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Language, Power, and Resistance Mainstreaming Deaf Education

By Elizabeth S. Mathews

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In her book *Language, Power, and Resistance Mainstreaming Deaf Education* Elizabeth Mathews takes the ideological position that mainstreaming deaf education represents the farthest reach of a regulatory 'medical model' of response to deafness, and a consequently oralist linguistic bias in education. This she contrasts with a 'social model' according to which being deaf is regarded not as a disability, but as a cultural identity, signified primarily by the use of sign language. According to her argument, the social model relies on the existence of 'congregated communities' e.g. as in special schools, the medical model being more associated with 'dispersed communities' i.e. deaf and hard of hearing children attending mainstream schools.

A significant proportion of the book is dedicated to explaining the medical model, its origins in theories of power, and its predominance in contemporary services, which introduction will be especially useful to students who are new to the field. Less attention is focussed on the social model, however, and the fact that the models are respectively conflated with speech and oral language versus sign language usage reduces these complex concepts and their applications to a 'social model good' / 'medical model bad' simplification which is problematic both practically and theoretically.

While the preference of a minority demographic to be identified as culturally 'Deaf' is acknowledged, the simplified medical / social narrative neglects the fact that a majority of deaf people are culturally of the hearing world, oral language users for whom hearing loss is indeed a deficit. This includes a majority of the deaf and hard of hearing children who attend mainstream schools, as referenced in the book's title. A counterposing of 'speech' v 'sign', as presented in the book, risks an underestimation of the challenge faced by many such children in learning a language, either oral or manual, and the simple fact that whether they are speaking

or signing, for successful participation in the education system, children ultimately require proficiency in the language of the curriculum i.e. in most cases in the Irish context, English.

That the persistent use of sign language in the 'congregated communities' of special residential oralist schools represented an act of resistance by deaf pupils is well illustrated. However, the seriously oppressive and punitive regimes within which such survival was negotiated, at what social and emotional cost to those deaf children and their families, is understated, as is the fact that parental resistance to the incarceration of children in segregated institutions was a significant factor in the impetus towards mainstreaming in the later part of the twentieth century. Nor can it be assumed, under present arrangements, that children attending special schools for the deaf in Ireland will have a significant linguistic or curricular advantage, considering the shortage of suitably qualified specialist teachers of the deaf and of trained teachers who are proficient in sign language. As for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) children attending mainstream schools, the dedicated service provided to them by the Department of Education, The Visiting Teacher (VT) Service (under the management of the National Council for Special Education since 2017) now suffers a similar shortage of qualified Teachers of the Deaf. That this was not the case at the time of writing raises serious questions as to why a book purporting as this one does to 'unpack the experience of mainstreaming' would not include the voice of this 'significant cohort', and why such selected references and third-party quotations as are included would be so prejudicially unfavourable to VTs.

The book can be commended for a thorough accounting of the labyrinthine history of deaf education, apart from a puzzling omission of reference to the establishment of the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College in the 1980s which surely signified an empowering advance for the Irish Deaf Community at the time and continues to offer graduate and post graduate courses in Deaf Studies, ISL Interpreter Training and ISL Teacher Training. In the historical context, the establishment, operation, and role of the National Council for Special Education might also have borne scrutiny, especially in the light of the author's claim that '...mainstreaming, instead of deinstitutionalising DHH students, is merely reinstitutionalizing them...into a spatially dispersed "institution" of local schools.'

Since the publication of the book in 2017, The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 was signed into law in December 2020. The act recognises ISL as a native language of the State and provides for the right to use, develop, and preserve it. It places a duty on public bodies to provide free interpretation and provides for specific obligations,

including in educational provision. In relation to professional advocacy for supports for deaf and hearing-impaired children in the mainstream, the legislation has predictably eased the burden of persuasion concerning deaf children who require ISL support. Ironically, by reinforcing the exclusive identification of deafness with signing, it seems it may inadvertently serve to invalidate the equal need for support of oral deaf children.

Not surprisingly, Ms Mathews reports shared concern among the Deaf community, parents of DHH children, and service providers regarding the current deaf education system. She concludes that DHH children move through a system driven by 'institutional ideologies and a medical model of deafness...presumably coping, but perhaps never quite reaching the potential they so deserve'. Whether under an ideological 'social model' the system might magically suddenly succeed where it currently fails is doubtful, however, not least because, as Ms Mathews acknowledges, the potential of the system to deliver rests on the very practical issue of appropriate resources. Chief among those resources, I suggest, would have to be an available pool of qualified teachers of the deaf (be they oral or signing or both) and a policy commitment to engaging only those so qualified in teaching positions in Deaf Education Services, whether mainstream or segregated. To this end it would be in the interest of all concerned to accelerate the plan, referred to by Ms Mathews, to re-establish a programme for the training and qualification of teachers of the deaf here in Ireland.

The strong and unapologetic ideological position adopted in Language, Power, and Resistance Mainstreaming Deaf Education is challenging, and leaves itself open to challenge in response. For this very reason it also has the potential to reignite a lost tradition of robust debate in the arena of Deaf Education, the revival of which would be very refreshing.

With a bit of luck, it might even springboard some measure of intercultural collaboration across the ideological divide. Here's hoping.

LANGUAGE, POWER, AND RESISTANCE MAINSTREAMING DEAF EDUCATION by Elizabeth S. Mathews is published in paperback by Gallaudet University Press, 2018 and costs $35.00