



Forty Years On

Elizabeth Andrews notes that things aren't what they used to be. There have been many changes since she began work as a ToD in 1978 and there is still much to do

When I began work as a Teacher of the Deaf in September 1978, my profoundly deaf pupils used Maico Windsor body worn hearing aids and a group hearing aid system in a special school setting. The British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD) was young and there was still excitement about the success of bringing two professional networks together into a single organisation. I was fresh from qualification on a one year, full time training course, operating out of state-of-the-art, purpose-built facilities in Oxford. A cohort of more than 40 other students trained with me: half already had experience working with hearing children and half were training 'end on' immediately following qualification to teach hearing children. All were funded or seconded by local education authority employers or by student grants. There were very few, if any, privately funded students. The strong advice from tutors at the time was not to take on the role of advising families or schools as a peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf until we had experienced working with a range of deaf pupils, in resourced units for hearing-impaired pupils or in special schools.

What a cocktail of factors, falling across a multi-disciplinary range of work, have transformed the landscape for children and their families over the last 35 years! They include:

- technological and scientific development, including the introduction of radio or FM systems, digital hearing aids and cochlear implant devices
- changes in attitude, particularly about the status of British Sign Language
- declining numbers of candidates undertaking initial teacher training to become a Teacher of the Deaf
- the earlier identification of deaf children via Newborn Hearing Screening
- the rising incidence of multiple disability in young children
- better understanding of the processes of first language acquisition and bilingualism
- increased integration of pupils with special educational needs into mainstream settings
- organisational change to professional services supporting deaf pupils, to funding mechanisms for pupils, and to the relationship between local education authorities and schools.

All of the above are important and they interact with one another. In such a context, professionals need to

maintain and update specialist knowledge across an unusually wide range and to be quick on their feet. The role that the British Association of Teachers of the Deaf has played in equipping teachers to respond to change over the last forty years has been critical. Like everyone else, I have benefited directly down the years from the training, conferences, networking and professional support that the organisation has provided. Later on in working life I was also privileged to work with BATOD as a partner on a range of policy issues. The organisation has been a powerful advocate for teachers and the children and families they work with. I was pleased to be asked to contribute to this edition of the magazine, celebrating BATOD's birthday, but thought a chronological survey of memories might be rather dull, so what follows is a very personal take on a few cross-cutting issues.

My first point is that it is good when assumptions are challenged, even when the process is painful and sometimes exhausting. In 1979, Richard Conrad published 'The Deaf School Child', which shattered complacency about how things were going with the education of deaf children, particularly profoundly deaf children. I was newly-qualified at the time, and the book certainly made my working life start with a bang. It forced individual practitioners to question and justify what they were doing. The exchanges at BATOD conferences following publication of the book were passionate. The furore triggered the videotaping of profoundly deaf children and young children who spoke intelligibly for the film 'A Hundred Years After Milan' and led indirectly both to:

- the formation of the National Aural Group (now DELTA) and
- more money for research into British Sign Language (BSL).

Wherever you stood on the issues at the time, I think it is clear, looking back, that the book triggered a more open and honest debate about unacceptably low educational aspirations for deaf pupils. It fuelled discussion about the very wide range of educational outcomes for pupils with similar audiograms and about potential models for using sign language in classrooms. So, in the same way, when someone asks carelessly, "Well, why do deaf children need specially trained teachers anyhow?" I think it is as well to take a deep breath and remember that questions like this are helpful. Challenge forces Teachers of the Deaf to focus on what is essential and to communicate the distinctive needs of deaf pupils crisply.

My second reflection is that new technology is powerful, but can only go so far. Change in this area has been so exciting and radical over the last few decades that (with apologies to L P Hartley) the past really does feel like a foreign country, where things are done differently. Deaf children can now be routinely identified in the first few months of life. Information and support can be provided to families and a direction of travel agreed much earlier. Parents are able to browse a world of relevant data independently, using their smartphones. Cochlear implants and powerful hearing aids significantly improve the range and quality of acoustic information available to children as they acquire language. All this is revolutionary, but equipment is only as good as the use that is made of it. Families still need help to understand the options available to them and how to negotiate the system. Schools still need to understand how to adapt standard delivery to optimise pupil outcomes and young deaf people still need support to work through their issues of identity. Teachers of the Deaf are primarily facilitators of language development and learning. Technology is a critical component in what they provide, but it is no substitute for professional personnel with specialist knowledge and experience, working in partnership with families.

Having spent more than ten years training Teachers of the Deaf at Oxford and Birmingham, my third point is, predictably, about training. In the 1980s, changes to GEST funding arrangements precipitated a crisis, because the number of candidates being funded to train steadily decreased. BATOD, with a range of other agencies working through the Joint Monitoring Committee on Training, has done a fantastic job of keeping this issue on the agenda with Government agencies down the years. There has also been the positive development of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA, now the NCTL) taking responsibility for checking the quality of training courses via validation of the mandatory courses. BATOD actively encourages teachers with an interest to train as Teachers of the Deaf and the Con Powell Scholarships clear the path to qualification for some people. However, in reflecting on the pressures on training, I am concerned about candidates that have no other option but to train after they have been appointed to a post working with deaf pupils. Families and pupils seek out Teachers of the Deaf at moments of crisis and they are entitled to expect support from a professional with appropriate knowledge, experience and skill. The assumption that everything can, or should, be learnt by Teachers of the Deaf training while 'on the job' is driven by difficulties with current funding arrangements and my own view is that some specialist training is required by teachers before they start working directly with deaf children.

And finally, a point about the continuing need to raise awareness of the distinctive needs of deaf children. BATOD, NatSIP and the NDCS continue to do a great job in this area, but it is salutary to reflect that the occasions when the education of deaf children has hit

the headlines during my professional lifetime have been few and far between. Following the Warnock Report in 1978, there was a flurry of activity around the Education Act of 1981, with its new arrangements for pupils with Special Educational Needs. Then, in the 1990s, attention was focused on deaf children as the case was successfully made for the introduction of Newborn Hearing Screening. Under New Labour, disabled children had a rare moment in the sun, with two well-funded national programmes running over a number of years: Aiming High for Disabled Children and Early Support. Aiming High developed an extensive programme of Short Breaks and normalised the expectation that local authorities should consult regularly with representative groups of parents using their services. Early Support embedded the principles of better co-ordinated support for families, a single plan and partnership working with parents. It also enabled the collaborative development of the Monitoring Protocol for Deaf Children. Moments like this, when Government pays attention to the needs of minority groups are hard-won and do not last long. Advocates for specialist services have to react quickly to events when the interest of the majority turns towards them and make hay while the sun shines. My general point therefore, is that BATOD should give priority to nurturing of the art of campaigning, persuading and working with Government alongside professional development in other areas.

Because there is a lot to campaign on. I am a child of my professional generation and the 1981 Act and believe that deaf children, young people and their families are entitled to informed and appropriately funded public services, wherever they happen to go to school. It is about rights, not warm words, and these are tricky times indeed, with cutbacks to local services, the fragmentation of the education system and a very different relationship between schools and local educational authorities than the one that supported advisory services in 1978, when I was starting out and BATOD was young.

Onwards and upwards. Happy Birthday BATOD and best wishes to everyone currently engaged in the exciting work of working with families and educating deaf children and young people. What will the next forty years bring, I wonder?

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