The Deaf People of Haiti

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Abstract
Negative societal perspectives toward deafness and widespread poverty create a challenging situation for Haitian deaf people. While there is some government protection through legislation, the scarcity of resources and lack of infrastructure has led to the apparent absence of a strongly developed deaf community. Available sources point to the use of American Sign Language (ASL) by the small number of deaf Haitians who are fortunate enough to pursue formal education, with the largest deaf schools based in the cities of Port-au-Prince, Jacmel, and Ferrier. However, it appears that the majority of deaf Haitians have very limited language access. Several non-profit organizations are working to improve the social situation of deaf people in Haiti, with programs ranging from the distribution of hearing aids to increased educational access.

1 Introduction
This report describes findings from research about the deaf community and sign language use in Haiti, using previously-published information found through library/internet research and information gathered through email and telephone interviews with individuals familiar with the Haitian deaf community. After providing a brief overview of Haiti as a country, I discuss disability, sign language, deaf education, organizations and ministries working with the deaf community and deaf social access in a Haitian context.

2 Overview of Haiti
Haiti is located on the western one-third of the island of Hispaniola in the central Caribbean, sharing a border with the Dominican Republic, which occupies the eastern two-thirds of the island. Hispaniola is the second-largest island in the Caribbean, second to Cuba, which lies to the northwest of Haiti. See Figure 1 for a map of Haiti in its geographical context (Lonely Planet 1997).

![Caribbean map](image)

Figure 1. Caribbean map.

The total land area of Haiti is 27,751 square kilometers (10,714 square miles). Out of a total population of approximately nine million people, roughly 33% of the Haitian population are urbanized, while the other 67% live in more rural areas. However, with 700 people per square
mile, even rural areas are heavily populated and, in terms of population density in the Caribbean, Haiti is second only to Barbados (Jacobson 2005). Haiti’s major cities include Port-au-Prince (the capital) and its suburbs, and other large coastal cities, such as Cap Haïtien, Gonaïves, Saint Marc, Les Cayes, and Port-de-Paix. See Figure 2 for a more detailed map of Haiti (CIA World Factbook 2010).

Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and, with a per-capita income between $300 and $425 (USD) per year (Batista 2008; Dupoux, et al. 2006), one of the twenty-five poorest in the world (International Literacy Explorer 2008). According to the CIA World Factbook (2010), 80% of the Haitian population lives under the poverty level and 54% live in abject poverty. Only 6% of Haitians have access to electricity (International Literacy Explorer 2008).

Although French and Haitian Creole are the official languages of Haiti, only the well educated speak French, while various dialects of Haitian Creole are spoken throughout the country. Roughly 95% of the population is black, with the other 5% being comprised of mulattos and whites. Haiti is a very religious country and is well known for its voodoo practices. These cultural practices are mixed with other Christian religious traditions that have been brought to the country. The primary religion in Haiti is Christianity, mostly of Roman Catholic and Protestant varieties. All the religious facets of Haitian life are typically seen as part of a spiritual world to which they pay keen attention; most Haitians practice both Christianity and Voodoo, simultaneously.

3 Disabilities

According to Grinde (1999), many Haitians believe that God will not let bad things happen to a family as long as they live right. If there is a weakness in a family member, it is because of some fault in the family itself. Disabilities are not viewed as just accidents or a result of genetics; instead, they have supernatural overtones that are being played out in the natural world (Jacobson 2005). Disabilities are often seen, especially in less-educated areas, as a punishment or
curse from God, gods, or family spirits. Some Haitians are afraid of people with disabilities because they believe that such a person is contagious or possessed. They may completely avoid interaction or touch in order to keep themselves from contracting the spell or curse. Because of these religious connotations attached to disability, people with disabilities tend to rely solely on international nongovernmental agencies or church organizations for support. Many locally-based churches and organizations are more prone to adopting the general attitude of the culture at large, following the trend that disabled people are to be avoided (Batista 2008).

As a whole, 75% to 80% of the Haitian population has no formal employment, so the majority of the Haitian population relies on small-scale subsistence farming for their livelihood. Because of the frequent natural disasters that pummel this country, many people find it difficult to have enough to eat—let alone support others who may not be able to support themselves. There is a direct connection between poverty levels and associated malnutrition and disability (NetAid 2007; GVCM 2008). Because people with disabilities are already stigmatized by society, it is even more difficult for them to find any type of employment that would meet their daily needs. It is estimated that “98% of people with disabilities are poor” in Haiti (Batista, 2008). However, this is not so different from the general population, where 80% live below the poverty level.

Although the Haitian government has an established disability policy that protects people with disabilities and their general rights, there is no administrative body that ensures their defense. In addition, there are no laws that ensure accessibility for people with disabilities or attempts to raise awareness about disability issues (Michailakis 1997). There are two places reported to have employed deaf people: St. Vincent’s brace shop, where deaf graduates from the St. Vincent School for the Handicapped make leg braces, and the Institut Montfort’s farm, which employs some deaf adults during harvest season (Haig 2008, Mahler 2008).

Most Haitian parents struggle to meet the basic needs of their children; having a child with a disability often requires more resources than families are able to provide. Complicating this, according to Grinde (1999), “it is the weight of the belief, shared by many parents and people in the community, that across the lifespan, many individuals with disabilities have little value and have a bleak future” (p. 76). Although many disabled Haitians want to be independent, parents and families can be overprotective of their special needs and prevent their children from accessing the services that may be available to them. As Jacobson (2005) puts it, “even though they love their children dearly, parents view children with disability as ‘worthless’...(they) may feel that these children cannot do anything and that they must do everything for them” (p. 147). Parents may also be so embarrassed to have a disabled child that they hide them within their home to avoid social stigma for both themselves and their children. Disabled people are often seen as a burden—both to the family and to society in general.

After a parent finds that their child has a disability, there are very few services available to help, and no government-sponsored programs. People with disabilities in Haiti have very limited educational opportunities and are disadvantaged in society. “The majority of children with disabilities remain in the family home, often hidden from neighbors’ eyes. Depending on many factors, including the severity of the disability, the income of the family, and the religious beliefs of the family, some will be neglected or left to die” (Grinde 1999). According to Healing Hands for Haiti (2006), “children born with a disability are usually left at hospitals or abandoned on the street, while others, children and adults acquiring a disability, usually become reclusive.” Because of these abandonments, many orphanages found throughout Haiti are filled with children who have disabilities.
Parents may feel uncomfortable when their disabled child reaches the legal adult age of 18 and may attempt to continue to exert undue control over their children’s lives. According to Grinde (1999), Haitian people believe that the following is true:

“as a baby, a handicapped child gets more attention, but later much less. If you are just handicapped, 80% are nothing. If you are low class and handicapped, there is no chance, you will always be nothing. If you are handicapped, you must beg. Handicapped women are often abused and sleep in the streets. Handicap men beg in the street…they are excluded…they have no access to education or health. They become nothing” (p. 90–91).

While some parents may not encourage their adult children to be independent, social reasons such as these influence their decision to try to protect their child from danger in wider society.

People who live and work among the disabled population believe that it is critical that general society is educated so that disabled people have a fighting chance for social access. They also believe that the country as a whole must be developed so that they can shift their focus past survival of just the most healthy to serving all of society, including those with disabilities. As Grinde (1999) points out, international aid will not solve the present problem: “at some point, change must also occur in the country … disability in Haiti is intertwined with the heritage and history. One would have to change attitudes, not just the environment” (p. 138). Until disabled people are viewed as legitimate human beings, society will not take responsibility for their livelihood.

According to Mahler (2008), children who are deaf have a better chance of being accepted than those with other disabilities. This is due to the fact that deafness is not often recognized by families until later on in the child’s life and parents have already integrated them into their family system. This leads to a greater feeling of connection and responsibility than they would for other children who they might choose to abandon because of more obvious physical differences.

4 Sign language

Exact statistics for the deaf population of Haiti are unknown and the numbers that are available are not consistent. For example, “in 1995, the Ministère de L’Éducation Nationale of Haïti estimated that 11% of the population had a disability, of which 15% (120,000) were children of school age...” (Dupoux et al. 2006) while in 1998, an estimated 7% of the Haitian population had some form of disability, “with half of them occurring in children under 15 years of age” (Pan American Health Organization 2008). According to Soper’s (2008) deaf population estimate, based on a country’s gross domestic product and ensuing health implications, Haiti may have had approximately 28 thousand deaf people in 2000. In comparison, the Ethnologue indicates there may be as many as 93 thousand deaf individuals in Haiti (Lewis 2009). Based on the number of deaf students attending schools, however, the percentage of deaf people per capita seems to be much higher than would be found in countries with higher levels of development. For comparison, Nicaragua (which follows Haiti as the second-poorest country in the Americas) estimates that 10% of their population has enough hearing loss to be considered deaf or hard of hearing (Barreto 2008). If this statistic were applied to Haiti, it would suggest a deaf and hard of hearing population of 900 thousand.

Sign language is not officially recognized by the Haitian government but it is used in at least some of the deaf schools. However, it appears that it is not widely used in the wider deaf community—at least in public. Mahler (2008) indicates that she has never seen deaf adults signing or seen sign language used in public places by children or adults. With no deaf associations or deaf clubs, it is probable that deaf people who do use a sign language learned it at
the schools they attended. Because only the privileged few attend school, it is likely that, while the presence of home signs could be prevalent, especially in rural areas where deaf people have not attended school, a developed sign language is probably used by very few of the Haitian deaf population.

Winkler (2008) indicates that most deaf people arrive at school only with home signs that they have developed with their families and this is probably the most prevalent type of manual communication used by deaf people in Haiti. There does not appear to have been any developed indigenous sign language present in Haiti before American Sign Language (ASL) was brought with the founding of the first deaf school in 1944. ASL is probably used by the majority of the signing deaf population because all known deaf schools and ministries were founded by organizations based in the USA and Canada. In addition, resources that are available in Haiti appear to have come from these two countries. For example, Canadian visitor MacKenzie-Stepner found, after working with “Healing Hands for Haiti,” that Haiti has no Speech Language Pathology (SLP) services in place. After returning from her first trip, she is now preparing for her next trip by writing a manual for other SLP providers who may visit Haiti in the future; she is compiling and creating SLP materials/information and ASL resources, including ASL dictionaries from the Bob Rumble Centre for the Deaf (Angus-Lee 2007). Deaf Missions, based in the USA, visited a deaf school in Haiti and brought with them resources from the USA. Winkler also reports that any volunteers with the Northwest Haiti Christian Deaf Mission (most, if not all, are from the USA) are encouraged to sign during church services and other gatherings that included deaf people and they have no difficulty communicating.

5 Deaf education

Although a reported half of all Haitian children do not attend school (Grinde 1999), Haiti offers three types of educational options for those that do: private schools, public schools, and schools run by international aid organizations. According to Dupoux, et al. (2006), 75% of all primary students and 82% of secondary level students are enrolled in private schools. The government does not exercise much control over the educational system in Haiti—meaning that even public schools are primarily run by private entities. “Less than 10% of the school age population is enrolled in public schools. At the elementary level, only 65% of those eligible for primary education are enrolled in schools, although public education is free from first to sixth grade.” Out of those 65% that begin first grade, only 38 students out of every 1,000 children will graduate from high school. This lack of education is probably directly correlated to the high illiteracy rate in Haiti that lies between 50% and 85% (Global Security 2008; International Literacy Explorer 2008). In addition, because French is used in many secondary schools as the official language of instruction and the majority of Haitian children speak Haitian, many students find it very difficult to succeed educationally—leading to low enrollment in schools as a whole.

The Haitian Constitution states that the first six years of education are compulsory. However, this requirement has never been upheld. This is believed to be due, in part, to many parents in rural areas placing their children with wealthier families in the cities in order to ensure that they have physical provisions. According to Dupoux, et al. (2006:3):

“[In return, these children work from sunrise to sundown at various household chores. At times, they are sent great distances to buy the necessities for the household. Usually, they get ready the school uniforms for the wealthier children their age who attend school, while they stay back to prepare food or clean the house to facilitate the comfort of the sons and daughters of the house as they return from school and attend to their homework. These children can be found even in the houses of the framers of Haïti’s latest Constitution. Obviously, compulsory education would destroy a source of cheap labor in Haïti.”
UNESCO estimates that only 2% of disabled children are enrolled in school (Coram Deo 2008). Because of the high cost of private education, most Haitian children do not have the opportunity for formal education. Less than 1% of the student population was identified as having a disability and were receiving special services to meet their needs. Those that made up this 1% were enrolled in private schools and had parents who could afford to place them in supportive environments (Dupoux, et al. 2006). Schools still report that they have a lack of adequate resources, such as financial backing, equipment, and trained personnel to adequately meet the needs of their students.

Victor A. Vodounou, a teacher trainer, visited Haitian deaf schools in 2005 with coworkers Dr. Frank Brister, a speech therapist, and Mr. Gil Hanke, an audiology professor, who had been visiting Haiti annually since 1995. Vodounou went specifically to see how he could help deaf teachers, teachers of the deaf, and deaf children in Haiti. He found that most teachers do not have the training or skills to effectively teach the many deaf and deaf-blind students in their institutions. During his time in Haiti, he taught both the teachers and the children some sign language and informed the teachers of various techniques to continue teaching sign language to deaf children. He has also identified the need for books of all kinds, including general reading for deaf children, sign-language books, and educational books (Hayden 2006).

See Table 1 for a list of deaf educational centers (schools and deaf classrooms) currently known to be operating in Haiti. Most schools are led by hearing people, but one deaf class, founded by the Northwest Haiti Christian Mission in St. Louis-du-Nord, is taught by two deaf teachers (Winkler 2008). For each school included in the table, information is provided whenever known about the institution’s location, founding date, number of students, whether it is a deaf-only institution or includes other disabilities, the grade levels available, and the primary contact for the school. In addition, the school’s communication philosophy is indicated where known, with “TC” representing a total communication philosophy that incorporates any type of language use that works, usually including both speech and sign language. When the location where the sign language came from is known, it is indicated in Table 1. Only ASL and, possibly, Jamaican Sign Language (JSL) was found in Haitian schools. Question marks indicate areas where no specific information was found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>School details</th>
<th>Grades available</th>
<th>Primary contact</th>
<th>Communication philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| St. Vincent School for the Handicapped (Ecole St. Vincent School for the Handicapped) | Port-au-Prince 119 Rue Paul VI (close to government buildings and palace) | Multiple disabilities, including deaf students.  
  100+ deaf students out of 400+ total.  
  Founded 1944. | Elementary and secondary education (ages infant–18 years) | Episcopal Order of the Sisters of St. Margaret; Director: Father Pere Leon Sadoni | TC                                                       |
| Institut Montfort pour Enfants Sours            | Port-au-Prince Saint Marc Lavaud  | Deaf and deaf-blind only.  
  600+ students.  
  Founded 1957. | Nursery–high school; vocational training (ages 3–20) | Sister Mona. Mrs. Marie Christine. | TC (SL from USA)                                       |
### Table 2. Deaf educational centers (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Center Name</th>
<th>City/Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Directors/Teachers</th>
<th>SL Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haitian Christian Center for the Deaf (HCCD) (Centre Haitien Chretien Pour les Sourds – C.H.C.S)</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Deaf only. • Founded 1976 • 200+ students.</td>
<td>Kindergarten; vocational training</td>
<td>George and Christine Braidwood</td>
<td>TC (SL from Jamaica/USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haitian Christian School for the Deaf</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Deaf only</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Steve and Judy Revis</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoration Christian School</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince (Delmas)</td>
<td>School for those with disabilities and extreme poverty (deaf students?)</td>
<td>Kindergarten–5</td>
<td>(Coram Deo International)</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jerusalem Deaf School of Mirebalais</td>
<td>Mirebalais</td>
<td>Deaf only • (4 teachers)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Pastor Kenold Chrispin (Global Vision Citadelle Ministries)</td>
<td>TC (SL from USA – visited in 2008 by Deaf Missions, USA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAZAPA School at the Jacmel Center</td>
<td>Jacmel (Founded in 1987)</td>
<td>Multiple disabilities (36+ deaf students)</td>
<td>Kindergarten–national certification; vocational training</td>
<td>Canadian and USA volunteers</td>
<td>TC (SL from USA or Canada)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montessori Deaf Preschool</td>
<td>(Possibly through PAZAPA in Jacmel)</td>
<td>Preschool (ages 2–6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest Haiti Christian Mission</td>
<td>St. Louis-du-Nord (Founded in the 1980s)</td>
<td>Deaf classroom • 10 students • 2 deaf Haitian teachers</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>Mary Beth Winkler</td>
<td>TC (ASL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ferrier School for the Deaf</td>
<td>Ferrier</td>
<td>Deaf only • 40 students</td>
<td>Primary school</td>
<td>(Christian Foundation for Children and Aging)</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaf school (name unknown)</td>
<td>Cap Haitian</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the list of schools in Table 1, St. Vincent School for the Handicapped and PAZAPA (2008) are two of the larger schools serving students with disabilities, including deaf students. However, they take very different approaches to education and are based in very different environments. While St. Vincent’s is a boarding school in the busy capital city, PAZAPA is located in a rural town of Jacmel with only ten thousand inhabitants. While the majority of students live at St. Vincent’s for at least nine months of the year and students that have no families may stay at St. Vincent’s year round, PAZAPA is a day school; students primarily live with their families and rehabilitation and educational programs heavily require the involvement of parents. Both schools have, however, managed to create a sense of community and acceptance within their walls and, for PAZAPA, one that even reaches out into the local community.

In addition to these schools, a very privileged few Haitians have been involved with a USA-based educational program through the Center for Intercultural Education and Development.
This program provides scholarships to deaf and prospective hearing interpreters from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to other persons with disabilities, and is implemented by Georgetown University. Although most CASS deaf students do not have secondary school degrees before accepting scholarships to study in the States, most are reported to have excelled academically in the USA and to have gained associate degrees in English within a couple of years. Unlike most others that work within the Haitian deaf community, this program does not have a religious component or motivation (CASS 2006).

6 Disability organizations and ministries

There are a number of organizations working with Haitian deaf people, but none that are deaf-led and no known deaf associations or deaf clubs within Haiti. The only known deaf club comprised of deaf Haitians is located in New York and includes former students from the Institut Montfort (Haig 2008).

Within Haiti, The Centre D’Aide Aux Personnes a Problemes Auditifs (Help Center for People with Hearing Problems – CAPPA. Sours Haiti) is a nonprofit organization that strives toward integrating deaf individuals into society, preventing deafness, sign-language promotion and education, increasing literacy skills among deaf people, and sensitizing deaf people to health concerns (Bultje 2008). CAPPA Sours Haiti was founded in 1998 and has become involved with some World Federation of the Deaf events, such as the regional working group exploring how deaf rights are being handled in the Americas. The Haitian Society for the Blind and the National Committee for the Rehabilitation of Disabled Persons work toward increasing public awareness of challenges that people with disabilities may encounter. They may be involved in some part in the deaf community but no specifics were found (Haiti 1998). Foundation J’Aime Haiti also plays some role in supporting disabled Haitians.

Under the supervision of Service Chrétien d’Haïti, who works in conjunction with Frontier Internship in Mission (FIM), Ezequiel and Yaniurka Batista have worked to raise awareness about disabilities in local churches and families in Port-au-Prince by uniting the various religious organizations that work in Haiti and hosting an ecumenical service to which over 700 people from nearby churches attended. They have also worked to connect people with disabilities, creating a place for mutual support. In Port-au-Prince, over 200 people from 20 different denominations attended a seminar they planned: “Basic Principles for Working with People with Disabilities.” This seminar was attended by 45 deaf people and its ecumenical worship service was led, at least in part, by a young deaf woman. In other seminars, courses on sign language were provided, and they now have a working group of eleven people serving the disabled community, one of whom is considered a “sign-language expert” (Batista 2008).

In general, local churches do not show much interest in working with people with disabilities because they are often seen to be a result of a curse from God or the lwa (family spirit-gods). Jacobson (2005) reports one story of a mother who experienced direct shunning by local churches while her disabled son was called an “animal.” Because of this, it usually falls on the shoulders of international ministries to reach out to the disabled population, including deaf people, and the majority of these ministries focus on physical and medical support and not on other types of services (such as linguistic development). See Table 2 for a list of known ministries currently working in some way with the deaf community.
Table 3: Disability ministries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ministry name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Type of ministry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Haitian Christian Center for the Deaf (HCCD)</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Spiritual teaching; interpreted services; medical needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of the Nazarene</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Healing services; medical services; construction work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coram Deo</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Medical services; school for disabled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing Hands for Haiti (NGO works with multi-denominations and other NGOs)</td>
<td>Port-au-Prince</td>
<td>Medical services; disability prevention; public awareness of disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah’s Witnesses</td>
<td>30+ Bible studies all over the country</td>
<td>Teaching, Bible studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist Church (with signer)</td>
<td>Cap Haitian</td>
<td>Interpreted church service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope of Hearing (The United Methodist Church)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Supplies reconditioned hearing aids led by Gil Hanke</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7 Language access

Because of the number of international non-government organizations (NGOs) that focus on the medical needs of Haiti, deaf people seem to have more access to hearing aids and other apparatuses that decrease the effects of hearing loss than sign language resources. There are no sign language interpreting services available in Haiti. As of 2003, only one school (PAZAPA) was known to have a sign language teacher who offered sign language classes to parents of deaf children and other interested members of the community (PAZAPA 2003). More recently, interns with FIM have also provided some sign language training in churches.

There is a permanent hearing clinic located in northwest Haiti that is supported by Comcare International, based in the USA, which provides solar-powered hearing aids for unreached people. They have given hearing aids to a few specially-chosen deaf people in Haiti (ComCare International 2001). In addition, Frank Brister has made nine trips to Haiti to deliver hearing aids and batteries to deaf children. According to one report, his efforts have led to the majority of deaf students in Haitian schools for the deaf having hearing aids—although they may not be able to afford the battery upkeep to continue using them (Focus 2001).

8 Conclusion

Although there is probably a large deaf population in Haiti, pervasive negative societal perspectives and overwhelming poverty makes the Haitian deaf community situation bleak. While there is some government protection through legislation, the scarcity of resources and lack of infrastructure has led to the absence of a strong deaf community. International aid usually focuses on providing hearing aids or other ways of helping deaf Haitians utilize their remaining hearing, instead of community or language development distinct to a deaf cultural people who rely on sign language as their primary means of communication and uniquely identify with each other as an ethnolinguistic group. It appears, from all available sources, that ASL is the sign language used by deaf Haitians who are fortunate enough to receive education at one of the available deaf schools, while the rest of deaf Haitians may rely on home signs or be hidden away with no language access at all.
References


