Exploring New Zealand Sign Language's discriminatory past and uncertain future

NEW ZEALAND 1NEWS

How did we get here? The history of New Zealand sign language

AUT Deaf Studies lecturer Rachel Coppage explains the language's history and explores the future of the Deaf community. (Source: Other)

Despite being made an official language in 2006, the history of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) is coloured with discrimination, and its future is equally as murky.

In 1880, teachers of the deaf gathered in Milan, Italy to discuss the future of Deaf education. In the forefront of discussions was the existence of sign language.

Deaf schools in Paris, France had experienced great success with sign language, using Deaf teachers to teach Deaf students.

These teachers used a holistic approach to instruct students in sign language, anchoring their signs in real life objects and concepts. The approach was so successful that some students went on to become Deaf doctors or lawyers.

However, at the time, prominent US inventor Alexander Graham Bell had achieved great results with teaching Deaf family members to lip-read, and this approach was brought to the Milan conference with much interest.

In addition to this, the Catholic majority of Spain at the time felt that sign language was an inappropriate method to talk to God. They believed that to speak to and be close with God, one needed a voice, and sign language did not fit that belief. There was a perception that the sign language community was closed off from mainstream society, and this needed to change.

This all culminated in the Milan conference in 1880, which possessed merely two Deaf teachers, deciding to effectively ban sign language worldwide. Many Deaf people lost their employment, including Deaf teachers, and in some instances children were strapped or caned for using sign language.

Around the same time in New Zealand, the government established the first Deaf school in the Christchurch suburb of Sumner and made the decision to incorporate the ruling from the Milan conference.

Deaf children in New Zealand were required to be separated from their families and live at the school, where sign language was forbidden. Lip reading and speaking were the only means of communication allowed, but was not the only means that existed in Sumner.

Forbidden from signing in public, students would communicate through sign after dark in the dormitories, and this underground signing was what lead to the development of NZSL. Rather than quashing sign language, the conditions in Sumner in fact lead to the birth of a wholly distinct and unique language.

After students left the Deaf school, there was a desire amongst them to create a Deaf space - a place where they could socialise, and sign. This led to the establishment of the first Deaf clubs, spaces for the community to gather and exchange experiences. The schools and clubs all fed into one another and made for a rich, developing Deaf community.

However, the present situation of NZSL and the Deaf community today is a far cry from the past. With Deaf schools closing and Deaf children forced into the mainstream, there is significantly less NZSL and Deaf culture exposure. AUT Deaf studies lecturer Rachel Coppage fears that, given time, this could lead to the erasure of NZSL. She worries that with Deaf youth unable to easily access their culture, they can find themselves adrift and experiencing what she refers to as "an identity crisis", unable to fit in either the hearing or Deaf world. The fragmentation of the culture, and a declining Deaf population thanks to medical advancement, makes for an uncertain future.

Ms Coppage would like to see a society where a child that is born Deaf is accepted as such, and not seen as a problem to be fixed. This change in attitude would, she feels, lead to a more accepting society and a stronger foundation for the Deaf community. She would love for people to realise that if a child is born Deaf, there is a community and culture there for them.

The issues facing the Deaf community and NZSL as a whole can no longer be tackled by the Deaf community alone, and Ms Coppage says that the Deaf community need allies in the hearing world to ensure the preservation of both the language and culture. **- Kieran Bennett**

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