

EDUCATION

Expert: Education for the deaf needs improvement

Approach in minority groups focus of criticism

By Francisco Vara-Orta | March 24, 2015 | Updated: March 25, 2015 10:47am

In a public lecture here Tuesday evening, Gallaudet University assistant professor Catherine O'Brien was sharply critical of how deaf children are educated in the United States, saying school districts should re-examine how they culturally approach teaching the deaf, especially those in minority groups such as Mexican Americans.

"Why are we still trying to teach a fish to climb a tree?" O'Brien, who is deaf, expressed through a vocal interpreter, getting nods in agreement from the audience at the University of Texas at San Antonio's Main Campus.

Referring to schools still teaching phonics to the deaf — such as how a letter should sound — she added, "Hello, these are deaf children."

Teachers often aren't adequately trained in sign language, making it hard on deaf students who rely on clear communication to learn, she



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said. “The way you access education is through knowing the language first, and often schools reverse that order when it comes to deaf students,” O’Brien said.

Sometimes deaf students can be misclassified as special needs and disciplined for behavioral issues when the root of the problem is a language barrier that causes their frustration, she added.

O’Brien has won national accolades for her research. UTSA officials described Gallaudet University as the world’s only liberal arts university for the deaf.



The Consortium for Social Transformation in the UTSA College of Education and Human Development sponsored the lecture, which drew about 150.

How Mexican-American children who are deaf are educated in U.S. schools is an underexplored topic, she said. O’Brien became motivated to explore it as part of her research after the father of two deaf children invited her into his home with an interpreter who could speak English, Spanish, and American Sign Language — hard to find, she stressed.

The father explained he emigrated from Mexico with his family in search of a better education for his kids, O’Brien recalled. But he struggled to find a place where they could excel and where the teachers and staff understood how to communicate with them in the three languages they navigated.

“Here you have a trilingual student who no one seems to know how to educate. So how is that?” O’Brien said. “The father then got on his knees and begged for me to look into this and that stuck with me.”

O’Brien said Mexican-American students already feel oppressed in many ways and cited findings on how minority students who also are deaf have a heightened risk of falling behind in school and spending adulthood in poverty.

“We have to change the expectation for our deaf Mexican-American students. We need to have high expectations of them,” O’Brien said. “We need to roll up our sleeves and get in there with them and also teach the community to see these students’ value.”

fvaraorta@ express-news.net

Twitter: @fvaraorta



Francisco VaraOrta

Education Reporter, KB 12
San Antonio ExpressBNews !

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