“Tourists in their own land”

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Thesis submitted to the Department of Social Studies, University of Dublin, Trinity College in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master in Letters (M. Litt).

Spring 2001
Chapter 3

Development of Official Policy In Ireland 1972 - 1999

Introduction

This chapter explores the development of policy from the early 1970s to the present day, focusing on a number of specific events and official reports, with the aim of outlining their influence on the policies affecting education for Deaf children.

It is well known that the Irish policy process is notoriously difficult to analyse and study because of its complexities. Catherine Earley states that:

“The process involved in the development of social policy in Ireland is complex, untidy, and fascinating to study. It starts from the creation of demands within society, or within the political system itself, and involves a complicated web of people, institutions and events” (Earley 1999: 152).

In other social policy areas, published reports are often an inspirational source of debate or further discussion. For example, O’Cinneide’s poverty study in 1972 caused an immeasurable stir that prompted public debate and demands for action to relieve poverty in Ireland (Curry, 1998: 44). The recent development of educational policy for Deaf children is no exception to Earley’s assertion about the Irish social policy process. However, the subject of this chapter did not receive the same level of publicity as O’Cinneide’s poverty study yet it had a considerable impact on those who are concerned with the education of Deaf children. Given its importance and impact, the process deserves critical analysis.
In order to simplify this analysis, the official position on the needs and rights of the Deaf community is explored and analysed. The report published by the Department of Education in 1972 is identified as a starting point because of its impact and influence on current thinking.

*Department of Education’s Report “The Education of the Children Who Are Handicapped by Impaired Hearing 1972”*

The year of the nineteenth sixty-seven is often regarded as a watershed for Irish education as the then Minister for Education, Donogh O’Malley introduced the “free” post-primary education scheme which resulted in a huge increase in student participation and public expenditure on education. This initiative was influenced by the then OECD report - “Investment in Education” (Breen et al 1990; Curry, 1998). That year was also of importance in relation to the education of the Deaf; apart from O’Malley’s initiative, 1967 saw the establishment of a committee by the Minister to “review the provision for the education of deaf and partially deaf children and to make recommendations” (Department of Education, 1972: vii).

The twelve strong committee chaired by the Department of Education’s assistant inspector, Thomas O’Cuilleanean, met thirty-one times and they published a report - “The Education of Children Who Are Handicapped by Impaired Hearing” - containing their findings (Department of Education, 1972). They called for a number of measures;

- Continued use of the “present” oralist policy of teaching and subordinate the status of sign language (6.13, 6.14);
- internal segregation (i.e. within the special schools for the deaf) to ensure Deaf children were educated in oral environment and to prevent any contact with Deaf children who were educated by ‘manual’ means (7.32, 7.34, 7.36);
- medically orientated re-classification of deaf children (2.13 - 2.18);
the establishment of a visiting teacher service (5.13 & 5.16).

Although the Department of Education published the report, there is no clear consensus on how the report was viewed internally. Some commentators view it as a significant policy document while others regard it as a guideline for those who engaged in the education of the Deaf. Matthews (1996) describes it as a guideline for those who want to work with Deaf children in schools. Crean (1997) regards the report as an official policy document. Interestingly, the report unfortunately received scant comment in Griffey’s memoirs despite her heavy involvement in the committee’s deliberations (Griffey, 1994:139).

The report is taken as a statement of the Department of Education’s stance on the education of the Deaf in Ireland. Many saw it as an official endorsement of the oralist philosophy. Crean states:

*It was inevitable that the approving voices from the combinations of prestigious (100 per cent non-deaf) doctors, oralist teachers, rehabilitation professionals, crusading oralists, hearing parents and other of like mind succeeded in producing such a report. The result was a 50,000-word manifesto of the utopian plans for training the deaf pupil for living with hearing people, in isolation from the deaf community (Crean, 1997: 60).*

Overall, the committee was somewhat limited in terms of representation: the strong impression given is one of homogeneity and oligarchy. For instance, in the report, six of the twelve-committee members were cited as separate members of the National Rehabilitation Board while one was recorded as the sole representative of the National Association for the Deaf (Department of Education, 1972). However, this membership list did not reveal that these same six members were also directors of the National Association for the Deaf (Link, 1972). The chairperson had apparently been a close acquaintance of Sr. Nicholas Griffey (Griffey, 1994: 81). This interpretation is supported by details about the persons who sent submissions to the report committee. More than half the number of people who sent submissions belonged to these institutions (Department of Education, 1972). There is no record of representation from the
Deaf community on the committee and there is no record of an acknowledgement of submissions received from the Deaf community.

Despite its terms of reference to “review the provision of the education of the deaf…” evidence shows that the measures suggested in the report had been implemented and had operated for quite a few years beforehand. Thus the committee report advocated a status quo situation. It is relevant to ask why the committee called for measures that had already been implemented and operational. The composition of the committee gives us a very good indication of the committee’s attitudes. Apart from a very minor instance, there was no major dissent recorded in the committee report. There was no Deaf representative on the committee, as Crean points out:

*If one discounts the doctors and department officials who could only act on the advice of the Dominican professionals we are left with the movers and shakers in the field of education of the deaf in Ireland at that time: Father Gallagher, Brother Wall, Sr. Nicholas Griffey and Sr. Carmel. The last three were trained in Manchester University then under the leadership of Ewing…*(Crean, 1997:57-58).

There was no clear reference to the use of sign language in the report despite its wide use in the Deaf community. The omission of clear references to sign language and the lack of alternative perspectives only serve to increase scepticism about the objectivity of the committee (Conama, 1999).

In the education system generally, Lynch and Drudy state that a consensual and essentialist view of the Irish education was very strong at that time. The consensual view refers to policy decisions being made in the interests of achieving a consensus, even though there was no serious consultation with interested parties with different perspectives. The essentialist view refers to the individualisation of students within the education system where responsibility for failure or success is seen to be solely with the individual student. This view would support limited improvements to the system instead of overhauling the system (Lynch and Drudy, 1993).
The report called for the internal segregation of children attending the special schools to ensure that ‘orally successful’ deaf children were shielded from a signing environment. However, such segregation had already been in force for many years as is evident from comments in several publications such as the writings of Griffey’s and O’Cuilleanean’s (Griffey: various sources, O’Cuilleanean, 1968: 6). As for the call for the establishment of a visiting teacher for the deaf service, this service was already in operation. Griffey makes the following startling statement about this service in her memoirs:

In 1967 I appealed to the Government for help. This time I went to Thomas O’Cuilleanean, head inspector, responsible for special education. Ever helpful and constructive, he was, I knew, on my side. He was present at a meeting, chaired by the Secretary of the Department, which was held in the Department’s offices at Marlborough Street. Here I made my request, armed with statistics from my work in Louth, Meath and Kildare. They did the trick. I left the meeting with sanction for the appointment of a visiting teacher for these three counties (Griffey, 1994: 81). (Sic)

It must be noted that the request was made in 1967 - five years before the publication of the report. It is just one of many instances where the 1972 report’s requested for specific measures that had already been implemented.

Despite a broad range of international investigations into educational approaches and methodology in the education of deaf children during the 1960s, the 1972 report’s references to these findings are minimal. The British’s Report into the Use of Finger-Spelling and Signing in the Education of the Deaf (Lewis Report) of 1968 (Lewis Report, 1968) was a chief source of international evidence: however, this report is not referred to frequently. The Lewis Report investigated the usefulness of finger-spelling and signing in Deaf schools. Given the weight of the responsibility and the experience of committee members on the 1972 report, it is reasonable to expect that they would have sought extensive international evidence.
The report also failed to take account of global trends such as the Americans’ increased doubt about using the oral approach as reported in the Federal document known as the Babbidge Report of 1965 (Conama, 1999).

There was no reported major dissent to the publication of the 1972 report, and this is something that cannot be explained. The number of contradictory comments in the report did not stop its being adopted as a guideline for the education for the Deaf in Ireland.

Interestingly, the approach of the Lewis Report is in sharp contrast to this 1972 report in terms of methodology and outcomes. The Lewis report interviewed the main organisations working for Deaf people in Britain and acknowledges the diversity of views on the subject of its investigation, for example, the place of finger-spelling in schools. Hence, the committee issued a warning to readers to be cautious when interpreting the recommendations issued at the end of the report. Overall, the Lewis Report recommended more research and discussion on the issues it raised (McLoughlin, 1987: 30-32).

While the 1972 report had not consulted representative organisations, this did not prevent it advancing own strong recommendations (1972 Report). More startling was the publication of the Babbidge Report of 1965. The federal government of the United States commissioned the report, which investigated the state of the education of the deaf. A president of the University of Connecticut who had no prior knowledge of Deaf issues chaired the committee: he was therefore, independent of existing services and institutions. The Babbidge report concluded with the statement that educators of the deaf have nothing to be proud of (Luterman, 1991: 143). This federal report continued, citing in Luterman et al (1991):

..., results of several studies indicated that deaf people were notoriously underachieving. The vast majority of them were working in blue-collar jobs with minimal academic and oral English skills. Over ninety percent of deaf people married other deaf people, and the goal of oralism to “normalise” the deaf was a distinct failure (Luterman et al, 1991: 143).
It is hard to know if, apart from the Lewis report, the 1972 committee in their deliberations had consulted the Babbidge report. From Griffey’s own memoirs (1994), we know that she made several trips to the United States, visiting institutions catering for Deaf children during the 1960s and there is a good chance that she must have been aware of this report. According to Luterman (1991), the report provoked a fierce debate in the United States and experts began to suggest “new” solutions such as total communication and cued speech.

The lack of discussion on sign language and its usefulness in the 1972 report does not imply that the committee did not have any prior knowledge of this subject. The following evidence supports this viewpoint. Griffey (1967) showed that she had intimate knowledge of the significant breakthrough in American linguistics in the early 1960s regarding the status of indigenous sign languages. However, she dismissed the breakthrough as insignificant.

The 1972 report is a clear indicator that the Department of Education approved the oral philosophy and there was no evidence of any opposition to the report. Griffey outlines one of many reasons for the approval of the report and lack of obvious dissent. Griffey writes:

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\text{In 1950 I found that 90\% of the past pupils of our school in Dublin wanted Irish deaf children to learn to speak and lip-read. Many of them said they would like to lip-read because their hearing friends and workmates were not inclined to communicate, either in writing or by means of manual communication. The position has not changed much today (Griffey, 1975).}
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There is no evidence of people’s views in 1950 to corroborate the views expressed in this statement. As for the statement that the “position has not changed much today”, there is no evidence for this statement either.

However, the latter position might have been referred to in the social survey of Deaf people carried out in the early 1970’s. The National Rehabilitation Board and National Association for the Deaf commissioned the social survey - Sociological Survey of the Young Adult Deaf People (National Rehabilitation
Board, 1973). The timing of the survey coinciding with the work of the committee, suggests that it would be of some assistance to the committee members in understanding the situation of Deaf people in the early 1970's and the consequences of the education system in previous decades. However, this is apparently not the case (Conama, 1999). Although a number of the social research committee members were also members of the 1972 committee, the committee’s report did not draw on the social survey.

The social survey, which was carried out by hearing social workers, contains a number of inconsistencies. For instance, the researchers claimed that they had a good interview relationship with the Deaf respondents but according to their survey, the majority of respondents found the researchers difficult to communicate with (National Rehabilitation Board, 1973:4). This is a clear illustration of the lack of an empathetic relationship between the researchers and the research population. Therefore, this social survey has to be treated with caution (Conama 1999).

Nevertheless, the survey contains a number of interesting facts, which can point out the inadequacies in the education of Deaf children. The survey reveals that 23 per cent of respondents were unemployed and the vast majority of the employed respondents had low paid menial jobs. Further, the majority of the respondents did not have friendships in their workplaces, which extended beyond the workplace. The recommendations of the survey were somewhat vague and include reference to the creation of more auxiliary services for Deaf people throughout the country (Conama, 1999). Apparently, this social survey had no impact on the deliberations of the 1972 report.

As for Griffey’s assertion in 1975 that Deaf people supported her policies as outlined in the 1972 report, this social survey reveals the inadequacies within the education system for Deaf children, which resulted in many Deaf people being unemployed or underemployed. Therefore, her assertion should not be taken at a
face value. It is clear that the rationale behind the support for oralism in the 1972 report was centred on the integration of Deaf people into the hearing community, while little or no regard was given to the quality of life and empowerment of Deaf people in society.

Official reports after the 1972 Report

The report became a focal point for those who were dealing with the needs and rights of Deaf people. For instance, the report of a working party examining the employability and training needs of disabled people, established by Minister for Health, was published in 1975. Three paragraphs were devoted to the needs of the Deaf people while an entire chapter was given to the needs of blind people. This working party may have had felt that the 1972 report was sufficient to deal with the needs of Deaf people, and they expressed their support for the recommendations of the 1972 report (Department of Health, 1975: 37).

Yet, the publication published by the National Economic Social Council (NESC) in 1980 made no reference to the 1972 report. The NESC, an important discussion forum which advises the government, issued a report on “Major Issues in Planning Services for Mentally and Physically Handicapped Persons” (NESC, 1980). It contains a number of references to the education and the employment of Deaf people. The report contains antiquated terminology that would be regarded as offensive and insensitive today. The report emphasises medically orientated rehabilitation as the key to services for disabled persons. It points out that “there is evidence to suggest that economic benefits may be derived from investment in rehabilitation through increased productivity and reduction in the cost of care of handicapped persons” (NESC, 1980: 13).

Apart from this apparently antiquated view of disabled persons, the report contains a number of interesting facts. The report reveals that in 1978, there were 825 Deaf pupils taught by 144 teachers in four schools and that the cost of teaching a Deaf child was £1,039 per annum. Converting this into an annual
amount, this would be at least £857,000. These statistical revelations made the Deaf schools, apart from the schools catering for “multiple handicapped children” more expensive and labour intensive to operate than other special schools. Indeed, the costs were almost 50% more than for other areas of disability (NESC, 1980: 60-70).

The report also touched on the question of integration of disabled persons in mainstream education. It made an inconclusive remark about the integration of Deaf children in such environments, but suggested that once the necessary provisions were in place, integration could be possible for Deaf children (NESC, 1980: 81). There is a lack of reference to third level education in the report.

This NESC report also touches on areas other than education, venturing into the arena of social work. It reports that two social workers were specifically employed to deal with the needs of Deaf people in the eastern area. The report discusses the choice between generic and specialised social work services for disabled persons. It supports the idea that specialised social work services are needed for dealing with the needs of Deaf people (NESC, 1980: 156-157).

There is no evidence that the report did made any impact on the government. However, the continued emphasis on medically orientated rehabilitation was highlighted by the publication of the Green Paper - Towards a Full Life - by the Department of Health (Department of Health, 1984). The report endorses the since discredited international classification of disability (Department of Health, 1984: 17-18) and contains few references to the needs of Deaf people. The report is dominated by paternalistic and rehabilitation approaches with little regard for the empowerment and rights of disabled persons (Department of Health, 1984).

From the 1972 report to the NESC publication, the official publications reflect the nature and influence of the official perspectives on the needs of Deaf people. Sign language and its benefits for Deaf people were deliberately ignored. A lack
of consultation with Deaf people and a lack of representation on the various committees caused this ignorance. Granted, these developments should be seen as expected, given the social and political situation during that period. However, this gives us a clear insight on what the consequences will be if the value of sign language continues to be ignored and lack of representation and consultation continues as the norm.

Although there was some social progress - especially for women - as happened during the 1970s (Conroy, 1999) - the evidence shows that this progress did not extend to other affected groups, for example, travellers and people with disabilities. Their experience can be said to be similar to that of the Deaf community. Even so, the pace of general social progress in 1970s was not sufficient for these marginalised groups to overcome traditional powers such as conservatism and the power of Catholic Church that were still considerable in 1970s (Chubb 1992). A number of factors continued to reinforce the lack of progress and the apparent passivity of the Deaf community.

The Irish Deaf community did not enjoy established international connections, which could function to educate or influence their perspectives on national issues. International connections first began in the sports arena, which led to the development of further networking. The community, through the representation of the Irish Deaf Sports Association, sent its first-ever sports team to the World Games for the Deaf in Sweden in 1973 (St. Joseph’s Yearbook, 1973). Continued international networking with other Deaf communities led to the establishment of the Irish Deaf Society as a late-coming member of the World Federation of the Deaf in 1985 and of the European Commission Regional Secretariat in 1985.

Such international networking for information purposes and policy comparative analysis was not available to the Deaf community in Ireland during the 1970s and this non-availability hindered the ability to develop alternative perspectives.
Further, Crean argues that the apathy of the Deaf community is deep-rooted and was reinforced by the nature of the oralist philosophy in schools where Deaf children were discouraged from the use of sign language (Crean 1997: 105-107). Such discouragement is known to stifle the personal need to stimulate and subsequently leads to the creation of low esteem.

Susan Phoenix (1988) supports this in her psychological survey of Deaf people in Northern Ireland in 1982. She made some remarkable statements at the first congress of the Irish Deaf Society in 1988:

*In 1982, I found intelligent young people sitting all over Northern Ireland…. Under-stimulated, mostly frustrated… unable to communicate with their parents and longing for some further education and training.*

*….. many (respondents) seemed puzzled that their ideas were sought…..(This) illustrates exactly how passive and neglected the deaf population in Northern Ireland have been for years” (Phoenix, 1988).*

Although the survey concentrated on Northern Ireland, it gives a good indicator of what the level of apathy among the Deaf community was across the border at this time. These factors may help to explain the lack of resistance or dissent among Deaf people against the recommendations of official reports.

**1980s**

The 1980s can be regarded as a period of sluggishness as there was a dearth of official publications during this decade. Therefore, it can be safely assumed that the policies of the 1950s - supported by the 1972 report were continued. However, there was one notable exception. In 1988, the European Parliament approved the recognition of indigenous sign languages as primary languages of the Deaf communities in Europe and called on national countries to do likewise (IDS Journal, 1988).

The 1990s saw some changes in policy implementation: this was a result of the criticisms and arguments first aired in the 1980s by certain representative
organisations especially the Irish Deaf Society, which had been established in 1981. The nineties saw the publication of the NRB literacy assessment results (National Rehabilitation Board, 1991), which fuelled the debate about the quality of education for Deaf children. The period also saw the gradual involvement of the Deaf community in the policy process. This took place in the context of an increased public profile of people with disabilities in society.

The report on the primary education review was published in 1990 and it made reference to the 1972 report and subsequent happenings. However, it contains only a small number of paragraphs which were not sufficient to merit analysis here. Nevertheless, the report called for more resources to be given to special education, including the education of the Deaf (Department of Education, 1990).

**NRB Literacy Assessment 1991**

The National Rehabilitation Board commissioned research on the functional literacy of Deaf children in 1990: this was quite extensive, with 358 Deaf children tested. The research “Reading Assessment of Deaf Children” by Trevor James and Erland O’Neill was published in 1991 (National Rehabilitation Board, 1991). Unfortunately there is no available literature to allow us to gauge the contemporary (immediate) reaction to the findings.

The NRB assessment was a controlled and scientifically conducted research project. The authors used two reading ability tests to assess 358 children ranging from 6 to 16 years of age. However, there is no indication which written language was the expected target language. It is presumed that the English language was the target language in this assessment. The purpose of the assessment was to evaluate the progress of children at school. The authors noted that the findings were in line with similar international research. It did not state whether the assessors were fluent in Irish Sign Language (ISL) or how the children communicated and interacted with the assessors.
McDonnell (1980) states that outcomes of the studies on Deaf children could depend on the validity of instructions that are communicated to Deaf children. There were a number of previous studies, which erroneously believed that Deaf children were mentally retarded when they were tested with linguistic and cognitive tests (McDonnell, 1980: 46). It is unfortunate that the surveys considered so far omitted the nature of instructions given to informants. It would be interesting to know what communication approach the assessors adapted to instruct the children regarding test procedure. Nevertheless, the international research shows that the results for the Irish literacy assessment outcome are not unique to Irish Deaf children.

The NRB survey found that an average 16 year old Deaf child would have a reading level equivalent to that of an average 9 year old non-deaf child. The report accepts that the results are well below generally accepted standards of functional literacy. Deaf girls perform better than their male counterparts but only marginally. The survey also discovered that the gap between their chronological ages and reading level ages increased as age progressed. McDonnell writes:

......as pupils get older the gap between their chronological ages and their reading ages tends to increase (McDonnell, 1980: 55).

Conrad’s celebrated study (1979) carried out an extensive and similar study in Britain with similar results. There are numerous American studies reaching similar results and they agreed that the adoption of pure oralism by schools was responsible for the devastating effects on the functionary literacy of Deaf children (Moores, 1978: 249-250).

These appalling results illustrate the shortcomings of the oralist system very clearly but on the basis of literature available, there seems to have been little action taken to alleviate or address these deficits. The authors state:

Children with hearing impairments typically experience great difficulty in acquiring good reading skills despite special education and training. Deaf
school leavers find that the social and vocational opportunities available to them are restricted by their limited attainments in reading and writing skills. Vocationally, deaf people have higher unemployment rates and obtain jobs in lower socio-economic classes than would be expected by their intelligence (National Rehabilitation Board, 1991)

The researchers had no doubt that this lack of functional literacy would have serious repercussions in the (later) working lives of Deaf people. However, the findings of the assessment were not followed by any policy changes and the next few years saw little activity arise as result of these findings apart from occasional congresses and seminars.

Green Paper - Educating for A Changing World 1992:

The Green Paper was published in 1992 and proposed devolution of power from the Department of Education to school boards. This would entail the boards’ production of individual school plans and the issuing of an annual report on their work (Curry, 1998: 107). The Green Paper contains a chapter on special educational needs but does not specifically refer to the educational needs of Deaf children.

The Green Paper’s definition of special education needs is very wide ranging, including special schools and the informal integration of disabled children in ordinary classrooms. However, the definition is medically orientated. The paper proposed a survey to determine the extent of special educational needs before planning and implementation. The paper also stated that the Visiting Teacher services were being re-organised (Green Paper, 1992: 60-65).

As for the needs of Deaf students, there was no explicit reference except for one minor detail - providing radio aids to students at universities. The paper proposes that a special education research facility within a university be established. Both references can be regarded as implicit signs of lack of knowledge among departmental officials (Green Paper, 1992: 60-65).
Commentators have identified that this NESC report coupled with the National Convention on Education played a major role in influencing the philosophical background to the White Paper, which was published in 1995. The NESC report argues that the category of school-going children with a social disadvantaged background can be extended to include children with disabilities. The report contains some interesting statistical facts, including the fact that there were 5 special schools catering for 581 Deaf children while 21 children were educated in special classes within ordinary schools. There were an estimated 1,500 children “with hearing impairment” educated in fully integrated schools with a pool of 27 visiting teachers.

Overall, the report supports well-provided educational integration for children with disabilities. However, it acknowledges the need for special schools for certain categories. Nevertheless, the report did not include a major discussion on this topic as there was a separate review going on at a same time.

Report of the Special Education Review Committee 1993:

This report was published in 1993 and it drew a lot of attention. From a Deaf perspective, there was a lot of interest in the report as it dealt with the question of the education for Deaf children. It has to be said that the report is comprehensive, covering education for all types of disabled children and it also includes an extensive quantitative study (Department of Education, 1993).

However given the short time frame (two years) in which to complete the report, it does not adequately cover all areas or discuss each area in-depth. Given the comprehensive range included, coupled with the short time frame for completion, the committee apparently held a strong consensual view of special education. They may have felt that the then system did not need an overhaul, but rather an incremental improvement.
There was no person with a disability sitting on the committee. As a result, they agreed to adopt the World Health Organisation's three-fold medically orientated classification of disability. However, they appear to have been unaware of the widespread dissatisfaction with this classification approach which was under review by the WHO at the same time. Disabled People International is known as a vehement opponent of this classification (Oliver, 1990: 6).

The report also made a reference to the 1972 report, using the re-classification of Deaf children based on level of hearing. There was no solid reference to Irish Sign Language. The committee seems to have been content to utilise a wholly hearing-based categorisation of Deaf children without exploring alternative perspectives regarding Deaf children. This perspective implies that the more hearing the child has the greater the opportunity the child has in the educational system. The assumption of an absolute relationship between level of hearing and intelligence development is a classic illustration of simple over-generalisation (Conama, 1998). Such over-generalisation can be traced to the much-discredited theories of Pintner and Myklebust (Moores, 1978).

There was a remarkable degree of inconsistency in the report. For instance, the committee praised the specially designed training course for teachers for the deaf in UCD while it largely ignored the possibility of utilising the indigenous sign language within the educational sphere (Crean, 1997). Then the report stated it could not make any decision on the suitability of various communication methods for Deaf children. At the same time, it claimed that the majority of teachers who were trained on the UCD course were confused by the lack of consensus on communication methods (Conama, 1998). This lack of consensus may be partly attributed to the nature of the said course in UCD.

The committee did not have ample time to study and discuss communication methods. As Griffin (1994) has said, the people on the committee “were only people and made of clay”. Even it drew a comment from Griffey as she said it
was disappointing to see that only six pages out of three hundred plus pages were devoted to the education of the Deaf (Griffey, 1994: 139). Finally, the Special Education Review Committee’s report did not outline a clear vision or seem able to resolve the issues regarding communication methods for Deaf children in the classroom.

**National Education Convention 1993:**
This convention was deemed a radical departure in the field of education where department officials, the churches, the teachers’ unions, and parents met and discussed the common issues. This led to the publication of the 1995 White Paper on Education - *Charting our Educational Future* (Curry, 1998: 107-8). Forty-two organisations were represented as the department removed its buffer between representations in order to let them discuss their views and hopes in a wider context. It gained extensive publicity (Walshe, 1999: 33-36). Its report contained a separate article focussing on special education.

The report supported the call of the European Council of Education Ministers for accelerated integration of students with disabilities. However, it opted for gradual and careful planning of integration. There is no reference specifically to the education of Deaf children (Coolahan, 1993: 119-125).

**Charting Our Future - White Paper 1995:**
The White Paper was published in April 1995 proposing a regionalisation of administrative control of education throughout the country by establishing ten regional boards. The Paper also outlines a legislative framework for schools. However, there is no specific reference to the needs or rights in education of the Deaf child.

The first part of this White paper concentrated on primary education and a positive statement was made acknowledging the right to education for people with disabilities. However, they proposed that a task force to be set up to discuss
and implement the recommendations of the Special Education Review Committee. It was also recommended that the remit of this proposed task force be extended to the post-primary sector. It has to be remembered that SERC has not issued a single recommendation about the education of Deaf children. Therefore, the White Paper is largely irrelevant.

**Towards an Independent Future - Dept. of Health report 1996.**

A further report published by the Department of Health in 1996 was another example of continued ignorance of the real needs of Deaf people. The report - “Towards an Independent Future” again used the controversial World Health Organisation’s three-fold classification to define disability and this demonstrates a negative perspective on disability.

The report also made an inconsistent acknowledgement of the importance of the United Nations’ Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities. The Standard Rules demand that consultation must take place at every level with people with disabilities or representative organisations of people with disabilities. Given that the committee’s body did not include any person with a disability, they did not observe this rule.

Malachy suggests that the report should be rejected as it supports the continuation of a status quo situation. The report opts for strengthening the situation where carers and service-providers take the central role and the recipients are requested to fit in to their categories (Malachy, 1997:3). The fact that the committee opted for this approach can be illustrated by several recommendations in the report, which called for the creation of more professional posts and training courses for those able-bodied people who wanted to work in these areas.

Against this philosophical background, it is not surprising to see that the report calls for a more paternalistic and philanthropic service for Deaf people. This attitude prevails where there is a passive resistance and a lack of confidence
among service-users (Abercrombe and Hill, 1976). This situation would be reinforced if the recommendations in the report are implemented.

There is a chapter devoted to the needs of Deaf people but there is over-emphasis on speech training and lip-reading and little consideration was given to Irish Sign Language. There is no explicit reference to the importance of an interpreting service. There is no single recommendation in the report that could be seen as empowering service-users or acknowledging the service-users’ personal independence rights: therefore, the report has to be treated with scepticism (Conama, 1998).

**Strategy for Equality 1996:**

At the same time as the publication of “Towards an Independent Future”, the Commission for the Status of People with Disabilities published its report - “A Strategy for Equality” in 1996 amid huge publicity. This bulky report contains 402 recommendations, which arose from a number of listening meetings and consultative sub-committees throughout the country. The Commission, chaired by Judge Feargus Flood, adopted an extensive consultative process, which culminated in the publication of the report.

The composition of the Commission was unique and representative of the disabled population. More than 60 per cent of the committee comprised people with disabilities and the remainder was made up of carers, parents, and service-providers. The consumer side is clearly represented here which was largely ignored in previous inquiries into similar areas. Quin and Redmond (1999) point out the stark difference between the report “Strategy for Equality” and the 1984 report “Towards a Full Life” which reflects major changes in thinking about the nature of service-provision for people with disabilities (Quin and Redmond, 1999: 157).

As for the interests of Deaf people, the recommendations affecting their lives are scattered across the wide-ranging list of recommendations. However the
recommendations themselves are substantial and radical. There are a number of recommendations calling for an extensive interpreting service for the benefit of Deaf clients providing a service in a variety of areas that range from hospitals to courts. The recommendations include highly radical suggestions including the suggestion that sign language should be officially recognised and that all teachers of the deaf should be fluent in sign language (Strategy for Equality, 1996).

In relation to education, there is recognition that Deaf children be educated within Deaf schools where peer presence and easy communication access are available. The report suggests that teacher-training courses should include sign language training development. The report went on to state that there should be flexibility to allow suitable Deaf people to become teachers of the Deaf (Strategy for Equality, 1996). This is a radical recommendation considering the removal of Deaf teachers in the 1950s by the Department of Education.

Although specific recommendations about the rights of Deaf people are scattered among the recommendations in the report, they are radical and forward-looking. This is partly a result of the consultation with some Deaf people and their representation on the various sub-committees.

Many commentators were confused by the claims by Deaf associations that the Deaf community should be regarded as a linguistic minority while apparently having no qualms about involving themselves in the disability movement. There is ongoing debate about this confusion. Admittedly, it can be strange to outsiders. However, one American observer points out that:

*In this case, though the two sides remain uneasy, bound as if in a bad marriage. The deaf community knows that whatever its qualms, it cannot afford to cut itself off from the larger, savvier, wealthier disability lobby*” (Dolnick, 1993: 43).
The experience is not unique to the Irish situation and Deaf people know that some of their aspirations and hopes can be realised by association with the wider, more general campaign of disabled activists. In the past, disabled activists proved useful supporters of Deaf rights and this experience is reflected in the publication of the Commission’s report “Strategy for Equality”.

**National Forum For Early Childhood Education Report 1998:**

The Minister for Education and Science established the Forum to identify the direction future policies on early childhood education should take. It was attended by several interest groups together with the teaching unions and departmental officials.

The report made a departure in terms of officially labelling Deaf children; it places Deaf children in a different category, including them in a chapter dealing with cultural minorities instead of combining them in with other areas of disability. It acknowledges that this action may seem to be inappropriate to readers who are unfamiliar with this categorisation:

*In this chapter the focus will be exclusively on the situation of profoundly deaf children. The use of sign language and the shared experience of deafness has led to a distinct cultural profile for members of the deaf community (Coolahan, 1998: 88)*

The report also made a distinction between Deaf and hearing impaired children and pointed out that the latter was in the majority. The latter group, with additional support, can be integrated into mainstream education. It pointed out that the situation was completely different for Deaf children. The report also notes the concerns of the Irish Deaf Society on the effects of oralism on Deaf children and acknowledges the breakthrough in understanding the linguistic structure of Irish Sign Language (ISL). This report was the first official publication to note the concerns about the effects of oralism and recognise the presence of ISL (Coolahan, 1998: 89).
The report cites the successful bilingual system in Sweden where the functional literacy and the ability to achieve academic levels among Deaf children have notably improved since the implementation of a bilingual system. Their system is based on the early acquisition of written Swedish and use of the indigenous sign language, Swedish Sign Language. Therefore, the report recommends that the provision of pre-school facilities be urgently implemented as suggested by the Model School for the Deaf project. The provision would ensure the maximum benefit of acquisition for Deaf children and for their parents who could learn Irish Sign Language and communicate with each other (Coolahan, 1998: 90-91).

**Education Act 1998**

For many years prior to 1998, many commentators agreed that the absence of legislation in the whole sphere of education hindered progress in the field (Curry, 1999; Walshe, 1999; Kiely et al, 1999). It was the Rainbow coalition government, which published the first comprehensive draft education legislation, aiming to decentralise the traditional administrative system. However, the decentralisation proposal disappeared with the fall of the government in May 1997. The incoming government introduced its preferred legislation avoiding the decentralisation issue: this legislation was enacted in December 1998 (IDJ Spring, 1999).

It was into this enacted legislation that a clause acknowledging the status of Irish Sign Language was inserted after an intensive lobbying campaign was spearheaded by the Irish Deaf Society. The insertion of this clause in the Act can be seen as an achievement for the Irish Deaf Society which had lobbied vigorously for the recognition of Irish Sign Language within the Act. However, the Act refuses to acknowledge the uniqueness of ISL as the government inserted the “other sign languages” fearing that other perceived sign languages would be excluded (IDJ Autumn, 1999). Irish Deaf Society warned that it could be used a loophole by foreign Deaf students who want to study in this country; they could
use this legislation to request expensive support services such as hiring interpreters from their respective countries (IDJ Autumn, 1998).

**Reflections**
The development of the official policy reveals a number of interesting facts. Despite numerous official reports published over the years, there is no clear cut policy or statutory regulation/s on many issues affecting Deaf people and, above all, on the education of Deaf children. The absence of official policy or statutory regulations reinforces the assumptions that policy has been left in the hands of those who supported oralism.

The philosophy of the official reports is interesting and is a clear indicator of changes over the period we have explored. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the policy favoured oralism, increased educational integration, and continued to emphasise medical rehabilitation as the way forward. This type of policy had ignored international trends or studies that expressed doubt about the beneficial effects of oralism. This type of philosophy disregarded the usefulness of sign languages. The early 1990s reveal the extent of confusion surrounding the usefulness of sign language especially in the report of the Special Education Review Committee. From the middle of the 1990s, the subject of sign language began to be seen in a positive light as stated in the *Strategy for Equality*, the *National Forum for Early Childhood Education* and the *Education Act*.

This gradual change in philosophy reflects increased awareness and increased representation of different perspectives in the policy process. Increased awareness can be traced to the establishment of the Irish Deaf Society in 1981 as the main representative organisation of Deaf people and the increasingly available information from international studies enabling the interested parties to compare the Irish situation and that of other countries. This awareness also reflects international developments where the European Parliament called on
national governments to recognise indigenous sign languages: this specific event
gave some basic impetus to those who wanted to change policy.

The 1988 European Parliament declaration and the NRB’s literacy assessment of
1991 can be seen as reversing earlier philosophy. The 1972 report was seen as
an official endorsement of the oralist philosophy and immediate subsequent
reports continued to support this. These reports had an impact on policy
implementation and as result the 1972 report became a focal point of criticism in
the subsequent literature. Later official reports, coupled with broader
representation lessened the impact of the 1972 report. The enactment of the
Education Act 1998 and the acknowledgements included in the report of the
National Forum for Early Childhood Education have effectively banished the
dominant philosophy of oralism.

These changes can be seen as reflecting the changed circumstances of the
1990s. The development of a partnership model in national social negotiations
became more prevalent in the 1990s although the degree of its success is a
matter of debate. The 1990s also saw the emergence of several writers such as
Barnes (1992) and Oliver (1992, 1996) offering alternative perspectives on
disability, which challenge the more traditional, medically driven perspective.
Their writings urge the empowerment of people with disabilities and have been
utilised to some extent by movements led by people with disabilities.

Their actions lead to increased public awareness on issues facing people with
disabilities. A gradual acceptance of social diversity in the 1990s and the
changing political landscape- such as the decline of the Catholic Church’s power-
has enabled the Deaf community to have confidence, to be critical of the issues
affecting them, and to take a proactive role in changing their circumstances.

This chapter has outlined the specific policies affecting Deaf people as
documented in several government reports and legislation. The next chapter will
focus on the socio-economic status of the Deaf community and will document the impact of policy on the status of Deaf people.