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Chair

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

Friday, 23 June 2000

Dear Chair

I would like to make a submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities.

My concerns are primarily about the provision of educational services to rural school-aged children who are profoundly deaf and rely on Auslan (the language of the deaf in Australia) for all communication¹.

In response to the published terms of reference, I would like to make the Committee aware of the following points.

In relation to term 1(a) iii

The signing deaf child in rural and remote locations

Children with profound hearing loss and who use Auslan are a very small minority of all children who are collected under the banner of deaf and hearing-impaired students. While most students who could be described as deaf or hearing-impaired in some way are educated in orally-based settings, profoundly deaf students who use sign to communicate are almost always educated in specialist school settings or in specialist teaching units in mainstream schools in major centres or cities. The educational reality for children who must use a manual form of language such as Auslan has been traditionally limited in a geographical sense. The

¹ In spite of the popular image of deafness being 'solved' and, by extension, deafness and signing being a 'thing of the past' signing deaf children are an ongoing reality. In spite of the increasing success of the cochlear implant, the device does not work optimally for all implantees and a significant number of implantations in children have failed to produce anywhere near expected results. Furthermore, not all cases of infantile deafness are treatable. These cases inevitably go on to communicate using sign language.

comparative rarity of the signing child and the historical centralism in the provision of educational services to deaf signing children has meant that the educational response to these children has been available only in the capital cities and, occasionally, in major regional centres. There has been an historical movement of deaf signing children into the cities and major regional centres due to their need to access appropriate educational services provided in these locations. Interestingly, the historical centralism has led to a consolidation of personnel and ancillary services for the deaf that are primarily based in the major cities in Australia. Moreover, the movement of the deaf away from rural and remote locations and towards major centres and cities has meant that there is little 'deaf presence' and historically low levels of service need for signing deaf found outside the major centres and cities.

Modern family attitudes to child rearing and educational provision are challenging old models of service organisation that created the centralism apparent in deaf educational services. While thirty years ago it seemed reasonable to many families that they should send their 4 and 5 year old children hundreds of kilometres away to attend specialist boarding schools for the deaf, parents nowadays would find such practices completely unacceptable. Parents now expect that their deaf child will be educated locally and that in most cases they will receive their education in an inclusive setting in a regular school.

This attitudinal shift is a reflection of society's increasing acceptance of and understanding of the personal and familial effects of disability. It is recognition of the right of the child to equitable access to optimum educational opportunity. Significantly it is a recognition of the right of such educational access without the child or their family having to further compromise their personal circumstances (such as family residential circumstances, family income sources) beyond the degree of disadvantage that such disabilities necessarily create.

Two illustrative cases are those of Stephen Wilson and William Taffe (my son). Both Stephen and William are 6 years old and live in rural circumstances far removed from the nearest deaf educational facility that could deliver a curriculum in Auslan. In fact, the nearest deaf facility would be 200 kilometres away in the regional centre of Shepparton. Neither boy speaks nor hears yet they are educated in local mainstream settings. In the case of Stephen, this is achieved through the use of full time interpreter services delivered by a fully qualified interpreter. In the case of William, this is achieved through the school employing a qualified teacher with near interpreter level Auslan skills who teaches side-by-side with the main classroom teacher on a full time basis. In William's school, the LOTE is Auslan (team taught by a deaf signing adult), teachers have special PD in deaf studies and Auslan, parent classes are provided, and whole segments of the classroom day are set aside as 'Auslan only' periods.

Both these outcomes are revolutionary in terms of rural deaf services in Australia. Up until the time our sons went to school, the standard approach to this problem was to simply suggest that the child be relocated to a special unit where boarding was possible or that the family move to a centre or city where services were in place. We are cautious of celebrating the outcomes for our sons though because the solutions we have negotiated with the school in both cases fall well outside the recommended funding levels specified by the respective educational authorities. In other words, on a blunt funding level basis our sons are receiving well in excess of what is recommended in a funding formula.

Catering for the needs of children with disabilities can only be successful when the individual needs of children *within their current circumstances* is taken into full account. Equity of access for profoundly disabled children, like the signing deaf, cannot be achieved if the sole tool for funding is a sliding scale providing a standard ‘compensation payment’ for degree of disability. The proper assessment of the needs of children like signing deaf in rural and remote communities can only be achieved when a consultative model of assessment is adopted. This must be an approach that is not dominated by a desire to affix a ‘fair and equal’ payment for degree of disability, but rather motivated by the need to establish the *real* educational support necessary to achieve equity of access for children with disabilities.

The fallacy of choice for rural signing deaf

Unlike children in urban locations, children in rural Australia don’t have access to a broad sweep of educational services. Specifically, rural children often have no option immediately available to them in order to meet their specific disability needs. Children may also be ‘trapped’ in a particular servicing model particular to the history, skills, or philosophical bent of local service providers. Some localities are particularly good at providing one kind of educational service but not another to the ‘same’ disability group. For example, there are a number of teachers of the deaf in our local area who would be wonderful if our son were able to access instruction through oral methods. Unfortunately, he can’t. So even though - ‘on paper’ - it would appear that we live in a land of educational plenty, not one of the locally employed teachers of the deaf actually has the skills to teach a deaf child who uses Auslan. If you are a parent of a deaf child who cannot access oral instruction on any level this service reality is frightening and threatens to significantly impair the educational progress of your child.

1(a) vii

Teacher of the deaf training

The numbers of teachers of the deaf have always been small in comparison to mainstream teachers. They have also been predominantly city-based. Some thought needs to be given as to how to develop training of teachers of the deaf. At present, there is a very high number of teachers of the deaf who know little to no Auslan. In other words, faced with a student who is a fluent signer, many teachers of the deaf could not actually teach a deaf child. While such a statement sounds like some kind of conundrum, it nevertheless accurately identifies the communicative limitations of many teachers of the deaf. Ironically, many teachers of the deaf simply cannot teach deaf children because they have no level of expertise in the language of their students. A concerted effort needs to be made to train new teachers of the deaf with specialist skills appropriate to the deaf client base they will have. There is a clear need to ensure that teachers of the deaf *can* undertake the duties with which they are charged. Additionally, it might be useful to explore some other options with accreditation and training where experienced interpreters might be fast tracked through teacher training programs, current classroom teachers who are fluent signers being accredited as teachers of the deaf, and also examining how deaf and hard of hearing people can train to be teachers of the deaf or specialist service providers.

I trust that comments made here will help the Committee understand some of the issues facing parents of children who are deaf. A more knowledgeable and sensitive educational system might be able to provide a more equitable educational response to the needs of the most disadvantaged and blameless members of our society: children with disabilities.

yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'R. Taffe', enclosed within a large, loopy oval flourish.

Richard Taffe