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The Graduate School

Department of Art Education

Deaf Learners as Artists

A Thesis in

Art Education

by

Betty Gloria Miller

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Date of Signature:

June 28, 1976

Signatories:

Alice M. Schwartz

Alice M. Schwartz, Professor of  
Art Education  
Chairwoman of Committee  
Thesis Advisor

June 29, 1976

Harlan Hoffa

Harlan Hoffa, Head of the  
Department of Art Education

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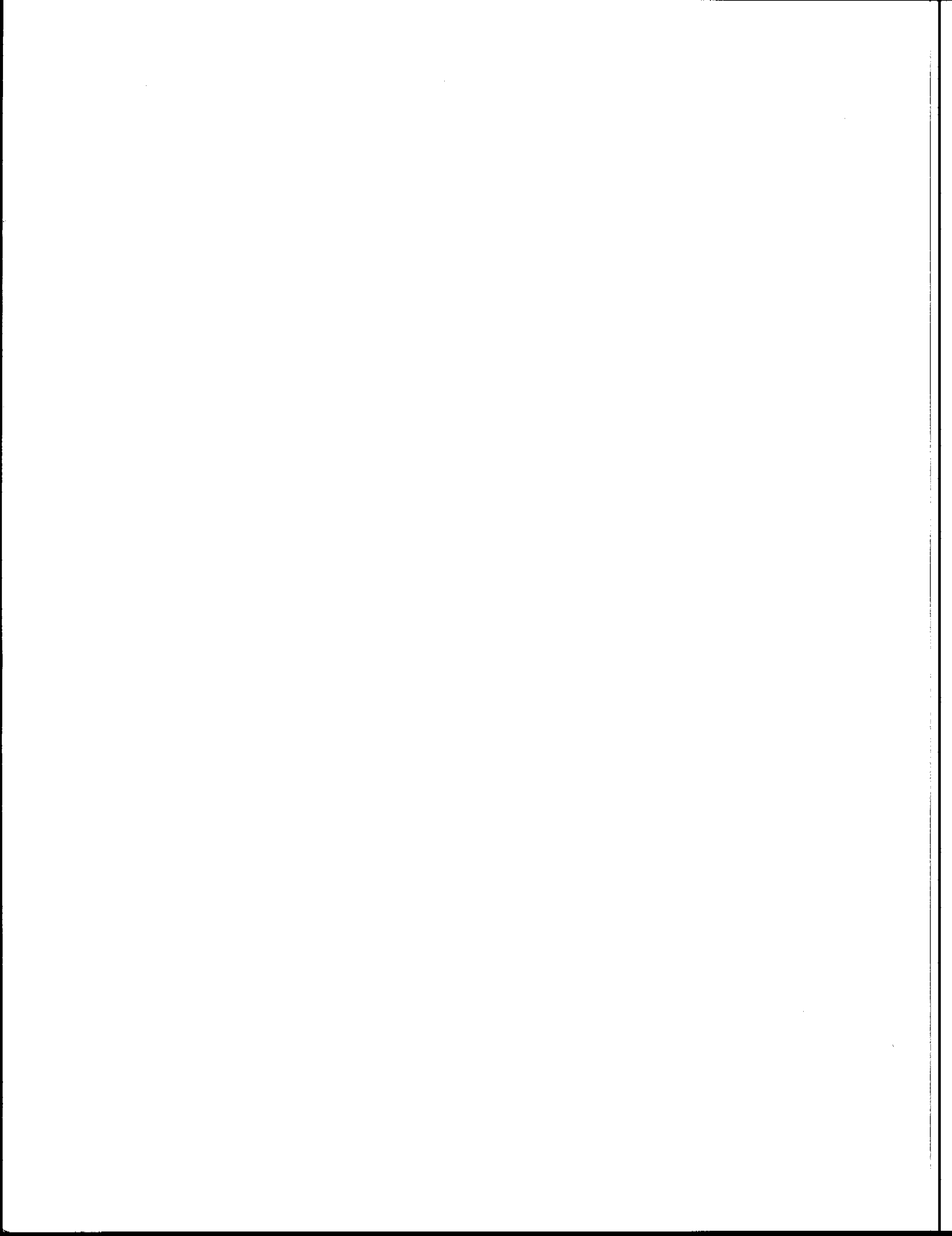
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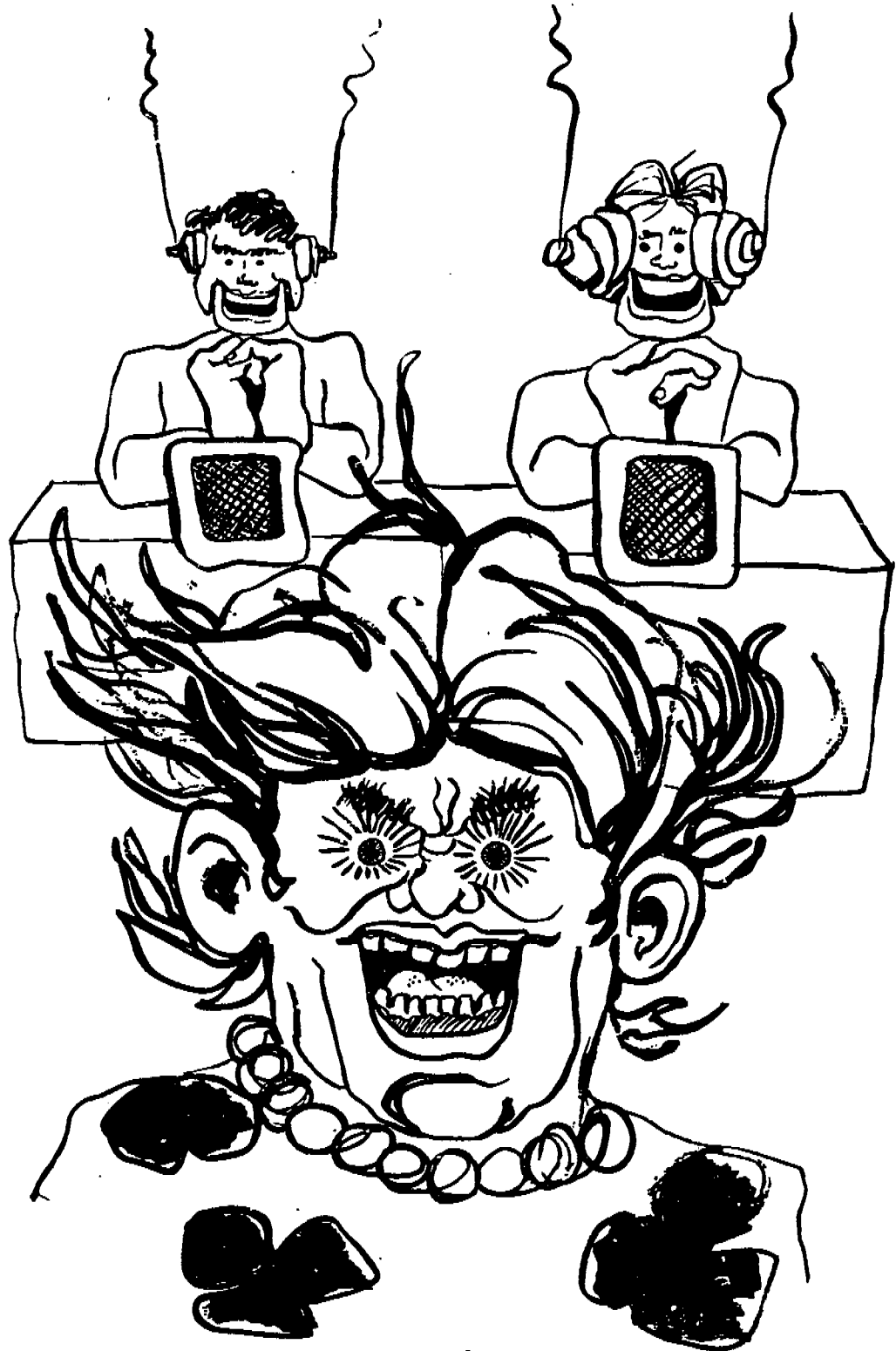
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Figure 1  
"State Oral School for the Deaf"



**Figure 2**  
**Sign Language: Angry**





Figure 3

Sign Language: To Know



Figure 4  
Sign Language: Sad



Figure 5  
Sign Language: To Touch



Figure 6  
Sign Language: In





Figure 7  
Sign Language: A Flower



## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Art education is concerned with exploration, discoveries, and statements based upon visual and tactile experience. It is an area of education which encourages divergent thinking through sensory, emotional, and intellectual response to image, material technique, design, communication, and environment. (Barrett, 1972)

The drawings on the first eight pages express what I honestly can not state in written or verbal language. They are more truthful and closer to my innermost feelings concerning education of the deaf and sign language. They exemplify the entire purpose and scope of this dissertation. This revelation, that communication through art expresses more than either written or verbal language, came about at the time I was "arting" under the direction of Dr. Kenneth Beittel, professor of art education, and his two assistants, Joan and Elmer, at The Pennsylvania State University during the Fall term of 1973.

In addition to the personal expression of feelings, I discovered that these art experiences helped me to look at my art work in a different perspective, enabling me to think in terms of various qualities of media and technique. Those experiences contributed to my becoming more flexible in my work as well as in the processes of that work.

Communication is the central difficulty in research dealing with deaf learners and previous studies indicate very little, if any, actual feedback from the subjects involved in these studies. I consider the need for feedback from the subjects to the researcher most crucial and I wanted to do a study which I felt could obtain extensive feedback directly from the learners. This feedback would include their thoughts, the processes of their work, and their feelings about themselves and their work. I hoped to gain deeper insight in these areas in order to learn more about deaf learners:

1. as persons and artists;
2. their approach to problem-solving situations;
3. their own views towards learning and the quality of their work.

I found that an ideal project would be the Drawing Laboratory similar to the one created by Dr. Kenneth Beittel. This project provided a private drawing laboratory where a person could make any kind of drawing he pleased. Each session took place once a week, and lasted two hours. Interviews and discussions would be held with the researcher, the assistants, and the artist (the subject). Some photographs of the art work and the process of creating this work would be made during this time. A detailed description of this study will be given in Chapter IV. I felt that this project would be a valuable study to elicit indepth information about how deaf learners think, analyze, learn and create.

There were two basic outcomes expected from this study which are: 1) that art might enhance development of a deaf artist's ability in solving problems which were qualitatively related to one another in technique, style, or theme, or related even to the self-image of the artist; 2) all subjects involved in the study were permitted to use Ameslan (American Sign Language - refer to page 36) as their immediate and comfortable means of communication. In addition, a possible outcome would be that in working in such a studio on a one to one basis under these conditions the artists' awareness of their beings and approaches to the quality of their work might be enhanced. As a result of being in communication with the learners, the researcher felt that she could obtain more direct information as to how art (drawing, painting, etc.) helped the subjects understand themselves, their own thoughts, attitudes, and values about their work and themselves. With this particular kind of interaction, this study might lead to new thoughts and better strategies for the researcher to use in facilitating the efforts of deaf learners in other class situations as they deal with problem-solving situations in their work.

The researcher would like to add at this point, various experiences dealing with reactions of many of her friends who viewed her art work in relationship to deafness and deaf education. Many of her friends (deaf and hearing) varied in their reactions to what they saw. All of them could identify,

even if they didn't like them, with one or more of the works. Furthermore, her art work elicited thoughts and feelings from her deaf friends about themselves and their deafness. This often led to long discussions in which Ameslan was used most of the time.

It was assumed by the researcher that from this study there would be some changes in the process of the work by the subjects as a result of:

1. self-evaluation by the subjects of their work (this is indicated by statements made by the subjects in the log);
2. discussing whatever might be more or less relevant to their work and themselves;
3. engaging in long, indepth discussions made possible through the use of Ameslan;
4. discovering new concepts and problem-solving situations;
5. developing some insights in self-image among the subjects as well as the researcher.

This study may lead to some serious questions about the development of the intellectual and affective domains of the deaf learners which need further study.

The researcher is hopeful that this kind of study in addition to her own personal experiences in teaching deaf learners, may help emphasize the value of producing art

programs which are badly needed at all levels in the education of the deaf.

In her teaching experiences of fifteen years with her learners, she observed that there were many "late bloomers" among them. Many of these learners lacked training in the visual arts in school prior to attending Gallaudet but later became artists. The program in art education at Gallaudet had to be basic because of this deficiency in early training. Also, it was observed that learners in the art department frequently lost confidence and patience in working with the basics, even when they had great potential.

Another aspect of this study involves the use of Ameslan and it is the researcher's observation from her teaching that when Ameslan was used in class room situations, the learners gradually became enlightened by their accomplishment in learning as shown in their processes and products as well as their discussions using Ameslan, a language with which they appeared very comfortable. It appeared that use of Ameslan during earlier training seemed to facilitate the early acquisition of basic skills.

It is the researcher's strong belief that the many varied forms of expression provided by art education for deaf learners would enhance their learning processes while serving a means to develop their total self concept as real deaf persons.



## CHAPTER II

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE OF DEAF EDUCATION

## Deaf Learners

The word, discipline, actually means to learn. That is the root meaning of the word: to learn, not to conform; not to imitate but to learn, not to obey but to find out. Learning or finding out, in itself, brings its own discipline. Therefore discipline, which is to learn, is a constant movement and not mere conformity to some pattern. (Krishnamurti, 1972)

Carl Rogers view of education for today would be that of the following goals:

The learners at all levels of education should:

1. be able to make intelligent choices and gain self direction;
2. become critical learners, and be able to evaluate the contributions made by others;
3. be able to adapt flexibly and intelligently to new problem situations;
4. work, not for approval of others, but for themselves as individuals;
5. express themselves freely in various approaches made available to them by facilitators.

"Students go through a frustrating but rewarding process in which gradually responsible initiative, creativity, and inner freedom are released." (Rogers, 1969)

These goals are especially essential for deaf learners whose main deficit is spoken and written English, their second language. Perhaps some schools for the deaf are able to realize these goals, but most are not. Most educators of the deaf believe that the essential aim of the education of the deaf is to teach deaf learners spoken and written English, to enable them to express, function, create, and think in terms of the English language. This is based on the common thought that the deaf learners must be able to live and communicate with the vast majority of society: the hearing world. Yet, in the past one hundred years, it appears to the researcher that education of the deaf has failed very badly. The deaf person is still disadvantaged educationally. They have trouble with concepts but most crucial is their language difficulty. Affectively, deaf learners have poor self-concepts, constantly comparing themselves with the hearing.

Because the deaf are auditorily deprived, much emphasis is placed on the teaching of speech, lipreading, and English so that they can "function in the hearing world." Because of this emphasis, deaf learners do not grow in their own right, instead becoming crippled imitations of hearing people. Very little has been done in making use of a deaf learner's visual and kinesthetic abilities. Too much emphasis, especially in the early years of education, is

placed on the deaf learner's deficiency (lack of auditory skills) instead of his assets (all other sensory modalities, especially vision). (Jacobs, 1974)

For the reader's better understanding of the capabilities of deaf learners, the researcher wishes to present a summary of the results of studies focused on the intellectual development of deaf and hearing children including adolescents. The observations from the six broad areas which follow were made by H. G. Furth and J. Youniss in a study entitled "Cognitive Structures Related to Verbal Deficiencies." (1970-1971) These cognitive structures are outlined as follows:

#### Logical Symbols

Deaf children manifested a basic capacity for the use of logical symbols: however, they were poor on discovery of symbol meaning and required more training than hearing persons before success was achieved. This deficit became evident at the age of 14 and was similar to that observed in so-called "culturally different" hearing persons.

#### Visual Imagery

Deaf children could mentally anticipate or visualize spatial positions as well as their hearing peers. They improved with age as did hearing children -- an indication that the use of visual symbols, as with the use of linguistic symbols, is dependent on and expresses the level of intellectual development.

#### Probability Concepts

Deaf children did not differ from hearing children in the basic comprehension of elementary probability concepts. The question of more complex probability notions was left open.

#### Memory

Deaf children were able to recall meaningful and nonsense words better than hearing controls, sequences of visual symbols equally as well as hearing children even

though they were inferior with digits (Digit Span). This last result can be attributed to a more poorly exercised number fluency.

#### Cognitive Style

In the use of expressive symbols deaf adolescents showed a substantially lower degree of agreement with peers than did hearing adolescents -- possibly due to less contact with the cultural environment. On other tasks, measuring cognitive control, embedded-figure perception, functional versus abstract grouping, there were no differences.

#### Communication

Deaf children were substantially poorer than hearing peers in sending a designated message, somewhat less inferior in receiving, even when they were permitted to use gestures and sign language. Communication accuracy improved considerably from 8 - 11 years, but still lagged behind the communication skill of hearing children.

On the basis of these and other results the normal capacity of deaf children as intellectually intact can hardly be questioned. If one considers that the linguistic achievement of the deaf children observed is very meager indeed, one cannot but be impressed by this basic attainment of intellectual competence despite severe hearing and oral deficiency.

The most dramatic deficiency was noted not in the area of intelligence, but in effective symbolic interpersonal communication. Quite clearly, young deaf children are not accustomed to communicate with others unless it is a communication in the context of real action when gesture language might be more an accompaniment than the carrier of the message. Here we are in the area of effective use of symbols for interpersonal communication. In our society hearing children are encouraged to pay increasing attention to specific symbolic-linguistic messages and therefore by age 8 - 11, they can send and receive rather complex messages. For the deaf children, such a task is novel, and they do poorly not so much because they do not know verbal language or signs but because they are not accustomed to considering a message situation; in other words, they do not take the perspective of the receiver.

Lack of spontaneous use can also be considered causal for deaf adolescents' poorer sensitivity to expressive symbols. And finally, when deaf adolescents appear to be behind hearing youngsters in the manipulations of logical symbols, it would seem reasonable to attribute this also to a long neglect of training and encouragement rather than a direct effect of having deficient linguistic mastery." (Furth, H. G. and Youniss, J., 1970-1971)

Hans G. Furth, applying Piaget's theory, states that the development of the thinking child occurs through the child's activity between his physical and social environment. Initially language is too difficult a medium for a young mind. In other words, a developed intelligence is required to use language intelligently. When a mind is fully developed, then language is a principal and preferred medium of thinking for an adult mind, for a mind that has reached, as Piaget calls it, the formal operatory stage.

Observations in studies of deaf children (Furth) show that basic development of intellectual competence is largely independent of the linguistic environment. (Furth, 1973)

This theory suggests that it would be necessary to expose deaf learners to operations other than linguistic symbols. More conscious efforts should be made to enable deaf learners to experience symbolic-expressive qualities through drawing, painting, rhythm, and movement and communication modes based on body movements and facial expressions. These modes of communication can easily benefit the learners and bring them emotionally and intellectually closer to their environment. This approach (experiencing symbolic expressive qualities through art) contributes to deaf education, and all educators of the deaf need to be convinced of the true value of art education for all their deaf learners.

## Visual Language of Deaf Learners

Presently, there is a need for a reorientation towards deaf learners showing them that they are not culturally or educationally disadvantaged but differently advantaged sensorily. Society has yet to look at the positive side of the disadvantaged and the potential within their handicap.

Culture consists of a set of attitudes, values, patterns of roles, acceptable behavior, and concepts of reality shared by a group of people. The deaf in turn have a culture which is truly a factor in their perceptual growth as it is in the lives of hearing learners. Art teachers and other facilitators in the development of the deaf must come to understand the deaf learner through exposure to his life style, language, and cultural patterns. Culture is truly a factor in all learners' perceptual growth.

In the past fifteen years, on the basis of this researcher's experience and observation in the educational field of the deaf, too many teachers, mostly hearing, lack understanding of deafness in relation to the deaf learner's behavior. This is primarily because most of these teachers do not know American Sign Language (Ameslan or ASL), the visual language of the deaf. American Sign Language appears to be an essential means of communication among most deaf people. Lacking knowledge of Ameslan, many teachers are

unable to obtain adequate feedback from their deaf learners to gain insight as to their life styles and cultural patterns.

The repression of sign (sign language) has been intense. One effect has been to weaken the deaf community. By analogy, conquering nations typically try to destroy the culture of defeated peoples by efforts at forcing them to give up their native tongue. Majority cultures often mandate that minorities such as Jews cease the use of their traditional languages. The degree of repression of sign language is best illustrated by a character in Joanne Greenberg's novel, In This Sign, who associates the use of signs with the smell of urine because the only place in the school children were permitted to use sign was the restroom. Even today we have efforts by educators to force deaf theatrical artists off public television because they use signs. Corollary to this, sociologist Kay Meadow has noted that sign is the only "native" language that children do not learn from their (hearing) parents. (Vernon, 1974)

In the United States, American Sign Language has been the visual language used by the deaf as a means of communication among themselves for the past 100 years. This language has its own syntax, semantics and rules, plus the physical characteristics such as form, shape, line, and movement. These physical characteristics are similar to those of design in the visual arts. This language has been constantly creative, depending on the situations, places, and emotions that may require specific new signs. Ameslan requires body movement, facial expression, and arm and hand movements to produce effective communication through visual means.

In discussing visual literacy, Parker quoted John Debes' discussion of body language: "Body language consists of

body actions by which we consciously or unconsciously express our feelings and ideas to others. Children often display a remarkably high level of visual literacy by getting meaning from certain forms of body language."

(Parker, December, 1969) This is particularly true not only of children, but deaf persons of all ages.

Ameslan was 'real deaf sign language', 'deaf deaf language', 'street signing', 'low verbal sign language', etc. ...Ameslan is an acronym made from the words, American Sign Language. Ameslan does not follow the English grammatical scheme. It is a wholly different language from English. In its structure, it has more in common with Chinese than English. (Fant, 1973)

This language has never been accepted officially in any school for the deaf as an essential means of communication in the learning process of deaf learners. Most of the hearing persons involved with the deaf consider the language as unimportant gestures or "substitutes" for lack of good English. Actually, English language (being the oral verbal/auditory type of language) is a deaf person's second language. Most educators who accept sign language, insist on using Signed English, not Ameslan, for classroom use. Signed English is a sign language borrowed from Ameslan using English syntax. This is just another indication of a condescending attitude toward the deaf and their true language.

The researcher feels that Ameslan is significant and essential to the learning process of deaf learners. Many