Stepping-Stones to Teaching: historical context on disability access from a personal perspective

*"Success is to be measured not so much by the position one has reached in life as the obstacles overcome while trying to succeed". (*Booker T. Washington*)*

Impact of Butler's Act, 1944

No route to a career in teaching was open to people with a disability in the UK until the 1960s. The medical regulations saw to that. Of the few deaf people brave enough to confront these barriers, even fewer breached them. Two key elements paved the way to a breakthrough: legislative changes in education and a big dollop of chutzpah from the people at the gate.

This radical political impetus for change in education began before and continued after the 1939-1945 world war. In relation to children with special needs the most significant of these changes came with Butler's Act of 1944. Up to that time, children with a handicap (the term used then) were not included in the education system at all. Such children were treated as an entirely separate category of provision based mainly on medical determinants. The overall aim of the legislation passed during this period was to bring them equality of access to education for the first time in history.

The focus of this movement was on the capabilities of children with handicaps, on what they could do given the right opportunities, as opposed to the usual negative assumptions as to what they could not. Butler's Act of 1944 brought them into the fold, effecting the most dramatic change by transferring responsibility for such children from Health to the Local Education Authorities so that special needs education became part of the newly formed national single framework for all education provision. This significant action created a momentum towards the formation of a level playing field aimed at empowering handicapped children by giving them the first chance they ever had to make progress within the system according to the age, aptitude and ability of each individual child.

Except that it didn't quite happen that way and it could be argued that this process of achieving equality of access is still ongoing today. The initial result was another form of segregation within the framework – to separate enclosures that came to be known as special schools. My experience as a consumer of special needs provision is one example of the impact of this measure.

I was born the year after Butler's Act, which was to my advantage. My early experience of life was as a child complete with all five senses and fully included within my family and the community where I lived in a small town on the north Ayrshire coast. My life at that time would be described as the same ordinary existence led by almost every other child who lived there. When we were not at school or in church, our playground was the road between our homes. It was our social network and entertainment venue where we found our own resources, played our street games and solved our own problems in a stable and safe environment.

My disjointed recollections of that period are mainly auditory rather than visual. Constants included my father's music on the piano and the violin; listening to the elements and hearing the sound of the sea in a conch shell; overhearing conversations such as my big brother telling my mother a two–footed mouse had been at the Crunchie in his bedroom drawer; lying on my stomach on the floor of the living room to listen to Mario Lanza on the wireless while ignoring my mothers calls to tea until her voice reached danger pitch and hearing our nursery school teacher telling us that we could only have orange juice if we had a dose of castor oil first and struggling to make up my mind if it was worth it. I do not know if I retained a good auditory memory because I lost my hearing or because I kept on trying to recall it afterwards. Whatever the reason, this tendency was to serve me well, not only in retaining my speech when I could no longer hear it, but also in preserving a recognizable Scottish accent for the rest of my life. The downside was that I was deprived of my natural orientation towards receiving input mainly via sound so was forced to find other, necessarily visual, and far less effective ways.

At that time, Scotland was renowned for its excellent education so I was very well prepared to deal with the loss when it came. We all went to nursery school when we were three years old, a place where we learnt to play together, to share things and to sing nursery rhymes. We wore brand new, brown leather satchels on our backs for homework on our first day at public school when we were five years old. Our mothers walked us round the corner to the school in the same group of friends we had shared from babyhood. Our classroom was grey as the deck of an old ship, the teaching mainly done by rote and drill, but we had the 3 R's ground into us early on, which was another blessing in my case, as it turned out.

And I cultivated ambitions for all the wrong reasons – while at public school I recall plotting to get up the steps to the highest tier of desks in my class so I could eat my toffees without threat from the teacher hearing the crackle of the wrapping paper and reaching for her tawse. I remember the arithmetic tests because I cheated. We had to line up in a very long line at the front while the teacher walked up and down asking the answer to consecutive sums and I was savvy enough to work ahead to know what question would come round for me. I'm sure others did the same. Reinforcement in the learning process came from the Sunday school Bible classes at my Presbyterian church along with the pulpit thumping sermons of our thundering, totally bald Presbyterian Minister. By the time I was seven years old I was speaking, reading and writing at a level appropriate to my age and perfectly happy with my world.

The catalyst came in the year 1952 when, to quote the poet Robert Frost:

'Two roads diverged in a wood and I –
I took the one less travelled by
And that has made all the difference'

Unlike the poet I had no choice about taking the path less travelled by. It was forced upon me as a result of a medical 'accident', which certainly made a dramatic change to the direction and quality of my whole life.

Vague recollections remain of being in Ballochmyle Children's Hospital and of bright orange lights flashing by as I was transferred to another hospital because, as I learnt later, I had succumbed to the TB Meningitis epidemic of that time. I recall Ward 12 of Irvine Central Hospital with more episodic clarity and appear to have had some fun there when I wasn't too poorly. My mother recounted an occasion over Christmas when she heard my voice leap out of the old box wireless singing 'Waltzing Matilda'. Truly, I must have found the hospital a great place to be where you got lots of treats and visitors and loads of comics too, like Oor Wullie and The Broons. I became used to the constant noise from trolleys clattering, nurses stomping in their heavy shoes, chairs scraping, bedpans clanging, people shouting, children crying until the ritual of moving the flowers to a table in the centre of the ward was observed and the ward settled down for the nught.

In the hush and glow of the dim nightlight one of the older patients would always lead the prayer for the seven other of us sick children in the ward placed in four beds at either side. One night we waited for her to settle us down as usual. I can't remember her name, only that she was much older than the rest of us. She was in the top bed at the left hand side of the ward while I was in the bottom bed on the right. She'd had a bad day and I knew why because I had heard her argue with her Dad for a party he said he couldn't afford. She asked me to lead the prayer instead. Maybe at the age of seven I was the next oldest one. I'm not sure, but I do remember that there had been a baby boy in a cot in a side room and a girl in the opposite bed and that both of them had died. I pulled the starched white sheet over my head until the others urged me to get on with it so they could get to sleep.

At first I tried to pretend the voice wasn't mine as I offered up to the void a tentative murmur: 'This night as I lie down to sleep' and the poor wee line wavered uncertainly up to the ceiling all by itself. Suddenly, out of the silence of each bed there rose in perfect unison an arch of voices with a resonance so overpowering that I can still remember it clearly today. Emboldened, I responded with a stronger second line, 'I pray the Lord my soul to keep' and thrilled at the crescendo of voices coming back to me, reverberating in my bony chest. 'If I should die before I wake' followed in a confident flow that blended softly into the silence with 'I pray the Lord my soul to take'. I woke up in the morning to a silence of a different kind.

People who can hear have no idea what total silence is like. My sister once tried to cut out all sound so she could empathize with me but was unable, no matter how hard she tried, to block out sound as there was always something she could still hear through the wrappings she had wound round her head, which was probably her attempts to keep breathing. A Liverpool MP I used to canvass for in my later life had deaf parents and she wanted to understand what they were experiencing so, on a visit to the Space Centre in Houston, she took the opportunity to enter a sealed chamber where there was no sound. Immediately she felt disoriented and imbalanced in a way that really scared her. Thankfully I did not feel any such fear for the simple reason I was totally unaware that anything had happened to me.

Of course I could sense that something was very different but I simply thought everything had become still for some reason, like the time a Doctor is about to make his rounds and a hush falls on the ward. I could still 'hear' by association with what I could see so that a sound was unconsciously attached to a relevant vision. It was when I could not see something that I was oblivious to the presence of sound. Inevitably the first shock happened when I found a nurse standing by my bed. My reaction was to laugh because I thought she had crept up on me on purpose. You just do not appreciate the warning alert sound gives you until you lose it. Only I still failed to connect the dots when she spoke and I couldn't hear her. Neither could I hear my own voice when I tried to respond like a frog that had lost its croak. Even then it never occurred to me that the fault lay with me and for weeks after that sudden loss of hearing I continued to think everyone else had gone bonkers for reasons best known to themselves.

Probably the protect system had cut in or I was just too young to conceive of such an abstract as the loss of hearing, but it was not until I recovered and was allowed home that the truth struck. We were sitting in the living room, my parents and I. With me on the sofa in the middle and a parent in armchairs on either side, I looked from one to the other. Each mouth was working silently – like a pair of goldfish in a bowl. The slow realization dawned that they were talking. I finally understood that they were actually talking to each other. It was a short step from there to a panicky awareness that I was not hearing them. I have no recollection about what happened after that.

My parents were confused. Both my sisters had succumbed to the TB epidemic of that time but emerged from the hospital unscathed, but they had been told that I was failing fast. It appeared that, when they had agreed to the administration of streptomycin and they were told about the possible side effects of that new drug from America, they believed the risk was worth taking in the circumstances. So when I began to recover they assumed all was well, especially as they were unaware of how fast my lipreading had kicked in. How could they be aware of something they had never heard of but lipreading can happen spontaneously when a child has fluent speech already, a good grasp of English along with a working awareness of phonics. Hence this skill of reading speech from lip movements became my unconscious tool. This meant my parents remained in denial for quite a while even though my mother had noticed that I only responded when I was looking directly at the speaker. Otherwise I demonstrated a total lack of awareness of sound unless it was conveyed through vibration, like a chair being dragged across the floor to my bed, and every time I responded to that alert it gave my parents false hope that the Doctors were wrong. Basically they were bewildered at the loss of their 'perfectly normal' child with no idea about how they were going to adapt to and protect this damaged version of the child they knew.

The Significance of the Eichholz Report, 1932

When I lost my hearing my parents truly believed my life was over. They dragged me from coast to coast, from Glasgow to Edinburgh and other places in search of an Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist who would give them hope of a cure. They had difficulty accepting that there was no cure for nerve deafness. The streptomycin had destroyed the auditory nerves to the brain. It could be said that I was one of the 'lucky' ones in that I survived TB meningitis, but 'unlucky' in the after-effects. I have no doubt that, if cochlear implants had been available at that time, my parents would have jumped at the chance. Who knows if that would have made for a better story, or worse?

Back in my home environment the consequences quickly made themselves apparent. Though everything appeared to be the same, it had all changed. All of a sudden there appeared to be a lot of what I was told I could no longer do now that I had been placed, unknowingly, in a box labeled 'Handicapped'. They might as well have engraved it on my forehead for all to see as evidence of damaged goods. My mother tried to explain that people had to know in order to understand when I didn't respond to them; that they would think me rude. How did I relate to this identity crisis? I reacted with fierce displays of resentment, resistance and denial.

Even now I have not quite reconciled myself to it, this permanent vulnerability that came with the loss of sound. It made independence so hard to achieve and the loss of personal privacy, brought on by the need to rely more on others for information, was character changing. A measure of acceptance occurred over time, especially when I discovered that I was not alone – not the only deaf girl in the world I thought myself to be – and so was able to get together with others like myself to advocate for change in terms of disability equality rights and access to information. In this way we felt empowered by taking control of our own destiny and took pride in the creation of the Deaf Broadcasting Council that succeeded in securing legislative measures that gave deaf people access to TV programmes via subtitles and sign language. Also in a series of disability discrimination measures that became law through the joint efforts of all disability groups. But possibly the greatest development of all was the rapid developments in electronic communication devices. A broad spectrum of opportunities opened up with electronic mail and text mobiles, which helped the drive towards parity in life. In spite of all this enhanced enlightenment, because I was fully aware of what I had lost, I found that I could never be myself again, an independent listener who could connect or disconnect at will to or from any conversation, piece of music, environmental sound. Where once anything that was going on around me automatically became part of my knowledge, acquired without effort and in an environment where I once played an inherent part, was gone. From then on, socializing was sheer hard work where a constant state of alertness was essential and where lipreading sapped the energy to the extent that the landscape of my life became two-dimensional, flat and auditorily sterile.

Yet much of that negativity about what could be expected of me in this new capacity could have been avoided if the approach to my hearing loss had been built on what I still had and not on what I had lost. After all, I was still the same girl with the same capabilities, yet it felt as if I had been unplugged from the mainstream of family, friends and community and re-routed elsewhere via a faulty transformer. In this context how was I supposed to re-connect? It was inadvertently made very hard for me from the start.

As a kick-off to my life as a newly disabled child, I was deprived of my local school, just round the corner, where I was doing very well. I was never told why I could not go back. It was as if I had lost my marbles along with my hearing. In their infinite wisdom the authorities made that decision, not because they considered, much less assessed, that my newly acquired needs could not be met where I was already settled, but because it was the arbitrary and inflexible policy of that time to segregate children with a disability into special schools. Where then was this level playing field of Butler's? Who were my parents to question this move? They didn't even know what questions to ask. Previously so secure in knowing the process by which their other three children had been educated: nursery school, then public school then Ardrossan Academy, they floundered in unknown territory and were forced to take advice on trust, not that they appear to have been given any choice in the matter. And that is where my parents also became vulnerable.

Clearly Butler's intended 'level' playing field still had a long way to go. While children with disabilities were brought within the single national framework under the local Authorities, they were still educated separately and subjected to a wide variation in standards and expectations as to what such segregated children could achieve in the special schools they attended. My own experience is a case in point.

The transfer happened a year before the Queen's Coronation in 1953. While my pals turned the corner into Caledonia Road as usual, I went the other way and caught a bus to Dalry, which was six miles inland. It meant the loss of everything that was familiar to be replaced by an unfamiliar school full of strangers, located down a lonely lane behind the main street of an unknown town. As an introductory badge of membership they clamped me with a hearing aid as big as my slight, seven year old torso. It took the form of a harness like a shoulder bag with two heavy batteries inside, one yellow and one purple, each measuring approximately 5"x 2" which kept banging against my hip as I ran about at playtime. An ominous black microphone the size of a bar of tar soap slotted onto the shoulder strap at the front from which a long lead coiled upwards carrying a unit with a rubber tipped mould to jam into the ear. All it did was buzz in my lug like a trapped bumblebee, which bore no resemblance to any recognizable sound. The whole lot ended up in the nettle patch so often they stopped trying to force me to wear that ugly and restrictive harness that was no help at all.

Every day seemed to follow a set pattern. It felt so slow and repetitive, more like a dull and prolonged holiday where we did crafts and simple arithmetic following a textbook page by page. English was also taught out of a grammar workbook with no actual writing or interactive teaching that I can recall. In retrospect, this was probably due to the fact that there was a total of 23 pupils covering the full age range with only three teachers. How that was supposed to be a more appropriate placement for me, I'll never understand when all it would have taken to let me continue to thrive where I had been was some reasonable adjustment to allow for my newly acquired lipreading skills. I became stultified with such a pitiful curriculum that lacked the momentum and energetic challenges of my mainstream school and I missed my wee pals. Inevitably, given that emerging stubborn streak in my personality, this enforced isolation and reduced expectation of my capabilities enraged me sufficiently to fight back for what I perceived to be the loss of where I belonged in order to go somewhere I did not want to be. One day, I just turned that corner into Caledonia Road with the others, walked into the classroom and sat down at my old desk. Imagine the furore. The teachers didn't know what to do with me. My poor mother was called to come and fetch me home, but I suspect that was when my parents took a close look at just what this 'special' school was offering.

By then the political scenario had moved on and offered an escape route. Way back in 1932, the Eichholz Report had addressed the need to provide for deaf children with academic potential by proposing that a grammar school be opened for them. Yet it was not until 1st January 1946 that this actually took shape at Dene Hollow, in Burgess Hill, Sussex. It transferred to Arlington Manor in Newbury, Berks under the name of the Mary Hare Grammar School, which was officially opened by its Patron, Princess Margaret, on 19th July 1950. Mary Hare herself had been a suffragette who took female emancipation a step further. She believed that the opening of a co-educational grammar school would offer a unique opportunity for girls to benefit from a high standard of education along with the boys and by that measure she created a pathway to a fruitful career for girls on equal terms with boys. When her school opened she specified that more girls than boys should be enrolled each year. Serendipity, though I was oblivious of my great good fortune when I took up my place there in 1957.

It may appear that the prospect of going from one segregated special school to another was questionable in view of my prior experience, especially when the alternative was located 400 miles away from home. My parents were in a real quandary that resulted in trouble and strife in 'oor hoose'. The fear of not knowing what would be happening to me from such a distance and the problem of making contact were prominent. Ultimately their choice boiled down to two options: either to keep me safe at home at the expense of a good education or take a huge risk that could give me the opportunity to have a self-sufficient future. In the end they left that decision to me (I wanted to go because I had just read about midnight feasts and lacrosse sticks in Enid Blyton's 'Mallory Towers') so when I was offered a place it was agreed that if I did not like it after one term I would not have to go back.

There can be no doubt in my mind that the right choice was made in the circumstances. That unique grammar school gave me a sterling education in almost every respect. The move to Mary Hare Grammar School was a watershed that placed me in an environment where my deafness was negated because all my peers were the same and in sufficient numbers to allow for a good social life and a wide choice of lifelong friends. Ultimately it provided me with the university entrance requirements that enabled me to go on to lead a ground-breaking career in teaching, a major achievement that otherwise would have been unattainable.

One surprising downside was gender rather than disability related. In my final year of A levels, for example, when it came to considering my university options - whether to read English or History I had to take into account the intensity of the lipreading both these verbose subjects would require. I concluded that it might be safer to take Art, which was a practical subject, so I applied to and was accepted for the Glasgow School of Art (GSA). The Principal was not supportive of any of these options and predicted that I would be married within two years of leaving school. The fact that he proved to be correct in that respect still does not excuse him.

However, it has to be said that the most serious disadvantage of being educated in that rarified, sheltered and exclusive environment was that it did little to prepare us for the world outside school. To go from there to higher education or employment and be the only deaf person around was no picnic. To attempt to enter a profession at that time was inconceivable, which is why I was later to advocate the development of a National Inclusion Strategy, as outlined in a previous article in the January 2018 issue of the BATOD Magazine.

The Enlightenment of Warnock and the Education Act, 1981

There was no access to a career in teaching, as I was to discover. Not for deaf people anyway. The first indication of the barriers was when I came to the end of my first year at the GSA. Their assessment was that they did not think I had sufficient talent to make a living out of Art (true), but that I would have made a good teacher except that the profession would not accept people with a disability. That did not concern me overmuch as I had never thought about teaching as a career at that stage. After that, any aspirations I may have had about a career were suspended while I got married and had two children. It was not until both my children were at school that the subject of teaching came up by accident.

A new school for deaf children had opened in Childwall, Liverpool so I volunteered to help catalogue their new library while my little boy was at playgroup in the mornings and his sister was in primary school. The Acting Head asked me if I would be interested in teaching English to the FE classes held in the evening as well. When I said I was not qualified to teach he said it 'didn't matter' as I had A level English Literature and he thought I would be a good role model for the students. But of course it did matter. I found it mattered very much.

To teach children or adults with any impediment to their learning requires very real teaching skills and I had no such experience. It was the incentive to do justice to my FE students that motivated me to take my first degree in Humanities with the Open University. By the time I graduated with a BA I had discovered how badly the system had let down so many highly intelligent deaf people of all ages in Liverpool due to the low expectations as to what they were able to achieve. In order to do something about it that was not purely remedial I felt motivated to get into a position where I could help prevent the damage happening in the first place. Obviously that involved teaching deaf children as well. To that end I decided to take a Bachelor of Education degree with Liverpool University in 1975.

Once again, I found that politics had laid more stepping-stones to facilitate a way forward so the timing of that decision was propitious. In 1973 Margaret Thatcher, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, had proposed a Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People. This enquiry had been set up in 1974 and chaired by Mary Warnock who produced a full report in 1978. In chapter 12, section 12.75 it was recommended that '*there should be more opportunities for people with disabilities to become teachers and obtain teaching posts in both special* and *ordinary schools'*. This established the first official endorsement of such a concept. Moreover there was mention of the '*very special way'* such teachers could contribute to the self-confidence of children with the same disability and to the promotion of more positive attitudes towards disability in ordinary schools. The keyword about 'flexibility' being needed in order to enable teachers with disabilities to become full members of staff was repeated in section 12.76. The recommendations of this Report were unanimously agreed by the Committee of Enquiry and enshrined in the Education Act of 1981 when it became law.

Clearly that law did not come in time to help me with my application to take the B.Ed degree with Liverpool University in 1975 but I discovered, via the Mary Hare grapevine, that a precedent had already been set. An enterprising individual, possibly benefiting in advance from the new climate of radical thinking on the subject, had quietly opened that door. Alison Berry (nee Stewart) had qualified as a teacher at Charlotte Mason Teachers Training College in Ambleside in 1973. She went on to train as a teacher of the deaf at Lady Spencer Churchill College in Oxford and qualified in 1974. Another ex-Mary Hare student, Angela Terry qualified the year after. As a precaution I used these precedents to counter the negative 'it can't be done brigade' and smooth my own way forward by reducing the 'fear of being first' on the part of the University.

There was genuine cause for concern about my chances of being accepted due to the number of other profoundly deaf graduates who had come up against the medical regulations and failed the hearing test. For that reason the number of deaf aspiring teachers was severely curtailed because the 'flexibility' denoted in the 1981 Education Act was still to come. Luckily, in my case, a bit of chutzpah worked a treat. I pointed out to the Doctor who examined me that the wording on the medical form stated the need to 'communicate effectively' at a specified distance. He agreed that I could communicate effectively in my own way (by lipreading) so he signed the form and I was through for training.

In a way, entering higher education symbolized my return to the mainstream context. It would not have succeeded but for the support I received from staff and students throughout my time at Notre Dame, the Teachers Training College affiliated to Liverpool University. They were unreservedly in favour of giving me the best shot at a chance to manage the training and to qualify as a teacher within mainstream education as was the prerequisite before moving on to the mandatory training to become a teacher of deaf children.

At first I was determined to make my way without asking that any allowances be made for me incase this was seen as an admission of weakness on my part. This meant that I had to attend all lectures as part of the registration process even though I found it impossible to glean any information that way. As I was unable to lipread lecturers who moved about the room and turned their backs while they spoke I tried to borrow the notes made by other students but found they were mainly an aide memoir for individuals, which made no sense at all without reference to the context in which the notes were made. Soon I cottoned on to those students who tended to write down every single word so gave them duplicating paper to use on my behalf and, at times, some of the lecturers passed on their notes as well. While this ensured I received most of the information I needed I lost a lot of time in the process because I had to work on the notes and reading lists before I could begin on the assignments and that was on top of looking after my family and working two evenings a week with the FE students. I owe a great deal to the constant support offered by my husband at home, but the pressure was high until I felt I had established my worth sufficiently to ask if I could have a lipspeaker to help me follow the key lectures during the course.

Consent for this support was a real turning point for all concerned because it was that one request that led to an all-embracing form of inclusion and to a lot of laughter as well. The British Deaf Association sent me a sign language interpreter instead of a lipspeaker at a time when I had no knowledge of sign language. He turned out to be a big hit with the students. For instance, when an outside lecturer came to talk about Art and put the lights out to show his slides, he expressed his annoyance at 'the couple that kept canoodling behind the curtain'. The whole hall erupted with laughter. Poor guy had not been informed in advance of what to expect – that I would need light to see my interpreter. More significant was the fact the other students could see what facilitated my access to information – simple things that made a difference, like waving or touching to gain my attention, facing me, speaking clearly in good light with no more than one talking at a time. They became so interested that some of them wanted to learn sign language to the extent they all watched the sign language interpreters while the lecturers found themselves addressing the air. Others became so deaf aware that I felt myself to be part of the group at last. The bonus came when they began to invite me out socially and I was able to take and give the same stick as everyone else. I graduated in 1978 and was awarded the Stokes Medal for 'Excellence in Teaching'. I couldn't help feeling I might have achieved a similar satisfaction with inclusion had I been left in my old school in Scotland. Having said that, the secondary stage may well have been a very different story.

Paradoxically, given all that goodwill and support while training to be a teacher, it was odd to find that the most prejudice against me taking the mandatory training to qualify as a teacher of the deaf came from the very profession concerned with teaching deaf children. Were they not aware that deaf children grew up to be deaf adults? Did they have no aspirations for them to aim high? Were they satisfied to maintain the status quo in small classes with poor outcomes? In sharp contrast to the open minded and flexible nature of support offered in Liverpool, those concerned with the training of Teachers of the Deaf (TODs) at that time were rigid in making no concessions.

For example, after my first successful six week teaching practice (TP) in a docklands school in Liverpool where I taught a mixed ability class of 42 Junior pupils with no help at all, it was agreed that I should do the next TP in a special school so that the focus would be on my teaching skills as opposed to my communication skills. Yet, when I began to apply for the training to become a qualified teacher of the deaf, the attitude was very different. While they were fully aware that I was unable even to hear a thunderclap, the teaching of speech was a compulsory part of the BATOD Diploma Course (British Association of Teachers of the Deaf). It involved the Examiner observing a speech lesson with one pupil from my class and also another taken from any other class in the school. The day this took place was make or break. I knew I had passed all the written papers but had no idea of my performance in the practical that included the teaching of speech. At the end of the session, the Examiner asked me how I had done it. I admitted that I had studied the speech record of every single child in the school, together with their current speech objectives so I simply applied the theory I knew to be relevant in each case. He told me that, on the basis of the practical examination, I had more than made the grade.

As there was a 35% failure rate with the Diploma at that time I felt nothing other than relief. In spite of this inflexibility, BATOD was by far the best choice as the course was by correspondence, which meant I could stay at home with my family and continue my teaching while I studied. I had first applied to the Lady Spencer Churchill College in Oxford but when I was asked what I would say to the parent of a deaf child who did not want a deaf teacher, I was taken aback. Would such a question be asked about what a hearing candidate would say to the same question from a deaf parent? I merely said that I would ask that parent how s/he would feel if this denial was one day applied to his/her own child and declined their offer of a place. One option that was never considered was Manchester University Department of Education and Audiology which was highly resistant to deaf people entering the profession at that time on the alleged grounds that they would be unable to teach speech or deliver auditory training. It was a defensive reaction where there was an apparent reluctance to consider the positives deaf teachers could bring to the profession, a stance that was to jar with the pending legislation resulting from the Warnock Report. I did not trouble myself to apply for a place with such overt bias and qualified as a TOD with the BATOD Diploma in 1980.

The legislative stepping-stones had provided access to teaching as a career for deaf people. What happened after that was up to them and the measure of their tenacity for seizing every opportunity offered them.

Access to the Classroom: 1978-1986

After teachers' status was acquired and the DFE Registration secured there was no further legislation to pave the way. Once you stepped inside the classroom you were on your own – a terrifying prospect for all new teachers who are aware of the huge responsibility given the fact that teaching touches lives – both ways.

My teaching career began at the Alice Elliott special school for deaf children in Liverpool in 1978 and I remained there until 1986. It was a strange anomaly to be the only deaf teacher in a school full of deaf children. Even within the legislative landscape that facilitated access to teaching and the acquisition of the required qualifications there were many in the profession who still questioned the viability of deaf people teaching deaf children, no matter how well qualified they were for the role.

At the International Congress of Teachers of the Deaf in Manchester in 1985 I was asked to present a paper at a fringe meeting. The title given was: 'What contribution can deaf teachers make to the education of deaf children?' This I found to be both patronizing and defensive so I began my talk with the question in reverse. What contribution did my colleagues with normal hearing and no direct experience of the challenges of being deaf think they made that was better? It was a nonsense question when, as professionals, we should value all our different contributions and work together for the benefit of the children.

It was at that same Conference that I discovered myself to be at odds with the aggressive advocacy for British Sign Language demonstrated there by a section of the deaf community against the oral/aural method of communication that was the main practice of the time. What I was opposed to was the extremism on both sides because neither was putting the child at the centre and accepting that no two children were the same and that all their individual needs were distinct and deserving of respect. To my mind so both methods had equal value but were only relevant if they met the educational needs of the child. That stance earned me no kudos from either side but it had always been my belief that teachers of the deaf should be responsible for providing a communication-rich learning environment for their pupils and to that end they had a responsibility to cultivate a wide and flexible range of methods to be applied where and when appropriate. It was my first class that had taught me the necessity of that approach and thereby initiated an intensive refinement of my fledgling teaching skills.

No teacher ever forgets his or her first class. Where the staff had been happy enough to accept me there as a classroom assistant, not all of them were so accepting when I returned as a professional on equal terms with them. Funnily enough it was the children who were most wary because, as far as they could see, I spoke like all the other teachers, so there was no outward sign that I was deaf. It was only after a lot of 'experimenting' to attract my attention that they became convinced that I really was 'one of them' and they were quite chuffed until they found out how tough I could be when they were underperforming or misbehaving. I was on a steep learning curve the whole time, but it was these children with their challenges that convinced me I had found my métier in teaching.

There were only nine of them to a class but they were just as hard work as the big docklands class I had taught for my TP. Over a period of eight years, my approach to teaching was informed, not by the hierarchy, but by the pupils. The main factor that enabled me to experiment freely with a range of methods in response to the individual learning needs of each child at the very start of my career was actually due to a weakness in the school's structure. These were the days before the prescriptive National Curriculum (NC) set out a system aimed at raising standards in pupil achievement. In the NC Levels of Attainment were set out that specified standards pupils were expected to reach by the end of each of the four designated Key Stages and Pupil Profiles recorded and monitored pupil progress over time in accordance with that framework. Though I understand why the NC was necessary, the sheer volume of paperwork this entailed impacted upon precious time that could more usefully have been spent teaching the children so it was counter productive in that respect. I often think that such a curriculum was designed for people who could not teach and became a serious inhibitor for those who could.

In later years, when Performance Management was introduced with an emphasis on professional development, standards of teaching began to rise steadily. However, the School Development Plans were more productive in that they were to become essential management tools whereby staff had to operate as a cohesive team with a common direction. In that way the necessary consistency and continuity of pupil progress was ensured through regular recording, monitoring and review. In the situation I entered in Liverpool, the staff there at that time operated as separate units and delivered what they wanted behind the closed doors of the classroom. In the absence of any directed approach I had to make my own plans within my own classroom on a trial and error basis, which was to serve me well as a teacher and, according to their external exam results, my pupils positive outcomes were the evidence that the methods worked.

The main advantage of such a situation is that it does not tie the teacher to any one established policy or method. The vacuum this absence of overall directive empowered the pupils to set the scene, which accorded well with the training I had received at Notre Dame because it had emphasized a child-centred approach to teaching. To me, it made perfect sense to take my cue from the pupils as to where they were and where they needed to go in terms of language development. Literacy is always at the core of everything. Not only does it give the pupils access to every other area of the curriculum it gives them independence in life. I owe so much to my first pupils for their willing collaboration in their own learning, and in mine.

They were a class of nine lively nine year olds: Beverley, Karen, Claire, Janet, Geraldine, John, Billy, Michael and Anthony. It had to be easier than the forty little terrors down the docks, but it proved to be just as challenging only in a different kind of way. With my BA degree I could have done a one year post graduate certificate in education (PGCE) and taught at the Secondary school stage but I chose to be trained at the Primary school stage so that I could become as familiar as possible with child development such as Piaget's theories of cognitive development and everything I could find on language development because that was the key to teaching deaf children at every stage.

Then there were the practicalities of how these theories applied in order to teach English to children who were mainly prelingually deaf and who could only have, at best, distorted sounds through a hearing-aid. Much as I absorbed each phase of my training it was the children who taught me how to teach. In their infinite variety as individuals and as a group, they showed me the way to respond by developing a wide range of approaches because there is never one right way for all children. Teaching styles must follow learning needs. It is the child that determines the approach, not any policy the school may devise and the first issue to be resolved was that of establishing a clear and comfortable line of communication between us.

I came to the issue of communication methods vaguely aware of the controversy that polarized the profession concerned with teaching deaf children. I did not use sign language myself because I did not need it. Neither of the special schools I attended as a pupil used sign language but my observation of those in my class was that they did need it. Whereas I had acquired spoken and written English and the ability to read effortlessly with the use of phonics before I lost my hearing, these children were not so fortunate. They had to acquire English the hard way, especially with a language fraught with exceptions to the rule in grammar, and it was clear that very little could be accomplished on either side unless we could communicate effectively.

Anxious to please, the children would nod enthusiastically when I checked to see if they had understood the learning objective of each lesson, but when I asked them to begin writing they were at a total loss. The standard of their reading was found to be low but the lack of written English skills was of serious concern. Yet when I watched them signing fluently to each other with a vibrancy of visual language I suggested we do a deal. If they would teach me their language, I would teach them mine. They found it hilarious and I was later to find that the joke was on me when a deaf adult from the local deaf community at Parkway observed them and let me down gently. The children had invented their own signs up as they went along. I had to unlearn all the signs the children used and take courses in British Sign Language to prepare for the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) accredited qualifications, which I did gaining passes at Levels 1 and 2.

But the children's own 'homemade' signs were still respected and phased out gradually when a new Headteacher asked the Manpower Services Commission to fund deaf native BSL users from the local deaf community to teach staff and children too. By then, the children's purpose had been served in establishing a rapport between us and on that sound basis the teaching of English as a second language could begin in earnest to try and make up for lost time. I fail to understand why this futile battle about oral/aural versus manual methods should persist. While in full agreement that speech is important, I do not believe the use of sign language is detrimental in any way. In fact, by understanding language, the value of speech becomes clearer to the children who then become motivated to improve their intelligibility. But speech alone will not give them a future. Only literacy will do that, especially expertise in written English as specified in the Eichholz Report, 1932: "*The real test of the value of language training is to be found in the capacity of the child to express himself in writing",* a belief endorsed in the Perry Robinson Report century in 1958. To that end – let each need be served, whatever that may be.

The really tricky bit was how to get a prelingually deaf child to write with confidence and enjoyment. They were so afraid of making mistakes. Again, the answer lay in harnessing the children's strengths and concrete experiences. They loved to 'talk' about their experiences, their feelings and their opinions. In effect, they were their own living forms of writing: the storyline, the characters and descriptions conveyed through their body language, gestures, facial expressions, and signs. That was when they came alive and confident. The task then was to enable them to retain and repeat this fluency - on paper.

Essentially they were encouraged to write down freely what they had signed. Initially no corrections were made. The aim was to help them write in freeflow, with a mixture of words, drawings and symbols, until they accepted that it was ok to make mistakes. It was a slow business spread over years of work but, in order to maintain their confidence, corrections were focused on what element of a child's writing, if improved, would make the major difference to the whole. Bit by bit their writing skills began to improve so that they were able to self-correct, a short piece at a time, and make use of subject-verb-object strategies, such as the Fitzgerald Key system, to translate BSL into English sentences. From there they would add conjunctions to lengthen their sentences and introduce other grammatical elements such as pronouns, adjectives and adverbs when they were ready. Plurals, verb tenses and articles tended to remain a difficulty throughout, but class mutual help correction sessions made it fun.

Formal work began when the children were ready as they needed the discipline of rote and drill at some point using a cross-curricular theme so that a core vocabulary could be established and reinforced by ties to every other area of the curriculum. Books played a central part at every stage though it was difficult to find books appropriate to their age and interests but at a level where they could be comfortably stretched. I therefore wrote adaptations of the book choices the children made. Group reading meant each child read a passage from the book, then explained it to the class and answered questions from the others. They were given comprehension questions and from that they learnt how to structure their answers according to the structure of the questions and then write a précis by combining the answers, going on to use paragraphs with the précis of each chapter. Their free writing continued with only priority element marking as this served as an accurate indicator of the level of new vocabulary and grammar being absorbed into their free usage. All this and more took years and years of consistent and applied work.

The most memorable reward came the time we joined other schools at the theatre to watch a ballet performance of Romeo and Juliet and I found my pupils explaining to these mainstream pupils who the characters were and the storyline. Let it suffice to say that these same children went on to be the very first ones in the school to pass CSE English language at the same age as their hearing peers. They had become bi-lingual and confident young people with a positive self-identity and readiness to launch themselves on the world. It was then time for me to move on to other challenges.

Access to Senior Management, 1986-2012

It was a difficult decision to move into management because this meant less time with the pupils. The main reason I sought promotion was due to the fact that it was not sufficient for me to be restricted to working with one or two classes at a time. I couldn't help noticing that some pupils I had taught had fallen back when they moved to another class. A like-minded colleague and I secured permission from the Head to pair up and team-teach as her expertise was in Maths and Music while mine was in English and Drama. This arrangement resulted in more pupils achieving higher standards and success in two of the external core subject exams, but it was still not enough. There had to be an ethos throughout the whole school to have high expectations for the pupils and to work together as a cohesive team to agree an appropriate curriculum and deliver it consistently and progressively, highlighting problems that arise and devising remedial programmes should any pupil begin to fall behind for any reason. The only way to have influence on a whole school agenda was to get into management. To that end I applied for the post of Vice-Principal at Hamilton Lodge School for Deaf Children in Brighton. I took up my post there in September 1986.

While there had been some initial discomfort about having a deaf colleague teacher in Liverpool, Brighton offered a warm welcome. Hamilton Lodge was a school with a good reputation and was in fact known as an excellent training ground for a Headship as most VP's went on from there to become Heads of their own schools all over the country. The Principal herself had been Education Officer for the British Deaf Association (BDA) so she was a pro-deaf activist fluent in sign language and I looked forward to working with her to acquire managerial skills in situ. The school was efficiently and effectively run with a well-established curriculum leading to external examinations in a wide range of subjects and I was pleased to be able to continue teaching the CSE English, RSA functional English and AEB Life Skills syllabi at the secondary stage as well as supporting the FE students in the evenings. The children there were just the same as children everywhere and kept me on my toes.

The role at senior management level was another steep learning curve. After the more free-speaking and democratic, if a bit haphazard style in Liverpool that bore little relation to what happened in the classroom, Walpole Road was a place of order. It was evident that this order was established from the top, by what appeared to be an autocratic style of management. Hamilton Lodge was a non-maintained school and therefore less accountable to the Local Education Authority, which gave the Principal and the Governors more autonomy over the decision making process. At a staff meeting shortly after I had taken up my post the Principal made an announcement about a decision that 'we' had taken on some issue. In all innocence I asked when this discussion had taken place as I appeared to have missed it. Immediately all eye contact was lost as heads dropped to laps. I cottoned on to the royal connotation and was disturbed by it. Perceiving that the agenda was in the full control of the Principal and that items raised by staff could only appear under AOB in the last few available minutes of the weekly staff meetings, was a measure of that control. Yet I found it to be preferable to the lack of direction and cohesion as experienced in Liverpool, especially as the curriculum was working well for the pupils in a continuum from Primary, up to Secondary and on to the Further Education department. Even so, on acquiring my own Headship, I established the use of an open agenda so that there was no impediment to staff contributions or ownership in the decision making process.

Gradually I was able to see that much could be learnt from experiencing different styles of management and where a Head was versatile and used a variety of approaches best suited to different situations it worked well. For my own approach I began to favour a collegial style of management and that was fine and dandy with a settled and self-motivated staff. But when circumstances warranted a firmer approach with individuals or groups there were times when other styles were necessary, such as having to be more dictatorial or authoritarian. I also came to perceive how good staff relations were underpinned by the way in which problems were tackled. In the earlier stages I had a tendency to confront problems head on and find a way of resolving them as quickly and efficiently as possible. I was to find that did not work well with some people. Neither was it wise to presume that those responsible for a situation were aware that there was any problem at all.

So, after an unfortunate session with the Head of Primary that resulted in her locking herself in the toilet, I knew I had to improve. It needed time, patience and a certain subterfuge where, instead of barging straight at the issue I had to make a gentle roundabout approach and invite the person concerned to a meeting to discuss a situation that had cropped up. The idea was give that person the chance to express his or her opinion on what happened and to do that in a non-critical way. From that point the discussion was usually able to cover the subject reflectively and the 'problem' became identified more as 'an area for development' together with an agreed plan for taking measures that would resolve the matter. I confess that pussyfooting around adults who should have known better stretched my patience to the limits at times but the training in situ served me well for the challenges of my next post.

This weekly boarding school also ran an Inclusion programme for the FE students who went out to local colleges with the support of a qualified TOD. They had extra support in the evenings back at base and also a larger peer group within the school with whom they could relax. It was this facility and the feedback from the students that gave me the germ of an idea about how to take Inclusion further when I again moved on for promotion in 1992.

The Heathlands appointment in 1992 was where I broke the glass ceiling as the first deaf Headteacher in the UK. From the media coverage the occasion was celebrated as a unique event of triumph over adversity. In my view, it was a lost opportunity for investigative journalists to pursue the reasons why an appointment like this was so rare in education. Even now, in spite of the Equalities Act of 2010, it would be interesting to know just how many people with a disability, especially those educated in special schools, have managed to secure access to teaching and to hold senior management posts. Such figures might identify and even resolve continued impediments to progress while simultaneously offering some opportunities for deaf teachers/leaders to impact on the enrichment of the pupils and on the teaching profession as a whole. If inclusion does not happen effectively in schools, it will not happen in society.

It was the Heathlands Board of Governors that had the courage to take the first step in appointing a Headteacher with a disability. Even when that disability was shared with all the pupils, it was a step into the unknown because not one of the teaching staff was deaf and this was a huge reversal of roles. In fact I was interviewed twice because the LA representative was concerned about the cost of interpretational support when it was needed. To address this issue an Equal Opportunities official was present at my second interview. The question asked of the Board was: Is this the best candidate for the post? When the answer was in the affirmative it was pointed out that it was the Board's responsibility to ensure I was supported in carrying out the remit of the post. Significantly the Chair of Governors had two sons who were deaf and there was also a deaf Governor both of them provided a rare capacity in relevant experience and skills. Over time, the constitution of the Board changed in response to government directives such as for parents, including deaf parents, to join the Board and in addition a growing number of deaf teachers were welcomed to take their turn as Teacher Representatives. The Board itself changed many times over the years with over half a dozen different Chairs but remained stalwart in providing constructive criticism and support throughout my twenty years at Heathlands because the whole ethos of the school was to facilitate the pupils at every stage of development to be the best that they could be and its infrastructure The whole ethos and the infrastructure was designed to make this happen. And happen it did. Slowly.

Every Headteacher will admit that high stress levels and exhaustion are inevitable in a position of such responsibility. When a headship involves a weekly boarding school with a day and night residential remit, the hours become formidable. Constant Government education initiatives, like the challenge of implementing the new National Curriculum, took its toll as the nature of managing the delivery of a high standard education for pupils suffered a radical change. When I took up my post in September 1992 it was the time when Local Authorities had begun to delegate budgets to special schools as well as to mainstream schools – known as Local Management of Special Schools (LMSS). It meant that managing schools had become synonymous in approach to running a business and producing a quality product so that Headteachers became business managers involved in finance, personnel and premises issues as well as delivering efficient and effective education to the pupils, the performance of which was regularly scrutinized by Ofsted.

I felt this pressure keenly because I had something to prove – that a deaf person could do this job. Failure was unthinkable for the negative impact it could have on the chances of other aspiring deaf teachers in the pipeline. But the trepidation didn't last long as I was plunged headlong into the work. The first step was to produce the equivalent of a Business Plan in the shape of a School Development Plan (SDP) in a school that was woefully unprepared for it. The school office consisted of three tables of different levels pushed together and supporting little more than two cranky old typewriters. As this was to be the hub of efficient activity it had to be updated as a priority, beginning with decent desks with the latest computers and computer training.

Within an archaic environment and with 75 members of staff, many of them long term, there were the inevitable difficulties in co-operation from people who had been content with the status quo. There was resistance to the implementation of the NC on the grounds that 'it was not meant for deaf children' until teaching staff were reminded that deaf children had a legal right of access to this Government directive. While I had my own reservations about how it would work in practice I knew it would be a work in progress in the years to come and that we had to build on the positives, like providing a consistent pathway to follow that could be amended as time went by. It was also to reinforce the fact that it was our duty as teachers to make this of the greatest benefit to deaf children as we could. The majority of teachers did come to realise that though the attainment targets set expectations high it was negative to assume no children could reach them because some did. The main advantage was that the NC set a direction via these staged attainment targets while the monitoring would record individual pupil progress over time as evidence that their development was consistently on track, and if not, to identify where the difficulties lay. Yet even when teachers were given more time for the paperwork, there was resentment about being tied down to a prescriptive curriculum that, I admit, the best teachers did not need.

The first SDP was also viewed with suspicion by the staff when its purpose was explained to them but, when they were given ownership of that document and areas of responsibility within the framework, the team cohesion began to form. The Senior Management team (SMT) became the Team Leaders who, in consultation with their departments (Pre-school, Primary, Secondary, Inclusion, Communication, Finance, Professional Development, Premises and Residential) set the targets for the main direction the school was to take for a period of 3 years ahead. The SDP then became the key working document of the school that kept all efforts moving in the same direction for the next twenty years and became a model emulated by other schools.

Gradually the staff began to get used to this shared and essential format for rowing the boat together, something I had recognized by its absence as an asset of great value when I was teaching in Liverpool. Strangely enough though, the one area that aroused the widest opposition from different categories of staff was unexpected. It concerned training, the 'Professional Development' of teaching, care, administration and finance staff. It was very worrying to note that some teachers and care staff did not feel the need for any more training at all while others thought the Performance Management process (PM) to be intrusive rather than helpful. It was explained that no matter how effectively a member of staff delivered in accordance with their remit, there was always room for improvement and the school was willing to be generous in terms of investing in that improvement. Sadly, it was not until PM was linked to pay that the opposition died a natural death, but that factor told its own story.

From such fraught beginnings great things grew. Eager new staff was recruited in all departments. Professional development was highlighted. Standards began to rise in both terms of teaching and pupil attainment. Pupils became more skilled in English, the one skill that would most enhance their independence and chances in the world of work. Discipline was enhanced. Ofsted graded the school as 'Outstanding' in every area. There was an invitation for the school to become a Beacon school. It became a Specialist School with funds to create a Learning and Resource Training Centre offering British Sign Language courses to staff, parents and the local community. A Sixth Form was opened and our students went from there to University, even to read English. An additional Inclusion partnership was created for students with a vocational rather than academic leaning. The Government then offered us the chance to become an Academy, something that was only offered to Outstanding schools at the time. But that was where we became the victims of our own success.

The Headship of a weekly boarding school was the epitome of my career, but it was all-consuming and it took over my life for a very long time. Even where I was involved in work outside school, like being the National Disability Commission's representative on the General Teaching Council, a Trustee of the RNID, a member of the BDA and a speaker in Conferences, it was all education related. It was a privilege but also a great responsibility because, as mentioned before, I could not afford to fail. Success was a must, not only for my pupils but also to set a precedent for other deaf people to aspire high. It took me twenty years in that post just to reach the point where I would have preferred to begin. So much went into laying the foundations for greater achievement for the pupils who alone are the true testaments to positive outcomes. In that respect, it was well worthwhile.

M.G. Hardie-Davis CBE   January 2018