

Recognition of the Rights of Deaf Communities: Citizenship and Group Rights

Steve Emery

This paper will address the issue of Deaf people's citizenship in relation to their affects on the Third Sector.

Dr Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) has argued that sign languages are some of the indigenous languages under threat from linguistic genocide. Historically, society has positioned all Deaf people under a disability or a 'hearing loss' umbrella, and charities and services have been set up and established on paternalistic and benevolent ethos.

In the last 25 years, however, Deaf people have come to identify their community as a cultural and linguistic minority and have been campaigning for society to recognise Deaf communities as having such status. These campaigns have had some successes, as evidenced by the growing number of countries that have officially recognised their native sign languages as *bona fide* languages.

In demanding recognition of their linguistic and human rights Deaf people have been insisting on a major say in the allocation of resources that are nominally allocated to services to Deaf people. Organisations, be they public or private are struggling to let go of the reins of power that their position brings. Even negotiating with mainstream Third Sector organisations to implement changes under various 'Disability Acts', as in the United Kingdom, for example, means having to weigh up the cost implications such changes mean and their empowering benefits in terms of equal opportunities, justice and fairness for all. This is just one indicator that Deaf communities still have some way to go in their struggle for human and linguistic rights.

In respect of the rapid changes taking place in Deaf communities worldwide, the University of Central Lancashire (UK) is funding research into the issues around Deaf people's citizenship. In particular, I am questioning whether Deaf people may benefit from being accorded special group rights, as a cultural group within a general policy of multiculturalism.

Skutnabb-Kangas, T. 2000 *Linguistic Genocide in education – or worldwide diversity and human rights* New Jersey: Lawrence Elbaum Associates