



**Response to:**

**Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Reference  
Committee**

**Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities**

Australian Association of the Deaf Inc. (AAD) is pleased to have this opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry. The Association has long held grave concerns about the education of Deaf people and hopes that this inquiry will result in positive changes.

AAD has serious concerns about the quality of education provided for deaf students, concerns that are echoed in countries around the world. The British Deaf Association Education Policy states that:

*Deaf people believe that deaf education has failed because they have been excluded from the system directly and indirectly, as professionals, employees, parents and consumers.*

We are of the view that an identical situation exists in Australia in that the sign language of the Deaf Community is not adequately utilised as a resource in the education of deaf children. We trust that in order to take steps to redress this situation, the information and views set out in this submission will be seriously considered and incorporated in any proposed changes to the education system.

**The Language Group**

Auslan (Australian Sign Language) was recognised as a Community Language in the National Policy on Languages in 1991. This means that Auslan is seen by the Australian Government as the language of a distinct linguistic minority group. It is the native language of many Deaf people. One research study has shown that there are 16,000 users of Australian Sign Language in Australia (Hyde & Power 1991) although the Association is of the view that there may be more. In addition, Auslan is the primary language of many Deaf people who do not have Deaf parents but have learnt Auslan later in their lives. Deaf people lead bilingual lives and use mostly Auslan as well as written and spoken English, with varying levels of competence in their everyday lives. Grosjean (1992) states that:

*The bilingualism present in the Deaf Community is a form of minority language bilingualism in which the members of a Deaf community acquire and use both the minority language (sign language) and the majority language in its written form and sometimes in its spoken or even signed form.*

Deaf people should have the opportunity to contribute to all aspects of economic, educational and social life of Australian society through their native language, Auslan. In order to effectively accomplish this, a bilingual education supported by competent interpreting service in both Auslan and English is necessary. This is echoed by the United Nations in the *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities*.

### **Implications of the Language Policy**

The aim of bilingual education is to enable effective language acquisition. For a person to function fully as a member of modern Australian society, the acquisition of English as a first or second language needs to occur. Therefore the form of bilingualism present in Deaf Education is transitional bilingualism, where Auslan, the most natural language for deaf children is used to enable acquisition of English as a second language so deaf people can function as equal members of society. It is important to understand that Auslan is a wholly visual-gestural language and therefore fully accessible to a deaf child, whereas spoken language is not. This is a major reason why we advocate using Auslan as the language of instruction to teach English as a second language.

It is a point of interest that in spite of the curriculum being developed as a project of national significance, Auslan as a subject still has not been implemented widely throughout Australia. This would have the advantage of:

- Creating linguistic environments for Deaf children where learning can occur naturally;
- Enabling hearing children to pursue career objectives such as sign language interpreting, deaf education etc; and
- Recognising and reflecting the cultural diversity of Australian society.

### **Educational Trends**

It is of concern that deaf children are being integrated into mainstream schools without adequate support. Anecdotal evidence is available which indicates that deaf children are being expected to manage in schools without adequate support, irrespective of whether they are signing or oral students. Support services required include: teachers of the deaf, interpreters, teachers aides, Auslan teachers, speech therapists. Such policies have also seen the closure of schools for deaf children in favour of integration, at the expense of quality of education.

It is our view that where deaf children are concerned, the education system in many cases has been allowed to run down to a point where parents have to negotiate access on a case by case basis without a pre-programmed systematic approach which takes effect as soon as a deaf child commences school.

AAD has grave concerns about the pedagogical approach being taken in providing an oral education on a large scale with only minimal inclusion of sign language, or with sign language provided as a kind of last resort when the child “fails” in the oral system. Research and anecdotal evidence has shown that such an approach can be detrimental psychologically, cognitively and educationally and is even more so at current resourcing levels.

### **The Way Ahead**

AAD believes very strongly that Commonwealth, state and territory educational authorities should provide world’s best practice education for deaf children.

This is in addition to increasing the levels of resourcing available to deaf students, in terms of appropriately trained and qualified teachers and interpreters. The days of integrating a deaf child with a nominal number of hours of teacher of the deaf or interpreting support should be behind us, and are a violation of the rights of the deaf child to equal participation in school education.

Alliances need to be developed between Deaf and hearing people in planning educational service delivery, whether they be parents, professionals or members of the Deaf Community. These alliances should be built on a foundation of trust and mutual respect.

We would be pleased to discuss our concerns with the Committee further. At this stage, we particularly wish to make the following comments on the inquiry’s terms of reference:

#### **(1) (a) Whether current policies and programs for students with disabilities are adequate to meet their education needs:**

##### **i) The criteria used to define disability and to differentiate between levels of handicap.**

AAD does not have enough information about this to make in-depth comments. However, we are concerned about what seems to be a practice of labeling students and then making all other decisions in terms of the label rather than in terms of this student as a person with unique characteristics. We also believe that too much emphasis is upon identifying problems and not enough emphasis on identifying abilities and personal characteristics unique to the child rather than attributed to the child’s deafness.

##### **ii) The accuracy with which students’ disability related needs are being assessed.**

AAD does not have enough access to information about this to enable us to make in-depth comments. Again, however, we are concerned that too many children are being pushed into programs that are not suited to their needs. We are particularly concerned about students who are profoundly or severely deaf being pushed into oral programs where they are not permitted access to sign language. It is our view that all children who are profoundly or severely deaf should have access to Auslan as their first

language and should be taught English as a second language. This includes children who have a cochlear implant.

We are deeply concerned about misconceptions about the ability of cochlear implants to provide a child with hearing input to a level where they are able to develop English language skills to *native fluency* wholly through auditory/oral means. We believe that the needs of deaf students with cochlear implants are being wrongly assessed.

**iii) The particular needs of students with disabilities from low socio-economic, non-English speaking and indigenous backgrounds and from rural and remote areas.**

AAD considers that all children who are profoundly or severely deaf automatically fall into the category of children with a non-English speaking background and should be educated bilingually with Auslan (Australian Sign Language) as the medium of instruction and English taught as a second language. This includes children who have a cochlear implant.

We also believe that deaf children in rural and remote areas of Australia do not have anything like adequate access to education. They certainly do not have access to a bilingual education.

**iv) The effectiveness and availability of early intervention programs.**

AAD is concerned that parents are not being given adequate accurate information about the effect of deafness on a child, the potential of a deaf child to live to its full potential, or about the educational options available to them and realistic assessments of the various educational options.

We believe that too many parents are being led to believe that a cochlear implant will “fix” their child, and that they are being led away from the idea of their children mixing with Deaf people who use Auslan.

Too many children are being steered into privately run auditory/oral programs, and when they “fail” in these programs are dumped into the state education system and programs that use sign language – which is then labeled a “failure” because it has students who have not been provided with appropriate early intervention and have thus fallen behind.

**v) Access to and adequacy of funding and support in both the public and private sectors.**

AAD believes that funding and support for deaf students in the public sector is woefully inadequate. AAD further believes that in relative terms, too much funding is provided to oral/aural education programs, and not enough funding is provided for bilingual education programs, including the promotion of the benefits of these programs to parents.

**vi) The nature, extent and funding of programs that provide for full or partial learning opportunities with mainstream students.**

There are models of bilingual education that can work in a mainstream setting. An example is the program at Toowong State School in Brisbane. These programs however, do not receive the level of funding they need.

AAD believes that no deaf student should be mainstreamed without adequate support. This however, happens frequently and is to be deplored – too many students are left to struggle in mainstream programs.

At tertiary level, deaf students still have to do battle with the system and resort to threatening to lodge complaints under the Disability Discrimination Act in order to have support services provided. Not all students are assertive enough to know how to put their case in the face of an obstructive system.

**vii) Teacher training and professional development**

AAD is of the view that teacher training programs do not provide anything like an adequate level of accurate information about the Deaf community and its language. Curriculum is heavily skewed in favour of auditory training and speech training. All teacher training programs should include a component on Deaf community, culture and language, and all teachers of the deaf should be required to be fluent in Auslan to at least NAATI para-professional level, whether or not they intend to teach in bilingual programs. AAD is appalled at the continuing experience we have of meeting “qualified and experienced” teachers of the deaf who are unable to communicate effectively with us. We would ask, if they are unable to communicate with educated, articulate, confident and assertive Deaf adults, how do they communicate effectively with their deaf students?

**viii) The legal implications and resource demands of current Commonwealth and state and territory legislation.**

AAD is concerned that Commonwealth and state and territory education departments do not provide sufficient resources for Deaf people to have equal access to education. We suspect that current education provisions could be in contravention of the Disability Discrimination Act.

**(1) (b) What the proper role of the Commonwealth and states and territories should be in supporting the education of students with disabilities.**

As previously stated, AAD is of the view that the Commonwealth and states and territories should be implementing world’s best practice for the education of Deaf students.

AAD would also like to urge the Committee to investigate the role of Government in deaf education in Scandinavian countries and the success rates of these programs.

We further urge the Committee to exercise extreme care when identifying what “success” means. Deaf students can be educated to a level equal to their hearing peers. We deplore any program that accepts “success” as meaning anything less than this.

**References:**

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Grosjean, F. (1992). *The Bilingual and Bicultural Person in the Hearing and in the Deaf World*. In *Sign Language Studies*, Winter 1992.