Editorial

Deaf Studies by Any Other Name?

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Welcome to Volume 15 and the 15th year of the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. Throughout this volume, the two of us will be co-editing a special section on Deaf Studies, to appear in each issue. A bit of history will be instructive.

In 1985, the field of Deaf Studies was in its infancy. Studies of and by deaf people were about their languages, their behaviors, their community histories, and only occasionally about their cultures. In that year, the First International Deaf Researchers Workshop was held at Bristol University. It was limited to deaf participants only and attended by interested scholars and teachers from all over the world. One of the co-editors of the Deaf Studies section (Tom) spoke at this conference on distinguishing deaf people from Deaf people, a convention that had been used before, but not widely, and became known as “small d” and “big D.” The ways that “deaf” interact with “Deaf” turned out to be very complex, indeed, perhaps more than we imagined at the time. Discussion for the duration of the conference and for several years after reflected both our determination to understand how to think about categorization and segmentation of people who are deaf and the sometimes problematic ambiguity when we use the sign “DEAF.” So went Deaf Studies, an emerging field marked by ambiguity.

Ten years later, in 1995, a group of investigators interested in sign language, the development of deaf children, cognition and learning among deaf individuals, and related areas came together and created the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. Finding a publisher was not as difficult as expected, but among the other early tasks was naming the new journal. Input was solicited from a broad audience and suggestions varied widely. It was clear that the word “deafness” was to be avoided, and some people were averse to using “deaf” as an adjective. One (hearing) observer, for example, emphatically argued that terms like “deaf education” do not make sense, even if they are commonly used. Others argued against phrases like “deaf children” in favor of options like “children who are deaf and hard of hearing.” Attempts to resolve all the contradictory advice yielded either titles too long to fit on the spine of the journal or ones that failed to capture the diverse content that we hoped to publish.

At one point, the name quest was taken to Gallaudet University, where a large number of researchers had gathered for a conference on education. Mutually exclusive suggestions continued to overwhelm the editorial group until it was suggested that one of them (the other co-editor of the Deaf Studies section, Marc) ask a prominent member of the Deaf community attending the conference for advice. The situation was explained to her and she responded “It doesn’t matter which name you choose. You are hearing, whatever you choose will be [seen by others as] wrong. If you were deaf, whatever you choose would be right.” Armed with that wisdom, the group sought out the broadest possible title and settled on the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education.

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The intended meaning of “Deaf Education” was clear enough, even if the literal meaning was unsatisfying to some. “Deaf Studies,” meanwhile, was intended to refer to all things deaf/Deaf in much the same way as the Deaf Studies Centre at Bristol used the term. The first research to emerge from the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) at Bristol concerned how people learned and used sign language and, over time, expanded to include investigations in five primary areas: sign language and sign linguistics; sign language acquisition; the Deaf community and Deaf culture; cognition, mental health, and education; and communication-related technologies (http://www.bris.ac.uk/deaf/english/about/story.html). The CDS definition: “Deaf Studies is the study of the language, community, and culture of deaf people,” well captures what the initial group had in mind.

In the 15 years that have passed, “Deaf Studies,” in the United States at least, has become perhaps more associated with sociological, anthropological, and ethnographic considerations of deaf/Deaf lives, and pressures to rethink “Deaf Studies” to be either more narrowly or more broadly focused have intensified. However, JDSDE and other broad journals in the field have seen relatively few submissions of relevant manuscripts. Among other consequences, it feels at times as though this exciting young field is developing all too slowly, that its relation to other areas of investigation (e.g., Deaf literature, Deaf history, language policy) is still being defined, and that it is not attracting sufficient attention from serious scholars. With a few exceptions, books and articles written 10 and 20 years ago remain the authoritative sources in some areas, and other areas remain untapped.

In an effort to encourage new voices that give us fresh perspectives, JDSDE has solicited submissions in last several months that focus on an evolving field of Deaf Studies. These submissions continue to come in and undergo the regular peer-review process. The special section will continue throughout Volume 15 and beyond, as long as we have manuscripts to offer. Hopefully, this is only the beginning. As the papers in this issue indicate, we need to continue to build Deaf Studies on a scholarly foundation that explores alternative perspectives, distinguishes assumptions from fact, and recognizes the complexity of the issues. We therefore invite future submissions at the level of theory and review—concerning the nature of Deaf Studies and its broad implications for individuals and society—as well as empirical studies that move us forward in various domains. We look to a time when investigations in all these areas inform each other and lead to a better understanding of what Deaf Studies is all about.

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