

## *Preface*

---

*Carlos Skliar*

This significant book offers us a map of the situation of bilingual education for deaf children in Latin America over the last 30 years, as well as an analysis of its ethical strengths, linguistic and educational purposes, and political ambiguities. What is presented in this book is a question that has been constantly reiterated to the point of becoming redundant but which contains the entire dilemma of our world. That is, the political, economic, social, media, and technological dilemmas that, despite universal proclamations of equality, equity, and quality, keep producing more inequalities, inequities, and educational reforms of dubious significance. The following two questions, which may seem unchanging, were, are, and will remain as palpable as they are profound.

Is there still room for an education aimed at specific individuals (and their needs) that is not simply based on a theoretical or generic idea of a person? And what are the specific, unique features that make deaf education a controversial issue whose processes and outcomes involve claims and denials back and forth to the extent that it has created a discontinuity, a disruption, a break, a chasm between Deaf children, the education community, public policies, educational institutions and the Deaf community? To state it in a straightforward way: What is it that keeps deaf education from producing absolutely, for the length and breadth of the continent, a defined identity in public policy that leads to a genuine difference in the meaning and organization of educational structures? And furthermore: Is there room to think about bilingual education for Deaf children without the irrational pressure to “normalize” within a stagnant and stale debate that opposes the language of “the other” (recognizing difference) and proposes the language of “we,” in the context of legal discourse in a push towards educational inclusion?

A number of years have passed in Latin American countries since the first models of bilingual deaf education were made concrete in the 1980s, particularly in Venezuela and Uruguay. It seems incredible that there are continued demands that ask nothing more than to transform deaf education, which in Latin America exists as a kind of dispersed geography. While there are intense illuminated nuclei (Venezuela,

Uruguay, and others), there are also arid desert landscapes where bilingual deaf education remains elusive.

One may note the contrast between advocacy of the need for early access to their (sign) language and the tremendous problems of access for the youngest Deaf children to the appropriate language environment. On the one hand, we see awareness of the need for comprehensive education, and, on the other hand, the immense difficulties in implementing an education that includes, at a minimum, wide-ranging materials and exemplars. We see the belief in the transcendental role played by Deaf adults in the education of Deaf children and the insufficient development of training programs to prepare them for this role. Lastly, we hear all the rhetoric about providing a comprehensive educational path for Deaf individuals, yet we know an insignificant number of Deaf students attend secondary schools and an even lower number attend higher education programs.

It should be clear, judging by all that has been accomplished to date and the richness and depth of the research and theoretical chapters in this book, that deaf education cannot be reduced to a quandary of optimism or pessimism. I would propose that it is a matter of public policy or, rather, the public nature of a policy whose tendency towards medicalization and pathologizing of childhood and of universal inclusion (in schools) in recent decades has resulted in nothing less than the total fragmentation or “atomization” of Deaf people, as if they were individuals who can cope in isolation or be left to their families, neighborhoods, cities, regions, and so on.

Precisely therein lies the essential nature of the public, of the ordinary, what it is for everyone is also for each and every one. No one remains a prisoner of his own fate. That fate depends on how we are born, the family we have, the schools available, the governments in place, and what the law provides or does not provide for the special situations of certain people. It is well known that this kind of “naturalization” of education, the idea that continues to insist on a “natural order of life and of things,” has produced more marginalization of the already marginalized, more impoverishment of the impoverished, more exclusion of the excluded, and more violence in already violent contexts. Public policy must be aimed at those twisting paths that are not spontaneous or natural but are a kind of social, economic, and political artifice.

Therefore, read this book through the lens of the public and not the political, where everything has been aimed with respect to the need to change the course of those individuals who come into the world under conditions that, even today, are unanticipated and considered imperfect. Indeed, all those societies that still vacillate between modernity and modernism, which have not yet gone beyond the excess of legal reason, insist on confusing charity and essential public policy with public welfare and supervision. They maintain an image of certain people as fragile or ill, an “otherness” that should be redirected onto the path of normality, for only then can they become (hypothetical) full citizens.

On the whole, this promise of redemption has not been fulfilled and perhaps is impossible to realize, beyond the supposed arguments of progress that govern an educational idea. The promise is unenforceable because it exists within a vision of achieving a utopia of equality, at the end of the educational process, while beginning with and continuing inequality, consciously or not. And equality cannot be achieved in the education of deaf children for the very simple reason that it entails a huge philosophical dilemma. For infants, for any infant, for children, for any child, any postponement of exposure to language is always too late.

Let's consider the issue of delaying, that is, of putting off, the acquisition and use of a language. This is not only dangerous it is criminal, if I may take the substantial risk of using such a strong term. It is criminal because it kills or anesthetizes the individual's existence, transforming it into a kind of impediment, not only to the possession of language but also for all that language contributes to human life—that is, invention, creativity, storytelling, fiction, community life, exposure to the world, writing, and reading—in short, what makes a person a human.

This postponement of access to language shows how the controversies of cochlear implants and inclusive education have changed the state of the art. They have opened a Manichaean discussion about the language acquisition of deaf children beyond what have been the effects and results of this dual interpretation of public policy. At least four phenomena that have been unidentified and deemed inconceivable until recently must be evaluated thoroughly in the coming years. These are: (1) fewer deaf children are using sign language around the world; (2) fewer Deaf adults participate in the Deaf community; (3) there are fewer cultural and educational encounters between deaf children and Deaf adults; and (4) a majority of residential and special schools for deaf students have been closed or redesigned as shared education facilities.

If we measure these consequences as “natural,” we obscure or hide an essential discussion: what about those vast numbers of deaf children who are cut off from these two “trends”: cochlear implants and inclusive education? But additionally, what happens to those deaf children and youth who still access this form of politics, who get cochlear implants without the required follow-up or documentation of their language development, and who don't thrive in inclusive educational programs and public schools? Is there a deaf population whose inexorable destiny it is to be educationally impoverished and another, on the contrary, to be “normalized” into the hearing world?

The questions are obvious and their essential radicalism and tension should be sustained. This is not merely a technical discussion but principally the reflection of a way of understanding the position and ethical exposition of education. That is, we have a responsibility to provide answers now; we cannot and should not delay any further.

And this is where bilingual deaf education persists with all its richness and impact. This proposal for bilingual deaf education has never been restrictive at its core but,

on the contrary, emerges as a serious effort to broaden and enrich the context of accessible language. It goes beyond the customary disputes between the use of sign language or the oral modalities and considers a comprehensive educational approach. When the “public” becomes political, the “bad luck” (being different) becomes good luck, offering thousands of deaf children the opportunity to enter the world and stay in it, with their uniqueness, without the need to be told by specialists that they are incapable, sick, weak, or disabled.

Let us continue, then, with a second point: the unfolding of the unfulfilled or unenforceable promise. All education takes the form of a conversation about what to do with the world and what to do with us and with others in the world. In other words, all pedagogy is a conversation, and clearly no pedagogy is possible without conversation. We can say that the entire book presented here reveals the issue in a clear, raw way, either its affirmation or its negation. Despite efforts realized in order to open up spaces for discussion, there is much that has been left undone. Indeed, one of the most exasperating indications in deaf education, since time immemorial, has been the absolute lack of discussion in educational spaces, particularly, about the impossibility of teaching deaf children if they had not first mastered a language. The result has been a view that deaf children are defective. Bilingual education arose to put an end to this unacceptable situation and created the bridges necessary to reverse it. It was understood that educating teachers to be fluent in sign language was a prerequisite, as were programs designed to train interpreters for the classroom and the significantly increased presence of Deaf adults (although sometimes merely as assistants and other times as educators). Thus, deaf schools that abandoned the clinical mode and its insistence on the exclusive use of the oral language were discovering that behind the debate about languages was the urgent need for educating deaf students.

There is no doubt that this book is a serious invitation, in capital letters, to consider everything that has been done so far. It is also a profound study that helps reflect on the changes suffered in deaf education with the passage of time together with changes in the world. However, the question as to the fate of bilingual deaf education remains tense, unalterable, and ethically concerned with the history of a linguistic community and its presence and the realization that certain individuals cannot and should not be abandoned to their own fate.