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GUEST EDITORIAL



# Sign language-medium education in the global South

Much research regarding sign language-medium education for deaf learners has taken place in the global North, which has often been regarded as a source of expert knowledge about deaf education and sign languages (Branson & Miller, 2004; Moriarty Harrelson, 2019). This special issue focuses on education for deaf learners in the global South as a site of knowledge production. This issue highlights contributions from researchers and practitioners from the global South who study the need for, implementation, and progress of programmes for deaf learners that utilise a national sign language as a medium of instruction. The term "national sign language" is used by the World Federation of the Deaf to refer to one or several sign languages that are part of the linguistic ecology of a country (J. J. Murray, personal communication, December 3, 2020). While the global South is not a static category (Friedner, 2017), this term refers to histories of exclusion (Pennycook & Makoni, 2020). In the context of deaf education, the term also refers to sites that have been subject to certain "prescriptivist modernization programs focused on introducing global North models of deaf education" and global North sign languages and sign systems (Moriarty, 2020, p. 198). In these contexts for intervention, certain historical figures, such as Frances Parsons, loom large. Parsons, a deaf professor of art history from Gallaudet University who became a US Peace Corps consultant, was a proponent of Total Communication as a system of sign-supported speech. In the 1970s and 1980s, she visited countries in South America, the Asia-Pacific region, and Africa to promote the use of Total Communication as a sign system related to ASL (Moriarty, 2020; Scott & Henner, 2021). The ongoing impact of Parson's efforts in these contexts, where an ASL-based sign system sometimes displaces the use of Indigenous national sign languages in classrooms with deaf children, is illustrative of the risks inherent to intervening in signing communities outside of the global North (Braithwaite, 2020). As well, regarding the global South as a locus for intervention by global North researchers risks positioning sign-language medium (or bilingual) education for deaf children as an invention of white people (Bell, 2006).

Particular contexts highlighted in the papers in this issue include China, Malawi, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago. This guest editorial also draws on information from the past and present deaf education systems in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana, based on fieldwork by Kristian, Ben, and Ian. While some of the issues that we discuss here may be specific to these particular contexts, we present them as case studies which illuminate some general issues in the implementation of sign language-medium education in the global South more broadly. Moreover, while these issues are discussed and localised to specific contexts in the global South, knowledge gleaned from these contexts can unsettle and reorient educational policy and practices in the global North and other locations. There is particular attention paid to lived experiences of former and current deaf students in the system as this has been missing from the academic literature (see Braithwaite, 2015), which has been dominated by mainly hearing people.

## Deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago

In the Caribbean generally (as well as in Africa–see Phiri, this issue), the establishment of formal education systems was rooted in colonial relationships with European imperial nations in ways which have shaped their ideologies and structures, and entrenched structural inequalities (Hickling-Hudson, 2004). The educational system implemented by European colonisers served to indoctrinate European values and ways of knowing into colonial subjects. As Moore and Johnson (2004, p. 205) put it, the Crown "intended to provide the lower classes in particular with the ideological tenets to become civilised loyal British colonial subjects, and to equip them with basic skills of literacy and numeracy." It simultaneously devalued, oppressed and eradicated Indigenous ways of learning and teaching and linguistic traditions. The formal education system was a vehicle of Anglicisation in the British West Indies, designed to eradicate cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity among its peoples (Ferreira, 1997). It represents an on-going act of colonisation, which has given rise to movements of resistance within various Indigenous communities (see Gahman, 2016).

Although special education for deaf children only began to be widely established from around the mid-twentieth century (Braithwaite et al., 2011), the pattern was much the same. The first deaf schools in the region, and the changing systems, methods, and ideologies of deaf education, have been deeply influenced by the interventions of "experts" from the global North, and by prevailing trends in Western Europe and North America. Interventions have often devalued and erased Indigenous signed languages and histories. This guest editorial shows the repercussions of this in the contemporary landscape and warns against the implementation of educational methods without respect for local resources, languages and experts.

The first deaf schools in Jamaica and Trinidad, which were still then British colonies, were established after a letter from the Jamaican mother of a deaf child was read out at a meeting of the British Deaf and Dumb Association in Bath, England in 1937. In attendance at that meeting was the Reverend Frederick Gilby, a recently retired Anglican minister and a hearing British Sign Language signer whose parents had been deaf. The Reverend had worked for much of his life in the field of deaf education in the UK and then in South Africa (Stiles, 2011). Gilby travelled to Jamaica, where in 1938 he helped to establish the Jamaican Association for the Deaf and the first deaf schools. Indeed, Gilby himself was the first officially known teacher of the deaf in Jamaica. According to Florette Case (1948, p. 32), the first Jamaican to teach at the deaf school, "The language of signs was used and the emphasis was placed on religious instruction." Gilby later travelled to Trinidad, where in July 1943 he helped to establish the Trinidad Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb and in November 1943 the first deaf school in Trinidad and Tobago, the Cascade School for the Deaf. The associations that Gilby helped to set up in Jamaican and Trinidad, and which remain responsible for managing deaf schools, were overseen by various prominent local business people and clergy. This institutional structure remains, and the governance of what is now called the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired is still dominated by hearing people with little connection to the deaf community, often little professional experience in deaf education, and often no signing skills (Ali et al., 2021). Deaf leaders in Trinidad recognise that the Association often does not act in the interests of the signing deaf community. Recently, this has contributed to the establishment of various less institutionally powerful deaf-led organisations that advocate on behalf of the deaf community, such as the Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Foundation led by Ian Dhanoolal and others (Dhanoolal, 2018). Partly because of the institutional power invested in the

national association (recognised legally through an Act of Parliament), it has been very difficult for these deaf-led organisations to have their own advocacy work recognised and funded.

## *Colonial methods in deaf education*

The methods, practices, and ideologies of education in deaf schools were also imported from the global North. In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, hearing teachers at the Cascade School for the Deaf were trained in England in the prevailing oralist methods. Both teachers and students observed the shortcomings of this approach. A deaf woman who attended the school in Trinidad observed, "The teacher would speak into a microphone. I would try to lipread and understand them, but I got nothing from it" (personal communication, 2021). One of the first teachers in Jamaica wrote that "It hardly seems worthwhile just to teach a few words that they will not use either willingly or spontaneously" (Case, 1948, pp. 38–3), and observed that the older deaf students "have evolved such a system of signing that teaching lip-reading is a hopeless task" (Case, 1948, p. 39).

When a shift from oralism occurred, it was not initiated by local signing communities, but again by intervention from abroad. Following a similar trip to the Bahamas, Frances Parsons was invited by the Cascade school to Trinidad and Tobago (Braithwaite, 2015). In 1975, Parsons taught Signing Exact English to teachers and parents at the local deaf school. This marked a partial shift away from oralism, as Total Communication involved the use of manual systems in addition to oral methods. However, this shift was to what Branson and Miller (1993) termed the symbolic violence of signed English that devalues national sign languages. There was an ideological clash among the educators over Total Communication versus pure oralism, and one teacher described it this way: "there was this pulling and tugging because before that teachers went to England to be trained in the oral method. So there were these English trained teachers who would want the children to speak" (Lamb, 2016, pp. 86–87).

What Parsons and the teachers seem to have missed was that by this time, the generations of deaf children who had passed through the Cascade school had already created their own sign language, which is now referred to as Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language (TTSL) (Braithwaite, 2018). Similar erasure of indigenous sign languages occurred in other contexts in Asia and Africa where Parsons campaigned for Total Communication (Moriarty, 2020). In Trinidad and Tobago, importing a foreign way of signing, and one which, after Parsons's brief stay, relied largely on very limited written resources, caused various problems. Some TTSL signers with younger deaf relatives recall learning the new "American" way of signing from them. Others report that they still have problems understanding the newer way of signing. As one community member reported, "Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language is better. American Sign Language is different, and I don't completely understand it" (quoted in Braithwaite, 2015).

Cheryl Maniram, a deaf Trinidadian who has worked as an assistant teacher in Trinidad for over 30 years, was a student at the school when Parsons arrived. She recalls, "In 1975 the principal of the school went away to Gallaudet University. He brought ASL back to Trinidad. But ASL and TTSL were different. I was confused. They were using this (ASL) sign for 'sister', but I knew a totally different TTSL sign" (personal communication, 27th November 2020).

As a student at Cascade School for the Deaf in the 1980s, Ian was taught in Signing Exact English by teachers with limited competence. This made it difficult to understand the classes. It was outside of the classroom and outside of the formal education system

that he was exposed to TTSL. Between classes, he socialised with the deaf groundsman and the deaf cook who had themselves previously attended the school, and who taught him TTSL. Students tutored each other during classes, conveying what the teachers were signing into TTSL.

### *Mainstreaming and sign language interpreters*

Ian was also one of the first cohorts of deaf students to experience mainstreaming. Since the 1980s, deaf students in Trinidad and Tobago who complete primary education have been placed in mainstream secondary schools and provided with sign language interpreters by the Ministry of Education. However, this initiative was made without the necessary infrastructure. The movement to include deaf students in mainstream secondary schools happened at a time when there were no local sign language interpreter training programmes and few reasonably proficient interpreters. Ian was one of the first (but not the last deaf student) to suffer the consequences of this initiative. The lack of available qualified interpreters meant that there was often only one interpreter for several deaf students in the same school, and therefore they all regularly missed classes because the interpreter was not able to simultaneously interpret for all classes with deaf students. Interpreters in mainstream schools are often in a position to make major decisions about the course of education for deaf students. An interpreter decided which classes Ian could take based on what the interpreter felt capable of interpreting at a secondary school level. This prevented him from choosing what to study and has affected his life trajectory. Decades later, deep problems remain with the secondary school system for deaf students in Trinidad and Tobago, as elsewhere (see Phiri, this issue). A thirteen year-old deaf student currently in her second year of secondary school recently reported to Kristian, Ben, and Ian that her choice of courses was proscribed by an interpreter. To this day, there is still no assessment and evaluation of sign language interpreters in the education system, and many of the serious difficulties that mainstreamed deaf students face stem from the quality of the interpreting in addition to the overall inefficacy of a mediated education for deaf students (Russell, 2021). An education mediated by sign language interpreters is not a bilingual education in keeping with the mandates of Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This is because an interpreter cannot replace the direct instruction in sign language, deaf peer networks, or deaf adult role models that are specified in Article 24 (Murray et al., 2020).

## Deaf education in Guyana

The history of deaf education in Guyana is in some ways quite similar to that of Trinidad and Tobago. In 1944, Reverend Gilby moved on to Guyana from Trinidad, although he was not able to establish a school or a national association in Guyana. The first deaf school in Guyana, David Rose School for Handicapped Children, opened in the capital, Georgetown, in 1969. The school adopted an oralist approach at first. As in Trinidad and Tobago, there was a shift in the 1970s towards Total Communication, which remains the dominant paradigm. However, despite many common historical, cultural and linguistic connections, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago differ in some important ways. Most obviously, Guyana is a far larger country, with many different Indigenous communities that are spread out and distant from Georgetown. There has been very limited research on sign language diversity in the country, but it is clear that many

Indigenous communities have their own signing traditions which are entirely distinct from those used in Georgetown. We provide a brief description from one such community.

Several hours' travel from Georgetown, close to the town of Bartica, there is a small Indigenous community with a relatively high rate of genetic deafness. In the village, there are deaf people of all ages, and most people, hearing and deaf, use a sign language which has been transmitted across at least three generations. Ben and Ian first visited the community in 2018. They were introduced to the community by members of the Deaf Association of Guyana (DAG), with whom they had worked on a number of projects. DAG had been lobbying to extend access to education for deaf children living outside Georgetown, where the David Rose School is located. The deaf children in this community had been attending the village school, where the teachers, who had not grown up in the village, did not sign. DAG had begun to provide some ASL-based resources and was trying to establish a special class for the deaf students. Apparently, DAG envisioned ASL as the primary language of formal education for deaf children. This was problematic because ASL was not used in the community, which already had a sign language. As had happened in Trinidad and Tobago, teachers had been provided with books and similar materials from which to try to learn ASL. As in Trinidad and Tobago, we felt that it was a mistake to try to implement an educational intervention for deaf students without first understanding the linguistic ecology of the community. The Indigenous sign language was clearly rich, well established and widely used in the community. It has a complex number system which could be applied for teaching mathematics within a formal setting, and this seemed a much better solution than trying to use (fragments of) ASL for the same purpose.

Kristian, Ian and Ben, along with another hearing Trinbagonian researcher, Johannah-Rae Reyes, initiated a research project in collaboration with the community, DAG, and the national Ministry of Education to begin documenting the Indigenous sign language for the purpose of creating pedagogical materials for use in the formal education system. The project also included Indigenous sign language training for hearing teachers.

During time spent in the community, we observed a situation in which a deaf girl from the village needed to give a formal statement at the local police station. The police stated that they would not accept the assistance of a local hearing signer, but would require a professional sign language interpreter from Georgetown, despite the fact that no one there knew the local sign language. To us, this illustrates a point made by Hubert Devonish (1986, p. 119) in relation to debates about Creole language education in the Caribbean: "My position is that the language problems of the school are the language problems of the society at large. The denial of language rights of Creole speaking children within the classroom is of the same order as the denial of language rights which their parents are experiencing outside."

## Deaf educational interventions and sign language rights

We believe that interventions in deaf education in the Caribbean have too often failed to connect questions of educational policy and practice to larger issues of the language rights of deaf communities. Such interventions may have extremely harmful consequences on the wider community, including the erasure of languages, community histories, and lived experiences and knowledge. The above example of interpreting at

the police station illustrates how critical the consequences may be for members of marginalised language communities.

On the other hand, interventions in education provide an opportunity for work which has an impact well beyond schools. Documenting a language for the first time and establishing its use with formal institutions of education can be a crucial step towards recognition within wider society. The only formal government document we know of that makes reference to TTSL (albeit by the odd name "Trinidad and Tobago Deaf Sign Language") is a *Language and Language Education Policy* commissioned by the national government in 2010 (Robertson, 2010). The policy provides very little detail on deaf education, stating that "At no time in the history of education in the country has there been sufficient information on deafness and Deaf Education for a policy position to be arrived at" (Robertson, 2010, p. 37; see also Mohammed, this issue).

Interventions in the deaf education systems of the global South that are based on models developed in the global North may make assumptions about language situations which are not consistent with local realities. Global deaf community activism and research has often centred around the legal recognition of national sign languages (De Meulder et al., 2019). In places like Guyana, there may not be any single national sign language. An argument we have encountered from policy makers, teachers, and even those involved in national deaf associations in Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and elsewhere runs along the following lines: If deaf children are educated in the local language of their community (for example TTSL, or an Indigenous sign language in Guyana), they will be ill-equipped to interact with the wider world; it is therefore better for children to be educated in a bigger, Western sign language like ASL because then they will have access to a global community. The flaw in this argument is of course that it is based in an ideology of monolingualism as well as prejudice toward Indigenous sign languages.

Very similar assumptions may be made about spoken language situations. For example, it might be assumed that elsewhere, the main spoken/written language of the education system is also the main spoken language of the general population. In the Caribbean, as in many other places where formal education was introduced within the context of colonialism, this is not the case (Devonish, 1986). In the Indigenous community we have described in Guyana, English is often the fourth language of hearing people, who use Carib, Creolese, and the Indigenous sign language. An education system which already marginalises the spoken languages of both teachers and pupils is not likely to be easily adapted to deaf students just by developing ASL-based resources.

## Toward sign language-medium education

The development of successful systems for deaf education therefore needs to draw on an understanding of linguistic ecologies which takes into account both signed and spoken languages. The Caribbean has a rich and growing tradition of research and activism around language and education, which has advocated for language education policies in which Creoles and other Indigenous languages are placed at the foundation of education systems (e.g. DeGraff, 2019; Devonish, 1986). Recently in Guyana, there has been a growing movement for bilingual education programmes which incorporate Indigenous spoken languages, led by local community leaders and responding to problems identified by teachers in those communities (Bhagirat, 2020). On the whole, signed languages have been left out of such discussions. We see great potential in forging collaborations with researchers and activists in these areas, and we believe that there is

potential for much productive engagement between those advocating for bilingual education programmes across different communities around the world.

We see several themes emerging from the brief description we have presented here. Innovations in deaf education in the Caribbean have been strongly influenced by individuals from abroad whose knowledge of local communities was limited but whose influence is still felt decades later. Shifts in policy have often been carried out abruptly, have lacked the kinds of infrastructure needed to make them successful, and have too often failed to build on existing knowledge and resources. Sometimes these interventions have done considerable harm, leading to language shift and endangerment, and disrupting language transmission. The historic implantation of the oralist method in schools in Trinidad and Jamaica has given rise to pervading ideologies in deaf education that live on in the respective national associations. These associations' attention is largely focused on hearing assistive devices, cochlear implants, and speech and language therapy, instead of the development, recognition, and valorisation of local sign languages. Frequently, the consequences of interventions have been unanticipated. The implementation of oralism in Trinidad and Tobago played a role in the emergence of a new sign language. Deaf children who were brought together in a residential school setting created their own language and transmitted it across generations without the involvement, and often without the knowledge, of their teachers. The introduction of special education has involved the professionalisation of educator and interpreter roles based on paradigms and qualifications that emerged out of foreign contexts. In communities around the Caribbean where direct visual communication between deaf and hearing people has been normal for generations, the imported ideologies and professionalisation that came with special education can be disruptive, and linguistic ecologies can be damaged.

We do not view the ultimate goals of a Caribbean sign language-medium deaf education as being merely a matter of access. Deaf education must be understood within the broader context of the impact of (neo-)colonial ideologies in education. The global South has not escaped the neoliberalisation of the education system so prevalent in the global North, which polices education rather than promoting it. This system also distances students from community goals and focuses them rather on individual success, with alarming consequences for mental health. As Gahman (2016, p. 73) explains,

> Through the panic-inducing threat of 'not being successful' in life, the discursive practices that constitute neoliberalism suggest human existence is rooted in the desire to gain competitive advantages, accumulate possessions, lay claim to 'knowledge,' and wield power. Neoliberal logic amplifies these capitalist social relations by making the assertion that people meant to flourish in life will only do so by demonstrating market ambition, financial self-reliance, and an entrepreneurial spirit.

Deaf education in the Caribbean is frequently framed in terms of deaf students "falling behind" their hearing peers and of making sure deaf people are "productive."

In response to these issues, Kristian, Ian and Ben have focused much of their work on documenting the languages, histories and experiences of Caribbean signing communities. We believe that this kind of work is valuable because it can support educational programmes grounded in an understanding of existing histories and ontologies. The process of documentation can itself be empowering. Ian's involvement in advocacy grew out of a TTSL dictionary project funded by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. The project brought together deaf community leaders from around the

country, who worked on documenting their language, particularly signs which were not derived from ASL. The dictionary itself was never widely distributed, but the deaf researchers who worked on the project were galvanised by the process of documenting the language and the history of their community. They decided to stay together and formed the first national deaf-led advocacy organisation, now known as the Deaf Empowerment and Advancement Foundation. It is through this kind of organisation and self-advocacy that oppressive systems and ideologies can be challenged.

## Articles in this special issue

Many of the complexities in Trinidad and Tobago, and Guyana illuminate general issues involving sign language-medium educational resources and training, and deaf students' access to education in other global South contexts. The papers in this special issue, edited by Kristin, highlight other specific developments, insights, and approaches in China, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and Malawi. We hope the contexts described in this special issue provide a glimpse of the fuller picture of sign language-medium education in the global South. However, space and other constraints prevent us from showcasing many other contexts that provide rich sources of data and knowledge.

Gabrielle Jones, Dawei Ni, and Wei Wang's article is an empirical qualitative study of the Chinese context. Using focus group and questionnaire methodologies, the researchers analysed themes that emerged regarding sign language research and instruction, interpreter training programmes, and deaf education in China. Jones and colleagues' paper points the way toward improved collaboration between deaf and hearing professionals, and greater involvement of deaf communities in sign language research and professional training. This culminates in the recommendation for a Chinese university for deaf students with a centralised Chinese Sign Linguistics centre and bilingual teacher training programme.

Sara Goico, Moises Villacorta Ayllon, Patricia Lizama Monsalve, Rosa Adelina Torres Vargas, Clinton Cerron Bardales, and Jorge Alejandro Santamaria Hernandez' article describes the implementation of the first sign language-based public deaf education programme in Iquitos, Peru. As in other global South countries that have been impacted by top-down inclusive education policy mandates that actually restrict the provision of sign language-medium education to deaf students, Iquitos has faced the declining vitality of its Indigenous sign language, *Lengua de Señas Peruana* (LSP). Placed largely alone in mainstream classrooms without accommodations, deaf students have lacked opportunities to acquire literacy in LSP and Spanish as well as access the curriculum. Parents' dissatisfaction with their deaf children's education spurred grassroots efforts to organise sign language-medium education in the public education system for the first time in Iquitos.

Noor-ud-din Mohammed's article outlines systems of e-learning that began in Trinidad and Tobago during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact they have had on deaf students' linguistic access. Applying the lens of McKeown and McKeown's (2019) conceptual framework for e-learning, Mohammed's study has broad implications for the educational experience of deaf students worldwide during the pandemic and recommendations for improving what is often a situation of grave inequities.

Wrapping up the special issue is Malonje Phiri's overview of challenges faced by deaf children in accessing education in Malawi, where, as in other countries in the global South, schools for deaf children are not always free. Phiri describes the inherent contradictions found in national governments' implementation of the mandates of

international human rights instruments that advocate for inclusive education without providing a clear definition of what this means in practice for deaf learners. Without this explicit guidance, too often deaf children are left unsupported in mainstream schools instead of learning alongside signing teachers and peers. Phiri's interviews with educators and classroom observations reveal ongoing challenges and point to recommendations for improved teacher training, including training of more deaf teachers. Like the other initiatives explored in this special issue, this requires collective effort by policy-makers, schools, teachers, and parents, and the full participation of deaf communities in education.

As well as drawing attention to inequities and ongoing challenges faced by deaf learners in the global South, this special issue highlights exciting developments and promising practices in sign language-medium education. In this way, the expertise and agency of researchers, deaf communities, teachers, and parents of deaf children in the global South are apparent.

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