DEAF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: REFLECTIONS ON INCLUSION

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to understand the experiences of deaf students who attended bilingual schools and identify with the deaf culture. The starting point was field research with three young women and two young men, between 21 and 27 years old, who had been enrolled in undergraduate courses for at least three semesters. The work consisted in semi-structured, individual interviews, conducted by a deaf female scholarship-holder and recorded on video; these interviews were later translated into Portuguese and analyzed for their content. The

results show how challenging it is to adapt to a world of people who, for the most part, have normal hearing, the difficulties of moving between sign language and Portuguese, the need to maintain identity points of reference that are valued by those who hear normally, as well as the importance of reorganizing teaching strategies and evaluating the involvement of the Libras[Brazilian sign language] interpreter.
HIGHER EDUCATION – INCLUSIVE EDUCATION – DEFICIENT OF AUDITION – TEACHING METHODS

A growing number of deaf students are entering higher education in Brazil. According to data from the Ministry of Education, in 2003 there were only 665 deaf people in universities. By 2005, this number had increased to 2428, split between public and private institutions (Brazil, 2006). The increased presence of deaf students within a university context is a recent occurrence and stems from several factors, including: recognition of the status of sign language as an official language as from the mid-1990s; the development of proposals for quality, bilingual education for the deaf, and an historical moment in which public inclusion policies have been gradually increasing the access of people with special needs to different social contexts and their active participation in the same.

This article specifically addresses the inclusion of deaf students who have been educated in a bilingual environment and who strongly identify with deaf culture. The objective is to understand the university experience of these students. Starting with general considerations about the experiences of young deaf people in special schools and their presence in higher education, some of the characteristics and challenges of inclusion in a university environment are initially assessed on a theoretical level. Then five interviews, conducted in the Brazilian sign, Libras, with deaf university students, are analyzed. This is a preliminary, exploratory study aimed at collecting information for subsequent work.

THE SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG DEAF PEOPLE

The school experiences of the young deaf people who participated in this study are the result of a process that began in Brazil in the 1990s: the establishment of bilingual school environments and the changes that this meant in terms of valuing sign language, as well as

deaf identity and culture and deaf community participation in the educational process, with deaf teachers becoming involved in the daily lives of special schools.

To understand the importance of this change, we must go back to the 18th century, when a fierce debate began about the education of deaf people, which set the advocates of bilingualism, on the one hand, against the advocates of orality, on the other.

In 1775 in Paris, Abbot Charles Michel l'Epee founded the first school to work with a gestural approach, in which sign language is considered the natural language of the deaf. He used it to teach French language and culture. At the same time in Germany, Samuel Heinicke established the methodological principles of orality, when in 1778 he created his own school for the deaf (Lacerda, 1998; Fullwood, Williams 2000).

One hundred years later, in 1880, sign language was proscribed by a resolution of the World Congress of Teachers of the Deaf, held in Milan, Italy. An oralist majority argued that the use of gestures and signs deflected deaf people away from learning the oral language, which was the most important thing.

This congress was an historical milestone, because it determined the trend followed in deaf education throughout the 20th century, especially in Europe and Latin America (Lacerda, 1998).

It was only after the 1960s that sign language gradually returned to the education scene. Capovilla & Capovilla (2002) speak of a "redemption of signs", which gave rise to a wealth of research on its linguistic structure, in areas as diverse as psychology, linguistics, neurology, education, sociology and anthropology.

Over the next twenty years, there was an intermediary period between orality and bilingualism, in which total communication gained ground. Oralization started being worked on at the same time as the use of signs, lip/face reading, amplification and the finger alphabet (Lacerda, 1998). All means of communication were possible for allowing deaf children to have access to the spoken language.

However, it was soon seen that there was a discontinuity between the spoken language and signs, and so the proposal to concentrate the education of the deaf on sign language began to gain ground (Capovilla Capovilla, 2002). It was understood that sign language was fundamental to the cognitive and linguistic development of deaf children as a first language, while the language spoken by the majority of the country should be worked on as a second language.

Today, many young deaf people who enter higher education have attended special bilingual elementary and secondary schools. We will examine this process of education from three points of theoretical reflection: identity construction, learning difficulties caused by as yet unsolved methodological issues and the limits created by the structure of special schools for the deaf.

Bilingual elementary and secondary education

Young people who have studied in a special bilingual school tend to identify deeply with the deaf community and culture. This is because bilingualism is not restricted to the teaching dimension, but must also be seen in its political dimension, as an historical, cultural and social construction and within the context of power relations and knowledge (Skliar, 1999).

Gesueli (2006) talks about the importance of deaf children having contact with sign language and with deaf teachers. For this particular author, this contact makes it possible, for these children to establish a relationship of belonging to the deaf community very early on, without this implying a view of themselves as disabled: "We've observed that recognition of their deafness begins to appear in 5 and 6-year old children. Before they had contact with deaf adults this recognition came later on, or didn't even happen "(Gesueli, 2006, p. 286).

This represents an undeniable advance in political, social and psychological terms, understood here as cognitive development and the constitution of subjectivity, which is possible only when children begin the dialogical process which comes from having a shared language.

But there are still restrictions on learning, caused by methodological difficulties, as some authors, including Capovilla and Capovilla, warn. They draw attention to the need to conduct systematic research on the effectiveness of the bilingual approach when it comes to making deaf children literate:

> It is our strong hypothesis that, when this finally occurs, there will be no way of avoiding acknowledging the revelation of a failure, which is threatening the success of the bilingual approach when it comes to obtaining results that are superior to the old ways for raising the reading level of deaf children to beyond the third grade of elementary school. Such a failure, foreseen but little analyzed, consists in another discontinuity involving sign language, a discontinuity that is as important as that

which overthrew the paradigm of total communication and made bilingualism so prominent. Equally, or even more importantly, since it is not just the discontinuity with something that the paradigm of bilingualism can discard, such as speech, but the discontinuity with something that is as dear to the paradigm of bilingualism as to any other of the two paradigms (i.e. orality and total communication): alphabetic writing. 2002, p.142)

The success achieved by the bilingual approach in the development of linguistic and communication skills, through the spontaneous acquisition of language and the construction of identity as a deaf person does not seem to be repeated when it comes to learning writing. Another issue related to this concern has to do with the capacity schools have of providing deaf people with the construction of knowledge at levels that are similar to those of people who can hear.

For many students, the difficulties of reading and writing end up diverting energy and attention (and decreasing the pleasure) away from the construction of knowledge in mathematics, history, geography, science, etc. (Virol, 2005). Moreover, as Dorziat (1999) remembers, deaf children generally enter school with little knowledge of the world, due to the linguistic restrictions that are to be found in their own families, in those cases where the parents can hear.

So, the tendency is to direct learning to that which is applicable in day-to-day life, aiming to provide a reasonable level of understanding of happenings and the development of social and professional skills. Many institutions lay more emphasis on socialization than on formal knowledge acquisition and the development of logico-mathematical skills, general culture and reading (Virol, 2005).

As regards the structure of special schools, it is necessary to evaluate whether hearing teachers have sufficient competence in sign language and if deaf teachers effectively participate in the daily life of the institutions (Lacerda, 1998). Teaching intervention requires, in addition to understanding the knowledge process and mastery of the specific content to be taught, a fluency in the shared, common language – Libras in this particular case – that is not always achieved by someone who can speak. On the other hand, deaf teachers and trainers often occupy peripheral roles in decisions about curriculum content.

All these possible difficulties must be considered for understanding the challenges that young deaf people face when it comes to adapting to the demands of the academic world. However, the increasing number of those entering university is already an indicator of

the progress that has been achieved in teaching that is aimed at deaf children and adolescents, and of the fact that bilingual education has had positive effects.

Young deaf people in the university context

A university context is challenging for all young people. Problems of adjusting to academic life and the obligations it imposes often lead to failure and abandonment. To assimilate new information and knowledge they have to overcome the shortcomings of their previous school experience, such as language deficiencies, inadequate study conditions, a lack of logic skills, problems with reading comprehension and difficulty in producing text (Sampaio, Santos , 2002). But integration requires not only the ability to carry out academic activities, but also involvement with colleagues, teachers and the environment. Both are fundamental in the early years of higher education for improving the chances of success (Diniz, Almeida, 2005; Ferreira, Almeida Soares, 2001).

Young deaf people, like any others, must deal with expectations, standards and ways of functioning that are different from their previous school experience. Adapting to this new reality will depend on their personal characteristics and skills, their history and how they face up to this period of self-development as young adults, which is marked by the construction of identity, autonomy, ideals and interpersonal relationships (Ferreira, Almeida, Soares, 2001).

A study by Foster, Long and Snell (1999) on the experience of deaf students in higher education in contexts of inclusion shows that the view they have of communication in the classroom and their involvement in the learning process is the same as that of their hearing colleagues, but they feel less integrated than the latter into university life. The study also reveals that many teachers do not bother to make the adaptations that favor deaf students and attribute the latter's success or failure to support services.

According to Goffredo (2004), to meet the special educational needs of young deaf people, the first step is to ensure their entry into the university through the entrance exam. But that does not guarantee that inclusion becomes a reality. Having overcome the barrier of entry, the next challenge is to remain on the course and this depends a lot on the mediation of the interpreter.

As Martins (2006) points out, the interpreter of sign language should be capable of perceiving the difficulties of deaf students and of discovering ways and methods for

mitigating them. He/she should be a bridge between students, teachers and knowledge that will help overcome the linguistic difference in communicative interaction. Therefore, the author adds, the way the interpreter acts requires a depth of theoretical knowledge of the different fields of study, familiarity with the language used in each situation and educational experience.

Some authors question the idea that the mere presence of an interpreter of sign language in the classroom ensures that deaf students have the same degree of accessibility as students who can hear, even in ideal situations where the preparation of the interpreters is excellent.

For Marschark et al. (2005), one of the assumptions of inclusion is that the discursive structure and information transmitted by a hearing professor to hearing students is appropriate to the knowledge and learning styles of deaf students. But deaf students form a more heterogeneous group than those who can hear. Most grew up in linguistically challenged environments, so they do not have the linguistic competences necessary for making effective use of the interpretation or of the textbooks, and many possibly entered higher education less well prepared than their hearing colleagues.

Foster, Long and Snell (1999) raise other problems faced by deaf students: a delay in receiving information (the time between what is spoken and its translation); a break in eye contact while the teacher writes on the board, walks across the room or reads a document, which prevents lip reading; and a loss of information, when it is necessary to choose between looking at the interpreter or observing the professor while he handles an object in the lab. or works with images.

With regard to informal communication, the authors also warn:

> Deaf students are rarely included in informal interactions between students who can hear as far as concerns the expectations of the professor, study tips, the "unspoken" rules of the organization and behavior in the classroom, therefore missing out on important albeit not "made public" information. (Foster et al., 1999, p.226)

Lang (2002) draws attention to two important issues. The first is that there is little direct communication between deaf and hearing students, or even between deaf students and their professors, which places them in a dependency situation. The second relates to support services or monitoring programs, which, while necessary, may reinforce the stigma of

difference, insofar as they require special logistics for adapting schedules, an extra activity load and additional commitment.

The complex issues involving the academic performance of deaf students still need to be researched in depth. According to Lang (2002), even in countries with more tradition in the inclusion of deaf students in higher education institutions - like the United States, where in 1999 there were more than 25,000 of them - there is a greater understanding of the barriers and difficulties than of the solutions. What is positive are the general guidelines, such as respect for the linguistic difference and the offer of specific methodological help (special materials, new teaching technologies and differentiated support services) (Martins, 2006).

THE FIELD RESEARCH

The field research that underlies this study relied on the voluntary participation of five deaf students, who had been regularly enrolled for at least three semesters in undergraduate courses at a university in southern Brazil. Three are female and two male, aged between 21 and 27 years. All have been diagnosed as having profound pre- or perilingual deafness, do not use hearing aids, have hearing parents, are fluent in Libras, participate in classes with the help of sign language interpreters and attended special, bilingual elementary and secondary schools.

The free and enlightened term of consent was presented in writing and discussed in sign language. One deaf undergraduate scientific research scholarship-holder, who is fluent in Libras and has been trained by the researchers[1], carried out the hour-long, semi-structured individual interviews. The interviews were recorded on video and subsequently translated into Portuguese by the official Libras interpreter. The translation was reviewed, first by the interviewer and then by the researchers[2].

The interview began by asking for general demographic data and then moved on to questions relating to the experiences of the students in higher education: the positive aspects

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[1] The researchers are involved in the research context: on several occasions one of them has had deaf students studying the subjects she teaches and another works with support services for university students with special educational needs.

[2] Given that the focus of the analysis is interview content and not sign language, we did not work with transcriptions or commentary.

and difficulties of university life, the changes that occurred with their entry into university, comparisons between secondary school and higher education and their relationship with colleagues and professors.

As suggested by Laville and Dionne (1999),the qualitative content of the data was analyzed using the open model approach that, according to these authors, is well suited to studies of an exploratory nature. In the open model, the content is first separated into elements, which are called units of analysis (fragments of content that are complete in themselves in terms of meaning).

In this study, the content was separated by theme. Subsequently, the units of analysis that had similar significance were grouped to form categories. Constant questioning of the appropriateness of the units of analysis to the categories that had been created led to successive adjustments to this initial scheme, until they acquired their definitive character.

The results were organized into three categories. In the first, deaf students' experiences in a mostly hearing environment are discussed. Two questions were addressed simultaneously: the deaf person/hearing person relationship and the need to establish a deaf identity that allows for the construction of a place of value (and not of disability) and recognition (of the difference). In the second category, issues relating to interpreters, professors and the organization of the teaching and learning space were assessed. These three aspects were jointly analyzed because, in a dynamic and interdependent way, they constitute relationships in the classroom. In the third category we discuss issues related to reading and writing.

ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

The inclusion in question: deaf people in a largely hearing environment

Entry to a higher education institution raises the question of the inclusion of deaf people within a hearing context in a very real way. These are young people who have spent their school lives surrounded by deaf colleagues, in the comfort of a special school, a place where they were with people who are the same as they are.

The two comments presented below illustrate the experience of entering higher education. There immediately occurs what deaf people interpret as hearing students "looking" at them: being looked at as someone strange and feeling strange and different:

P4: When I arrived here I was very nervous. The place didn't have the "smell" of deaf people[3]. I wanted to express my opinions freely. People who can hear look at deaf people... it's very strange... they didn't know any deaf people. There was a lot of confusion; it was difficult, several things; never mind the people.

P5: I've already noticed people laughing; someone else being astonished and another person wondering. That's why it's difficult for deaf people to get information; it depends on various things. Those who can hear are afraid about some things, because deaf people know a lot; and it seems as though they know nothing. It was very funny when I entered college; I have a lot of fun here at university.

In a largely hearing environment, it is inevitable that the issue of deafness is always going to be present in the most obvious, and at the same time, the most challenging of situations: the question of language. The change that occurs in comparison with elementary and secondary education is felt in the day-to-day routine of the classroom because of the difficulties of understanding. In the following comment it is possible to perceive how a deaf person interprets the university environment:

P1: In secondary school it's very simple; it's easy. But I'm already at university and you come up against the difficulty of the professors and students understanding you. Here at college they treat me in class in the same way they treat those who can hear. Deaf people were treated as deaf people, but here at college it's very different because things come from the community of those who can hear. Sometimes it's very complicated for deaf people to understand the reading, the texts; I end up having a certain difficulty; in different contexts I suffer, but I struggle to survive; I have to study, so I make an effort.

In this excerpt what stands out is the complex issue of inclusion/exclusion in a world understood as being split: deaf people on one side and those who can hear on the other, and this will have an impact on the way that identity and the deaf community are understood. The words of P1 indicate the distinction that deaf people have learned to recognize throughout their lives and during their time at school – there exist two communities; the community of the deaf and the community of those who can hear, and this community, the university community, is the community of those who can hear. We can perceive the great effort that a

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[3] An idiomatic expression used as an indentifying mark by deaf people, which indicates familiarity on the part of deaf people with a particular place or situation.

deaf student needs to make to adapt to the "community of those who can hear". Another issue that stands out is the challenge of moving between sign language and Portuguese, which for deaf people has a particularly great impact when it comes to reading and writing tasks.

Running right through the words of P1 is the fact of his being different. He refers to "the lesson of those who can hear", a context that places him in the position of someone who "struggles to survive". This is a very important aspect, because the efforts of a university student should be directed towards learning and not "survival", understood here as the possibility of continuing to exist as an individual who recognizes himself in a deaf culture and identity. This is clear in the following words:

> P1: Oh, deep down I'm deaf. There's no doubt that I'm always going to have contact with deaf people; it's worth having contact with them. It's not that I don't want to have contact with those who can hear, but I feel happy being around deaf people; we have conversations. For example, those who can hear are talking away - blah, blah, blah - and sometimes I don't know what they're saying to me. With deaf people I understand everything fine. I'm used to it. My culture, my life and my identity is deaf.

> P2: They're different; deaf friends communicate using sign language. Conversations are a relationship of exchange. People who can hear have other habits, for example; it's usual for those can hear not to mix with deaf people and just stay with those who can hear.

> P5: But I believe that it's difficult for people who can hear to understand what deaf people are like; those who know what it's like are deaf. People who can hear are never going to understand what it's like. Never. In my opinion it's a very different level, never below or above, end of story, never.

The persistence of references points constructed from a distinction between deaf people and those who can hear can be noted here; this is an identity based on the notion that deaf people belong to a linguistic and cultural minority, a deaf world (Lane, 2008). This way of looking at oneself and at others is the result of a path in life in which valuing deaf identity and culture allows for the construction of value references for oneself. The other possibility offered by society is usually the disability, a lack, someone who is always "less" when compared with a body that is considered "perfect". If these are the two possible reference points, then the gain that a deaf individual gets from recognizing himself/herself as part of a living and creative culture can be understood.

However, as Santana and Bergamo (2005) remind us, identity is not constructed in a social vacuum. Discourse and practices produce identities. When relationships of belonging to

a certain group (deaf people) and the distance in relation to the other group (those who can hear) are emphasized, then rigid and not very fluid boundaries between these two groups are established. This reinforces the idea that it is necessary to "survive" in the midst of those who can hear, before thinking about appropriating this space. Other identification possibilities (gender, cultural, socio-economic, religious, etc.) do not appear in what these people say, or, when they do appear, it is very generic as in the following example:

> P2: Yes, it's true that people who can hear think and wonder about deaf people in college. Are deaf people capable of doing college? How? I study and read the same as hearing people; I have equal rights; they study and read the same as I do; it's just that they communicate differently. They use speech and I use signs; it's different. In all other things we're the same. Just that.

It needs to be recognized that higher education institutions, just like society in general, are poorly prepared to accept deaf students. In this context, resorting to the use of a safe and positive definition that can serve as a support for identity can be understood. As Breivik (2005) says, in the contemporary world there are few (or no) safe identity positions. Minorities and other fringe groups face great obstacles, because it is difficult to alter the definitions imposed by the majority. This majority, in the university environment, has little direct experience with deaf people, and little or no knowledge of deafness or sign language. Living shoulder to shoulder with deaf people, therefore, is a very great novelty in the academic community.

> P1: A colleague asked me a question; he asked, like, do you know how to read? So I said to the interpreter, tell her I know how to read. Oh, it was such an annoying and embarrassing situation, I'm not going to use my voice and say I know how to read; I asked the interpreter to tell her that I know how to read; I took advantage of the presence of the interpreter. The woman asked me, "Wow, can you understand the words? Goodness, I was so upset with that. I got annoyed because they take some contexts and question them, thinking that we seem to be ignorant.

> P2: When I want to I give my opinion; people who can hear think that deaf people are capable. Deaf people speak; I express my opinion. When people who can hear think that deaf people are not capable of giving an opinion they laugh; they say that deaf people don't know. I'm sorry, but deaf people don't understand because of different consequential aspects; deaf people and those who can hear have different ways of learning.

> P3: Those who can hear think that deaf people don't know how to express an opinion [...]. "But,

sometimes they [colleagues who can hear] are a bit, like, doubtful that deaf people are capable of attending university. Are they going to succeed? They wonder about us.

However, ignorance about deafness does not fully explain the difficulties faced by deaf students. Diversity in the classroom ends up questioning concepts of normalcy. As Davis (2002, p.38) says, "disability disturbs people who think of themselves as not disabled". The concepts that revolve around the experience of (ab)normality and (dis)ability will mark relations between deaf people and those who can hear, just as they mark relations between people in any situation where there is a breakdown of the ideal of a body taken as normal. It is in this sense that we can understand the following comment: "Because I notice some professors getting frightened and others suspicious, they think ... others get worried. It seems that my body is broken, that it scares people" (P5).

Interpreters, professors and the organization of the teaching and learning space

For young people who go to bilingual schools the desired context for higher education would be continuity of the reference points they knew and shared throughout elementary and secondary school, as they say:

P1: I think that deaf people….. well, let's dream. Maybe deaf professors, professors who have mastered sign language, professors who are more fluent, put aside this oral issue, just for those who can hear, and we come within the context of a bilingual, linguistic environment.

P2: In the future I myself want to go to a university that also has deaf professors, to learn to work in the university and [have] interpreters to oralize for those who can hear. In the future deaf people are capable of having a college of their own for deaf people.

There are extremely few higher education institutions worldwide where this situation is found. The best known reference is Gallaudet University in Washington.

In Brazil, legislation that deals with the inclusion of deaf people in regular education institutions (Brazil, 2003) establishes that whenever necessary a Brazilian sign language/Portuguese interpreter must be offered and recommends flexibility when correcting written tests, in such a way as to value their semantic content.

According to Martins, "ever since they were registered to work in the educational area, interpreters have been trying to construct their place in the triangulation 'hearing professor,

SLI [sign language interpreter] and deaf student' between and with deaf people – a space in the *between* which translation itself introduces" (2007, p.178).

The interpreter assumes the role of mediator, the one who "will carry the voice" of one to another (P2). Without the interpreter communication is interrupted (P3), although there may possibly be compensatory resources (P4):

> P2: When I don't understand, I ask; when I understand but have some doubt, some question, I want to contextualize it, I want to express my opinion or I want to discuss something, then the interpreter will be my spokesperson.

> P3: I miss classes too. If there's no interpreter it's complicated, so I miss class. Or I leave the classroom.

> P4: The professor knows that deaf people write to the professor to communicate with him. When the interpreter doesn't come it leaves a bad feeling. [...] If it's a lecture I leave, there's no point in staying. If it's group work, I sit in and write; my communication is by writing.

The young people interviewed consider the presence of the interpreter to be indispensable. But, all report difficulties related to training for these professionals, a point already identified by some researchers (Foster, Long, Snell, 1999; Martins, 2007; Masutti, Santos, 2008). These difficulties are more obvious in higher education, given the complexity and specialization of the different areas of knowledge. They are perceived in the dynamic of communication, in the excessive use of the sign language alphabet, in the difference between what the professor transmits and what the interpreter interprets and in the lack of specific signs for the different areas:

> P1: For example, if the interpreter isn't good at sign language then it's bad; it cuts the lesson down. For example, the interpreter is weak in the way he works; he doesn't know the signs well... The professor talks a lot; there are always some difficult words, the interpreter makes signs and mixes them with the sign language alphabet. This cuts out a lot of things; sometimes they just freeze, there's a lot of confusion, I don't understand. That's not what I want. I want a perfect interpretation; to interpret everything that the professor said. I need to understand everything; sometimes I forget things and I need the context of the lesson to remember them.

> P2: If the interpreter is good at sign language then I understand; another interpreter, a new one, may not know many signs; I'm patient; interpreters also learn more and more; they learn the signs and I learn how to study; the learning is the same.

P3: If the interpreter doesn't know the signs very well... It depends... because if he uses the alphabet and goes wrong, he goes back, he uses the alphabet again, I use signs, it depends, I notice... [...] It depends, I read the interpreter's lips; I know if he's translating differently, or I look at the professor; I look at the interpreter. That's why it's difficult to reach profound knowledge.

P4: If some signs are missing I teach them to him (the interpreter), but I waste time doing this. The problem with signs is that there are no signs for informatics; the interpreter doesn't know them. [...] In second grade I used to ask a lot of questions; in college it's different; I don't ask a lot because of the interpreter. The interpreter doesn't understand the question; he doesn't have the sign, so he asks the professor, who also doesn't understand. I lose interest. I'm no longer interested in freely asking questions.

P5: I've noticed that many interpreters don't ask the professor things because they think it's some nonsense from a deaf person. But I think it's very important; I want to know the answer and the interpreter thinks it's nonsense. I keep on struggling until I succeed, until the interpreter understands that he needs to translate the question; I never give up. [...] I ask the interpreter; if the face of the interpreter is 'what a pain', that's his problem. It's my right to know; hard luck on him if he suffers and gets angry; hard luck; he's a professional and he has to do it.

One student (P5) raises a delicate question about the availability of the interpreter for mediating communication with the professor. He further suggests that the interpreter may possibly "select" what is or is not suitable for the student to ask, which would mask the difficulties that this student might be having from the professor. From being a mediator he becomes a barrier preventing a relationship from being established between a hearing professor and a deaf student.

This discussion, which is eminently ethical, goes beyond the objectives of this study, but this fact is registered here in the hope that rigorous research on this matter is carried out. As Martins (2007, p.188) says: "From the moment the educational SLI becomes a figure in the education of deaf people, then it is perfectly justifiable for us to question the discursive practices and effects engendered by this action".

Beyond the actions of the interpreter, the delicate dynamic that is established in the classroom (because communication occurs simultaneously in different directions) was indicated as an aspect that creates difficulties for deaf students.

Inclusion is an ideal, but in practice the obstacles are concrete and manifest themselves in the slightest of details. For example, what should be done when attention in the lesson is divided between the interpreter and the professor? In the special school, the teacher used sign

language and there was no interpreter in the classroom. The teacher in a regular classroom, as is the case in higher education, writes quickly on the board at the same time as he is providing explanations. He is used to a dynamic in which students listen and take notes at the same time.

> It is important to remember the fact that most of the teachers who work in the inclusive classroom were trained to work with a relatively homogeneous public that speaks the majority language, i.e. that speaks the same language as the professor. These teachers are now faced with a signing student, a foreigner in his own country, and who does not recognize Portuguese writing as the written representation of his natural language. (Rosa, 2008, p.174).

This obliges the deaf student to develop strategies in order to accompany the pace of the lesson, as the words of the two following students illustrate:

> P1: Somethings, yes, because, for example, the question of interpreters, of professors who write on the board and talk at the same time; it's difficult to see the translation of the interpreter and write on the board at the same time; I get confused. I asked a deaf colleague to help me; he copies it down and then I go home and check it. We work hard together to study. After class we go home to work together. We get tired of doing this but it's normal.

> P2: I write and I look. People who can hear listen and the writing part is easy because the professor writes and talks; they listen together; it's easy. For deaf people, because they're not very capable of doing the two things, writing and looking at the interpreter, it's difficult. It's not easy, but university professors don't understand what it's like being deaf.

> P4: You need to pay attention in the lesson to the interpreter and to the professor. I've missed things because the professor was writing on the board quickly... I was looking at the interpreter and couldn't write. What can I do? I choose to watch the interpreter until the end and then I copy things down. I don't waste my time.

It is necessary to point out, however, that the difficulties cannot be directly attributed to the student. They are due to the actions and habits of the educational context. As a result, it is a case of asking if it should not be up to the professor and the teaching institution to develop strategies for integrating the student, and not the opposite?

As Freebody and Power (2001) show, even flexible institutions, which are sensitive to the specific aspects of communication of deaf people, work with standard curriculums that are

oriented towards an idealized clientele of an-historic individuals. This leaves little room for creating alternative strategies and for focusing on individual differences.

It is necessary to think carefully about the methodologies to be implemented in the context of inclusion so that teaching failures are not falsely justified by a lack of interest or inattention on the part of the deaf student (Lorenzetti, 2002/2003).

The following transcribed excerpts illustrate this well:

P4: Example; if the professor talks a lot he organizes a paper beforehand and gives it to me. It depends... Mathematics is written on the board; you don't need an interpreter... If the professor talks, an interpreter is necessary. There can't be slides, no lighting; there needs to be a little light because of the interpreter. It's compulsory.

P2: There are a lot of people talking at the same time [in a discussion] for us to try and come to a conclusion; to try and link the ideas, because they are all discussing at the same time. People need to talk a little, one at a time, then it makes it easier to perceive how the discussion is developing. When everybody tries to say the same thing it's complicated; for example, when the interpreter is beginning, starting out, there's confusion with the signs because everybody's talking at the same time.

Inclusion causes a destabilization of crystallized structures. Not only the professor, but also students who can hear need to review the way of organizing and conducting interactions in the classroom so that their deaf colleagues can benefit fully from the resources available. A new type of learning may then take place: that of relationships within a context of diversity.

The reading and writing challenge

According to Sampaio and Santos (2002, p.32), "teaching at the university level presupposes a considerable amount of intellectual work, demanded mainly in reading activities and the comprehension and expression of complex content". Reading and writing are, therefore, two major challenges for students who enter university, many of whom bring with them comprehension deficiencies, are not used to reading and do not like reading. Oliveira and Santos (2005, p.119) emphasize that "various studies have shown that university students do not have the level of reading expected of them for this stage in their education".

So, young deaf people are not alone in their difficulties with regard to reading and writing, but their situation is rather more complex. Studies of their development consistently

reveal low levels of literacy and reading and writing learning difficulties (Watson, 1999; Padden, Ramsey, 2000)[4]. It is not surprising, therefore, that this issue is so apparent in the words of the students:

> P2: Sometimes I can't manage it; I make an effort, I have to try; sometimes I can't manage the reading part. At times I want to give up; I keep on reading, some things I understand, I continue... I try. Later I talk to other people and I ask them what it's like, but I can't manage it, I'm missing a lot of things. [...] I've already tried reading a book and I even managed to understand it; I tried getting to the end, but for example, some words I don't know; I don't have mastery over the vocabulary. So, sometimes it seems that I can't manage to get to the end.

> P3: I have a difficulty in the research area, how to find some words; it depends, it's difficult [...] It depends. It depends on the difficulty of this reading. If it's an easy reading text, then it's easy to understand, but if it's a difficult text I have no knowledge of the vocabulary; I'm going to have to look in the dictionary in order to understand the meaning of these words.

> P5: I have a difficulty, for example, with writing out a long word that I can't remember by heart; just normal, day-to-day words I manage to remember by heart. For example, if I don't use a word it's easy to forget it. I read it, I can understand it, yes, I can write it normally, but it's difficult for me.

The relationship between understanding in reading and academic performance has been tested and established in some Brazilian studies, among which that of Oliveira and Santos (2005). This relationship is perceived both by students as well as by professors, and constitutes a tension zone: what can be demanded of deaf people in higher education in terms of reading and writing? Where do the difficulties that can be attributed to linguistic differences begin and end?

If these questions are not raised with the professors and students, there is a risk of underestimating or overestimating the competences and skills of the student and the knowledge constructed in the various disciplines.

For example, when a deaf student says "I can't manage to learn a long word by heart", this may sound strange for anyone who is unaware of how deaf people learn to read and write. Considering they have no auditory channel for constructing the phoneme-grapheme relationship one strategy used for learning to write is visual processing. The written word is dealt with and understood as an ideogram that needs to be visually memorized (Capovilla,

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[4] There are many causes for this, but discussing them is beyond the scope of this article.

Capovilla, 2002). In knowing this strategy it is possible to understand what it means for deaf people to read a text that contains specialist vocabulary that is different from that in daily use.

The tension created by reading and writing difficulties can be seen from various perspectives, as a more detailed analysis of the words of the interviewees reveals. One comment that appears in a subtle way but that is worth mentioning is that these difficulties "denounce" or expose a failing that refers back to the question of the disability or the cultural difference.

In the following transcription we see that P1 does not complete the sentence in which he relates that the professor was taken aback by her textual production. The student notices that the professor did not like it and she raises a doubt about what he thinks with regard to deaf people when he is faced with her writing. What draws our attention here is the fact that the incomplete phrase is followed by an inference, that the professor does not agree with the student's right to have her own language. Disability? Difference? The professor's "alarm" causes ill-feeling:

> P1: For example, in the past, an interpreter came in and said 'Oh, professor, the text production of deaf people is closer to sign language; he doesn't write well in Portuguese. I noticed that the professor didn't like that a lot. I felt bad. I imagined, goodness, he was taken aback, what must he think of deaf people, I think ... it seems that the professor doesn't agree with my right to have my own language. I felt a bit strange with that, but no problem, the moment passed; you just have to keep calm, move ahead and keep fighting.

The insistent way in which the interviewees mention deficiencies in their school career is also very significant. Entering higher education seems to instigate a resignification of their past experience. Faced with another level of demand deaf students interpret what they experienced before with regard to teachers and knowledge in an extremely critical way, as the following comments illustrate (the names of the schools have been removed):

> P1: In my opinion school [x] is to blame; for example, we fight, so the content should be the same as in the schools of those who can hear. It shouldn't be different, because then we wouldn't find it so difficult when we get to college. For me it was a lot worse because I had to make twice the effort because of the lack of content. That's normal.

> P2: Unlike, for example, in the [x] school, they do very little reading there, there are more training activities, doing exercises and practicing. And in the university there's a lot of reading; in fact the

written production has to be right when you have to read because of how much you have to write. We lack practice [...] The secondary school teacher needs to teach more; here the content is new and I don't know it; that's prejudicial to me. I could have learned it before. I have to try and make an effort. I can't do another subject. [...] For example, in secondary school the level of the disciplines is low. At university it's not the same; it's different.

P3: Because there at [x] it's very easy and here at university it's more difficult. The texts in college, the reading texts are fairly difficult. I think it's better because you learn more.

P5: It's completely different. Bloody school [x]; they only gave us easy words; they think those poor deaf people. Even I've talked badly about [x]. Lots of time I hope that in the future deaf people will be strong and fire those people who can hear, bye-bye. Substitute those who can hear; deaf people need to be in charge [...] reading and content in the secondary school is horrible; very little more advanced than elementary school and in the secondary school, even today, those teachers are not very concerned…. I noticed that the teachers are not worried about students; they don't assume any responsibility.

Putting oneself in this critical place that demands better quality teaching for young deaf people – it requires putting oneself in their place – may be very valuable for the deaf community. Being in university may lead to the opening up of new horizons. Perhaps it is necessary to take this somewhat painful path out of the comfort zone of the community in which they spent their childhood and adolescence and to face up to the challenges of the adult world and of the world seen also as "their" (those who can hear, as mentioned previously) world, in order to be able to return with other reference points and other levels of reflection.

This is probably one of the greatest contributions that higher education can make to these young people, these future professionals who, for future generations of deaf people, will represent new and endless possibilities in terms of achievement and quality of life.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Various aspects must be examined when analyzing the situation of young deaf people who are interested in entering higher education. At the very least it is necessary to consider their previous school experience and the institutional context they are seeking to enter.

This exploratory study was carried out with students who always attended special bilingual schools. They wholly identify with sign language and with deaf culture. In the university they use the services of interpreters. Not all deaf students have these

characteristics: oralized deaf people, or those who are audibly challenged but still have some hearing or who use a hearing aid as the basis of their communication have other types of need that must be assessed and recognized in their specificities.

The university is a new and unknown context for young deaf people, which presents demands that are greater than those they were used to in the special school. Their functioning is ruled by the norms, principles and characteristics of the hearing world, in which oral-auditory communication performs a central role in the organization of teaching/learning and socialization. The vast majority of their colleagues and professors can hear, are unaware of the specific aspects of deafness, share ideas of common sense, do not know sign language and find it difficult to relate with those who are to a significant degree different.

The results of the research allowed us to identify some of the challenges that deaf students in higher education face. The first has to do with deaf identity: being in an environment where deafness and visual communication are not the rule demands a lot from these young people. But if, on the one hand, this experience overloads the student cognitively, emotionally and socially, on the other it enables them to look afresh at their previous experiences that were restricted to the deaf community. Provided they can rely on the support of the educational institution young deaf people will be able to have positive experiences within a context of diversity and heterogeneity.

According to Breivik (2005), this can counterbalance negative aspects of identities that are perceived in a rigid, sometimes even separatist way. For example, what is noticeable is that at no point in the interviews did the students refer to those who can hear as "colleagues". Why is this word absent? Is the gulf that separates deaf students from those who can hear so great? Or is this still a very incipient process, for both one and the other, in which identities that have rigid outlines are preventing people looking beyond the differences? The same is valid for those who can hear, whether they are students or professors.

Undoubtedly, coexistence with diversity makes it possible to reassess the, at times, static and prejudiced reference points, as well as to look for a resignification of oneself when faced with the other, opening up room for transformation and creativity.

As for the higher education institutions they need to radically review the way in which they deal with teaching and learning. They need to understand deafness and think about the linguistic and cultural differences and about the way in which these differences impact upon the academic life of these students.

The difficulties they face may be related also to the linguistic and sensorial difference and to the specificities of their learning process. Strategies used with students who can hear may not be suitable for deaf people. However, these peculiarities go frequently unperceived by the professor who is used to dealing with those who can hear and they may not merit his attention if it is not demanded of him.

As we have seen throughout this work the sign language interpreter, although essential, is not sufficient. Inclusion requires a profound reflection about responsibilities and the role of the professor and the institution as a whole.

Although reading and writing have been discussed in this article, we are very far from covering all aspects related to these two dimensions of academic life. For example, very little was mentioned about tests and work, i.e. assessment. Assessing in itself is one of the most complex aspects of teaching practice. Assessing while taking into consideration differences in terms of accessibility and communication and, at the same time, observing the minimum criteria established for university education, as well as for the development of skills and competences, is even more complex. This issue merits the attention of future work.

Generally speaking, and not just in the case of deafness, the inclusion of people who have special educational needs in higher education is recent. Therefore, it is up to those institutions, which have great responsibility vis-à-vis society as to the qualification of citizens and the advance of knowledge, to rethink their strategies and invest in research that contributes to a better understanding of the challenges and to the creation of contexts that favor inclusion processes.

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