- MEO IUDICIO -

FROM DEAF TO DEAF: OBTAINING COMMUNICATION CHOICE IN AN ERA OF CHANGE

Communitas
ISSN 1023-0556
2005 10: 189 - 193

Magteld Smith*

This opinion piece is from a "deaf" perspective. The writer's intention is not to list all the prevailing misconceptions and misunderstandings about deafness, deaf people, and sign language. Rather, it is to promote a line of thought and action that may lead people to undertake meaningful and effective programmes for the "deaf". The arguments emanate from a combination of frustration and anger over the failure of hearing people to recognise and make appropriate use of deaf people's strengths, personal development, politics and, indeed, the exercise of choice.

The situation of the deaf in South Africa is complex. It is linked to the country's political and social views regarding different ethnic groups as well as the history of education for the deaf. Till now, there has been no uniform sign language in the country, like that found in the United Kingdom and United States. Instead, many different sign language systems have developed among South African ethnic groups. According to the De La Bat School for the Deaf (2002: 9), there are more than 100 sign language varieties used in the world. Every sign language reflects its own history, culture, and social values, and may have many regional variations. Educational philosophy varies from one school to another. Against this background, South Africans are confronted with the great problem of studying various sign languages.

In South Africa, academics, educators, and policy-makers are hard at work trying to transform deaf education and socio-economic integration. As a result, numerous legislation and policies that support Deaf people have been proposed, one of the latest being the Employment Equity Act (1998) which seeks to outlaw discrimination and promote affirmative action in the workplace. Disability is mentioned as a ground on which people may not be discriminated against.

Despite the political changes that have taken place in South Africa since 1994, numerous socio-economic challenges remain. Negative societal attitudes remain a "killer" in the development of deaf persons in South Africa. Most hearing people still consider hearing-impaired persons from the "medical model" point of view. Perhaps the most common problem between the deaf and hearing people is the practice of double standards.

* Magteld Smith, a hearing-impaired person, is a Master's student in Governance and Political Transformation in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein.

Hearing people who would probably be well-mannered, open-minded, conciliatory, and generally pleasant with other hearing people undergo a subtle change in their conduct when they are with hearing-impaired individuals. Also most hearing people have the misconception that the deaf cannot speak for themselves. The offenders are mostly unconscious of, and do not recognise the attitudes described above, resulting in a so-called unconscious discrimination and prejudice.

Academics, activists, politicians, public servants and the Office on the Status of Disabled Persons in the Office of the President who have an interest and responsibility in issues pertaining to disability, have for some time now struggled with the issue of defining disability. The government needs to understand the necessity of categorising disabled persons into clearly defined groups for the purposes of service delivery, education, social security, and employment equity. Disabled women struggle with both the oppressions of being women in male-dominated societies and the oppressions of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied. To further worsen the scenario of deaf people, deafness is an invisible disability and to the knowledge of the writer, not one feminist theorist in South Africa could construct a theory of female disability and integrate it into the experiences and knowledge of female disabled people.

Disability, whether it is visible or invisible, has become a buzzword in most societies of South Africa. Deafness is no superstition, it is a reality. Dependency, as opposed to independency, is created by this system.

According to The Centre of Deaf Studies (University of the Witswaterand 2005), it is estimated that 500 000 South Africans accept and use South African sign language as their natural and first language, and there are presently 35 schools for the deaf and hard of hearing. Approximately 66 per cent of deaf persons are functionally illiterate; and approximately 70 per cent of the deaf population are unemployed.

While communication is the cornerstone of all forms of human relations (Steinberg 2004: 3), deafness is a cultural construction as well as a physical phenomenon. The difference between the hearing and the deaf is typically construed as simply a matter of audiology. Hearing people in general believe that deaf people cannot talk. Most deaf people's vocal apparatus is perfectly normal. Some have acquired speech, others have not. Some deaf people prefer to use their voices, while others do not.

According to the De La Bat School for the Deaf (2002), there are various types of "hearing loss". The single term "hearing loss" covers a wide range of losses that have very different effects on a person's ability to process sound and, therefore, to understand speech. Another misconception is that deaf people are visually sharper than hearing people. Deaf people do use their eyes as hearing people use their ears. Deaf people learn to rely on visual cues, and do become more alert about taking in and processing visual messages. Paying close attention is a survival skill for many people with hearing loss.

The problem of deaf people is not the inability to hear meaningful sounds, but the problem of being cut off from other humans who speak a different language. Being unable to understand or use a spoken language at all, or at least in a very limited way, creates ongoing fear in most deaf persons' day to day living. Deaf people believe they speak a different language, and because of the greater community being unable to understand this language, they feel like foreigners in their own country. They do not see themselves as disabled or handicapped persons, but only as a cultural group that uses a different language.

"Silent" is not a straightforward or unproblematic description of the experience of a deaf person, however. Firstly, few deaf people hear nothing. Most have hearing losses, which are not uniform across the entire range of pitch. They will hear low sounds better than high ones, or vice versa. Sounds will often be quite distorted, but heard. Secondly, for those who do not hear, what does the word silent signify? Unless they once heard and became deaf, the word is meaningless as a description of their experience.

Silence is a metaphor rather than a single description of the experience of most deaf people. Deafness is a relationship, not a state, and the use of the "silence" metaphor is one indication of how the relationship is dominated by the hearing. An overwhelming part of the general community sees deaf people as disabled, unable to live as normal persons. Although this is based mainly on ignorance, deaf people have very little hope of ever changing this view, and every day live with the fear of being classified as stupid, inferior to hearing persons, and unable to make sense of any communication.

The deaf person's greatest dream is to be accepted as a person in his/her own right, a full contributing member of society, who is entitled to all rights and opportunities, offered to other people, and who has a right to his/her own language and culture, within the boundaries of the greater community.

Deaf education in South Africa was determined by a philosophy of oralism, which was notoriously unsuccessful according to Aarons and Akach (1998: 1-28). It could be argued that the fragmentation of the South African deaf community can be attributed to the educational system, lack of resources in schools, lack of teacher training, the degree that deaf children are influenced in their attitudes and perceptions by their parents, and the failure of government and other interest groups to develop one uniform and national sign language.

Learners who attended the De La Bat School for the Deaf were taught to speak as hearing persons and to understand spoken language through speechreading, the so-called oral system. The problem is not the oral system (the success of this system depends on hearing aids), it is the overpriced supply of hearing aids by agents and service providers, and the ignorance of medical schemes in South Africa towards the supply of hearing aids to deaf people. This continuous behaviour is very problematic: a lack of hearing aids and other hearing materials prevents South African deaf children from being exposed to different contexts in and outside the classroom. The success of these learners will further depend on the support of their parents, teachers, the

implementation of a combination of a standardised sign language combined with oralist educational philosophy, dedication and extremely long hours of learning and speech therapy by the learners themselves and professional knowledge regarding deafness.

The post 1994 South African government has developed highly forward-looking policies which, if properly implemented, can over time drastically alter the social disadvantages experienced by all people and especially those with disabilities. The landmark policy document, the White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS) was adopted in 1997. The INDS is a policy document (see Republic of South Africa 1997) which seeks to ensure that government departments and the private sector consciously make their policies, procedures, practices and programmes disability integrative and inclusive. It also seeks to radically transform attitudes, perceptions and behaviour towards people with disabilities, thus creating a work environment in which disability issues and the needs of people with disabilities are fully integrated, as a matter of course, not as an afterthought or special favour.

Integration needs to be viewed as a struggle over competing objectives between groups involved in unequal power relations. The motivation behind the question of transformation is the desire for a society in which social justice is realised and people, deaf people in particular, have real decision-making powers and control over their lives.

However, the new South Africa draws attention to the tendency of society to view people with disabilities as a single group. Thus, people in wheelchairs have become the popular representatives of people with disabilities, and the silent exile continues for deaf people.

In conclusion, there has been a long, hard struggle between advocates of oralism and those who advocate the use of sign language as a communication mode for deaf people (cf. Van Cleve 1993). Both groups had paternalism in common, saw deafness through their own cultural biases, and sought to reshape deaf people in accordance with their ways. Both used similar clusters of metaphors to forge images of deaf people as fundamentally flawed, incomplete, isolated, and dependent. Both used that imagery to justify not only methods of education, but also the inherent authority of the hearing over the deaf. This has not changed.

REFERENCES

Aarons, D. and P. Akach. 1998. One language or many? A sociolinguistic question. *Papers in Linguistics* 31: 1-28. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch.

De La Bat School for the Deaf. 2002. Newsletter. Worcester: Institute for the Deaf.

Republic of South Africa. 1997. White Paper on an Integrated National Disability Strategy. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Steinberg, S. 2004. *Persuasive communication skills: Public speaking*. Cape Town: Creda Communications.

The Centre of Deaf Studies. 2005. University of the Witswaterand: Johannesburg. [Online]. Available: http://www.wits.ac.za [23 July 2005].

Van Cleve, J.V. 1993. *Deaf history unveiled: Interpretations from the new scholarship*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.