

ORALISM AND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

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What is Oralism?



Oralism gained popularity in America in the 1860s, as it began to be implemented in deaf schools. Oralism is the idea that deaf individuals should be educated through the means of lip reading, mimicking mouth shapes, and practicing certain breathing patterns as well as vocal exercises that were meant to help deaf individuals produce oral language. This concept was also referred to as the oral method. Supporters of oralism believed that it was important for the deaf community to assimilate into the "hearing world."

Although oralism began becoming institutionalized in American in the late 1860s, there are articles that discuss how this oral method was not a new idea. In *The British Medical Journal*, a section titled "The Education of Deaf-Mutes" discusses how ideas of implementing an oral component to educate the deaf community could be traced back to as early as 1648. In 1648, John Bulwer published a book in which he notes that individuals that are born deaf and dumb should learn to hear through their eyes (*The British Medical Journal, 1890*). At this time, schools had not yet adapted to the idea of oralism but the idea of teaching deaf individuals to produce speech was present.

It wasn't until the 1880s that the debated of whether sign language or the oral method should be taught in deaf schools began to gain more attention (Haller, 1993). Those in favor of the teaching of the oral method in deaf schools believed that it would be best for deaf individuals to learn to talk, as they could then communicate with non-deaf individuals. However, the opposing argument to this was that although oralism would allow for deaf individuals to communicate with the hearing world, it would be more difficult for the deaf community to communicate amongst themselves. At this time, there were more people that were in favor of the implementation of oralism in deaf schools than there were individuals in favor of sign language. One of the most notable promoters of oralism is Alexander Graham Bell. Bell's influence on the promotion of oralism will be further discussed in the next section. But before moving on, here is an example of a deaf individual who had been taught the oral method.