



Signs of the times

Miranda Pickersgill talks about her experience in deaf education from the time before sign language classes, when the deaf community was isolated, to the rich world of sign bilingualism

BATOD is to be commended for including in its review of deaf education over the past 40 years a number of personal accounts and perspectives, both in this magazine and on the website. Those of us whose careers encompassed the years 1970-2010 were fortunate to have witnessed significant changes within deaf education and across the context within which we worked.

The prevailing theme of my own career (and the focus of this article) was the use of sign language and the development of sign bilingual policies and practices. This grew from my first encounters with deaf children and deaf adults in the early 1970s in Middlesbrough, through a period of small-scale classroom innovation and experimentation in Nottingham in the early 1980s. This was followed by more widespread and large scale service development in Leeds in the late '80s and '90s. By the end of the century, the early sign bilingual policies and practices faced the challenge of the increasing acceptance and popularity of sign language use. What had started as a small rebellion at the margins of deaf education grew into what felt like a revolution before becoming established as part of normal practice.

I consider myself extremely fortunate and privileged to have had the opportunity of working in such an exciting, challenging, rewarding (and exhausting and frustrating!) area. This article is a reflection on some features of the period as they impacted on my work and on my life as a whole. My career path was very different from that of the majority of Teachers of the Deaf in the '70s and '80s. The people I encountered, who influenced, supported and worked with me at various stages were certainly atypical. The schools and services in the places where I worked were often unreceptive but there were other local factors which enabled me to develop my ideas and practice. The time wasn't always right for me to do the things I wanted to do, but I benefitted greatly from changes in society as a whole as well as those within the deaf world. One aspires to be with the right people, in the right place and at the right time. By 'right' I mean necessary or appropriate to be able to achieve what one wishes to. In reality, one may be lucky to get two out of the three 'right'. At worse, one or even none!

Recently qualified Teachers of the Deaf must find it hard to believe that there was a time when sign language was not accepted by the education establishment; when there were no sign language-using deaf children and young people in mainstream schools, colleges and universities; when there were no sign language classes; when there

was just a handful of skilled signers capable of interpreting and when deaf and hearing professionals were not employed in sign language and role model capacities. That time did exist and it covered most of the first decade of this history of deaf education. Education provision for deaf children was primarily in deaf schools staffed by Teachers of the Deaf, a specialist profession whose members had followed a similar training, resulting in separateness and distinctiveness which was reflected in the association BATOD. The '70s was a time when deaf education seemed to be very inward-looking, focusing on its teachers, schools, training institutions and, of course, the oral method.

Those of us who started to work outside the prevailing philosophy encountered animosity from many in the teaching profession and sought support and advice from elsewhere. The main source was the deaf community and organisations like the British Deaf Association which were strong and active at the time, producing talented deaf leaders and tutors. My first encounter with a deaf person was in 1973, in my first teaching post. The early '70s was in many ways not the right time to introduce sign language in the classroom. In addition to being regarded with suspicion by my colleagues, the only way I could become skilled in sign was by attending the deaf club and deaf events (of which fortunately there were many) in my own time. Subsequently it was from within the deaf community that I was able to recruit a number of deaf language and role models to work with individual families and then groups of deaf children within a support service. What had started out as a small-scale initiative would in time become the foundation of sign bilingual education.

In the '70s we did not see our responsibilities as encompassing the need to influence society and education as a whole. The deaf world remained isolated so in the wider society there was a lack of awareness about deafness and sign language. In addition, attitudes to race, gender, disability and languages other than English were very poor. By the early '80s this began to change. There were many developments – political, in society and in technology – which affected the context within which one was working. One had to respond to these changes, try to influence them where possible and exploit any possibilities which they presented. Changing attitudes to disability and languages, the move towards the integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools and growing awareness of the value of bilingualism in hearing populations, all took place alongside the mobilisation of the deaf community

to campaign for the recognition of British Sign Language – beyond its newly acquired linguistic status through the work of researchers like Mary Brennan. In the '80s, the work of the Centres for Deaf Studies in universities like Bristol, Edinburgh and Durham was to provide vital theoretical support for sign bilingual education. I was also fortunate to meet Sue Gregory while working in Nottingham and she introduced me to the latest thinking regarding child development and deaf families with deaf children. The time was certainly right for considerable progress to be made in the use of sign language in deaf education.

In 1986 I moved to Leeds and was fortunate to work in a large multicultural city with a strong Labour council often at variance with the central Conservative government. Leeds started to develop new services reflecting the needs of its communities. The climate at that time (the late '80s and early '90s) and the characteristics of Leeds as a place were conducive to the development of sign bilingualism as a policy and in practice. The sign bilingual movement grew with the help of organisations like LASER about which I have written on the website. My work in LASER took up a great deal of my spare time since there was an urgent need to bring people together, disseminate and discuss the latest information about sign languages and education through its conferences and publications. Protest movements can be a source of great energy, confidence and enthusiasm; one believes one can change the world. However, turning protest into policy and practice as we were doing at that time was harder. Fortunately during this period we in Leeds had considerable freedom of manoeuvre (and the resources) to set up a new service from scratch and to develop what came to be known as the sign bilingual model. For me the years between 1986 and 1998 were the right time. I was in the right place and with the right people.

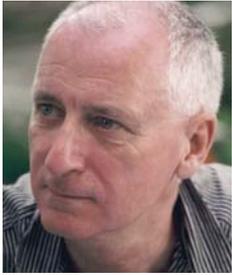
By the mid-90s sign bilingualism was growing up and becoming respectable. It had to respond to educational developments, taking what was good and adapting what was not. This was a period of exciting work in the teaching and assessment of both sign language and English. We also saw more schools and services moving in the same direction. Some of the growing popularity of sign bilingualism could be attributed to the bandwagon effect generated by a growing interest in and media coverage of sign language and featured users in the TV series 'Language for Ben' and 'See Hear'. The deaf world of the '80s and early '90s had largely been characterised by co-operation and collaboration but by the mid-90s we started to see more fragmentation, resentment and what one might call struggles for power. Through the '90s, the sign bilingual movement expanded to include people from a wide range of institutions, organisations and associations. We had underestimated the extent to which, in embracing sign language, we had opened up deaf education to others who came to have a stake in what happened in schools and services – the deaf community, deaf parents, social workers with deaf people, deaf associations, interpreters and sign

language researchers. In addition to providing employment opportunities, we needed to involve these people in policy development and decision-making with all the challenges that this presented. Instead of deaf education being monopolised by Teachers of the Deaf as it had been in the '70s, responsibility, ownership and power became shared with deaf people and other professions with expertise in sign language whose expectations often differed from those of teachers.

The move from the margins into the mainstream of deaf education presented a challenge for the core group of sign bilingual establishments. We were experiencing a loss of control and potential dilution of the original message, despite attempts to counter this by defining the model of sign bilingualism. This period coincided with the substantial development of mainstream provision for sign language-using deaf children and young people for philosophical and budgetary reasons. Mainstream school and college staff were playing an increasingly important role. Funding for deaf services was being delegated to schools. LEAs were struggling to retain their vital role in providing for low incidence needs. By the end of the century sign bilingualism was losing some of its distinctiveness and had to develop a more pragmatic response to the changing needs of the children and of schools. My own direct involvement in deaf education ended at the beginning of 2000 when I moved to Durham to become Chief Executive of CACDP (now known as Signature). Whilst there, I retained my commitment to supporting the use of sign language but my involvement changed to promoting training and qualifications in the language for deaf and hearing people.

Space does not permit me to pay tribute to the number of people who contributed so much to my career. It is primarily deaf people who come to mind but not just those with whom I was fortunate to work for so long. I was profoundly affected in my early career by the extent to which deaf education had failed many deaf children. Through the deaf clubs, specialist training centres and a particular mental ('handicap') hospital in Devon, I encountered deaf people whose lives had been blighted by a lack of opportunities to communicate in as easy and effective way as possible. They and the people who worked with them provided a significant impetus for me to try to ensure that no deaf child for whom I was responsible would be so deprived. It was no accident that initially I chose (or was asked) to work with children and adults with complex needs where 'all else had failed'. Although they may have been 'guinea pigs' in terms of sign bilingual practice they showed me what was possible and how this way of working could be developed to meet the needs of a wide range of children. Had I not come into deaf education in the early '70s and had the opportunities presented to me in the '80s and '90s in the cities where I chose to work, with the people whom I met, my story would have been very different. How fortunate I was!

Miranda Pickersgill is a retired Teacher of the Deaf and former CEO of CACDP (now Signature).



Reflections on the inaugural meeting of BATOD in 1976

David Braybrook reflects on the nature, speed and extent of change over BATOD's 40 years

The year that BATOD was created was also the 100th anniversary of Alexander Graham Bell's invention of the telephone. To mark that event the editor of the "Bicentennial Monograph of Hearing Impairment: Trends in the USA"¹ wrote:

"To renew ties with the past need not always be daydreaming. It may be tapping old sources of strength for new tasks."

My memory of the inaugural meeting was that it was a positive celebratory occasion. There were inevitably some tensions given the National College of Teachers of the Deaf (NCTD) was the larger organisation and had successfully led the profession prior to the formation of the Society of Teachers of the Deaf (STD). Six years previously (1969) the Department of Education and Science in Education Survey "Peripatetic Teachers of the Deaf"² identified that "experienced Teachers of the Deaf in special schools have been attracted to peripatetic work and many have responded with enthusiasm to its demands. Nevertheless it is little understood and criticism has at times been heavy."

Looking back, the mid-70s was a pivotal period in the development of the profession and in the furtherance of its work. There was a sense that as a profession we were moving into a new era and that the thoughts and writings of a previous generation, while still well regarded, were beginning to be replaced by a new thinking and new practices. The work of the Ewings³, Sibley Haycock⁴, Agnes Lack⁵, MM Lewis⁶ and Edith Whetnall⁷ which had served deaf children and the profession well were beginning to be replaced by Van Uden's work on the oral maternal reflective method⁸, the emergence of various sign systems, the development of Total Communication and auditory-oral approaches. Also at that time a major and much awaited change was on the horizon. The Warnock Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People⁹ had been established and in its report, two years later, was to change the context, language and thinking by creating a new concept and structure for children and young people with special educational needs.

The report with its over 200 recommendations and the resultant 1981 Education Act set a new agenda for the forthcoming decade. Wilfred Brennan in 1982 in his book "Changing Special Education"¹⁰ wrote in detail about the post-Warnock period.

"Teachers in ordinary schools must lose their fear of children with special needs and those in special schools learn to admit that for some of their pupils the ordinary

school might be a more appropriate place for their special education. Parents of normal children must lose their fear that the presence of children with special needs in the school will be a disadvantage for their own children." (This is a quote from 1982 and shows how far we have come; this language now seems shocking!)

It is hard now to recall what the baseline was at that time for developing integrated practice. It is not surprising that the Teachers of the Deaf led the way in integration given the history of deaf children having been included in ordinary schools since 1907. However, as in life, not everything moves forward as we would wish. Brennan also wrote in 1982 that "Educationalists, careers officers and employers must seek new opportunities for young people in further education, in training and in employment." While the achievements, academic opportunities and careers of deaf young people have vastly changed since the early eighties there remain today funding issues in relation to accessing further and higher education, in accessing apprenticeships and ensuring a wide range of employment opportunities.

The medical, audiological and technical advances, not least the introduction of cochlear implants in the late seventies, and the greater understanding of early language acquisition and language development as a result of research in the field of linguistics accelerated massive change in the nature of the work and in the provision for deaf children. The societal change, heralded by Warnock, supported this and in the nineties inclusion seemed to herald a realistic goal. So much so that in 2003 the government created a Ministerial Working Party, on which I sat, to consider the future role of special schools. There was a genuine feeling by government and others that special schools had had their day and perhaps, like Italy, we should move to a totally inclusive model. Thirteen years on special schools are a major resource in our diverse and some would say fragmented system of educational provision. We may now only have twenty-one special schools for deaf children and young people compared with over 80 in the 1970s but they provide valuable and valued provision for deaf children especially for those who have complex needs.

For me, looking back, the 1960s was a decade in which the traditional mould began to break. The separateness of the world of deaf education began to be questioned and in the 70s the work began to be more a part of special education and a recognised element of the larger picture of provision. The traditional approaches of formally teaching language and teaching speech began to move towards a model of interaction and acquisition which