

DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE EYES OF THE DEAF IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS IN QUEZON, PHILIPPINES

*Ashley M.
Venerable
AsianNGO*

*Rosario V. Tatlonghari (rvtatlonghari@devcom.edu.ph)
College of Development Communication, University of the
Philippines*

Abstract

There are around 360 million people with hearing loss worldwide according to 2014 report of the World Health Organization (WHO), but only few researchers have studied this particular population of people with special needs. This study fills important gaps in the literature about non-Western deaf communities. Amid endeavors on their development through special education, there had been few efforts that aimed to surface their own perspectives (and consequently, hear their “voices”) on development. This study identified how college deaf students of Bartimaeus Center for Alternative Learning in Quezon, Philippines view development using visual communication techniques. Complete enumeration was employed. The Constructivist Theory of Perception guided the study, which states that past experiences and stored information influence perception. Thematic analysis generated these development themes: social development; pleasant environment; interpersonal relationships; availability of resources; employment; infrastructure development; values; and peace and security. Using the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) development indicators on inclusive growth, findings showed the deaf students’ views on development were similar from the development indicators of the government. The only exception was the perception of development as having good interpersonal relationships, which is important for deaf people in their development, but not included in the NEDA’s indicators. This points to the need of eliciting their perspectives on matters affecting them as they have the capacity to say something of utmost significance. Visual communication techniques can be used as sites for such meaningful responses and to listen to their valuable ideas.

Keywords: deaf; development; perception; development indicators; visual communication

Introduction

There are two distinct perspectives on deafness, which define how deaf persons are treated and their identity – the medical model and the cultural model (Groves, 2008). Batir (2008), in a historical overview of education for the deaf, mute, and blind children, recognizes the need for educating the deaf, for being deprived of education makes them excluded from the society. It was only in 1440s when the first recorded deaf individual learned reading and writing, paving the way for developments in special education among the deaf people.

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) as cited by GDC, estimates that about 66% of deaf people live in developing countries. In 2009, it has been reported that there is a high incidence of deafness in the Philippines, with two to three per 1000 Filipinos being deaf. With around 360 million people with disabling hearing loss worldwide according to 2014 report of World Health Organization (WHO), it is notable that only few researchers have studied this large population with special needs.

Much of the studies about the deaf have been focusing on their medical conditions (e.g., new discoveries on how to cure and improve their hearing). There were few researches however, that examined their lives. These included ethnicity and ethics (Lane, 2005), the relationship between the deaf and society (Lee, 2012), deafness within social identities (Skelton and Valentine, 2003), educational analysis of deaf students (Bat-Chava, 1999), family dynamics of deaf children (Broussard, 2005), and media portrayal of deafness (Avon, 2006). However, the bulk of the present literature is mostly Western.

Keating (2003) examined social relations between the deaf and hearing students at a public elementary system, and suggested that the feeling of isolation among the deaf can change if non-verbal communication is emphasized. Bat-Chava (1999) studied about the struggles with language skills, especially written English of hearing-impaired students. These studies point to the prevailing problem of isolation/exclusion of the deaf and their struggles fitting in within the verbal world of the non-hearing impaired people. Lee (2012) forwards the idea of “deaf spaces,” which act as “places for transmission of information, safe areas to learn and use sign language, and sites of network and community development among other deaf people”. This is in line with the concept of the deaf community as a “cultural linguistic minority,” according to the cultural model.

A study assessed the needs of deaf teens and how these needs must be satisfied so they can be well adjusted in society. “Social adjustment” means “a harmonious relationship with environment involving the ability to satisfy most of one’s needs, on the basis of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.” It was suggested that the government’s focus be more on stimulating the public’s awareness on special education and the need of education for the special children especially in the rural areas (Nadir, et al., 2006).

In the University of the Philippines Los Baños, College of Development Communication, the very few studies on the deaf were concerned with effectiveness of instruction media (Policar, 2007), meanings of secondary special education constructed in secondary classroom experiences (Agor, 2009), interactions mediated by signs and symbols (Abustan, 2009), nature of interpersonal communication among students with disabilities and regular students in an inclusion class (de Ocampo, 2012), and a textual analysis of articles about the deaf (Bayan, 2010). Literature suggests that all endeavors focus on their

development through special education. However, there had been few efforts that aimed to surface their own perspectives (and consequently, hear their “voices”) on development; hence, making this study significant.

This study fills important research gaps about non-Western deaf communities, providing deeper understanding of them being a member of “linguistic minority” in a developing country. It can contribute to the body of knowledge on listening to the deaf, as they would always have significant ideas to share, especially on matters directed to, or affecting them.

There have been vast improvements internationally about the status of people with disabilities in society. Worldwide, countries review their development programs and services for people with disabilities, to ensure their inclusion in all sectors of society, in the hope of enhancing opportunities for them to create a better way of living (International Labour Organization, 2009). The Philippines’ development agenda is anchored on inclusive growth. To realize this, people with disabilities must be involved in all aspects of development, as they can impart important contributions in society.

This research, which can be considered a listening project, seeks to understand the views of development among deaf people in a tertiary institution in the Philippines, with the hope that such views can serve as springboard in charting their own development. Taking the example of recent events such as the “Deaf President Now!” campaign at Gallaudet University in 1988, these have empowered people who are deaf and convinced them they can accomplish much politically when they speak as one (Jankowski, 1997, as cited by Critchfield, 2002).

Theoretical framework

The Constructivist Theory of Perception proposed by Richard Gregory, one of the most influential perception theorists, guides this study. He believes that “perception involves a lot of hypothesis testing to make sense of the information presented to the sense organs.” He argues that the perceptual process involves making inferences about the world. In this process, he or she makes an intelligent guess about what he or she perceives, where knowledge and past experiences contribute significantly.

According to McLeod (2007), Gregory assumes that about 90% of the stimulus is lost when information comes into the eye and travels to the brain. In this case, the brain has to guess what has been seen through stored information and past experiences. As the sensory receptors receive information from the environment, the data is then combined with previously stored information about the world, which has been built up as a result of experience.

In discussing the Constructivist Theory of Perception, Turvey (1972) said that senses could also be “generative.” He concluded that “perceiving and imaging engage the same neural apparatus, at least at some level, and that memory sustaining operations (rehearsals) and acts of remembering (imaging) are carried out within the perceptual system mostly related to the memory material.”

Methods

This study used thematic analysis to determine the perceptions of development among deaf students of Bartimaeus Center for Alternative Learning, a post-secondary school for people with special needs in rural Philippines. The school caters to students within a major region in the Philippines, which includes three provinces and five municipalities. The participants of this study consisted of all the deaf students in tertiary level who were taking computer courses. Since they were in their post-secondary years, ages of the participants varied significantly. The main research goals were to identify and understand the themes that arise from the individual perceptions of the students.

For the first phase of the study, photo elicitation technique was used. The participants were asked to evaluate the ten photos pre-selected by the researcher and her adviser based from their learning of the concept of development as student and teacher of development communication, respectively. From the photos shown, they were asked if the photos depict development or not, and to provide the reasons behind their statements. The teacher-interpreter was there to engage the respondents in their own sign language and to facilitate better communication between them and the researcher. After the photo elicitation process, another visual communication technique was used. The students were made to draw something that represented development and to explain their drawings. The process that transpired here could be explained by one of Turvey's (1972) ideas: the use of nouns such as imaging (e.g., to draw) prompts one to a particular object or scene which is recalled or constructed like a real object or scene as viewed and experienced by the receiver. This process hoped to surface what they could not communicate through words in the first stage. Responses were then thematically analyzed through coding. Themes generated were compared with the national indicators in the Philippines' development agenda.

Indicators of Development

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA, 2011) released the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) for the year 2011-2016, which shows the critical indicators of development in the Philippines. The Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016 focuses on the achievement of inclusive growth—defined as economic expansion that benefits all levels of society—through employment generation and poverty reduction, with a focus on good governance and anticorruption measures (ADB, 2012).

Key sectors and development indicators:

- 1) *Macroeconomic Policy* - high and sustained economic growth, enhanced labour market conditions conducive to growth, sustainable fiscal sector, reduced poverty incidence, and equalized development opportunities.
- 2) *Competitive Industry and Services Systems* - productivity and protection of consumer welfare.
- 3) *Competitive and Sustainable Agriculture and Fisheries Sector* - food security, incomes in agriculture and fishery sector, sector resilience to climate change, growth in agriculture and fishery sector, and productivity and production.
- 4) *Accelerating Infrastructure Development* - development of infrastructures in terms of transport, water, energy, information and communications technology, social infrastructures and crosscutting indicators.
- 5) *Towards a Dynamic and Resilient Financial Sector* - resilient and inclusive financial system.

- 6) *Good Governance and the Rule of Law* - effective and transparent governance and access to justice.
- 7) *Social Development* - health, nutrition, and population management, education training and culture, housing and development, social protection and access to asset reform.
- 8) *Peace and Security* - armed conflict being brought to a permanent and peaceful closure, and safe environment.
- 9) *Conservation, Protection and Rehabilitation of the Environment and Natural Resources towards Sustainable Development* - conservation, protection and rehabilitation of natural resources; improved environmental quality for a cleaner and healthier environment, reduced air pollution in Metro Manila and other major urban centers; reduced water pollution; improved water generated and disposal, and improved adaptive capacities of human communities resulting in the resilience of natural systems.

Photo elicitation technique

Because the deaf lose their sense of hearing, other senses become more functional. This includes the sense of seeing, thus, this study utilizes the importance of visual means in effectively communicating with deaf people.

Picker (2013) reviewed the current literature on visualization and mental imagery over the past few decades, which showed the ability to visualize, is a key component to reading comprehension, citing NRP (2000) and Johnson-Glenberg (2000). Mental imagery training was found to improve the deaf's ability to recall information and answer questions about the story. This supports the reason for employing photo-elicitation technique and drawings as data gathering methods. Vilorio (2006) suggested that photographs could influence people's attitudes and beliefs towards certain phenomena. Just like any other communication medium, photographs have advantages and limitations. It encourages critical thinking and attention since it stresses key ideas. Galvez (2009) used photo elicitation technique in her study. She aimed to determine how poverty was depicted in newspaper photos and the perceptions of the rural and urban poor towards these depictions of the poor in the photos. Citing Frohman (2005) who also used photo elicitation, the method is said to be moving the power from the researcher to the respondent. It is because the respondent has the freedom to choose the significant and meaningful elements in the photos.

Van Aken, et al (2010) claimed that using the technique provides the researcher with four advantages: (1) photos help participants to dig deep into their mind and get tacit knowledge from them; (2) it can give deeper information than other techniques; (3) it may help reduce the barriers between the researcher and the participant, and (4) it can empower the participants in such a way that they can be engaged in different activities e.g., planning for development. Citing Collier (1957), they said that photo elicitation is usually done by insertion of images in interviews. With this method, the data gathering usually lasts longer and is more focused than other methods. It can produce information that lie in the subconscious mind of the participant and cannot be gained through verbal interviewing. Turvey (1972) explained this as distinctions between tacit and explicit knowledge, referring to the work of Polanyi (1964, 1966).

Use of Drawings

This is related to the developmental-existential affirmative-formulative therapy with clients with hearing loss advocated by Wax (1999), which is a culturally affirmative personal psychology model focusing on client self-awareness and self-exploration (Fusick, 2008). Byndom (2012), citing Glickman and Harvey (2008) and Munro, et al. (2008), presented narrative therapy that also includes the use of drawings as one technique, which reflects the visual aspects of deaf culture and may be more linguistically appropriate for the deaf.

Results and Discussion

From their perceptions elicited from the photos and their drawings, the researcher found similar views on development, although differences were also noted. These similarities became the basis of their perceptions of development. The following were the themes found in the study:

Development as social development

This is the most prominent theme from the data gathered. ‘Social development’ was coined in the 1960s (Sachs, 1994). Erbick et al. (2010) suggested the importance of including the human element when assessing development. For the student-participants, improving one’s quality of life was development. Their drawings indicated being able to live in a larger and concrete house. They also labelled their drawings with the words “poor” and “rich” which showed that they linked development with socio-economic status in society. A participant even said that happiness depended on one’s social status. Poverty, like living in the slums, was associated with sadness, and affluence was equated with happiness. Consequently, a family with scant resources was seen as underdevelopment. Here, the constructivist view of perception indicates that “perceptual experience of something corresponds to the act of synthesizing something,” that is, “a person who is seeing and hearing things that are not present is experiencing his own acts of synthesis (Turvey, 1972).

Health, nutrition, population management (not too many children), education and housing emerged as major themes from the drawings – areas in social development in the Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016) by NEDA. The Philippine Strategy on Sustainable Development likewise presents a multi-dimensional framework of development: social, economic and environmental (Florece, et. al, n.d.) In the photos, most of the students still considered the image of a poor person as development, as long as the person was “healthy” and “strong”. On the other hand, they labelled it underdevelopment when someone looked weak, thin, and poor. Furthermore, most of the students’ drawings depicted concrete houses which they thought of as signs of development. Slum areas in the photos were not considered development because of perceptual associations with congestion and no permanency of settlements. Development was also equated with education, particularly being able to graduate in college.

Rist (2010), citing Teresa Hayter (2005), said that in the 1960s, there was actually little attempt to define development. Instead, the assumption was that “development, whatever it was, could lead to improvement in the situation of poor people.” The perceptions that emerged from this study are consistent with such assumption.

Development as enjoyment of a liveable environment

For the student-participants, development meant having a clean environment. Here, the relationships of perceptual systems and the visual one were involved, with neural spatial representations (Turvey, 1972). When shown a clean river, it was development for them; but when they saw water buffaloes in the river – a common sight in the rural areas – it was no longer development.

As to their drawings, there were trees, plants, and seas, which showed the nature-development link in their perceptions. For them, development was being able to pursue urbanization without disrupting the environment. This indicates that they may not have the conceptual box of “sustainable development,” but their views reflect its essence: an approach permitting “improvements in the quality of life at a lower intensity resource use,” thereby leaving behind resources for future generations (Monasinghe and Swart, 2005).

This generated theme is along the conservation, rehabilitation and protection of the environment and natural resources in the Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016). The 1980 World Conservation Strategy emphasized that humanity has no future unless nature and natural resources are conserved (IUCN, UNEP, WWF, 1991).

Development as engagement in interpersonal relationships

Having a “happy family” seemed to be of importance among the respondents. A picture of a family living a “hard life” was interpreted otherwise. When shown an image of a poor family, they still considered it as development because all the family members were smiling which they perceived as happy family. One participant even noted the closeness of the family members to one another, with embraces showing love and affection. Another participant drew a community where the people could live and stay and do whatever they want to do, which meant development as being able to live happily and enjoying freedom. According to Sen (as cited by Erbick, et al, 2010), “development is the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy”; that is, being free is being able to act in accordance to one’s own will with no restrictions from the nature of his situation or the will of others.”

Harmonious interpersonal relationships may not be in the Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016) by NEDA, but these are important for deaf people in their development. This points to the need of eliciting their perspectives on matters affecting them. Meena (1994) states that social relationships between individuals and communities could either promote or constrain sustainable development.

Development as availability of resources

The student-participants perceived development as having ample resources for need satisfaction. Seers (1997, as cited in Ortega, 2010) cited human’s fulfilment of needs and necessities as one of the three indicators of development. Their view was that accessibility of basic needs for public use and consumption meant development. Relating this with the Philippine Development Plan (NEDA, 2011-2016), this is part of the increased productivity thrusts that would lead to the availability of resources to people. The concept of resource availability can also be equated with resources being managed sustainably. Communities and individuals’ access to resources is necessary for livelihood (IUCN, et. al, 1991).

Development as employment

The prevailing perception among them was that development meant having a source of income, having a job. Hard life usually associated to poverty was still considered development as long as the poor were employed, which in turn would provide them money for survival. However, there was somewhat conflicting thought of underdevelopment when someone had a tough job, e.g., being a construction worker was not development.

Despite a strong economic rebound in 2010, progress in the country has remained slow in reducing poverty and generating jobs. (ADB, 2012). Employment is part of the competitive industry and services sector of the Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016). In the Second Development Decade when there was a paradigm shift from economic to humanistic development, indicators for development included not only employment per se, but “meaningful employment” (Ongkiko and Flor, 2008). This can somehow explain the dimensions of meaning of employment among the student-participants; employment may be considered development but it should not maintain one’s dignity.

Development as infrastructure development

Infrastructure development was one of the most recurring indicators of development from the data gathered. It was evident through the buildings, highways, and bridges that were present in their drawings. Photos of infrastructure improved or built were viewed as development while those that looked weak and substandard were seen as underdevelopment. Some also drew technological advances such as cellular phones and computers. Therefore, it may be surmised that the views of infrastructure development were associated with technological innovation. According to Florece, et. al (n.d.), the development potential is a function of the present state of technology. Modernization and industrialization also emerged as major themes in a study of views on development of informal settlers relocated to Laguna (Ortega, 2010).

The above views are concurrent with the infrastructure development component in the Philippine Development Plan (NEDA, 2011-2016), which aims to enhance the quality, adequacy and accessibility of the infrastructure facilities and services in terms of transport, water, energy, and information and communications technology. The Rural Productivity Enhancement Sector Project of the Asian Development Bank has helped improve socio-economic conditions in poor rural areas through the construction and rehabilitation of roads (ADB, 2012), which proves how building infrastructure could lead to development.

Development as having positive values

Filipinos are known for being hospitable and family-oriented. The deaf students saw development in the positive traits of welcoming visitors, paying respect to the elderly or to persons in high social/political positions, and being a loving family member. It has been established earlier that the students regarded love reigning in the family as development. In addition, they thought that one who was responsible enough to do his or her job properly, despite the difficulties, was development.

Development in terms of proper values was not included in the Philippine Development Plan indicators. In a reference material on development communication, however, the underdevelopment problem could be analysed using the values paradigm, one of the four paradigms used by Ongkiko and Flor (2008) in analysing underdevelopment. The paradigm

assumes that positive values are associated with development. This only highlights that the deaf do have significant ideas about development.

Development as attainment of peace and security

For the participants, development meant effective governance, exemplified by government officials personally talking to people. ADB (2012) declares that good governance and sound public sector management matter to development. In fact, it identifies governance as a key driver of change. Furthermore, development according to the respondents means having peace amongst the Muslims and the government. This was elicited from the photo shown to them depicting a Philippine senator and a leader of an indigenous tribe, which they thought of as Muslim. There were also responses on unsafe areas being considered underdevelopment. The Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016) of NEDA included good governance, peace and security in the indicators of development. According to Meena (1994), conflict, war and tensions constrain efforts to promote sustainable development. Public safety was also among the comprehensive measures of development in the Social Indicators Project of the Philippine government in the past (Ongkiko and Flor, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Development has many meanings. How the term is perceived depends on one's view of the world on the basis of his experiences. To Sachs (1994), it is a way of thinking.

Within the premises of the Constructivist theory of perception, the views of the deaf on development bear striking similarities to how the government determines development in terms of indicators per development area/sector. Of the eight thematic categories generated from the study, seven could be classified under the critical indicators set by the Philippine Development Plan (2011-2016) of NEDA. Good interpersonal relationships and positive values, however, are not among these development indicators, which reveal the importance placed by the deaf on social development.

Sign language is a must for research among deaf people to facilitate effective communication and eliciting relevant responses. Use of oral and written communication methods should only be used to a limited extent toward more inclusive research methods. Visual communication techniques can be used as sites for meaningful responses and to listen to their valuable ideas. These are deaf spaces (Lee, 2012) that can be venues for fruitful interactions and address the issues of social isolation and discrimination. Perception of development among deaf students in other school levels can also yield interesting perspectives, as well as studies comparing perceptions and aspirations of development between deaf students and out-of-school youth.

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