

Keynote Speech

“Improving Deafness Education in the Philippines”

Inauguration of Training Course for Teachers of the Hearing Impaired, at the University of the Philippines, College of Education

by Kurt Bangert

I consider it a privilege to have been invited to join in the opening program of this Short-Term Training for Teachers of the Hearing Impaired.

It may appear odd to invite the Representative of a Mission to the Blind to speak at the opening of a course dealing with hearing impairment. But this is obviously a recognition of the fact that CBM has not limited its role to blindness but has always been interested in deafness as well. CBM is probably the only international blindness agency which also has a mandate for deafness. In fact, I firmly believe there is an urgency for CBM to focus more on deafness issues.

In 1988, on my second visit to the Philippines, I requested an American friend living in this country, to show me Smoky Mountain. That person was a teacher of the deaf. When we proceeded into the slum area, the teacher, driven by her professional interests, walked up to a house to make an inquiry in Tagalog: “Do you know of any deaf person in this community?” she asked. After a some exchange of words and a shuffle inside the hut, there emerged a five-year old deaf girl.

Of course, finding a deaf child at the first and only house we approached was a co-incidence, for not every house had a deaf child. But that co-incidence was helped along by a deafness rate far higher than it needed to be. We could not determine the cause of the girl’s deafness, and much of the deafness occurring today remains unexplained in terms of what might have caused it. I assume that most cases of deafness are potentially avoidable. In the case of my 1988 experience, the situation was aggravated by the fact that the girl had never undergone audiological testing and had received no special service whatsoever. It was simply there in the house wondering what life would have, or rather would *not* have, in store for her.

That experience seven years back brought home to me the insight that much needed to be done in the Philippines in terms of prevention of deafness as well as education and rehabilitation of the hearing impaired.

There has been some progress in the educational field since 1988, but to my knowledge very little has been done in the area of prevention. And in some cases, very little *can* be done to prevent deafness.

A good number of deafness cases are hereditary. The onset of deafness in these cases is sometimes prenatal, sometimes after birth. If we wish to reduce avoidable deafness, then the following is needed:

1. Increased awareness amongst the population about the causes of deafness such as: hereditary deafness and acquired deafness through rubella, meningitis, mumps, Otitis media, ototoxic drugs, and others.

2. Improved diagnostic services such as: primary ear care, simple diagnostic techniques, early referral to specialists.

3. Preventive measures such as: genetic consultation, vaccination (rubella), no application of ototoxic drugs, etc.

4. Special attention to high-risk children to avoid sensorial/neural hearing loss: children of premature birth, those receiving ototoxic drugs, those infected by rubella or CMV, and those with a history of deafness in the family.

According to existing surveys in the Philippines, the prevalence rate of hearing impairments (children and adults) is 1,03% of the total population, which would amount to 670,000 hearing-impaired persons in this country. The number of those under 18 has been estimated to be 184,000 (mild to severe). All of them could benefit from special services. Less than 3,000 hearing-impaired children are currently enrolled in schools. They represent less than 2% of those children requiring services.

While we may not be able, in the Philippines, to establish services equal to those offered in the fully industrialized countries, it is possible to improve the services for the education and rehabilitation of children and adults with hearing impairments in this country. In many cases what is needed is goodwill, determination, training, and more effective policy making. Where funding is a problem, that can be solved in many cases.

I would like to list here some of the areas in which CBM feels that improvements are needed and possible:

1. Regular school teachers should learn more about disabilities in general, and about deafness issues in particular.
2. In-service and pre-service training should be provided for deaf education teachers and support staff to generally improve the education for deaf children.
3. Pre-school education should be provided for children as soon as they are identified as hearing impaired.
4. In the cities, day-care kindergartens for deaf pre-schoolers with residual hearing should be established where they learn to speak and lip-read.
5. The number of DECS special education units for deaf pupils in regular schools should be increased.
6. A nation-wide "deafness awareness" campaign should be considered.
7. A network with barangay health workers should be developed for the prevention of the causes of deafness.
8. Simple diagnostic devices should be introduced and widespread screening of school children should be conducted to detect medical problems leading to deafness.
9. These simple tests can be corroborated or falsified by regional audiological clinics.
10. There is a need to develop and print suitable textbooks and workbooks for use at schools and special units.
11. There might be a need for a manual of self-instruction for deafness teachers and/or volunteers.
12. Assistive devices such as hearing aids need to be more readily available at affordable cost and with sufficient training in their use.
13. Regional resource persons and trainers of trainers need to be trained.

14. Total communication and bilingualism ought to be developed as the method of choice in deaf education.
15. Resource referral centers should be established for the benefit of CBR programs which often neglect deaf persons.
16. The Filipino Sign Language needs to be further standardized.
17. The quality of interpreters needs to be improved, and additional interpreters must be trained.
18. A national committee on deafness should be established and an annual conference on deafness could be considered.
19. A research agenda in the area of deaf education ought to be developed.
20. The opportunities for higher education of gifted deaf graduates should be provided.
21. More attention should be given to the vocational training of deaf people, either in regular training centers designed for the non-disabled and/or in special programs specifically provided for the deaf.
22. The employment of hearing-impaired workers should be promoted. There is a need for a registry of deaf persons as well as a placement and employment office for disabled persons.

Not all of these 22 suggestions can immediately be put into practice, but a decided and concerted effort needs to be made as soon as possible if the deaf community should be mature participants in Filipino society of the 21st century.

I want to take this opportunity to also say something about cochlear implants: This is a sophisticated and very expensive operation that in our view is unsuitable for the Philippines because a) it helps only very rich patients, b) it rarely constitutes a 100% cure, c) it is effective only in certain deaf individuals with a special audiological pattern, and d) even in developing countries it is considered a controversial treatment, especially amongst the hearing-impaired community.

When it comes to deafness prevention, education and rehabilitation of the hearing impaired, the Philippines is at a disadvantage: Not only do the many vernaculars and two different national languages (Tagalog and English) make communication difficult, but the remoteness and rural nature of the 7000 islands contribute to the difficulty of preventing deafness and educating the deaf. There are challenges and obstacles, no doubt. But the very fact that this teacher-training course is starting today is an indication of the determination to make a difference. What is needed, is a vision, a willingness, and hard work.

In closing, I want to share this thought with you:

A vision without a task is a dream
A task without a vision is drudgery.
A vision and a task is the hope of the world.

As you begin the course, I wish you success in your teaching and in your learning. You have a task at hand. I wish you a vision that goes beyond the horizon of this course. God bless you, and have a good day.