

The State of Higher Education for Deaf Students in the Philippines

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Abstract: For most Deaf students in the Philippines, education stops at the secondary level. Few have attempted to be mainstreamed in higher education institutions, which lack the support systems for the Deaf. The paper begins with a story about a deaf student who recently graduated from college, and then provides some data on disability in the Philippines. This is followed by a description of the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB) experience in educating the Deaf. DLS-CSB (through its School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies (SDEAS), is one of only three institutions in the country offering bachelor's degree programs for the Deaf. The paper states the vision and mission of SDEAS and how these are implemented in the programs and services offered. It also provides data on its faculty and students, general strategies and interventions used (in class and other venues for learning), the employment status of its graduates, and problems faced in the education of the Deaf. The paper ends with some recommendations for the advancement of higher education of the Deaf, not only in DLS-CSB but also in other parts of the Philippines.

Key Words: deaf students, higher education, Philippines

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Prologue: The Story of Mayleen

Let me begin by sharing a story about Mayleen Mutia, a young Deaf girl who finished her secondary education in 1994 at the Taft National High School, a public school in Eastern Samar, one of the poorest provinces in the Philippines. Of her experience then, she has this to say:

"In High School, I was mainstreamed and studied with hearing classmates. I did not know how to sign and I was taught to communicate orally. There was

another Deaf person in my school and it may seem weird, but we would communicate with each other by speaking and by trying to lip-read what the other was saying. I don't think we actually ever understood each other. We seldom interacted with each other because that would give the hearing students a chance to tease us for being Deaf. It was very hard for me during classes because I could not hear what the teacher was saying and would try to guess what the lecture was all about by lip-reading. I was not growing and improving as a person."

For five years after high school graduation, she did not pursue further education. She describes those years as follows:

"Five years is a long time and I feel as if those were lost years of my life because I could not continue my studies. Most Deaf persons have the same experience. Some Deaf youth are not aware that there are opportunities to pursue a college education and so they stop studying. Some, like me, are luckier, in the sense that we are able to continue studying even if we had to wait a while before doing so."

She goes on to say:

"Unaware of any Deaf school where I could continue my education, my parents encouraged me to enroll in a hearing school in Samar or Leyte. I decided not to enroll in either school because I felt I would not fit in a hearing school environment and would not really be able to better myself. I tried to convince my parents to allow me to go to Manila to look for a school for the Deaf but they would not let me go because they said Manila was too far and was a dangerous place and no one will take care of me there. And so, for 5 years I stayed at home, occasionally helping my uncle in his small business and accompanying my mother to places she would visit."

But Mayleen had a dream for herself and a big part of it was gaining a college education. It was only in 1998, however, when she came to know, while watching a television program, about a Deaf youth who was studying Engineering in a prestigious university in Manila. Seeing him communicating through signs encouraged her to persuade her parents to let her go to Manila because she, too, wanted to learn how to sign. By January 1999, she was enrolled in De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB)'s Sign Language Learning Program (SLLP). And thus, she says, *"My journey to being an independent Deaf person started in earnest."*

Five months later, Mayleen enrolled in DLS-CSB's Certificate Program in Accounting for the Deaf. She completed this program in 2001. Not being satisfied with just a certificate, however, she immediately applied and enrolled in the Bachelor in Applied Deaf Studies program under the Entrepreneurship track in June 2001. Her hard work paid off as she graduated with honors last June 2005.

Disability Data in the Philippines

As Mayleen herself realized, she is one of the very few Deaf individuals who have had the benefit of postsecondary education. The difficulty of getting reliable statistics on people with disability (PWD) notwithstanding, the 2000 Census of Population and Housing of the National Statistics Office of the Philippines shows a total of 942,098 PWD, of whom 13.91% are hard of hearing, partially deaf, or totally

deaf.¹ Considering that only 4.13% of all PWD are academic degree holders, one can imagine how much smaller would be the percentage of Deaf and hard of hearing people who are college graduates.

This situation is understandable in light of the fact that only six institutions, all but one of which are located in Metro Manila, offer postsecondary education for the Deaf. Of these, three offer 2-3 year certificate programs in computer operations/technology, accountancy, or religious education. These are: Miriam College (primarily a day school for hearing students), Manila Christian Computer Institute for the Deaf (a day school), and the Bible Institute for the Deaf (a residential school). In addition to offering self-contained classes for its Deaf students, Miriam College also mainstreams a few of them to other programs, provided they hire private interpreters. The other three institutions offer courses leading to a bachelor's degree—in Business Administration (for the CAP College-School for the Deaf, a day school), in Education (for the Deaf Evangelistic Alliance Foundation in the province of Laguna, a residential school), and in Applied Deaf Studies (for De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, a hearing day school with self-contained classes for the Deaf)². Access to postsecondary education is, therefore, very much restricted.

Like Mayleen, most Deaf students graduate from high schools whose mainstreaming programs do not provide support services for the Deaf who join predominantly hearing classes. Moreover, for those who go to self-contained classes, learning is hampered by the use of Signed English, rather than Filipino Sign Language (FSL) as the medium of instruction. Thus, many of them lack the knowledge and skills expected of college entrants.

Educating the Deaf at DLS-CSB

De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB) is a member of the De La Salle University System, which consists of eight institutions. It is part of a worldwide network of schools managed by the De La Salle Brothers (also known as the Christian

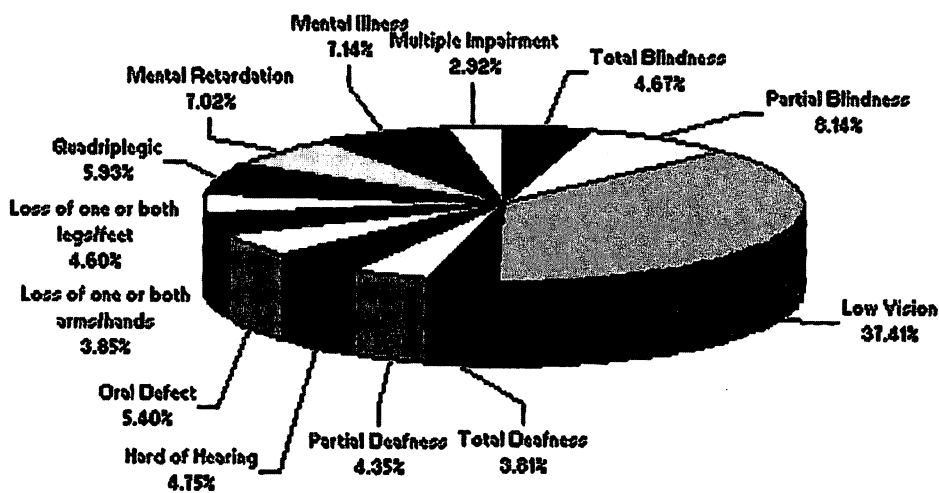


Fig. 1 Percent Distribution of Persons with Disability by Type of Disability: 2000
 Source: National Statistics Office, 2000 Census of Population and Housing

Brothers). DLS-CSB envisions itself as a Catholic, dynamic, and innovative learning community. As a learner-centered institution, it recognizes the uniqueness of every individual and responds to the diverse needs, talents, and interests of all learners.

Since its founding in 1988, DLS-CSB has set itself apart from other higher education institutions in the country through its offering of innovative degree and non-degree programs designed for the development of individuals for professions in the arts, design, management, service industries, computer applications in business, and special studies.

The School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies (SDEAS) is one of six schools in the College. It became a full-fledged school in 2000, evolving from a vocational course in bookkeeping and accounting that started in 1991. SDEAS fulfills the Lasallian mandate of educating the poor by providing scholarships for underprivileged Deaf students who would otherwise not have a chance to pursue a good college education.

Vision-Mission

The vision of DLS-CSB SDEAS is to become an emerging leader in education for the Deaf through (a) programs that are responsive to their needs; (b) research on innovative strategies for their holistic development; (c) international linkages; and (d) empowerment of the Deaf by preserving their heritage and nurturing Filipino Deaf culture.

Guided by this vision, SDEAS ensures “that the Filipino Deaf youth achieve their full potential and become competent and valuable members of the Deaf community and the Philippine society” through the provision of various opportunities for educational, professional, and personal advancement of its students and graduates.³

Faculty

The present SDEAS faculty roster consists of 36 members, half of them Deaf and the other half hearing. All but two of the latter are proficient in sign language. Each of these two is assigned an interpreter who collaborates with the non-signing faculty to facilitate a learning environment conducive to learning. Only five (14%) are fulltime faculty members. Most have a master’s degree in their respective fields of specialization.

About half of the faculty members have teaching duties only and a third have both teaching and administrative loads. The rest are assigned either to student formation/development work or to linkages and partnership development.

The SDEAS educators adhere to five core beliefs, namely:⁴

1. The Socio-Cultural View of Deaf People (vs. the medical/pathological perspective), which considers “deafness as a culture beyond hearing impairment, and the community of the Deaf individuals as a cultural and linguistic minority”.⁵
2. Learner-Centered Education, which views learning from the standpoint and experiences of the Deaf learners.
3. Evaluation and Feedback for Transformation and Empowerment. Counseling and non-academic activities allow the Deaf students to learn the skills of planning, evaluation, and reflection. Such activities develop their self-confidence and empower them to pursue their goals.

4. The Deaf Community Role Models. The Deaf students' interaction with Deaf professionals and para-professionals in the school can help them see possibilities and directions for their own lives.
5. The Bridge Builders. Deaf and hearing faculty must take the lead in being Advocates for the Deaf so that policies, programs, and interventions take the Deaf students' needs and interests into account.

Students

Out of over 8,000 students in DLS-CSB this school year, 128 are enrolled in SDEAS. Majority are female and are enrolled in the multimedia arts track. Most of the students come from the poorer sector of society and are therefore given partial or full scholarship grants by the College. They graduated from high schools located in different regions in the country, using different educational approaches (e.g., auditory-aural, total communication) and communication modes (i.e., speech/lip reading and/or signing exact English, SEE).⁶

Programs and Services

Believing that Deaf people can be trained to become productive and independent members of society, SDEAS offers a program leading to the degree of Bachelor in Applied Deaf Studies (BAPDST). This program aims to develop in young Deaf adults the competitive skills and expertise needed for gainful employment. It seeks to empower Deaf graduates with the confidence and competence to perform well in the workplace and to become leader-advocates for the improvement of the life circumstances of the Deaf.⁷ The program covers General Education courses, Deaf studies, and Electives in two specialization tracks: Multimedia Arts or Business Entrepreneurship.

SDEAS also offers two non-degree programs: the Deaf Learners' Preparatory Course (DLPC) and the Filipino Sign Language Learning Program (FSLLP). The DLPC, introduced this school year, is a two-trimester program that helps Deaf high school graduates with deficient skills and poor psycho-spiritual development to qualify for entry into the BAPDST. It provides remedial, enrichment, and formative activities via four clusters of study: Formation, Filipino Sign Language, English, and Mathematics. The FSLLP is a program for the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and hearing people. The FSL classes (Levels 1, 2, and 3), alongside seminars and workshops on Visual-Gestural Communication, help the students arrive at a greater understanding and appreciation of the Deaf's unique language and culture.

The SDEAS Office of Academic Programs (O-AP) supervises these programs, as well as the Student Academic Services and Internship Program. It works hand-in-hand with the Office for Deaf Esteem and Formation (O-DEAF), whose initiatives and interventions are based on a conceptual framework that integrates humanistic and developmental psychology, learner-centered philosophy, and a socio-cultural view of deafness. Its Support Formation Unit offers Guidance and Counseling and Faith Formation programs for the Deaf. Its Student Activities Unit, on the other hand, oversees programs for sports, performing arts, student leadership, and social action.

The Office for Partnership and Development (O-PD) serves as the advocacy and information arm of the School. It seeks to remove barriers to working relationships

between Deaf and hearing people and thus facilitate the Deaf learner's education, interaction, and employment. The O-PD is one of the concrete outcomes of the partnership of DLS-CSB and the Postsecondary Education Network International (PEN-International). This network, to which Tsukuba University of Technology belongs, aims to improve life conditions of the Deaf through post-secondary educational opportunities and technological resources. The OPD carries out its mandate through three programs: Outreach for Education and Community Advancement of the Deaf, Communication and Advocacy, and Employment and Business Opportunities.

Teaching-Learning Strategies and Interventions

In line with the learner-centered thrust of the College, SDEAS faculty members utilize a variety of strategies in the classroom to facilitate the learning of Deaf individuals with diverse needs, interests, and capacities. With FSL as the medium of instruction, the faculty use strategies such as computerized word games, cooperative learning, hands-on activities, Problem-Based Learning, drama, and watching CDs or VHS tapes. Outside the classroom, students receive support through consultations with their teachers, with the O-AP Head, or with the Student Academic Services Unit. Other opportunities for learning are offered through field trips, inter-subject collaborative projects, workshops/seminars, competitions, practicum requirements, and KEYPALS (an exchange program between SDEAS and TCT students through electronic mail correspondence in the English language).

The strategies used by the Support Formation Unit include individual/group guidance and counseling sessions, enrichment programs for parents, spiritual retreats and recollections, signed Holy Masses, parent-child dialogues, fellowship, career education, and volunteers' formation. The Student Activities Unit, on the other hand, organizes a Deaf Camp and Deaf Festival as well as a Deaf Summer Encounter. For its part, the Office for Partnership and Development searches for and creates opportunities for partnerships with PEN partners, NGOs, business, and media through community outreach; assists business establishments and employers to realize their corporate social responsibilities through training and employment of Deaf people; and supports Deaf community initiatives through collaborative projects and information campaign. Deaf students and graduates benefit greatly from the support provided by this Office to prepare both student/graduate and the people in the workplace for working together to achieve company objectives. Furthermore, Deaf students/graduates are mentored as they venture forward in their career paths—from the preparation of their curriculum vitae to the job interview, from planning to operating a small business. Study tours, business forums, and on-the-job training are tools for active learning of the students.

Employment of Graduates

Prior to 2003, the BAPDST program offered seven electives. Out of 14 students who graduated from this program, data were available for 12. All but one of these are employed (in the fields of teaching, social work, counseling, or administrative support). Since 2003, when the number of electives was reduced to two, SDEAS has had 51 graduates. Only 1 of the 29 graduates from the multimedia arts track is currently unemployed, whereas 9 of the 22 graduates from the business

entrepreneurship are still exploring business opportunities to start up or are seeking jobs that are appropriate for their competencies. About 25% are self-employed. The school assisted majority of these graduates in their job placement;

Deaf Education in the Philippines

Issues and Concerns

About a year ago, several groups involved in Deaf Education worked on a collaborative project to present issues and concerns in Philippine Deaf Education to a UNESCO-Philippines Consultative Forum on Deaf Education. These groups, convened by DLS-CSB with the support of PEN-International, included schools (CAP College-School for the Deaf, CAP-SFD; Manila Christian Computer Institute for the Deaf, MCCID) and organizations (Philippine Federation of the Deaf, Philippine Deaf Resource Center, and Catholic Ministry to Deaf People).⁸

A common concern raised by the groups is socio-psychological—the lack of understanding of the psychology of deafness, the need for immediate linkage with the Deaf community to provide interaction opportunities for the Deaf children and support for their parents, the need for guidance and counseling services, especially in schools with mainstreaming programs, and the very low self-esteem of the Deaf.

At the core of the problems in Deaf education are the unresolved issues of language and communication. The lack of research on FSL and the culture of deafness, the lack of materials on FSL, the absence of policies on the use of sign language in the classroom, and the diverse levels of signing skills of teachers and interpreters have led to problems in the literacy skills of Deaf students. These also explain the restricted access of the Deaf to postsecondary education and, consequently, to employment opportunities.

Another serious flaw of Deaf education is that it has not developed a system of consultation with Deaf adults who could provide valuable feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of the educational interventions and strategies. There is also a lack of openness in public schools to the hiring of more Deaf faculty and counselors who could serve as role models for the Deaf students.

Still another concern is the lack of an organized form of support services for the Deaf who are placed in predominantly hearing classrooms. Among the services that should be provided are: competent interpreting, seminars and workshops to tackle adjustment problems, parent education classes, and orientation sessions for teachers to help them better understand the Deaf learners.

Recommendations and Future Directions

In view of these issues and concerns, the schools and organizations catering to the Deaf have raised several recommendations:⁹

1. Formulation and implementation of policies on: the use of Filipino Sign Language in all levels of education for the Deaf, the provision of adequate support services for postsecondary Deaf students, and the licensing of teachers of the Deaf.
2. The involvement and participation of Deaf leaders in the formulation of these policies.
3. Systematic research on the use of sign language and other aspects of the Deaf

culture.

4. The creation of a registry of all organizations offering educational programs for the Deaf.
5. Faculty members' self-evaluation of their perspectives about the Deaf learner.
6. Implementation of instructional methods and strategies suitable to the Deaf.
7. Introduction of appropriate teaching and learning interventions as early as pre-school education for the Deaf.

At DLS-CSB, the mandate for SDEAS is clear. In line with its vision and mission, SDEAS will introduce a bilingual (FSL and English Language/Filipino Language) and bicultural (Deaf Culture and Filipino Culture) into its curriculum. It will expand career advancement options for the Deaf through various academic programs appropriate to their levels of readiness and areas of interest. Moreover, it will strengthen initiatives for partnerships with industry and enhance student and faculty development. Likewise, in the spirit of collaboration, it will extend its services to other schools and organizations for and of Deaf persons. Finally, it will take the lead in pushing for the advancement of Deaf education in the network of Lasallian institutions in the Philippines.¹⁰

These are challenging directions, but with the support and assistance of other proponents and advocates of efforts to improve the lives of the Deaf, we are confident that our goals will be achieved. In particular, our partnership with PEN-International and alliance with its other partner-institutions, such as Tsukuba University of Technology, will certainly inspire and spur us onward in the pursuit of our mission.

Epilogue: Listening to the Sounds of Silence

In a speech she prepared as a candidate for the honor to speak on behalf of her fellow graduates, Mayleen Mutia summarized her experiences at DLS-CSB thus:

"CSB is where I spent a number of years studying and I have seen how this, truly, is an institution that caters to a diversity of learners. Through the School of Deaf Education and Applied Studies it provides a venue for Deaf students to better themselves and work for a brighter future. My involvements with both the Deaf and hearing communities have greatly helped me develop as a person who thinks for herself, who does things independently, and is able to make informed decisions.

"I thank the SDEAS, their faculty and staff, and my fellow Deaf students for making my dreams of becoming a productive person come true and for providing a venue for a Deaf person like me to be employable and to have a meaningful role in society. I thank them for helping me discover my Deaf identity, for helping me develop my personality and character, and introducing me to a world where I am significant as a Deaf person. I thank the SDEAS for helping me set directions and for guiding me along the path to the attainment of my goals. I pray that the SDEAS will continue to assist Deaf students to become empowered individuals... Indeed, we are our nation's hope and we now have the chance to make a difference in our country and for our people."

I had the good fortune of seeing first hand what Mayleen was speaking of. She

was the “buddy” assigned to me when I took a basic course in the Sign Language Learning Program of SDEAS. I must admit that as I attempted to enter her world of silence I was awed by what I “heard.” While I struggled to communicate with her in her language, I realized how confident she was of her Deaf identity, of her unique personality and character. Patiently she taught this hearing educator what a rich world lies beneath the sounds of silence of the Deaf.

Currently, Mayleen is employed as an encoder-clerk of a health insurance company in Manila.

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