

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

Feedback from St Albans East Deaf Facility, Melbourne

Introduction

Provision for Deaf Education in Victoria is broad and varied to meet the complex needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students. Parents have access to Early Intervention services before moving into the school system. They are able to choose from schools for the Deaf which provide communication methods ranging from oral or auditory verbal (speaking and listening), signing in English or Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Parents may choose to send their child to their local school and be supported by Visiting Teachers of the Deaf. They may also choose a third option - Deaf Facilities.

Deaf Facilities operate under the auspices of a host school through which students are enrolled. Facilities are staffed by trained Teachers of the Deaf who support classroom teachers as Deaf and Hearing Impaired students access the regular school curriculum. Deaf and Hearing Impaired students may also be withdrawn to work on specific programs such as speech, listening, language and communication. Programs may also address Deaf Studies, social skills and self esteem. There are Deaf Facilities which specialise in oral education, others whose major focus is bilingual education, with Auslan as a first language, and many who address all communication methods, depending on the needs of students.

Eligibility for Entry to Deaf Facilities

Students are eligible for a Deaf Facility if they meet the criteria of a permanent hearing loss in both ears which is moderate, severe or profound. If eligible, they are funded under an arrangement flowing from the review of Deaf education in 1990. Staffing at Primary Deaf Facilities is currently provided at the rate of one Teacher of the Deaf to every four students or part thereof. The coordinator's role is that of a Leading Teacher with a mix of administration and teaching duties. Funding for a Leading Teacher is not included as a separate line in the Deaf Facility's Global Budget, but should be, to acknowledge the need for professional leadership. It is essential that the current funding model for Deaf Facilities be retained.

We agree that students who have a moderate/severe/profound hearing loss should continue to have access to Deaf Facilities. We feel there can be some confusion between the term 'moderate' in terms of disability and 'moderate' in terms of hearing impairment.

The educational requirements of signing Deaf children who require full time interpreting to access the wider curriculum should be recognised within the Educational Needs Questionnaire. There are clear implications for funding when students are spread across different year levels as staffing on a one to four ratio may not be sufficient.

Many children are not only Deaf or Hearing Impaired. Many may also have significant learning difficulties, and parents need to choose between a Facility and funding under the Disabilities and Impairments program, when students need the expertise inherent in each.

The criteria for access to Deaf Facilities should be broadened to include students with conductive losses. Conductive Deafness interferes with the conduction of sound to the hearing nerve, is frequently caused by middle ear infection, but can be present without infection. Often fluctuating in character, it is sometimes referred to as "Glue Ear". There needs to be a recognition that there are times when students with conductive losses function as severely to profoundly deaf. This has clear implications for access to language and communication, access to the language of the classroom and listening in background noise. There should also be acknowledgement of the disruption to schooling that occurs with variations in middle ear functioning from day to day. The needs of students with conductive losses are complex. Access to a learning environment with trained Teachers of the Deaf will provide an appropriate supported learning environment. Currently only students with permanent conductive losses have access to Deaf Facilities.

Funding

The field of Deaf Education is not homogenous, and this is in response to the varied and complex needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students, different teaching methodologies and modes of communication. This breadth of program approach is highly valued. As the needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students change, there is sometimes a need to move to a different educational placement. For students currently within a Deaf Facility, parents may decide to access the Visiting Teacher Service from their local school, or a specialist school for the Deaf. There needs to be recognition that different areas and services in Deaf Education have their own distinct needs for funding and resources, and this should be accepted. The different areas co-exist and work together.

The current Educational Needs Questionnaire disadvantages Deaf and Hearing Impaired children. Funding is available on hearing only and does not address the complexity of language needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students. Students with moderate, severe or profound deafness may also have additional learning needs or disabilities over and above their deafness and this should be funded and supported with extra expertise. There needs to be recognition that there are additional programming needs. Often no descriptors adequately address the current level of performance of the students. Students in Deaf Facilities are currently funded under a different arrangement, and this should continue.

Within the Educational Needs Questionnaire there remains a lack of acknowledgment that while Deaf and Hearing Impaired students can reach a level within the normal range in language functioning, there is still a need for funding support to maintain language learning. The hearing impairment may be ongoing, but the needs of the students will increase as the language of the classroom increases; the gap increases with the need for higher order thinking and increased expectations. New vocabulary often needs to be taught explicitly. There should be an acknowledgement of the increasing cognitive and linguistic demands of the curriculum. The need for Teachers of the Deaf remains high because they understand the links between language and cognition, and provide programs which support this. It is important to ensure the long term viability of funding and recognise that the needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students broaden as the curriculum broadens.

The Role of Teachers of the Deaf

Despite Early Intervention programs and early detection rates, the gaps are too big for Early Intervention to have remedied by the time a pre-lingually Deaf child is ready for school. When initially tested on entering school, Deaf and Hearing Impaired children's language is typically two to three standard deviations below the norm of age matched hearing peers. The challenge is enormous and can even get harder. Throughout the world, studies have shown that Deaf children develop vocabulary, which supports language growth, at half the rate of hearing peers. A Deaf child entering Prep at five years typically has a vocabulary of 2 - 3 years. Children who are born with significant hearing impairment are at critical risk for developing language skills. The ability to understand the language which is communicated to them, to express themselves in language, and to develop inner self thought are all dependent upon language development. These examples concern children diagnosed as having a hearing loss at a young age. The situation is worse and the gaps greater with a late diagnosis, making access to educational services critical, and the role of Teachers of the Deaf imperative.

Teachers of the Deaf as specialist professionals bring a detailed knowledge of deafness, the implications for learning, a deep understanding of developmental stages: what a child is achieving in language and communication and what comes next developmentally. They are skilled in setting up situations from which children can learn with deliberate planning to extend linguistic competence. Specialist professionals have the ability to evaluate, engage in diagnostic teaching and their knowledge of task analysis to plan for the small steps that need to be taken in achieving set goals.

Integration Aides may be seen as an alternate support. However, while Aides can often work through programs set by specialist professionals, they do not have the training to lead the process of learning for Deaf and Hearing Impaired students, to liaise and set up optimal learning environments. Aides might be experienced with particular Deaf students, but they do not have the skills and experience to generalise to the varied needs of other Deaf and Hearing Impaired students. Current funding for Teachers of the Deaf within Deaf Facilities should be maintained.

Deaf and Hearing Impaired students who are in their local schools also need appropriate support from specialist professionals. For many, a Visiting Teacher for one hour once a week does not fulfil their need. The Visiting Teacher Service needs to be significantly increased.

Transport

There is a need for flexibility in infrastructure areas such as transport of students. This is a critical area for Deaf Facilities. Facilities are specialist schools operating within regular schools. They have a Region wide catchment area. If a Facility is the most appropriate educational option for a child, then transport should be available.

Some families will live nearby and be able to bring their child to school. There are many others who, while living in the catchment area, are many kilometres away. They may not have two cars, they may be unable to drive their children many kilometres to access a Deaf Facility, return to their home suburb to take other children to school, and then attend work on time themselves. Parents have the right to choose the educational placement of their child, but choice is not true choice if they are placed in an impossible economic position.

Access implies that eligible students, who require the model of support offered by a Deaf Facility, should have fair and equitable access to transport to facilitate their attendance. Over recent years there has developed gross levels of inequity in access to transport. Transport provision varies from Region to Region, and even within Regions, from Facility to Facility. Those Facilities whose students have access to taxi transport, have been subject to the continually arising threat that all transport provision will be removed.

Transport should not be contingent upon socio-economic status, fluency in the English language or political connections. Children are being denied access to some Deaf Facilities and therefore the most appropriate educational support for them, due to lack of transport.

Transport must be a clearly targeted state budget initiative, and be equitable and consistent across and within Regions.

Professional Development

A large part of the role of Teachers of the Deaf within a Facility is to provide Professional Development to classroom teachers. They work to give teachers an appreciation of the needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students and the ability to access skills provided by specialist Teachers of the Deaf to a greater level. For mainstream teachers there needs to be more access to funded Professional Development in school time on a regular basis. Professional Development needs to occur at the teacher's school with their own students. There is still a need to develop in some teachers shared responsibility for program needs, rather than as the sole responsibility of the specialist professional.

Deaf Facilities should be considered as specialist settings. While they are based in mainstream schools, they are staffed by trained Teachers of the Deaf, and have their own Global Budget. Facility staff are involved in a dual system (mainstream and specialist) that is complex and requires resources in skills and time in excess of a single system. Teachers of the Deaf in Facilities draw on wide experience and exceptional interpersonal skills. They combine the skills and knowledge of curriculum in both regular schools and specialist schools.

Program Support Group (PSG) meetings are often a valuable avenue for Professional Development for classroom teachers. They acquire a lot of knowledge through the course of the year and become attuned to the needs of the children. PSGs formalise professional input and accountability and focus on the educational needs of Deaf and Hearing Impaired students. They provide an impetus for a focus on the student at certain times of the year.

Parents as Partners

The Program Support Group process formalises the principle of collaboration with parents where parents are partners in the educational process and play an important role in setting learning priorities for their children.

While it is expensive to hold Program Support Group meetings with the need to employ Casual Replacement Teachers to cover classroom teachers, they are valued and should be established for any students within a Deaf Facility.

If parents are to have true access and be involved in a full collaborative way, funds are needed for translation of reports and minutes of Program Support Group meetings. The availability and use of interpreters is valued and should be continued.

Teacher Training

The State Government also has an accountability to Deaf Facilities in terms of adequate resourcing and provision of trained Teachers of the Deaf. There needs to be an acknowledgement that to undertake specialist qualifications there are significant costs for prospective Teachers of the Deaf. Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees, University fees, the loss of one year's salary and the need to fund the full cost of living for a year create debt. There is then little incentive after graduating as a generalist teacher to pursue a further year of study. In addition there is a limited career path for Teachers of the Deaf. As a result of these pressures, we are already experiencing a shortage of trained Teachers of the Deaf. It is essential that fully trained Teachers of the Deaf are available for employment in Schools and Services for Deaf and Hearing Impaired students.

It is imperative that the Department of Education and Training address this by offering financial incentives such as those provided to Reading Recovery, Maths, Science and Languages Other Than English (LOTE) teachers, to qualified teachers to train as a Teacher of the Deaf. Financial incentives should encompass direct payments to encourage participation in the post-graduate training as a Teacher of the Deaf. Budgetary provision should also be made for teacher release to allow participation in required teaching practicums.

In undergraduate teacher training courses, there should be a compulsory unit on disability. While Professional Development is important, all teachers cannot suddenly become specialists with targeted Professional Development, and it de-values trained Teachers of the Deaf to think it may be so. Professional Development needs to focus on class teachers learning how to maximize the benefit of specialist support. All teachers require Professional Development, but this should not be confused with having the expertise to provide support in place of trained Teachers of the Deaf.

The Professional Standards from the Victorian Institute of Teaching need consideration. There needs to be an acknowledgement that any accreditation processes must take into account the specialist strand. Current structure for the Victorian Institute of Teaching is of concern in that there is no specialist representation. Without expert input into the specialist area, accreditation cannot be fully representative of the practices in the field.

Marie Fram
Coordinator
St Albans East Deaf Facility
St Albans East Primary School
Station Avenue
St Albans Victoria 3021
(03) 9366 2071

Brian O'Dea
Principal
St Albans East Primary School
Station Avenue
St Albans Victoria 3021
(03) 9366 2071