

Employment and Deaf People - are we moving in the right direction?

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This paper is an ideological essay that raises several questions about employment and deaf people. It starts off with a description of specific categories of deaf employment:

- deaf people working in the deaf field;
- deaf people having their own businesses;
- and deaf people on long-term welfare benefits.

Questions are raised from a personal, ideological perspective with respect to whether we are going the right way to minimise the constant need for such interventions (employment services, IT support, confidence building courses, English skills etc) at late (adult age) stages of deaf people's lives, whether we should maintain the accepted status quo for the voluntary sector to carry out work for the statutory sector, and whether we ought to change today's trends to ensure that future cohorts of deaf adults have no need for support. In the penultimate paragraph, a parallel is drawn with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the government inspectors for education, asking whether an "OfDeaf" body would be best placed to inspect deaf-related needs in statutory provision.

The international community within this conference will be advised that the UK provision of education for a wide spectrum of deaf people is subject to a lottery of postcode (zip code), whereby the educational experience of a deaf child depends on their geographical location. While a lot of progress has been made in the UK with respect to deaf and disabled people's rights to employment, namely the Disability Discrimination Act (1995), there is still a lot of work to be done. National policies are inconsistently delivered locally in councils scattered across the country.

Over the past few years, the UK Labour government has had a national policy to encourage disabled people into employment, rather than keep them inactive, whereby they would be relying on various welfare benefits. It is now mandatory for disabled people to be assessed on their ability to work rather than their inabilities. A government-run scheme known as "Access to Work" pays for disability costs considered necessary to enable a person to work, by independent assessment. For the wheelchair user, this may entail travel provision, for a blind person, maybe a specialised computer. For deaf people, needs differ according to experience, abilities and communication preference. The ideal picture is that all deaf people should now be able to work, as long

as they have made sure their needs are met in the work-place. I know that while I have sign language interpreters for any group meetings that take place within my job, and a minicom by my desk, I am able to carry out my tasks professionally. I do, however, worry about locally determined assessments that are often based on a restricted localised budget. Some deaf people will be told that they do not need qualified interpreters as much as they really do, and this can be a budget-driven decision. This level of inconsistency is reflective of the UK and its general policies. Work is underway to address this issue, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

Deaf people working within the deaf-sphere

Today in the UK there are many deaf-related organisations and businesses. There is also a high level of expectation that deaf people will enter deaf-related employment. To give a few examples, deaf people qualified as teachers will be much more likely to be found to be working with deaf children; deaf people qualified in psychology will be more likely to be working in research that involves deaf people; and deaf people qualified in media-related subjects will be more likely to be found working for deaf television programmes, or deaf-related magazines etc. When I started collecting information and thoughts for this paper, I emailed various deaf organisations to ask about the approximate numbers of deaf people they employed in total: including full time, part time and sessional workers. The Centre of Deaf Studies, Bristol University employs an average of 10 deaf staff, the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) has 34; Royal Association for Deaf People (RAD), 39; the British Deaf Association (BDA); 26 and the Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), 125 (2004). These numbers are quite high when we bear in mind that no deaf people worked for such organisations until only a few decades ago.

There are deaf people who have been employed by a company or organisation because they are dealing with disability and feel it is important to have disabled people amongst their staff make-up. Would these deaf people be happy to sacrifice their jobs and join mainstream statutory services? Or would they rather remain in their "disability-aware" organisations, *aka* a safe-haven?

It is debatable as to how to perceive and judge this picture of a "deaf-industry". On the one hand it is important that such deaf organisations should be led by deaf people and most of its work ought to be carried out by deaf people. However on the other hand, should we need deaf organisations to exist? Shouldn't we be trying to have deaf people employed in the mainstream, e.g. working in local councils for deaf people in the local area rather than working within a local deaf organisation? But some may argue the merits in using local deaf organisations in that they KNOW what is needed and are well placed to advise and provide on matters in relation to deaf people. However working for the government may mean that one would have

to follow the philosophy of whoever is the leading political party. It may be too difficult to bring about changes or radical movements in a government that does not have a unified vision about deaf people. The voluntary sector is being used more and more to carry out short and long term projects, maybe it is easier for them to carry out this work rather than people working within the government.

Deaf people having their own businesses

In more recent years we have seen a rapid growth of businesses set up by deaf people themselves (e.g. see <http://www.royaldeaf.org.uk/bus1.htm>), with the majority of its enterprise related to deaf issues themselves. These companies include media; design; theatre; deaf awareness training and even more deaf awareness training; consultancy work; teaching specifically tailored to deaf people's needs, sign language teaching etc. There are now even companies that specialise in delivering communication needs such as theatre interpreting.

Looks fantastic on the surface doesn't it? But it is also debatable whether such a plethora of services from both businesses and organisations is reflective of a continued mess of education which produces school leavers with lots of problems that need to be addressed. Why are we in this situation where such gaps in society still exist? Instead of this full-blown deaf industry, shouldn't we focus on encouraging changes in society to ensure that there will no longer be such gaps and hence no need for these businesses? But then again where would these deaf entrepreneurs go for employment? It is all very well to have a business related to gardening, dress-making, etc, but when it comes to making money out of deaf issues, reservations are apparent. It is also relevant to ask how active are these businesses towards changing trends in society for today and the future's new born deaf babies. It is perfectly clear that we do need these businesses for society as it is today, but do we really want this "system" to continue for years to come? How about changing statutory provision so that all young deaf children have exactly what they need (as measured objectively) and deaf-awareness training is delivered to hearing children at such an early age, reinforced at regular intervals throughout their childhood, and hence there won't be such a need for such businesses at a later stage?

Maybe the ideology outlined above is two-tiered, where on one hand all deaf related enterprise ought to be controlled and run by deaf people, e.g. the production of a magazine for deaf people, but all deaf issues that are related towards hearing people becoming aware and learning sign language ought to be addressed at a much earlier stage and delivered in statutory provision.

Deaf people who are inactive recipients of a full range of benefits

There are deaf people who are not in work because they have been entitled to a full range of benefits since the age of sixteen – being assessed for one's ability to work is only compulsory when someone is aged over eighteen and has applied for welfare. Therefore there exists a cohort of deaf people who are inactive and would not think about leaving the benefits system because of a variety of reasons – a dependent group, although not very representative of deaf young people today. I have spoken to many of these people, and to some extent I can appreciate the arguments from those who have had poor educational starts to life, whereby they would much rather be on benefits than work in low-skilled work. The frustration they would most likely encounter in low skilled work where support would not be given to much extent and limited opportunity to progress, is outweighed by remaining idle on benefits.

Are we moving in the right direction?

I often find myself questioning the political activities of deaf organisations and the government itself. It is evident that to make future generations of deaf people much more employable, there needs to be an effort to recognise and address the inconsistencies in local delivery of both education, and national policy on employment.

Ideologically, it is questionable whether deaf organisations ought to be needed? If they have been set up to fight for equality then shouldn't these organisations have a ten year plan where they will then close, in the expectation that deaf people will have their needs met within statutory provision? By this, I mean instead of having national voluntary organisations for deaf people's needs, shouldn't we have deaf people employed within local authorities in the UK to ensure that a continuum of deaf people's needs are met at the local level? But would there be too much "red tape"? Would it be better to have more local deaf organisations? Local deaf organisations are able to claim that they know best, and deliver the needs of its community, but are they politically placed to have major influences on the future of deaf people? Or are they best placed to meet today's immediate needs?

Some individuals can be said to be blind to the work that they are doing. They do not realise that their immediate work helps maintain the status quo of the need for non-statutory organisations/businesses to "repair" the persistent deficits we find in deaf children at school-leaving age. However there would be little opportunity for paid work in a field that would involve trying to change the system to eliminate the need for such repair! One would be justified to say that it would be impossible to imagine all 234 deaf employees working in the various organisations mentioned above, giving up their livelihoods and fighting for their organisations to close down! In the trends of today's capitalist society, especially in the western world, it isn't a surprise how money can often be the ruling factor. If lots of money is to be gained from such a deaf

industry, what chance is there of stopping this? Look at McDonalds, Microsoft, GAP etc to name but a few. Indeed, the Department of Trade and Industry wants to have a thriving economy, maybe there's a hidden political agenda here?

If the need for vast numbers of sign language interpreters has to be addressed in order to minimise the need for "helping" deaf adults in the future, then one has to address how these people should learn in colleges under statutory funded programmes, or even learning such a prestigious language earlier at school. Or should we continue to have a plethora of organisations and businesses competing to deliver sign language and charging exorbitant fees? It is known that competition is the key to having greater standards to deliver.

If statutory provision improved, it would then be questionable whether deaf businesses would collapse because new cohorts of people will already know about deaf people. We would not need deaf companies providing consultancy, teaching sign language because people would have communicated effectively with deaf people much earlier on. However deaf businesses could still be able to flourish in hearing-related enterprise rather than deaf ones, i.e. accountancy and film making.

The needs of deaf people and children should ideally be met under the immediate local authority they live in, who ought to employ deaf people to ensure objective measuring of related targets just as do Ofsted for school inspections. These "OfDeaf" inspectors could then make sure that deaf people's needs are being catered for in its range of services, and perhaps work alongside some nationally-drawn agenda to make deaf people's needs understood at a much earlier stage of their lives rather than addressing much needed gaps once they have left school.

A parallel can be made with reference to Black people. We now have Black people who work within the government who ensure racism is eliminated; we also have Black MPs and Black Lords too. The positive results of this has been evident in greater numbers of Black and ethnic minorities in mainstream employment. A notable person to make reference to is Trevor Philips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (<http://www.cre.gov.uk/about/commissioners.html>) who is Black, experienced and was appointed by the Home Secretary. With reference to another minority, lesbian women, it is interesting to note the appointment of Angela Mason OBE as Head of the government's Women and Equality Unit at the Department of Trade and Industry. Here we have a lady who is a lesbian, but fighting for women's equality as a whole. Will we have a deaf person, working within government or a QUANGO, fighting for linguistic minorities or disability groups one day? Or will we continue to have people in the voluntary sector trying to persuade the government about this and that and continuing the on-going work of "repair"?

To me, there are 2 cohorts of deaf people. Those who are in our present generation, and those of the future. Surely the problems faced by our present cohort should address the political agenda of education/employment and hence render necessary changes.

Glossary of terms for the international community

Lottery of Postcode – If you live in one specific area, you may be lucky, if you live in another specific area, you may be unlucky.

National Policy – What the government says it believes in

Local delivery – How statutory provision is maintained in the local area

Public sector – The government and its local authorities, councils etc.

Red Tape – paperwork and restrictions

Statutory provision – any service that is given by the government, e.g. Jobcentre Plus, Learn Direct, Youth Services.

Voluntary sector – Charities and organisations that actively fund-raise to run themselves. Some of their services are paid by grants from the public sector.

Employment services – whereby professionals in the voluntary sector are providing support and advice to help deaf adults into employment

Ofsted – The government's body of inspectors who look at education delivered by schools.

QUANGO – Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation

Welfare benefits – money paid by the government to help maintain a living