

A LONGITUDINAL LOOK AT DEAF EDUCATION POLICY AND CHANGE IN SWEDEN, GREECE, CYPRUS, AND HUNGARY: SIMILARITIES, DIFFERENCES, AND CROSS-COUNTRY INFLUENCES

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ABSTRACT

This symposium provides a longitudinal perspective on evolving educational policies, including bilingual education, in four diverse countries: Sweden, Greece, Cyprus, and Hungary. These countries share similarities in that they are all developed nations who are members of the EU but they each have adopted different policies and practices with regards to education of deaf students. We will be taking a look back 25 years and looking forward to the next 10—15 years, focusing on the forces outside of education (e.g., political, economic, social, and technological) that have an impact on policy development, implementation, and change. The discussions will focus on inter-country influences and the extent to which decisions and strategies, including lessons learned, in one country influence policy development, implementation, evaluation, and expectations in other countries. We will address when and if assumptions cross national borders and how the associated cultural, linguistic, political and economic differences, including the nature and role of the deaf/Deaf community and sign language, have an impact on implementation. Finally, we will explore strategies for countries to share information in order to stay current and benefit from cross-utilization of ideas and experiences.

INTRODUCTION:

Policies and practices regarding the education of children who are deaf and hard of hearing have evolved and continue to evolve over time, sometimes through intentional planning and sometimes in response to external forces. Ideally, changes in practice, including teaching strategies, lead to improved student outcomes. However, improving outcomes is not the sole motivator for change; many external factors influence practice. Broad influences include changes and advancements in medicine and technology, economic conditions, and societal beliefs and attitudes. Other factors that separately and in combination influence (and are influenced by) policy and practice include: governmental laws and

policy, teacher preparation, demographics and geography, and special interest groups and advocacy.

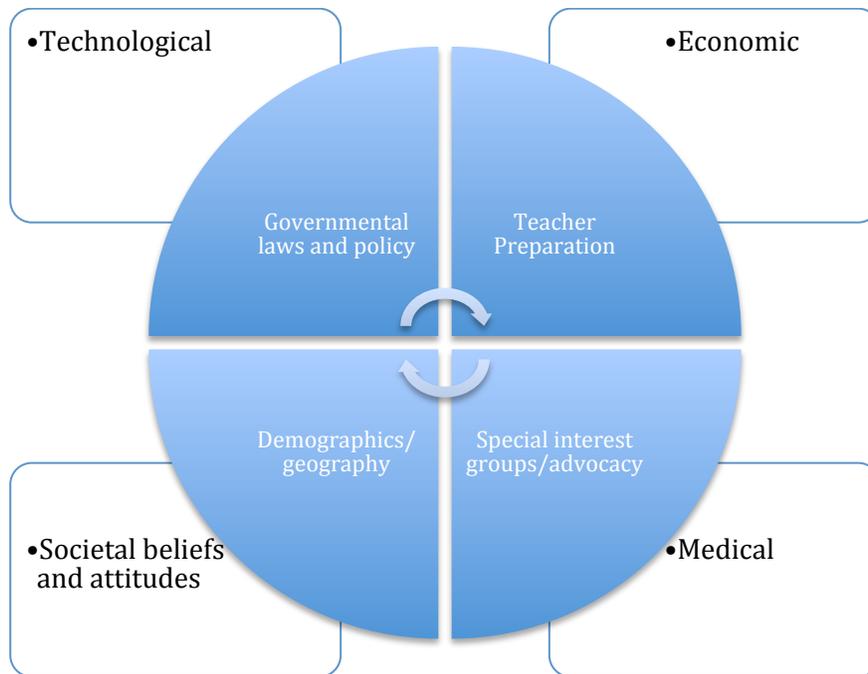
In this symposium educational policy and change, particularly related to language choice and use, is examined in relation to these factors in four European countries—Sweden, Hungary, Greece, and Cyprus. All of the countries are members of the European Union, where there is strong support for mainstreaming efforts, and all receive EU funding for education. All participate in the Bologna Accords which assure comparability and consistency in educational offerings, particularly at the post-secondary level. On the other hand, these countries have adopted different policies and practices with regard to education of children who are deaf or hard of hearing. They represent different trajectories regarding language and communication policies effecting educational practice. In particular, they are at different points on a timeline of policy development and change regarding bilingual education.

METHOD:

The presenters from each country were asked to look back 25 years and look forward to the next 10—15 years, focusing on the forces outside of education (e.g., political, economic, social, and technological) that have an impact on policy development, implementation, and change. They were asked to prepare a paper addressing the following three core topics:

1. Briefly describe your country's educational policies, including bilingual education, over time—provide a short overview of where you were 25 years ago, what has happened since then, and where you see yourself in 15 years
2. Discuss influences and consequent changes in policies
3. Discuss how your country has influenced and/or been influenced by other countries

In expanding on the above three topics (policy, change, and inter-country influences) they were asked to envision educational policy and practice being at the center of the diagram below. The diagram includes a range of factors that, separately and in combination, influence (and are influenced by) policy and practice (the area surrounded by circling arrows). The outer text boxes are the most general areas of influence and the inner ones are more focused on education of deaf and hard of hearing students. Presenters were encouraged to select three or four of the eight factors that they felt have had the greatest influence in their country regarding deaf education and bilingual models of education.



An analysis of these responses yielded several themes that are addressed below. In addition, in the symposium, discussion will focus on inter-country influences and the extent to which decisions and strategies, including lessons learned, in one country influence policy development, implementation, evaluation, and expectations in other countries. We will address when and if assumptions cross national borders and how the associated cultural, linguistic, political and economic differences, including the nature and role of the deaf/Deaf community and sign language, have an impact on implementation. Finally, we will explore strategies for countries to share information in order to stay current and benefit from cross-utilization of ideas and experiences.

RESULTS:

In all the countries, national governmental laws or acts have influenced educational policy in the schools. The Swedish Parliament in 1981 decided to recognize Swedish Sign Language (SSL) as the first language of its deaf citizens and to require teachers to use SSL in the educational process. Since then, Sweden has been engaged in bilingual education, whereby children are taught in Swedish Sign Language (SSL) and written Swedish. Hungary has primarily used auditory-oral methods in its schools but is in the process of altering their methodology in response to a law passed in 2009 requiring a bilingual option be offered in the schools by 2017. This legislation also recognized Hungarian Sign language (HSL) as a language and the Deaf community as a linguistic minority. Greece officially accepted a total communication philosophy in 1984. Greek Sign Language was recognized in 2000 by the Ministry of Education as the language of Deaf people, and the prime language of deaf students. According to the same law teachers are required to know GSL in order to work in schools and programs

of deaf students. However, bilingual education is being offered by a few programs, while most of the teachers continue to use Total Communication. Cyprus has officially applied oral methods for educating deaf and hard of hearing children, the vast majority of whom are educated in inclusive classrooms in general schools.

Health policies have influenced the early identification of infants who are deaf or hard of hearing and the provision of early intervention services in all the countries. In Cyprus newborn hearing screening programs and early intervention services are well developed and strongly supported. Newborn screening for all babies is offered by private clinics, and some public maternal hospitals in Greece, while public early intervention programs are offered in major cities. In Hungary free early intervention is provided in the homes immediately after diagnosis focused on developing hearing and speech, with no provisions for sign language instruction. In contrast, in Sweden the language of instruction in early intervention and continuing on through preschool is Swedish Sign Language. However, despite the strong focus on early learning of SSL and the expectation that students will be taught in SSL, the teachers in EI and beyond are not “required” to know SSL and consequently too often are not fluent in or using SSL.

For all these countries the increasing prevalence of cochlear implants is having an impact on educational practices, often in spite of official policies. In particular, there has been a reconsideration of the role and use of spoken language in educational settings. This presents a challenge to Swedish educators who have followed a bilingual policy whereby Swedish is taught in its written form. It presents a challenge to the team in Hungary who are developing a bilingual option and a strategy for marketing it to parents. In Greece and Cyprus technological advances in hearing aids and cochlear implants have contributed to a new change in placements and in curricula and communication approaches to deaf education. In all the countries this is leading to a greater percentage of deaf and hard of hearing children being educated in mainstream settings.

Thus all of the countries are experiencing a change in the demographics of their special schools. This shift is due to many factors, including a European Union explicit preference for mainstream settings; furthermore, the potential for children with cochlear implants to access the curriculum in mainstream settings and parental pressure for them to do so has undoubtedly contributed to this trend. Along with the trend toward increased mainstreaming is the trend for special schools for the deaf serving students with additional disabilities. Greece and Cyprus also report a higher incidence of deaf and hard of hearing students from immigrant families in special schools. In Sweden and Hungary students may have differential schooling placement based on whether they are deaf or hard of hearing. Whereas all of the countries are experiencing increased mainstreaming, they report differing levels of success with such. Research has shown that children in Greece face challenges in these settings due to lack of appropriate support services and thus access to curriculum and to communication in the

classrooms (Lampropoulou 1998; 2010). In contrast, deaf and hard of hearing children in Cyprus are academically and socially included into general schools where effective support services have been developed (Hadjikakou, Petridou, & Stylianou, 2005; 2008)

The trend toward mainstreaming presents a threat to d/Deaf communities. A declining role and influence of the deaf community is projected in Sweden. In Cyprus and in Greece young Deaf people are participating far less in Deaf Clubs than they did in the past (Hadjikakou & Nikolarazi, 2011) and some project the waning of Deaf culture in the future. In Greece students who are deaf and hard of hearing get in touch via technology and primarily use signed Greek not GSL.

Parents and the d/Deaf community have played differing roles in the countries with regard to policy. In Cyprus parents have played a strong role in the establishment of educational policies. In the 1980's they fought for full inclusion of their children into general schools and have remained strong advocates for oralism. There was neither involvement nor opposition from the Cypriot Deaf community. In Greece, parents collaborated with teachers and the Deaf community to advocate for total communication in the 1980's. There was similar collaboration in Sweden where all parties welcomed and supported the introduction of bilingual education. Today parents in Sweden may choose spoken Swedish training for their children. In Hungary parents did not play a strong role in the creation or passage of the law requiring a bilingual option, yet the choice of method to be used with a particular child is in the hands of the parent. Parents will have the option of choosing bilingual or oral education; however, plans to educate parents about the options have not been developed. In contrast, the deaf community in Hungary advocated for the legislation, but have participated minimally in implementation endeavors.

All of the countries have faced, and continue to face, challenges moving from theory to practice where theory is embodied in the laws or mandates motivating change and practice is found in implementation. A common theme across the countries was lack of financial resources from governmental agencies to sufficiently support implementation. Another common theme was the lack of what might be considered an infrastructure for supporting change. This was particularly noted for Sweden and Hungary. As discovered by 80 interviews conducted by Patricia Mudgett-DeCaro and James DeCaro in 1999, teachers in Sweden were not being adequately prepared for bilingual approaches in the schools. For example, they knew signed Swedish but not Swedish Sign Language. In addition teachers did not have guidance or materials for teaching Swedish as a second language. Foster, Mudgett-DeCaro, Bagga-Gupta and colleagues (2003) addressed potential issues having an impact on Sweden's implementation of their bilingual policy. These included: limited sign language instruction for parents, insufficient in-service resources for teachers to learn SSL, and scarcity of interpreters in universities limiting access of deaf students to curriculum. These issues have remained and compounded by newer legislation

increasing teacher workload and expectations and decreasing teacher status, salaries, and power. As Hungary has been developing their implementation plan the same potential obstacles have arisen. There are questions regarding resources and strategies for supporting in-service training, for teaching bilingual instructional methods in university training programs, and for providing appropriate and sufficient sign language instruction in the schools and the university.

In Sweden, Greece, and more recently in Hungary the legislative initiatives influencing deaf education have been broad, encompassing recognition of sign language, the Deaf community, and the importance of interpreters. Education reform is thus tied to social/cultural issues and the status of sign language and availability of sign language instruction. In Sweden and Greece sign language is recognized in the universities and is part of the curricular offerings. In contrast Hungarian Sign Language has not achieved status as a foreign language at the university and so cannot be used to achieve foreign language points needed for graduation. Part of the problem is that its recognition as a language in Parliament preceded formal linguistic studies of its structure and analyses of similarities and differences in the sign language used at the different schools for the deaf across the country. In addition, students cannot major in sign language and can only take courses as an elective. The minimal availability of sign language courses exacerbates the reported shortage of interpreters, a shortage also reported in Sweden and in Greece. This shortage mitigates legislation supporting the access of deaf and hard of hearing persons to education and public information.

Another interesting theme is cooperation and collaboration. Sweden reports that its history of consensus helped forge early partnerships between schools, parents, and the deaf community leading to policy initiatives that all could embrace. However, that optimism led to underestimations of the money, time and commitment required for change. Similarly, Greece reports partnerships between various organizations and stakeholders in mandating and accomplishing change. For example, collaboration between parents, professionals, the National Institute for the Deaf (NID), and the Hellenic Federation of the Deaf (HFD) led in 1984 to the official acceptance of the Total Communication philosophy by the NID schools. Since then there has been a gradual cultural shift in Greek deaf education to bilingual education. This has been influenced by the official recognition by the Greek Ministry of Education of the Greek Sign Language (GSL) in 2000 as the prime language of deaf students, the Deaf Community's lobbying, and the University of Patras' research and programs for teachers in deaf education and deaf studies. Organized Cypriot parents fought for full inclusion, supported by different laws and policy of the Ministry of Education and Culture. In contrast, Hungary is experiencing difficulty bringing different stakeholders together and opposition rather than collaboration is impeding progress.

DISCUSSION:

Primary stakeholders in policy development, implementation, and change are the teachers who are at the center of our model. Teachers share the excitement and burden of adjusting their educational efforts to meet the challenges of outside forces. In most cases the schools and teachers are not leading the reform efforts but instead are finding themselves in the position of responders and implementers. Reform efforts may threaten the ownership and control of the curriculum and its delivery by the individuals most closely involved: the teachers of children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

We can see how governmental policies can spark innovation and change; but we can also see how policies, especially those affecting teaching conditions as seen in Sweden, can have a negative impact. We can also see that other benefits to legislation may occur such as in Sweden where the effect of bilingual policy on deaf/hard of hearing student's performance in Swedish has been disappointing, but the effect on their self-esteem and world knowledge has been very positive.

We can see how the best-laid plans may become thwarted by inadequate monetary and systemic support including time and commitment. For example, the successful implementation of instructional policies depends on the identification and provision of professional and in-service training in the schools and in university programs.

We have seen that, as projected by many, cochlear implants have had a profound effect on the landscape of deaf education. At the same time that models for bilingual education were taking hold supporting the use of sign language and written language as avenues to literacy, the increasing prevalence of cochlear implants and their increasing potential for access to spoken language were sparking renewed interest in auditory-oral avenues to language and literacy. New conceptualizations of bilingual education may meld the benefits of sign language and spoken language into bimodal bilingualism models of language learning and instruction. Inter-country dialogue and collaboration could facilitate the development and dissemination of such models and promote advancements in the field.

In conclusion, educators from different countries should engage in collaborative examination of their policy outcomes. By carefully examining the forces that facilitated and impeded progress in their own and other countries educators can hopefully plan appropriately and avert the missteps and obstacles experienced by others. Such collaborative problem solving may lead to the desired outcomes of policy change for students, teachers, and the community.

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