

To the Community Affairs References Committee
(community.affairs.sen@aph.gov.au):

Deaf Australia (NSW) would like to make a submission to the Hearing Health Inquiry on behalf of its members in NSW.

We would like to address point C: Adequate access to services.

It is our view that in adequate access to services in the early intervention and educational spheres is costing deaf and hard of hearing people socially and educationally and this impacts their ability to be fully independent members of society.

The problems we see are:

1. That early intervention programs do not all appear to take seriously the risk of delayed language acquisition or the potential for early Auslan programs to eliminate this risk.

The solution we propose is the introduction of a language acquisition “Auslan Safety Net” policy for early intervention programs for deaf or hard of hearing children.

The difficulty with current provision for deaf children in NSW primary and secondary schools has its roots in entrenched assumptions existing in early intervention models in Australia. The general trend for children from hearing families is to attempt an auditory verbal or auditory oral (AV/AO) approach to education first, assisted by technology such as hearing aids and cochlear implants. If this fails, signing is considered a last resort.

It is not our intention to detract from the work done by AV/AO therapists and early intervention programs which promote the use of speech. Rather, the exclusive use of this method must be re-evaluated with a proper consideration of the reality that for a percentage of children there will be a significant delay in language acquisition, and that they will fail to acquire fluency in spoken English at a rate equivalent to their hearing peers. The effects of such a catastrophe on the deaf child – their social, emotional and cognitive wellbeing – cannot be underestimated. The impact is life-long, leading to significant and ongoing financial and social costs to the community.

The outcomes of exclusive AV/AO programs can also be difficult to predict. ‘There is no such thing as the ideal school placement for all deaf children. Which school is right for which child is something that time rather than degree of hearing loss clarifies.’ (Lewis, cited in DET 2003, p. 16). Even for those who successfully acquire spoken language, Auslan frequently becomes the language of choice in later life, to the astonishment of parents who have laboured to give their child an exclusive AV/AO education.

Given this risk, we urge DET to adopt an “Auslan Safety Net” policy, whereby all parents of deaf children would be offered free Auslan tuition, in the home, as well as

programs for the development of signing skills offered outside the home alongside AV/AO programs. Itinerant teachers of the deaf employed by DET to work with parents of deaf infants would be able to provide, or would have the resources available, to arrange this tuition.

If such “safety net” programs are offered alongside AV/AO programs, rather than as a last resort, it would not only eliminate the risk of delayed language acquisition, but relieve parents of the unrealistic expectation that they will make a choice between modes of communication before the certain success of either program for their individual child is known. For many children, both spoken English and Auslan may become modes of communication that they use in later life, and this would allow, what they will ideally enjoy as deaf adults, “the best of both worlds”.

2. That staff who teach or support students who use Auslan to access the curriculum are not required to be fluent in Auslan.

The solution we propose is the adoption of a benchmark for fluency for staff employed to work with children who access the curriculum using Auslan, whether teacher aides, learning support officers, interpreters or teachers of the deaf. This benchmark should be NAATI Paraprofessional level accreditation or NABS/ASLIA Deaf Relay Interpreter Certification as a minimum.

A “one size fits all” approach is the approach taken to the staffing of programs catering for deaf and hard of hearing children. Policy, recruitment, and training should provide for the needs of all deaf children, not simply the children who use speech and lipreading to communicate. Two sets of specialist staff are required for the proper education of deaf pupils, who use Auslan to access the curriculum, whether in support classes, or in mainstream settings:

1. Teachers of the deaf who can teach the deaf child directly without the use of an interpreter
2. Interpreters who can facilitate access to the curriculum for students who are attending mainstream classes taught by a teacher who is not fluent in Auslan

Currently the staffs fulfilling the role of teachers of the deaf for students who use Auslan to access the curriculum are not required have any level of fluency in Auslan. Similarly, the role of interpreter in classrooms is fulfilled by teacher’s aides (special) or learning support officers who do not have to be fluent in Auslan to be employed to work with children who use Auslan to access the curriculum.

For those children who do access the curriculum in Auslan, there should be sufficient staff to make sure that all classes are interpreted or taught directly in Auslan. Just as we would not tolerate having a hearing child taught by a teacher who could not speak English, in the same way, we should not tolerate a deaf child who uses Auslan to access the curriculum being taught by a teacher who is not fluent in Auslan.

3. There is no clear policy about the language of instruction for deaf and hard of hearing children and this is leading to a poor quality of education where people are not fluent in either English or Auslan.

The solution we propose is the provision of bilingual-bicultural programs in support units (hearing) across NSW where there is a “critical mass” of students who use signed communication to access the curriculum, in order that these programs become centres of excellence for the education of children who access the curriculum through Auslan or other forms of signing.

Support classes, if well staffed and funded, have the potential to provide the “best of both worlds”, with a deaf peer group, a multitude of opportunities to interact with hearing peers, and the ability to choose from a wide range of elective subjects offered in the regular school.

Hearing support units where there is a “critical mass” of students who use signed communication to access the curriculum should move towards an Auslan/English bilingual-bicultural approach, and should be properly staffed and funded, so that where there is a critical mass of deaf students, deaf students can learn with deaf peers while at the same time having access through interpreters to the full range of curriculum options offered by the host school. Such units can become centres of excellence for the education of deaf children.

An Auslan/English bilingual-bicultural methodology is preferable to Total Communication which is the practice of present units for those children who access the curriculum using signed communication. This choice of an optimal education methodology for hearing support units serving deaf children who sign is made with a full awareness of the difficulties of prescribing one educational method for all children in a given unit. The reasons for this choice are as follows:

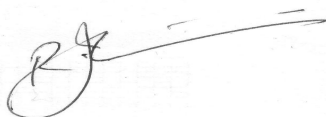
- This choice would not prohibit the use of other supports, such as AV/AO, augmentative communication methods, or other signing systems where appropriate.
- A signing methodology is necessary as this recognises the goal of AV/AO approaches. The goal of AV/AO approaches is to integrate the child as fully as possible into a mainstream class. Hearing support units do not therefore fulfil a need in the area of AV/AO educational approaches. Children accessing the curriculum through speech can be well-served in mainstream classes under current structures.
- Of the signing methodologies available, only Signed English, Total Communication, and bilingual-bicultural approaches have been widely recognised and researched.
- Signed English was developed in an attempt to improve the English literacy of deaf children. As with all methods, it has had successes and failures. The reasons for preferring a bilingual-bicultural methodology which uses Auslan over Signed English are:

1. Auslan is capable of transliterating English in order to convey English idioms where necessary. "It has been strongly suggested that the use of MCE [Manually Coded English] systems is unnecessary when natural signed languages can convey English." (DET 2003, p. 4). Signed English is unnecessary.
 2. Auslan is a visual language and makes visual sense. Signed English does not make visual sense and can be very confusing.
 3. Auslan is a full language, capable of expressing emotions, thoughts, abstract concepts, humour and complexity with the same range and efficiency as spoken English. Signed English is not capable of efficiency or complexity equivalent to that of spoken English.
 4. Auslan is the language of the adult deaf community.
 5. Auslan is the language used by interpreters at tertiary level (both in TAFE and universities) and the use of it in school thus prepares deaf students for using interpreters in tertiary study.
 6. No testing in Signed English is widely available and neither is there training widely available to develop this skill, even were it desirable to do so.
- Total Communication, which has been widely used in DET schools in the past, and is still used by a reported 7% of students (Parliament of NSW, 2009), is even less viable than Signed English. According to a 2003 literature review, "Research has reported that the syntactic structures of speech and sign both suffer when used in combination in SC [Simultaneous Communication]" and "There is a wide-spread problem of teachers being unable to generate an accurate and sustained production of sophisticated sign and the oral language in SC." (DET 2003, p. 4).

Reference:

Department of Education and Training. (2003) *Literature Review of Good Practice in the Delivery of Educational Outcomes for Students who are Deaf or Hearing Impaired.*

Yours sincerely



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President
Deaf Australia (NSW)