

THE NEED FOR SPECIALIST TRAINING IN THE EDUCATION OF DEAF CHILDREN IN GREECE: LISTENING TO TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract – *In view of the ongoing discussion concerning teacher training requirements, this study explores the views concerning the role of teacher training of those teachers who are involved in the education of deaf children in Greece. These views were elicited through in-depth, open-ended interviews, and the data generated were analysed using grounded theorising. Teachers indicated that they were being asked to respond to the needs of deaf children without having the relevant background knowledge or the initial or in-service training needed to enable them to be adequately prepared for such a responsibility. They described their job as difficult, explained that they felt insecure and unsupported, and that they doubted whether they could achieve communication with deaf children. Their comments served as a basis for an insight into teachers' perceptions and a broader understanding of their needs. The latter included an emphasis on adequate initial and in-service training, as well as on the constant provision of relevant information and support, all of which would enable the teacher to become a more effective educator of a deaf child.*

Introduction

The two interrelated reforms in special education, integration and recently inclusion, resulted in an increasing number of children with special needs being educated in regular classrooms (Minke, Bear, Deemer and Griffin, 1996; Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994). In view of the ongoing changes in the field of Special Educational Needs (SEN), the role of the SEN teacher is gradually being redefined. An emphasis is being placed on teacher effectiveness (Ainscow, 1993) with the role of the SEN and regular teacher being constantly reconsidered. Recent data in the U.S.A. reported a critical shortage of appropriately qualified special educators, who tend to leave their teaching positions because they feel overwhelmed, unsupported, unprepared and disempowered (Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore and Carpenter, 1997). While special teachers have such feelings and leave their jobs, there is a prevailing view that all teachers, and not necessarily SEN teachers, can serve children's

needs if they possess a set of appropriate teaching skills (Dyson, 1994) and if they are prepared to work with a full range of children in programmes designed to serve all students (Swartz, Hidalgo and Hays, 1991-92).

Critics of the inclusion movement (Semmel, Abernathy, Butera and Lesar, 1991; Kauffman, 1989) doubt whether regular teachers are competent and able to respond to the needs of all children in their regular classrooms. Furthermore, regular teachers often perceive themselves as being unprepared and incompetent (Whinnery, Fuchs and Fuchs, 1991) and feel that they do not possess the skills required to teach children with special needs (Semmel *et al.*, 1991; Kauffman, 1989). Even the most effective regular classroom teachers judge that the required instructional and curricular adaptations for children with special needs are often unfeasible in regular classrooms (Scumm and Vaughn, 1991). Under the current circumstances in an average regular classroom with a large number of children and limited time to devote to each child, regular teachers recognise that the needs of all children with and without disabilities cannot be met in the same classroom (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1994; Semmel, Gerbel and MacMillan, 1994).

Serious concerns have been expressed regarding the lack of effective teaching in the area of SEN, which has led to a closer scrutiny of the role of teachers (Hall and Dixon, 1995). This situation is frustrating, because a necessary prerequisite for the provision of effective education for students with SEN is the provision of qualified and effective teachers (Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore and Carpenter, 1997). Considering the fact that a growing number of children are educated in regular classrooms, effective teachers need to be located in regular classrooms. Unfortunately, initial teacher education (ITE) does not enable teachers to respond to the diverse needs of students with SEN (Goodlad and Field, 1993; Fullan, 1991). There is always a need for further in-service training (Fish, 1985), which also does not always appear to be effective (Lyon, Vaasen and Toomey, 1989).

These concerns regarding low teacher effectiveness have been quite intense in the area of teaching deaf children. Specifically, Luckner (1991) expressed his worries regarding the fact that several educational programmes failed to respond to the needs of deaf children. While there are several factors that may contribute to this situation, such as issues of communication policy and organisational problems (Allen, 1994), curriculum goals, strategies and materials used (Luckner, 1999), a focus should also be placed on teacher's knowledge and ability to teach deaf children, which further shifts our attention to the role of teacher training or staff development for teachers of deaf children (Luckner, 1999; Allen, 1994).

The education of deaf children requires teaching staff with combined

knowledge in various areas such as audiology, psychology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, modes of communication and the application of such knowledge to the individual needs of the children (Markides, 1986). Regardless of the educational setting where the deaf child is located, much of the responsibility for the child's education is placed on the shoulders of the specialist teacher of the deaf (Lewis, 2000).

The value of this role can be better enhanced, considering that in many countries it is a mandatory requirement for teachers willing to become involved in the education of deaf children to be specially trained. This is the case in the U.K., where teachers are required to attend a full-time one-year or a part-time two-year course in order to be qualified as teachers of deaf children (Training Establishments for Teachers of the Deaf in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1995), and also, in the U.S.A., where specific standards have been developed as a foundation for the development and maintenance of effective teacher training programmes for teachers of deaf children (Joint Standards Committee of the National Council on Education of the Deaf and the Council for Exceptional Children, 1996).

Also, entrants to training courses for teachers of the deaf are usually required to come with teaching experience, following the rationale that if the education of children with special needs is considered as an integral part of the ordinary school, then the special teaching staff need to have a common base of training with mainstream teachers and be familiar with the mainstream context (Hegarty, 1993).

Unfortunately, training for teachers of deaf children has recently been criticised (Rittenhouse and Kenyon-Rittenhouse, 1997) for failing to prepare teachers effectively. This situation poses questions regarding the reasons that cause low effectiveness. An answer may be that training courses do not match teachers' expectations because teachers' needs are not properly assessed. Staff development courses and teachers training programmes often do not consider teachers' beliefs and prior experiences (Rosenberg, Jackson, and Yeh, 1996), teachers are not involved in identifying their needs (Allen, 1994) and time is not dedicated to listening to teachers' experiences and exploring their perceptions regarding the role of training.

The aim of this paper is to add a broader understanding to the issue of staff development and in-service training of teachers of the deaf, by listening to the views of people who are directly involved in this training, namely teachers working with deaf children. The study explored the experiences, perceptions and attitudes of teachers in Greece currently educating deaf children, with regard to teacher education and its implications in the education of deaf children.

The Greek context

The education of deaf children

Greece is a country in the south-eastern part of Europe with a total population of approximately 10.25 million. Out of 2,050,400 children aged 5-19 years (National Statistical Service of Greece, 1994), and based on international data (Parving and Hauch, 1994), it is estimated that there were around 3,076 hard-of-hearing and deaf students in 1991, while 668 hard-of-hearing and deaf children were registered in special schools and special units (Ministry of Education, 1995).

The educational provision for deaf children in Greece ranges from special residential schools, to resource rooms and special units for hard-of-hearing and deaf children, which are mostly located in the major cities of Greece. The special schools for the deaf belong either to the Ministry of Education or to the National Institute for the Deaf (NID), which falls under the responsibility of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and is supervised for its educational function by the Ministry of Education. The NID was founded in Athens in 1937 and in the period from 1956 to 1970 the Institute established residential schools in five more cities, among which the primary school in Thessaloniki that was founded in 1958 (Lampropoulou, 1989).

The special units and resource rooms for hard-of-hearing and deaf children belong to the Ministry of Education. They started to operate in around 1985, when Law 1566/85 introduced the educational trend towards integration. Their establishment regarding the education of deaf children was limited in North Greece, mainly in Thessaloniki, and no other units for deaf children have been established in the other parts of Greece. This is due to the fact that at that period the Association of Parents and Guardians of hard-of-hearing children was founded in Thessaloniki. This association defended the aural approach, supported integration, and opposed the education of deaf children in Special Schools and the use of any mode of communication that included signing. The Association exercised considerable pressure on the State and played a critical role in the establishment of special classes and units in nursery, primary and secondary education:

The philosophy of the educational settings concerning the mode of communication is either Oral/Aural approach or Total Communication (T.C.). In units, the Oral/Aural approach has been adopted as the only mode of communication. In Special Schools for the Deaf, depending on the school communication policy, either the Oral/Aural approach or Total Communication is used. Bilingualism, which has been adopted during the last years as a mode of

communication in schools for the deaf in some countries, such as Sweden and the U.K., is not an official mode of communication in any of the educational settings for deaf children in Greece.

Teacher training

Initial teacher training

Up to 1981, the general training of primary teachers was two years in duration. A new law was then introduced (Law 1262/82) stipulating that Pedagogical Academies (Teachers Training Colleges) would cease to operate. They were replaced by Pedagogical Faculties (University level) and the initial teacher education (ITE) of teachers in primary education was extended from two to four years.

Nowadays, during ITE teachers are required to attend around 3-4 modules in the education of children with SEN, the content of which varies among the Pedagogical Faculties and Departments in the various Universities in Greece. The Pedagogical Department of Primary Education in the University of Patras (South Greece) offers some modules specifically in the education of the deaf, but in the rest of the Pedagogical Faculties students usually attend a generic module in the education of children with SEN, among which 1-2 sessions may be dedicated to the education of the deaf. In addition, since 1998, a new Department of Special Education started to operate in the University of Thessalia, in central part of Greece, which plans to offer several modules in teaching deaf children during the 4th year of studies.

It needs to be clarified that all the above information concerns pre-service teacher training for mainstream teachers in pre-school and primary education. Teacher training requirements for teachers in secondary education are different. They include the attendance of a 4-year course, which is focused on a subject such as language, physics, maths; during which students rarely may have the chance to attend any modules in SEN. In particular, only students that study Psychology or Physical Education have the opportunity to attend some generic modules in SEN, without, however, having specific modules in the education of deaf children.

In-service training for teachers of deaf children

The first legislation on special teacher training was introduced in 1972 (Decree 1222/72), which introduced the additional training of teachers in special education for one year apart from their main training course and later, Law 225/75 established a two year in-service training course in special educational needs. This course is selective and teachers who are interested in attending it have to meet

particular requirements, that is, having past experience in general teaching and succeeding in the relevant exams (Ministry of Education, 1994). This two year in-service training programme operated only in Athens until 1997, after which additional training courses in Thessaloniki (North Greece) and Ioannina (West Greece) started to be offered. These courses are generic, not specifically targeted at any particular disability and although they do offer some modules in the education of the deaf, they do not provide teachers with the opportunity to acquire a deep knowledge and specific understanding of the educational needs of deaf children. Apart from this training course, there is no specific training for teachers of the deaf. The NID used to offer a one year in-service course for its new teachers, but this does not operate any more (Lampropoulou, 1989).

All the above information regarding in-service training concerns primary education teachers. There are no special training courses for secondary school teachers, in either generic SEN education, or specifically in deaf studies. Therefore, teachers who work with deaf children are not trained, and they had and continue to have almost no opportunity to receive any type of in-service training in the education of deaf children.

The study

Research method

In view of the concerns regarding training requirements for teachers working with deaf children, a qualitative study was undertaken in order to explore the views of teachers currently involved in the education of deaf children in Greece with an aim to illustrate how the system of training for teachers of the deaf is organised in Greece, and what the implications of this training are for teachers and children. Qualitative measures are considered as an effective way in research (Luckner, 1999; Rittenhouse and Kenyon-Rittenhouse, 1997; Clark and Peterson, 1986) of listening to people's views, enabling in-depth consideration of people's ideas and attributing a special importance to the individuality of each person's view. A semi-structured in-depth interview was used as a research tool that promotes deeper understanding and insight into people's perceptions (Cohen and Manion, 1997). The interview was guided by an interview guide, involving the following open-ended questions, which were used to encourage teachers to share their perspectives regarding their role as a teacher educating deaf children:

- What are your experiences regarding your initial training as well as in-service training in the area of deafness?

- What is your opinion regarding the role of teacher training for a teacher of the deaf?
- How would you describe the education of deaf children?
- What are the reasons that urged you to work in the education of deaf children?
- What are your current needs as a teacher of the deaf?

The participants

Participants in this study were teachers selected from north Greece and in particular from the city of Thessaloniki, a city of approximately 1 million inhabitants (the second biggest city in Greece). The city of Thessaloniki was chosen for this study because it was the only city in Greece where the educational staff worked in a range of educational settings for deaf children, while in other cities there were no units or resource settings for hard-of-hearing and deaf children, but only special schools.

Out of the total 50 teachers working with deaf children in primary and secondary settings in Thessaloniki, 25 teachers participated in this research, working across the whole range of educational settings for deaf children in Thessaloniki, special schools and units for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, at pre-school, primary and secondary education. Specifically, 13 teachers worked in primary and pre-school education (6 in special schools and 7 in special classes and units) and 12 teachers worked in secondary education (7 in special schools and 5 in units). Their age ranged from 30 to 48 years, their teaching experience in regular classroom before getting involved in the education of deaf children ranged from none to 18 years, while their teaching experience with deaf children ranged from 1 to 25 years. In this study, all teachers in primary schools were trained as teachers in Pedagogical Academies (which, as noted earlier, no longer operate) while teachers in secondary education graduated from the University. There are no University graduates among teachers in special schools or special units for deaf children in primary schools. Due to the limited employment opportunities for teachers in Greece, teachers who graduated recently from University are likely to be unemployed or work in villages, small towns and mostly in general classrooms. On the contrary, teachers who graduated many years ago and who are more experienced are entitled to work in big cities and in special educational settings.

Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed and their analysis was based on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and techniques that are suggested by Powney and Watts (1987). By reading the transcriptions,

familiarity with the transcript was achieved and meaningful units of analysis, which appeared to be informative for this study, were subsequently identified. The units were gradually related to the research focus and themes, and categories singled out. Specifically, the categories included information on the following topics: initial training, in-service training, the role of the peripatetic teacher for deaf children, and the implications of all these factors in the way that teachers perceived their role towards deaf children.

The presentation of the analysis were made in a manner which enabled the informants to speak for themselves. In particular, it included (a) the participants' comments, which were quoted so that the reader could have direct access to the ideas and perceptions of teachers in the exact way that they were expressed and (b) these comments were enriched and compared with literature findings as well as analysed, interpreted and discussed by the author.

There was no intention to focus on the numerical or proportional frequency of the responses of the participants. The overall goal was to highlight the importance and power of individual responses in defining and evaluating reality, a point that has been underlined by Larcher (1993). In conclusion, the comments quoted illustrate a range of perceptions which were expressed in this study either by a small or a large number of parents and teachers.

Findings

A very interesting issue regarding the participants in this study was the fact that teachers working with deaf children were not trained to work as teachers of the deaf, since there are no training courses for teachers of the deaf in Greece. Furthermore, in their majority teachers had no background knowledge in the education of the deaf before they started to work in educational settings for deaf children. During their ITE, no modules in the education of the deaf were offered. Also, no in-service training courses for teachers of the deaf were available. Only 8 teachers, who were employed by the NID attended a course for a period of around 10 months in the education of the deaf. This course is no longer offered: it used to be offered by the NID many years ago exclusively to newly employed teachers, but it was not recognised by the State as an official qualification of a teacher of the deaf. Until now, there has been no other initiative to establish in-service training courses specifically in the education of deaf children. Therefore, the perceptions of these teachers that attended the NID course regarding the role of teacher training in the education of deaf children are quite unique, since they are the only ones who had the experience of training in Greece and could comment on its the role. Their comments reflected positive experiences, as can be seen from the following representative comment:

'We attended a one-year training course, which included theoretical and practical sessions. We attended various modules and listened to many professionals... in addition we observed teachers of the deaf in their classroom and also did some teaching. In this way, when I became a teacher of the deaf I felt that I was somehow qualified to teach deaf children, although I believe that I need more extended training. I expected that the NID training would be upgraded and continue to be offered to teachers willing to work with deaf children. Instead, this form of training does not operate any more and there is no training course for teachers of the deaf in Greece.'

Considering the short duration of the NID course, and the fact that teacher training in SEN has often been described as insufficient (Wilmore, 1996) it is encouraging that the NID training had this positive impact on this teacher's self-confidence, making her feel at that time qualified to teach deaf children. Naturally, after a period of time, through her experience as a teacher of deaf children, the teacher discovered that training is an on-going process, that NID training, albeit valuable, was not sufficient, and had to be further enriched and extended. This is not surprising, since there is a difference between training and teaching, between feeling confident and qualified just after having attended a training course and feeling effective as a teacher of the deaf in the classroom, by managing to respond to the needs of the deaf child and implement the knowledge and skills acquired during the training (Burden, 1990).

In the same way, the following teacher, as well as all the teachers who attended the NID training course, acknowledged its contribution, underlining, however, that no in-service training can be considered as a panacea for teachers involved in the education of the deaf. There is always a need to keep up with the ongoing changes in the educational world and teachers need to go through a continuing process of learning, which can be realised only through the constant in-service training.

'I attended the one-year training, but there is a need for frequent seminars, for further training to take place so that I will have the opportunity to update my knowledge concerning the latest advances in the education of the deaf, so that I feel that I have new ideas and that I can offer new things to the children as a teacher.'

Apart from the teachers who attended a training course and who commented on the positive role of training, the following teachers, who did not have any training experience, acknowledged the role of training in an indirect way, by

admitting that a teacher working with deaf children needs to have a broad knowledge in the educational needs of the deaf population.

'There are deaf children in our school with multiple disabilities, such as physical and health impairments or a range of learning difficulties. Therefore, teachers need to have a broad knowledge on various subjects, such as psychology, education of the deaf, audiology, language development, speech therapy, so that they can best respond to the needs of the children.'

'The teacher who works with deaf children should be knowledgeable about several issues, since in our school we deal with various children who are so different, and who beside their deafness might have other disabilities and we do not know how to treat them and how to educate them.'

Deaf children are considered to be a heterogeneous group (Maxon, 1990). This diversity requires the teacher of the deaf to have various skills and knowledge bases, in order to respond to the diverse needs of the children. Furthermore, the above teacher was especially concerned about a group of deaf children with special educational needs. During the last years a shift of school population has been observed from special schools to resource rooms or mainstream classes, and an increased number of deaf children with additional needs has been observed in special schools. In some countries such as in the U.S.A. there is a special training course for teachers working with deaf children with additional disabilities (Moores, 1996) while in the UK there is a course for teachers working with deaf-blind children.

Regardless of the level of knowledge and skills that a teacher may possess through initial or in-service training, there is always a need for additional support and knowledge, which can mainly be derived from a special advisor in the education of the deaf, a peripatetic teacher of the deaf (U.K.) or the itinerant teacher (U.S.A.), who informs and supports teachers regarding issues in deafness. The itinerant teacher can be responsible in providing instruction to deaf children, as well as supporting and informing the educational staff. Unfortunately, this service does not operate in Greece. There are only general SEN advisors but not at specific areas of SEN, such as the education of the deaf, while in secondary education there are no SEN advisors at all. In this way teachers remain alone and unsupported, although they are in great need of information as well as emotional support, as indicated through the following comments:

'Well, it is certainly difficult to work with deaf children and after working for many years you feel a bit frustrated, because there

is no feedback from children and very slow progress, which discourages you.'

'It is interesting but also difficult, and you feel psychologically tired. It's not so simple like teaching hearing children. Even if you plan your lesson you can rarely follow it, and many problems come up. It is a difficult job, when we finish the lesson I feel psychologically tired and I don't have the strength to help my child.'

'We need the support of a special advisor, who would guide and inform us concerning deafness, Unfortunately, there is no advisor in special education, there is nobody to guide and counsel us.'

'There is nobody who can support the children or me, somebody who could come frequently to my classroom and advise me, give me some guidelines. I feel that I cannot respond because I do not know how, I need more knowledge, additional training, but there is nothing in Greece.'

'I am not trained, I do not know what is appropriate for children, and in addition there is no trained specialist in the education of the deaf, an advisor that can help and support us. Teachers may be interested in the education of deaf children but if they have no knowledge in the field and if they are not supported, how can they become better teachers for the deaf child? We may try different approaches and methods searching to find out what might be successful, experimenting to see whether any of our ideas may succeed. In this way, we lose precious time, children are not properly educated and we do not feel satisfied.'

The role of the 'special needs' expert, who constitutes a resource and a consultant to specialist colleagues has been well documented (Harrison, 1993; Thomas and Smith, 1985). Furthermore, the empowering role of itinerant teachers, the positive impact that they can have on the education of deaf children and the support and guidance that they can offer is well acknowledged (Yarger and Luckner, 1999). Collaborating with the itinerant teacher helps teachers develop a broad base of knowledge and respond to the diverse needs of students, whilst also enabling them to acquire additional skills, such as learning to collaborate effectively with families (Yarger and Luckner, 1999), an issue that has been discussed by the following teacher:

'Well, it is very interesting to educate deaf children, but it is also quite difficult. In many cases, we are so alone... parents do not help their children, they do not try to communicate, they do not want to learn Sign Language and as you understand communication can not

rely only on lip-reading. Some parents reject Sign Language but fortunately these parents are very few. Some parents accept sign language but they have never attended Sign Language lessons. Especially parents that live away from Thessaloniki do not have the opportunity to attend lessons, do not have access to Sign Language classes. But they do not even make an effort to learn Sign Language through interacting with their children.'

It is encouraging that this teacher acknowledges the well-established important role of the parents of a deaf child as a source of additional and essential support in the education of their child (Luckner, 1991). Unfortunately, the above teacher is disappointed with the level of collaboration between teachers and parents, emphasising the importance of sign language in establishing communication with the deaf child. However, hearing parents of deaf children go through several emotional stages since the diagnosis of their child as deaf (Nikolarazi, 1997; Luteran, 1987), and they need systematic counselling in order to accept the role of Sign Language and its positive role for their child's development. Many parents in Greece do not have access to counselling centres or signing lessons, they cannot easily travel to another city in order to reach a counselling centre, and may never have the chance to participate in a counselling session, learn about Sign Language and attend Sign Language classes. Therefore, it is not easy for them to acquire a positive attitude towards Sign Language or even realise the importance of the early establishment of communication in the education of the deaf child (Long, Stinson, Kelly and Liu, 1999).

Traditionally, there has often been a controversy in the education of the deaf regarding language acquisition and communication, questioning which language and which mode of communication will best prepare deaf individuals to communicate effectively in the society (Morariu and Bruning, 1987). Until now there has been no clear conclusion regarding which mode of communication is most suitable for educating deaf children (Hsing and Lowenbaun, 1997). Among the three most widely used modes of communication in the education of deaf children, the Oral/Aural approach, Total Communication (T.C.) and Bilingualism, T.C. and the Aural Approach are mostly used in the educational settings in Greece.

A simple awareness of the importance of clear and effective communication is not sufficient to enable communication with a deaf child (La Bue, 1996), who is in great need for a communication system that will allow him/her to gain access to knowledge and the curriculum and interact with other people. Effective communication requires teachers not only to be aware of the meaning of the different modes of communication, but also to be able to use them effectively in order to communicate with a deaf child. This is a demanding and complicated task,

and the comments from the participants in this study reveal that even if teachers claim that they adopt a certain mode of communication, this does not mean that effective communication has been established.

'At school, the official mode of communication is Total Communication, meaning that we use speech and Sign Language but we are not sure whether we effectively communicate with children, because there are meanings difficult to be conveyed. In addition, there are many words that don't exist in Sign Language, or there are many words which are represented with the same sign. The difficulties in communication are also caused by the fact that children do not communicate with their parents at home and parents do not support our work.'

'We have problems in communicating with children. There is a lack of communication, teachers do not know well Sign Language and I think that they should have a deeper knowledge about modes of communication.'

'I don't dare to say that I communicate with deaf children and I suspect that children cannot understand everything that I say. When deaf children speak with each other I understand a few things and when we speak with hearing people deaf people can understand a few things. They should be able to see us and lip-read us, to see our hands. When I teach, I sign, talk and write at the same time. I try to exploit all the possible ways that may help a deaf child understand better. The aim is to communicate. How? According to my view, this is Total Communication, which includes everything.'

'There is sometimes no communication, even with the use of signing communication cannot be established. When children come to school at the age of 5 without having established communication with their parents, when there is no communication at home how can we achieve communication at school?'

It is not surprising, that the above teachers expressed their concerns regarding the level of communication between them and the children, since teachers did not hold any qualification in Sign Language. Signing courses in Greece started to be offered a few years ago, and most of the teachers who used T.C. learned to sign by experience. However, it cannot be expected from a teacher to use a mode of communication effectively in the classroom without having at least a thorough understanding and a strong theoretical background concerning the modes of communication, which is always provided as part of a training course for teachers of the deaf. During such a course teachers will become deeply informed and

acquire skills that will facilitate communication with a deaf child. There is a consensus (Long, Stinson, Kelly and Liu, 1999; Latimer, 1983) that teachers with a broad knowledge regarding the modes of communication and high skills in Sign Language are beneficial to deaf students, enabling them to develop to their full potential, feel comfortable, and benefit from learning experiences.

Nevertheless, despite the well documented role of teacher training and the knowledge and skills that a teacher of deaf children should have, 3 teachers working in special units have their doubts regarding the importance of teacher training and the theoretical background:

‘I do not know whether I need a broader knowledge in the area of deafness. Last year, there was a teacher at school, who was supposed to be better trained and have more knowledge than me, but children and parents were not satisfied with her.’

‘I try to be informed, by reading books and contacting professionals. I know that some teachers have attended an in-service training course in SEN, but I doubt whether trained teachers know more than I do.’

Although disappointing, it is not surprising that a small number of teachers questioned the role of training. Teachers had never been asked or required to attend a training course before they became involved in the education of deaf children. They chose to work with deaf children without being aware of the needs of deaf children and the demands this entailed; they just happened to be in such settings by chance. No training qualification was considered as necessary at the beginning, when teachers decided to work with deaf children. They were allowed to work in a teaching position, without much concern about whether they were prepared and whether they had the knowledge and the skills to teach deaf children.

‘I just applied and I happened to be in this school.’

‘I was looking for a job, there was a teaching job in this setting at that time and I decided to work with deaf children.’

‘It was matter of coincidence, purely looking for a job.’

It is unfair, though, to expect teachers who have not been trained to conceive the importance of training or form a positive attitude towards it (Harris and Evans, 1995). Since teachers never attended a training course, they could not be aware of the skills, the knowledge, the amount of help and support that could be withdrawn from such training. Therefore, they easily undermined it. Even in the following case where the teacher acknowledged the importance of training, he did not think highly of its role:

'There is a need for knowledge and training... however I believe that you learn many things in practice through experience... theory is not enough. I have been working for three years in the education of hard-of-hearing children and I still face many difficulties, children always surprise me.'

There are often concerns regarding the fact that teacher training programmes place the emphasis on theoretical knowledge, without enough regard for the way that this knowledge can be integrated in the classroom (Reitz and Kerr, 1991; Burden, 1990). Of course, there is no doubt that no theoretical background and no amount of in-service training will prepare teachers to cope with all the needs of hard-of-hearing and deaf children. A depth of understanding comes with experience, and much is learnt through doing the job, but in-service training acts as a reinforcing and informative tool in combination with teaching experience (Hegarty, 1993). However, the role of experience should not undermine the role of teacher training. Teachers need to be always alert, willing to become informed and be further trained and open-minded to listen to other people's suggestions and experiences, that will enable them to get a wider knowledge and become more efficient in their work (Berry, 1988).

Conclusions and recommendations

Various professionals in deaf education have expressed their concerns regarding the knowledge of teachers of the deaf and their abilities to respond to the needs of hard-of-hearing and deaf children (Luckner, 1999; Rittenhouse and Kenyon-Rittenhouse, 1997; Lytle and Rovins, 1997; Moores, 1996). Teachers' comments revealed that they were asked to become responsible for the education of deaf children without being adequately prepared, or having the background knowledge that would enable them to respond to the children's needs. This was a stressful situation for teachers, who expressed their anxiety and insecurity, felt that they did not have the knowledge and the skills to respond to the diverse needs of deaf population, and emphasised the difficulties that they faced, particularly in establishing communication with deaf children. Furthermore, a small number of teachers were not convinced about the importance of training, which is perfectly understandable, since teachers who have not been trained cannot appreciate the role of training or form a positive attitude towards it (Harris and Evans, 1995). This picture is frustrating for teachers as well as for children. Teachers do not seem to feel that they can handle difficulties in their job, they face many problems in communicating with deaf children and they feel anxious and unsupported, as has

been reported in other studies (Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore and Carpenter, 1997). Since teachers feel that they are not effective in their job, children cannot be expected to be adequately educated, considering that effective education requires qualified and effective teachers (Rosenberg, Griffin, Kilgore and Carpenter, 1997).

Teacher training is a factor of paramount importance and teachers' actions in the classroom cannot be seen in isolation from teacher training. Teachers' awareness of the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing children need to begin from ITE, because mainstream teachers are likely to encounter hard-of-hearing and deaf children in their classroom. However, teachers cannot be expected to become teachers of deaf children just through ITE. There is a need for in-service training, which will help teachers to increase their competencies in communicating with deaf children (Long, Stinson, Kelly and Liu, 1999), update their knowledge and become more efficient in their work (Berry, 1988).

There is a need to set specific standards and principles for the training of teachers of hard-of-hearing and deaf students, which is an established policy in other countries. Also, through the ongoing educational changes in the area of the education of the deaf, the role of the teacher of the deaf is gradually differentiated and new dimensions and responsibilities are added. Nowadays, deaf children are no longer educated only in special units or in special schools. Inclusion (Shildroth and Hotto, 1991) has become an increasingly common practice and a shift of placement from units and special schools to mainstream schools has been observed. As a result, there is an increasingly great need for qualified educators for deaf children not only in special schools and resource rooms, but also in mainstream schools (Beaver, Haytes and Luetke-Stahlman, 1995).

In view of all these developments, there is a need to consider a broader role of the teacher of the deaf, with a special emphasis on the empowering role of itinerant teachers and its positive impact on the education of deaf children (Yarger and Luckner, 1999) as well as the new role of the teacher of the deaf as a member of a trans-disciplinary team of teachers or as a member of a co-teaching team responsible for the education of deaf children (Luckner, 1999). In such settings, co-teaching would include two or more teachers, including a teacher of the deaf, who they would jointly plan, coordinate, teach and evaluate a number of students in a single physical space. Co-teaching is a relatively new policy, but it has a number of benefits offering opportunities for social interaction, giving the chance to hearing children to learn sign language, the sense of shared responsibility for teachers, but it also has its challenges concerning the interpersonal relations and the extra time that is required for teachers to collaborate (Luckner, 1999).

Developing or upgrading a teacher training programme is certainly not an easy process and any recommendations need to take into account several issues such

as organisational problems or available resources, and especially staff concerns. Further research in Greece as well as abroad needs to be done, which will take into consideration teachers' perceptions and identify their needs. Teacher participation is vital in any staff development (Allen, 1994) so that training courses can match teachers' expectations and teachers can be motivated to attend these courses. Finally, apart from teachers' needs, we may also consider the participation of other professionals, as well as parents and deaf children to the planning and the provision of training courses, considering that the establishment of training courses in other countries have taken place and continue to run under the collaboration of several authorities (Joint Standards Committee of the National Council on Education of the Deaf and the Council for Exceptional Children, 1996; Training Establishments for Teachers of the Deaf in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, 1995).

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