

Title: *Disabling Pedagogy Power, Politics, and Deaf Education*

Author: Linda Komesaroff

Publisher: Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2008

ISBN: Paper 1-56368-361-X, 978-1-56368-361-9, 139 pages

Cost: \$45.00 USD

Reviewer: Jan-Kåre Breivik

Disabling Pedagogy is a must-read for everyone engaged in deaf education--be it teachers of the deaf, administrators and politicians, parents of deaf children, or deaf adults--throughout the world. The book provides strong arguments in favour of bilingual education with a strong focus on sign language as a deaf person's first and most important language.

There have been plenty of references in the literature to the low educational level and poor literacy achievement most deaf students have attained. This under-achievement has been differently understood among researchers and educators. One view blames the "victim" by pointing to the failure of deaf children as the result of deafness, claiming hearing loss as the main barrier to learning. Within this "tradition" the solution is to provide more of the stuff that has caused much of the problem in the first place: speech training, better hearing aids, cochlear implants, and a "stay-away-from-sign-language" attitude. If visual techniques are involved they serve as a basically oralist attitude and educational strategy (i.e., Signed English and so called Total Communication).

A contrary view, the one Komesaroff embraces, emphasizes the way in which deaf students have been educated, pointing to pedagogy that is disabling, rather than any defect in the child as the cause for educational failure. In support of this view, Komesaroff points to a large body of research and practice on the benefits of using sign language as the first language and as the necessary language of instruction for deaf children.

Komesaroff, a senior lecturer at Deakin University, in Melbourne, Australia, has also edited *Surgical Consent: Bioethics and Cochlear Implantation* (Gallaudet University Press, 2007) one of the best books available on Cochlear Implants.

In *Disabling Pedagogy* she backs-up strong arguments by presenting her own research. She establishes a deep and situated account of deaf education in Australia by combining interviews with teachers, deaf leaders, and parents, with ethnographic observation in school settings. The accounts, which also include court cases, however, are quite depressive reading. The phonocentric (or audist) position of dominant groups and institutions and their influence on educational policy and practice have mostly resulted in failure and disempowerment. In order to acquire more positive and future-oriented understanding, Komesaroff subscribes to a research strategy that she coins "politically active research."

"Systems do not usually change at the top" (p. 116) she states, and since language and education are "bound up with issues of power" (p. 115), research cannot simply do

with neutral rapport. In her own active and politically informed research she shows (partly by means of her active involvement) how attitudes and practice can change when parents and teachers get the chance to see and experience what a different educational policy can do for deaf children. To substantiate her conclusions she also draws upon experience from other countries (Scandinavian mostly) where bilingual educational schemes have been implemented.

As a Norwegian anthropologist with some knowledge of this field, I highly recommend the book. But I have to say (in line with Komesaroff) I am not too optimistic for the future of deaf education. Even in the Scandinavian countries where the different sign languages have been recognized and where bilingual education has been politically confirmed, the tendencies to go in the other direction are quite massive (normalization, mainstreaming, routine cochlear implantation of small children). However, this book is a central contribution to the field, and provides grounded arguments for a better educational policy and for claiming access to sign language as a human right for deaf kids.

Jan-Kåre Breivik is a senior researcher within social anthropology at the Rokkan Centre for Social Science Studies, University of Bergen, Norway. In 2005 he published the monograph *Deaf Identities in the Making: Local Lives, Transnational Connections* (Gallaudet University Press). E-mail: jan.breivik@rokk.uib.no

As a Deaf educator and researcher heavily involved in Deaf education, I recommend *Disabling Pedagogy: Power, Politics, and Deaf Education* as a go-to book for anyone who wants to understand Deaf education through the contrasting lenses of Deaf people and hearing people. The author does a remarkable job of exploring power dynamics within Deaf education. She addresses a variety of important issues, includes a keen analysis of hearing-deaf viewpoints, presents powerful personal anecdotes, and provides a succinct overview of history, research, and laws related to this important topic. This is a brief overview of the literature reviewed here was drawn from the following databases: ERIC, Wilson Education, ProQuest, PsychInfo, EBSCO, JSTOR, and SAGE. The search terms used were the following: bilingual; deaf education; literacy; English as a Second Language; English Learner; written ASL; age of acquisition; second language acquisition; dual language; critical period for language; deaf multilingual learner; bimodal bilingualism; heritage ASL; and sign bilingualism.

3. *The Psycholinguistic Turn in Deaf Education*. Komesaroff, L.R. *Disabling Pedagogy: Power, Politics, and Deaf Education*; Gallaudet University Press: Washington, DC, USA, 2008. [Google Scholar]. LEAD-K.