

Chapter 9: Frowned upon by the Gods

Chapter 9: Frowned Upon by the Gods explores the long-standing challenges and debates within the education system regarding the most effective way to communicate with deaf students. Central to this debate is the longstanding conflict between sign language and oral communication, with educators historically divided over which method best serves the needs of deaf learners. Linda Adams' realization that her son Keith craved language serves as a poignant reminder of the two centuries of neglect that the deaf community faced. For much of history, deaf voices were ignored in educational decisions, and their methods of communication were sidelined, affecting their social and educational lives. This tension highlights the difficulty that deaf individuals faced in asserting their own identities and advocating for their rights in a society that often overlooked them.

Drawing from the work of scholar H-Dirksen Bauman, the chapter presents deaf history as akin to chasing fireflies in the dark—glimpses of understanding punctuated by long periods of ignorance. Although sign languages developed independently in various cultures, they were often unrecorded, which led to debates about whether they predated spoken languages. Ancient references, such as those by Socrates and the observations of deaf individuals in the Ottoman Empire, show the different ways societies viewed deafness. However, in many cases, deaf individuals were marginalized, facing exclusion and discrimination not only socially but legally. The chapter paints a picture of a society that, for much of history, struggled to accept and include deaf people as equals.

Throughout history, European societies exhibited a deep-seated belief that deaf individuals were incapable of faith or intellectual engagement. This belief led to their further exclusion from mainstream social and religious activities. However, the tide began to turn in the eighteenth century with the groundbreaking work of Charles-Michel de l'Épée, who established the first public school for the deaf in Paris. His work in teaching sign language and advocating for deaf education significantly changed the perception of deafness in European culture. De l'Épée's contributions laid the foundation for the development of deaf education systems across Europe, marking a shift from seeing deafness as a deficiency to recognizing the potential of deaf individuals when given the proper tools for communication.

Despite these advances, the 1880 International Congress of Educators of the Deaf in Milan marked a significant setback for the deaf community. The congress resulted in a ban on the use of sign language in schools, a decision heavily influenced by the participation of Alexander Graham Bell, who argued against the use of sign language. This decision had a lasting impact, as it further distanced deaf communities from their linguistic heritage and reinforced the stigma surrounding sign language. The ban on sign language in schools led to generations of deaf children being taught to communicate solely through oral methods, often with little success. Even in environments where American Sign Language (ASL) was prevalent, individuals like Ken Watson faced oppression, with schools penalizing the use of ASL and discouraging students from using their natural language.

The narrative shifts to the personal experiences of Keith Adams, who benefited from the inclusive, all-deaf environment at the California School for the Deaf. In this supportive setting, Keith was able to thrive, developing strong social connections and experiencing significant personal growth. Unlike his earlier experiences, where communication barriers impeded his development, Keith was able to fully participate in the learning process, fostering a sense of identity and pride in his deafness. This highlights the importance of an educational environment that recognizes the needs of deaf individuals and supports their use of sign language. The chapter ultimately underscores the ongoing struggles and triumphs of the deaf community, from early marginalization to the eventual embrace of their unique culture and language, embodied in Keith's journey and the broader impact on deaf education and identity.

This chapter emphasizes how far the deaf community has come, yet how much work remains to be done in ensuring that deaf individuals are fully integrated into society. The battle between sign language and oral methods of communication has shaped the education and lives of many, but the growth of a generation like Keith's shows the potential for positive change. With continued advocacy and support for the use of sign language, the future holds promise for a more inclusive and equitable society where the deaf community is fully recognized and valued. Through historical reflections and personal stories, this chapter offers a powerful reminder of the importance of language in shaping identity and fostering inclusion.