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The experiences of Deaf students at a South African university

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THE NUMBER OF DEAF[1] STUDENTS entering South African higher-education institutions grew tremendously after the country's new constitution was adopted in 1996. The increase occurred in response to demands made on the state in the context of its constitutional obligation to increase access to the education system. To accommodate the diversity of learning needs and address barriers to learning, the state, in turn, required education institutions to provide educational support services to students (Department of Education 1997). Higher-education institutions, such as the University of the Witwatersrand, have since begun to offer services such as South African Sign Language (SASL) interpreters and academic support to deaf students. Despite such services and opportunities, deaf students in South Africa, like their counterparts in most other countries around the world, continue to encounter many difficulties and challenges when they attempt to obtain a university qualification (Liversidge 2003).

The philosophy of inclusive education holds that to create equal opportunities for all, an education system must be responsive to the diverse needs and aims of all its students. Inclusive education is being implemented in many countries, notably, the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia and South Africa. According to the World Federation of the Deaf, many policy-makers strongly support the 'full-scale mainstreaming of all disabled students with all students in regular schools near to their homes' (WFD 2007: 3). However, deaf students require particular support services, including Sign Language interpreters and academic support, and when determining the effectiveness of these services in terms of equal access to learning, the

social and academic experiences of Deaf students are seldom explored. To begin to counter this trend, I researched the experiences of a group of deaf students registered at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. This particular university was chosen for two reasons. Firstly, the participants and I and were all students there at the time. Secondly, the university Disability Unit has run a structured student-support service for deaf students since 1986, and the university is open to students from diverse backgrounds, including different linguistic backgrounds such as SASL. This chapter reports on the study in some detail, discusses its findings and draws some conclusions about the need for further research and investigation.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical perspective that underpins this study is that deafness is not merely a physical disability but also a cultural and linguistic phenomenon (Thompson 2004). The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) put it succinctly when it said; 'Deaf people view themselves as a cultural and linguistic minority. But they encounter barriers put up by society, suffer from lack of access and are therefore also "disabled"' (EUD 1997: 10). To clarify: there are two main paradigms related to deafness, the pathological view and the cultural and linguistic view.

The *pathological perspective* on deafness classifies deaf people as a disability group (Peel 2004). According to this view, deaf people have a deficiency that needs to be corrected. To address this deficiency, medical professionals have developed cochlea implants and other hearing devices.

The *cultural and linguistic perspective* acknowledges that Deaf people, who communicate in Sign Language and share certain values and beliefs, identify themselves as members of a cultural and linguistic group, regardless of race or ethnic background. Members of the Deaf community who are protagonists of this view do not regard deafness as a special need or a deficit but as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon, and they propose that Deaf people be recognised as a distinct cultural group (Peel 2004). A Deaf participant in Komesaroff's study (2000: 1) put it succinctly when she said:

> I don't consider myself disabled, but I understand the meaning of the word 'disability'. I understand that…and I understand the community's perception of that word and I accept that I have a disability in hearing but I am not physically disabled.

There are, however, some deaf people who, for political reasons, view themselves as disabled because of the difficulties they experience with communication

in our hearing-dominated society. Moores (2001) confirmed that many of the societal and educational problems experienced by Deaf people relate to issue of communication. From a socio-cultural perspective, it is therefore appropriate to examine the communication needs of the Deaf community alongside those of other minority language groups, rather than to compare them with those experienced by people with disabilities.

According to Butow (1994), the shift in focus away from the provision of welfare and towards ensuring human rights for all made people realise that viewing deafness solely as pathology can be inappropriate, and tends to contradict the way that Deaf people see themselves. I agree with the Deaf community's approach, and regard Deaf students not as disabled but as able to succeed in higher-education institutions, provided they have access to appropriate services, such as Sign Language interpreters, note-takers and other academic support programmes.

As noted, research reveals that the problems faced by deaf students are primarily related to issues of communication, academic language and literacy, relationships with teachers and other students in the learning environment, and community support (Thompson 2004). Crottey (1998: 8) points out that it is through social interactions that people 'enter into the perceptions, attitudes and values of a community'. How Deaf and hard-of-hearing students see themselves and others, and how they think hearing people see them, impacts on their experiences at educational institutions.

Deaf people in South Africa are a community within a wider community. The Deaf Federation of South Africa (DeafSA 1998) points out that 90 per cent of deaf children are born to hearing parents and 10 per cent are born to deaf parents. A Deaf community is a group of deaf and possibly hearing people, 'who, based on shared experiences among each other and identification with one another, participate together in a variety of activities' (Higgins 1987: 153). Sign Language also distinguishes members of the Deaf community as a separate linguistic group. Penn (1993: 11) states that:

> Sign Language is the language of the eyes and hands, of movement and space. Sign Language is the natural language of the Deaf. One of the most important determinants of acceptance into the Deaf cultural group lies in the proficiency of Sign Language.

Problems experienced by deaf university students

While higher-education institutions have adopted policies stating their commitment to inclusive education, any assumption that equal rights,

opportunities and access to education are actually afforded to all would be false. In fact, deaf students encounter a range of barriers when they attempt to enrol at universities (DeafSA 2006). Firstly, SASL is not recognised as being equal to other languages. This is despite the support offered to the language by protective legislation including the South African Constitution of 1996, the South African Schools Act of 1997, and state policies such as the Integrated National Disability Strategy (Department of Social Development 1997).

For example, higher-education candidates, particularly when registering for a degree in the humanities, are required to have obtained a pass in two of South Africa's 11 official languages at secondary-school level (Department of Education 2005). One of these languages must be their home or first language, and the other must be on the Department of Education's (2005) list of recognised additional languages. This requirement constitutes a barrier for Deaf students because SASL is their first language, yet it is not included among the country's 11 official languages, nor is it among the list of recognised additional languages mentioned in the Revised National Curriculum Statement. Secondly, when deaf students do access higher education, they encounter additional academic and social barriers. Reduced levels of communication and social integration, imposed by the lack of a signing environment at most institutions of higher learning, can lead to misunderstandings and the isolation of deaf students.

Aims and rationale of the study

The rationale for the study was threefold. Firstly, I was motivated by my experiences as a Deaf teacher in two schools for deaf learners in South Africa's North West Province. I wanted to find out how best to prepare deaf learners for higher education, and to do so I decided to explore the experiences of deaf students who were already at university. Secondly, I aimed to assess the implementation of an inclusive education policy and the support services provided for Deaf students at one higher-education institution in South Africa with the hope that other institutions might be able to reflect on their own policies and practices. Finally, I aimed to contribute to the body of literature on deaf education, which in relation to the academic and social experiences of deaf students in mainstream higher education, is particularly sparse.

A review of the literature on deaf people and higher education in South Africa shows that DeafSA conducted a pilot study in 1998 on the situation of Deaf students in tertiary institutions. Although this study was a good one, it does not describe the experiences of Deaf students or present a Deaf person's

point of view. Other studies, such as that by Howell (2004) on 'Disabled students and higher education in South Africa', do not focus specifically on Deaf students but on disability in general.

Internationally, research has shown that the majority of deaf university graduates were hard of hearing or developed deafness post-lingually (see, for example, Brelje 1999 and Komesaroff 2000). This can be attributed to the scarcity of Sign Language interpreting services at universities. Brelje points out that opportunities for higher education are far greater for hard-of-hearing students in many countries than they are for Deaf students because the communication needs of the latter are not always met. Komesaroff (2000: 1) firmly states that Deaf students are 'grossly under-represented in higher education' worldwide.

The educational transformation that has swept through South Africa since 1994 means that opportunities for deaf people to access higher education have increased, and this is, in turn, making it possible research the experiences of Deaf persons. Education support services are the 'key to equal participation in the learning process' (Department of Education 1997: 12) and their availability to Deaf students in the context of equal participation in the learning process is worth exploring.

As noted, the experience of deaf students with regard to support services in higher education is a complex phenomenon and little research has been conducted in this regard (Liversidge 2003). Furthermore, very little of the research done so far has been conducted by Deaf researchers (Thompson 2004). Therefore, this study aimed to fill a significant gap in the research, contribute to the development of new theory, and identify issues for future research initiatives.

In examining the implementation of inclusive-education policies, it was hoped that the study would have significance for other institutions including, for example, the national and provincial departments of education, which wish to promote equal access and success, particularly with reference to Deaf students. It was also hoped that the study would lead to the identification of factors (such as additional communication options) that help to facilitate positive university experiences for Deaf students, and that this would assist university management, academic and administrative staff in widening access to higher education for Deaf students. It is hoped that the findings of the study will also be useful to Deaf students who plan to access higher education via a mainstream university.

To sum up, the research described in this chapter aimed to explore the experiences of Deaf students from a Deaf perspective, and to inform various

stakeholders (Deaf students, institutions of higher learning and the state) about the academic and social experiences of Deaf university students.

Services for Deaf students at the University of the Witwatersrand

According to university archives, the University of the Witwatersrand was founded as an open university and until apartheid legislation forced it to do otherwise from the 1960s to the 1990s, the institution welcomed all students, regardless of race, gender and disability.[2] In the early 1990s, the university's human resources department established a Transformation and Equity Office to address access and employment-equity matters generally, and specifically in relation to people with disabilities, including deaf students and staff. The office has since assumed responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring the university's disability policy. Essentially, the Transformation and Equity Office focuses on policy implementation, while the Disability Unit, which was established on the campus in 1986, deals with service delivery to students with disabilities, including the Deaf.

The Disability Unit provides academic support, guidance and support to students with disabilities, including the Deaf, and aims to facilitate their adjustment to university life. The service includes the provision of SASL interpreters, note-takers, mathematics tutors, invigilators, adaptive devices, computer training, Braille services, interventions related to physical access to buildings, assistance with bursary and loan applications, as well as applications for extra time for essays and examinations. The establishment of the Disability Unit enabled the institution to lead the way in making university degrees accessible to students with disabilities and Deaf students, thus aligning itself with the principles of South African and international policies on inclusive education.[3]

The Disability Unit has strong links with the education faculty's Advanced Certificate in Education, which is the programme that accommodates the largest number of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students on campus. This certificate was introduced when the Further Diploma in Education that the university had offered since 1996 was phased out. According to Steinberg et al. (2004), the Further Diploma started by providing specialised courses in mathematics, science and English with the aim of upgrading the qualifications of teachers who were underqualified.[4] In 2000, a specialisation related to teaching learners with special educational needs was introduced, and this was followed by the introduction of specialisation in Deaf education in 2001. Thus, Deaf students in the Advanced Certificate in Education programme frequently make use of the support services provided by the Disability Unit.

The institutional and environmental support services for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students offered by the university attracts students from all over the country and from neighbouring countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland. In addition, it is important to note that the university is located within the city of Johannesburg, which has a thriving Deaf community. This offers the students opportunities to socialise and a base from which to receive moral support.

Limitations of the study

The study was limited by several factors, one of which was outside of my control. Firstly, a national strike of civil servants occurred during the time set aside for data collection, that is, May and June 2007. Since many teachers are civil servants, the strike meant that we could not access the participants because they were either participating in the strike action or had to stay away from their usual places of work for safety reasons.[5]

Secondly, the perspectives of hearing students and lecturers were not included. Thus, there was no direct investigation of peer attitudes or lecturers' collaboration and support. Thirdly, the study focused on 12 Deaf students in an academic support programme at one university. The research therefore cannot be generalised to apply to the wider Deaf and hard-of-hearing student population at the university concerned or at other South African higher-education institutions.

Research methodology

Criteria for the selection of Deaf participants were that they were either currently registered at or recently certificated by the University of the Witwatersrand, and that they were both Deaf or hard of hearing *and* fluent in SASL. All students who participated in the study indicated their availability and gave consent for the research. Eight of the students had just completed their Advanced Certificate in Education and four were still studying towards their certificate. In addition, the manager of the university's Disability Unit was asked to complete a questionnaire because, in her capacity as co-ordinator of the Disability Unit, she was the primary facilitator of students' support services on campus. Her responses helped to clarify the range of services offered, how they were made possible, as well as how the Unit envisaged them being used and how they were actually used.

As far as the students were concerned, two data-collection techniques were used, namely interviews and written narratives. A schedule of questions was drawn up and used to guide the interviews with the Deaf participants,

and Deaf participants were asked to submit a written description of their experiences as students at the university.

After drawing up the interview schedule, which contained a mix of structured and unstructured questions, I carried out a pilot study in February 2007 to determine the efficiency of the questions in collecting information from Deaf participants. Three Deaf students registered for the Advanced Certificate in Education were interviewed in the pilot study. They were asked to give feedback on the design and content of the interview, discussing any challenges they had experienced in responding and making suggestions regarding the signing, meaning and order of the questions. Minor amendments were then made to the interview schedule.

Interviews with Deaf students were conducted in SASL and recorded on video to ensure that concrete and precise data was captured for analysis. I used the interview schedule as a guide but it was constructed so as to allow me to elicit additional information when, for instance, a question was only partially answered.

Data analysis

I applied an ethnographic approach to analyse the data. I began by studying the transcripts from the interviews and identified common themes that emerged. This was one of the most challenging stages of the study; as Stewart and Shamdasani (1990: 116) have noted, the coding exercise requires 'several passes through the transcript as categories of topics evolve and the analyst gains greater insight into the content of the group discussion'.

This research entailed a social study, therefore it may not correctly generate issues of validity. There is a possibility that the participants in the study presented experiences that were time specific. What they experienced at the University of the Witwatersrand between 2003 and 2007 may have changed as support services became more or less available. In order to enhance validity of the data in this study, the following efforts were made: I compared the findings that emerged from the interviews with the participants' written narrative (documents) of their experiences as students; I then compared the findings with existing literature on the experiences of Deaf students in other integrated education settings; the accounts of participants' perspectives given are based on their own signs or words as recorded on the videotape; and a university colleague reviewed both the data and the conclusions.

About the participants

This section provides brief biographical information about each participant in the study. I changed the names of participants to protect their privacy

and preserve confidentiality. The description of the participants provides contextual information about their experiences and assisted in interpreting the findings of the study. The following categories were used to characterise the degrees of the participants' hearing levels (see Table 8.1):

TABLE 8.1 Degrees of hearing

Hearing ability	Decibels (dB)
Normal	−10–15 dB
Slight loss	16–25 dB
Mild loss	26–40 dB
Moderate loss	41–55 dB
Moderately severe loss	56–70 dB
Severe loss	71–90 dB
Profound loss	91+ dB

Source Adapted from WFD (2007).

Celia is a black Deaf woman who is 35 years old. Her hearing level is 26–40 dB. Although Celia wears hearing aids and considers herself hard of hearing, she is fluent in SASL and campaigns for the educational rights of Deaf people. She was the first Deaf student to enrol and graduate from the Further Certificate in Education programme in 2003. At the time of her interview, Celia had returned to the university and was enrolled for an honours degree in adult education. Although she was the only Deaf student in her class and used a SASL interpreter, she was an active learner who participated in all classroom discussions and debates. During our interview, she expressed gratitude to the university for the provision of SASL interpreters but pointed out that Deaf students should be able to decide who interprets for them rather than the Disability Unit.

Paula is a 30-year-old black Deaf woman. Her parents are hearing, but she and a nephew and a niece were all born deaf. Her degree of hearing is 80–110 dB and she does not use a hearing aid. Paula is fluent in SASL and expresses herself much better in this language than in writing. She was repeating her final education module at the time of the interview. She attributed her previous failure in the module to the academic language used at university level and her frustration with the SASL interpreting service. Her interpreter frequently arrived late and sometimes did not show up at all.

Themba is a 29-year-old black Deaf man, who became profoundly deaf at the age of ten, through meningitis. His hearing level is 80–110 dB. He is attracted to the Deaf culture and describes himself as a Deaf person. Unlike other Deaf students in his class, Themba enjoys writing and his assignment marks are always high. He was satisfied with the SASL interpreter service. Themba does not like it when hearing students feel sorry for him because of his deafness. He believes that deafness should not make him a symbol of pity, but that it is a challenge he has had to overcome.

Rosemary is a 35-year-old Black woman who describes herself as hard of hearing and wears hearing aids. Her hearing level is 40–90 dB and she also has a physical disability. Rosemary communicates via SASL and speech (IsiZulu and English). At the time of our interview, she had completed her Advanced Certificate in Education and was in the process of applying for an honours degree in education. She says she interprets voluntarily for other students in the absence of a SASL interpreter.

Razina, a 34-year-old black Deaf woman, is profoundly deaf with a hearing level of 91–110 dB. She describes herself as Deaf and her main language of communication is SASL. Her desire to excel as a teacher of the Deaf had motivated her to enrol at university. At the time of the interview in 2006, she had not been successful in passing her first modules, and planned to take a two-year break before returning to her studies. She cited family commitments as the reason for suspending her studies. Despite the availability of SASL interpreters, she expressed frustration that she had received no academic support.

Misha is an Indian woman aged 32 who has a hearing level of 91–110 dB. She describes herself as Deaf and communicates mostly in SASL. She has a Deaf older sister, who acts as her role model. She was motivated to enter the teaching profession after receiving a scholarship to study at Gallaudet University in Washington DC and because of the many professional Deaf people she met while in the USA. Misha complained about the allocation and co-ordination of SASL interpreters at the University of the Witwatersrand, noting that, at times, a single SASL interpreter was allocated to her for a whole day at a time. This meant that the interpreter became fatigued and Misha felt that she then missed out on important discussions in class.

Siyabonga is a 35-year old black woman who describes herself as hard of hearing and sees herself as part of both hearing and Deaf cultures. Her hearing level is 56–90 dB, and although she became deaf when she was just two years

old, she prefers to communicate in a combination of speech and signing. In 2007 she was in her first year of study in the ACE programme. She was the only student who wrote to the Disability Unit requesting an interpreter who could both sign and speak at the same time. She noted that she had not had access to a SASL interpreter service when she completed her initial teacher training at college.

Nandi is a 29-year-old black woman. Like Siyabonga, she describes herself as hard of hearing and communicates in both speech and signs. She is not sure when she became deaf but thinks it was around 10 years of age. Her hearing level is 41–70 dB. Her motivation to enrol for the Advanced Certificate in Education is because during her initial teacher training she had not been trained in deaf pedagogy. She was dissatisfied with the curriculum studies aspect of the certificate course noting that the SASL interpreters did not interpret everything in the class and that the Deaf students therefore did not have equal access to the information given to the hearing students.

Claude, who is 31, is a black man who identifies himself as Deaf. His hearing level is 91–110 dB. There is no other trace of deafness in his family. He prefers to communicate in SASL. He indicated that he was happy with the SASL interpreter service. He was in his final year of study at the time of our interview, and noted that, during his time at the university, he had constructively engaged hearing students who had misconceptions about Deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Dumisani is a 33-year-old black woman who became deaf at the age of 11. She describes herself as hard of hearing, though her hearing impairment is severe (71–90 dB). Dumisani communicates with hearing people and Deaf people using speech and SASL respectively. She attended a mainstream school where she had no access to SASL interpreters or Deaf classmates. At the time of our interview, she was in her final year of the certificate programme. Dumisani expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that when the students are off campus, the university communicates with Deaf and hard of hearing students mainly by telephone. She also felt disappointed that, at the graduation ceremony, students in the certificate programme they are not capped like students who obtain the same qualification from other universities.

Emmaarah, a 29-year-old Indian woman, is profoundly deaf. Her hearing level is 91–110 dB. She is fluent in SASL and is married to a hearing man. SASL is her main mode of communication. She is not willing to simplify SASL for students who don't know the language well, and prefers to write

down her words, albeit reluctantly. Like Paula, she struggled with academic English literacy but, due to hard work and commitment, she succeeded. She noted that she socialises mostly with other Deaf students, and that when they are not around, she doesn't communicate.

Valli is an Indian woman who is 30 years old. She describes herself as hard of hearing. Her hearing level is mild to moderately severe (41–70 dB). She communicates well in both speech and SASL. She can talk on a mobile phone, but only to close friends and family who are able to understand her voice. Valli was the only hard-of-hearing participant who said that she did not depend on SASL interpreters in the lecture halls. As seems to be the case with most Deaf and hard of hearing students, she attributed her struggles with her studies to ill health rather than to communication problems. She had applied for entry into the an honours programme for 2008.

In summary, the group of study participants was made up of Deaf and hard-of-hearing teachers who had been or were students at the University of the Witwatersrand between 2003 and 2008. They had all registered for or completed the two-year Advanced Certificate in Education. All but two participants had been successful in their academic studies at the time of the interviews. The group consisted of mostly women, which is a common trend in schools for the Deaf in South Africa. Seven participants identified themselves as Deaf and five as hard of hearing. Nine participants were Black and three were Indian. Their ages ranged from 29 to 35. The majority of participants (11) had been exposed to SASL interpreter services prior to their enrolment on the certificate programme. One study participant, Siyabonga, had not, and her expectations of the interpreter services offered were also different: she wanted an interpreter who both mouthed and signed every word spoken in the lectures.

In terms of commonalities, however, all the participants had used the SASL interpreter services offered by the university, regardless of their hearing levels. In addition, all had become deaf in their early childhood, between birth and 11 years of age. They all had hearing parents, which means SASL was not their mother tongue, but for most it was their preferred language. Just two participants, Paula and Misha, had Deaf family members.

The hearing levels of the study participants ranged from moderate to profound. It appeared that the levels of hearing did not influence participants' decisions to describe themselves as Deaf of hard of hearing but rather a categorical allegiance. For example, Siyabonga's audiogram showed that she had a hearing level of 80-120 dB, yet she described herself as hard of hearing.

Despite the varieties in the levels of hearing loss, all the participants registered with the Disability Unit for support services. The most frequent service used is the South African Sign Language interpreting. Services such as note-taking were not used because they were not available. The Disability Unit manager indicated that, due to the growing number of students with disabilities enrolling at the university and the need to balance the types of support service provided, there was a limit on the services that could be provided. Interestingly, none of the participants had requested other services such as computerised note-taking or assistance with extra-time applications from the Disability Unit. Although Siyabonga mentioned that she needed an oral communicator, whether she took this up with the Disability Unit is unknown.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the data can be categorised as follows: motivation to study, individual participant's perspective, academic experiences, challenges faced, the university climate and pre-university experiences. Table 8.2 on the next page outlines the categories and themes identified.

What emerged from the data was that two main factors motivated these Deaf and hard-of-hearing students to enrol at the University of the Witwatersrand. The first was their personal commitment to contributing to the improvement of Deaf education. The second was the availability of institutional and environmental support services at the university.

The participants, all stakeholders in Deaf education by virtue of being teachers, felt that their previous training had not adequately prepared them for teaching Deaf learners. They noted that they had entered schools for the Deaf unaware of appropriate teaching methodologies, Deaf culture, the role of SASL and the psychosocial development of Deaf learners. Programmes in Deaf education offered by the university were seen by participants as an opportunity to empower themselves to contribute to the improvement of the education of Deaf learners.

The study confirmed that provision of the support service has a significant impact on deaf students in terms of equitable access and success in learning institutions. It also confirmed the need for reliable support services for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students if they are to succeed at the university level. Some students complained about the quality and inconsistency of the SASL interpreting service, an issue that is indicative of a larger problem in South Africa.

Categories and themes that emerged from the interviews and written submissions

Pre-university experiences	Part of all-Deaf classes Using interpreters Early inclusion Role of interpreters
University climate	Accessibility Awareness 'Club' membership Classroom situation
Motivation to study	Wanting to contribute to Deaf education Following the example of role models Campus recruitment strategy is effective Socialisation Self-empowerment Keen to upgrade existing qualifications
Challenges faced	Peer attitudes Lack of Deaf peers Lecturer attitudes English literacy Learning methods Note-taking Social isolation Environmental constraints Interpreter shortages Fear of failure Multiple visual tasks Dependence on third parties for access to information
Academic experiences	Communication issues Language access Coping strategies Study skills Limiting factors Studies Academic discourses
Institutional factors shaping students' perspectives	Social integration Support services First lecture Assessment processes Administrative issues Campus amenities

In relation to the access and success of these Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, factors such as their own motivations and coping skills, as well as the availability of support services were significant. The data showed that all the participants had coped remarkably well, considering the communication obstacles they had faced. Some participants noted that they experienced tutorial activities that included group work as problematic because of the fast-paced and often overlapping nature of spoken exchanges (see also Foster 1998). Some found these spoken exchanges impossible to follow through speech reading and often felt excluded from discussions. With skilled SASL interpreters and a change of attitudes by students, both Deaf and hearing, group work could be made more accessible and inclusive.

The study confirmed the findings of the existing literature about the need to obtain feedback about inclusive education directly from Deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Traditionally, research in the area of Deaf education has reflected the voice of hearing people. Little attention has been given to the perceptions of Deaf people themselves. In addition, hearing people, who often have had only basic or little knowledge of Deaf culture and related issues, have conducted the research. This meant that the 'Deaf voice' was often disregarded (Komesaroff 1998). Yet, changes made as a result of listening to Deaf voices are more likely to make the university more accessible for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Another key theme that emerged from the study was that Deaf students prefer to relate to other Deaf students. According to Foster (1998), groups of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students 'often find in a community of Deaf peers the real conversation, family, information and friendships which they do not get from interactions with hearing people' (Foster 1998: 130). Furthermore, communication barriers seem to hinder the development of relationships between Deaf and hearing students, although the lack of interaction may also be linked to previous bad experiences that Deaf students do not wish to repeat.

Despite communication barriers in the classrooms, Deaf participants in the study appreciated the positive attitudes of the lecturers in the Advanced Certificate programme. For example, one lecturer secured SASL interpreters from the Disability Unit by continually supplying the Unit with schedules indicating when the interpreters would be required.

Discussion

The availability of support services such as SASL interpreters and the presence of other Deaf students at the institution clearly helped to motivate these Deaf and hard-of-hearing students to enter the higher-education arena.

The presence of other Deaf students offered opportunities for peer interaction and friendship. However, if Deaf and hard-of-hearing students are to have a positive experience of social and academic integration, issues such as the politics of educational practices and research epistemology need to be exposed and challenged.

Deaf students view themselves as culturally and linguistically different but not as disabled. However, the university's policy and practice positions Deaf and hard-of-hearing students as disabled. This 'denial of linguistic and cultural difference, in preference for a disability construction, ignores the situation in which Deaf people find themselves' (Komesaroff 2000: 10). It must be noted that the 'denial' may be unintentional in some cases as, historically, Deaf people have been viewed by society within a pathological paradigm. However, the cultural and linguistic view of deafness cannot go unchallenged. Clearly, Deaf people share some characteristics with other cultural minority groups, but they also share characteristics with the disability sector. Thus Deaf people can be defined as a cultural and linguistic group with a difference (Thompson 2004). Their challenge in a social and academic environment is exacerbated by the fact that they cannot access spoken languages, such as English, in the same ways that other minority groups can. A possible solution would be for society to shift from regarding deafness as a welfare issue to a human rights issue – within a welfare framework, deaf students are viewed as unequal to others but deaf students view equality, as offered by a human-rights perspective, as a cornerstone of their acceptance and happiness.

In terms of academic experience, a number of participants such as Themba, Dumisani and Valli, to name a few, demonstrated high levels of competence in English literacy. However, several expressed the view that English literacy took up most of their energy and time. The low level of English literacy was one of the main barriers that some Deaf and hard-of-hearing students had to overcome. The problem is exacerbated by the poor quality of education in schools for the Deaf, where a lack of role models, low expectations of schoolteachers, and teachers not being fluent in SASL, combine to discourage learning. However, it seemed that participants could have taken more advantage of the academic-support services to improve their English literacy. Limited time on campus was cited as a problem because, as part-time block-release students, they came to campus for just one week per term and their sessions ran from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. Support services such as the writing centre close soon after 4 p.m. However, as Lang (2002: 277) has noted: Deaf and hard-of-hearing students in higher education must 'become more involved in redirecting their own destinies'.

While Deaf and hard-of-hearing students face particular challenges, there seems to be a lack of awareness about Deaf people's needs as a minority group. Raising and promoting awareness of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students and their needs would encourage their further inclusion in the life of the university. A wider and deeper awareness of deafness would assist Deaf and hard-of-hearing students to feel that they can compete on an equal level with hearing students on campus.

In discussions about the general climate on campus, participants indicated that the university seemed generally aware of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students; however, their social and academic experiences showed that they were not integrated fully in university life. This is due to factors such as poor communication, inadequate support services and students' lack of assertiveness.

My investigation of participants' pre-university experiences revealed that prior educational experiences acted either as a barrier or as an advantage throughout their higher-education studies. Schools thus play a vital role in preparing Deaf and hard-of-hearing students for higher education. However, there is no guarantee that Deaf and hard-of-hearing students will have positive academic and social experiences in either secondary or tertiary education institutions.

Implications for policy and practice

As early as 2000, the University of the Witwatersrand's policy on disability had identified the diversification of the institution's staff and students as a strategic imperative, and proclaimed that 'the university community will reflect and respect diversity' (University of the Witwatersrand 2000: 1). It is necessary, therefore, to assess the impact of the policy on the institutional community. This evaluation should consist of more than annual reports from heads of department. Instead, the perceptions of 'insiders', that is, those most directly affected by such polices such as the participants in this study, need to be sought out and made public. The university could then use an analysis of the experience of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students to identify possible gaps between the goals of the policies and the actual experiences of students.

In addition, activities that raise awareness around the issue of deafness throughout the university community need to be encouraged and promoted. With the presence of the Centre for Deaf Studies, the Disability Unit and the SASL department on campus, the university already has a support structure that could further raise and highlight the issue of Deaf awareness. For example, recently graduated Deaf and hard-of-hearing students could be asked to share their experiences with all new and prospective students. This

would give new students an idea of what to expect and an awareness of the support services available to them, and may help to promote Deaf awareness among hearing students and staff.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing students face many unique communication challenges in fulfilling their academic goals in mainstream tertiary institutions. Linguistic competence in SASL is a distinct advantage for educators of Deaf learners. It would be beneficial for the Department of Education to encourage more school teachers and university lecturers to learn SASL by providing resources and funding an investigation on how best to accommodate Deaf students in the context of inclusive education. One of the key stakeholders in such a study would be university-based services such as the University of the Witwatersrand's Disability Unit. Deaf people should also be involved in this investigation and asked to provide suggestions as to how they would like to be accommodated. Further studies of how inclusion policies are being implemented in other educational contexts would contribute to a better understanding of how to make policies more effective, particularly with regard to Deaf learners. As Powers (2002: 230) has confirmed:

> There is an urgent need for teachers to develop a shared language and understanding of what inclusion means at school and at classroom level… beyond vague notions of greater participation in mainstream settings. I contend that educators of Deaf children, and indeed all educators, need to be aware of the oversimplification and confusion that exists and to work towards a clearer definition of inclusion that can help drive the practice.

Research on inclusive education and deaf schoolchildren needs to be done in collaboration with Deaf and hard-of-hearing people so that such studies have an 'insiders' perspective as revealed in this article.

The study on which this chapter is based aimed to create a foundation for future research. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students still face many obstacles to achieving their academic objectives within a university setting. The need to improve support services for Deaf and hard-of-hearing students cannot be emphasised enough, and the need to include Deaf 'voices' in the use and assessment of such services is equally critical.

Although the study explored the experiences of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students who have managed to reach higher education, it is vital to keep in mind that they are a tiny minority within the Deaf community. Far too many Deaf students fail to complete their secondary education, and never have the opportunity to realise their potential via mainstream universities.

Notes

1 Deaf people identify themselves differently; broadly speaking, some spell 'Deaf' with an upper-case 'D', and identify strongly with the Deaf community. They exhibit attitudinal (linguistic, political and social) cohesion with other Deaf people and tend to use Sign Language as their primary means of communication (Baker and Cokely 1980). The other group spell 'deaf' with a lower-case 'd', and tend to have developed deafness post-lingually. They tend to identify more with people who use speech and are more likely to use lip-reading and hearing aids to help them communicate. In this chapter, 'Deaf' is used to refer to the cultural community and 'deaf' refers to the audiological phenomenon of not being able to hear.

2 See also the section on 'The Liberal Tradition' in History of Wits on the university's website.

3 The Unit was established early in the 1985 as the disabled students program. I know no other university that provided such service before that time.

4 The upgrading of teacher qualifications forms part of the transformation of South Africa's education system, a process that has been ongoing since the abolition of apartheid in 1994.

5 Although participants were attending the University of the Witwatersrand where I was studying, they were part-time, 'block-release' students who came to campus for just one week per term, so I had planned to interview them at their workplaces.

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