

Diversity and Justice: Being Different in Universities and Schools

Dr Linda Komesaroff

Deakin University

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I don't consider myself disabled,

but I understand the meaning of the word 'disability'.

I understand that ... and I understand the community's perception of that word

and I accept that I have a disability in hearing

but I'm not physically disabled (Participant 2).

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss issues of diversity and justice in higher education and schools and report on the early stages of a research project documenting the experiences of deaf students in teacher education focussing on issues of identity and academic literacies. The study explores the way in which culturally deaf students are included or excluded through academic practices, academic literacies and policies of inclusion for disabled students.

This project builds on the findings of previous research into language policy and practices in deaf education (see Komesaroff, 1998). Deaf people are highly represented among students who are functionally illiterate and many struggle to achieve academic success (see Duffy, Warby & Phillips, 1993). There are few teachers who are deaf themselves and even less who can be considered culturally and linguistically deaf. Less than 1% of the profession of teachers of the deaf are culturally and linguistically deaf; that is, identifying themselves as members of the Deaf community and fluent or native users of Australian Sign Language (Auslan) (Komesaroff, 1998). There is an urgent need to increase the number of culturally and linguistically deaf adults qualifying as teachers to increase deaf children's access to Auslan and bilingual. With increasing interest in Auslan and calls for bilingual programs, the need for Deaf teachers fluent in Auslan is growing.

Deaf students, however, are grossly under-represented in higher education. It is generally recognised that 10% of the population have some degree of hearing loss. In developed societies, early onset profound deafness is recognised as accounting for 0.1% of the population (Johnston, 1989). Deaf students have historically been disadvantaged in education by lack of accessible instruction and lack of positive deaf role models. At Deakin University, almost 30,000 students were enrolled in courses across the university sector in 2000 and only 22 of these students identify as being deaf or hearing-impaired (personal communication, Planning Unit, Deakin University, 29 & 30 November, 2000).

Given the small number of deaf students who attend university and the increasing demand for their employment in bilingual schools, deaf students at universities enrolled in teacher education represent an important group of students to support. This study seeks to explore the experiences of two deaf students in higher education completing an undergraduate degree in education. The results of this study will be used to inform future research with the intention to conduct a larger study of deaf students qualifying as teachers. Deaf students are targeted in university policies as members of an equity target group: disabled students. Being different in universities and schools, the title of this paper, refers both to the diversity in student, teacher and researcher populations and the need for us to act in ways that are different from the past.

The study

This project is a case study of two deaf students in higher education enrolled in undergraduate education degrees at two different universities. Two research sites were selected to increase the degree to which the students' identities are protected. The participants for the research were recruited by approaching deaf students known to the researcher and through personal referral from members of the Deaf community. The criteria for selection of participants were that they are deaf, at any stage of an undergraduate degree in education, identify themselves as culturally and linguistically deaf (fluent or native users of Auslan) and study on-campus. The students were interviewed once in 2000 and will be interviewed twice per semester in 2001. Interviews are being conducted in Auslan at the students' universities. All interviews are videotaped to enable the researcher to produce a translation and transcription of the interview in English. As a hearing researcher, I recognise the minority language status of Auslan and the unequal position of deaf students participating in this research. Transcripts are provided to the participants for their accuracy and any amendment or addition. The results, implications and recommendations from this study will be discussed with the participants.

The participants are female, profoundly deaf and bilingual in Auslan and English. Both come from hearing families and were raised and educated primarily through English, spoken or signed. Both participants have relatives who are tertiary educated and are studying to become primary teachers of deaf students. Participant 1 is in her third year of a primary education degree and has returned to study as a mature-aged student. She was employed in the government sector for several years and left to pursue tertiary study. She has completed a diploma in teaching Auslan as a language other than English and almost completed a diploma in Disability Studies. She was raised and educated orally, relying on speech and lip-reading and attending regular schools. She began to acquire Auslan at the age of 16 when she was first introduced to the Deaf community. Participant 2 is in her second year of a primary education degree and completed school two years ago. She was raised and educated through simultaneous communication: the simultaneous use of spoken and Signed English. She attended a segregated primary school and congregated high school (a school with a deaf facility to cater for a group of deaf students). She comes from a large family of teachers and was encouraged to become a teacher by friends and her own teachers who recognised her potential.

Key issues in higher education for culturally deaf students

Preliminary findings from the analysis of the first interviews identify the following key issues for culturally deaf students in higher education: access and support, academic literacies, cultural difference or deficit, and language and identity.

Access and support

The issue of access is particularly highlighted in the case of Participant 1. She was not provided with interpreters in the first year of her course and as a result joined a group action being taken against the university under anti-discrimination legislation, the Disability Discrimination Act (see Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). The university was legally obligated to provide her and other deaf students with interpreters.

First year was a bit difficult because I wasn't provided with interpreters or note takers full time, I had to rely on other students to take notes for me but it was limited. I never received full notes so I really had to persevere and keep asking and asking and asking at Student Services and finally it was organised and I had interpreters and note takers. But the problem still came up when interpreters were sick or on holidays and the problem is ongoing.

When I arrived and there weren't interpreters and there were no replacement interpreters or the note takers would come late, that was a big frustration for me (Participant 1).

Later in the same interview she described her first year experience as 'a difficult time' (Participant 1). In the second year of her course, she requested and received three hours support on a weekly basis from a tutor. The tutor's role is to explain assessment topics, advise on essay structure and proofread written assignments. The participant also sought extended borrowing from the university library and was granted four weeks borrowing, an additional two weeks to the usual student borrowing period. Gaining regular access to interpreters and other support services has often involved repeated requests and formal complaint.

I also have some difficulties in the library too because normally deaf people have to read things over and over again but I've just recently succeeded. I've complained about not having enough time for library book borrowing and finally I've now got four weeks borrowing instead of two Finally! (Participant 1).

The second participant, attending a different university, reported no difficulty with support or access to the university. She is provided with interpreters and note-takers for all classes.

Academic literacies

Given the documented low levels of literacy achievement among deaf students (see Walker & Rickards, 1992), academic literacies may present a significant challenge to deaf students and barrier to higher education. Both participants were asked about their literacy skills and the strategies used when faced with difficult text. Participant 1 believes that having the support of a tutor has been vital to her success at university:

[I] wish I had a proper tutor for teaching me about essay structure because I try my best to rearrange my work and structure my writing. The problem is sometimes the lecturers don't understand what I've written. I understand it myself but they don't understand what I've written so that's a bit of a problem.

I now have a tutor to help me make changes to my writing so that lecturers can understand it.

... when you have two or three assignments due at the same time ... that's really difficult. But it's difficult for me because of the words and because of the length of sentences and the reading and the way it goes on and on (Participant 1).

I asked this participant how she copes with studying in, what is essentially, her second language:

I think I cope reasonable well, only worry when I'm using written English and the grammar of English and how to write something. It looks wrong, it doesn't sound right and that's a problem for me but I think I cope alright (Participant 1).

This participant rates her English literacy in the range of 5-7 on a scale of 10. Her main strategy when faced with reading a difficult text is to reread:

... if I read something and I don't understand it, I might read it again two or three times to try and gather the meaning. If it's a word I haven't heard before, I use a dictionary and then try and link it to the whole picture (Participant 1).

She converts the text into a visual picture, not Auslan, but a picture representing the meaning of the text:

When I look at a text and read it, I think I have a picture. I read word by word, first time slowly and then once if I find that I've lost it, I have to go right back and read it again, sometimes two or three times until I get a picture of it in my head If I'm reading something and I know what it means, I try and link it to something in my own understanding. In my mind, not signing actually, but just thinking about it in my mind (Participant 1).

The second participant rates her literacy skills as average compared with hearing students and above average for a deaf person:

There's always somebody who is better than me and always somebody who is worse than me. So I don't know, perhaps average. I don't know, maybe high, above average for a deaf person. I don't want to say that, 'as a deaf person', but meaning deaf people have limited language in English but I had a lot of focus on English from my parents (Participant 2).

Participant 2 is not an especially avid reader: 'there's a lot of things I just have to read that I perhaps don't want to read'. The strategies she uses when faced with difficult text include asking her friends, using a glossary, looking for another paragraph in which the same word is used or asking her parents. She also recognises that some of the texts are difficult for other students: 'sometimes when I'm stuck and don't understand it, I'll find out that my friends also didn't understand it and it was the same for them'.

Cultural difference or deficit

Both participants consider the general level of awareness of their needs among staff and students is low. Participant 1 found lack of understanding among academic staff about the interpreters working alongside them in the classroom. She would often have to explain the interpreter's role to other students, lecturers and teachers during practicum visits.

For students in class and teachers and lecturers, it was very confusing for them at first. I had to explain why I had interpreters and note takers most staff don't have awareness and I think that's part of a barrier too. That's a problem when they're not aware of deaf people because this is such a big place and there are so few deaf people and Student Services don't tell lecturers what deaf students need. I'd be interested to know if they receive any information about raising their awareness, to tell lecturers that you have a deaf student in your class and this is what they'll need. Because I always have to go and tell them, 'Hey! I'm deaf and this is the interpreter', and they back off a little from that and it should be done well before that (Participant 1).

Participant 1 felt most respected and understood in two particular subjects: Women's Studies and Linguistics. It is no coincidence that these subjects explicitly explore minority politics and cultural and linguistic difference. Her studies confirmed her belief that she is 'the same as everyone else'; 'I found people respecting who I am, not that I'm deaf or old but respecting me and making them aware' (Participant 1).

Participant 2 has also found university challenging, but believes that her experience of mainstream education has made it easy for her to integrate into the university and mix with other students. Like Participant 1, she says she felt 'we're all the same. We had common interests and there were other students who were also being taught and so it was easy to fit in with everybody'; the lecturers, she said, however, responded to her 'as a deaf person' (Participant 2):

The lecturers and the tutors were good but they knew me as a 'deaf' person. They wouldn't know my name but they'd remember my face and it was a bit embarrassing because ... here I'm the only deaf student in the university studying education. So I kind of stand out and I found that a bit embarrassing, but the classes were good and the tutors would treat me equally. They don't give me extra help and sometimes if I ask for it, they'll say 'You need to go to Learning Services area' and I think, 'Oh well! They're treating me equally'. Sometimes I might have a question about the essay and wonder if I've gone off the track because sometimes the English is a bit challenging and I'll ask if they can read through my essay and they say no ... They'll answer my questions but they won't read through my draft and I ask my friends if they'd said the same thing to them and they said yes. So I think that's good.

But sometimes in tutorials when we're having group discussions I feel the lecturers talk to the interpreters rather than talking to me. Some of them do that. Some of them are great; they understand and accept who I am but some of them ...will say 'How are you?' and 'Things going well?' But they'll say during the class, 'Oh, could you please stay back so I could talk to you' and sometimes I'm a little bit stuck because I can't talk to them other than after class. Sometimes ... they'll be going through the names but they won't call out

my name because they know I'm already there. I'd rather that they said my name and I could say 'yes' through the interpreter.

Some of them do approach me and ask how I'm going and it makes me feel like I have a relationship with them and I know if I have any problems I can go and see them. They're good but some I've had problems with. One lecturer last year, I found that she would put me down in front of everyone if I would miss a class because I was late, she'd say something like ... - in front of everyone this is - 'You weren't here last week'. I know that she wouldn't say that to other students and she'd say, 'Do you have a medical certificate?' And I'd come almost every other time and I'd say to her 'Could we talk about this later?' and she'd say no and she'd continue talking and I couldn't stand it. It was so embarrassing and so sometimes they treat me as being deaf first. I was about to say 'disabled' but no, I mean being deaf (Participant 2).

This participant thinks that her lecturers wonder how she will teach (deaf) children although they do not necessarily perceive her as disabled.

I think they may be asking themselves 'How is she going to qualify as a teacher?' I say I'm going to be a teacher of the deaf but they don't understand that. I'm sure they realise that but they don't think of that when they look at me. (Participant 2).

Their motivation to become a teacher differs. The first participant talked about the politics of deaf education and the opportunity to make a difference to deaf children's lives, particularly in the area of language development:

[It's] for the next generation so they don't have as difficult time going through what I went through. With support things can improve and things progress; if not, it's like there's just a barrier. I'd like to encourage deaf children because they need more language development and people to look up to, to improve. Not cochlear implant or anything like that, but to encourage them to study and to be aware about the future and communicating with deaf people or whatever. So I think probably working with deaf children would be closest to my heart (Participant 1).

Further study has enabled her to increase self-awareness and understanding of her deaf identity and develop skills to help other deaf people:

It's been more important for me to find, to seek, what it is about being deaf because it wasn't explained to me about what deafness meant ... in the past I could see that deaf people complained about their problems and it was important for me to come to university to find out what I could do for other people (Participant 1).

She has mixed feelings about teaching in the future because of the political climate in deaf education: there is a general lack of deaf teachers, lack of hearing teachers proficient in Auslan, lack of schools that endorse and support bilingual education, and conflict between deaf and hearing approaches to deaf education. Becoming a teacher also requires a significant shift in her position and status in relation to other teachers. Before studying to become a teacher her interaction with schools has been as a parent of deaf children. Her position is problematic in that she has actively advocated for changes in language policy,

calling for Auslan to be used as the language of instruction in deaf education. She is concerned about whether she will be accepted as a deaf teacher within a profession dominated by hearing staff. She has already noticed changes in response from teachers who ignored her views as a parent and deaf mother.

[I'm] wondering if some teachers will accept a deaf teacher or will they back off from me? In the past I've had to change my attitude. I've had to use speech and do all of the changes for *them* so why can't they change for *me* now? I think that would be fair. The teachers at ... [the deaf school] accepted me but not before, when I was just a mother [at the school] (Participant 1).

She is angry that teachers of the deaf have not valued her experience and knowledge as a deaf parent and decided to enroll in a teacher education course, saying 'I had to go out and get *their* degree' before they would listen. Educational advancement is often one of the few ways in which members of a minority group can increase their status in the majority group.

... they say they're looking forward to me coming back to work there again. I drove home thinking - just because I'm a teacher! Like in the past, I wasn't but now they're saying because I'm going to be a teacher, why didn't they think that in the past! Why didn't they respect me when I was a parent! So I've got a few mixed feelings (Participant 1).

Language and identity

Both participants were raised and educated through English (spoken or signed) and acquired Auslan in their teenage years. Both now use Auslan as their dominant language and find it problematic to identify their first language or mother tongue. Their comments show the strong relationship between language and identity.

When the second participant was in her final year in a segregated primary school, the teachers invited deaf adults using Auslan into the classroom: 'I used to watch and was really excited to see it' (Participant 2). She had not fully acquired Auslan by the age of 12, not understanding the grammatical structure of native sign language and still 'very strongly signing in English' (Participant 2). At about 14 years of age, she was fully exposed to Auslan and accepted it a year later: 'So it's only been for a short time' (Participant 2). I asked what she thought about Auslan and Signed English and which language helps her the most:

I don't have any regrets, I thank my parents for learning Signed English and thinking of communication as the important thing. At that time, they weren't thinking of which was the better sign language to learn. They were concerned with communicating with me and it helped me a lot. Now I can't say if my parents had done Auslan what difference it would have made to me. I can't say that. It's like asking somebody from an Auslan family what would it be like if they'd been communicated to in Signed English (Participant 2).

Identifying her mother tongue and second language is problematic. Although Auslan is becoming her dominant language, she points to the fact that her home language is English and therefore, she differs from students who speak a different language in the home.

... most of my friends who have two cultures ... have an Asian background and so they communicate in a different language at home and so ... I would regard them as ESL. But for me, I've got Signed English at home I think ... English is my first language, really. But I accept being called someone who

speaks English as a second language so I don't know. It's almost like I've got both languages of equal status: English and Auslan.

I'm starting to think Auslan is [my mother tongue]. But when I think of my family, my parents, I think of English. I don't sign with them in Signed English [signs]. I use English because I'm speaking at the same time but it's really Auslan in English word order I sign in Auslan most of the time. I'm trying to think what would be my 'mother tongue'. I'm struggling to think about English because it would be too easy to say Auslan is my mother tongue. I accept that English has been good for me, so it's difficult. There's a lot of issues surrounding Signed English like the fact that it's not a language (Participant 2).

Teacher preparation assumes a dominant (hearing) view of the world and this participant's requests to respond to assessment tasks from a Deaf world view have been denied. Assessment tasks are framed from a hearing perspective that excludes or ignores deafness:

Sometimes I think, okay I'm studying to become a teacher of the deaf, then it's best to study early and in my teacher training. For instance, when I was at ... [a school for the deaf] last year, that's where I wanted to go. They said no, I had to go to a regular school. And I thought, oh well, I need that experience, but I've come from a family of teachers.

I said before that I had to do teaching prac in a regular school and not at ... [a school for the deaf]. At the moment I'm trying to negotiate having a special round there but they said no, I had to be in a regular school. But I want to start early. Like I might need to write about the 'social theories of writing' or whatever and I think to myself, should I write it from a Deaf perspective? They say, no, I have to write it from a hearing view because I'm in a course studying regular education. So it's a bit disappointing.

I remember two years ago I asked them and they said no. I tried to negotiate this year. I'm studying sociology and we had to interview a family about their educational background and I asked if I could interview a deaf family and they sort of said, 'Oh well, err' and I said well I'm going to teach deaf children in the future and so they said, 'Oh, yes okay'. So I've had some wins. Last year in Language and Literacy I asked them if I could study a deaf child's reading and they said no. And I said, well what about a CODA [child of deaf adults]? I said it's a *hearing* child of deaf parents, still a *hearing* child and they said that's okay but I wasn't allowed to study a deaf reader. So it's interesting (Participant 2).

She is keen to relate her studies to deaf education and would find her course more valuable if she was able to do so. Although the university has a large department for the study of deafness, she is aware that the content of the post-graduate degree in special education (hearing-impairment) is largely based on a medical view of deafness and the study of speech and hearing: 'I could wait until my teacher of the deaf course, but we won't be studying the same subjects' (Participant 2). She is unsure whether she will even complete studies in deafness as she may well be employed without it. She is trying to apply the content of subjects such as Language and Literacy to the education of deaf children but currently has little understanding of how to teach English through a native sign language.

At the moment I'm thinking about how I would teach them English through Auslan. I don't really understand how because I grew up with Signed English

and I know that I acquired English from that. But Auslan is a different language and so teaching English through a different language, I don't know I'd teach through Auslan but I'm not sure how (Participant 2).

She is certain that she will not find out how to teach English to deaf children at university. She has arranged to work in a school in North America during the summer vacation where a large number of deaf teachers are employed and American Sign Language (ASL) is used to teach English as a second language:

For sure not here at university because they don't know about deafness and the course for teachers of the deaf here is focused on audiology and hearing. They've only just recently introduced Auslan classes for only three hours a week! But I'm going to the Californian School for the Deaf and over half the staff there are deaf so that's why I'm really interested in going to see how they teach language. That's really my reason for going I'm going to work at the Californian School for the Deaf.

I'll be really focusing on how the deaf teachers teach English and how they teach language or teach English through Auslan or ASL and trying to understand how the children acquire one language through a different language because the school has over 50% of their staff who are deaf so I think it will be a great experience There's really strong Deaf culture [there], so I'm really pleased to be going. have work experience there (Participant 2).

Her work in this school will not recognised by her university:

I asked if it could be work experience ... recognised through this university but they said no, because it's a special school. It would have to have been a regular school so it wasn't accepted but anyway. So I'm going in my own time (Participant 2).

Despite the difficulties associated with being deaf in an almost exclusively hearing university, neither participant prefers to attend a deaf university (such as Gallaudet University in Washington DC). Both participants identify diversity of views as more important than hearing status:

It depends. I think it's more of a challenge because everybody here doesn't always have the same views. Doesn't matter if you're deaf or hearing, people have a different view. So even within a Deaf university, there would be the challenge of disagreeing with somebody else's views. So I think it would depend; I don't think it matters (Participant 1).

I don't know. I think maybe [I prefer] a hearing [university], because then you get both perspectives. I don't know. Maybe it would be too much with just the deaf. It's nice to be able to share things with everyone (Participant 2).

Discussion

The data reported here identify ways in which deaf students are positioned in universities. There is conflict between the way in which these students view themselves as culturally and linguistically different and university policies and practices position them as disabled. Their difference is generally framed as a disability, however, it may also be rendered invisible by teaching and administering these students as if they were 'any other student'. Despite the fact that they are preparing to teach deaf students, the participants are generally provided

with little assistance in linking their current studies to their future teaching situation. Nor are they prepared for the difficulties they may face as minority language teachers working in a predominantly hearing environment.

Universities and academic staff exhibit varying degrees to which they are willing to allow deaf students to adjust the content of assessment and practicum requirements. One of the participants in this study has been unable to study deaf families, deaf children or work in deaf schools and have this work recognised by the university for assessment requirements.

The linguistic legitimacy of native sign language was established by the work of American linguist, Stokoe (1960), more than four decades ago. It was not until 1987 that Auslan was included as a community language in the *National Policy on Languages* (Lo Bianco, 1987). The first Auslan dictionary was published two years later (Johnston, 1989). In 1991, the Deaf community was recognised as a cultural and linguistic minority in *Australia's Language: The Australian Language and Literacy Policy* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991). There is a conflict between these national policies that recognise deaf people's status as members of a cultural and linguistic minority and educational policy that identifies deaf students as members of the equity target group: the disabled. Disability networks have embraced a policy of *inclusion* (see Jenkinson, 1997) which, in the case of the deaf, can run counter to cultural values and efforts towards self-determination (Reagan, 1994). At the very least, policies of inclusion for deaf students fail to identify their needs as language minority students. Universities call for staff to take into account a student's disability and make appropriate adjustment to ensure their equal access to higher education (http://www.deakin.edu.au/div_css/ss/DRC/policies.htm, accessed 27 November, 2000). Such policies are intended to cater for deaf students. Deaf students may be better supported by universities and academic staff who recognise their minority language status.

The participants' preference to be recognised as culturally and linguistically different is consistent with the view of organisations that represent deaf people. State, national and international organisations of deaf people call for recognition of and access to their language in education. Since the late 1990s, the Australian Association of the Deaf has sought to have Auslan recognised in the Australian constitution, legislating Deaf people's right to access their native sign language (C.A. Allen, personal communication, March 16, 1998).

Conclusion

As educators and educational researchers, the politics of educational practices and research epistemologies must continue to be challenged and exposed. In higher education, practices still exist that exclude or marginalise difference. Deaf people (as teachers and lecturers) are all but absent from our schools and universities. Significant change is needed to a system of education dominated by hearing teachers. The denial of linguistic and cultural difference, in preference for a disability construction, ignores the situation in which many deaf people find themselves. Language exists within a social and cultural context and is therefore political and bound up with issues of power. Schools and universities are powerful institutions whose practices can maintain the positions of particular cultural and linguistic groups. Educators must reconsider the assumptions underlying 'disability' policies.

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