

Irreconcilable Differences: The Education of Deaf Children in Canada

James C. MacDougall

Samuel Johnson said it was the greatest human calamity, Helen Keller said she would rather be blind, and A.G. Bell feared that unless extraordinary measures were taken, a new and toxic variety of the human race would emerge. Deafness, the invisible disability, affects only one person in one thousand,¹ but for as long as history has been recorded it is a topic that has been plagued with controversy.

Some history

For the past 300 years, the question of the “right way” to educate deaf children has been at the center of a bitter educational dispute. Before that time, education was not an issue, as virtually every society took the term “deaf and dumb” quite literally. The idea that deaf children were capable of education constituted a dramatic breakthrough, but it came with a heavy price as it was based on two very divergent ideas.

In France, a monk, the Abbe de l’Epe, noticed that deaf people on the streets of Paris used a manual “sign language” to communicate among themselves, while in Germany Samuel Heinicke, an educator, showed that many deaf people were not “mute” but could be taught to speak.

Speak or Sign: The Great Debate

These two breakthroughs, along with work in other parts of the world, had a profound impact on educational practices for deaf children everywhere, including here in Canada. Unfortunately, these two brilliant insights, one involving recognition of the sign language and the other the realization that deafness has only an indirect effect on speech development, were seen as incompatible. Those who became interested in the teaching of speech to deaf children (known generally as “oralists”) were, and still are, adamant that to be successful in the acquisition



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of speech, deaf children have to avoid all contact with sign language. Sign, in their view, is too easy to learn and thus detracts from the motivation to learn speech.

Those who promote the use of sign language (notably deaf people themselves) recognized the usefulness of speech but emphasized the importance of the having a deaf child learn what they see as their “natural language – sign language.” American Sign Language (ASL) is used in the English speaking community and Langue des Signes de Québec (LSQ) in the French speaking community.

This debate between the “oralists” and the “manualists” has persisted to this day and is alive and well here in the educational system in Canada.² In my hometown, Montreal, for example, in the Anglophone sector there are two schools for the deaf: the Montreal Oral School for the Deaf and the Mackay School for the Deaf.³ One supports the “oral” point of view and the other an approach that includes the use of sign language. This situation is replicated in some form in Toronto, Vancouver and virtually every major city in Canada.

In some localities, such as the Maritime provinces, a single educational authority, the Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority (APSEA), offers a choice of communication approaches while in others (such as Montreal) the educational services are divided quite sharply between the two approaches, and moving between the two systems can be difficult and, in some cases, quite traumatic for parents and children.

At this point I should declare my own bias as a former executive director of Mackay Center and known supporter of an approach that, for most deaf children, includes the use of sign language. The fact that I grew up in Ottawa with deaf parents and am a native signer most likely has something to do with my opinions on the issue as well.

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Contemporary Issues in the Education of the Deaf in Canada

There are many practical issues facing educators of the deaf in Canada. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the field is experiencing a serious crisis arising from the implementation of the inclusion/mainstreaming ideology and the advent of the cochlear implant. Unfortunately, in this field, one person's crisis is another person's triumph.

The Impact of Mainstreaming

In the case of mainstreaming, traditional schools for the deaf have been closing all over Canada; even if they are not completely closed, the numbers are dwindling and the threat of closure is imminent. From the point of view of the "oralists", this is a good thing as they, like their famous mentor A.G. Bell, generally abhor the very thought of separate schools for the deaf.

On the other hand, many educators, and in particular the deaf community, feel that the schools are an essential element in the development of the identity of the deaf child as a member of a cultural minority group (Deaf culture⁴).

Deaf culture advocates are clearly losing this battle. It appears inevitable now that, while there may be some concentrations of deaf children at certain schools, most deaf children will receive their education alongside their hearing peers in the future. In some cases the child will function using speech and hearing, while in other cases sign language interpreters will be provided in the classroom.

Many feel that, while this paradigm may work in the classroom, in other less formal social situations the deaf child will become isolated and alienated due to communication breakdown. The view here is that deaf children who sign need a critical mass of other deaf children in their environment for healthy psychosocial development to take place. On the other hand, those of the oral persuasion feel that it is a "hearing world" and the sooner the deaf child starts behaving like a hearing child the better.

While there is still some debate about the concept of total inclusion in the broader field of exceptional education, there is a general consensus that, in most cases, it is a goal worth fighting for. In deafness however, this debate, at least from an ideological point of view, is far from resolved.

The Supreme Court weighs in on Inclusion: The Eaton case

It is worth noting here that the Supreme Court of Canada decision on this topic, aptly entitled "*Benefit or Burden*", took the view that inclusion was only a means to an end, not an end in itself; the education of deaf and blind children was cited as a possible exception to the rule. The court stated that the "benefit of the child" is the ultimate test of an educational placement, not inclusion per se.⁵ The Eaton decision was reviled by many in the inclusion movement in the field of disabilities but was hailed as a legal breakthrough and a vindication of their views by the Deaf community.

The Cochlear Implant: Miracle cure or False Hope?

Another development that has sent shock waves through the field is the advent of the cochlear implant. An increasing number of parents of deaf children are opting for this expensive procedure (\$20-30,000 for the device and the surgery plus extensive post operative rehabilitation).

Profound deafness is caused by a destruction of neural hair cells in the snail-like cochlea in the inner ear. Since these are neural cells, regeneration or "cure", is beyond our reach at the moment. One way around this is to insert a number of small electrodes right into the cochlea so that the eighth (auditory) nerve is stimulated directly. Various electronic processors convert the auditory signals into electrical impulses that are sent to the auditory areas of the brain.

This medical breakthrough is seen as limited from the perspective of the Deaf culture. Everyone involved - even the most ardent proponents - agree that the implant does not reproduce normal hearing for the deaf child. However a sound-like sensation is created, and it appears that for many deaf children, particularly those who have once experienced hearing, this device is very helpful. Whether it works well for very young congenitally deaf children is more problematical and very controversial.

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A good way to learn about the highly emotional controversies involved with the implant is to go to the *Sound and Fury* web site (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/>) where the trials and tribulations of two real life deaf families are revealed in excruciating detail.

From the oralists' point of view, short of a complete cure based on neural regeneration, the implant is the holy grail of deafness. Once this advanced technology is refined and perfected, deafness will essentially be eliminated. In fact, upon his promotion in the Order of Canada, Canada's leading proponent of the "oral" point of view, the late Dr. Daniel Ling, made just that claim. The response of the Deaf community was to write the Governor General of Canada demanding that she rescind Dr. Ling's award. They feel strongly that calling for the elimination of deafness comes dangerously close to the hated eugenic policies of the past, which actually resulted in the elimination of deaf people during the holocaust.⁶

However one feels about the implant and the controversies swirling around it, one thing is clear: most parents (at least in the early stages), with some notable exceptions, like it; medicine likes it; and the oralists like it. In my view, rightly or wrongly, in the future virtually every deaf child will be implanted.

From an economic standpoint this can be expected to have a profound effect on educational programming for deaf children. Apart from the high cost of the procedure itself, we

can expect the impact on resource allocation to be substantial. This raises a long-standing issue in the education of deaf children: what percentage of resources should be allocated to “curing” deafness and what percentage to just plain education by whatever means of communication? From a personal point of view I remember well my mother telling me that her education at the Belleville School for the Deaf in Ontario at the turn of the century was so heavily concentrated on teaching speech that her general education suffered as a result. Many other deaf people have recounted similar stories.

On the other side, to be fair, the claim is made that if speech is learned and ‘hearing’ is in some sense restored, the long-run cost to society will be much less, since expensive adaptations and accommodations in the future will not be necessary. Some jurisdictions in the US have recently made this argument to justify widespread implementation of the implant in young deaf children⁷.

The Literacy Challenge

Apart from the issues of mainstreaming and the implant, the most perplexing issue facing educators of the deaf concerns the fact that the average graduate at the high school level has a reading achievement score only at the distressingly low grade 3-5 level.⁸ Just why this troubling statistic holds in virtually all areas of the developed world (Canada is within the curve on this) has been the subject of intense debate in education circles and among academics generally.

Any educator knows that reading and literacy are themselves areas of controversy, particularly in the field of exceptionality.

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La polémique entre ceux et celles (les oralistes) qui veulent que les enfants sourds apprennent à parler et les tenants du langage gestuel (les manualistes) continue de faire rage au Canada. Les manualistes arguent qu’il existe bel et bien une culture des sourds fondée sur le langage gestuel et qu’il faut donner à ces enfants la possibilité d’apprendre et de nouer des liens avec ceux et celles qui parlent ce langage. Quant aux oralistes, ils disent que, comme les enfants sourds vivent dans un monde d’entendants, il faut les aider à parler dans la mesure du possible. Une nouvelle technologie controversée, les implants cochléaires, est en train de donner l’avantage dans ce débat aux oralistes en permettant aux enfants sourds d’entendre, même si ce n’est que d’une façon imparfaite.

Add the normal deaf controversies, and what results is a very confused and complex situation facing any educator of the deaf.

Naturally, those who favour the oral point of view claim that, as deaf children ‘learn’ to hear and speak, their reading ability improves. Sign language advocates who favour the bilingual-bicultural approach emphasize the fact that many deaf children fail at the oral approach and thus are deprived of a primary language in the early years critical to language development.⁹ Sign language (ASL/LSQ) is easily learned by deaf children and can provide the foundation for later reading, in their view. Each side can provide evidence to support its point

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of view, confirming that any successful early language intervention can have a positive effect on literacy. However, with some very notable exceptions (in both camps), most deaf children fail to achieve a high degree of literacy in the majority spoken language.

From the teachers' point of view, the literacy challenge is *the* challenge. Needless to say parents are very focused on this aspect of their child's education as well. Achieving functional literacy represents an unquestioned goal of any education program, so one can only imagine the angst and distress that permeates the whole deaf education system as long as this unacceptable reality holds.

It is easy in this context to overlook the perspective of deaf children themselves, who are not only caught between two strongly held views concerning which communication system they should use, but also feel that they may not be able to achieve one of the most highly valued skills in the society – functional literacy. The potential effect on the personal and social identity and alienation of the child and the family is large and is currently under study.



Qualified Teachers in Short Supply

A final element of the perceived crisis in deaf education in Canada concerns the shortage of qualified teachers of the deaf. For a variety of reasons, specialized programs for teachers of the deaf have been significantly reduced in Canada. This may in part be attributable to the inclusion movement, which in some sense seeks to have all teachers qualified to have exceptional children (including deaf children) in their classrooms. As the need for separate classes diminishes, so does the need for separate teacher education programs. Related to this is the idea that deaf education should be part of special or inclusionary education and should not constitute a separate category of teacher education.

Whatever the reasons, depending on the province and the jurisdiction, the future of specialized teacher education for deaf children is perceived to be under threat. Canada does have an active national organization of educators of the deaf, The Canadian Association of Educators of the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, and many of the issues discussed here have been extensively discussed at their meetings. However, because of their small numbers, their influence on policy is quite limited when compared to mainstream education and even other areas of exceptionality.

What can be done?

It seems clear to me that we need something like a Royal Commission to investigate the affairs of the Deaf in Canada. I know that everyone with an issue wants a Commission, and I know that this is not a panacea for all that ails us in the field. However, everyone involved – oralist or signing advocate, parent or deaf person - knows that something is desperately wrong. We have no national direction and seemingly random changes in service delivery continue to occur in various jurisdictions

across the country without regard for the long run consequences.

The education of deaf children cannot be disentangled from other issues such as health, early identification, use of technology, the training of professionals including interpreters, research policy in universities, employment, and larger social/cultural issues.

The time is long past for the various factions involved in deaf education and deafness generally to put aside their rigid ideologies and biases and to start working together cooperatively.

Because of the centrality of education issues, educators will have to show the leadership and courage to speak out on the issues. We will also need the help and active support of others in the field of exceptional education and education generally.

A final note: not all the news is negative. Canada is blessed with some of the most experienced and gifted teachers of the deaf who work tirelessly for the benefit of their students. We also have many outstanding deaf leaders, oral and signing, who are represented in virtually every walk of life – physicians, lawyers, teachers, artists, professors and senior administrators. As many deaf people say, “the only thing a deaf child cannot do is hear!” 🗣️

- 1 J. C. MacDougall, “Deaf Children in Canada,” *Rehabilitation Research Canada* 1 (1988): 97-102.
- 2 J. C. MacDougall, “The Education of the Deaf in Canada: An Update,” *Canadian Psychological Review* 1 (1979): 53-58.
- 3 The situation in Francophone Quebec is quite different but is beyond the scope of the present article.
- 4 The accepted convention is to spell Deaf with a capital “D” to indicate membership in the Deaf culture. See Padden, C and Humphries, T. (1998). *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge University and Dolnick, E. (1993). *Deafness as Culture*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, Vol.272. NO.3 (p.37-51).
- 5 *Eaton v. Brant*, County of Education (Ontario) 1997, 1, SCR.
- 6 Horst Biesold, *Crying Hands: Eugenics and Deaf People in Nazi Germany* (DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2002).
- 7 A. Q. Summerfield, D. H. Marshall, G. R. Barton and K. E. Bloor, “A Cost-Utility Scenario Analysis of Bilateral Cochlear Implantation,” *Arch Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg.* 128, no.11 (2002):1255-62.
- 8 J. C. MacDougall, “Literacy and Deafness: A Challenge for the Millennium,” *Networks*. [Newsletter of the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD)], Spring 1998.
- 9 R. Hoffmeister, “A Piece of the Puzzle: The Relationship Between ASL and English Literacy in Deaf Children”. In C. Chamberlain, R. Mayberry, and J. Morford (Eds.), *Language Acquisition by Eye*. (Mahweh, NJ: Erlbaum Publishing, 2000). For a more general reference and resources see, <http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu/InfoToGo/072.html> (2000).

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