

Deaf Perspectives on Deaf Education: An Ethnographic Study from Trinidad and Tobago

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This paper discusses the results of ethnographic research into the views of members of the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago on Deaf education, and highlights some ways in which their perspectives diverge from prevailing philosophies and policies in Deaf education in the Caribbean. It argues this kind of research is needed to address the shortcomings of current educational provisions for Deaf children and adults, and that the perspectives of Deaf adults, in particular, must not be relegated to the periphery. Instead, Deaf communities around the region have crucial roles to play in addressing the problems in Deaf education and in planning for an uncertain future. Finally, it presents an example of how research which fails to sufficiently involve Deaf adults can produce misleading results and potentially misguided policies.

Keywords: Deaf Education; Trinidad and Tobago; Ethnography; Special Education

Introduction

“If the Hearing educational establishment were to recognize the Deaf community as a legitimate minority group, they would soon be forced to admit they know nothing about the structure of the group and that Deaf people could probably help themselves a lot better than Hearing people can.” (Woodward, 1982:13) Although Woodward was writing over three decades ago, his words are all too pertinent today. While the emergence of the field of Deaf Studies, and the development of new frameworks such as Ladd’s concept of ‘deafhood’ (Ladd, 2003), and the idea of ‘Deaf Gain’ (Bauman & Murray, 2014) have opened up exciting new avenues for empowering research which places Deaf communities at the centre of work in Deaf education, most of this research has been led by academics in North America and Europe. As (2011:6), among many others have noted, “too little has been published about sign languages and the deeper social situation of deaf communities outside of the United States and Europe”. This paper contributes in a small way to addressing this lacuna by reporting on ethnographic research from the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago.

It is widely acknowledged that there are longstanding problems in the Caribbean with the educational systems provided for citizens who were either born deaf, or lost their hearing early in life. For example, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s National Language and Language Education Policy, prepared in 2010 by linguist Ian Robertson, states that: “At no time in the history of education in the country has there been sufficient information on deafness and Deaf Education for a policy position to be arrived at.” Important foundational research is now being done by teachers and educational administrators. For example, Paul (2008) looks at the perspectives of hearing parents of deaf children in Trinidad and Tobago, and Conrad et al.

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(2010) discuss the role of special schools in social justice. Mitchell (2012) provides a detailed case study of the educational experiences of a deaf child in St Lucia, based on interviews with the child, the school's principal, and three teachers. Soutar's PhD thesis on Deaf education in Jamaica focuses on the issues faced by teachers in implementing a new bilingual educational policy. Such work is timely and important. Nonetheless, it is striking that while this research investigates the experiences of deaf children and their predominantly hearing parents and teachers, the points of view of Deaf adults are rarely represented.

There are several reasons for this gap. One important factor has to do with language. Hearing researchers, especially those in the field of special education but without much direct contact with Deaf communities, may lack the linguistic abilities to conduct research directly with Deaf adults. As a result, they must either rely on the assistance of sign language interpreters, or choose to focus their research on hearing stakeholders such as teachers and parents. At the same time, research continues to be disseminated almost exclusively in journals, which demand a high level of English (or Spanish or French) reading and writing skills. This makes findings inaccessible to the vast majority of members of the Deaf communities in the region, for whom these written languages are not native, and among whom levels of literacy in spoken languages remains generally low.

Problems in Deaf education can be self-perpetuating. The failure of the school systems in the Caribbean to prepare Deaf students for successful entry into higher education has meant that the number of Deaf professionals and academics able to contribute to the development of Deaf education here has remained very low. To date, only one Deaf adult has completed a Bachelor's Degree, and she is also the only trained Deaf teacher. Without the perspectives and skills of Deaf professionals, improvements in Deaf education have been limited, and deaf children have been denied potential role-models. As Deaf education across the Caribbean has moved towards a focus on the use of natural sign languages in the classroom, it has become clear that lack of linguistic competence among teachers is a problem. Soutar found that: *"An outstanding weakness of many teachers was their low JSL [Jamaican Sign Language - BB] competence and lack of linguistic knowledge of JSL and English, which impacted their ability to effectively apply appropriately selected teaching strategies and techniques."* This is one area where it is clear that Deaf professionals should be making major contributions. Although Deaf adults in Jamaica are employed as Deaf Cultural Facilitators in schools operated by the Jamaican Association of the Deaf, Deaf teachers remain the exception in the Caribbean, rather than the rule, and Deaf researchers are even less common.

This paper argues that one way to better understand and address these problems is by producing research which reflects the insights and knowledge of Deaf adults. Such research can identify issues which have been hitherto overlooked by researchers and professionals working in the field of Deaf education, and suggest new, culturally sensitive solutions to longstanding problems. As Lane (1992:23) puts it: *"deaf people themselves should be crucial participants in the discussion and agreement concerning the lives of deaf children and adults and the roles of the professions that serve them, but they have been excluded – socially, by law, and by oppressive education."*

Methodology

The starting point for this research is the view that deafness can be understood from a cultural-linguistic perspective. Traditionally, deaf people have been treated by medical and educational professionals within what has come to be known as a 'pathological' view of deafness: they are

‘broken’ and require treatment, rehabilitation or cure (Woodward, 1982). Since the 1970s, an alternative model has arisen: of Deaf people as members of minority cultural groups, with their own norms, shared experiences and, crucially, languages (Padden & Humphries, 2005). The Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago meets this definition: it has its own language, Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (henceforth TTSL), its own organisations, and many shared values. These values are often not fully recognized by statutory bodies: It is telling to note, for example, that the body to which most government funding is assigned in Trinidad and Tobago is called the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired; Deaf Trinbagonians almost unanimously reject the term ‘hearing impaired’, in favour of ‘Deaf’.

The research presented in this paper involved an ethnographic study of the views of members of the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago on Deaf education. Ethnography focuses on describing a culture or a group of people through participation as well as observation. The following key features of the ethnographic approach were adopted in this research project:

- 1 **Extended participation in the community.** The research being presented in this paper was conducted over a period of more than six years. During this time, I have been involved on a daily basis with members of the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago. This involvement includes participation in community events, and membership of various community organisations, including being elected as a Board member of the Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Foundation (DEAF).
- 2 **Learning the language of the community.** When I first began this research, my knowledge of TTSL was extremely limited. Over the years, I have learnt and researched the language, achieving sufficient fluency to participate fully in community events and to function as a sign language interpreter.
- 3 **Observation from within the community.** It is important to recognize the limitations of my connections to the community: I am hearing, and though I have lived and worked in Trinidad and Tobago for the past seven and a half years, I was born in England. In order to address these limitations, I have worked closely alongside Deaf researchers and organisations, in an effort to achieve, as far as possible, an accurate insider perspective.

As well as community participation, the research process has involved recording of conversations, in order that it be possible to reproduce utterances and opinions accurately. The following measures were put in place to ensure the reliability of recorded data:

- 1 All recordings were conducted by Deaf researchers, generally without a hearing person (including the present author) being present.
- 2 The language of the interviews was TTSL, the natural language of the community.
- 3 Interviews took place in Deaf community spaces. These included at Deaf sporting events, and at the homes and workplaces of Deaf people.

As is often the case in ethnographic research, interviews were generally unstructured (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Since the topic of education is of considerable interest within the community, it frequently arose spontaneously in conversation. In total, a corpus containing recordings of 100 different Deaf signers, from all areas of Trinidad and Tobago, aged between 18 and 76, and totaling approximately 25 hours has been compiled. From this rather

large corpus, I coded by topic, and thereby extracted data of relevance to Deaf education. In selecting extracts to present in this paper, the following factors were considered:

- 1 The view expressed should be widely held within the community. This was established through an ongoing process of review. Opinions expressed in interviews were repeatedly discussed with other members of the community, including at community meetings, in workshops and in informal settings. Only views which were widely accepted by the community are included here.
- 2 The paper aims to cover both some historical information and perspective on the current educational system. Therefore, I have included information from community members of all ages.

Finally, the following considerations guided the presentation of data as I wrote this paper:

- 1 The findings are presented in a narrative format, including frequent direct quotations.
- 2 Where necessary, I have provided additional information in order to contextualize comments for the reader.
- 3 All quoted opinions are anonymized. I provided the English translations myself, with assistance from native signers where necessary.

Ethnography aims to “convey the subjective reality of the lived experience”(Pole & Morrison, 2003:16). Inevitably, there are a variety of opinions within this community, as in any other. The value of this research is not in providing definitive solutions to questions surrounding Deaf education, but rather in providing important perspectives which have too often been overlooked, rooted in the experiences and knowledge of a community which, more than any other, has been affected by the policies and practices of Deaf education.

Findings and Analysis: Deaf Perspectives on Deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago

Given that Deaf communities are defined partly in terms of their use of signed languages, the history of signing can provide important insights into the history of a Deaf community. The linguistic situation in the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago is complicated, and directly linked to the history of Deaf education. The first residential deaf school, Cascade School for the Deaf (CSD), was opened in 1947 (see Braithwaite, Drayton, & Lamb, 2011 for an overview of the history of Deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago). Although there may have been fragmentary pockets of deaf signers before this time, no direct evidence has yet been found and, as far as we know, the establishment of CSD created the first opportunity for deaf children from around the country (and from elsewhere in the region) to come into contact with each other.

The prevailing educational philosophy at the time, oralism, was imported from Britain. This approach focused on trying to teach deaf children speech and lipreading skills, and saw signed language as a barrier to success (Lane, 1992). Deaf Trinbagonians who went to school in the first three decades after the foundation of CSD remember teachers using speech drills, and banning them from signing in the classroom. Despite this, they also remember that once classes were over, they signed to each other anyway, using signs of their own creation. It was in this way that Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL) was first born. One remembered: “*At my school, Cascade School, we didn’t use American Sign Language, we only used Trinidadian Sign Language. It was completely different. For example, there were difference signs for ‘mother’,*

'father', 'woman', 'bus' and 'home'." As the first generations of Deaf students created this new language, a new Deaf community was born.

In the 1960s and 1970s, research into American Sign Language (ASL) established that it had the same levels of linguistic structure as spoken languages, and opened the way for new educational approaches in which ASL and other signed languages played greater roles in Deaf education (Nathan, Marschark, & Spencer, 2003). At the same time, the popularity of oralism in the Caribbean began to wane. A proponent of one of these new approaches, Frances Parsons, was invited to come to CSD from Gallaudet University in Washington DC, to teach parents and teachers the basics of ASL. From the diary she kept at the time (archived at Gallaudet University) it seems that Parsons herself was not aware of the existence of a signed language in Trinidad when she arrived in 1975. After Parsons left, ASL and English-based signing continued to be used right up to the present day.

While the move to signing in schools is widely regarded as a positive step by Deaf Trinbagonians, it created a language barrier between Deaf people who had gone to school before 1975 and those who went to school later. One interviewee described how he learnt ASL as a second signed language: *"After I had left Cascade School for the Deaf and grown up, my [Deaf] sister had a [Deaf] child. My nephew went to the school in Marabella. I used to drive to the school to pick him up and take him home. I was surprised to see that they were using a new sign language, American Sign Language. I asked him to teach me, so that I could understand."*

In fact, this individual is rather unusual: few Deaf adults in Trinidad and Tobago have other Deaf family members (apart from spouses). Others who had used TTSL at school never became fluent in ASL. When asked about her linguistic preferences, another older interviewee reported: *"Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language is better. American Sign Language is different, and I don't completely understand it, but Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language I know completely."*

Washabaugh (1981) wrote about the effects that changes in educational policies in Grand Cayman had on the deaf people living there. As a result of a genetically inheritable condition, the proportion of deaf people living in Grand Cayman in the first half of the twentieth century is known to have been very high. Washabaugh describes how the various different approaches to Deaf education which were tried, including periods of oralism, as well as influence from JSL, ASL and an indigenous Caymanian signing variety, created divisions within the deaf community: *"These shifting educational programs for the deaf certainly account for much of the great variability of signing on Grand Cayman. But they also account for certain divisions in the deaf community. The deaf who were in different eras subjected to different educational programs do not see eye to eye on what is good and what is bad about the communicative techniques used by the deaf. They have different loyalties, partly because their educators have taught them to despise different aspects of deaf communication. As a result the deaf of Grand Cayman are not only geographically scattered; they are also socially disjointed."*

The situation in Trinidad and Tobago is somewhat similar: As a consequence of changing currents in educational policy, there is a sharp difference between the TTSL created and used by Deaf Trinbagonians who went to school before 1975, and the predominance of ASL among younger signers. This has led to problems for some older individuals who are isolated from younger members of the community by the language barrier. It has also raised the possibility that the older indigenous way of signing may disappear forever, to be replaced by a variety of ASL (Braithwaite, 2014). The move towards mainstreaming of Deaf children, has also contributed to the endangerment of TTSL. In the past, the transmission of TTSL across generations was aided

by the presence of older TTSL signers working at CSD. Several interviewees remember learning TTSL from those Deaf adults, even while ASL was being used in the classroom. Mainstreamed children, however, who often have little or no contact with older Deaf signers at school, are unlikely to acquire TTSL. The prospect of the disappearance of TTSL is of concern to many Deaf adults, for whom it represents a truly unique Deaf Trinbagonian cultural creation and a source of community pride. It is not only school-aged children who are affected by changes in educational policy and practice, but adults too, and for this reason, all Deaf community members have a stake in decisions made about the future of Deaf education.

Many Deaf adults expressed concerns about the present system of Deaf education at various levels. At the earliest level, many felt that more needed to be done to make sure that deaf children have early access to signed language. A Deaf teaching assistant described an example of the kinds of problems he had encountered. One pupil, he said, only started school aged 12. Because the boy's family was all hearing, he had had no access to a signing model, and so when he arrived at the deaf school, had to be taught the basics from scratch. This inevitably took a long time, and resulted in very serious educational delays. Another interviewee felt that early access to sign language was the biggest priority in Deaf educations, saying: *"Some Deaf children never go to school. I think it's very important that Deaf children learn sign language."*

Talking about their own experiences at secondary school, several people reported that they felt isolated when placed in a mainstream school with few or no Deaf peers. Many said that they would have preferred to attend a special secondary school for Deaf students. One interviewee remembered: *"For CXC's, I wanted to find a Deaf secondary school, but there weren't any, so I had to go to a hearing school. I was the only Deaf person there."* Another said: *"When I was studying for CXC's, I had many challenges. The Deaf were not accepted by the hearing people, and there were many communication problems."* The failure to achieve success at CXC level, especially in English, was a constant theme, and many reported that this was their greatest barrier to fulfillment later in life, limiting career and further educational options severely.

Some complained that the sign language used by teachers and interpreters was limited and that it was excessively influenced by English. One contrasted his experiences at schools in Trinidad and America: *"When I graduated [from school in Trinidad], I went to a Deaf school in America. Here, the teachers follow a hearing culture approach. In America, there were hearing and Deaf teachers, but they all sign more naturally, and adopt a Deaf cultural approach."* Many felt that the provision of sign language interpreters in mainstream schools had been inadequate, and that this had a negative impact on their educational performance.

Many of those who had left school expressed a desire for further education, and frustration at the lack of educational opportunities available. One interviewee said: *"I want to learn more. I'm interested in taking CXC's and going to university, but there is no support for Deaf people. I'd like to take English and Maths CXC's, but there are no interpreters."*

For demographic reasons, the number of people in this situation is in fact much higher than the number of Deaf children currently in education. The incidence of pre-lingual deafness in Trinidad and Tobago has varied considerably over time. Historically, the single biggest cause of pre-lingual deafness was rubella (German measles). Karmody (1969) showed how a rubella epidemic in the early 1960s resulted in a particularly high number of deaf babies being born at that time. Another epidemic in the early 1980s had the same effect (Ali, Hull, & Lewis, 1986). As a result there are large numbers of Deaf Trinbagonians aged around 50 and 30. Successful vaccination campaigns have meant that rubella was more or less eradicated from the country in

the 1990s (Irons, Lewis, Dahl-Regis, Castillo-Solórzano, Carrasco, & de Quadros, 2000). As a result of this, CSD, which was reported as having a waiting list of over 200 children in the early 1970s (Pedro, 1973), now has less than 30 pupils. Many Deaf people from the generation born in the early 1980s shared a desire for educational opportunities. Despite this, the vast majority of the resources spent on Deaf education continue to be focused on the much smaller population of children under 18.

Conclusions

Even from this very brief report, it is clear that some of the issues raised by Deaf adults are barely touched on in the academic literature. Almost all of the literature on Deaf education in the Caribbean focuses on the education of children, but there is clearly a need for more attention to be paid to the educational needs of the large populations of adults who left school without qualifications and want access to further educational opportunities. Mainstreaming may be less popular among those who lived through it as students than policy makers might imagine, and is placing unanticipated pressure on the future of TTSL. The recent introduction of cochlear implants, almost unanimously unpopular among Deaf in Trinbagonians is another area where the views of the Deaf community seem to be at odds with those of policy makers.

Deaf adults are not always seen as stakeholders in the education of Deaf children to whom they are not related. The vast majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Schein & Delk 1974). Deaf adults who have left the education system, and do not have deaf children may not seem to have the same stake in discussions as hearing parents or teachers. In fact, as we shall see, many Deaf adults do feel strongly about this topic, and decisions made about Deaf education can have profound and often unanticipated effects on whole Deaf communities.

In the early years of Deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago, when schools were being established for the first time, there was a shortage of expertise in Deaf education, a lack of knowledge about Deaf communities and signed languages, and the Deaf community was just beginning to emerge, it is perhaps understandable that Deaf Trinbagonian perspectives were largely absent from debates around Deaf education. We can no longer make these excuses. The previous section gave a flavor of some of the perspectives that Deaf adults have to bring to these discussions. I will finish by discussing an example of how their contributions are essential to research in this area.

Bobb-Alleyne-Dann (2008) investigated linguistic variation in sign language varieties used around the Caribbean. Working with a group of teachers and students from Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, St Lucia and St Vincent, she used pictures to elicit signs for distinctively Caribbean concepts, such as local foods. She found that in some cases, there were considerable differences between the signs produced by the participants from different countries, for example in the names of their own countries. She also found that her participants didn't know signs for many Caribbean concepts, claiming that there are no signs for "spice, clove, nutmeg, breadfruit, chenette, genip, ackee, dasheen, cassava, and so on", and concluding that "*the absence of signs for popular Caribbean words is disturbing*" (Bobb-Alleyne-Dann, 2008:51).

The problem with this experiment is that it failed to include a sample of Deaf adults. In fact, there are many signs for such local concepts, including at least some of the ones on the list above. The Dictionary of Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (to which Bobb-Alleyne-Dann contributed, along with the crucial involvement of Deaf adults) contains signs for breadfruit, chenette and cassava, among many other local concepts. The fact that the group of teachers and students surveyed did not know these signs is not a reflection of linguistic gaps. Instead, it is

indicative of the problems caused by leaving Deaf adults, the group with the greatest signing competence, out of Deaf education. Were there more Deaf teachers, the chances are that some of them would have known these signs, and been able to pass them on to their pupils. That the hearing teachers in this survey did not, shows that they need more training, and perhaps more contact with the Deaf communities who use such signs every day.

Some of the Bobb-Alleyne-Dann's conclusions are also somewhat problematic. The solution to the perceived problem of linguistic diversity is to work towards the creation of a standardized Caribbean sign language variety: "Educators of the Deaf and their students need to assemble in a forum that discusses sign language. The relevant ministries in each island must collectively discuss a plan for standardizing Caribbean signs and developing a dictionary of signs"(Bobb-Alleyne-Dann 2008:51). Should any such project take place, it would be essential that it was lead by the core members of the language communities in question, a group omitted from this list. Moreover, Deaf communities around the Caribbean do not necessarily recognize the need for standardization in the first place. Internationally, organisations such as the World Federation of the Deaf and the Sign Language Linguistics Society have emphasized the importance of protecting the linguistic diversity of Deaf communities. Indeed, rather than seeing local varieties as problematic, members of the Deaf community of Trinidad and Tobago have lead efforts to preserve and teach their language, seeing the uniqueness of TTSL as a source of community strength and pride.

Bobb-Alleyne-Dann's article makes a number of important points, such as the observation that there is considerable linguistic diversity in the signing communities around the Caribbean, and the emphasis placed on the importance of local sign language varieties is echoed in the Deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago. Bobb-Alleyne-Dann herself writes that: "*The process of documenting and standardizing must be no hearing person's trophy. Every step must be managed by the culture that it affects.*" The issues that the paper raises only go to show that this is correct. There are important issues here, but they cannot be addressed until Deaf adults are placed at the centre of the discussion.

The first West Indian teacher, at the first school for the Deaf in Trinidad, Floretta Case, wrote in 1948 that "[e]xperts from outside may visit and make very helpful suggestions; but it is the West Indian people themselves who must evolve a system of education suited for their peculiar conditions and needs" (Case, 1948: 45). That Caribbean educators and administrators like Bobb-Alleyne-Dann, Paul, Soutar, Mitchell and others have lead the way in pursuing new research in the Caribbean is an excellent sign of the progress which has been made. The time has come now for Deaf perspectives to be placed at the centre of the discussion. To parallel Case: while hearing professionals may make very valuable contributions to the development and improvement of Deaf education, it is Deaf people themselves, young and old, who must lead the way in evolving a system of education suited for their peculiar conditions and needs.

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