



# The Deaf People of Belize

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## **Abstract**

American Sign Language (ASL) is the sign language used by the educated deaf community in Belize, with high comprehension of ASL varieties used in the United States and Canada, and sustained contact with these varieties, although with some regional variation that is unique to Belize. Because of several vocabulary differences, some people prefer to call the sign language in Belize “Belizean Sign Language,” and yet they still consider it a variety of ASL. According to local sources, no conventionalized sign language was used by the Belizean deaf community until 1958, when deaf education and ASL were introduced.

The Belize deaf community has been adversely affected since the closure of deaf associations and the loss of key deaf community role models and leaders in recent years. There is no longer a central meeting place nor an advocacy center for deaf Belizeans, and meetings are frequently organized through religious services. While there are three deaf schools in the central districts of Belize and various independent organizations are working to support the deaf community, deaf people in rural areas and the far northern and southern parts of the country do not have many educational resources available to them. Development needs include, but are not limited to: further options for education, interpreter training programs, employment opportunities, and greater social access for the entire Belizean deaf community.

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# 1 Introduction

In this report, we discuss the current sociolinguistic situation of deaf<sup>1</sup> Belizeans, with findings based on information from the Internet, academic publications, and personal correspondence with people knowledgeable about the Belizean deaf community.

## 1.1 Overview of Belize

Belize is located in Central America and is bordered by Mexico to the northeast, Guatemala to the west, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. Belize's barrier reef runs along the length of its coast and is the second largest barrier reef in the world. According to a July 2010 estimate, there are approximately 315,000 people living in Belize (Central Intelligence Agency 2010). Belize's largest city, Belize City, lies on the eastern coast and has a population of roughly fifty-five thousand. Located in the interior, the capital city of Belmopan has roughly ten thousand people. Other major cities in Belize include Orange Walk in the north, San Ignacio in the west, and Dangriga on the eastern coast (Tageo 2009). For a map of Belize in its geographical context, see figure 1 (BelizeTravel 2009).



Figure 1. Belize map.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we use a lower case “deaf” when referring to all Belizeans with hearing loss, specifying “deaf culture” or “deaf community” when focusing on deaf people who identify with each other as a unique deaf cultural group.

Belize's weather is tropical with violent hurricanes often hitting the country between June and November and coastal flooding plaguing the southern part of the country. The highest peak is Doyle's Delight at 1,160 meters (about 3,806 feet), and the land area of Belize is approximately twenty-three thousand square kilometers (about 14,270 square miles) (Central Intelligence Agency 2010). The nation is divided into six districts: Corozal, Orange Walk, Belize, Cayo, Stann Creek, and Toledo. See figure 2 for a map of Belize's districts and major roads (Embassyworld.com n.d.).



Figure 2. Districts of Belize map.

Belize is ethnically diverse, with Mestizos comprising 48.7% (almost half) of the population, Creoles 24.9%, Mayans 10.6%, Garifunas 6.1%, and other ethnicities making up the other 9.7%. The majority of Belizeans follow Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity. While the official language is English, a reminder of its former status as the colony of British Honduras, the majority of the population speaks Spanish and/or Belizean Creole English (also known as “Belize Kriol English” or simply “Kriol”) (Central Intelligence Agency 2010, Lewis 2009).

As of 2007, the unemployment rate was a reported 8.5%. Belize's major employment options include the service industry, agriculture, tourism, construction, and oil. In 2005, 61.9% of the Belizean labor force was employed in the service industry, 19.5% in agriculture, and 17.9% in industry (Central Intelligence Agency 2010). Roughly fifty years ago, forty Mennonite families moved to the Spanish Lookout area in the Cayo district and now produce over 80% of the country's crops (Dinsmore and Dinsmore 2009).

## 1.2 Disability in Belize

In 1991 and 2000, the Belize national censuses reported that the disabled population numbered 12,431 people (6.5% of the population) and 13,774 people (5.7% of the population), respectively. The 2000

national census also indicated that highest disability percentages were found in the southern districts of Cayo and Toledo and that 10.3% (roughly 1,419 people) of that year's disabled population reported significant hearing loss (International Disability Network 2004). According to the World Health Organization and the World Bank, it is probable that the disabled population in Belize is much higher than reported and actually closer to twenty-seven thousand (International Health Division n.d.). If this estimate is more accurate, 10.3% of twenty-seven thousand would indicate a deaf and hard of hearing population of roughly three thousand. Other deaf population estimates range between 12,671 and fifteen thousand (Berke 2009, Lewis 2009). According to PAHO (n.d.), roughly two thousand school-aged children had disabilities and 8.5% of these reported some type of speech or language disorder in 2000. While exact deaf statistics are not yet known, Cayo Deaf Institute has started a list of all deaf people with whom they have contact and hope to develop a much more accurate idea of the Belizean deaf population (Byler 2009, Marshall 2009a).

There are a number of disability organizations serving the Belizean community. These organizations tend to work independently from each other, and according to the International Disability Rights Monitor, "...there are no cross-disability organizations in Belize. In general, disability organizations have few financial resources and rely on the support of international agencies to fund activities" (International Disability Network 2004:32). The four primary Belizean organizations that work with disabilities in general include Community Agency for the Rehabilitation and Education for Persons with Disabilities (CARE), Special Olympics International, Motivations Belize Association, and The Belizean Assembly of and for Persons with Disabilities. (Others that focus on special education are described in section 3.1 below.)

Community Agency for the Rehabilitation and Education for Persons with Disabilities (CARE) has historically focused on the needs of disabled children, but in recent years has expanded to include heightening HIV/AIDS awareness through Braille manuals and sign language DVDs. This initiative is one of the first of its kind in the Caribbean, and CARE is partnering with other like-minded organizations such as the Alliance Against Aids and the Stella Maris School; they distribute their materials at CARE resource centers and libraries across the country. The DVDs are available at various associations and resource rooms in the country. CARE has also lobbied for driver's license rights for deaf people (Lucas 2009, Chanona 2008a, LoveFM 2008, Miss-Delectable 2008).

Special Olympics International began an official partnership with the Belize government in 2008. Special Olympics International had already been sending disabled athletes to international competitions—once the partnership was established, the Belize government added its financial support and encouragement. In 2009, the National Special Olympics was hosted in Orange Walk and four hundred athletes from across Belize converged for competition. Although technically the National Special Olympics included people with all kinds of disabilities, no sign language interpreters were present at the games (Bocalan 2009, Marshall 2009b, Government 2008).

Motivation Belize Association was formed to prepare and empower members of the disabled community to live independently, to record disability demographics in Belize, and to help provide social access to all disabled people in Belize. It is based in the Cayo district and is a nonprofit organization managed by the disability community itself. The Belizean Assembly of and for Persons with Disabilities is located in Belize City and serves as a national member of the global organization, Disabled Persons International (Government 2008, Independent Living Institute 2005, Mobility International USA n.d.).

Disability Awareness Week, an annual event held in Belize with different themes every year, is intended to raise public awareness of disabled and special needs children in various classrooms (Doelman 2009). Events like these and Special Olympics competitions are slowly raising awareness about disability in Belizean society.

## **2 Deaf access and rights**

Many people in Belize, including the deaf population, struggle with poverty. Parents and families with deaf children often have very little support (Brenton 2009). Many parents are ashamed of having deaf children, since they regard deafness as a divine punishment, and so they are lead to lock their deaf children away (Ferguson 2009). Some deaf children are abused, homeless, or not allowed to attend school (Lentz 2009). Because they have so few resources, some parents avoid enrolling their children in school as parents may struggle to purchase uniforms, books, or pay school registration fees (BlissfulSage Foundation 2007). Other parents, even those in Belize City, are not aware of available resources and services, and assume that if their child cannot talk, he or she cannot go to school (Chanona 2008b). According to Woods (2006), only 3.7% of parents of deaf children are able to communicate well with their children while the others use basic home gestures.

Employment opportunities for deaf people are very limited and many employers are wary of hiring deaf people due to communication barriers. Since deaf Belizeans generally have low literacy levels, using written communication with employers is usually not a viable option (Marshall 2009a). For deaf Belizeans who find employment, job options include stocking shelves at grocery stores, driving a taxi, catering, teaching, mechanics, cooking, woodworking, and hairdressing (Bocalan 2009, Thurton 2009, Jansen-Tacheny 2008, San Pedro 2002, Bullard 1973). Although the opportunities for job training and placement for disabled people remain limited, there are disability pensions, grants, and benefits available for those who are disabled after joining the workforce (Banana Bank 2008, Office of Policy, U.S. Social Security Administration 2003).

In 1997, the British National Association of the Deaf and World Federation of the Deaf created a report for the Belizean government stating that Belize's disability policy was not being fully implemented and it suggested ways for improvement. The report communicated concern about the lack of support for disability rights, legislation ensuring accessibility of public services, and disability-friendly media. It indicated that people with disabilities actually have very little say at the government level even though the government invites representatives and organizations serving people with disabilities to help with policy-making and the operation of government organizations, and provides financial assistance for sustaining or creating such organizations. Instead, people with disabilities work solely within non-government organizations that provide disability advocacy, services, awareness, and so forth (Michailakis 1997). After over a decade following this report, it does not appear that many changes have been made.

Deaf people are not allowed to earn driver's licenses in Belize and there are only two known deaf drivers in all of Belize (Marshall 2008d). Disability organizations are now asking the government to change the law so deaf people can legally drive. They believe the current law is a violation of constitutional rights and they plan to lobby persistently for the right of deaf people to drive. If this law is passed in Belize, deaf Mennonite farmers will also finally be legally allowed to drive their tractors (Lucas 2009).

## **3 Education**

Eight grade levels of primary education are required by the government for all children ages five to fourteen. In 1995, an estimated 97% of school-age children were registered in primary school and the average teacher to student ratio was 1 to 31. As of 2006, there were 282 primary schools and 2,600 primary school teachers in Belize (Hopkins 2006). Secondary education lasts for four years and focuses on either general curriculum or vocational training. Most schools in Belize are managed by church ministries but maintain partnerships with the Belize government (Encyclopedia of the Nations 2009).



### 3.1 Special education

A Special Education Unit in the Ministry of Education<sup>2</sup> was established in Belize in 1991. Since then, The National Policy for Persons with Disabilities ensured the right of every disabled child to access mainstream education (Government Ministry 2005). Despite this,

“...in many cases schools require that parents or other family members provide special assistance to such students, as the school itself is unable to provide it...of all elementary students with disabilities: 50% receive inclusive education in which all students of the same grade are in the same classroom; 15% are taught in special classes; 3% attend special day schools; 17% are taught at home; and 15% have no education available to them. With regard to high school students with disabilities: 65% receive inclusive education; 5% of students are taught at home; and 30% have no education available to them.”  
(International Disability Network 2004:10–11)

Teachers have limited options for training in special education. Some go to Cuba on a five-year scholarship to obtain a special education degree and then return to Belize to serve in a government-operated position for six consecutive years (St. John’s 2008). The Cooperative Association of States for Scholarships (CASS) has also trained people in special education (Harris-Stowe 1994). Because of the lack of local training opportunities and resources, as of 2006 there were only seven teachers in Belize who focused on special education. According to Hyman (2009), most teachers working in special education have not had any type of specialized training and over half have not even finished secondary education. To address these pressing special education issues, four organizations focused on special education are taking steps to help support Belizean special educators and schools: the National Resource Center for Inclusive Education (NaRCIE), the State University of New York (SUNY) at Cortland, BlissfulSage Foundation, and Bridgewater State College.

The National Resource Center for Inclusive Education (NaRCIE) was founded in June 2007. NaRCIE supports inclusive education, integrating deaf and disabled children into regular classrooms with support services so that all children can learn together. They foster cooperation with agencies and schools that share this inclusive educational approach. NaRCIE also trains teachers and parents of special needs children (which includes posting educational tips on YouTube and TeacherTube), supports the establishment of parent associations for disabled children, and provides periodic workshops throughout Belize for teachers to learn more about special education. Some of these workshops bring in outside resources, such as deaf teachers from Gallaudet University (Bocalan 2009, Marshall 2009a, NaRCIE Belize 2008, Teacher Tube 2008 Government of Belize 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Specific leaders in special education are provided here, with their roles. The Belizean Minister of Education is Patrick Faber (Godwin 2009). Dativa Martinez is the director of Education Support Services in the Ministry of Education (Government of Belize 2005). Eleanor Enriquez is the coordinator of the Special Education Unit/NaRCIE (Chanona 2008b). Merlene Neal is the Educational Assessor and Resource Officer of the Special Education Unit within the Ministry of Education (Doelman 2009). This school year she is focusing her efforts on deaf students (Neal 2009). Abigail Wade is the Minister of Education of the Cayo District. She has expressed interest in deaf education issues and the testing and diagnosing of hearing loss, support of hearing parents with deaf children, and teachers knowing sign language (Brenton 2009). Francisco Cal is the point person for special education in the Punta Gorda area (Broido 2009). Elodia is an itinerant teacher in Orange Walk district, working with blind and deafblind children and at St. Peter’s Anglican School (Bocalan 2009).

The State University of New York (SUNY) at Cortland has developed a partnership with Belize's Ministry of Education that focuses on producing special education resources for the administrators and primary school teachers in Belize. The materials include a resource manual given to almost every primary school principal in the country, which includes an Internet website coordinated with the resource manual, a CD with information about disabilities, audio and text communication among educators, reproducible materials for teachers such as flash cards, video recordings to address strategies for classroom issues accessible online and on CD or DVD, and on-site workshops facilitated by experienced teachers from the Cortland area (Hopkins 2009). SUNY hopes that these resources will empower Belizean educators to take the lead in improving special education in their region. (Hopkins 2006)

The BlissfulSage Foundation wants to develop special education programs that provide resources and training in cooperation with CARE but the extent to which this has been accomplished is unknown. They seek to supply resource libraries, staff development and awareness programs to Belizean educators (BlissfulSage Foundation 2007). In addition, Bridgewater State College in Florida, USA, is offering specialized training to Belize teachers and has already trained one hundred teachers, with the intention that they return to Belize to further train others (Hyman 2009).

### **3.2 Deaf education**

Although deaf children may attend primary school, very few have the opportunity to attend secondary school or obtain a university education. Recognizing the need to increase focus on deaf education, the Ministry of Education has created an action plan that focuses on creating a holistic approach for deaf education and the development of a deaf education procedure manual. Implementation of this plan is not anticipated until 2015 (Caribbean 2009 and Ministry of Education n.d.).

There are several resource centers and educational units around the country that work with special needs children and their parents. These centers are staffed by itinerant resource officers that go to schools around the country. However, only two government-run special educational institutions for children with mental and physical disabilities exist that include deaf students: NaRCIE (also called The Special Unit) and the Stella Maris School (Encyclopedia of the Nations 2009, Hopkins 2009, Chanona 2008b). Two additional schools—the Cayo Deaf Institute and Saint Peter's Anglican School—offer Christian educational options to deaf students in Belize.

#### **3.2.1 Stella Maris School**

The Stella Maris School, located in Belize City, is the largest school for students with disabilities in Belize (NaRCIE Belize 2008). Founded in 1958 with only five students, the school now has thirteen classrooms that hold roughly 135 students, including less than twenty deaf students. These twenty deaf students create a cohort called the Belize School for the Deaf (BSD) (Brenton 2009, Davis 2009, LoveFM 2009). Although BSD formerly had several deaf-only classrooms and a residential facility, when the BSD principal was charged with sexual indiscretion, he and other staff left the country, and the government decreased funding. Following this funding crunch, most of the residential facilities were converted into integrated classrooms. There are multiple younger deaf students together in one of these classrooms without any interpreter, but the school frequently provides an interpreter to individual deaf students in higher grade levels, even though these students are more literate and there is only one higher grade level deaf student in each classroom. Stella Maris School employs at least two deaf staff members: one who teaches in a classroom with hearing students and another who offers sign language classes to the public. A few students are still reported to board at the school but the students return home during summer vacation (Brenton 2009, Thurton 2009, Bullard 1973).

In addition to academic subjects such as writing and reading, mathematics, and speech, vocational training is also offered in areas such as home economics, woodworking, social skills, daily living, and

occupational skills (Government of Belize 2002). Recently, the Special Olympics basketball team from Stella Maris School competed in the Belize City Primary School Basketball Tournament (Special Olympics 2009 and Amandala 2009). Other special events have included the National Deaf Spelling Bee, a two-day arts and crafts camp, therapeutic horseback riding, hosting the Special Olympics Fun Run and camp, and a Disability Awareness Week family fun day. (Corozal.com 2009, Ciego 2009, LoveFM 2009, National 2008, Woods 2005, and Jones 1998)

A number of local and international organizations and groups support Stella Maris School through financial support, facility maintenance, health care, and donations of technological equipment, such as computers. A Parent Teachers Association has formed at the school (Government of Belize 2001) and teachers from the United States (e.g., Florida Atlantic University and the University of New Hampshire) have offered training and provided educational resources, some of which focused on sign language use and deaf education. In addition, Belize's primary Internet provider, Telemedia, provides complimentary Internet access to the school (Bhagwanji 2009, Broido 2009, Belize Telemedia 2008).

### ***3.2.2 Cayo Deaf Institute***

Cayo Deaf Institute (CDI) is located on a fifty-six acre lot in the Spanish Lookout Mennonite colony located in the central Cayo district. It is directed by German Mennonite missionaries and is the only residential school for deaf students in Belize (Ferguson 2009). CDI's founders, Frank and Sara Thiessen, received permission from the Belizean government to use the land for CDI in 1999. This step happened in conjunction with founding of Empathy for the Deaf, which provides services nationwide and is based in the Mennonite colony (Government of Belize 2007). Thiessen served as principal until November 2006 and was replaced by Tony and Nettie Loewen in 2007. The current principal is Joel Reed, a deaf man from the United States who arrived in Belize in 2005 and is married to a Canadian CDI schoolteacher and curriculum supervisor who grew up in Belize. The current school directors are Clarence and Linda Thiessen and there are eight school board members (Bocalan 2009, Chapel 2009, Reed 2009). The school operates solely on support from the Canadian Interlake Mennonite Fellowship Church, individuals, other churches, and the nearby Mennonite colony and its Kleingemeinde Church (Penner 2009).

As of 2009, there were approximately twenty deaf children ranging from ages seven to eighteen (Marshall 2009a). Some students who are orphans or come from broken homes spend their holidays at varying Mennonite homes in the Spanish Lookout colony or at the CDI farm (Lentz 2009). CDI searches for potential deaf students in surrounding areas and students represent many rural areas, ethnicities, and even the neighboring country of Guatemala. CDI functions separately from the Ministry of Education and has established its own educational standards and expectations. CDI's goal is to build its students' character, teach them sign language along with academics in a primary school setting, and train them in a manual labor trade (Ferguson 2009).

CDI's instruction includes math, language and Bible classes, speech training for the hard-of-hearing students, hands-on skill training in horticulture, animal husbandry, carpentry, and cooking (Penner 2009). Their facilities include a vegetable and animal farm, schoolhouses, a woodshop, soccer pitch, cottages, cafeteria, church, classrooms, residential facilities, and a bus for transporting students (Bocalan 2009, United Nations, Committee on the Rights of the Child 2004). Students graduate when they reach age eighteen (Reed 2009). In 2004, sign language teachers from CDI traveled to surrounding villages in Cayo and Stann Creek districts and into Guatemala to teach sign language to families with deaf members. Through these workshops, they report that 235 people learned some sign language. This same activity was repeated in 2007 in Punta Gorda, which reached another 185 people, and in Orange Walk in 2009 (Parks 2009, Reed 2009).

CDI hosts a deaf camp every three years at various locations within Belize (e.g., CDI Campus and Punta Gorda) and the Summer 2005 camp was attended by 187 deaf people (Parks 2009, Ambergis 2007). The president of Silent Word Ministries based in the USA has assisted with this camp and has

trained deaf ministry workers (Barr 2009). Work teams from the United States and Canada sometimes volunteer at CDI, usually in construction or maintenance, but an audiologist has also visited to conduct hearing tests and fit audio trainers (Burns 2009). Although resources remain scarce, some resources from the USA are available. Other resources have been created at CDI to reflect Mennonite values (Reed 2009).

### ***3.2.3 Saint Peter's Anglican School***

Saint Peter's Anglican School is located in Orange Walk Town. It follows a British teaching system with its roughly one hundred students, including several deaf students. There were twelve deaf students from ages eight to fourteen, in grades two to ten, all in one classroom for the 2008-2009 school year. As of the 2009-2010 school year, there were eleven students: seven boys and four girls ranging in age from eight to fifteen (Deaf Class 2009 and Marshall 2009a). Most of the deaf students learned sign language after age two; they do not have deaf parents and were placed in the school between the ages of seven and nine.

Nancy Marshall is responsible for having developed deaf education at Saint Peter's and has been involved with mentoring and teaching the other staff in deaf pedagogy and sign language (ABDM 2008 and Lehman 2006). Bible, language arts, and mathematics are included in Saint Peter's curriculum and the school has access to ASL and educational resources from the United States (Marshall 2008d). Several other volunteers, including an interpreter from Goshen College (Indiana, USA) and a Peace Corps volunteer, have worked at the school. Contact between students at Saint Peter's Anglican School and those at Stella Maris School has been encouraged so that students with special needs can meet each other and build a support network (Ical 2005).

### ***3.2.4 Other deaf education options***

In Punta Gorda, in the Toledo district on the southern coast of Belize, roughly fifty deaf are placed into various schools with no obvious language support. Because of the high teacher turnover rate and lack of signing skills by teachers, deaf students do not have much opportunity to excel academically. At most, there are three deaf or deafblind students in any classroom. At one point, a Peace Corps volunteer lived in a small community and worked in a few schools with disabled children, teaching sign language to the deaf students, tutoring them, and training the teachers in more effective ways of communicating with deaf students (Broido 2009).

In the northern Corozal district, there are twelve known deaf children but no teacher for deaf students in the area. Deaf students are isolated in various village schools or attend school at Mary Hill Roman Catholic School, integrated in classrooms of students with various disabilities. The primary teacher at Mary Hill Catholic School has attended a few sign language classes but there is no evidence that she uses any sign language in her classrooms. Two other known deaf students are attending a technical high school and are supported by a few signers from a local Jehovah's Witness ministry (Marshall 2008d and Marshall 2008c). One volunteer from the USA interpreted for and tutored deaf children in Corozal for eleven weeks (Marshall 2008b and Marshall 2008a).

San Pedro, a town on Ambergris Caye, an island northwest of Belize City, has a deaf class, possibly at La Isla Bonita Elementary School. One student who transferred to Saint Peter's Anglican School from this school did not know many signs, pointing to possible lack of sign language use in this area (Marshall 2009a). Another deaf person attended school at San Pedro Roman Catholic School. This same student has participated in deaf national and international forums, an international deaf dance competition, a leadership training workshop, and a Belize City pageant. (The San Pedro Sun 2002)

## 4 Deaf meeting places

There are several places where deaf people have historically met together regularly, including casual places such as restaurants and private homes and more organized spaces such as associations, clubs, and religious meetings. Although deaf associations and clubs seem to have mostly closed their doors, deaf Belizeans still gather together, primarily at religious meetings and church services.

The Belize National Association of the Deaf (BNAD) is affiliated with the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and officially represents the WFD in Belize. However, it has not been active for the last decade after its closing following the president's (also the former BDS principal) conviction of sexually molesting students (Bocalan 2009). According to Broido (2009), the Belizean deaf community was devastated over the loss of a key role model. When BNAD was active, they had weekly and monthly meetings, but now that they are inactive, WFD is considering releasing their membership (Bocalan 2009). Most members from the BNAD moved to the Hearing Impaired Club of Belize in Belize City, but that also seems to have disbanded three years ago (Bocalan 2009, Marshall 2009a). A Belize Deaf Youth Club may meet somewhere in Belize, but we found no information about it other than its name (San Pedro 2002).

Deaf religious ministries in Belize include Cayo Deaf Institute's church service, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Open Door Church in Belize City which offers some signing, and Jesus' Deaf Church in Orange Walk. Cayo Deaf Institute's church has been pastored by Frank Thiessen since 2004 and includes a teen ministry on the school campus (Reed 2009). The Jehovah's Witnesses are known to meet in downtown Belize City, Orange Walk, Belmopan, and San Ignacio and use sign language in their services (Harrods 2009, MontageStoryTellers 2009, Thurton 2009). The Open door Church in Belize City offers some signing during the service for deaf people who occasionally attend its services. The signer present at this service has attended a few sign language classes at Stella Maris School (Crosbie 2009).

As of 2006, Jesus' Deaf Church had fourteen attendees that met at Life Changing Ministries, a Spanish Mennonite church. Nancy Marshall (founder and deaf missionary from the United States who is supported by the Virginia Mennonite Board of Missions) has taught American Sign Language (ASL) and has been involved in deaf education in Orange Walk for a number of years. Before moving to Belize in 2005, Marshall earned a Master's degree in deaf education from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. In addition to establishing the deaf branch of Saint Peter's Anglican School, Marshall started Jesus' Deaf Church in Orange Walk. Each week, Marshall uses her van to pick up deaf people in the surrounding area to attend services. The pastor of Life Changing Ministries also helps transport some of the participants back to their homes after services. Jesus' Deaf Church hosts week-long Vacation Bible School (VBS) activities every summer, which include swimming and Bible-themed games. Volunteers from the USA and Life Changing Ministries sometimes help distribute materials, crafts, and food. About a dozen deaf children attended the 2007 VBS, but recent years have seen a decline in attendance. The church also hosts a Girl's Night Bible Study on Friday nights (Marshall 2009b, Marshall 2008d, ABDM 2008).

## 5 American Sign Language

American Sign Language (ASL) appears to be the primary sign language in Belize. ASL users from other countries visiting Belize have reported that when they communicate with ASL, they are easily understood (Brenton 2009). Not only has ASL been used in Belize deaf education and religious ministries, some deaf Belizeans have studied in the USA, further enforcing ASL's vitality in the country (Crosbie 2009). Nancy Marshall, who has lived in Belize for several years and is a fluent user of ASL, says that deaf people who do know a formal sign language use ASL (Marshall 2009a).

## 5.1 Sign variation

Gallaudet University indicates that Belizean Sign Language is based on ASL with a few local adaptations (Gallaudet University 2009). According to Broido (2009), there are slight variations that distinguish the ASL variety in Belize from the ASL variety used in the USA. In addition, regional variation may also be present within Belize as Orange Walk, Cayo, and Belize districts are reported to have some vocabulary differences (Thurton 2009). In Belize, especially in Orange Walk, signers use a modified “T” handshape to make it less offensive to hearing people in the country because of its negative gestural connotation in the wider community. In addition, some signs for numbers, animals, food, and months of the year are also distinct from ASL in the USA. Fingerspelling is very rarely used in Belize because of low literacy levels and there are some reports of sign variation dependent on one’s social network (Brenton 2009, Chicalei 2009, Marshall 2009a).

Stella Maris School reportedly uses a mixture of ASL, Signed English, and Signed Exact English (SEE). ASL was first brought to Belize by the founder of Stella Maris School. Since then, a Peace Corps volunteer working at the school brought ASL books and resources and trained the teachers in ASL, and two deaf teachers at the school continue to encourage the use of ASL. SEE is sometimes used at Stella Maris due to the availability of SEE and Signed English materials (Broido 2009). Marshall (2009a) reports the increased use of initialized signs in Belize City as compared to other parts of the country.

According to Doelman (2009), Cayo Deaf Institute also uses ASL but is more heavily influenced by the Canadian variety of ASL as compared to the ASL variety used in the USA. Marshall (2009a) indicates that CDI’s sign language may follow English word order more than the ASL used in other parts of Belize. One former staff member calls it a Belize dialect of Pidgin Signed English (Byler 2009). The founder, Frank Thiessen, learned ASL from intensive two-week courses at Bill Rice Ranch in Tennessee, USA. He indicates the use of a Total Communication approach, including the use of sign language, fingerspelling, lip-reading, and oral communication methods. Many students enter CDI not knowing any sign language so CDI focuses on teaching their students ASL, using some sign language DVDs from the USA as teaching material (Ferguson 2009 and Reed 2009). According to Broido (2009), CDI has made some modifications to ASL in order to improve their students’ English literacy levels.

Saint Peter’s Anglican School and the Orange Walk area also report the use of ASL, with less English influence than the other two schools. This is largely due to Nancy Marshall’s influence and a former deaf teacher who brought ASL to the community (Marshall 2009a). According to Lehman (2006), young children at the school are just beginning to learn sign language and many have experienced serious language delays, but older students develop solid signing skills. An intern from Gallaudet University, who taught for ten weeks with Marshall at Saint Peter’s Anglican School, indicated that deaf people in the area may have trouble signing full sentences and fingerspelling English words (Marshall 2009a). According to Bocalan (2009), the sign language used at Saint Peter’s Anglican School is very basic and uses a mix of ASL and Signed English.

In districts where no deaf educational options are readily available, including Corozal in the far north and Toledo and Stann Creek in the south, the majority of deaf people do not use a developed sign language (Bocalan 2009). The use of ASL appears to be directly tied to the educated deaf population while other deaf Belizeans use home signs and basic gestures, something educated deaf Belizeans call “body language” (Harrods 2009). This is probably especially true in rural areas where deaf people tend to be isolated from consistent access to a developed signed language.

## 5.2 Hearing signers

There are at least three sign language courses offered in Belize. The Stella Maris School offers a sign language class every three months and eighteen students (mostly teachers and community workers) complete their course successfully in 2006. At a cost of twenty U.S. dollars, students attend one-hour

sessions twice weekly for three months (Woods 2006). The University of Belize also offers a sign language course. In 2009, thirteen students completed the twelve-week beginner's course, which was taught by a secretary who works at the university and learned sign language at Stella Maris School, and through a class at a deaf school in the USA (Office of Public Information 2009). Nancy Marshall has offered a week-long community sign language class annually for the past four years at Life Changing Ministries in Orange Walk. While fifty-two people attended in 2008, lack of advertising led to a drastic drop to only five people in 2009. In the future, Marshall is considering offering a more advanced course (especially for parents of deaf children) in addition to the beginner course she already offers (Bocalan 2009, Marshall 2009).

Hearing people who are involved in the deaf community and use sign language are sometimes mistaken as being deaf and are regarded with disbelief when they are discovered to be hearing (Bocalan 2009). There are few, if any, culturally-identifiable children of deaf adults (CODAs) in Belize. Since sign language use in Belize has grown only in the last few decades, deaf signers have just recently come into the generation of mothers who are among the first to start teaching sign language to their hearing children. Marshall believes these CODAs will be able to promote change in regard to advocacy for accessibility and interpreters once they become adults (Marshall 2009). Currently, there are very few sign language interpreters, and no certified ones, in Belize. There are no known interpreters in the districts of Orange Walk and Corozal and only a few (some reports indicate only four) in Belize City (Marshall E-mail 2009).

## **6 Conclusion**

American Sign Language (ASL) is the sign language used by the educated deaf community in Belize, with high comprehension of ASL varieties used in the United States and Canada, and sustained contact with these varieties, although with some regional variation that is unique to Belize. Because of several vocabulary differences, some people may prefer to call the Belize's sign language "Belizean Sign Language," but still consider it a variety of ASL. According to local sources, no conventionalized sign language was used by the Belizean deaf community before the founding of deaf education in 1958 and ASL's immediate introduction into the classroom. Deaf people who have not had the opportunity to attend school appear to use home signs that are mostly unique to their own homes but may share some similarities with ASL in Belize because of particular gestures that are generally used by the Belizean community and culture.

The Belize deaf community has been adversely affected since the closure of deaf associations and loss of key deaf community role models and leaders. There is no longer a central meeting place nor an advocacy center for deaf Belizeans and meetings are frequently organized through religious services. While there are three deaf schools in the central districts of Belize, deaf people in rural areas and the far northern and southern parts of the country do not have many educational resources available to them. Development needs include, but are not limited to, further deaf educational options, interpreter training programs, employment opportunities, and greater social access for the entire Belizean deaf community.

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