

**Submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee**

Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities

1(a) whether policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their educational needs.

We currently have a crisis in the approach to the education of deaf children both in the State of Victoria and nationally.

In relation to educational outcomes, deaf children are one of the most vulnerable disability groups. The major barrier to many deaf children's learning in Australia is that they do not share a common language base or clear communication with a full time teacher.

Communication and language are essential for access to education and learning. Many deaf children are not provided with the language/ communication support to enable them to adequately access educational options that are available to their hearing peers or other disability groups.

The reasons for this lack of access to appropriate educational support are: the current criteria used to define disability; the small number of appropriate specialist teachers; and the limited availability of teacher of the deaf training programs..

1(a)

i) criteria to define disability used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap

ii) the accuracy with which students disability related needs are being assessed

Current assessment tools negatively discriminate against deaf children's access to appropriate educational support. Many deaf children are unable to access appropriate pre school and school programs because criteria to assess the level of disability in current assessment tools overlook the fact that a precursor to learning is a shared language and communication base. Language and communication barriers define deafness as a disability.

If a child can not hear the lesson they will not understand the content and have no hope of learning. Assessment tools for funding should as a minimum remedy this impossible situation. Ultimately the deaf child should be fully funded for an interpreter or communicator in situations where the classroom teacher is not able to communicate with the deaf child at the same pace as the rest of the class.(ie **all** situations where there is **not a teacher of the deaf** available)

Many young deaf have often been written out of the eligibility for additional assistance at preschool or kinder because of their "silent presentability".

The assessors report:

"They can play independently in a corner, are no bother, they seem ok with the other children because they will point to things and sort of interact, they look bright."

So begins the total absence of regard for their meaningful involvement and participation in the learning process. As parents see the deterioration at home with no hope of adequate funding or support they look to the specialist preschool settings and travel kilometres to get there or they just get by. And sadly for many deaf children the journey to low educational attainment, with the prospect of leaving school with a year 4 literacy level, and difficulties in transition to meaningful work begins. A situation that could have been avoided if access to early learning and adequate language support in the primary years had been provided.

v)Funding

Current assessment tools do not provide deaf children with access to appropriate educational resources, because the impairment is about profound if not total communication barriers. To adequately provide funding for the deaf child, formulas need to cover communication and interpreting costs, as well as access to specialist teachers of the deaf. If this situation is not remedied there will not be any real inclusion of the deaf in the education process in Australia. Funding for programs is an issue in both public and private sector programs for deaf and hearing impaired children.

.vii) teacher training and professional development

There are too few teachers of the deaf, regional communities are particularly disadvantaged. The special literacy and numeracy issues for deaf children are not being addressed in teacher training programs.

The Victorian State Government released a research document “Better Outcomes-Better Services” relating to children with disabilities. It indicated that the future may include a reliance on generalist teachers and aids to provide tailored learning programs for children with disabilities. In the case of the deaf this is inappropriate and indicates a misunderstanding of the barriers and challenges facing deaf children, If real inclusion is to happen deaf children need teachers who can communicate with them and share a language base. This is a speciality and the Government can not ethically walk away from this fact, and the daily reality facing deaf children in the classroom.

Nationally there is a crisis in the training options and supply of teachers of the deaf.

In regional Australia the situation is particularly acute. Where are the specialist teachers of the deaf, how will policies deal with the training, recruitment and supply of deaf educators to rural areas? Can policies be developed that will address the transport or accommodation issues facing rural families with deaf children.

Again and again we hear of depressed literacy levels among deaf children . Virtually every article written about deaf children describes their struggle with reading and writing.

We have no developed or literacy strategy for this particularly vulnerable group of students. We currently have a crisis in literacy and outcomes for deaf children across

this State and it needs to be addressed. We continue to be told that literacy for the average deaf child is 8 or 9 years, that is about year 4 level. Why? and How can we continue to just observe this figure and not act effectively?, Most but not all deaf children are disadvantaged in this way, we have a very small percentage of profoundly deaf leaving school with literacy levels at university standard. These high achieving deaf children have emerged from schools where there has been a dedicated resource for each child to bridge the classroom communication gap, and specific literacy strategies for the deaf child.

We need an urgent assessment of best practice in deaf literacy and implementation of a State or National literacy strategy directed at deaf children.

(1) b What would be the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories

Governments need to consider the following policy issues

Are Deaf and Hearing Impaired children to be included in targets for educational outcomes? This is the test of real inclusion in the education process. If so then:

1. The diversity of need, the level of need and the cost of communication and language supports must be factored into assessment tools and funding formula. It is this fact that must be faced by policy makers in relation to deaf children, if it is not addressed our children are discriminated against.

2. The Commonwealth needs to further invest in the tertiary programs to train teachers of the deaf, and provide incentives for rural employment

3. Governments in partnership with educators and parents should develop best practice learning models for the deaf and hearing impaired which address their special literacy needs, opportunities for social development, and learning confidence.

We know that all parents of deaf children are concerned about the quality of the learning environment, the expectations and skills of the educators, the opportunity for their children to meaningfully participate in school life, and to achieve their potential. Adequate funding for the education of deaf and hearing impaired children is required, for both private and public sector schools. Specifically a national literacy program should be developed, rural areas provided with an education service for the deaf children, and options for parents that allow for choice of mainstreaming with real inclusion, facility based integrated settings, or specialist settings with good standards of curriculum and sound expectation of educational achievement. State government funding is currently inadequate to meet the needs of the deaf student.

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