

## **The History of Deaf Language and Education in Trinidad and Tobago since 1943**

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### **Introduction**

The histories of deaf people around the world have frequently been neglected.<sup>i</sup> One reason for this is that the native languages of deaf people are signed, and there is no widely used system for transcribing signed languages. In many countries, deaf people have typically had little access to literacy in a spoken language as an alternative format. As a result of such factors, there are few textual historical records produced by deaf Trinbagonians, and their history has largely been overlooked. This paper focuses on the development of the education of deaf children in Trinidad and Tobago since the first school for the deaf opened in 1943.

### **Deaf Schools and Deaf History**

Bredberg (1999) has argued that there are problems with the traditional approach taken by writers of 'disability history', which focuses on the institutional treatment of impairment and disability. As Baynton (2000:490) puts it: "since deaf education has long been dominated by hearing people, these histories have tended to emphasise what hearing people thought and said about young deaf people" rather than on the perspectives and experiences of deaf adults. It is certainly the case that deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago has been, and continues to be dominated by hearing people, and the majority of what has been written about the deaf population has been written by hearing people and concerned with education, impairment and (re)habilitation.

Nonetheless, an understanding of the history of the deaf community in Trinidad and Tobago cannot be divorced from the history of deaf education in the country. In most communities around the world, the vast majority of deaf children have two hearing parents.<sup>ii</sup> Schein and Delk (1974) estimated that 5% of deaf Americans had two deaf parents, and that 90% of deaf children were born into hearing families in which neither parent signs. In Trinidad and Tobago, the biggest single cause of profound deafness historically has been maternal rubella: there are large spikes in the deaf population which coincide with outbreaks of rubella in 1960/1<sup>iii</sup> and 1982/3.<sup>iv</sup> Rubella (also known as German measles) is a virus infection that causes a brief red rash, and a low fever. If it happens early in a pregnancy, the baby can be born deaf. The proportion of deaf children with deaf parents is likely to be no larger than in the United States. Because the parents of deaf babies are rarely fluent in a signed language, these babies may well not be exposed to an accessible first language from birth, in contrast to hearing babies. Before the establishment of a school for deaf children, many of these babies may grow up without much contact with other deaf individuals, and consequently they may never become fluent signers. In such circumstances, the establishment of a school for deaf children can have a transformative effect. The most famous example comes from Nicaragua, where a national sign language emerged for the first time in the years after 1980 when the first school for the deaf was established in Managua, and deaf children from all over the

country had the opportunity to interact with one other (Kegl, Senghas & Coppola 1999).

Because deaf communities are often defined, amongst other things, as language communities (i.e. groups of individuals who share a signed language), and because national sign languages might only emerge after a school for deaf students has been established, there is a meaningful sense in which the establishment of the first national deaf school may also mark the beginnings of a national deaf community. Clearly, the history of deaf education, the history of deaf language and the history of the development of a deaf community are intimately bound together.

### **Beginnings: The Establishment of the Cascade School for the Deaf**

The post-emancipation period in Trinidad and Tobago saw the beginnings of the modern education system (Campbell 1996:1). While this brought access to public education to the general population, no provisions were made for special education, including the particular educational needs of the deaf population. It is difficult to get an accurate estimate of the number of profoundly deaf people in Trinidad and Tobago in this period. According to the census of 1931, there were 74 deaf and dumb people, 1,062 deaf and 154 dumb.<sup>v</sup> The categories 'deaf and dumb' and 'dumb' are no longer widely used, and the census does not contain any further information about degrees of hearing loss. There is also no information about how many of these people were school-aged children at the time of the census. Nonetheless, it is clear that there was a significant number of people with hearing loss and communication problems for whom there were no official special education provisions.

This began to change when the first school for deaf children was opened on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1943 at 52 Edward Street, Port of Spain.<sup>vi</sup> The impetus behind the establishment of the school had come in part from Reverend F. W. Gilby, an Anglican Minister from England. Gilby was born in 1865 to deaf parents, and, though hearing himself, learned British Sign Language as his first language.<sup>vii</sup> Throughout his life, Gilby was involved in deaf education. In Britain, he was Chaplain Superintendent of the Royal Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb for thirty years as well as H.M. Inspector of Schools for the Deaf. At the age of 72, Gilby heard about the educational needs of the deaf in Jamaica at a rally of the British Deaf and Dumb Association in Bath in 1937. He traveled to Jamaica and assisted in setting up the first school for the deaf there in 1943.<sup>viii</sup> Then, having received a letter from Primrose McCarthy, the Trinidadian mother of two deaf sons, Gilby came to Trinidad, arriving around May 20<sup>th</sup> 1943.<sup>ix</sup> He helped to found the Trinidad Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb<sup>x</sup> on July 29<sup>th</sup> 1943. The first president of the Association was the Anglican Archbishop of the West Indies, Dr Arthur Anstey. John Todd, a local businessman, was the first treasurer, and the Governor Sir Bede Clifford and his wife Alice were the first patrons.<sup>xi</sup>

Edward Street was only a temporary location, however; and on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1946 a new residential school opened at 19 Cascade Road, with an initial group of 15 students between the ages of 4 and 16.<sup>xii</sup> Gilby was also involved in finding staff for the new school. The first principal of the new school was Floretta Case, a Jamaican who had previously taught at the school for the deaf in Jamaica, and the first teacher was Alice Crummach, a Canadian, who had also taught in Jamaica.<sup>xiii</sup>

The number of students increased quickly after the opening of the Cascade School for the Deaf (CSD). CSD had residential facilities, initially for 30 pupils, and took a mixture of day pupils and boarders. The number of students continued to rise

steadily over the following years until the demand for places exceeded capacity. In 1950, there were 41 pupils, 12 girls and 29 boys, almost all aged between 8 and 14. In 1951, the total was 43 (aged between 6 and 15) and in 1952 it was 42.<sup>xiv</sup> As a result, the school was rebuilt in 1953 to accommodate more residential facilities.

### **Expansion and Inclusion**

Formal education of the deaf was gaining momentum and soon one school was not enough. In 1956, the Chief Medical Officer of San Fernando General Hospital, Dr. Robert Gunness, and Medical Social Worker, Joan Bishop, asked whether teachers from the CSD could assist in the south of Trinidad, where there was a sizable population of deaf people without access to education. Within a few years, three teachers from Cascade, including future Principal of CSD, Wallace Pedro, regularly went to Marabella to help teach deaf children. Largely as a result of the rubella epidemic in 1960-61, by 1971, Pedro reported that there were at least 200 deaf children who could not be accommodated by CSD.<sup>xv</sup> This problem was somewhat alleviated when a new school, the Audrey Jeffers School for the Deaf (AJSD), opened on April 6, 1971 in Gopaul Lands, Marabella.<sup>xvi</sup>

In the meantime, some deaf Tobagonian children had been educated at CSD, since there was no school for the deaf children in Tobago. In November of 1983, Dr. Hilton Armstrong, along with a group of parents of deaf children, secured a lease from the Methodist church and the Tobago School for the Deaf, Language and Speech Impaired opened in Plymouth.<sup>xvii</sup>

Despite the growth of educational opportunities for deaf children, the number of deaf children still exceeded the capacity of the deaf schools and there remained a significant number of young deaf people who never went to school. This problem was exacerbated by the large rubella outbreak, and consequent increase in the number of deaf babies, in 1982/3. This period saw the formation of several private organisations targeting the educational needs of these children. One such institution, the Deaf Alert Learning Centre (DALC) opened at King's Street, Princes Town, in 1990.<sup>xviii</sup>

In addition to the increase in capacity, CSD and AJSD were formally incorporated into the education system of Trinidad and Tobago for the first time in 1980. At this time, they were re-designated special schools that became the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.<sup>xix</sup> Students are prepared for the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA) examination at the age of approximately 11 to 13 years at both schools. Successful candidates are placed at secondary schools staffed by sign language interpreter assistants employed by the Ministry of Education.<sup>xx</sup> In addition to this, the Ministry of Education has set up a system of units which cluster deaf students alongside hearing students in selected primary and secondary schools, with a teacher of the deaf assigned to these units. These changes reflect a general move towards inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago, in line with wider international trends.

### **From Oralism to Signing**

Another important change in deaf education that took place over this period was the shift in educational philosophy with regard to the mode of instruction. By 1961, CSD had 60 students and 8 teachers, two of whom had received diplomas in teaching deaf students at Manchester University in England, and a third teacher was about to follow, supported by a British Council scholarship.<sup>xxi</sup> It is therefore not surprising that

educational philosophy at CSD reflected the predominant view in Britain at the time that deaf children should be taught using the 'oralist' approach, focusing on speech and lip-reading, and making use of amplification devices.

In 1970, a certificate programme in the education of the deaf started in Jamaica at the University of the West Indies, Mona Campus. Moislie Clement and Claudette Chin Chuck, two teachers from CSD enrolled in this programme, and eventually received their certificates. Chin Chuck subsequently went to the Bahamas where she witnessed the use of Total Communication, an educational philosophy which stresses the use of all communicative resources available, including use of sign language, rather than relying solely on oral methods. Following a 1973 conference at the University of the West Indies, (Trinidad and Tobago) on deaf education in the Caribbean, Pedro and Clement went to Gallaudet University in Washington DC, to receive training in American Sign Language. There they met Frances 'Peggy' Parsons, a junior professor in History of Art. Parsons, herself deaf, and an advocate of Total Communication, had previously helped to introduce this approach in the Bahamas, and Pedro invited her to come to Trinidad. Parsons made a trip to Trinidad in 1974, and taught classes in American Sign Language at CSD to parents and teachers of deaf children. This signaled a shift in educational practice in Trinidad, which moved away from the oral method and towards Total Communication and signing in the classroom.<sup>xxii</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In this brief sketch, we have focused on three aspects of the history of deaf education in Trinidad and Tobago: (1) the initial establishment of a school for the deaf (2) the restructuring and expansion of educational infrastructure, and (3) the shift in educational philosophy from oralism to signing. Each element has had profound consequences for the development of deaf language and community. First, the establishment of a school for the deaf provided some of the necessary conditions for the development of a national deaf community and sign language. Whilst a large number of deaf people certainly existed in Trinidad and Tobago before 1943, it was not until the establishment of CSD that deaf children from all over the country were regularly brought into day-to-day contact. As the educational infrastructure expanded, more deaf people who had previously been isolated, became part of this growing deaf community. Finally, the switch from oral education to signing in the classroom signaled an acknowledgment of the central role that sign language plays in a deaf community. Recent events, such as the publication of a dictionary of Trinidad and Tobago Sign Language in 2007, and the formation in 2010 of the first deaf-led advocacy group, the Deaf Empowerment Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago, indicate that, nearly seven decades after the founding of the first deaf school, the deaf community is emerging as a strong, articulate and self-determining group.

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we use 'deaf' to refer to those people with profound hearing loss either from birth, or acquired pre-lingually.

<sup>ii</sup> Exceptions to this include the well-known cases of Martha's Vineyard (described in Groce 1985) and Providence Island (Washabaugh 1986) where genetic deafness in a small, enclosed community means that the deaf population is far higher than elsewhere and Providence Island Sign Language is used widely by both hearing and deaf people.

<sup>iii</sup> For further discussion of the link between a rubella outbreak in 1960/1 and deafness, see Karmody (1968, 1969).

<sup>iv</sup> According to the Caribbean Epidemiology Centre's Surveillance Data, there were 1159 cases of Rubella in Trinidad and Tobago in the years 1982 and 1983, compared to 360 cases over the two following years, and 24 cases for 1994 and 1995 combined. Numbers of rubella infections have fallen

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dramatically as a result of vaccinations and a campaign to eradicate rubella from the English speaking Caribbean and Suriname (Irons et al. 2000).

<sup>v</sup> *British Deaf Times*, Jan/Feb (1944:5)

<sup>vi</sup> Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Deaf (1993)

<sup>vii</sup> Gilby (1944:117)

<sup>viii</sup> Gilby (1944:118)

<sup>ix</sup> *British Deaf Times* Sept/Oct (1943:94)

<sup>x</sup> The name has changed several times, in 1962 to the Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Deaf, and in 2000 to the Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Hearing Impaired.

<sup>xi</sup> *Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Deaf 50 Years of Service 1943-1993* (Trinidad and Tobago: Government Printers, 1993), 1-13.

<sup>xii</sup> Trinidad and Tobago Administration Report of the Director of Education for 1945-1948. Published by Government Printers.

<sup>xiii</sup> *British Deaf Times* Nov/Dec (1944 :118)

<sup>xiv</sup> Trinidad and Tobago Director of Education (1953).

<sup>xv</sup> See Pedro's paper in Seminar on Deafness (1973).

<sup>xvi</sup> Trinidad and Tobago Association in Aid of the Deaf (1993)

<sup>xvii</sup> Cupid (1997)

<sup>xviii</sup> Dowrich (1997)

<sup>xix</sup> Williams (2007)

<sup>xx</sup>. Interview with a Sign Language Interpreter Assistant by the authors. Trinidad and Tobago. October 26, 2010.

<sup>xxi</sup> Trinidad Association in Aid of the Deaf (1960).

<sup>xxii</sup> The oral method is the main approach used at the Diagnostic Research Educational and Therapeutic Centre for the Hearing Impaired (DRETCHI) which works with children who have a mild to severe hearing loss who benefit from amplification, and use speech as their primary means of communication.

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