

BOOK REVIEW

ILA PARASNIS (EDITOR). *Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience*. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press. (1998). 306 pp. HB: \$49.95 ISBN: 0-521-45477-8; PB: \$19.95 ISBN: 0-521-64565-4.

For centuries, educators and other professionals have carried on a bitter debate over the “right” way to educate deaf children. On the one side are “Oralists,” who feel strongly that deaf children should rely only on hearing and speech for communication. They cling to a “medical model” that views deafness as a deficit to be cured. On the other side are those who promote a “difference model,” which claims that deaf people constitute a unique cultural group who share a signed language (American Sign Language, ASL; in Quebec, Langue des Signes Québécoise, LSQ) (see MacDougall, 1971, 1979, 1994, for a review of issues in deaf education in a Canadian context).

Until very recently the “Oralist” side of this debate dominated the field of deaf education. Under this scheme of things signed languages have absolutely no place in the education of deaf children. There are still a number of educational programs for the deaf which absolutely forbid the use of signed language in any form.

The book, *Culture, Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience*, is an elegant and comprehensive exposition of one side of this long-standing debate in deaf education – the side which portrays deaf people as comprising a bilingual and bicultural minority group whose native language is a signed rather than a spoken language (ASL/LSQ).

Paradoxically, viewing the phenomena of deafness as cultural entity with bilingual and bicultural characteristics only adds to the controversial nature of an already controversial topic. Fortunately, readers who

are interested in following the complex train of thought which finally arrives at the conclusion that deafness is indeed best seen as a cultural condition can turn to this nicely edited volume. In three well-organized sections, the editor (Ila Parasnis, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, NTID, Rochester New York), assembles readable articles (mercifully keeping traditional jargon to a minimum), drawing from a wide variety of experts with both academic and personal experience in the field of deafness. The articles are the ultimate product of colloquia on the same topic that were held earlier at the National Technical Institute of the Deaf.

In the first section, up-to-date information from the fields of bilingualism and bilingual deaf education is outlined to provide a framework for viewing the deaf experience. François Grosjean (University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland), a well-known expert in the field, presents the psychological aspects that illustrate how a bilingual/bicultural person functions in society. He spells out the implications of this concept for educational practice and he leaves little doubt that he feels that, "Deaf children should be brought up bilingual – with sign language as their primary language and with the majority language (especially in its written modality) as a second language." (p. 34).

Kenji Hakuta and Elizabeth Mostafapour (Stanford University, California) provide a more general background involving the topic of the history and politics of bilingualism and bilingual education in the United States. The message for the field of deaf education is that we have much to learn, especially about the interaction between political ideology, practice and research. However, they point out that many significant differences remain – an obvious difference is that ASL has no written form and the native language in the case of the deaf is not shared between parents and offspring (except in the case of deaf parents of deaf children).

Josiane Hamers (University of Laval, Quebec) picks up on this theme and outlines the important sociocultural and cognitive variables that influence and are influenced by second language learning of the ethnolinguistic minority child. Here we see the connection to the well known linguistic situation in Quebec. In fact Hamers was originally associated with the academic group involved in issues of bilingualism founded by Dr. Wallace Lambert of the Psychology Department of McGill University. Her paper is rich in both theoretical and empirical details which have great relevance to the issues involved in the bilin-

gual education of deaf children. Again, the similarities between minority bilingualism in the hearing population (in the Canadian context) and the situation with deaf children are striking but profound differences remain. For example, the well-known immersion approach can't work because it depends on a child whose first language is valorized and learned to a high degree. In the case of deaf children, their first language or "mother tongue" is most often severely impoverished and even denigrated. The use of the phrase "mother tongue" speaks volumes to the difficulties of marrying the traditional study of bilingualism in hearing people with the deaf experience.

It may be of historical interest to note that while the work of Lambert's group was attracting world attention for its pioneering studies of bilingualism in a sociocultural context, the Medical Faculty of McGill through its School of Communication Sciences and Disorders was a leading advocate of the medical/deficiency model of deafness and hearing impairment. The Education Faculty (with some significant dissension) became a reluctant partner in this effort when they lent their course numbers to courses offered in the Faculty of Medicine for a teacher training program for the deaf. This program was discontinued by the university a number of years ago due to lack of student interest and certification difficulties. I mention these real life examples to emphasize that the topics covered in this book are not just academic issues, but, as is the case for most debates in the field of minority language education, they can have very definite consequences for educational practice and professional training.

One important contribution of this book is to highlight the application of ethnography in order to shed light on important aspects of the bilingual/bicultural experience of deaf persons. The judicious use of first-person accounts to illustrate theoretical issues is long overdue in this field. For example, Susan Foster (NTID, Rochester New York) illustrates the way a deaf person relates her experience with hearing family members:

I don't have any communication with my grandparents . . . I know they want to talk to me and I want to talk to them, but I can't . . . I'm glad I came here (to College) so I won't see them as much. (p. 120)

In a similar vein a deaf student expresses a well-known sentiment of deaf persons:

I went to the residential school . . . I didn't see my family much but I felt I belonged to my family at the institution. (p. 131)

The pivotal role of the residential school in the identity of the deaf person is legendary, and is based on the bilingual/bicultural experience of the school as opposed to home life, which in many cases involves only use of spoken English, the second, weaker language for most deaf children.

The heart of the concept of the bilingual/bicultural child is the concept of deaf culture itself. No one better explains Deaf culture in the context of bilingual education than Carol Padden (1988), a deaf person who wrote the classic *Deaf in America: Voices from a Deaf Culture* with Tom Humphries. If you want to know what deaf culture is, read Padden's two chapters in the book under review; better yet, read *Deaf in America* or Oliver Sack's *Seeing Voices* (1989).

There are other interesting chapters on social identity, political activism, diversity in the curriculum, minority empowerment, and social assimilation, all of which shed considerable light on the main theme of the book — the Deaf experience from a bilingual/bicultural perspective. For example, Foster, in her discussion of social identity, leaves us with an important question which arises from the fascinating study of deafness on Martha's Vineyard at the turn of the century. Nora Groce (1985), in her book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, found that when everyone on the island, including the hearing population, used sign language, deaf islanders were "full and equal participants in a genuinely bilingual and multimodal society." A similar phenomenon was seen in a Maya community in Mexico (Johnson, 1991) and is currently under study as part of an honours project in the Department of Anthropology at McGill (MacDougall, 1999). Foster's question is: to what degree does our monolingual and monomodal culture of hearing English users create as well as sustain the need for a community and culture of Deaf people? A poignant question indeed for anyone interested in this field.

The final section of the book adds a personal touch. Here we are presented with first-person accounts of experiences in a bilingual/bicultural world. Deaf children of hearing parents, hearing children of deaf parents, deaf children of deaf parents, and a post-lingually deafened African-American — all tell their story, and all shed light on the complexities of the bilingual experience from a deaf point of view.

The experiences of Patricia Mudgett-Decaro (National Technical Institute for the Deaf) as a hearing child of deaf parents hit home for me as I share the remarkable experience of growing up with deaf parents.

Experiencing both the deaf and hearing worlds as a child with the linguistic and cultural and psychological complexity that is engendered by that unique situation is well portrayed by Mudgett-Decaro. The phenomenon of switching between cultural worlds and languages, sometimes feeling part of one world and not the other, or not feeling part of either, has a sharp resonance for me. As she aptly puts it, "it is a bilingual bicultural margin, a place neither deaf nor hearing."

After centuries of viewing deafness as a medical phenomenon that needs to be cured, we are just beginning to open the floodgates to a new model with a distinctly different orientation. Language and culture are two essential ingredients of our collective humanity. Viewing the deaf experience in this context can only add to the richness of our understanding. But a careful reading of this collection of papers also raises a red flag. Decades of study and practice in bilingualism and biculturalism shed a great deal of light, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to resist the idea that the phenomenon deafness stands alone in the human experience.

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