PROPOSAL:

“ASL for My Family and Me” aka Project ASL
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Focus: Serving Diverse Families with Deaf/HH Children with culturally appropriate signs

Background: Families of Deaf and hard of hearing children (Deaf/HH) are in critical need for early access to American Sign Language (ASL) to counteract language deprivation, social isolation, and cognitive delays. Data shows that Deaf/HH children of color and other diverse backgrounds are most at risk for language deprivation as they seldom learn to adequately communicate with their hearing families nor do not perform well academically due to a lack of access to language during early years. Language deprivation or linguistic neglect is defined as a lack of access to a natural language during the critical period of language acquisition (Humphries et al., 2014a, b; 2016 a, b). Thus, this proposal, entitled “ASL for My Family and Me” (Project ASL), addresses a great need for Language Planning for diverse families with Deaf/HH children within the ages of 0-5, especially those children of color. While the number of diverse families has been on the rise with 90% compromised of hearing families, many are typically unaware of ASL as the visual language that is most accessible and easy to acquire. Further they may be unaware that emerging vocabulary ASL skills can be used to piggyback the learning of spoken English for those children who benefit from hearing technology (i.e., hearing aids, cochlear implants) (Yoshinago-Itano, 2006). To address this critical need, our organization, National American Sign Language and English Bilingual Consortium for Early Childhood Education (NASL-ECE), aims to promote effective communication and cultural sharing among all family members. NASL-ECE encourages meaningful and practical language planning with a multicultural lens that would give a cognitive, emotional, economical and educational benefit to young children and their families, promoting conceptual and language knowledge and personal empowerment in their homes, communities, and schools.

Problem Statement: There are three major issues currently facing diverse families with Deaf/HH children and they are as follows:

1) Systematic Obstacles for Diverse Families and Children
Diverse Deaf children and families are often “stuck in the bottleneck” as illustrated in Simms et al., 2007 work. The image uses a bottle metaphor that shows that early in life with a medical hearing screening, diagnosis and lens, the diverse Deaf child are significantly behind developmentally due to lack of communication and
language access. Moreover, misdiagnosis has led diverse Deaf students placed into classrooms for students with cognitive disabilities or inappropriately classified with disorders such as attention deficit disorder. These consequences could be reversed if early effective interventions are set up to support diverse families and their Deaf/HH children.

2) Lack of Curricular and Product Availability
The opportunity for caregivers and families to access ASL programs at a variety of universities, community colleges and high schools. These institutions show increased enrollment, but primarily for economically advantaged Caucasian participants which outpaces the number of under-represented and underserved diverse families who face many hardships in accessing services. Our project intends to create materials that are accessible and supports diverse families with Deaf/HH children.

3) Underrepresentation of Multicultural Competence
Most of the professionals who work with diverse children do not possess multicultural competence due to lack of knowledge and understanding of multiculturalism. We aim to be proactive by forming a team of professionals who are also multicultural and inclusive. We believe cultural competence is an important practice for providing effective family-centered services in their home environment.

Proposed Project Description: NASL-ECE is seeking to fund the employment of a part-time Project Manager whose job would be to create a digital ASL program. This program would be user friendly for cultural minority families such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Latino/Mexican Americans, and so forth. The fact that each of these cultures contains a distinct set of terminology and traits that dictates ASL models should demonstrate signs that reflect one’s particular culture. For instance, in one of the categories, namely food, an African American model demonstrates signs related to soul food: collard greens, black eyed peas, oxtails, and so forth. By being knowledgeable about the language and dialect, as well as being sensitive to multicultural families’ home culture, service-providers can develop trust and cooperation with diverse families of Deaf/HH thus better serve their socio-emotional and academic needs.

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