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Clarke School: A brief history of oralism



Magna house, a former dormitory at the Clarke School for the Deaf before it was converted into condominiums. Courtesy of Forbes Library

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NORTHAMPTON — The history of the Clarke School provides a window into the longstanding controversy over deaf education in the United States.

Clarke was the first oralist school in the country and played a leading role in promoting that educational philosophy, which focused on speech and lip-reading, as it rose to prominence beginning in the late 1800s. It was the most famous school of its kind, drawing support over the years from President John F. Kennedy, President Calvin Coolidge and First Lady Grace Coolidge.

Historically, residential schools for the deaf used manualism — sign language or fingerspelling, in which the fingers are used to form letters to spell out words — to teach, according to Brian Greenwald, a historian at Gallaudet University, a bilingual school for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and co-editor of “In Our Own Hands: Essays in Deaf History, 1780-1970.” But oralism’s ascendance in the late 19th century came with a campaign to eliminate sign language or other methods that combined signing and oral speech.

“Oralism was a tool — if successfully mastered — and oralists hoped it would normalize deaf people and remake them in the image of hearing, speaking Americans,” Greenwald said. “The main goal was to ensure that deaf students integrated with hearing children, while minimizing contact between deaf people. By blocking this contact, it was thought that [sign language] would peter out.”

By the 1920s, oralism had become the de facto educational model for most deaf students in the United States, and the vast majority of deaf teachers had been replaced with hearing teachers, according to Greenwald.

One of oralism’s most important boosters was the inventor Alexander Graham Bell, who had a relationship with Clarke over five decades; he taught there and married one of his students, Mabel Hubbard, the daughter of one of Clarke’s founders and later the first president of the Bell Telephone Company. Bell also promoted oralism across the Midwest, convincing schools and government officials to teach speech to deaf children, according to Greenwald.

The signing deaf community now views Bell negatively for championing oralism and eugenics, and promoting his view that deaf people shouldn’t intermarry or socialize together. Greenwald, who is currently writing a book about Bell and the American eugenics movement, said that oralists took advantage of the evolutionary ideas gaining acceptance at that time.

“Speech was perceived as a step up on the evolutionary ladder, and sign language came to be viewed as inferior, closer to monkey gestures,” Greenwald said.

But deaf people were resilient through it all, inventing their own signs and using them on the sly, creating their own organizations and continuing to marry each other, Greenwald said. And in the 1970s, in the wake of the civil rights era, academics and educators once again recognized sign language as a critical educational tool, and as a language equal to others.

As for Greenwald, he was himself a student at Clarke in the late-1980s. While he was there, in 1988, students at Gallaudet shut down the campus in protest, demanding that the college’s trustees appoint a deaf president for the first time since Gallaudet was founded in 1864.

The Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet became a national news story and was a catalyst for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Greenwald remembers a Clarke classmate pulling him into the school’s recreation room to watch the protests on television. He said he had never seen so many deaf people signing in one place.

“As we watched the events of DPN unfold on the television during the morning and evening news, we became emboldened and started signing to each other,” Greenwald wrote in a 2014 scholarly article, adding that a houseparent tried to interfere but students stood firm and continued signing. “This was our time and place, and the houseparent knew this.”

Greenwald said that oralism as a philosophy never completely went away. And the debate about how to educate deaf students still continues today.


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