

Engaging with sign – a language for you and me

Margaret-Anne Christie outlines her school's engagement with the Controlled Schools Support Council training programme for children

I am a Qualified Teacher of the Deaf (QToD) working in a Hearing Impaired Unit within a mainstream school in East Belfast, Northern Ireland. I teach Foundation and Key Stage 1 and I thoroughly enjoy it. The school also has a Key Stage 2 Unit. Our school has had a Hearing Impaired Unit attached to it for many years so the students and the community have always known someone who is deaf. When they see a deaf person it's not a big deal to them which is exactly what we're looking for. But sometimes communication can be difficult between our deaf children and the hearing children.

My class integrate with their mainstream peers for PE and activity based learning, occasionally they will go for World Around Us topics and they always attend class trips. They love going into their mainstream classes and always come back with stories of fun things that have happened or games they played. We are extremely lucky to have staff who are open and welcoming, with them including our deaf pupils in all the interesting, exciting things that school has to offer.

Our staff have Deaf Awareness training each year (with me) and are brilliant when teaching our kids. They know what a radio aid system is, how to use it correctly –

including where their mic should be and how to mute! – and who to call when, for whatever reason, it doesn't work (me again). The staff are used to giving them processing time and looking for the best seating options and all the good tricks we want our children to take advantage of to have an effective learning environment. They also try to remember to factor in listening fatigue; by 2pm our children are exhausted and some of them still have an hour until home time.

The children in our Units have varying hearing levels and communication needs. We have some children who speak almost exclusively and use no signs, we have some children who mostly use sign with some speech and at times we have had children who had very little speech or sign. We need to cater to them all and in order to do that, we use BSL along with spoken English. I am continuing to develop my own sign language skills by attending evening classes provided by Action Deaf Youth.

Last year an email came through C2K (a Northern Ireland-wide information and communications network operated on behalf of the Education Authority) about a programme that the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC) was hoping to run called 'Engaging With Sign – A Language





hearing children could remember and use with the deaf children to open up more avenues for conversations. It broke down barriers that we knew were there but hadn't found a perfect way to conquer yet, and allowed the hearing children to see that our deaf children were very smart. They already knew lots of the signs and it helped raise the confidence of our deaf students as they knew more than the hearing kids in this area, they understood what Anthony was

For You And Me'. They had secured funding for the programme from the Department for Communities' Sign Language Partnership Group in August 2018. This programme wanted to reach out to nine schools with deaf children in Northern Ireland and give them free (always the magic word in schools) sign language sessions with their hearing peers. It consisted of two sessions for the children followed by a Parent Workshop. I applied for the course by completing a form giving information on our deaf students, including their hearing levels, communication methods and explaining why I thought it would be a good idea for our school.

Since we have a variety of communication needs within our class the children do tend to stick together during work and play because they know how to talk to each other and how to be understood. That's not always the case when they're talking to a hearing person – adult or child. This programme allowed them to pick a hearing friend from their mainstream class and all learn some sign together.

Anthony Sinclair was our tutor last year and the children all came together in our assembly hall to learn the BSL fingerspelling alphabet and simple signs. This included a song that the deaf and hearing children performed at assembly for Sign Language Week and lots of useful vocabulary like family/animals/colours that the

saying, they were first in the games and were able to help the hearing kids when they forgot a sign.

It was a great motivator for both sets of students. It allowed our hearing students to widen their own perspectives and engage with not only Sign Language but the students who use it to communicate. Following the children's session, there was a parent workshop and parents of deaf and hearing children attended. It offered some insight into the challenges that our children face every day, from lipreading to conversation jumps, to background noise and listening fatigue and the feeling of frustration when someone does not understand what you're trying to say even though you're doing your best.





It was a truly worthwhile endeavour. The parents were able to see how isolating and difficult it can be for a deaf child in a 'hearing world'.

This year I applied to 'Engaging With Sign – A Language For You And Me' programme and we were lucky enough to be successful again; however, the format changed. CSSC are now working with Action Deaf Youth to facilitate the program and instead of having ages 4-11 all taking part in one big session, they were split into 4-8 and 9-11 in order to cater to the different needs of the students. Before these sessions started I had a meeting with the facilitator Michelle Hull and an interpreter to discuss what we wanted to achieve in the sessions and plan according to the educational and communication needs of the children.

My own class were studying Life on the Farm at the time and Michelle brought that into both sessions with us. The children now know signs for animals on the farm and the noises they make. They can read and sign a book about the farm and they can sign Baa Baa Black Sheep. They played Animal Bingo and had to partner up with a hearing child and work together to show everyone what the animal was, using only signs. The following week they learned lots of insect signs and a new nursery rhyme Incy Wincy Spider and many more interactive signing activities. Michelle also had sessions with Key Stage 2 about their topic The Rainforest and some activities on countries around the world that were a huge success, and the children couldn't wait to tell me all about it.

Both sets of children thoroughly enjoyed all aspects of it, they were able to relate their learning at the end of the sessions. My favourite outcome of the whole programme is that when I am outside during break time, I can see my own class mixing with different hearing children and helping them learn more signs. It has opened up

communication between the children and they are developing lovely new friendship groups because of it.

The Parent Workshop this year included more parents of hearing children and it afforded them the opportunity to see what challenges our children and their parents can face. It helped them see that our deaf children are just like theirs, except they use a different communication method sometimes. All the workshops were well organised

and interesting while remaining relaxed and fun.

Last year when the programme was launched, there was a Media Day where children got to demonstrate their learning and it was broadcast on local news, the media attention was very positive and all the other QToDs I have spoken to about this programme have mentioned how it would be great for their children in mainstream settings. I imagine CSSC will be inundated with applications next year, and rightly so. This has been one of the most worthwhile programmes that I have taken part in at school. It raised the profile of Sign Language for our whole school and in our community, and most importantly, it helped our children communicate better and more effectively with each other, with hearing children and also with hearing adults.

Going forward I am planning an assembly in March for Deaf Awareness Week that will incorporate all the deaf and hearing children who took part in the programme and we will be showing off their new signs to the whole school. Since the end of the programme, many more children have asked me when it will be their turn to learn sign language and I have happily directed them towards our deaf children who have become their teachers. I am grateful that we had the opportunity to take advantage of this wonderful and extremely worthwhile programme. My only wish was to have had more sessions. ■



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Conference

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The cover features three photographs: a woman in a white jacket working with children at a table; a woman in a black dress pointing at a screen displaying a list of phrases; and a man in a dark jacket speaking to an audience in a room decorated with a palm tree and city skyline.

Let's Count!

- A: Good Evening
- B: Good Evening
- A: Name (one)
- B: Name (one)
- A: Name (one)
- B: Name (one)
- A: Well, (one), Bye
- B: Bye