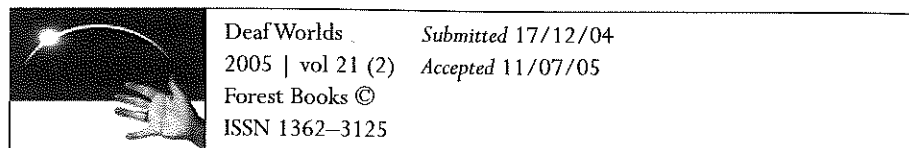# The potential of the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS): its role in enhancing social justice for the Deaf community: a personal observation

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Key words

Abstract

The establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Dublin, Trinity College, is justifiably regarded as a milestone in the history of the Deaf community. The paper briefly examines the general perception of what CDS is for and how it relates to my personal experience of representing the Deaf community at public policy level. The issue of social justice for the Deaf community in this context is briefly discussed. Brief consideration is given to how similar centres (e.g. Women's Studies) were established and how their establishment and development is paralleled with of the establishment of CDS. The paper concludes by pointing out the uniqueness and potentiality of CDS in its role in enhancing social justice for the Irish Deaf community.

Biography

John Bosco Conoma (M. Litt, BA) is chairperson of the Irish Deaf Society, and is active on many committees and working groups within the Irish Civil Service and other government bodies monitoring the progress of Deaf and disabled people in society. His M. Litt. work focused on Social Policy and the Deaf Community. Recent publications include a research publication on poverty within the Deaf community. Mr Conama is acting Chairperson of the Model School for the Deaf project, as well as being the Irish Deaf Society representative on the governmental Advisory Committee on the Education of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. Mr. Conama is currently working towards a PhD in equality studies. He also lectures at the Centre for Deaf Studies, University of Dublin.

1. Introduction

The establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) deserves to be regarded as a milestone in the history of Deaf community. It came about as a direct response to the demands of a lobbying campaign by the Irish Deaf Society, in which I was particularly active. These demands were influenced by many factors, including a major shift in understanding of the perspectives of deafness and the establishment of a number of similar centres in Britain and Europe.

The core activities of these academic establishments are centred upon the realisation that indigenous sign languages are languages in their own right and one of their aims is to *incorporate the investigation of the lives* of Deaf people from cultural and linguistic rather than medical perspectives. Although in existence for a number of years, it remains vital for the Centre for Deaf Studies to reflect upon its own achievements and develop a direction in which it may lead the way.

I begin this paper by establishing a general perception of the CDS before going on to explore its role briefly in relation to enhancing social justice for the Deaf community. I reflect on this role and draw upon my own personal and professional experiences of dealing with public policies at every level. What informs these policies are medical perspectives of deafness and my experience shows there are clear links between such perspectives and public policies.

In order to boost the potential and avail of opportunities presented to the Centre, the CDS could draw upon its own experience in parallel with those available in centres for the study of alternative disciplines. I conclude with a number of general points, illustrating ways in which the CDS could develop its role in supporting social justice for the Deaf community.

2. General perception of CDS

To establish a general perception of the need for a Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS), there are three important sources to be drawn upon: the CDS itself, the academic literature and the Deaf community. The CDS' own statement can be found in its handbook, which is also shown on the website:

> Our primary role as a teaching institute involves training native/near-native Irish Sign Language users as teachers of ISL, training Irish Sign Language/ English interpreters and broad-based teaching in the area of Deaf Studies. In terms of research, our focus to date has been primarily linguistic in nature (Centre for Deaf Studies, website (www.tcd.ie/Deaf_Studies)

There is a tremendous scarcity of academic literature about the need for such a centre, so I will draw upon the limited resources available. The need has been identified however, that in order to work with Deaf people, professional qualifications with a base in a socio-cultural perspective of deafness should be a requirement. Another important issue is the need to question and challenge public policy, which is perceived as hostile or unfriendly to the Deaf community (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996, Bienvenu, 1993).

Ancedotal evidence arising from my contact within the Deaf community demonstrates a perceived need for Deaf Studies as being predominantly based on the demand for an increased number of qualified interpreters. When enquiring about the need for ISL tutors, the response was more qualified. This muted response was not wholly surprising, since medicalised perspectives heavily condition attitudes within the Deaf community.

While these perceptions correlate with the CDS' statement on the whole, it could be a serious oversight if we ignore other identified needs. In training ISL tutors, interpreters or those who wish to work with the Deaf community,

one factor that is essential is a good understanding of both the socio-linguistic and socio-economic positions that Deaf people hold in society.

It is clear that the Deaf community endures enormous social injustice, largely arising from public policies and societal attitudes. There is an endless body of literature that supports this. The definition of social justice should not only be limited to the economic sphere, but extended to include cultural and political spheres (Lynch1999; Fraser 1995). This definition can be justified by a great deal of research emerging in recent times, documenting how difficult and frustrating it is for Deaf people to maintain their status in society within and beyond the workplace (Conama & Grehan 2001).

Thus, it is essential for those who wish to work with or within the Deaf community to conceptualise the social justice needs for the community. They must realise that the Deaf community does not need any introduction to the notion of social injustice as they experience it first hand on a daily basis. Failure to realise the existence of social injustice serves only to perpetuate this disadvantage with regard to the Deaf community.

It has occurred to me, having encountered concerns on personal, institutional and governmental levels, that issues affecting Deaf people cannot be solved simply by the provision of linguistic access, though many Deaf people do benefit enormously from this, particularly those who have had access to further and higher education.

Recently, there has been a remarkable increase in public policy moves to ensure the inclusion of all people in society. These public policies – whether they be legislative, corporate or community policy based – are increasingly scrutinised to ensure the inclusion of groups commonly labelled as 'vulnerable' or 'weak'. This scrutiny often involves ideological quarrels as to whether the perspectives offered by policies are compatible with the 'needy' groups'. The Deaf community is no exception.

The Deaf community must endure perspectives imposed by dominant groups in society regardless to whether they are appropriate to what Deaf people want. When confronted yet again, by these out-dated and incongruous points of view, the Deaf community will often take stock of the whole situation, only to realise what a vulnerable position it occupies and what little energy, power and academic resources it possesses to challenge these perspectives. All too often, with so few resources, the community opts to

simply continue to tolerate these familiar, if unsuitable approaches. The consequence of which simply upholds the status quo.

The three dominant perspectives on deafness are medical, social and cultural-linguistic. The medical model views deafness in individualistic, pathological and deficiency-related terms. This model therefore validates the need for a range of interventions – surgical or audiological – so as to restore hearing and the ability to speak, in order to fully assimilate into society (Rosen 2003, Lane 1995). The social model in contrast sees deaf people viewing their disability as a difference - acknowledging their deafness as an "impairment", but as with the social model of disability, the impairment itself is not the reason of their oppression, but society's attitudes. The principle of this social model is to compensate for deafness by means of technological advances; therefore, the aim remains to integrate and assimilate deaf people into the world of the majority (Rosen 2003, Lane 1995).

The third model views deafness, through sign language and its related culture, as a natural human variation, and regards deafness as defining Deaf people's very being, rather than being an impairing trait. The Deaf community itself is a very strong proponent of this model. *Deaf* (note the capital D) refers to persons who see themselves as culturally Deaf and mainly use sign language. They base their identity on shared experiences, common linguistic characteristics and a shared set of collective beliefs and values. They want to integrate into society as long as their linguistic and cultural rights are fully respected and upheld (Ladd, 2003).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the differences of these three perspectives in depth, but we can note here that the third approach is regarded as intrinsic, having developed naturally from within the community itself, while the two former models have been constructed externally. It is easy to recognise that the first perspective heavily influences public policies although recent initiatives such as providing text-based services like speed text facilities at conferences and subtitles on TV programme come closer to the second perspective. The third perspective is much favoured by the Deaf community but is regarded by others as unattainable and unfeasible. There is an apparent tendency or wish to 'soften the blow' by those who regularly deal with the Deaf community by opting for the second (social model) perspective. This leads to an inevitable clash of views but one has to consider the value of social justice when it comes to prioritising these perspectives.

This is not to say that these perspectives have not been challenged at all; there is one group that resists these perspectives constantly in the hope of a breakthrough. The example is the representative organisation, Irish Deaf Society's involvement in several policy debates. Their challenges are often questioned as to whether they are truly representative of the Deaf community but those who question them like this tend to overlook one key issue: the question is – are there sufficient material and academic resources at the disposal of the Deaf community to articulate or present the perspectives that are so obviously and greatly preferred by the Deaf community? The answer, at least from my personal experience, is definitely no. This is an experience shared by many Deaf people basically due to exclusion and discrimination.

This negative response to this question has serious consequences, as there is a growing tendency to rely on a very small pool of Deaf people with the necessary skills and experience to present or articulate the Deaf community perspective, which leaves them increasingly overstretched over the range of issues that require attention. This causes some to question the authenticity of their representation. The situation is really a vicious circle.

Recent developments at many levels have led to an increasing demand for experienced and skilful negotiators. As a consequence, the small available pool is over-stretched and under pressure. It is really a matter of urgency to increase this pool of expertise. It is all very well to have adequate representation but to offer expertise from a true community perspective requires that expertise come from inside the community.

We also have to ask if we should be content with the social model perspective, which only brings a limited form of social justice to the Deaf community, knowing that the cultural-linguistic model is feasible and achievable. But I doubt anyone wants to continue the compromised efforts associated with the social model perspective.

The cultural-linguistic model of deafness might only offer a descriptive perspective that is held by the Deaf community, although for them, it holds much potential in reducing social injustices. In order to strengthen the cultural-linguistic model, which might bring social justice to the Deaf community, it may be a good idea to establish a link to the equality framework developed by the Equality Studies Centre in University College Dublin (UCD). This framework

is based on the analysis of the nature of various egalitarian principles, extending from basic equality to equality of condition. These various forms of equality have different expectations and targets to achieve. The equality framework, briefly described here, also develops practical approaches to tackle social injustices (Baker, Lynch, Cantillion and Walsh 2004). This equality framework would enhance the potential of the socio-linguistic model of deafness.

Leaving this issue for now let us examine other studies within academia that could be an inspirational and useful reference for our future development.

3. What about other studies?

It is necessary to draw a parallel with centres such as Women's Studies, Disability Studies and Ethical Studies. Bienvenu (1993) examines the parallel development between studies and Deaf Studies concluding that backgrounds and experiences led to the establishment of centres. They are being developed in response to uncongenial public policies. Centres such as Women's Studies and Equality Studies Centre in UCD have identified themselves as being created out of frustration from the limitations offered by theories and perspectives explaining the social injustices, given through one single academic discipline.

In order to tackle social injustices, the need for a multi-disciplinary setting has been identified, where relevant programmes can be developed and delivered. Lynch (1999) states it is essential to have *a co-operative, inter-disciplinary and pluri-disciplinary mode of inquiry to contribute a better understanding of equality and social justice.* Oliver and Barton (2000) stress the need to maintain close focus on relevant issues and not to be distracted by *intellectually challenging or academically rewarding issues only to benefit scholars* themselves.

Another important issue identified by these centres is the development of research methodologies and the choice of research topics which will materially benefit those enduring social injustices. Historically, the production of research regarding issues facing the Deaf community was dominated and is still dominated by the medical perspective, which reinforces the status quo. In response to this, others have attempted to develop or discuss methodological issues in order to meet approval from the Deaf community. For instance, Ladd (2003) devises nine *subaltern* qualities to assess the researcher's appropriateness to conduct the research within the Deaf community.

Another related and very important issue is the matter of role models. O'Connor (2001) lists, for example, the lack of peer role models within the academy among the reasons why professional women lag behind their male counterparts in society. Additionally, Oliver and Barton (2000) warn against tokenism and to guard against this, the full involvement of disabled people is necessary ranging from developing curricula to teaching. Analogously, it is very important for the Centre for Deaf Studies to maintain the supply of professionally trained Deaf people and the retention of Deaf people within the CDS, where they can confidently participate in any decision-making process.

Nevertheless, once these measures are in place, one should not be complacent. Bienvenu (1993) stresses the need to question the purpose of Deaf Studies constantly and reflectively. I think there is a great deal of potential in developing the CDS further and maintaining its important links with the Deaf community. Owing to the existence of the Deaf community, the maintenance of such links brings legitimacy and validation to the CDS.

4. Potential of CDS in this regard

The CDS could be utilised to develop and enhance a framework where public policies could be evaluated, assessed and changed to further social justice for the Deaf community. The uniqueness of CDS should be recognised in this regard.

The uniqueness / potential of the CDS could be enhanced by:

- Developing a co-operative multi-disciplinary setting with other relevant departments within TCD
- Setting up research into language policies / their effects
- Setting up emancipatory research into socio-linguistic issues
- Offer proactive evidence-supporting views / perceptions to public policy by establishing an appropriate framework linking it with equality framework outlined by Equality Studies Centre, UCD.
- Increasing the pool of people with special expertise by training Deaf people and recognise the importance of suitable role models for the future generations of Deaf children.
- Liase and collaborate with other centres such as Women's Studies, and Equality Studies regarding methodological issues and approaches such as an equality framework.

These points are not exhaustive and could be added to, but the main point here is to draw attention to the potential the CDS has for improving social justice for the Deaf community; this is of paramount importance.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines how the CDS and the Deaf community can work together to improve social justice for the Irish Deaf community. There should be an emphasis on the analysis of *social inequality* in relation to the Deaf community and we should examine ways to address these injustices, for example through research and input to public policy. This is the premise on which the existence of Womens' Studies and Equality Studies Centres (as well as numerous others) are based. Through them, we can learn and liaise to avail of their expertise to develop the socio-linguistic framework, which can address social injustices adequately.

The whole area of social inequality simply cannot be divorced from the study of the Deaf community's culture and language, or indeed from the work of interpreters. It is an inherent part of all these aspects and an awareness of such deserves a presence within the structures and the curriculum of the CDS. This emphasis would lead to an increased number of Deaf professionals to deal with the underlying but conflicting perspectives behind public policies. Having outlined a number of general points as to how the CDS could enhance its role in this regard, it is quite clear that we must all do what we can to ensure a better world. We have a great resource in the CDS in helping to make that happen.

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