

Title: Rethinking Literacy: What Really Predicts Reading and Writing Success of Deaf Students?

There are widely held beliefs in the field of Deaf Education about literacy: (1) deaf students underperform; (2) hearing level predicts achievement; (3) children from deaf homes do better; (4) spoken language and spoken phonological knowledge lead to higher outcomes; and (5) public-school placements outperform residential programs. This session tests those assumptions against evidence and translates the big ideas into implications locally for educational policy and for teachers.

The presentation draws on a U.S. dataset of 368 deaf students in grades 3–6 from varied educational settings. The central message is that literacy outcomes are highly variable—there is no single “typical” deaf reader or writer. Across analyses, writing scores tend to be higher than reading scores, suggesting an instructional opportunity to intentionally use writing (e.g., guided writing, sentence combining, structured genre routines) as a bridge to reading development.

When explaining why outcomes differ, demographic factors—including hearing level—account for only a small share of the variance. In contrast, language proficiency (ASL and/or spoken English) is a strong predictor of both reading and writing, and phonological knowledge (spoken and/or fingerspelled access to vocabulary) adds additional explanatory power. Although students with Deaf caregivers may initially appear to score higher, those differences largely disappear when language proficiency is taken into account, emphasizing that what matters most is early, consistent access to strong, accessible language. The dataset also found no significant differences in literacy outcomes across educational settings, reinforcing that placement-based claims should be made cautiously.

For Trinidad & Tobago, these findings connect directly to urgent priorities: expand early intervention that guarantees access to language (not technology alone), increase children’s and families’ access to fluent language models, and strengthen preparation for teachers specifically in Deaf Education pedagogy (bilingual/multimodal language and literacy instruction) because progress depends on instruction aligned to students’ language strengths and needs.

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