5 The Deaf community and its characteristics

In the next two sections we will examine those areas of the Community about which we seem to know most. These are the well-researched but rather superficial areas of socio-economic activity and education, and we have to probe quite deeply into them to contribute significantly to our picture of the Community. Schein and Delk (1974) have carried out the largest study to date in their census of the American deaf population, Jackson's (1986) study in the UK provides a very good indication of the issues, and Kyle and Woll (1985) summarize some of the key points of earlier studies in Britain.

5.1 Employment

The most common observation on employment is that deaf people are 'under-employed rather than unemployed'. Kyle and Allsop (1982) report unemployment of 8.6 per cent, and Kyle and Pullen (1985) of 15 per cent (among 23-year-olds)—general adult unemployment in the UK varies from 8 per cent to 15 per cent. In terms of type of job, all studies confirm the under-employment. Deaf people generally have jobs in the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations (62 per cent as compared to around 25 per cent of hearing people: Kyle and Pullen, 1985). Generally less than 3 per cent are found in Social Class 1 (Professional/Managerial), though this is also a less common category for hearing people. Kyle and Allsop (1982) found that very few Deaf people ever reached a position of supervision over others and the prospects for promotion were very bleak for most.

Kyle and Woll (1985) report that Deaf people were generally happy at work even given the fact that very few had another Deaf person in the same factory or division. Nevertheless, the statistics tend to hide the great gulf in the quality of working life between Deaf and hearing people. Foster (1986), in an examination of graduates of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in the USA, found many areas of problems when she interviewed Deaf workers Although all felt competent in the carrying out of their job, communication difficulties were often a major barrier. Most of the workers were lonely at work, spending most of their free time on their own. Their career goals tended to be lowered after initial contact with the workplace—supervisory roles were usually ruled out. Over half described situations in which they felt they had been treated unfairly.

This rather bleak picture is also reflected in the report of the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), Communication Works: Inquiry into the Employment of Deaf People (RNID, 1988) which was designed to illustrate some of the problems. As well as setting out the same issues as above, they used some case studies.

FF began work and it was soon apparent that her skills—particularly in literacy and language—were much less developed than had been realised. The expectations that she would pass through the training course rapidly and would soon be a productive member of the team were found to be unrealistic. This had several consequences.
Firstly, it put FF under a lot of strain. She felt she was not succeeding in her job. Secondly, the co-worker assigned to FF was having to try to do her ordinary work as well as helping FF to do hers—this produced great stress. Thirdly, the planning department found itself effectively short-staffed and began to experience delays in processing applications. Again, there was increased stress throughout. Finally the relationship between hearing staff, the sign language interpreter and the deaf worker began to deteriorate.

(RNID, 1988, p. 21)

Although these negative experiences at the interface with the hearing community are not untypical, and though they are significant ones for Deaf people in the conduct of their lives, it should be pointed out that the major problems are in the transition phases between jobs or from school to work. It is at these points that expectations may be greatest on the part of both hearing and Deaf workers and when the greatest difficulties arise.

Schein (1987) confirms most of the employment results for deaf people from all walks of life in the USA. Stinson (1970) suggests that under-employment arises because of poor self-image, though given the problems of stress and pressure from hearing society, the low self-esteem is likely to be a product rather than a cause. Christiansen (1982) attributes the under-employment of Deaf people to the change in the economy from a base in manufacturing to a base in service industry. Deaf people are simply not represented well in services. He concludes:

In general, it appears that in order to secure a given job in the labour force, a deaf person must be better educated, and more qualified, than a hearing person vying for the same position.

(Christiansen, 1982, p. 19)

Significantly, there are also differences between white and non-white Deaf people in employment. Non-white Deaf people are less likely to be employed and are likely to earn much less.

Jones and Pullen (1987), in the first part of a major study of Deaf people in Europe, broadly confirm these findings in the perception of Deaf people. They found evidence of under-employment, thwarted ambition and even occupational segregation, attributed to the type of expectancies built up by schooling. Interestingly, they found that jobs were usually acquired through personal contacts rather than on the open market or through the rehabilitation or job-finding agencies. This might be a factor in Deaf people becoming ’stuck’ in one level of employment as it is difficult to see how their employment needs could have been adequately evaluated in that situation.

The picture of employment is therefore not a happy one in many respects and constitutes a great waste of potential. (Remember that hearing loss does not produce a decrease in intellectual capacity, and so Deaf people will be just as cognitively competent as hearing people.) The reasons for such problems would normally be considered to lie in the education Deaf people receive, and most investigators have considered this a major factor.
5.2 Education

All the major studies of national groups in different countries highlight educational failure on a massive scale. Although education will be dealt with more extensively in Unit 5, it is important to consider it here in relation to understanding the Community in order to build up some picture of the likely outcomes of deaf children’s education. Deaf children read poorly (profoundly deaf 16-year-olds at an average reading age of less than 9 years), speak unintelligibly and have limited lip-reading skills (Conrad, 1979). They are less likely to go to college in the USA (Christiansen, 1982), though more likely to go into further education in the UK (Kyle and Pullen, 1985).

The purpose here is not to highlight these failures—which in any case can be compared to other minority groups in the UK—but rather to consider the impact that such a situation has on the Deaf community itself. The effect is colossal. On the one hand, the schooling often produces great feelings of failure either during schooldays or when entering the work-place, and on the other, the schooling itself is disabling when it institutionalizes deafness (in large residential settings) and when it represses the formation of a successful identity. In many respects, Deaf young people may leave school pre-programmed to fail and to accept the failure. They move from childhood into a powerless situation in adult life—often being found a job by their school or by parents, and left at the lower levels of the salary structure. Even when the possibilities for pressure towards change occur, Deaf people are unable to take up the challenge because of their learned helplessness.

One ‘obvious’ solution to this problem is to avoid the separateness of the deaf school by mainstreaming the deaf child from the earliest age, and thus avoiding the perils mentioned above. Unfortunately, unlike some ‘disabled’ groups, this may not be a solution for Deaf people. However, before going on to see why this might be so, it is important to note that there are two levels to the effect of deaf schooling. On the one hand, we can see the negative acceptance of failure in society at large as it develops in the child and young adult, but on the other there is the tremendous advantage of the creation of identity. While schooling may be a disarming experience on one level, it is a crucially important one on the other level. Through the continuing contact with other Deaf people (even where there are no adult role models), language and culture grow. The key adolescent stage of establishing identity is met in a community environment where confidence in communication and social interaction can be experienced. For many Deaf young people this could be the most important period of their lives, when the socialization takes place not from adult models but from other Deaf young people. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the first questions that Deaf people ask each other on meeting is which school the other attended.

Mainstreaming has become one of the most controversial issues for Deaf people and one which mixes the desired promise of acceptance by and equal status with hearing people, with the stark reality of constant difference and the enormity of the language gap. Integration procedures have existed in deaf education since just after the Second World War and it has always been the case that a majority of hearing-impaired children are in ordinary schools. The proportion of Deaf children is difficult to determine
since it is possible to utilize the statistics of hearing loss in many different ways, but it can be seen that many Deaf young people no longer have the experience of schooling in direct contact with other Deaf children.

This trend is now widespread across the UK. For many groups, special education had been an isolating and frustrating experience; for physically handicapped young people in particular, the effects of their separate schooling had been to disable them in the able-bodied world. Integration offered the possibility of closer contact and thereby greater likelihood of acceptance and success. For parents, the attractions of having their children treated as equals in an ordinary school are just too great. Linked to this is the finding in Conrad's study of deaf school-leavers that there are no measurable differences in academic achievement between special school children and integrated children (when one controls degree of hearing loss) (Conrad, 1979). Unfortunately, when we look at the observational research on deaf children we find that the outcomes in the classroom in the mainstream are not good.

Gregory and Bishop (1989), in a language and interaction study of deaf children in ordinary schools, found that the quality of interaction was greatly impaired and that the language actually accessible to the deaf child was considerably less than was available to the hearing classmates.

However, one of the most direct criticisms of integration comes from Ladd (1981) who was mainstreamed during his education. It is worth detailing his insights of the boy in a mainstream school (there is an updated version of this paper in Reader One, Article 10 'Making plans for Nigel: the Erosion of Identity by Mainstreaming', which you might like to look at):

He survives by cunning; his homework is copied or else is simple enough to pick up from the textbook alone. He does poorly in term time but better in exams; the strain forces him to specialise and he is literally top in a couple of subjects and bottom in others. He understands few of the events that the school involves itself in; it is impossible for him to hear in meetings and he develops a terror of drama, gym, science and art where you have to demonstrate whether you have understood by carrying things out.

(Ladd, 1981, pp. 408-9)

It is easy to see how the illusion of success is possible to maintain for a deaf child in such a setting. Deaf children are unlikely to be a behavioural problem (or they would have been moved), and since the currency of integration is whether the child 'seems to have settled or appears to be coping', there is very little actual monitoring of the cognitive and psychological development of the child. The pressures on the child are immense.
All this has an effect on him, and at home he stays in more and more, inventing and playing games alone. As close to the womb as he can get. I must be careful not to paint things too black. They are that black, but when you are growing up you don't know any different; you are told repeatedly that this is what growing up to be a man is all about. You still hate it, but because of this, it rules out suicide as an option.

(Ibid., p. 410)

These are harsh words—all the more so as they come in a situation where this person has been surrounded by well-meaning adults. It is also striking that the young person does not know 'any different'. The effects of the integration remain unevaluated. But the effects begin to be apparent in the search for an identity in adolescence.

His search for an identity becomes more intense. 'I'm an introvert, that's it. I can't follow things. But that's not because I'm deaf. They told me I wasn't deaf, just that I can't hear very well. So if I can't follow, it must be because I'm thick. That must be true. I can never think of anything to talk about to others except football. So that's what I am.' Now he is truly split in half. His rational mind says that he can't be thick because he is where he is, whilst his emotional mind sees no other alternative identity.

Oh Ewing, Oh Van Uden, what a marvellous choice you gave us deaf children! To see ourselves as stupid rather than to be able to see ourselves as deaf and accept it and work from there.

(Ibid., p. 411)

Such views are not untypical, though clearly there are others who never reach the stage of comprehension that Ladd has reached and so continue to believe in their success. There are others who reach Ladd's conclusions but have no means of expressing themselves adequately and their lives end in suicide. There are no figures for such problems in the world of Deaf people but nearly every Deaf person whom one could approach could list a number of others who have found the identity problem and frustration too much.

Activity 7

The issues of identity and membership of a community are very difficult to imagine if you have never found yourself in a situation where your self-esteem was called into question. Few of us on courses ever really fail. Try to recall visits you might have made to a foreign country when you have been on your own and surrounded by speakers of another language—where you are quite clearly the foreigner. List the feelings you had at the time and consider how easy it was for you to ask questions or obtain answers.

Comment

What you may have found is that, first, it is difficult to remember any situation in which you were completely a 'foreigner'—we avoid those situations as far as possible because we have an inherent fear of this isolation. When it does happen we usually feel unable to ask questions and also very uncertain of the responses. The solution is to ask safe questions to which we can predict the answers. This is the situation in which many Deaf people find themselves for much of the time.
Education and employment are two areas where we seem to have a great deal in the way of statistics but little insight. Both create experiences which shape the lives of Deaf people and thereby have an impact on the Community. Up to now, hearing people have been satisfied with assurances from each other that the statistics were fine, or, if they were not (as in the case of reading problems), then they were a direct result of the deafness. Rarely have we taken note of the views of Deaf people or paused to look behind the statistical and audiological entity to try to understand the experience of deafness.

**Activity 8**
Examine two of the communities you noted in Activity 4 in Section 2, of which you are a member. Describe the characteristics of the members in terms of the dimensions we have highlighted for Deaf people—educational background and employment. Consider how important these factors have been in determining the power of the community in which you are involved.

**Comment**
What you may find, as in the case of Deaf people, is that there is a range of ability and background but the likelihood is that the power of the group to raise money, to influence others, to determine its own future, is directly related to the status of the members. For Deaf people the effects of education and the consequent poorer jobs obtained are a major problem in improving their situation.

### 6 The Deaf community as a social structure

As in education, two different levels of activity in the Deaf community have been developed. On one level we have provision and associations. On the other level we have Deaf people, their interaction and what an experienced social worker once described as ‘their secret language’.

Throughout the UK there is a network of Deaf clubs and societies. Most have their origins in the associations initiated by Deaf people but organized by hearing missioners. Some remain as charitable bodies with their own Trust Deed and Trustees or Board of Hearing Management. Some are still dominated by the Church. In the nineteenth century, these associations catered for the moral and spiritual welfare of Deaf people as well as providing further education and often providing training in a trade. Many were stifling of initiative, being wholly controlled by hearing people who could sign and could function well in the hearing world. They offered an infrastructure which allowed Deaf people to interact and they provided a meeting place. Modern day social work and attitudes towards charity and care have changed these voluntary organizations to a great extent. Nevertheless, in order to find out about deafness it is still the most natural thing to ask the principal of the club or the senior social worker.

This infrastructure is seldom part of the ‘Deaf way’ (a term discussed later in Section 9.4). The major interaction among Deaf people takes place on a different plane which only occasionally interfaces with this organization.