

## **Minority Rights in a Supra-national Era: The Case of the Deaf Community in the UK<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

The hegemonic influences of nationalism have led to the decline and loss of many minority languages. In recent years however, in parallel with supranationalism, minority groups and Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) advocates have promoted equitable rights for all. This paper will discuss the field of LHR and will specifically address the rights of D/deaf children in the UK. It is argued that despite official recognition of British Sign Language in 2003 significant steps have not been taken to promote and support a paradigm shift, from viewing the Deaf as a 'disabled' grouping to viewing them as a socio-cultural minority.

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### **Introduction**

Minority groups have experienced language loss and marginalization due in large measure to the ascendancy and strength of nation-states. The ideology of nationalism is one of assimilation, community, social cohesion, integration and homogeneity, to provide certain advantages including commonality of citizenship and collectivity. In order to achieve these advantages in most states a variety is elevated to the status of official language and by deliberate language planning and policy, legitimized, standardised and institutionalized. Within this philosophy there is clearly limited space available for cultural difference or the fostering of alternative varieties, and as such the symbolic status of the national language serves to both unite and empower, whilst also intentionally or unintentionally serving to divide and discriminate. As citizens have come to live within this shared habitus, command of the state language(s) has become the norm and discourse in any language

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other than the official, is often interpreted as ‘deviant’, ‘abnormal’, ‘illegitimate’ or ‘unpatriotic’. Moreover, any notion of having to accommodate to minority speakers by the majority is looked on unfavourably by most.

Recent accounts however have emphasised the influence of supra-nationalism and globalization on individual and group linguistic ideology and practice (see, for example, Maurais & Morris, 2004; McEntee-Atalianis, in press; Wright, 2004), highlighting shifts from monolingual policy and practice to multilingualism, especially in micro-linguistic settings such as supranational organisations or business contexts. Increasing internationalisation has endowed citizens with rights and responsibilities which penetrate and extend far beyond national perimeters, fostering new communities of practice—both real and “imagined” (Anderson, 1983; Hannerz, 1996). As a consequence global citizens are able to function along a complex linguistic continuum and there is an increased understanding that multiple or hyphenated identities do not equate to divided socio-political loyalties. The acceptance, recognition and validation of linguistic diversity within these expanded markets are helping to define multilingualism as a resource and a right rather than a problem. Groups who may indirectly benefit from this paradigm shift are minority<sup>2</sup> language communities.

In parallel with supra-nationalism, challenges have been made to national policies and practices which promote conformity and congruence, by many minority groups and Linguistic Human Rights (LHRs) advocates, in order to establish equitable rights for minority groups and their languages. As a consequence in some quarters more democratic and visionary calls have been made (as exemplified by The Hague Recommendations for regarding the Education Rights of National Minorities, 1996, p. 6) for a change in perspective and the creation of a framework of enhancement. Within this framework minority cultures are not viewed as oppressed, deficient or even deviant groups within nations, unable to contribute to the cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital of a state (Bourdieu, 1997), but rather as a hidden resource whose intellectual and productive capacities remain untapped. Linguistic diversity is therefore applauded and shifts in language policy are called for to ensure that dominated ethnolinguistic groups are not forced to assimilate to the majority culture or be segregated by means of monolingual reductionism (Kontra, Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson & Várady, 1999). The need for minority groups to access both community

and state languages for an equitable existence, enabling contribution to civil society and the granting of democratic rights, is acknowledged.

To date many nations have been unwilling or unable to embrace this new approach—some for fear of claims of self-determination by minority groups, leading to the relinquishment of power by the majority stakeholders—others, due to an unwillingness or inability to envision a new and different system and reluctant or unable to devote money from national coffers to minor parties. However, one minority group who in no way pose a threat to the stability and unity of a nation may serve as a model for other ethnolinguistic minorities in their journey for self-recognition: that is the Deaf community. They are a community for whom a shift to the majority language is extremely difficult and whose linguistic rights probably ought to be prioritized and protected by every state. In this definition, Deaf people are those who identify with other Deaf people, interact with the Deaf community and are users of sign language.<sup>3</sup> They are culturally and not audiologically defined and are referred to, as is standard, with a capitalized ‘D’ (see below for further discussion).

### **Focus of this Paper**

In March 2003 the recognition of linguistic rights for the Deaf community in the UK was realized when British Sign Language (BSL) was officially recognized as one of the national languages of the United Kingdom. A move not only warmly welcomed by the Deaf community and those living/working with the Deaf, but one in line with current international and European trends<sup>4</sup> (and following such moves in Scandinavia, Portugal and Greece for example). It marked a hopeful beginning for a brighter future for the Deaf community and the enrichment of British culture. However, this recognition has not yet been followed by significant legislation nor funding or intervention; for the most part, community support for Deaf people in the UK remains under-developed. The Deaf and their potential membership (deaf children born to hearing parents) are still predominantly regarded as a ‘disabled’ grouping demanding service provision rather than a cultural and linguistic minority demanding equal status.

This paper will therefore discuss the linguistic rights of the Deaf, focusing discussion on educational rights and early support for D/deaf children and their parents within the UK. First however, the paper will address the work of LHRs researchers, some of whom have pressed

strongly for the rights of the Deaf internationally. Whilst respecting and commending the viewpoints and advocacy of LHRs researchers there are also limitations to the field, some of which have been highlighted in a recent paper by May (2000) and will be commented upon here.

To begin therefore let us consider the aims of LHRs researchers, who are attempting to affect a change in minority language status internationally.

### **The Aims of Linguistic Human Rights Research**

The field of Linguistic Human Rights seeks to draw attention to the social and political forces impacting on minority language loss and emphasizes the democratic right of all individuals to participate in civil society in the language of their choice (see, for example, Hamel, 1997; Kontra et al., 1999; Phillipson, 2000). Denial of this right they argue can lead to “linguicism”, which is defined as “unequal access to power and material resources on the basis of language” (Kontra et al., 1999:13). Advocates of this work argue that minority groups should be afforded the same rights and protections as majority language users and where appropriate institutional support should be available to protect these rights and enable ease of communication for those who are not in command of the majority language. In describing the field, Kontra et al. (1999) propose three pivotal tasks for LHRs research: the agreement and establishment of a common vocabulary by interdisciplinary researchers, (e.g. establishing what is meant by the use of such terms as ‘mother tongue’); enhancing a positive view of minorities as an untapped and hidden resource, in an attempt to empower and protect minority groups; and finally the need to consider, compare and contrast individual and universal language scenarios.

### **The Limitations of the LHRs Framework**

As highlighted by May (2000) in a recent critique of the LHRs field, although the motives and principles of LHRs should be applauded there are some problems with its argumentation and use of terminology which need to be addressed before discussing any linguistic minority. These limitations are therefore addressed here and definitions made explicit with regard to the Deaf community.

### ***Individual and Collective Rights***

May (2000) asserts that most notably,

these sets of literature seldom engage directly with the problematic questions much discussed in social and political theory, of what actually constitutes a ‘group’, and, given the complexities involved in defining groups ... whether any rights (linguistic or otherwise) can actually be attributed to them. (p. 371)

Moreover, he claims that the “common disjunction between ‘individual’ and ‘collective’ aims ... problematises the legitimacy of *any* claim to a group-based minority language right, whatever its social and political merits” (p. 372).

LHR literature May argues draws upon the notion of collective or “communitarian” rights and as such adopts an “essentialised view of group identities” (p.376). Post-modern interpretations of identity suggest that given individual variability and fluidity of identity determining group boundaries is no longer a simple undertaking. He suggests that rather than taking an essentialised perspective LHRs advocates would be better to frame their arguments within “group-differentiated” rights (Kymlicka, 1995). Within this theory individual rights are valorized whilst acknowledging and determining the relationship of community membership (cultural and linguistic) to these rights. Two arguments drawn from Kymlicka’s work include the rejection of any “assumption that group-differentiated rights are ‘collective’ rights which *ipso facto*, stand in opposition to ‘individual’ rights” (p.377), rather equality and ‘justice’ demands that individuals from different communities can be granted different rights and therefore by extension in relation to the community discussed in this paper, that the Deaf may be granted unique rights, for example to use sign language in such social institutions as the Law Courts, to be educated in sign language; to provide funding for the support of Deaf cultural events and media.

Secondly, group-differentiated rights acknowledge the right of the individual to disagree or differ from the group. Therefore the right of individual Deaf members to integrate within the hearing community and be educated in the majority language if he/she so wishes, or conversely, the right of the hearing child born to Deaf parents to be educated in their native language—sign language.

He further argues that LHRs writers must elaborate upon the association between language and identity and acknowledge, as many before him have noted (see for example, Edwards, 1994) that language may not constitute a defining feature of group or individual identity. He claims that much of the literature leaves the subject uncritically examined and ill-defined, often presenting an unquestionable link between language and identity. Framing his discussion in the post-modernist constructivist paradigm he argues that for some ethnic groups the argument that loss of a language would lead to loss of identity is fallacious. Indeed there are many examples to support his assertion, the loss of the Irish language being one of them.

In his review of anthropological and sociological explorations of ethnicity he highlights the merits of the “situational account”, in which ethnicity is seen to be constructed socially and politically and is not necessarily predetermined by specific cultural characteristics or historical inheritance per se – an interpretation that accords with post-modern theories of multi-layered and shifting identities (a view similarly supported by myself in McEntee-Atalianis & Pouloukas, 2001). Whilst agreeing with this interpretation May (2000) also asserts however that it would be remiss to ignore the “collective purchase of ethnicity” (p.373) and that language has indeed often been used as an important marker of identity in calls for minority group recognition. He finally concludes that “ethnicity needs to be viewed as *both* constructed and contingent, *and* as a social, political and cultural form of life” and that although language may be important to some ethnic groups it is not necessarily a characteristic feature.

These considerations must be addressed when discussing the Deaf community therefore. With respect to the Deaf community, Sign Language is unarguably a core value and a defining marker of identity and group solidarity, however it is important to acknowledge the diversity of competence in the language by members within this community, the multiplicity of associated identities and the constructed and fluid nature of Deaf identity.

Quite unlike any other minority or majority group, the Deaf community has a unique and diverse cultural, social and linguistic make-up. Perhaps surprisingly for some, audiological deafness does not predetermine membership. There are audiological deaf individuals who choose not to belong to or identify with the Deaf community but rather seek integration within the hearing majority culture and often choose to

identify with a disabled status. By contrast there are hearing individuals who maintain a Deaf identity, some are relatives of the Deaf, e.g. their children, siblings, parents, friends or co-workers who integrate in the Deaf community and who use sign language as the language of communication and as an identifiable marker of membership.

Since 90-95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents the majority of Deaf people have come to learn sign language only when first in contact with other Deaf, and for the majority this is on entering school. Even here we find diversity in the educational policies of the schools and the educational experiences of the children. Some may have been mainstreamed, others may have been in bilingual institutions. Moreover some may be exposed to Deaf clubs or cultural groups whilst at school, others not. As such the majority of Deaf children are different from other ethnic minority children as they may not inherit or inculcate all aspects of their Deaf status and identity from birth but construct it through interaction with members outside of the familial group at a comparatively older age. The experience of Deaf children born to Deaf parents is somewhat different—they are exposed to Deaf culture and sign language from birth, their exposure to the hearing culture may be predominantly from outside the family.

There is therefore a diverse range of cultural, educational and social experience within this community and as such there are a range of competences and configurations of language experiences in sign and English (spoken and written). Some may only experience English through the written form, others may speak English. Deaf identity is therefore constructed, fluid, heterogeneous and based upon a common consciousness, common experiences and cultural forms – one of the most important of which is sign language.

### ***Pragmatic Realities: ‘Majority Opinion’ and Current Practices***

Assuming that minorities are recognized as worthy of equitable rights convincing the public to alter their policies and practices, is another very different and difficult issue. May (2000) argues that “what is needed ... is a greater degree of tolerability... towards specific minority initiatives or, more positively, a climate of “socially enlightened self-interest” (p. 279). He proposes two ways forward: to highlight the virtue in preserving linguistic and cultural diversity in the face of the potential hegemony of international languages, particularly English—extending therefore the

multilingual policies of international organizations to intra-State languages; and to embrace an ideology of “an *obligation of justice*” (p. 279)—by acknowledging individual and group rights where possible, and where there is a significant critical mass of speakers.

Although May’s first suggestion is commendable, recent investigations of practices within multilingual organizations have suggested that although multilingualism is promoted *de jure* there is a *de facto* preference for the limiting of communication to *linguae francae*, particularly to one dominant *lingua franca*, English. In recent papers (McEntee-Atalianis, 2004, in press) I reported that in the functioning of the EU and the UN (and its related agencies) for example, there appears to be a disparity between multilingual policy and monolingual or restricted bilingual practice (see also Ammon, 1994; Cenoz & Jessner, 2000; De Swaan, 2001; Dürmüller, 1994; Fishman, 1994; Gubbins, 2002; Quell, 1997; Labrie, 1993; Labrie & Quell, 1997, Loos, 2000; Pearl, 1996). Language rationalization is often reported and found to prevail due to economic and pragmatic constraints, such as an inability to employ and house multiple interpreters/translators and to pay for the enormous cost of multilingual practice. Multilingualism is found to be guaranteed for most participants (i.e. those whose languages are recognized by the organizations as ‘official’) at the highest levels of representation and functioning but in lower levels of the organizations, and in less formal settings, exchanges are rarely supported by interpretation, and so delegates are often forced, coerced or are simply compliant, conversing in what is becoming the dominant international *lingua franca*, English (Mamadouh, 1999).

With the above in mind, is it possible to suggest that “socially enlightened self-interest” is a persuasive-enough argument or is it the case that similar pragmatic constraints—social and economic—will restrict the use of official minority languages within national boundaries—such that although multilingualism is officially recognized, monolingualism is still preferred? What of the Deaf community and D/deaf children in the UK? Is the spoken language of the majority still prioritized, especially with regards to the education of D/deaf children and if so what can and must be done to support the language of the Deaf and to enhance the life chances of deaf children born to hearing parents and Deaf children born to Deaf parents?



### **The Deaf Community and the Rights of Deaf Children**

Examination of State policy and practice with regards to the Deaf community suggests that notions of “socially enlightened self-interest” and “obligation[s] of justice” appear to feature only in glimpses. For the most part, community support for Deaf people in the UK remains underdeveloped. In recent years we have witnessed some changes, e.g. sign interpreters in the media and other social institutions, however for the most part sign language is still not afforded the same status as the majority language, English. A striking example of this is in the education of the Deaf. Educational research (on a national scale) indicates that the majority of deaf children have failed in an educational system which pushes for mainstreaming through the medium of English—few have achieved the standards of their hearing peers—and not surprisingly, have gravitated towards low status jobs. Many experience mental health problems having failed in an unsupportive and unrealistic system (Griggs & Kyle, 1996). Conrad (1979) (reported in Gregory, 1996) investigated a group of deaf school leavers who had been exposed to oral education. He reports that these children left school with a median reading age of nine years, poor lip reading skills and poor understanding of spoken English. More recently Gregory, Bishop & Sheldon (1995) report that one in seven young deaf people (all born in the 1960s) that they interviewed did not have adequate enough language skills in English or sign language to take part in an interview. This economic, linguistic, psychological and social disparity is marked and will continue to widen unless changes are made to the current paradigm.

There are several reasons why deaf children fail in mainstream education despite their intellectual and cognitive equivalence to their hearing peers:

- They simply do not hear (their parents, teachers, information within their environment) and need to experience different language learning environments to hearing children. Moreover, a tremendous amount of development and learning for hearing children is a consequence of overhearing information from the environment whilst often engaged in other tasks. Deaf infants and children cannot partake in this style of learning and even if provided with interpreters this information is often not transferred to the child.

- Moreover, despite what is sometimes portrayed, medical science has not made significant strides in ‘treating’ hearing loss. Even medical intervention, such as cochlear implants have not proven as successful as first hoped (Marschark, 2002). Deaf children generally do not speak well and are consequently often unable to understand or explain and express their needs/opinions/ideas to the hearing around them. As a consequence a great deal of time is spent in schools speech training with an emphasis on learning the majority language—English. The focus is less on academic content and more on language learning.
- Despite the above, self evident facts, hearing policymakers continue to treat deaf children as if they were hearing and monolingual, and to ignore their obvious bilingual competence. The use of the natural language of Deaf people has been insufficiently explored and applied in education internationally (except in a few countries for example in Scandinavia and in some parts of the USA). This is not helped by major international initiatives – such as the Salamanca declaration (UNESCO, 1994) which places mainstreaming at its heart and only allows some support from sign language for some deaf children in paragraph 21.

Currently in the UK there is a nationwide attempt to introduce an early intervention programme for deaf infants. At present (2002-2006) an ‘Early Support Pilot Programme’ (ESPP) is being tested (funded by the Department for Education and Skills, in collaboration with the Royal National Institute for the Deaf and the National Children’s Bureau) in an attempt to improve services for ‘disabled’ children (including ‘D/deaf’ children) under two years of age and their families. This programme arose primarily in response to the perceived need to offer guidance to Local Education Authorities and parents who may be substantially effected by the earlier identification of deafness through the early screening of newborn babies (as early as two months of age). Despite some very positive steps and suggestions, including a more child-centred approach and a need for early intervention, the D/deaf are still classified within the medical paradigm as a ‘disabled’ grouping whose needs for bilingual/bicultural education appear under-served. For example in monitoring progress in the pre-school years it is suggested that the

developmental yard-stick should be that of the hearing child, where sign language is mentioned it is in a supportive rather than autonomous role:

LEAs should look for evidence of the following:

- general development against developmental norms for hearing children in the first year of life
- the child's developing ability to attend to/respond to sound and voice using hearing aids and/or cochlear implant
- the child's developing ability to attend to/contribute to conversational interaction
- the child's developing understanding and emerging use of spoken language
- the child's understanding and emerging use of British Sign Language or sign communication to support spoken language,<sup>5</sup> where a sign bilingual or total communication approach is being used in the home. (LEA/0068/2003, paragraph 52)

Interestingly, the document acknowledges the importance of services for other ethnic and linguistic minorities but fails to recognize the Deaf as a 'minority' group in their own right or the importance of early access to sign language and Deaf culture for deaf children and their parents. The apparent motivation throughout all documentation is linked to issues of homogenization and cost-cutting, in that early intervention they consider will "dramatically improve the chances of successful inclusion of deaf children into mainstream schools and consequently into society. It therefore has the potential to reduce the long-term cost to society of providing support services" (LEA/0068/2003, paragraph 11).

Although the majority may applaud such proposals envisioning in the same way as these policy makers the Deaf as a 'disabled' grouping in need of 'repair' and remediation, these proposals do not reflect the ideals of the Deaf minority who may not favour mainstreaming, inclusion or a reduction in such services as interpreting and for whom gaining competence in the majority language is extremely difficult. This programme does not recognise the needs of some deaf children born to hearing parents who may be unable to become fully competent in the majority language until they have a strong foundation in sign language (see discussion below). Further, little mention is made of contact between

parents/infants and the Deaf community, or the provision of Deaf role models (unless requested) and despite some mention of sign language, an accent is still placed on the promotion and support of the hearing faculty (e.g. audiological services; fitting of hearing aids). Key workers who are suggested to work in the early intervention programmes are only suggested to have a basic knowledge of sign language and be teachers of the deaf. The latter they admit currently have little knowledge of working with infants and pre-schoolers.

Copious research (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994) has proven that it is impossible for some deaf children to naturally acquire a spoken language. Moreover it is obviously problematic for them to learn a second language without first acquiring a strong linguistic foundation – and this is best constructed via access to sign language. Since, as mentioned above, the majority of deaf children (90-95%) are born to hearing parents, (the vast majority of whom have never interacted in sign or had contact with the Deaf community), the future for deaf children certainly appears grim from the outset. It is a fact that the majority of deaf children enter school with an impoverished cultural and linguistic foundation, which is unable to withstand the demands of the current mainstream educational system. Kyle and Allsop (1997) report, in their study of Deaf communities within the European Union that few (35%) deaf children have learned to sign before the end of the critical period. Moreover, comparisons cannot be made with children who enter into other bilingual immersion programmes, such as English-speaking children who are immersed in French in Canada. These children already have a robust foundation from which to draw upon in their establishment of a new linguistic framework and most significantly are majority children immersed in a minority language and culture.

Moreover, research has shown that deaf children who miss out on the ‘critical period’ of language acquisition lag behind those who have learned a sign language from birth. For example the postponement of sign language acquisition has been shown to delay early cognitive development and socialization (Heiling, 1998). In comparison however, deaf children born to Deaf parents, though few in number, have demonstrated that a sound pre-linguistic/linguistic and cultural foundation in sign language and Deaf culture can lead to comparatively greater success long-term for the deaf child (Brennan & Brien, 1995). Children of signing parents have been found to be more emotionally mature, intellectually developed, and have greater success in learning a second

language compared to their deaf (of hearing) peers. For example, Braden (1994) reporting on 171,517 deaf informants found that deaf children born to Deaf parents were superior on numerous scales of non-verbal tests of IQ. Moreover, their first language acquisition proceeds in a manner comparable to spoken language. Gregory, Bishop & Sheldon (1995) also report that 38% of the deaf school leavers they interviewed stated that their preferred or only language was BSL.

More positively, successful bilingual/bicultural programmes in other nations (notably Denmark, Finland, Sweden) have provided a model of educational achievement for the deaf. These programmes are founded on the principle that it is advantageous for deaf children to first be exposed to sign language and that this provides the basis for the learning of a second, spoken language once the child is developmentally and emotionally ready. These programmes moreover recognize and respect the rights and status of both signed and spoken languages and their users, enhancing an environment of positive multilingualism, whilst also recognizing the developmental abilities of the deaf child. Deaf bilingualism has certain unique characteristics, including the fact that: certain language skills particularly in the spoken language may never be competently and completely acquired; the Deaf rarely find themselves as monolingual in any one context; and unlike many minority groups, they will remain bilingual throughout their lives as it is almost impossible for them to assimilate to the majority culture and language due to their hearing loss. Therefore the dynamic bilingual/bicultural educational philosophy and policies of some nations now more accurately and positively reflects the multiplicity of Deaf identity, as individuals move in and out of both Deaf and hearing cultures on a daily basis. By the practice of these principles both languages and cultures are acknowledged and cherished. Results have shown high academic achievement and well-adjusted individuals.

Moreover ad hoc and more structured attempts have been made to educate and support hearing parents in their introduction and interaction with the Deaf world and sign language (e.g. intervention programmes in Australia, Mohay, Milton, Hindmarsh & Ganley, 1998, and in the UK, Kyle & Sunderland, 1993). This has permitted a recognition and acknowledgement of the vital role that caretakers play in providing a rich and desirable environment for the deaf child and has highlighted the importance of the introduction of early attentional strategies and the recognition of early approximations of utterances by deaf children at the pre-lingual stage. Additionally it has provided much needed support for

hearing parents who are often left to find their own way in their struggle to provide for their children. These programmes have proven to have positive outcomes for both parents and children. Many successful models can be found in the USA.

There is now sufficient theoretical and applied scientific evidence for us to conclude that we have to reassess and change our policies, practices and attitudes with regard to deaf children and adults in the UK if we are to fully recognize their language and rights alongside those of hearing citizens. It is time for a paradigm shift—from viewing the Deaf as a ‘disabled’, ‘deficient’, even a ‘deviant’ and ‘retarded’ minority, to one which is linguistically and culturally integrated. These individuals have the potential to make great contributions to our society if we first recognize that efforts must be made to support the early acquisition of sign language and their cultural inheritance. Clearly, submersion programmes fail many deaf children, however we also know that establishing an early foundation of communicative synchrony between care-taker and child and investing in the visual mode will create a strong basis for the learning of a second spoken language, which in turn can provide a spring-board for integration into the larger community permitting access to the most prestigious economic and symbolic capital within the nation, English. Currently in the UK deaf children and their hearing parents may arguably be deprived and restrained by the system they are within. They are not easily able to access information about the importance of early contact with sign language, or indeed information about sign language and Deaf culture and as a consequence may even view it with relative contempt and/or fear.

### **The Way Forward**

Clearly as a first step it is necessary to place children at the centre of this struggle and by providing deaf children with early access to a visual language and Deaf culture. We must reconsider, as many LHRs researchers advocate, sign language as a solution not a problem by finding ways to empower the Deaf and demystify their culture and support hearing families of deaf children.

A very obvious way forward is to construct bilingual-bicultural programmes for pre-school and school-age children for both the hearing (children of Deaf parents) and D/deaf. As an initial development steps may be taken to construct early intervention programmes (0-3 years of

age); pre-school programmes and family education and support programmes in order to facilitate acceptance of deafness; increase family involvement (parents, siblings and extended family) in the child's development; promote a greater understanding of deafness and the Deaf community; help children and their families learn and respect both hearing and Deaf cultures; and develop a solid means of communication for the deaf child, e.g. through the use of Deaf role models; speech and language therapists, Deaf and hearing teachers etc.

There has been demonstrable success in other countries with such programmes in centres which favour the language, visual orientation and cultural needs of deaf and 'hard of hearing' infants and children, whilst respecting and incorporating the language of the larger society and the linguistic and cultural diversity of the student population and their families. The goals of bilingual education with respect to the D/deaf should be: to provide a positive cultural identity; linguistic competence; and access to literacy and the national curriculum as enjoyed by their hearing peers (Gregory, 1996).

However all of the above is not as easy as suggested, in order to teach BSL it is necessary for a BSL pre-school and school curriculum to be developed but as yet we have some but arguably insufficient knowledge about normal BSL development in deaf infants. It is therefore necessary for such research to be prioritized and supported in order to develop BSL and bilingual educational programmes.

Moreover, although some bilingual programmes do exist in the UK and many education authorities claim to offer it, their provision varies widely (Gregory, 1996). Therefore what has to be developed is a minimum criteria for a programme to be bilingual/bicultural, e.g. some curriculum subjects in L1, others in L2; the presence of native users of L1 (BSL and English) in some or all facets of the educational settings; fully bilingual staff; minimum qualifications for teachers/support workers/role models; designated language policies in bilingual schools (e.g. including considerations beyond the pupils to provision for sign instruction and deaf awareness for monolingual hearing employees); consideration as to how the Deaf and hearing communities are integrated into the school and how the school contributes to the life of the Deaf and hearing community? Moreover the role of the school in providing support for parents and the wider community need to be considered. Outreach programmes offered to parents and families as well as the larger community may be considered so that the institution may be considered as a resource centre for the area.

Moreover in this endeavour it is acknowledged that D/deaf children are not a homogenous entity who will benefit from one wide-sweeping intervention programme. One of the challenges that must be faced when considering intervention and education is the heterogeneity of deaf children and their families and the need for individual family service plans (for infants 0-3 years) and individual educational plans (for children over three years). They may have different degrees of hearing loss; be brought up in signing or spoken language environments; may/may not have contact with other Deaf; some may benefit from amplification of spoken language; some may have competent signing parents, others may receive impoverished communication; yet others may favour integration into the hearing community. At the heart of any early intervention or educational policy and plan must be choice.

### **Conclusion**

As found in many discussions of language loss and competition internationally in this supranational era the continued argument of 'survival of the fittest' is advanced, in which legitimacy is equated with 'naturalness' and 'normality'. Extinction of languages is drawn into simplistic analogies with the endangerment and loss of other living species and as such it is implied that language loss or the accommodation of minority speakers to the majority language is somehow a 'natural' phenomenon:

In effect, biological metaphors reinforce, by implication, a widely held view that language loss is an inevitable part of the cycle of social and linguistic evolution. Thus one could view the loss or death of a language as simply a failure on its part, or its speakers, to compete adequately in the modern world where, of course, only the fittest languages can (and should) survive. (May, 2000, p. 368)

Indeed this perspective ignores the reality that 'the fittest languages' are politically and socially legitimized, an accident of history for the most part and not selected 'naturally' but constructed (along with their status) by the state and recognized and reinforced by its members.

Moreover a more literal interpretation of biological deficit/inferiority is made in relation to the Deaf. With the above considerations in mind, it is clear that D/deaf children continue to be categorized predominantly as biologically 'disabled' and not culturally whole. They are categorized as



in need of a 'cure' in order to become 'hearing' citizens and in so doing it is proposed that they will be able to assimilate to the majority culture, rather than be potential/actual members of a unique minority linguistic group with an innate physical characteristic which deems them as a distinct cultural grouping; as distinct as any other race or ethnic group. The medical model still holds sway and there appears limited acceptance for a socio-cultural labeling, and even where this is accepted, as with other minority groups, limited support is provided. Acceptance of their minority status and adequate educational provision to ensure bilingual competence can only serve to enhance their life chances and therefore their ability to contribute to the life of their nation.

In discussing recent intervention programmes for deaf children it is apparent that, as discovered by Blackledge (2004) in his analysis of political discourse of multilingualism in Britain, it is a "reality that languages other than English are associated with disorder in an English State" (p.69). Clearly therefore in advocating and promoting linguistic rights and multilingual policy for minority groups, pragmatic considerations of an economic, political and social nature, must be considered and incorporated into any framework of enhancement and that family and individual choice must take precedence. What is clear is that the state and its membership have to adjust on two counts in relation to the Deaf minority: firstly they have to envisage them in a new light, as a 'non-disabled' grouping and distinct from individuals (e.g. those sometimes referred to as 'hard of hearing') who identify with a 'disabled' categorization, as lacking or being deficient in a sensory organ and desiring medical intervention in order to become assimilated in the hearing culture and secondly, accept the legitimacy of another official language and community within their borders.

Through introducing and building upon some of the bilingual programmes both in the UK and abroad the linguistic and cultural rights of the Deaf can be addressed and enhanced and British culture can be further enriched.

## **Notes**

- 1 Thanks are due to Prof. Jim Kyle, Centre for Deaf Studies, Bristol University who read and commented on earlier drafts of some sections of this paper.

- 2 The term 'minority' is used here to refer less to the numerical size of the group and more to communities whose first/home/only language and culture is other than that of the official language or culture of the State and who, as a consequence, experience differences in privileges and rights in the society (see May, 2000, 2001; Tollefson, 1991).
- 3 For an excellent introduction to British Sign Language see Sutton-Spence and Woll (1999). Also see Ladd (2003) for an excellent account of Deaf culture.
- 4 Although the Council of Europe still does not recognize sign languages as minority languages.
- 5 Branson and Miller (1998) argue that sign supported systems (which consist essentially of manually coded versions of national languages) are as equally hegemonic as national spoken and written languages and serve to undermine the linguistic rights of the Deaf.

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