

Deaf Education and sign languages: spinning and unraveling the past, the present and the future

Entrevista concedida por
Robert Hoffmeister* a Ronice Müller de Quadros**
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Robert J. Hoffmeister, Ph.D. established and is the Director of the first program in Deaf Studies of the United States. He is a hearing from Deaf parents and he always was aware of the need of seeing Deaf with “Deaf lens”, as he refers to a term used by Ben Bahan¹. This point makes a huge difference among other programs established around the world. The Deaf way is different. Sensible to that difference, Robert Hoffmeister keeps working in Deaf Studies that include all the areas that are studying related aspects to DEAF WORLD.

Key words: Hoffmeister, Robert-Interviews.

* Department of Literacy and Language. Boston University.

**Pedagoga, Doutora em Letras-Linguística obtidos na Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul com Doutorado Sandwiche na University of Connecticut. Coordenadora Geral do Curso de Graduação em Letras/Libras, Centro de Comunicação e Expressão (CCE) da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC).

We have more than 20 years discussing Deaf Studies and this subject spreads out for the whole world, you are one of the first persons that started this area, could you tell us how this had started in the 80's (maybe before)?

I began at BU 25 years ago. I graduated from the University of Minnesota and wanted to establish an education program that was not like the traditional program available at the time. After graduating I was offered a job at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. My task was to develop a graduate program in education of the Deaf. I was given free reign (no controls or model) and could develop whatever program I wanted. This was my first opportunity to think about what people needed who would work with the Deaf (adults) and Deaf children as partners and colleagues not as oppressors and controllers. The opportunity at Temple provided the time to think about what is needed and how I could implement a new idea.

While at Temple, I was part of the Dept of Special Education and occupied a position that was connected to the Elwyn Foundation (EF). As a result of my bad experience at University of Arizona's graduate program in the education of the Deaf, I wanted to establish a program where the research and application of information about Deaf adults and Deaf children would be from a Deaf perspective. Ben Bahan refers to it as looking through a "Deaf lens". Boston University offered me the opportunity to establish a new undergraduate program and to revamp the graduate program in education of the Deaf. The graduate program was changed first into a series of courses that had a linguistic/language based bilingual/bicultural foundation. Where ASL was treated as a subject with content matter and where hearing people learned ASL as a 2nd language. As a result of these, we established four semester of ASL coursework and I was lucky to hire Steve Nover as one of our first ASL instructors².

Steve encouraged me to approach the Dean at that time to establish an undergraduate program. The School of Education, to my surprise, not only encouraged us but funded us to establish the Undergraduate Program in Deaf Studies. Steve and I developed a proposal and submitted it to the University Board of Trustees and the Programs in Deaf Studies was chartered in the fall 1981.

The program initially was focused in three areas; psychology (cognitive), sociology, and applied psycholinguistics. Soon the elective coursework expanded to include anthropology, literacy studies, women's studies, African studies, and other areas geared to student interest.

The main thrust of the program 25 years later remains the same four areas:

- Applied Linguistics
- Cognitive Psychology
- American Sign Language as a 2nd language
- ASL Linguistics

Within each of the above areas students must focus on how the Deaf, both children and adults, come under intellectual and academic examination.

We now have the following program offerings in the Programs in Deaf Studies:

- Deaf Studies: Undergraduate and Graduate (MA)
- Deaf Education: Graduate (M.Ed.)
- Advanced Research with application to education: CAGS, Certificate of Adv. Graduate Study.

We are an affiliated program with:

- Applied Linguistics in the Graduate School (PhD)
- Literacy and Language in the School of Education (EdD)

How Deaf Studies are related to Sign Language Studies, if this is the case?

In my view Deaf Studies is the overall designator for all areas associated with the intellectual examination of the culture and language of Deaf people. Deaf Studies includes research on sign language and also the aspects of teaching sign language as a first and 2nd language in the world. Sign Language is at the heart of the DEAF WORLD and is the largest area under discussion. Deaf culture intersects with Sign Language when we analyze signed texts, poetry, ballads, etc. The difference with the latter is the focus on the analysis of the themes as opposed to the language structure.

How Deaf Studies empower Deaf people in Education?

This is a very interesting question. I am not sure that I can really answer this question with any type of empirical support. Deaf Studies as a field has forced Deaf education to begin to examine the lives of Deaf children in and out of school. Since its inception, many researchers and educators have looked at schools from different perspectives and different models of examination. Harlan Lane examines the education of the Deaf

from a model of colonialism and oppression. This model has been the dominant model for most people in Deaf Studies. Other models are being applied as the field expands. The post colonial model, post modernism, deconstructivist, and critical literacy models are being applied by Ben Bahan and Dirksen Bauman. The history of Deaf people and Deaf children is now emerging as a solid field, with Brian Greenwald, Stan Schuchman, John Van Cleve, among others. What is exciting is that Deaf Studies is becoming a subject area in many schools where teachers are examining these issues with Deaf children from literature, literary, and structural perspectives. I think the availability of research and literature in Deaf Studies will empower Deaf people to research many of the questions that have been either avoided or not known to the academic community. Questions, such as, how Deaf people think about particular topics (legal, educational, medical, etc.) to questions that are difficult to research, i.e., abuse in schools, the relationship of power between Deaf children and the Hearing people who supervise them, etc. Paddy Ladd brings in the issue of genocide by those in the medical profession who promote the uncontrolled surgical processes on Deaf children without the child's consent. Deaf Studies will empower Deaf people to begin asking questions, hard questions of the community and those who work with the community. Deaf Studies will provide the space, so to speak, for people to ask and investigate all types of questions that are of concern to the DEAF WORLD. When they are answered the education system will need to be responsive and reflexive to the results. This is empowerment by and for the DEAF WORLD.

Could you talk a little more about DEAF WORLD? What exactly do you refer as a DEAF WORLD?

DEAF WORLD as a printed term comes from the sign in American Sign Language which the Deaf use to refer to themselves. As we explain in our text *Journey into the DEAF WORLD* (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996) the term refers to a 'group....possessing a unique language and culture'(p. ix). The most interesting problem in defining the DEAF WORLD is categorizing its members. DEAF WORLD membership is not based on level of hearing loss which is the focus of the Hearing professionals who work with Deaf people and children, but is based on identity. It doesn't matter what level of hearing loss you may have, if you call yourself 'DEAF'" and use the signed language of your DEAF WORLD

community, you are a member of the DEAF WORLD. The DEAF WORLD resides on the DEAF v. HEARING side of the border, so to speak. To give you an idea of the identity difference and the difference in thinking I use the following example. In the HEARING WORLD the meaning of 'to become Deaf' is to lose one's hearing. In the DEAF WORLD the meaning of 'to become Deaf' is to learn signed language (Hoffmeister, in press). The membership in the DEAF WORLD all use a signed language, this is the defining outward behavior. Those who use a signed language have grown up in a particular way, have developed and understanding of their cultural behaviors and align more with other Deaf people than their own extended Hearing families. This seems to be true no matter what country Deaf people reside in. The DEAF WORLD has developed its way of living from the individual members interaction with the Hearing world and from the way the individual members have learned to survive in the larger world.

How American Policies influence the Deaf Studies?

There are a number of policy issues that affect the Deaf but I am not sure how they influence Deaf Studies. One policy that could influence the approach that professionals might take would be the policy issues around bilingualism. The US is still in the middle of the discussions as to multilingualism and its subset bilingualism. Currently, there are strong discussions presented against bilingualism in schools. One problem has occurred and that concerns attitudes towards immigrants. Immigrant issues and language issues seem to blend together in the US since most bilingualism is seen as an immigrant problem. If we can work to view Sign Languages as part of the preferred second languages (French, German, etc.) then the negativity of bilingualism will lessen. But the monolingual and anti bilingualism factor in the US will create problems for those examining Signed Languages. A more difficult assault will occur if cochlear implants become the policy of the medical profession for any Deaf baby. Once that becomes a policy issue then some very difficult barriers to sign language will be encountered. Ironically, non Deaf educators are promoting sign language for young hearing babies to increase their cognitive development. This idea flies in the face of all the discussions around signed languages in Deaf education and in the speech and hearing professionals. This field of Deaf Studies is very complicated because of so many different interest

groups, some of who are integral to the community and some who are only professionally involved.

How many Deaf teachers and bilingual teachers you have educated in your Program?

Since 1980, the first year of the bilingual program in education, we have graduated over 300 teachers. 50 of them are Deaf. The education of the Deaf program is a unit within Deaf Studies and does not have undergraduates. The Deaf Studies Program which is a much more expansive and inclusive examination of how Deaf people live has an undergraduate component. Those who wish to obtain a doctorate participate in a program that is affiliated with Deaf Studies, the Applied Linguistics Program.

“Because deafness is in good part a cultural construction,...the shape of its construction is an expression of broader cultural values. And since deafness is usually conceived by hearing people as merely a lack, an emptiness where hearing and sound ought to be, the effect is that Deaf people and their means of communication become blank screens for the projection of cultural prejudice, fear and hope, faith and ideology.” (Baynton, D. *Forbidden Signs*, U of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 1)

“In the beginning, I thought I could change man. Today I know I cannot. If I still shout today, if I still scream, it is to prevent man from ultimately changing me.” Elie Wiesel

“Passion, belief and truth are stronger than all the armies of the world”

Notas

- 1 Ben Bahan is a Deaf leader from Deaf community, he is a Ph.D Linguist, Professor at Gallaudet University.
- 2 Steve Nover is the Director of Center for ASL & English Bilingual Research.

Educação de surdos e línguas de sinais: desfiar e fiar o passado, o presente e o futuro

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Robert J. Hoffmeister

PhD Director Programs in Deaf Studies
621 Commonwealth Ave. Boston University
Boston, MA 02215
Phone: 617 353 5191 (v/tty)
Fax: 617 353 3292
Site: www.bu.edu/education/students/prospective/undergraduate/programs/deaf/
Site: www.bu.edu/sed/students/prospective/graduate/programs/deaf/
E-mail: rhoff@bu.edu

Ronice Müller de Quadros

Centro de Comunicação e Expressão – sala 517 – prédio B
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina
Telefones: (48) 3331 6586 ou (48) 9981-2711
E-mail: ronice@ced.ufsc.br