

**Submission to
The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee
Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

Background

I am the father of Ben, a 7 year old profoundly deaf boy, who has accessed early intervention programs, been exposed to integration into mainstream programs and is currently attending the Victorian College of the Deaf. My son's first language is Auslan (Australian Sign Language) and he has no oral language.

My wife and I have been attending Auslan classes on and off for the last 5 Years and whilst we can communicate with Ben, he is not receiving the same language input as our other children (who are hearing). Therefore we feel it is important for his development that he attends a school where there is fluent Auslan signing, full access to the standard school curriculum, a positive learning environment and deaf role models.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference give me cause for concern as they appear to be biased towards resourcing and funding arrangements. The Inquiry states that the committee is looking into education of students with disabilities but when I read the terms of reference, the first thing that came to mind was that this inquiry was very much concerned with the resource and funding requirements and who is responsible for providing them. Five of the eight sub points in 1(a) and 1(b) are dedicated to this theme.

There are only three sub points in 1(a) that even broach the topic of quality of education which I feel is just as important if not more important an issue to be addressed.

Early Intervention

As with most people, my family didn't know early intervention organizations existed until we needed one. Following diagnosis of our son we found that the deaf world was full of factions, Oral verses Signing, Signed English verses Auslan to name a couple.

Our early intervention organization (Monnington) provided us with good support and assisted us with communicating strategies. What we found strange at the beginning was that, although the organization espoused AUSLAN as the language to learn, very few of the workers were proficient at AUSLAN themselves. We found out later that AUSLAN had only recently become the Professional workers choice of language acquisition for the deaf and similar organizations were going through the same transitional phase. Many of the staff attended the same AUSLAN classes as us, to address the issue of AUSLAN skill deficiencies within the workplace.

Monnington provide services state wide and with government funding being reduced each year their resources are being stretched very thin. For this organization to continue to provide a valuable service to families, at this very important stage of the development of their deaf child, there must be a major review of the functions they perform and have those functions adequately funded and resourced. I would think that this example would be representative of many early intervention services that rely on Government funding.

Disability Determination Criteria

The criteria utilized to differentiate the different levels of handicap appear to discriminate against abnormalities that are not visible. Children that are deaf do not present as requiring significant assistance when they are being assessed because they have mobility.

The Deaf community must take some of the responsibility for this practice continuing because they do not see themselves as disabled but a language minority and therefore don't accept responsibility for addressing change to the evaluation criteria for determining disability level for deaf children.

The following is an example that illustrates the discriminatory nature of the evaluation criteria where the silent handicap is concerned.

Our family saw benefits in our son developing local community relationships and decided to send our son to a local kindergarten. Another boy, who was classified as legally blind, was also going to attend the same kindergarten for the same sessions.

Both families applied for assistance funding for the respective disabilities and they were both assessed according to the criteria of the day. The result was that the little boy who was blind received funding and Ben was assessed as not sufficiently disabled to receive assistance.

The kindergarten teacher initially assured us that this would be OK; Ben would still derive some benefit from continuing in the program. It quickly became apparent that without adequate communication channels the teacher found it difficult to engage Ben in the program appropriately. eg. She found that Ben became bored during reading time and just getting his attention to warn him of danger became an issue.

We wanted the integration to work so we engaged an assistant ourselves (With the consent of the Kinder) with signing skills. Once this occurred Ben's boredom and frustration levels were reduced significantly and the experience was generally a rewarding one for him.

At the end of the year, the kindergarten teacher admitted to us that at the start of the year she thought that dealing with a blind child would create greater issues than a deaf one. She learnt that issues of guiding the blind boy around the kindergarten were insignificant compared with the challenges of reaching a deaf child without having competent communication channels available.

Mainstream Inclusion

The decision to send your child to mainstream school can be influenced by outside pressures such as location, family unity etc; but once the decision has been made, as a parent you want to ensure that your child receives equal access to the school curriculum. In the case of a profoundly deaf child, the only way this can be achieved is for a full time language assistant, who is fluent in AUSLAN, to be available for all classroom periods. This still doesn't address the issues that appear in the playground (An informal source of education). The things that a deaf child would readily pick up in the playground would be the physical things that they can see (Good and Bad).

We considered sending Ben to our local school where we have a daughter attending. At the initial interview, the principal indicated that the school would be happy to receive Ben. She indicated that there was staff with special education qualifications (None with AUSLAN skills), a boy in the year above with signing skills (This boy moved to another school the next year) and that Ben would attract \$18,000, which would fund a third of an assistant.

We walked away from this, because we didn't think it was good enough that Ben would only have access to a third of the curriculum and the remainder of the time he would have to struggle through. (This is assuming that all the \$18,000 would be channeled towards providing a language assistant with proficient AUSLAN skills.) Would anyone be happy if they were told that their child was going to receive access to a third of the curriculum at best?

To put this in perspective, it would be like a hearing child being sent to a telepathy school (Not having the ability to receive the signals) and being told that they could have an interpreter (with limited English speaking skills) for a third of the classes and be grateful you are getting that much.

We were fortunate because we had a realistic choice in the Victorian College of the Deaf but our decision not to send Ben to mainstream school may have to be reassessed as the falling number of students puts pressure on the existence of the school.

With this thought in mind I have tried to assess:

How can “inclusion” work in mainstream schools for deaf children?

1. Full time language assistants for all classes.
 - This is the minimum for every child with hearing impairment, so that they have at least a minimum of equal access to the curriculum.
2. Setting up of Mobile Deaf Facilities
 - Success of inclusion relies on the child having a sense of belonging and the best results have been obtained to date where there are deaf facilities within the school environment. This would provide advantage of providing the deaf children with peers of their own and provides an opportunity to pool the assistance funding to ensure there is a full time language assistant with AUSLAN skills available to the children at all times.
 - This raises the issue of where to set up the facility. As with all demographics, there is no rhyme or reason where deaf children are located throughout the State and there is no guarantee that the next generation of deaf children will be located in the same district.
 - The only practical solution I see is to this is to set up mobile units, which are regionally based. Planning for this can be coordinated through early intervention agencies, as they have prior knowledge of where the future deaf students will come from.
3. Introduction of AUSLAN as the LOTE in the school.
 - When I was growing up, the LOTEs that were in vogue were Latin and French. In more recent times, these have been replaced with Italian, Japanese and other Asian languages. This is partly due to a push towards providing a second language that can have more significance in the child's every day life.
 - It doesn't matter which ORAL language that the school provides for the children, the deaf child will not have full access to this part of the curriculum and are therefore being denied equal access.
 - If the schools that have Deaf Facilities could offer AUSLAN as their LOTE, it would provide equal access to the curriculum and also assist in the deaf children's self esteem (This will be an area that they will actually be better than their hearing counterparts) It would also flow into the playground, as the hearing children would have access to a mode of communication with the deaf children. Currently there is one school within Victoria that has AUSLAN as their LOTE, but there are many other schools that have hearing-impaired children who are not getting access to a LOTE.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

With respect to the teachers with special education qualifications, a three-month course tacked onto their Bachelor of Education does not leave them equipped with even adequate communicate skills to deal with a deaf child. Nobody would consider that they knew Italian after 12 weeks of study. Well, AUSLAN is language and has structure like any other language and after 12 weeks the teacher would probably have enough language to say “hello”, “my name is”, “ask for the toilet”, “count to twenty” and “name a few animals”. This isn’t good enough to be considered adequate to be able to describe everyday situations, let alone trying to describe what’s going on in the Harry Potter story or explain English sentence structure. Also, if the teacher doesn’t use this language for a period of time, you can forget them even being able to recite the limited AUSLAN they learnt.

There are some communications strategies that can assist the education of a Deaf child such as always make sure that they can see your face when you are talking, identify the subject before inviting them to look out the window. I don’t profess to know all of the strategies but early intervention agencies could provide information on this topic.

This would still be stopgap Band-Aid action and should only be coupled with a language assistant with competent AUSLAN skills at least equivalent to the school level the child is studying. The assistant would also be required to have the skill of relaying what has transposed without putting his or her own slant on the subject.

The question is where do these people come from?

1. Deaf adults are very competent signers but would be hard put to interpret what has transpired in the classroom. They could be provided with the class program to assist in relaying the curriculum details.
2. Hearing People with Signing skills
 - a. Children of Deaf Adults (CODA’s) are a resource that needs to be tapped. They have hearing and have been signing since birth. So they could relay what is going on in the classroom with very competent signing skills. To engage these people in this work vocation, it must be made attractive as a career choice.
 - b. Hearing People that have learnt AUSLAN. These people would need to pass some test and receive a sliding scale grading according to their signing proficiency

Conclusion

The issue of Education of students with disabilities does impose extra financial pressures and whilst it is important to establish this support and the responsibilities of statutory authorities, these issues cannot be allowed to cloud the main issue of quality education with equal access for all children. My submission concentrates on a silent minority group within the broader disability umbrella. One that doesn’t visibly present as disabled and as such doesn’t fair as well in the determination of the level of handicap.

The need for competent communication skills between the teacher and the deaf child has been demonstrated, highlighting that basic concepts cannot be imparted let alone complex issues explained to the child without it. I have emphasized that the quality access to education is paramount to a deaf child and if they are to be educated on an even footing, they must be provided with a full time language specialist with AUSLAN skills to relay the messages.

Some options for improving the 'inclusion' of deaf children into mainstream schools were provided, such as:

- Setting up Mobile Deaf Facilities
- Co-ordination with early intervention agencies to identify where services will be required for the next generation of hearing impaired children.
- AUSLAN as the LOTE
- Communication strategies for "talking" to deaf people.

The subject of education of the educators in issues confronting the deaf children was addressed, providing a couple of options regarding where to source skilled people in AUSLAN.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to submit my points of view on the Education of students with disabilities.

Robert Morrison