

Sunday 28 April, 2002

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee  
Commonwealth Government  
Canberra

**Senate Committee Inquiry into the Education of Students with Disabilities with reference to Deaf and hearing impaired students**

I am the mother of a 6-year-old boy named William who has a bilateral profound sensory-neural hearing loss. William also suffers from chronic otitis media (a persistent conductive loss), which virtually makes the little hearing he has negligible even with the most powerful hearing aids available.

Since his diagnosis some 6 years ago, my husband and I have been on a steep learning curve looking at the methods of educating a child as our own.

William's main mode of communication is through the Australian language of the Deaf – Auslan. He is being educated bilingually. Learning occurs through his first language, Auslan. English, written and read, is his second language. He learns English through his first language, Auslan.

I would like to address some of the Terms of Reference for the Senate Inquiry.

Note that when I refer to “Deaf children” I am for the most part referring to both Deaf and hearing-impaired children who, regardless of the level of hearing loss, are first and foremost visual learners.

1a)

***i & ii) The criteria used to define disability and the accuracy with which a student's disability related needs are being assessed***

Deafness is a disability of communication. A high level of specialist support is required to educate Deaf children and undoubtedly it is expensive. Most of the application forms I have completed relating to support funding for William have focussed on ideas such as “danger to himself or others” or issues of physical mobility and toileting. These ideas are largely irrelevant to Deaf children.

Deaf children need *access* to language to be able to be educated regardless of whether the language is spoken English or Auslan. To date, both in the pre-school and school settings the forms have not allowed for an explanation of the real needs associated with William's disability.

***iii) The particular needs of Deaf students from rural and remote areas***

In rural areas, parents are often faced with untrained staff teaching or assisting with the education of their children. Mostly these staff members are well meaning and

attempt to find out and learn about deafness. But no amount of kindness can substitute for the necessary specialist language skills required to teach a Deaf child to be literate in English. Often the parents are the ones teaching the staff.

In country areas, schools advertise for staff and position criteria are usually not met by applicants. Clearly there is a shortage of trained Teachers of the Deaf (TOD) especially in rural areas. Visiting Teachers (V.T.) are required to travel vast distances and expected to know all things about all disabilities. In some cases, children whose first language is Auslan receive visits from VT's who possess minimal signing skills. *If* an interpreter is deemed to be required, one may not be readily found. Moreover, if an interpreter is found they are often untrained and unqualified. By this, I mean that the "interpreter" may or may not have had any formal training in studying Auslan as a language nor have been formally accredited as an interpreter. Often the interpreter/aid has some "basic skills" in signing. These signing skills may not even be in Auslan, but some other simple language coding system such as Makaton.

In other cases, parents are unaware of the support that their child may be entitled to and therefore accept the level of education that is provided. This is especially true in remote areas. Some parents are good advocates for their children. When my son was aged two I was organising meetings with a range of people to discuss his educational options e.g., Regional Manager of Department of Education, Manager of Children Services (Human Services), local members of parliament, to name but a few. At one time, both Victorian government departments (i.e. Human Services and Education) claimed not to have responsibility for my son's early education (3-4 years) citing it as the other's responsibility. This was highly stressful for us as a family and I would not like another family to experience this treatment.

I would not be exaggerating to say that, in the country, VTs or Teachers of the Deaf (TOD) with little to no fluency in Auslan are regularly employed to educate Deaf children whose first and only accessible language for education at an early age is Auslan. The untrained interpreter aid 'supports' the student who struggles along with various educators as his or her language role model. The child returns home to a family who again have not learned the language to be able to communicate freely with him.

#### iv) *Early Intervention Programs*

Our family used a statewide early intervention service called Monnington Centre. I believe the service provided me with sound advice and supported me greatly. However, parents were often stressed by the impact that funding cuts and the service's highly stretched budget would have on the level of service to their children. This service attempted to visit families fortnightly during school term, however, the visits were far less frequent.

Another early intervention service called Taralye seemed to be more affluent offering more frequent visits to country families. However, these two organisations offered different approaches. Taralye focussed on cochlear implantation and oralism for profoundly Deaf children whilst Monnington Centre provided parents with both options and did not push one educational philosophy.

vii) ***Teacher Training and professional Development***

TOD in Victoria are poorly trained to work with **both** signing children and oral Deaf children. The signing component of Melbourne University's TOD course is minimal. I cannot see how a TOD can teach a signing Deaf child if the teacher herself is not fluent in Auslan.

The Dept of Education through Monnington Centre suggested that Auslan was the easiest language for Deaf children to access as deaf kids learn mostly through their vision. As previously stated, I support this view. However, that Department is unable to provide enough fluent users of Auslan who are TOD.

The same applies for "interpreters" at school. Few Interpreter/aids have had formal qualifications in Auslan. In many cases, the 'interpreter' is the language model for the student but has limited formal Auslan skills. This is the same as someone modelling English who has limited skills in English.

At the same time, parents who need to learn Auslan to be able to adequately communicate with their children have little access to Auslan classes. Parents attend whatever limited basic classes are available – if any – and struggle with communication as best as they can. Local Deaf people may offer assistance by way of signs representing a vocabulary of nouns but unlike most native users of English in Australia, few Deaf adults have studied their language as a subject at school as we did. There are few qualified to teach Auslan. The situation is bad in the city but tragic in the country.

In summary, access to education for signing Deaf children is limited. It is limited principally by the lack of language models the child has. Hearing parents of Deaf children are not usually native users of Auslan and have minimal access to formally learn Auslan to allow for freedom of communication. Even the teachers and aids are usually not fluent users of Auslan for the Deaf child. We know that Deaf children are visual learners but access through a visual language for education and general communication is rarely available. This primary and basic aspect of educating Deaf children needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

I would be happy to discuss these issues with you further.

Yours sincerely



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**Cristina Taffe**