming more common for teachers to implement the use of hand gestures and ASL (American Sign Language) to silently communicate with their students. For a simple example, one of the signs used in many elementary classrooms is "*bathroom*." If a student needs to use the bathroom in the middle of class, instead of raising her hand and saying "Can I go to the bathroom, Teacher?", the student raises her fist and signs "*bathroom*", and the teacher signs back "*yes*" or "*no*". The conversation occurs in complete silence and students are not disrupted as a result.

Because sign language is helpful in small areas of classroom management such as in the example listed above, the premise of my study was that if signing is used more frequently throughout the school day, not only would teachers benefit from using ASL, but students as well. Recognizing that children need to feel engaged and excited in order for the best learning to occur, my hypothesis is that children would find it fun and engaging to learn a new language (particularly one that requires physical movement); and, in turn, using ASL would give them a greater understanding of linguistics.

Disruptive students might feel more focused and attentive. More senses would be used when signing, speech and visuals were combined. For instance, when teaching Geography to a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class, the teacher can say, “Today we are going to begin learning about Australia,” show the country on the map, and teach the students the ASL sign for Australia and explain the history of that sign. Students would thus be engaged aurally, visually, kinetically, and cognitively.

In this research project, I explore the use of ASL in an upper elementary classroom, starting with a review of relevant research.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review summarizes research findings in two pertinent areas: (1) teachers’ experiences with effective classroom management and views on how to reduce stressful school environments, and (2) the various ways in which sign language has been used with hearing children, including classroom management, language and communication development and memory enhancement.

### *Class Management*

Research shows that teachers often experience burnout from stress factors on the job. After only four years of teaching, 25 percent of all new teachers leave the profession, and one of the primary reasons for leaving is teachers’ low sense of job satisfaction resulting from disruptive students (Haberman, 2004).

Ryan Del Guercio, a high school educator said he knew that many teachers have high stress levels and he did not want to be one of them. Guercio stresses the importance of the first two weeks of school when it comes to managing the classroom well, noting that practices that are established early tend to continue through the remainder of the year. He emphasizes, "I always go back to the basics when it comes to how to handle my classroom: (1) Establish control, (2) create effective discipline policies, (3) build rapport, and (4) determine the needs of problem students" (Guercio, 2011, p. 39).

Harry and Rosemary Wong agree that teachers must have a thoughtful, clear plan for managing their classroom from the very first day of school and continue these plans diligently through the entire school year. "Classroom management refers to all of the things that a teacher does to organize students, space, time, and materials so that instruction in content and student learning can take place" (Wong, 1998, p. 84). The Wongs believe that if a classroom has established, effective means of management, then less problems will arise, therefore minimal discipline will be required.

Educator C.M. Charles (2008) stresses the need to establish a classroom that meets the students' needs, including security, hope, dignity, belonging, power, enjoyment, and competence. When a teacher meets these needs, Charles says that it produces an attractive school climate that produces synergy for the students. Charles defines synergy as "a phenomenon in which two or more people (or other entities) interact in a manner that builds mutual energy. Among humans, that condition often leads to increased productivity, satisfaction, and enjoyment" (Charles, 2008, p. 246). Charles finds that building camaraderie between the teacher and students is known to increase students' enjoyment of school and that misbehavior is often due to a lack of

intellectual stimulation. Incorporating activities involving movement is a strategy teachers can use to combat boredom (Charles, 2008).

### *Sign Language with Hearing Children*

Bethany C. Larson & I. Joyce Chang note that most of the research regarding using sign language in the classroom has been with Deaf children. However in recent years more studies have been done with the hearing population, specifically with children with disabilities (Larson & Chang, 2007).

Amy Brereton researched a kindergarten class whose teachers used sign language with hearing students. The two teachers Brereton studied found it easy to implement sign language in coordination with their regular curriculum. Signing became a valuable class management tool for these teachers. "When working with one child, Cindy could address the behavior of other children without raising her voice or moving between children" (Brereton, 2010, p. 94). During circle time, students could be told, through ASL, to keep to themselves or to stop a certain behavior. Brereton's research noted that teachers also found signing particularly useful during assemblies when children, who are sometimes sitting far from the teacher, need instructions. They did not need to interrupt the assembly by using their voices.

Signing was also useful in hallways at schools when where students are expected to be silent. In these situations, teachers played games with their students -- similar to "Simon Says" -- where they sign instructions with no speech, and the students would follow the instructions (Brereton, 2008).

In addition, Brereton (2009) studied how sign language in the classroom helped a disruptive and physically aggressive student named Alana. Alana had difficulty communicating when she was upset. Her first reaction was to hit, kick, pinch, or bite. After learning to sign, Brereton noticed that Alana “used signs rather than aggression as a physical form of communication, especially when she was highly emotional. During group instruction signing was a way for her to move without being reprimanded for not sitting still.” (Brereton, 2009, p. 465). Through signing, Alana was able to channel her physical energy into a positive outcome, instead of harming classmates.

Like Brereton, Constance D. Lawrence’s research similarly concluded that combining sign language with a lesson in school adds a kinesthetic element that children respond to, and which helped them in the classroom. Lawrence notes: “The use of sign language, I have found, helps students to pay attention and be physically involved in the lessons” (2001, p.4).

Onur Kurt has done sign language research with special needs students. In one study, he examined the use of signing with two autistic boys with complex special needs including limited language development. Kurt’s research found that combining verbal instructions with simple gestures and /or signs was “slightly more effective and efficient on promoting the acquisition of receptive language skills for both students and teachers” (2011, p.1436). In addition to studies with autistic children, studies have also been done regarding using sign language with children (ages 0-6) with other special needs such as Down’s Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and other learning disabilities (Toth, 2009). Anne Toth mentions that all children, no matter their abilities, have a need to communicate and she found that signing can act as a bridge that leads to oral



communication for people with special needs. Results were varied and children with Down's syndrome responded best to signing (among the various special needs types). Larson & Chang note that children with dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder are two populations that have been researched using sign language (2007). Also, Toth noticed that there was greater success seen with children over age three, who had communication support and encouragement from the parents, siblings, and grandparents. Toth records that "A nonverbal, school-aged child affected by Autism and who had, up to that point, spent much of his day screaming or being physically out of control, learned to stop his agitation to watch his teacher sign to him"(2011, p. 92). The eye contact involved in sign language provides a reciprocal process of communication between adults and children, which is necessary in linguistics (Barnes, 2010).

Teaching sign language to babies has become popular because of a book called "Baby Signs" according to Susan Kubic Barnes (2010). Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet who was a founder of the first school for the deaf in the United States said, "The more varied the form under which language is presented to the mind through the various senses, the more perfect will be the knowledge of it acquired, and the more permanently will it be retained" (Barnes, 2010, p. 22), therefore hearing children can develop a better, more intellectual understanding of an oral language when they acquire sign language skills. Barnes finds that there is no evidence to indicate that babies who sign will have delayed speech, nor is there any definitive claim that a baby's ability to sign is correlated to better linguistic abilities. Babies and young children, through signing, can express themselves and their desires rather than act out physically or emotionally with tantrums and crying. Barnes reports that research also says that "early childhood centers that adopt school-

wide signing programs for the nurseries and preschool programs report that parents and teachers say that the environment is more quiet and peaceful than non-signing centers” (2010, p.27). Jitendra & Costa (1997) report that sign language can “serve to maintain behavior control and foster self-esteem, attention, on-task behavior, communication, and academics” (Lawrence, 2001).

Marilyn Daniels says sign language helps with the visual aspect of learning because signs function as pictures. She suggests that if sign language is combined with reading books aloud to children, it promotes better understanding of the text and “supplies enticingly attractive comprehension support” (Daniels, 2001, p. 23). A child’s first learning experiences rely on the brain’s visual cortex, according to Daniels, and over half of the brain is devoted to visual processing. Because of this, learning to sign is easy for youngsters who speedily acquire the skill, according to research. Many babies learn to sign before acquiring the skill to formulate speech (Daniels, 2001).

### *Memory*

Huda Hindal, Norman Reid, and Manal Badgaish (2009) researched working memory, performance and learner characteristics on thirteen-year-olds in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Part of their study focused on visual-spatial learners who “think in pictures rather than words”. The researchers report that memory has a visual loop and an auditory loop. Memory improved if both a visual and auditory stimulus was presented to the students. Upon completion of the study, the researchers concluded that, “if information is stored in multiple ways, there are more links and, a better chance of reaching a desired piece of information” (Hindal, Reid, and Badgaish, 2009). Bower reports that using sign

language stimulates both sides of the brain: processing information in language linked to the left side and linguistic processing on the right (Lawrence, 2001). It is stated that in young children, sign language may not necessarily assist them to speak earlier, but it does “help them grasp some basics of language structure” (Lawrence, 2001, p. 6). A two-year experiment with 28 children learning Italian Sign Language showed that the group using sign language better performed when measured in the areas of visual perception and mental development versus a control group who didn’t learn to sign (Larson & Chang, 2007).

According to Daniels (2001), sign language improves memory for students learning to spell. If a child says the name of the letter while fingerspelling it, the student is much more apt to remember. Daniels states, “Studies show that a child’s memory of the spelling sequence of words is dramatically improved when he or she is taught spelling with this method. Fingerspelling involves both a thinking activity and a physical activity; The two aspects, joined in tandem, generate a powerful influence on the memory” (p. 22).

Nicholson and Graves (2010) claim that sign language is useful for helping ELLs (English Language Learners) learn English. An ELL student makes a connection between their native language and a particular sign and then can associate it with the English word. “Once confident in English they rely less and less on the signing aspect thus creating the bridge between the two languages a success” (Nicholson & Graves, 2010, p. 4). If the ELL student is frustrated and doesn’t know how to say something in English he/she can sign the word and the teacher or other student can understand (Nicholson & Graves, 2010). Sign language also acts as a connection that leads to speech for SEN (Special Educational Needs) students, says Brereton (2008). Brereton also

theorizes that “by physically expressing ideas and emotions through ASL, children are more aware of their emotions and interests” (2008, p. 313) and by learning to sign, children become more appreciative of diverse populations.

### **Research Question**

It is clear from research that teachers need to focus their efforts on class management due to classes that are filled with students with various needs. A teacher may be trying to focus on helping English Language Learners (ELLs) at the same time working with a student with Autism or a different behavior disorder, all while trying to instruct the class on proper classroom conduct and academics.

Sign language has been used with hearing children for various reasons such as to help develop better communication skills in young children with special needs. It also has been a helpful tool for teachers to use with kindergarten and preschool classrooms when ASL has been implemented into the curriculum to aid in memory and understanding, as well as help with communicating messages to students silently without having to disturb others.

Since most of these studies focus on young children (primarily ages 0-6), I am left wondering how sign language might be accepted in an older elementary classroom, specifically with fourth graders. In light of this, my primary research question is: What are the perceived benefits of using signing in the classroom from the student’s perspective? My secondary question is: From the teacher’s perspective, what are the perceived benefits of using sign language in an elementary classroom?

## **Methodology**

### *Method and Rationale*

This project focuses on implementing American Sign Language in an elementary classroom using a qualitative methodology. I focused on observations and questionnaires from the teacher and surveys from the students, as well as the researcher's own observations. The qualitative method makes sense for this study because I will be able to gather rich and interesting responses to the in-classroom study. Qualitative studies allow researchers to study their participants in a real life scenario, in all of their complexity without the use of experimentation and control groups. After the data was collected, I looked for reoccurring themes in the observations and questionnaires to make interpretations on the experiences of the individuals involved.

### *Sample*

The sample group for this research is fourth grade students at an elementary school that I will refer to as "Thompson Elementary". The teacher of this class will be involved in this research and will be known as "Ms. Adams". There are 28 students in the class. Thompson Elementary has approximately 512 students and is a culturally diverse school with the main ethnicities being (in descending order): Hispanic, Asian and Asian/Pacific Islander, White and Black. 73.4% of Thompson Elementary students are on free or reduced-price meals. 31.6% are transitional bilingual and 10.4% are special education students. There are five ELL students, five highly capable students, and two students with Individual Education Plans (IEP's) in Ms. Adams' class. Ms. Adams has

worked as a teacher for thirteen years. I, the researcher, taught the students sign language during these four months and I made observations to include in the data.

### *Instrumentation*

Ms. Adams and I made observations of the classroom environment before introducing sign language into the daily routine. To gather the following data, I, the researcher, worked as a student-teacher in Ms. Adams' fourth grade classroom. I had periods of part-time and full-time teaching during the four months of gathering data. The first thing I did was to post the sign language alphabet up on the wall. Students immediately began to fingerspell and interest was generated. Throughout the school days, I incorporated signing throughout various aspects of instruction:

- While walking through the halls to promote silence, but still being able to communicate.
- When prompting the students to line up in alphabetical order to walk through the halls.
- Greeting the children signing "Good morning" or "Hello" when they enter.
- While going over the daily schedule, I signed the various subjects and learning activities.
- While reading a book aloud to encourage interest in the text.
- While teaching various subjects including math and science to promote understanding of academic vocabulary.
- While students were testing or studying quietly, I used sign to silently communicate sometimes to get students back on task.

- To play fun, interactive games while learning the new language.

After sign language was added to the classroom routine, and the children had been exposed to it for four months, both Ms. Adams and I made a second round of observations. Observations were especially noted in regards to:

- Classroom management and students' behaviors
- Students' attitudes towards learning
- Students' concentration on the teacher

I questioned Ms. Adams to gather her feedback on her observations and comments on how the use of sign language affected the classroom environment. The questioning was in written form. I also recorded my observations on these same questions.

The teacher's questions were:

- What were the students' responses to ASL?
- What were your overall observations of using sign language in the classroom?

Questionnaires will be given to the students at the end of the four months of learning ASL. Students were asked:

- Did you like learning ASL?

Yes/No/Not Sure      Comments

- Did ASL help you to focus on the teacher's instructions?

Yes/No/Not Sure      Comments

- Would you like to do more ASL in school?

Yes/No/Not Sure

- How many of the signs did you understand? Circle one:

All signs      Most signs      Some signs      No Signs

- Did using ASL make school more fun?

Yes/No/Not Sure

- Is there anything about sign language that you didn't like? If so, please describe your thoughts:
- Share additional thoughts about what you like about sign language:

### *Analysis and Validity*

After four months of making pre-observations, implementing ASL into Ms. Adams' class routine, collecting final observations, interviews, and questionnaires from the teacher and the students, I analyzed in which ways using sign language in the classroom may have been beneficial to a fourth grade classroom. I looked for common themes among the responses and compared the teachers' and students' feedback for similarities and differences and came to a conclusion on how sign language was beneficial in the classroom.

My bias towards this study is that I learned sign language within the past four years because of a problem I have dealt with concerning my vocal cords. I am wary about using my voice all day in a classroom with students and I want to implement ASL as a part of my strategy in teaching. Sign language will be a tool for me to help with my



communication to save my voice, and through this study I hope to show that it will be beneficial for elementary students and other teachers as well.

I thoroughly enjoyed my experience in ASL college classrooms as a student and I observed how the teachers operated the class in sign language. Knowing that I would someday be a teacher, I took notice of how my professors used sign in their classroom management as well as their teaching. My prediction was that sign language would help the students become more engaged and interested in their studies and that it would assist with better memory and understanding. I found learning another language in sign to be fun and rewarding and I thought that students would agree with me.

## **Data**

### *Pre-Observation*

According to Ms. Adams and me, the pre-observation of this group of fourth graders at Thompson Elementary was that, overall, they were a very energetic and talkative group of students. There was a wide variety of academic levels in this classroom which required the teacher to differentiate instruction. Some are very eager and capable learners, while others were more unwilling and idle. Some ELL students had a difficult time in school academically. This class required more of a focus on classroom management and discipline compared to classes Ms. Adams has had in the past.

*Post-Observation*

*Student Surveys: 18 of the 28 students in this class took part in the following survey.*

***Did you like learning sign language?***

Yes (16)                      No (2)                      Not Sure (0)

Comments:

***“Yes” answers***

1. I like sign language because it's fun and I can talk to Mrs. Avilez when the whole class is taking a test or when the whole class can't talk.
2. It makes me learn like I'm learning new stuff and it's interesting to me.
3. It's fun to learn sign language.
4. Sign Language was really fun for me. I hope I learn more sign language words.
5. Because if I see someone that cannot hear I will do sign language.
6. I liked learning sign language because it was fun and I got to experience a new language.
7. I like sign language.
8. I really loved sign language
9. I really like different ways to speak.
10. Yes like I will like I can sign for deaf people.
11. It was great and fun to me.
12. I do because it's fun.
13. I liked learning sign language.

***“No” answers:***

1. It was not easy to remember and is not fun.

***Did sign language help you to focus on the teacher's instructions?***

Yes (9)

No (2)

Not Sure (7)

Comments:

***"Yes" answers:***

1. Because when she signs I can tell what she is signing.
2. Yes because she used sign language so we had to watch her to get our instructions.
3. I like sign language.
4. Because it helped me with the schedule.
5. Because I knew what she was saying.
6. During schedule time.
7. Yes so instead of talking you can sign it.
8. It helped a lot.

***"No" answers:***

1. It was just too confusing.

***"Not sure" answers:***

1. I think did or didn't.
2. I'm not really sure but I think it's fine.
3. I'm not sure.
4. No comments.

***Would you like to do more sign language in school?***

Yes (13)      No (3)      Not Sure (1)

Comments:

***“Yes” answers:***

1. I will love to learn more ASL in school!
2. I think sign language is good and I would like to learn more.
3. I want to learn more sign language.
4. I would love to learn more sign language in school.
5. Because I get to learn new signs.
6. Yes because sign language is really fun to do in school!
7. Yes because sign language is fun and I get to talk with my hands.
8. Yes because we could learn more signs that we never knew.
9. I would love it.
10. Sign language is a really fun way to communicate.
11. Yes so we can learn more.
12. I want to learn a lot of words.
13. I really enjoyed learning it.

***“No” answers:***

1. No because school is already hard enough and adding sign language will just be more stressful.

***“Not sure” answers:***

1. You'll be gone so yeah.

***How many of the signs did you understand?***

All signs (5)

Most signs (9)

Some signs (2)

No Signs (1)

***Did using sign language make school more fun?***

Yes (13)

No (1)

Not sure (3)

***Is there anything about sign language that you didn't like? If so, please describe your thoughts:***

1. I didn't dislike anything.
2. When people do it over and over again when I want to learn.
3. Nothing.
4. I didn't like nothing.
5. I didn't learn so much about it.
6. Sometimes I don't like because it is hard to remember some signs.
7. There is nothing I didn't like about sign language.
8. No.
9. I like sign language because it is fun and you can do a lot of things in sign language.
10. I do like all of them. But I didn't like "walk" (the walk sign) because it was too hard to learn.
11. There's not any sign language I don't really like.

***Share additional thoughts about what you like about sign language:***

1. I like sign language because when we take a test and we can't talk I can use sign language to talk to Mrs. Avilez. Also it's a fun way to talk to another person.
2. I LOVED sign language.
3. I like sign language because I can talk to deaf people if they are.

4. I enjoyed it and loved doing them. It was fun learning sign language.
5. I like about sign language is they can teach more signs and I know a deaf person too.
6. I liked when we did the quiz yesterday and it made me not forget the signs. And I could teach more to Sandra in (a nearby city).
7. What I liked about sign language was that it made learning better.
8. I liked learning sign language because I got to shape my hands in fun ways to speak and I got to play around with different signs to make funny sentences.
9. I like when we learn new signs. I like when we go over the schedule every morning in sign language. It is really, really fun to do sign language in school.
10. The movement because some of the movements are funny.
11. I like sign language because you don't have to talk and it's silent.
12. It helps me if I meet a deaf person.
13. It's interesting and it's good for people who can't hear, so I think it's another good way to communicate with people.

#### *Teacher Perspective*

##### ***What were the students' responses to ASL?***

Students were eager to learn and practice the signs. They enjoyed communicating with each other using ASL. It was a very positive experience.

##### ***What were your overall observations using ASL in the classroom?***

By using ASL in the classroom, it gave students an opportunity to represent words non-linguistically, which is good for all learners. It helped students remember new vocabulary words.

The teacher was able to redirect students who were off task or unclear about the expectations using ASL. This helped keep the noise level in the classroom down, since students could be redirected without the teacher needing to speak. When using ASL, most students were engaged and paying attention.

#### *Researcher/Student-Teacher Perspective*

I found that most of the students were very excited to learn sign language. When I signed, they naturally, without being prompted, followed my example and began to sign as well. Many times students asked me to teach them more sign language. It stimulated their thinking and wanted to learn more. When I used sign language while reading aloud a book, the students were very engaged and actively signed along with me. Students also enjoyed the physical movement to add to their school experience.

I felt that using ASL in the classroom built camaraderie between the students and me. I also really liked that the students had to make eye contact with me to know what I was signing to them and read my facial expression. On the other hand, for some students it was difficult to get them to give me eye contact to receive the information I was communicating to them because they were distracted or didn't care. Only a couple of the students had no interest and did not like learning sign language.

This class was a very talkative group of students, and I noticed that using sign language was a helpful tool when lining up to walk quietly through the halls. I liked using sign language to manage the students to remind them to keep on task. Instead of repeating words verbally to correct kids, it was nice to have the different option to remind them with signing. I was able to address off-task behavior silently to one student without being a distraction to others around him/her.

## **Analysis**

A review of the data reveals some overall themes from this study:

A majority of the *students like to learn sign language in school and said it made their classroom experience more fun*. One student said, "Sign Language was really fun for me. I hope I learn more sign language words. Another wrote, "I like sign language because it's fun and I can talk to Mrs. Avilez when the whole class is taking a test or when the whole class can't talk." "I like learning sign language because it was fun and I got to experience a new language", said a third student. I noticed that using sign language helped the students to be happier, and made them more engaged in their school experience. The students seemed to like the idea of being able to communicate in a new, non-verbal language. Using their bodies while communicating was an interesting way of incorporating movement within the classroom, which is a great means of generating interest in school activities. I also believe that the students felt empowered as they began to learn a language that is not known to most people. Some students told me that they were teaching sign language to other people outside of the classroom, which supports that they enjoyed it themselves.

I feel that the few students who did not enjoy learning to sign had a general dislike for school. They were students who performed low academically and did not have motivation to learn many subjects. For these few students, sign language did not appeal to them. One student said, "School is already hard enough and adding sign language will just be more stressful." This response was atypical and not representative of the majority of the class.



Half of the students surveyed said that using *sign language was helpful for focusing on the teacher's instructions*. One student mentioned, "Yes, because she used sign language so we had to watch her to get our instructions." Both of the teachers' feedback supports the idea that signing helps the students' ability to concentrate. Ms. Adams said, "When using ASL, most students were engaged and paying attention." I noticed that when I used sign language, most of the time the students focused more on me because they had to look at me and give me eye contact as I gave the message in sign. When I taught the students a new sign in conjunction with a school subject, I explained the reason behind the sign or my trick to remembering the sign, which the students seemed interested in learning.

I started the morning going through the schedule of the day that was written on the board. While pointing at the words, I silently made the sign for the various subjects and activities. Many of the students followed along mimicking my signs without being told to. Two of the students surveyed commented that they enjoyed signing while going through the daily schedule.

I, being a student-teacher, only taught the students for the last months of their fourth grade year. If I would have had the students full-time for the whole year, teaching ASL from the very beginning, I feel that the students would have been trained even better to focus on my instructions because of using sign language since they would have been more accustomed to my style of teaching with ASL integration.

Another theme that emerged from the data is that most *students wanted to learn more sign language in school*. One student said, "Sign language is fun and I get to talk with my hands." Another wrote, "I will love to learn more ASL in school!" I, from the

student-teacher perspective, observed that the kids were very eager to learn more and often times asked to do more sign language. Because the students found sign language fun to do, they naturally wanted to use it more in school. I found that using sign language with regular school subjects was a creative, stimulating way that sparked the kids' interest.

The teachers noticed that *using ASL in the classroom helped to promote a positive atmosphere*. My reflection was: "I felt that using ASL in the classroom built camaraderie between the students and me." My effort to use sign language made the students appreciative of the creative, kinesthetic way that I was teaching them. I think that the students felt a special sense of belonging in this class because of learning this unique skill.

*Incorporating sign language within the classroom is a useful management tool* was another theme that appeared from the data. Ms. Adams said, "The teacher was able to redirect students who were off task or unclear about the expectations using ASL. I noted that signing was helpful to give a silent message to a child without disrupting those around him or her during a lesson, test, or independent work time. With this talkative group of students, I used sign language to promote a quieter environment. When lining up the kids to enter the hall, where silence was the school rule, I used sign language to communicate to the students to line up in alphabetical line order and signed to the kids asking if they were ready to go to music, P.E., or wherever we were walking to. This was a helpful tool that I often used to manage the class.

Other comments showed that some of the *students were eager to know sign language to communicate with people who are deaf*. A student commented, "I will like I

can sign for deaf people.” Another has a deaf friend and said, “I could teach more to Sandra.” Somebody else wrote, “(Sign language) is interesting and it’s good for people who can’t hear, so I think it’s another good way to communicate with people.” While teaching ASL, I made sure that I was simultaneously teaching the children about people who are deaf and how they use signing to communicate because they cannot hear. Some of the students knew deaf people already and said that they could sign some things to that person. Others said that if they meet a deaf person in the future, they can be able to sign to him or her. I also explained to the students that if they’d like to learn more ASL, it is considered a foreign language and it may be a language that they will have the chance to learn in high school or college.

### **Implications/Recommendations**

The implication from this research indicates that incorporating American Sign Language in an upper elementary classroom is beneficial in a variety of ways. First of all, the students were engaged in a unique, enjoyable way. For them, it made school more interesting and fun to learn a new language along with their regular curriculum and daily routine. The use of sign language increased the amount of eye contact between teacher and students and built a sense of rapport and connection through learning this visual, kinetic language. Secondly, sign language in the classroom is beneficial from a teacher’s perspective because it is a creative tool to stimulate the classroom environment and allow for communication through bodily movements. Students became more eager learners through combining academics with ASL. With sign language, the teacher has an innovative way to manage the students as a whole group and with individuals in a quiet manner. Because of these benefits for the students and the teacher, the positive effect is a

greater sense of satisfaction within the classroom environment for the instructor and the children.

From this study, an important recommendation for a teacher who wants to implement sign language in his/her classroom is to first of all learn sign language themselves through college courses to gain a greater understanding of the language. Teachers can also use ASL resources (i.e. books, online ASL dictionaries) to learn ASL, but I feel that being in an ASL college classroom will best prepare them to instruct their own students. I also believe that for the teacher who wants to use sign language with his/her students, it is best to start at the beginning of the school year and build on their understanding throughout the entire year. Because of my limited time in the classroom as a student-teacher, I didn't have the opportunity to implement sign language to the extent I could have if I had more time with the students. I believe that the results of this study, if researched for a full school year, would have been improved upon.

## **Conclusion**

Sign language, though used primarily for those in the Deaf community, is useful for hearing people as well. Earlier studies have mostly shown how signing is helpful for young children and those with special needs. These groups have benefitted primarily for the use of developing communication abilities. Signing has also been used in classrooms as a creative tool to teach and manage students as it generates interest, focus and enjoyment. Enhanced memory and a greater understanding of language are also correlated to a hearing person learning sign language. When a student uses sign language in an academic setting, he or she is learning visually and kinetically, linking knowledge with images while using their body movements. Not only do the students benefit from

signing, but also the teachers. No matter the age of the students, a class benefits from the use of sign language. The teachers find that signing is a helpful tool to manage classes and make learning more interesting, creative and fun.

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