1. Qualified teachers of the Deaf with appropriate communication skills
2. British Sign Language (BSL) on the school curriculum
3. Appropriate curriculum including accessing the examination structure
4. Expectations

1. Qualified teachers of the deaf with appropriate communication skills.

1.1 When deaf children are supported by qualified teachers of the deaf there is a noticeable difference in their attainment. It is crucial that they receive the specialist support from teachers who not only understands the issues surrounding the impact of a hearing loss on their general development, their intellectual development but also on their emotional health and well being. When they have this knowledge they can offer appropriate information to mainstream staff about appropriate strategies to use and how to maximise the child’s hearing with the correct use of any audiological equipment.

However, there are no incentives for mainstream teachers to train as specialist teachers for deaf children. Whilst there is a course (Moray House college of Education) to train teachers to become teachers of the Deaf this is under threat due to financial constraints on local authorities.

1.2 Parents have a vital role to play in working with their child’s teachers to support their child’s learning. To leave it solely to the school is to deny the importance of the parent’s role. Schools recognise and now hold ‘homework evenings’. Parents are guided through the changes (eg: chimney stack subtraction v borrow and pay back 10 method) and suggestions to improve numeracy and literacy in the home (eg paired reading time).

1.3 In order to access mainstream subjects, the communication used must also be of a high calibre. If teachers cannot communicate effectively then the deaf child will inevitably underachieve.

There are no incentives for teachers of the deaf to hold additional higher level communication qualifications. There are some BSL courses available but many teachers of the deaf pay for these courses themselves. The courses are not designed specifically for teachers or working in education. The suggestion of putting sign language interpreters into the classroom would not necessarily help since the role of an interpreter and the role of a teacher are different. The number of available qualified registered BSL/English interpreters in Scotland is small.

1.4 The number of deaf teachers of the deaf is also very low. To drive forward the sense of achievement, having positive deaf adult role models visiting and working in the school would demonstrate that working hard can derive benefits.

2. British Sign Language (BSL) on the curriculum

2.1 In order to improve deaf BSL users’, literacy skills, they need to have the confidence, the skill to move from BSL to English. However, unlike mainstream children where it is mandatory to study English, deaf children do not have the same opportunity to study BSL; their first language. As a result the child does not understand the rubric of their first language and then struggle to work with the different grammatical structures of English. When deaf BSL users see the link from one language to
another their literacy skills move to a different level. For many deaf BSL users they suffer a lack of self esteem, lack of confidence and a fear of failure since they have neither an opportunity to study BSL and / or gain a qualification in English. Achievement requires confidence, a sense of understanding which enables them to develop a pride in their learning.

2.2 British Sign Language is recognised by the Scottish government. However, the Curriculum for Excellence: Modern Languages and the 1+2 Language document, BSL is not awarded the same degree of recognition as other languages including Gaelic. This sends a negative message to educators, parents, pupils and society.

2.3 However, by offering BSL as a mainstream subject, the opportunity to improve and enhance communication between deaf and hearing would increase. Much has been noted about the poor emotional health and well being experienced by some deaf children. Social interaction, peer mentoring and working together are all important learning experiences.

3. Appropriate curriculum including accessing the examination structure

3.1 Traditional schooling uses linguistic and logical teaching methods. Yet there are many alternative ways to learn: visual/ spatial, kinaesthetic, auditory, interpersonal and intrapersonal. When differentiation combined with individual learning style, then everyone has the potential to access an appropriate curriculum and achieve success.

3.2 Many deaf children are now being educated in their local mainstream school. For them to achieve, their teachers must look at alternative ways to encourage them to learn including following recommendations from specialists from a peripatetic service / support department. Basic deaf awareness results in staff being better informed and with understanding of the challenges deaf pupils face.

3.3 It is acknowledged that accessing mainstream English is difficult. Many leave school without any formal English qualification. If they are BSL users then they experience additional difficulties in understanding and using the grammar of written and spoken English. ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) focuses on learning the grammar of English in different contexts depending on the individual’s circumstances. From experience, deaf children derive much success from this course since it explores English, its grammar, its application in written form and also in everyday communication. It seems ironic that foreign nationals can leave Scottish schools with an English qualification.

3.4 In order to complete the ESOL course all four elements: writing, reading, listening and speaking to be assessed. Speaking is not an option, not a choice or realistic for many deaf children. Many deaf professionals will deliver presentations just like their hearing counterparts. They have to develop an additional skill, that of working with a sign language interpreter. Yet, this skill is not taught in school. The new National English course may help redress this imbalance but ESOL (modified to meet the specific needs for a deaf learner) whether as a stand alone course or used in conjunction with the mainstream English course would help improve literacy level. The speaking element could be
amended /differentiated to look at the ability of the pupil with their communicator. Instead of focusing on the ability to speak, the focus should be on the ability to communicate.

3.5 For many years, deaf pupils (and were sign language users) were unable to access their SQA exams / assessments in BSL. They accessed the curriculum in sign language but were then denied the option to demonstrate their skills / knowledge through the medium they accessed their schooling in the examinations. They were assessed not on the subject content / concepts but rather on their ability to read and understand the questions written in English. They were then required to answer the questions in written English. As a result many fared badly because their literacy skills were poor.

This changed when in 2000, SQA allowed the question paper to be signed (the pupils were still required to write their response.) In 2002, responses were permitted to be signed with the responsibility of transcription falling to the staff. As a result pupils can demonstrate their knowledge of the subject, the concepts being examined and not on their ability to read and write English (there are obvious exceptions: English, modern languages). I believe the number of qualifications many deaf BSL users leaving school has increased. However, the question still remains over the standard of sign language skills the teaching staff have.

3.6 Alternative qualifications have a place in today’s education and can offer relevant awards which are accepted by many employers. The range is vast: ASDAN, John Muir, Saltire Award, RHS awards to name just a few. Schools must move away from the ‘one shoe fits all’ exam body to consider the alternatives.

4 Expectations

4.1 The past shows success is determined by the ability to speak English. If no speech or poor unintelligible speech, it was then assumed lower ability. As a result, deaf often underachieved. Today, there are still barriers but perhaps the greatest barrier is expectations.

Pupils must have high expectations. Mainstream teachers must set high but achievable expectations. Parents must have realistic expectations.

Conclusion

Recognising the failures and disappointments of the past can lead to a brighter positive future. Moving BSL into the curriculum and modifying the current ESOL course to enable deaf BSL pupils to develop their English skills are simple yet practical options. Working together with the curriculum, with qualified professionals and society, attainment can be raised.

Margaret Kinsman

24th April 2015

MARGARET KINSMAN

PT Deaf Dingwall Academy / Highland Deaf Education Service
Associate Assessor HMIE
External tutor for the teacher of the Deaf Course
SASLI registered BSL/ English Interpreter
Appendix

NDCS January 2015 Quality standards: Resource provision for deaf children and young people in mainstream school
HMIE 2011 Count Us in: Mind over Matter
BATOD March 2010 Kinsman M ESOL and the Deaf child
(www.batod.org.uk/index.php?id=/resources/publications/magazine)

Scottish CILT Autumn 2014 Kinsman M Introducing BSL in a Scottish Secondary School
(Issue 28, Autumn 2014, 1-12 ISSN 1756-039X (Online) © Scottish CILT Introducing British Sign Language in a Scottish Secondary School)