



## Deaf education from the 1970s to 2016: a personal journey and recollection

Sue Lewis reviews her long career in deaf education

### Pre the 1970s

My personal experience of deaf education pre the 1970s I have written of before in this magazine. My sister Diane was diagnosed as deaf in the early 1960s. She was fitted with Medresco hearing aids and ill-fitting ear moulds and we were told to wait for a visit from the Teacher of the Deaf. Since we did not have a landline at the time, the appointment came through the post and my mother quickly had to arrange time off work. There was no discussion about choices, since there was no choice – Diane would go to the school for the deaf as soon as she was out of nappies. She would be taken by taxi. Little was said about the degree or cause of her hearing loss and little advice about how to establish hearing aids; just that she must wear them all the time.

Diane was 'taught language' using various schemes. These included Topley's Sound Sense and lists of vocabulary that were suitable for each age group. This included words that we were told not to use because they were too hard to lip-read such as 'cooker'. We were never told not to use sign with her. It was just never mentioned. The approach was to be LRS – listening, reading and speaking with reading and speaking taught simultaneously. Progress was slow – and we were warned that it would be, but there was also much celebration as she found her rather precarious voice and a range of social greetings and single words. We were told that any time without hearing aids was 'wasted listening time' that Diane would never get back. This of course holds true, but I can still remember the shock of going into her school and discovering that some teachers had a very cavalier attitude to hearing aid use and indeed did not really believe that Diane would talk in any intelligible way.

Most approaches to supporting language acquisition in deaf children were based on behaviourist principles, adults modelling and children copying. The failure of children to generalise these learned sentences into their everyday communication was seen as being part of their deafness. Deaf children found learning language hard and therefore language needed to be drilled into them. An important technological advance towards the end of this decade was the ability to make tape recordings and video recordings. These provided the opportunity to check more closely how children were doing, analyse their voices and progress and, most importantly, study language acquisition and learning in both hearing and deaf children.

### The 1970s: schism and faith: questioning outcomes

The 1970s were a time of excitement, controversy, learning and commitment within deaf education. It is ironic that a decade that brought together the existing professional associations of Teachers of the Deaf into a single organisation, was also characterised by sharp divisions being openly voiced as to how to promote language acquisition. For me, it was the decade in which I gained QTS, passed my probationary year and began to work as a Teacher of the Deaf. I completed a one year full-time course in London, mandatory training for Teachers of the Deaf – probably the most difficult and yet the most stimulating training I had ever done. Every student on the course was an experienced mainstream teacher; almost all of us were seconded by a school or local authority with regular reports being provided to our schools as to how we were doing. It was a year that challenged us to reflect on our teaching, on what we could see in the best of schools for the deaf in Britain and indeed in Europe and to look towards the future for deaf children. The course in London had three full-time lecturers and drew on other guest speakers and London University staff. I remember a truly inspiring talk from someone recently appointed to the Bullock Committee, being mesmerised by an impedance bridge and by the earliest phonic ear radio hearing aids and determinedly trying to distinguish an implosive /b/ from an egressive one!!! Geoff Ivimey introduced us to transformational grammar and semantics and the works of Roger Brown. However, in the final analysis we were urged to read, debate and try out, and to ask the question – does it work? The 'so what' we are encouraged to constantly ask today.

As a teacher trainer, recently stepped back from the role, I have a number of concerns about the capacity within the current system to deliver high quality Teachers of the Deaf, given the format of current courses. Currently many students are already working with deaf children in contexts in which they have little support or can gain little experience of strategies that support deaf children's learning. Today's part-time courses struggle to deliver the detail of understanding that Teachers of the Deaf need in both audiology and language and in such skills as influencing and partnership skills.

The 70s courses included two teaching placements and many visits to schools, where we were alternately dismayed or encouraged by the standards of reading and writing children were achieving. A visit to Holland,

to St. Michielsgestel School led us to meet Dutch deaf children speaking and writing English as well as, if not better than, many of the English children we had seen.

The debate and discussion following these shared visits challenged our stereotypes and our thinking. Why DID deaf children achieve better in some parts of our country than in others? It is a debate that is still relevant today. We might be more aspirational for deaf children in terms of the careers and qualifications that are accessible to them; nevertheless, underachievement and poor literacy levels have not been eradicated. There are still far too many professionals who see poor literacy levels as inevitable and do not address these with the urgency that they should.

Key developments in mainstream education and in special educational needs in general meant schools were challenged to review their provision and outcomes. These included the Bullock Report (1975). For the school for the deaf in which I worked this was the first time that everyone had sat down together to define the approach to language and literacy and when attempts were made to monitor children's progress in both language and literacy. After the Bullock Report we had a written policy, a commitment to a language for life and an agreed approach to speaking, listening, reading and writing and booklets to tick off when children had mastered certain structures or vocabulary. Despite this not all teachers used the approach systematically. There were no systems in place for monitoring or evaluating impact, however, and the approach was based on second language teaching techniques, for children who had no first language. It failed miserably to inspire children, because it did not have within it the language and vocabulary that each needed to live their life.

From 1976 onwards I was much more conscious of the professional association for Teachers of the Deaf, BATOD, than I had been of the earlier organisation. Con Powell was probably one of the few people who influenced Teachers of the Deaf at all levels and was an inspired choice as its first president. Meetings both regionally and nationally had a renewed vigour. Speakers introduced us to the new technologies of radio aids, talked of possible inner ear technology for the future and opened up the debate as to where deaf children should go to school, as the Warnock Committee met. At the end of this decade Richard Conrad's 'The Deaf School Child' challenged the very core of deaf education, demonstrating something that everyone knew, though rarely spoke out loud – that the large majority of deaf children left school barely able to read and write and with few academic achievements. For Conrad this was a failure of 'oralism'; his answer to this was for sign to be introduced into schools and homes. Almost overnight individual schools, including my sister's, declared their approach to language acquisition to be 'total' communication or the use of sign. There was no consultation with parents.

The late 70s and the 80s were characterised by a

defining of positions by individuals and groups in relation to the approach to language and learning. In 1980 the National Aural Group (later DELTA) was formed and the Sign Bi-lingual consortium very soon after. It is one of the paradoxes of deaf education, that, as the quality of sound available to deaf children improved, the majority of special schools and many resourced provisions adopted total communication or a visual language, British Sign Language, as their way towards higher academic standards, literacy and communication. A promise that has not been fully fulfilled.

In contrast, members of NAG/DELTA saw hearing as the 'vital fulcrum' through which language would be acquired. NAG/ DELTA drew from research into language acquisition in hearing children to promote a natural language approach based on how parents across cultures supported language acquisition in their hearing children. This approach was rooted in the research of Snow and Ferguson, Brown, Gordon Wells and David Wood and his Deafness Research group. This seminal research, underpinned by Bruner's work, identified key factors that supported language acquisition and learning in both deaf and hearing children. Many of the issues identified and the recommendations made hold true today. These include the importance of adults as scaffolders of learning, the notion of 'power' in conversation and of adults' comments and probing questions.

Wood's research, coinciding as it did with a major change in placing patterns, was and continues to be hugely influential. It signalled the importance of the conversational context of language acquisition. Wherever deaf children were placed, one-to-one conversational sessions at least once a day became the norm. Where Teachers of the Deaf were not on-site, teaching assistants were appointed to check children's hearing aids, provide this conversational support and facilitate the child's interaction with others.

Alongside this, huge changes were taking place in technology as radio aids and post-aural hearing aids became the norm, replacing the use of group aids and auditory trainers. Test boxes and detailed understanding of language acquisition became part of the newly trained Teacher of the Deaf's repertoire. It is of grave concern currently how little some newly qualified Teachers of the Deaf know about stages in language development and the strategies that promote this. In some services pupils' hearing aids and FM/radio aids are still not managed effectively because there is not a sense of urgency as to ensuring they are working effectively.

### **The 1990s: Towards a mainly service-led provision**

The major revelation of Wood's research and of others such as Geers and Moog was the importance of input. DELTA produced films and research in the 1980s and 1990s that demonstrated that profoundly deaf children were more than capable of both learning to talk intelligibly and of achieving highly. However, it was also clear that children and young people, throughout the

United Kingdom, were achieving very different things according to where they lived. David Wood's team stressed the importance of quality input and demonstrated that this applied whether the group studied was deaf, hearing, had severe learning difficulties or were higher education students. He also stressed that language addressed to deaf children must be 'contingent' on the child's level. This fits well with today's emphasis on learning that is tailored to the child and focused on next steps. In Wood's model this is delivered in a conversational context, following Brunerian principles. Such tailoring is about reciprocal interactions and meaningful input from the child's point of view, not the highly curtailed and restricted inputs some deaf children still receive. In the 1990s myself, Vicky Hopwood and Clare Gallaway published several papers highlighting the dangers of the restricted language input some deaf children were receiving. My more recent observations in classrooms, of small group and one to one support, indicate that this is still the case for too many deaf children; deaf children may have access to more effective amplification but outcomes are still too variable because some Teachers of the Deaf are not proactive enough in checking each child is receiving the input they need and influencing environments accordingly. This means exposure to language and ideas at the right level and in contexts which enable them to listen, learn and progress swiftly.

The 1990s saw not only the first cochlear implants for children but also the piloting of newborn hearing screening. Undoubtedly cochlear implants and the development of FM technology have been game changers in terms of access to language for deaf children. Newborn hearing screening has meant deaf children for the first time can routinely be expected to keep pace with their hearing peers in language skills – providing of course they are effectively aided and their parents and teachers effectively supported to facilitate this.

From 2002 the Early Support Pilot Programme, later Early Support, developed training and assessment and monitoring tools for checking on children's programmes with their parents. Such tools build on the research from earlier years that recognises the importance of parents as the critical influencers of their children's development. It is for parents to decide how they wish to communicate with their child, not practitioners; the role of the practitioner is to ensure that parents are as informed and confident as possible in the choice that they have made.

In the last forty years we have moved to a position in which fluent spoken language which provides a secure basis for learning and literacy is within the reach of almost all deaf children, should this be what their parents choose. Developments in technology have facilitated this and the greater access that deaf children and young people potentially have to learning and to high attainment within mainstream schools or specialist

provision. However, this is not the entire story. To achieve well we must look to some of the lessons and experts of the past. David Wood and Con Powell's work in the Manchester parent guidance programme and at Oxford Polytechnic all point to a changing role for Teachers of the Deaf in influencing others rather than being the main deliverers of programmes for deaf children. The positive achievements of learners in the 1998 Lewis and Hostler study, none of whom had a cochlear implant, confirmed that effective amplification is only part of the equation needed to support deaf children's achievement and wellbeing. The 2016 Ofsted Common Inspection Framework stresses the importance of leadership, of the quality of curriculum and experiences and of partnership working with others. It stresses vision and ethos, high expectations and the importance of quality of teaching, learning and assessment if outcomes, including those relating to the wellbeing of the child and the specialist needs of the child, are to be high. There are times today when deaf education is still too focused on old divisions and on provision, not outcomes and insufficient attention has been paid to ensuring that all Teachers of the Deaf know what high quality input looks like for a specific deaf child and how to ensure that what is needed is in place to secure their high achievement.

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