

ATTAINMENT OF PUPILS WITH A SENSORY IMPAIRMENT

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Heriot-Watt University (HWU) is the academic home to Scotland's largest concentration of scholars specialising in the field of Sign Language Studies. In the REF2014 UK-wide audit of research, HWU's case study on 'Ensuring greater equality for sign language users', describing the impact of our work in the field over the last decade, was recognised as outstanding in terms of its reach and significance for society. This written document is a personal submission which draws upon intensive dialogue within this academic team and with students and partners in the community and professions, and on the author's global experience of 30 years' academic engagement with Sign Language Studies. *This response addresses the education of deaf learners only.*

A response to the report

1. The Education and Culture Committee is to be commended for initiating its inquiry into the attainment of pupils with a sensory impairment in Scotland's education institutions.
2. This response is strongly motivated by the development, during the period of the inquiry's progress, of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill and its successful progress to royal assent after publication of the inquiry report.
3. The context created in respect of British Sign Language (BSL) by the presence of the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act is intended to be, and indeed must be, transformative for Deaf¹ people in Scotland.
4. Until the first National Plan for BSL is published, it cannot begin to be clear what effect the new legislation will have on the education sector. However, it is critical that the spirit of the Act must prevail, and as relevant institutions act upon the present report, specific consideration must be given to BSL users as distinct from other people with sensory impairments (whose position in society is *not* shaped primarily by membership of a linguistic minority community).

¹ The single unifying characteristic motivating the capital 'D' in 'Deaf' is the use by all Deaf people in Scotland (including Deafblind people) of some form of BSL. It is their status as members of a linguistic community that generates the coherence of the Deaf community. In this form, then, 'Deaf people' are all those who use BSL as a first or preferred language.

From home to school

5. The committee's report understandably focuses upon the school years. However, we should never lose sight of the fact that the pre-school years are the springboard upon which all cognitive and educational progress is built.
6. In the case of over 90% of deaf children, the family home is not shaped by parents who are Deaf and sign fluently. This is absolutely critical. It means, in particular, that many deaf children will never even have the *opportunity* to discover themselves as Deaf adults (or to "attain their full Deafhood", in the words of the Deaf scholar, Paddy Ladd [2003]) – and to acquire all the developmental benefits of growing through a language which is fully and naturally accessible to them – unless BSL is introduced to them in some other way.
7. The 'other ways' in question might include learning BSL at school (see below). Nevertheless, human beings naturally acquire their first languages with greatest efficiency when they are available as part of the nurturing process from birth. It is therefore imperative that, in a country which is committed to the 'promotion' of BSL, Scotland rapidly develops a sustainable and adequately-resourced strategy to ensure that every deaf child is given the fullest possible opportunity to learn BSL, from the early months onwards, from fluent signers who understand what it means to mature from deaf childhood to mature Deaf adulthood.

Models of educational provision

8. The committee has evidently been persuaded of the merits of the 'resource base' approach to education for pupils within these populations. In order to ensure that 'resource bases' function to their full potential for deaf learners, the following must be more closely considered.
9. There is a noticeable inconsistency in the report's attention to 'habilitation' with respect to visually impaired children, but not in the case of deaf children. It is true that this terminology is not very familiar within the world of deaf education. However, the concept it marks ought to be more closely taken into account. Habilitation refers to enabling the child to interact effectively with the wider world, by learning to adapt where necessary, deploying strategies or facilities that permit full social engagement. Within the Deaf Studies literature, Padden & Humphries [1988] refer to the "history of solutions" that Deaf people have identified, ie behaviours and capabilities – including, of course, the use of visual-gestural languages – that permit the human flourishing of Deaf people in a world dominated by, and largely designed to suit, the hearing.
10. Deaf children must be afforded access to this "history of solutions", this habilitation. The only people who know these solutions deeply are Deaf adults. There is therefore a pressing need to create professional opportunities for Deaf people, as respected experts on Deaf upbringing, to bring their experience into the education of deaf children.

11. The “history of solutions” also extends into the field of pedagogics. As learners, Deaf adults have studied in the kinds of classrooms now being formed around the next generation of deaf children. They know what works in such classrooms: Paddy Ladd and Donna West [2015] have called these “Deafhood pedagogies” and the lessons they offer should be learned and implemented in every classroom that includes a deaf child as rapidly and efficiently as possible.

Numbers and qualifications of staff

12. Successfully locating deaf learners in mainstream schools, with or without ‘resource base’ facilities, depends utterly on the provision of appropriate staff. The report highlights the possible shortage and the inadequate preparation of teachers of deaf children. It is right to do so: these must be addressed with all possible speed.

13. More careful consideration should be given to the proposal made by Dr Audrey Cameron (§30 of the report) “to have children in smaller group environments, interacting directly with a teacher who is qualified and skilled in the necessary language and cultural aspects”.

14. As the committee knows, the level 3 qualification that it recommends as a possible minimum for teachers of deaf learners does not represent native-like fluency in the language. There seems to be no *a priori* reason why level 3 should be considered sufficient. It is, in the short-to-medium term, a ‘reasonable adjustment’, given that adopting this standard across Scotland would demand a significant up-skilling of the workforce. But it is vital that the groundwork is established now to lead to (indeed, insofar as is possible, to guarantee) fully satisfactory outcomes in the longer term. Strategic plans should therefore be drawn up which show how the relevant workforce will attain level 6 or equivalent BSL skills within a specified timeframe.

15. Possibly the most glaring oversight in the report, however, is the lack of attention to Communication Support Workers (CSWs) for deaf learners. These are the staff – not teachers of the deaf – who, at present, typically work most closely (often one-to-one) with deaf learners on an everyday basis. Where these learners are BSL users, the CSW is primarily operating as an educational interpreter. For this reason, it is absolutely vital that such provision should be in the hands of suitably educated, professional interpreters. Given that there is, as the committee knows, a desperate shortage of such interpreters across Scotland, and that the employment conditions of CSWs are currently not competitive with other working environments for BSL interpreters, it is predictable that very few qualified interpreters are working in the education sector at present. In fact, the evidence available – as reported, for example, to the BSL Bill Facebook group set up by the committee – strongly indicates that most deaf learners, at all levels, have their education channelled to them via a CSW with level 2 BSL skills or below and no training in interpreting.

16. If the Scottish Government and Education Scotland wish to enable deaf learners, at any level, in mainstream settings to attain their full

educational potential, then the provision of fully-trained educational interpreters in these roles is necessary.

17. The report notes (§75) that the Minister hoped that BSL qualifications may be boosted by schools offering BSL as a language under the 1+2 languages policy). Ministerial support to facilitate this outcome – currently in development through a Scottish Universities Insight Institute project <http://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/Programmes/Programmes20152016/NationalBSLPlan.aspx> – would be enormously beneficial. The widespread learning of BSL across the country would, over time, ‘normalise’ BSL use so that it were recognised and celebrated simply as part of the linguistic and cultural landscape of Scotland. It is plain that this would be beneficial to deaf learners in direct and indirect ways. Nevertheless, in terms of the value of 1+2 BSL to the workforce, it is clear that pupils studying BSL at primary level this year would not become teachers of deaf children for another 15 or more years. The evidence presented to the committee shows that the BSL skills of the current workforce are inadequate, and the Deaf community cannot rightfully be expected to wait 15 years in the hope of change.

Leaver destinations

18. The report’s comments on access to higher education should be of particular concern, given the fact that it is fully 25 years since Susan Daniels and Sophie Corlett [1990] demonstrated that the population of Deaf students at tertiary level in the UK was less than half of its proportionate size within the population. Little has changed.
19. It is a myth that Deaf students’ levels of English language qualification prevent them being successful at university (§98). The work of the CHES (Consortium of Higher Education Support Services for Deaf Students) consortium, for example (http://www.uclan.ac.uk/about_us/the_consortium_of_higher_education_support_services_with_deaf_students.php), showed over a period of many years that, with appropriate support services, Deaf students with many learner profiles could achieve outstanding degree-level outcomes.
20. It would be entirely possible for one or more Scottish universities to emulate the successful models available elsewhere in Britain and Europe, and pro-actively to create services for BSL-using Deaf students. If the Scottish Government and Education Scotland wish to provide a ‘draw’ from the top of the educational chimney, to lead Deaf learners to greater attainment in education, such a model would be an integral element in the learning landscape.
21. Universities have been saying for 30 years that they will ‘respond to disabled students’ needs when they are presented with specific instances’. This is demonstrably inadequate. The converse has repeatedly been proven to occur: Deaf students will go where the services are robust and of sufficient quality. Build it, and they will come.

Conclusion

22. As the committee's report highlights, "more work is needed to improve the prospects of pupils with sensory impairments and (we can) expect ongoing efforts and existing initiatives will be given greater impetus as a result of (the) inquiry".

23. The committee rightly identifies the inadequacy of relevant data as one of the key issues holding back progress. This is not an issue confined to education. If it is treated as such, then the 'joined-up thinking' that is required to ensure a holistic approach (from family life, through schooling and skills development, to work and effective citizenship) will be missing. Scottish Government must take an integrated, long-term approach to these issues – as the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act directs – in order to produce truly successful, sustainable outcomes.

24. Coupled with the momentum generated by the British Sign Language (Scotland) Act, there should be every reason to anticipate a period of sustained momentum across the public sector in Scotland to advance the interests of sign language users and to promote BSL, enlisting the signing community in contributing to social progress.

