Submission to Education and Culture Committee’s inquiry on attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment

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I would like to submit evidence to the Education and Culture committee’s short inquiry on attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment.

I am delighted that the Education and Culture Committee has launched this inquiry; there is an urgent need for a review of deaf education, to help us better understand why most deaf children are failing to achieve on a par with their hearing peers.

Firstly, I would like to introduce myself, I was born deaf in Glasgow and started my education in a deaf school at 2½ years of age. At 11 years of age my parents made the decision to move me to a school in England, Mary Hare Grammar School for the Deaf, where I stayed for the following 7 years. I left school with 10 O’Levels and 2 A’Levels and I returned home to Scotland to study Chemistry in which I have a BSc Hons, I later became the first Deaf person in Scotland to be awarded a PhD. I am also a registered teacher of Chemistry with Science (PGCE from University of Edinburgh). Currently, I am a research fellow at the Child Protection Research Centre based at the University of Edinburgh and a project manager for the STEM in BSL glossary project based at Scottish Sensory Centre, University of Edinburgh. My main focus of professional and personal interest is the welfare of deaf children and their access to education.

Many of my Deaf school friends achieved similar levels of qualification, which shows that in the right educational environment there are no limits to what deaf children are capable of academically. Deafness is not a learning disability. My deaf friends and I were encouraged at school to aim high. Our headteacher’s ethos was that “Deaf children can do it as the same as hearing children”. It is a shame that this mantra is not shared by other educators in the UK.

According to GIRFEC, the wellbeing of children and young people is crucial and the GIRFEC approach uses eight words to describe what it looks like when things are going well – in other words whether a child is:

Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included.

One must question, are the deaf children being properly included in schools in Scotland? There is an urgent need to study the current policy of inclusion in the field of deaf education.

The inclusion policy that has its origins in the Warnock Report (1978) and the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, was introduced to strengthen the requirement that children with impairment should be given additional support for their learning in a mainstream setting. This legislation is regarded as the means to ensure deaf children are given
equality of opportunity to attain with their hearing peers. However, even in schools which are fully committed to providing effective additional support, it is not effective as I found whilst doing a piece of research I undertook as part of my PGCE studies in 2004. I hope this work will prove insightful and challenge some of the assumptions that having deaf pupils in mainstream is always the best way to achieve the highest levels of attainment.

The focus of my study was the inclusion of bilingual, profoundly deaf children in a mainstream school. The question I was looking to answer was why do deaf pupils not answer as many questions posed by classroom teachers as their hearing peers?

Some of the findings from this study were presented to Inclusive and Supportive Education Congress, International Special Education Conference, Inclusion: Celebrating Diversity? in 2005 http://www.isec2005.org.uk/isec/abstracts/papers_g/grimes_m.shtml and included the following:

The teachers of the deaf were all observed working hard to transmit information to the deaf pupils in every lesson observed, ensuring that the deaf pupils received the same information as the rest of the class. However, the deaf pupils were not able to get involved with “question and answer sessions” in the same way as the rest of the class. Questioning is an important aspect of educational development and is vital in the context of classroom interaction, yet questioning tasks presented deaf pupils in a mainstream setting with some very specific challenges.

The first of these to be observed was deaf pupils sitting in the wrong place in the classroom. In one example in one class the teacher of the deaf was sitting on the deaf pupil’s left side and the mainstream teacher standing towards to the right. This meant that the pupil was unable to see both teachers at the same time. For any effective teaching to take place, it is important to be aware of the seating arrangements; deaf pupils need to be sitting somewhere their field of vision includes sight of the class teacher, teacher of the deaf/ communication support, whiteboard and other pupils. This becomes increasingly important during the question and answer sessions.

In most of the classes observed, a ‘sub-class’ with the teacher for the deaf and deaf pupils existed with the teacher for the deaf taking on the bulk of the responsibility of supervising and teaching deaf pupils. However, this is clearly at odds with the belief that inclusion means that deaf pupils benefit from being taught by subject specialist teachers in secondary schools who are the first line of support for all pupils in the classroom. The reality for many deaf pupils is that they are actually taught by teachers of the deaf or communication support workers or personal subject assistants who are not subject specialists; this inevitably places them at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing learning.

During the Q & A sessions I observed, the teachers of the deaf were not given sufficient time to enable them to translate all the questions posed by the class teacher for the deaf pupils. The speed and frequency of both questions and answers left deaf pupils lagging behind the rest of the class, this time pressure also inevitably led to information being lost or dropped or summarised as teachers of the deaf (or whoever had the role of relaying the dialogue) tried to keep up. To give
you some idea of the speed of the interaction in these classes, I timed the average ‘wait time’ per question (i.e. the amount of time the teacher waits before allowing pupils to respond) to be at 1.2 seconds. Wait time is an important concept in oral questioning. It is practically impossible for even the most experienced and gifted sign language interpreters or teachers of the deaf to be able to translate the questions and answers in time for the deaf children under these conditions.

The above is only one example of where additional support does not necessarily provide all the help a deaf pupil might require.

In stark contrast my own experience of being educated at a deaf school environment was that I was able to participate in “question and answer sessions” in the classroom and I had plenty of opportunities to debate issues and discuss topics specifics with both my deaf peers and teachers of the deaf. I firmly believe that had a huge impact on my learning and later academic achievements.

I also had an opportunity to teach science and chemistry to the same pupils in the school where I carried out the small-scale piece of research. During these question and answer sessions (I was using BSL to teach the class with an interpreter translating the lesson for the hearing pupils), it was such a joy to see the deaf pupils being the first to raise their hands high in the air, finally having an opportunity to fully participate in what is for their hearing peers an everyday occurrence. In stark contrast deaf pupils very rarely have equal access to direct teaching in a mainstream setting.

It is of great concern to me that more and more deaf children are receiving support from personal support assistants or communication support workers in mainstream settings who themselves have very underdeveloped BSL skills. For the content of the lesson to be conveyed accurately from English into BSL the person doing this must not only have the knowledge of the subject but also the ability to extract the meaning from what is said and then relay this in a linguistically (and sometimes culturally) appropriate way. This requires a high level of linguistic skill in both English and BSL - only registered BSL/English interpreters are qualified to this level and very few work in education settings in this country.

I’d now like to draw the committee’s attention to another challenge that deaf students have historically faced and which has had a huge impact on levels of attainment. Historically it stems from the marginalisation of BSL in deaf education and the continuing emphasis on mainstreaming. One consequence of this has been that BSL has not been allowed to organically develop its own vocabulary to enable deaf students and their teachers to explore specialist terms and concepts in a range of subject areas without recourse to fingerspelling or initialisation.

In an effort to bridge this gap I am currently working as project manager for the Scottish Sensory Centre’s STEM in BSL glossary project. The glossary project was set up in 2007 to support the deaf children and their teachers and interpreters by providing a bank of BSL signs for different scientific and mathematical terms. Since then, a team of 22 Deaf scientists, Mathematicians, sign linguists and Deaf teachers have worked together to develop over 1000 new signs for Astronomy, Biology,
Chemistry, Geography, Maths and Physics. Video clips of the signs are on the Scottish Sensory Centre’s glossary website [http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/BSL/list.html](http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/BSL/list.html). The team worked hard to make sure the signs are visually motivated and, by following the linguistic precepts of the language, represent the concept at the heart of each scientific term. Definitions for each term are also in BSL along with video clips of demonstrations in the laboratory. The aim of the glossary project is to encourage independent learning for each deaf child. The BSL glossary has been well received by deaf pupils, teachers for the deaf, mainstream teachers, interpreters, communication support workers and classroom assistants. The website receives over 70,000 hits per year - peaking at the start of the year and before the exams. We have seen deaf pupils using the glossary and then go on to achieve qualifications; this shows the importance of having access to education via BSL. One of the problems of this project is to obtain sufficient funding. Scottish Government and Scottish Qualification Authority funded the first few years and we had to apply for extra funding from professional institutions for the remaining stages.

What I’ve tried to do above is outline some of the barriers and challenges that to my mind have led to the poor attainment levels of deaf children in Scotland. The Curriculum of Excellence in Scotland and GIRFEC quite rightly aspire to enable each and every child and young person to be a successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and an effective contributor. Deaf people have so much to contribute to the country and the notion of ‘Deaf gain’ (the positives deaf people bring, as opposed the historically perceived deficits) but in truth, for many deaf pupils these remain mere concepts.

What we need is a system for gathering data on the achievements of deaf pupils - we know anecdotally that deaf children and young people are underachieving but we have no reliable data set to enable us to identify areas of best practice and establish a baseline from which we can assess our performance. I would also respectfully suggest that whilst this inquiry is welcome (and long over due), this cannot be achieved without a comprehensive review of the deaf education system and a commitment to fund research to engage with educators, deaf pupils, their parents and members of the Deaf community to establish a way forward.