I would like to submit the following evidence for consideration to the Education and Culture Committee inquiry into the education of deaf children. There are three points I would like to make to allow you to understand the context of this submission:

Firstly, I would like to thank the Education and Culture Committee for launching this inquiry and congratulate you for the positive way in which you have encouraged deaf people to participate in this inquiry by collecting evidence in both BSL and written English.

Secondly, I would like to emphasise that this evidence submission from a native BSL user who is also a deaf professional (I am a recently retired teacher). I have lived experience of education through the ‘oral’ system, and also worked as a researcher with the late Dr Mary Brennan as a researcher in British Sign Language, at Moray House, University of Edinburgh. Dr Brennan’s research focussed on the grammar of BSL, and BSL/English interpreting. Her central concern was deaf people’s lack of linguistic access and the disadvantages deaf people experience as result of this. She believed that research into sign language could contribute to our understanding of the importance of sign language and help deaf people realise their potential. Her work on BSL was central to the British Deaf Community’s successful campaign for the recognition that BSL is a ‘real’ language and she argued and believed that deaf children acquire sign language and develop language capacity at same rate as hearing children develop spoken language. This research was the foundation of the BSL curriculum and current research in BSL.

Thirdly, I have chosen to submit my evidence in written English to allow me to check the transcript prior to submission.

The findings of the recent report on the educational attainment levels of deaf children come as no surprise to me. It confirms my own fears about (and experiences of) the education of deaf pupils. For example, in my experience, many of the deaf pupils I taught in transition year from primary to secondary school had limited understanding in the mathematical, scientific concepts and self-identity usually expected of pupils at their stage in education. They also lagged behind their hearing peers in reading and writing.

Education continues to be a deeply frustrating issue for the deaf community because deaf pupils are being denied opportunities that are theirs by right. In most
schools, the mission statement is based in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child: Children’s education should develop each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage children to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures\(^1\). Unfortunately, my own experience is that this does not necessarily happen for all deaf children. There is clearly evidence of good practice in some parts of Scotland and these schools should be commended for the hard work they do in helping young deaf people achieve their potential. But given the overall picture, I ask that the Education and Culture Committee consider a more detailed investigation into the attainment levels of deaf pupils with a view to identifying any regional variations in this pattern and their underlying causes.

My own personal experience as a teacher is that some people have very low expectations of the skills and abilities of deaf children. I feel that is linked to a belief that it is better for deaf pupils to learn through listening and speaking rather than using sign language or a combination of both BSL and spoken English. This leads to a focus on developing speech and listening skills at the expense of educational attainment. In this type of situation, in-service training for teachers inevitably focuses on issues such as speech therapy or audiology rather than topics such as the linguistic features of BSL or deaf studies (for example, understanding the importance of cultural differences between deaf and hearing communities when working in a mainstream environment.) I strongly believe that, in many, cases this is misguided. It seems that there is still a lot to learn from the lessons of the past. I meet many people who are shocked to find out that deaf children are not necessarily taught by people who are fluent in BSL. I also have recent experience of young people telling me that they have been told to speak rather than sign in class.

I was educated under the oral system of education. As a child I struggled with basic literacy skills. By the age of 13, I was still unable to read or write. I could speak but had no understanding of the words I was using. My parents had to move me to a residential school in England to ensure I received a basic education. Sadly, today, there are still parents faced with the same decision: of moving their children to England for the sake of their education. They do this in the hope that it will improve educational opportunities for their children. It was not until I discovered sign language that I realised my potential and identity. My life changed. I now have a degree in mathematics, and qualifications in teaching. This was possible because I was able to access education in BSL via a skilled interpreter.

My own experience is that the medical model of ‘disability’ dominates the lives of deaf people. When a deaf baby is born, the advice to the parents comes from a paediatrician or audiologist - many of whom do not understand the importance of early sign language acquisition for a deaf child. The focus is on the ‘fixing’ of deafness and encouraging children to use their ‘hearing’. But this approach fails to recognise that deaf children are inherently linguistically able and that they have the same innate capacity for language as other children. By denying access to the child’s innate capacity for language, they are restricting the child’s ability to learn.

\(^1\) Article 29: UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
through questioning and exploring the word though their natural language. Hearing children of hearing parents from birth grow up in a language rich environment, this means when they go to school they have the language skills, this background of language, social and cognitive skills that for the basis of most primary school activities. Deaf children who are denied access to sign language will have been unable to develop these skills to the same extent as their hearing peers. This means they start school at a disadvantage. This is compounded as the pupil progresses through school and can lead to frustration and anger as the pupil tries to communicate and understand what is happening around them. Sometimes these feelings emerge as ‘problem behaviours’ or disengaging from learning. Deaf pupils can leave school with no sense of achievement and confused about their own identity. When this happens we have failed in our collective responsibility to provide our young people with the skills they need to make the most of their lives and contribute to society. This is why it is so essential that parents of deaf children are encouraged to sign with their children. At school, our children (hearing and deaf) rarely have the opportunity to meet role models who are native BSL users. In the UK, we have deaf BSL users who are elite athletes, academics and researchers, and professionals such as architects, lawyers and leaders of deaf organisations. It is important that schools provide opportunities for pupils to meet and learn about these role models. This will allow deaf children to see that there are opportunities for them when they leave school. Without this, we risk reinforcing a message to deaf children that they are not expected to be ambitious and achieve their goals.

Over the years, hundreds of thousands of pounds are spent on such a child’s education. In mainstream education, the basic means of communication is spoken and written English. Many of the learning activities are designed for simultaneous processing of visual and spoken material. Hearing children can do this. Deaf children cannot. The child is asked to ‘listen’ rather that learn through the medium that allows them to access information quickly and effectively: visual communication. Deaf children become baffled and withdrawn. This quietness is taken as a sign that everything is fine. For many pupils, access to education is not through a qualified interpreter but a pupil support assistant (PSA). In some cases the PSA will be learning BSL from the pupils and staff because they do not have enough experience in BSL to communicate easily with the pupil. Even if a PSA has Level 3 BSL, this does not automatically mean that they are skilled in interpreting. Interpreting involves processing between languages and requires expertise in two languages including understanding of the linguistic features of those languages. In the case of interpreting between spoken English and BSL this means processing between not only two different language modalities (spoken and visual-spatial) but also two languages with different linguistic structures. Even of the interpreter is highly skilled the deaf pupil in a mainstream environment must rely on the interpreter and other visual input to access all activities in the class:

‘Given the inherent challenges and compromises involved in interpreter-mediated education, a number of people in the interpreting field have begun to question whether signing deaf children can be educated effectively in
mainstream schools at all. Even ‘competent’ interpreting may not result in full inclusion of a deaf child in the complex communication environment of a school, placing them in a disadvantaged position’ (Napier et al, 2010).

I have been delighted to find out about the good practice that is taking place in parts of Scotland with the promotion of BSL within the school curriculum and teachers of the deaf studying BSL to Level 3 (and hopefully above this). However, there is no mandatory requirement for teachers of the deaf to be fluent BSL users. This creates difficulties for the pupils who find that their teachers lack the receptive skills to process the speed and regional variations of their BSL. As a teacher, I know that if a pupil is struggling with a concept, it is my responsibility to find an alternative way to explain. How can a teacher do this is they are unable to understand the pupil’s question because they do not understand what the pupil is asking? I have taught many deaf pupils who are very intelligent, capable, and eager to learn. Sadly, many of these pupils had been dismissed as having learning difficulties. This was not the case. They were struggling to communicate with their teachers. It is for this reason that I feel that we should be promoting bilingual or BSL Education for deaf children.

This inquiry is vital opportunity to improve the life chances of deaf children in Scotland. It is essential that we work towards real collaboration between a range of groups: teachers of the deaf, deaf people, parents, voluntary organisations, researchers and related professionals with the aim of sharing our expertise and understanding. The first book published by a deaf man in 1779 was devoted to education practices with deaf children and the role of sign language. More than 200 years later, deaf children are struggling. For many in the deaf community, this inquiry and the BSL Bill has given us our first opportunity to be heard since the decisions of the Milan Convention of 1880 to ban the use of Sign Language in schools. The Scottish Parliament has given the deaf community hope. We know that members of deaf community across the UK are watching in the hope that they too might get a similar opportunity. Our dream is that, at last, the door that was closed on the deaf community in 1880 will open and that for the first time in over 130 years we will have to right to influence policy in deaf education and fully participate in the decisions that affect our lives. We are hoping that finally we will have access our collective human right: to use our own human cognitive learning processes through British Sign Language. This will not only allow our deaf children to flourish but also give formal recognition of the value of their langue and culture.

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