

Ireland and Finland: A comparative study of two Deaf communities

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Introduction

This chapter presents a comparative case study of the Deaf communities in Ireland and Finland. There are a lot of potential benefits to be gained in undertaking comparative cross-national studies. Cross-national comparative studies of Deaf issues are not commonplace but examples of this kind of analysis have begun to appear recently. For instance, the World Federation of the Deaf published an international survey on the national education system for deaf children in several countries in 1991 (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1994). An investigation of the status of sign language in seventeen countries carried out by the European Union of the Deaf is another example (Kyle and Allsop 1997).

Barcham (1998) points out that due to the continued exchange of information at a superficial level, it is possible to work in the field of special education in one country with no reference to what happens elsewhere. She believes more in-depth international comparisons would enhance the understanding of the development of policies and practices in Deaf education in one's own country (*ibid* 246). May (1998, 21) points out that economic globalisation may internationalise welfare production and that there may be a long-term process of convergence underway. This would strengthen the role of comparative analysis.

Even considering the difficulties involved, a comparative study is still an attractive option since it offers an international dimension that certainly enhances our understanding of where the Irish situation stands in relation to other countries. May (*ibid* 185) describes four different approaches to comparative research: an 'import-mirror' view,

a 'difference' view, a 'theory-development' view and a 'prediction' view. These approaches are not distinct as a comparative exercise might apply more than one approach.

The first approach, import-mirror, refers to those studies in which comparisons are made between one country and another in order to interpret policies and practices more clearly. This view might be useful for those who want to introduce practices from abroad into their own country. The second approach, difference, refers to studies which set out to explain the cultural, social, political or economic differences between countries. This approach is crucial to understanding similarities and diversities of policies between countries. It is related to a third approach, theory-development, in which academics have developed the 'difference' model by using the comparisons to generate theoretical generalisations and explanations. Most prominent among these is the typology of welfare regimes developed by Esping-Andersen (1990). Finally, the prediction approach refers to the potential outcomes of particular policies after examining cultural, social, political and economic contexts in many countries. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is a prime example of an organisation doing this type of work (May 1998:185-89).

For the purposes of this study, the first view described by May is the most appropriate although it is not suggested that we should introduce practices into Ireland similar to those in Finland. In the next section, I explain the methodology used in the study. I then explain the choice of Finland for comparative analysis in terms of its historical, social and political background. This is followed by a brief description of the Finnish Deaf community and its history, which provides a necessary context within which the socio-economic status of Finnish Deaf people can be compared with that of their Irish counterparts. A number of brief comparative references to important social services are also made. To conclude, the lessons arising from the comparison are noted.

Methodology

The methodology of this comparative study is simple. Barcham's case study of the Finnish Deaf community and the author's personal correspondence with officials of the Finnish Association of the Deaf provides the nucleus of the information contained in this chapter.¹ A

154 number of documents and reports provided by the Finnish Association of the Deaf constitute further sources of information. Publications from international organisations such as the OECD are also utilised. As for the Irish part, information collated for a master's thesis (Conama 2002), provided a starting point. This information was obtained from official reports, academic articles and social policy publications. The representative organisation of the Irish Deaf community, the Irish Deaf Society, provided information as well through its research reports and quarterly journals.

Finland and Ireland

Finland was intentionally chosen because of its many similarities to Ireland. Both countries are geographically situated on the periphery of Europe, which affects their ability to influence mainland European politics. Both countries are members of the European Union and are militarily neutral, and both have relatively small populations. Finland with 5 million people has a slightly larger population than Ireland with just fewer than 4 million (OECD 1999). While Finnish society has linguistic diversity, with a number of minority languages especially in the border areas, bilingualism—English and Irish—is dominant in Ireland. Both once had a dominant agricultural economy but now depend heavily on manufactured exports to sustain their economies (Singleton 1998).

TABLE 1: BASIC DATA, IRELAND AND FINLAND (2003)

	Ireland	Finland
Population	3,917,336 (2002)	5,112,000 (1995)
Area size (square miles)	27,137	130,524
Official language(s)	Irish English	Finnish Swedish Sami Sign Language (FinSL)
GNP per capita in US\$	\$30,002	\$26,502
Growth of GDP (1998)	8.9%	3.5%
Unemployment rate (2003)	4.6%	8.9%

(Sources: OECD 2003; Eurostat 2003; Ireland 2002)

Their economies are small and open and have no significant influence on the world economy. They are susceptible to the effects of the global economic shifts (OECD 1999). Both countries have experienced high unemployment rates when in economic recession. However, Finland's high rate of unemployment is a recent phenomenon (*ibid*) while the Irish experienced a long period of high unemployment before the 'Celtic Tiger' economy emerged.

Both countries have a colonial past and a significant neighbouring world power (i.e. Russia and Sweden with Finland, Britain with Ireland). One major difference between their colonial experiences was that Finland had localised government, which gave the Finnish population a degree of cultural and social autonomy and which did not lead to any sustained effort at mass assimilation. Ireland, in contrast, experienced centralised power from London and also experienced attempts at religious and linguistic assimilation. Interestingly, in the 19th century, both countries experienced catastrophic famines that resulted in the deaths of thousands of people, though far more casualties were recorded in Ireland. The Irish perspective on this disaster tends to be more politicised than the Finnish view of their famine. The Finns regard theirs as an ecological disaster rather than a case of economic mismanagement as happened in the Irish case (NESC 1992; Singleton 1998).

Welfare regimes

Although there are similarities between both countries, there are significant cultural and social differences. These differences are reflected particularly in social policy responses to the needs of their populations. To understand these differences, it is useful to draw on comparative research—with particular reference to the third approach described above, theory development—which attempts to classify national welfare systems and social policies. Esping-Andersen's work (1990) has provided the most prominent analytical model in this area. Esping-Andersen developed a typology of three welfare regimes. He measured the social policy responses of each country on the basis of decommodification and social stratification. Decommodification refers to how independent an individual can be without depending on labour market income and social stratification refers to the extent to which social policy responses ameliorate social class structures (*ibid* 35–79).

The first regime—known as the social democratic welfare regime—is rated high in terms of decommmodification and is regarded as a strong exponent of socialism in terms of ameliorating social stratification. These are characteristic features of welfare provision in the Scandinavian countries. In contrast, conservative / corporatist welfare regimes are typical in central European countries such as Germany and Austria. In this type of regime, decommmodification is measured as average while conservatism remains strong in terms of social stratification. The third type of regime is known as a liberal welfare regime. This regime is ranked low in terms of decommmodification and is a strong exponent of liberalism. Countries such as the USA, Britain and Canada fall into this category. Broadly speaking, the typology would place these regimes as follows in descending order of their degree of egalitarianism: social democratic, corporatist and liberal. Although Esping-Andersen places Ireland in the liberal and Finland in the conservative category, he recognises that a number of social policy measures in Finland makes it more like the social democratic model.

However, Esping-Andersen's work is not universally accepted, and other theorists have identified shortcomings in his typology of welfare regimes. In a feminist critique, Lewis (1994) pointed out that women's unpaid work was not recognised in the typology. Other researchers argue that there are more than three types of welfare regimes. Leibfried (1993) identified a Latin Rim model and Castles and Mitchell (1993) proposed four clusters of welfare regimes. Ireland's location in these classifications, however, is problematic due to its unique history and social development (O'Donnell 1999:70–90). Most social researchers agree that a typology of welfare regimes makes a considerable contribution to understanding cross-national differences (*ibid*). It is now generally agreed that Finland belongs to the social democratic cluster while Ireland fits into the liberal model (Hill 1996:38–58). Therefore, it is clear that Finland and Ireland have different welfare regimes.

Finland recognises social benefits as a right of citizens and administers universal social services, which citizens can avail of regardless of their income or status (Sainbury 1994). Despite experiencing a deep economic recession in the 1990s and a subsequent recovery, the Finnish government has vowed to adhere to what they describe as 'the Nordic welfare society' (OECD 1999). As the Finns

develop their rights-based welfare regime, their country has been recognised as one of most progressive, tolerant and wealthy countries in the world (Singleton 1998).

By contrast, the Irish welfare philosophy has been historically dominated by the principle that welfare benefits are residual and based on need. Before Ireland experienced its 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom, it was seen as a conservative European backwater (O'Donnell 1999:70–90). Anti-intellectualism, clerical control and continued economic protectionism of the economy coloured the international perception of Ireland (Chubb 1992:19–20).

In summary then, Ireland and Finland have very significant structural similarities and certain historical experiences in common. However, they possess very different welfare regimes, reflecting differences in political ideology. In the next section, we attempt to see if these regime differences are reflected in policies and outcomes with regard to the respective Deaf communities.

The Finnish Deaf community

The Finnish Deaf community has been publicly prominent in the global discussion of Deaf issues. Internationally, it is often regarded as being one of the most progressive and advanced Deaf communities. This perception is reflected in the re-election of a Finnish Deaf woman, Liisa Kauppinen, as the president of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) in July 1999 and the election of her successor, Markku Jokinen in 2003, a Finnish Deaf man. The office of WFD is currently situated in Finland. The Finnish Deaf community has been able to provide a number of experts to the WFD to sit on special commissions on a number of critical issues. It has been prominent in aiding Deaf communities in the developing world. The Finnish Deaf Association has sponsored community projects to empower Deaf communities in Tanzania and Uganda. Along with the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs it has also sponsored regional conferences on Deaf-related issues and has enabled local Deaf delegates to attend (FAD, 2003).

Statistically, there is no actual census of Deaf people in Finland. However, according to the Finnish Association of the Deaf, there are about 5,000 Deaf people, reflecting a rule of thumb ratio of 1:1,000 Deaf people in the general population (FAD 1999a). Most Deaf people

158 are concentrated in southern Finland since the social and economic infrastructure there enables them to obtain a relatively higher standard of living. However, they are not concentrated in specific areas but are geographically scattered throughout the southern cities (*ibid*).

The association also estimates that 80 per cent of Finnish Deaf people possess fluency in FinSL (Finnish Sign Language) and, overall, that approximately 14,000 people among the national population possess an 'average understanding' of FinSL. In 1995, Finnish Sign Language, along with other minority languages such as Sami and Swedish, were recognised by the state constitution. This has had significant implications for the citizenship rights of Finnish Deaf people (FAD 1998). A national centre for sign language research has been established. The state has also set up a commission known as the Finnish Sign Language Board to implement and monitor measures aiming to promote and support FinSL (FAD 1999a). Both initiatives can be seen as a state response to constitutional recognition of FinSL. To understand the current situation of the Finnish Deaf community, one has to look at the historical background to explain how they managed to achieve what they have achieved. We can then compare their history with the Irish experience.

Though the state has now acknowledged FinSL, like many countries Finland has had a long history of sign language oppression. Finland implemented the oralist philosophy of Deaf education in the late 1890s and abolished their former system, which was based on the French method and which used what was known as 'methodical signing' (Lane 1984:58–64). The experience is broadly similar to what occurred in Ireland although the context is somewhat different. 'Methodical signing' survived in the Irish Catholic schools until the 1940s but was eradicated in the Protestant-run schools in the 1890s (Crean 1996).

Formal education for the Deaf came earlier to Irish children than to their Finnish counterparts. The first known Irish school was opened in 1816 (Matthews 1996) while a Finnish Deaf man, after returning from Sweden, opened the first school in Porvoo in 1846 (FAD 1999a). There is no record of how Finnish deaf children were educated prior to the establishment of this school. From that point on, both countries saw the opening of a number of Deaf schools to cater for the educational needs of deaf children.

Like many countries in Europe, Deaf education in Finland experienced the fallout from the 1880 Milan conference (FAD 1999a). The momentum to embrace the oralist philosophy that believed in banishing sign language from schools and substituting speech training began in the Scandinavian countries during the 1870s. It came to prominence in Finland towards the end of the nineteenth century where there was resistance against it and Deaf people decided to form a representative organisation in 1905—The Finnish Association of the Deaf—to protect and uphold the status of FinSL (Barcham 1998:249).

In Ireland, however, there is no recorded resistance against the implementation of oralism, especially in the 1890s and later in the 1940s. There is some speculation that in the 1880s Francis Maginn, the founder of the British Deaf Association, attempted to establish a similar organisation for Ireland but received little support from Irish Deaf people. As for the 1940s and 1950s, there is no clear explanation for the lack of resistance among Irish Deaf people to the oralist approach. It is possible that severe economic stagnation, clerical control of educational and social institutions and the prevailing anti-intellectualism mentioned by Chubb (1992) were factors.

Oralism in Finland dominated the educational scene up to the mid-1970s and according to FAD it left a damaging legacy while failing to achieve its main objective—the eradication of FinSL (FAD 1999a). This legacy can be clearly seen in older generations of Deaf people who tend to be less confident in using FinSL in the public arena and fail to recognise FinSL as their own language (*ibid*). A number of harsh measures were employed to banish FinSL and older Deaf people remember being severely punished for using FinSL. Finland also experienced a eugenics campaign to reduce the number of Deaf people (Hietala 1996). In the 1930s, for example, Finnish law did not allow Deaf people to marry without getting permission from the President of Finland, a law that was not repealed until 1969.

The Irish Deaf experience can be seen as generally similar but more thoroughly documented especially since the 1940s. Oralism dominated the world of education for the Deaf for a very long period (Lane 1993) but it became dominant in the education provision for the Deaf in Ireland from the late 1950s. As for marriage, there was no specific legislation preventing Irish Deaf people from intermarrying.

The Finnish government set up a commission inquiring into the state of the education for the Deaf in 1973 (Barcham 1998). The commission concluded with a report stating that sign language had a part to play in the education of the Deaf but regarded it as an auxiliary and arbitrary language (*ibid* 250). This has a striking similarity to views expressed in a report on the education of Irish deaf children although the report did not reach any firm conclusion about the status of Irish Sign Language (ISL) (Department of Education 1972).

During the early 1980s, Finnish Deaf leaders decided to do something to protect the status of FinSL, which had been under constant attack, especially on the educational front. In this process, they developed a largely successful strategy to protect and promote the use of the FinSL (FAD 1999a). In 1987, a government curriculum document was published which placed an emphasis on the education of deaf children within this context. It recognised bilingualism as the appropriate approach for educating deaf children and stated that any attempt to use FinSL and spoken Finnish simultaneously would result in a 'pidgin' language. In 1990, the government curriculum document went further and recognised FinSL as the first language of deaf children (Barcham 1998:250).

To have the government acknowledging the status of FinSL in the late 1980s was a pioneering development in itself and ahead of other countries including Ireland. During the 1980s in Ireland there was no official investigation as to the status of Irish Sign Language nor was any serious attempt made to establish an official investigation. The Finnish strategy was rewarded in the following decade with the incorporation of FinSL as a minority language in the state constitution in 1995 (FAD 1999a). A dedicated research centre and a state sponsored FinSL Board have since been established (*ibid*).

In contrast, developments in Ireland happened much more slowly. A representative organisation—the Irish Deaf Society (IDS)—was formed in 1981 after much dissatisfaction with the services being provided by existing organisations. The IDS was also established to mark the UN sponsored international year of disabled people (Irish Deaf Journal 1988). Since the establishment of the IDS, there had been no obvious long term strategy in place and a piecemeal approach was adopted in a campaign for state recognition of ISL. Judging by the lack of progress

on this front, it is clear that this approach had not been successful. The piecemeal approach can be exemplified by one-off projects such as the survey of the Irish Deaf community in 1992 (Matthews 1996), individual studies such as research into the grammar of ISL (McDonnell 1996), European Union HORIZON initiatives to train ISL/English interpreters and ISL tutors, and a MAPS project to train Deaf adult trainers (MAPS 1999). These initiatives were not continued due to lack of funds and official indifference. However, since 2002 the Irish Deaf Society has adopted a more pro-active strategy of contacting politicians, political parties and government departmental officials directly and arguing its case. This has proved to be a successful approach and a number of research, advocacy and literacy projects have been approved and funded by the government (Irish Deaf Journal 2003).

Historically, both countries experienced the negative consequences of oralism and both Deaf communities have attempted to deal with its effects. There are similarities in historical processes between the Finnish and Irish Deaf communities. However, since the 1980s the Irish are still struggling with the consequences of history while the Finns have developed a set of policies to protect the status of FinSL. It is important at this point to examine specific policies towards the Deaf and the socio-economic status of Deaf people in both countries.

Socio-economic status of Deaf people

In this section, brief comparisons are made in relation to employment, education, literacy, social services and participation in policy.

Employment

Before the economic situation worsened in the 1990s, Finland enjoyed an average national unemployment rate of 5 per cent. Unemployment in the Deaf community was just under eight per cent (FAD 1999a). Thus, in Finland a Deaf person was roughly one and a half times more likely to be unemployed than his/her hearing counterpart. In Ireland during the same time period a Deaf person was three times more likely to be unemployed than his/her hearing compatriot (Swan 1994). However, in the transition from an industrial to an information age and with the collapse of its main trading partner, the Soviet Union, the unemployment rate in Finland worsened rapidly from the late 1980's

162 onwards. The peak occurred in the mid-1990s when the general rate reached 15 per cent (OECD 1999). For the Deaf community, the rate climbed steeply, doubling to a rate of 30 per cent (FAD 1999a). This meant that Finnish Deaf people found themselves twice as likely to be unemployed as hearing people.

There has been a remarkable recovery in the Finnish economy since the mid-1990s, which has seen a gradual reduction in the general unemployment rate. In order to maximise the benefit of this recovery, the Finnish Association of the Deaf launched an employment project in 1997, which trained 12 Deaf career guidance counsellors and which was financed by the European Social Fund. The counsellors are expected to be employed in state employment centres to disseminate information and to advise Deaf clients on employment matters (FAD 1999b). The project aimed to maintain the independence of Deaf persons and increase the flexibility of employment options for them. This project is the first of its kind in Europe and is underpinned by the important principle of empowering Deaf people directly. The unemployment rate for the Finnish Deaf community should be reduced over the long term.

Education

There are 17 schools for the Deaf in Finland, all of which adopt a bilingual approach in the education of deaf children. The early acceptance of bilingualism in the Nordic countries made a huge impression on the Finnish education system for the Deaf (FAD 1997). However, only two Deaf schools employ Deaf teachers and there are very few hearing teachers who regard FinSL as their mother tongue, much to the dissatisfaction of the Finnish Deaf community. This has significant implications in that the quality of education delivery varies from school to school. The ongoing debate in Finland centres on teacher competency and their unfamiliarity with the recent establishment of bilingualism (FAD 1997; Barcham 1998).

However, the introduction of bilingualism was made easy by the social democratic attitude of the Finnish State department of education. FinSL was acknowledged as a teaching language in the early 1970s and was further advanced by becoming a school subject during the 1980s. The gradual acceptance of FinSL as an indigenous language was somewhat delayed by a debate centred on the alleged superiority of

Signed Finnish over FinSL. Nevertheless, linguistic and social research 163 revealed the status of FinSL as a primary language. The acceptance of FinSL is reflected in the legislation approved by the Finnish parliament and its incorporation into the Finnish State constitution (FAD 1997; Barcham 1998).

The introduction of bilingualism is vindicated by the increase in the number of Deaf people entering third level education. It is generally estimated that one third of young Finnish Deaf people have entered third level education while among the older generation, the number was but a trickle (FAD 1999a). Although bilingualism has taken root in the Finnish system, this has not been the case in the Irish situation despite several efforts to have it established (MSDP Handbook 1998). The impact of bilingualism in Finland is reflected in the decision to have FinSL accepted as a university subject. Several doctoral theses investigating the status of FinSL have been submitted to universities. The establishment of a dedicated research centre further supports the infrastructure of bilingualism where a ten year long lexicographical study of FinSL has recently been completed and further measures to investigate the language are planned. The cultural and linguistic transmission of FinSL to future generations of deaf children is secure since the government sponsors a national scheme of free instruction in FinSL to hearing parents of deaf children. It is estimated that 95 per cent of deaf children in Finland are born to hearing parents (FAD 1999a).

It is safe to state that such an infrastructure is virtually non-existent in Ireland. This lack of understanding is reflected in a clause inserted in the Education Act whereby the state is expected to provide education to deaf children through 'Irish sign language or other sign languages' (Ireland 1999). The Model School for the Deaf Project set up a pre-school provision for deaf children and its leading principles are firmly within the bilingual philosophy (Irish Deaf Journal 2003). Bilingualism has not been embraced by those who direct education in Ireland despite the efforts of the IDS and the Model School for the Deaf to host information seminars (*ibid*). Compared to the Finnish situation, it seems it will be a number of years before Ireland can match the Finnish infrastructure or have ISL established as a university subject.

Literacy

In 1988, a survey was carried out to ascertain the reading level of deaf children in Finland. Like an Irish survey of 1991 (James and O'Neill 1991), the Finnish survey found that the reading skills of an average 15-year-old Deaf child corresponded to that of an 8-year-old hearing child (Hakkarainen 1988). This study was conducted before any substantive implementation of bilingualism occurred and was carried out even where signed Finnish was regularly used (FAD 1994). However, subsequent surveys, carried out after the introduction of bilingual education, indicate remarkable improvements on the 1988 survey. The improvements are exemplified in the literacy standard of deaf children having moved towards the national average and in the rising numbers of Deaf students entering third level education (*ibid*). The authors of these surveys identified a number of reasons for these improvements, such as the early language acquisition of FinSL by deaf children at home and the re-designated status of spoken Finnish as a foreign language in Deaf schools (*ibid*).

Comparatively, the Irish experience is similar to that reported in the 1988 Finnish survey but there has been no subsequent investigation into literacy levels of Irish deaf children. Moreover, up to the year 2000 no urgent action was undertaken to alleviate the literacy problems identified in the James and O'Neill (1991) survey. Recognising the literacy crisis within the Deaf community, the Department of Education and Science agreed to fund a five-year project aiming to build up a tutorial infrastructure for those who need to develop and improve their literacy skills (Irish Deaf Journal 2000).

Social services

It is worth mentioning that Finnish social policy responses have made considerable improvements in the services available to Deaf people. There are, for example, two full-time interpreting training centres, which ensure a regular supply of qualified FinSL interpreters. In addition, there are 20 interpreter referral centres throughout Finland. There are 24 salaried interpreters with many more freelance interpreters filling in the gaps (FAD 1997). Currently, two ambitious initiatives are under way to establish long distance interpreting services operated by a

video-conferencing facility (FAD 2000).

By contrast, in Ireland there is only one agency handling interpreting assignments. I know of no salaried interpreter, while a small pool of interpreters are available to do assignments on a freelance basis (Irish Sign Link 2000). Since two one-off training courses for interpreters were held in this country, the campaign to set up a permanent centre for this purpose was launched by the Irish Deaf Society in the early 1990s and was intensively lobbied for in the late 1990s. This campaign culminated in the announcement to fund a Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College, Dublin, in June 2000 (Irish Deaf Journal 2000). The numbers of interpreters and ISL tutors are expected to increase in the years ahead.

On Finnish television, five-minute long news bulletins are transmitted daily through the medium of FinSL. A weekly programme, focussing on the Deaf community in Finland, is transmitted on Saturdays. With government financial support, the Finnish Association of the Deaf produces, on average, fourteen videotapes a year, a copy of which is sent to Deaf people throughout the country. The videos contain bulletins of important news, current affairs and discussion about cultural and social life in Finland. The presentation is given entirely in FinSL. Recently, the national broadcaster appointed a Deaf editor to manage the daily 'News in Sign Language' programmes (FAD 1997).

In comparison, Ireland has a daily two-minute long news bulletin transmitted on television through ISL. In addition, it has a total of six hours a year devoted to the TV programme 'Hands On' which addresses Deaf community issues. There is no comparable video scheme or Deaf editor in this country. A survey on socio-economic conditions faced by Deaf people suggests that the recent economic successes in Ireland have not been passed on to benefit the Deaf community (Conama and Grehan 2002; Poverty Today 2002).

Policy participation

The Deaf community in Finland have participated at state level in terms of formulating language and communication policies towards the Deaf community. This participation is guided by two principles: that FinSL is the language of the Deaf community and that the Deaf community is regarded as a cultural and linguistic minority. Official recognition of

166 FinSL and the establishment of the Finnish Sign Language Board are clear results of this policy-making participation. The Board contains a number of Deaf persons working with civil servants to identify and implement the necessary measures to promote and uphold the status of FinSL in Finnish society (FAD 1999a). This is only one example of representatives of the Deaf community and the state working together. There are others. In 1997, for example, a special working group, which included a number of Deaf representatives, investigated the rights of those who use sign language, and published a report. The group was established under the aegis of the Finnish Ministry of Justice, exemplifying the extent of participation in the consultative process by Deaf people. The report identified the main obstacles to those who want to use FinSL comprehensively and offered a number of proposals to eliminate these obstacles (Finnish Working Group 1997).

There is a stark difference between the two countries in the extent to which control over projects is entrusted to Deaf people. Control of the employment project to train Deaf career guidance counsellors, and funded by the European Social Fund, for example, was entrusted to the Finnish Association of the Deaf (FAD 1999a). This reflects the confidence and belief of the Finnish state and the EU in the ability of FAD to administer such a project on behalf of its sponsors. In Ireland, a similar application by the Irish Deaf Society was rejected in favour of an application by a consortium of paternalistic service providers, which subsequently employed two hearing career guidance counsellors to cater specifically for Deaf job seekers (Irish Deaf Society 2000).

The examples of the empowerment of Deaf people in real terms are striking, especially since Finland has only recently recovered from the deep economic recession of the early 1990s. It illustrates that the civil rights of Deaf people are both respected and recognised and that their needs continue to be met by different services regardless of Finland's priorities for economic restructuring and recovery. The Irish experience is different and two case studies of two specific policy issues—education for the Deaf and access to broadcasting (Conama 2002; Conama and Grehan 2002) have demonstrated the serious marginalisation of Irish Deaf people. The research found that consultation with Deaf people was of a minimal and superficial nature and therefore they had no real input into policy-making. Given the importance of these issues to the

Deaf community, it is fair to expect that empowerment of Deaf people to participate in policy-making processes is almost non-existent. 167

Conclusions

It has to be stressed that the task of comparing the Finnish and Irish Deaf communities is not easy given their cultural and social differences. Nevertheless, the 'import-mirror' approach enables us to evaluate the rate of progress in Ireland. The 'import-mirror' approach also helps us to place Irish social policy responses in an international context.

Finland was chosen because of its similarity to Ireland in key respects. Using the Esping-Andersen model of welfare regimes, it becomes clear that social policy responses to the needs of the Deaf communities are microcosms of national social and economic practices. The Finnish response to the Deaf community bears a strong resemblance to the social democratic model in which stronger state intervention encourages the empowerment of Deaf people to take control of their destiny. In the Irish case, the picture shows a piecemeal and uncoordinated approach to the demands of the Deaf community, a liberal social policy attitude of weaker commitment to egalitarian ideas, and reluctance on the part of the state to intervene on behalf of minorities.

There are some similarities in the historical experiences of the Irish and Finnish Deaf communities. Both have witnessed a long domination of oralism in the education of deaf children, a domination that has left a lasting mark on both communities. Since the 1980s, the experience of both communities began to diverge as the Finns embarked on a positive and democratic approach to development. While the Irish experience has been characterised by slow progress, there have been some positive developments such as the establishment of a representative Deaf organisation, the Irish Deaf Society, and once off, beneficial interpreting and Deaf tutor training courses.

However, things have changed quite dramatically since 2000, undoubtedly helped by a buoyant economy and changes in attitudes towards disabled people in general. Given the persistent campaigning by the Irish Deaf Society, the state eventually agreed to fund a Centre for Deaf Studies and a literacy programme for Deaf people. It also sanctioned the setting up of a bilingual pre-school through the Model School for the Deaf Project and initiated a scheme to have ISL taught to

168 families in their home environments. Moreover, a number of projects aimed at advocacy and literacy are funded by government departments and administered through the Irish Deaf Society (Irish Deaf Journal 2000, 2001, 2003).

The Finnish Deaf community has acted in a cohesive way and has operated a progressive strategy through its representative organisation, the Finnish Association of the Deaf. The strategy involved three policy strands—language policy, education policy and communication policy. The first policy was very successful, and its crowning achievement was state recognition of FinSL and the establishment of the Finnish Sign Language Board. The outcomes in relation to the second strand have been somewhat mixed, since the lack of trained Deaf teachers and the reluctance of hearing teachers to embrace bilingualism hinders full development. However, it must be stressed that the substantive implementation of bilingualism is vindicated by the improvements in literacy levels of deaf children. It is as yet too early to evaluate the third strand, communication policy. Several innovative projects are currently under way aimed at developing services in relation to communication.

In contrast, until relatively recently, Irish Deaf people had developed no clear strategy. Such lack of progress can be explained by referring to the social and cultural conditions of the time. Paternalistic organisations were dominant in providing services and the attitudes arising from this dominance made it difficult for Deaf people to develop alternative approaches. However, with changing social and political circumstances, Ireland may belatedly be able to implement a proactive approach to social policy-making.

We have seen positive and progressive measures introduced to improve the socio-economic status of Deaf people in Finland. Most of the initiatives were based on linguistic and cultural perspectives. The explicit acknowledgement of the Deaf community as a linguistic and cultural minority is identified as an important social and political value. It is clear that lessons can be learnt from the Finnish situation, notably that empowerment of the Deaf community and their participation in policy making are crucial in alleviating the dismal socio-economic situation of many Irish Deaf people.

Notes

1. The Finnish Association of the Deaf forwarded a number of documents and reports, including a report submitted to UNESCO, in a response to my list of questions.

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