

LITERACY

By **Carmela Pitman**, Vice-principal
Immaculate Conception School, Sudbury CDSB

& SIGN LANGUAGE

Literacy, being embedded in all that we do, is a necessary condition for personal growth. Literate people are those who are able to understand and participate in communities in which they find themselves and are able to communicate effectively with others using the language of those communities.

~ Author Unknown



L to R: Joanne Brabant, Patrizio (Pat) Presenza, Carmela Pitman, Diana Salvador

Communication and literacy come in many different forms. They can be taught in various ways. Every Sunday, since November 2007 I have been attending lessons in American Sign Language (ASL), a language created for deaf people.

After each class, my brother Pat and I would drive home together. In fact, he is my sign language instructor. What makes my brother unique and special as my instructor, is that he is actually deaf. Therefore, learning sign language has always held a special place in my heart. As I sit in class, Pat teaches with his hands signing words and phrases, using written instructions on the board and not using any voice. I have come to truly understand that as we were growing up, our communication was limited because our only means of communication was lip reading. Lip reading entailed my brother and I having face-to-face communication at all times so that he could clearly see the lip movements and make out the words as I spoke. Of course, there were limitations to this

form of communication. Talking had to be precise, clear and at a slower pace so that Pat could grasp as many words as possible.

Sign Language was not the supported form of communication since Pat attended school integrated with hearing students in all subject areas, except for language. He received speech assistance and resource assistance through one-on-one support during language instruction. Teachers supported Pat in the classroom by wearing a special FM system that amplified their voices. When Pat was ready to attend university, educational services were limited for deaf people in our community, so Pat had to attend Gallaudet University for the deaf in Washington D.C. There he completed a bachelor of science degree and graduated in 1995. At university, he was fully immersed and introduced to deaf culture and therefore his use of sign language flourished. His communication and literacy skills improved greatly. In 1998, he graduated with a bachelor of education degree from York University in Toronto, Ontario.

In January 2008, as Pat and I were driving home together from one of our classes, the thought of sign language and literacy and learning, became apparent in my mind. I could not wait to share the news with Pat. During our drive home, Pat sits quietly in his own tranquil world, as face-to-face communication would be somewhat difficult at this time. As soon as I dropped Pat off at home, I explained how I would love to have him at my school to lead *Family Literacy Day* through sign language and to promote learning through the life of a deaf person.

The afternoon began with a special PowerPoint presentation. The introduction included how literacy can take on various forms such as writing a grocery list, reading a newspaper, reading a recipe, singing and reading the lyrics of a song or sharing a story

together. Then as a school family, we shared a story. During the reading, Pat signed the words and used facial expression to bring forth the meaning of the story. The story was followed by a song, *Don't Laugh at Me* sung by Errol Lee. The song fit well for Pat as he placed himself as the character signing the lyrics as they read, "I'm fat, I'm thin, I'm short, I'm tall, I'm deaf, I'm blind, hey aren't we all, ...someday we'll all have perfect wings, don't laugh at me." As I watched Pat and the gathering of students before him, feelings of empathy and compassion mounted as I realized that Pat is different in the way he learns and in the way he communicates with others. Nonetheless, he was capturing their interest and they watched him intently.

Another special guest, Joanne Brabant, a communications devices specialist from the Canadian Hearing Society, assisted Pat during the presentation when the principal, Diana Salvador and I addressed the students. Joanne's part of the presentation, involved explaining how teachers with hard of hearing students use an FM system in the classroom and how deaf people use a Teletype (TTY) device to communicate by telephone to their family and friends.

As the presentation ended students were introduced to various vocabulary and they attempted their signing skills with hand expressions. Peculiar and familiar hand shapes caused students to interact with curiosity and laughter. At the end of the presentation, the students all raised their arms waving their hands to clap in appreciation.

I thought back to about seven years ago, when as a teacher, I invited Pat as a special guest to teach students the beauty of sign language to the poem, *In Flanders Fields*. The students were thoroughly engaged and eager to present at the Remembrance Day celebration for students, staff and parents. I will never forget the principal's comment that it was one of the most beautiful presentations he had ever seen.

Research shows that using sign language in an early childhood literacy program for deaf or hearing students increases vocabulary and improves letter and word recognition. Sign language instruction greatly improves communication and literacy skills for children who have special language needs. It engages children in the instruction of reading and writing activities.

The education system has served Pat well and he has accomplished his educational goal as instructor. He presently is the literacy coordinator/instructor for the Canadian Hearing Society and instructs adults who are hard of hearing and deaf, who aspire to attain and complete their education.

For further information, contact Carmela Pitman at carmela.pitman@scdsb.edu.on.ca.



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