Attainment of school pupils with a sensory impairment – Submission from Rachel Mapson

I work on a self-employed basis as a professional BSL/English interpreter. I am a member of ASLI\(^1\) and am registered with the NRCPD.\(^2\) Although I am not an education professional, I have worked as an interpreter in various educational establishments. This response reflects my own personal perspective and some brief thoughts regarding the education of deaf children.

- **the need for change**

Studies conducted since the 1970s have consistently shown that deaf children under-achieve at school in comparison with their hearing peers.\(^3\) This indicates that the education system is not adequately meeting the needs of deaf children. These problems need to be addressed to enable deaf children to fulfil their potential and become effective participants and contributors within society.

Language competency is an integral element of educational attainment. One of the problems with the education of deaf children may relate to our predominantly monolingual attitude and the lack of value placed on use of British Sign Language (BSL) in educational settings and society more generally. If BSL was embraced as a positive choice and as a medium of instruction, then the benefits of bilingualism could place deaf children in an advantageous position rather than perpetuate the under-achievement that currently exists.

Although most deaf children are now taught alongside hearing children in mainstream settings it makes little sense to teach deaf children and hearing children in exactly the same way. Their experiences of language are *not* the same; most deaf children are unable to acquire, or access, English in exactly the same way as their hearing peers. Education

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\(^1\) Association of Sign Language Interpreters [https://www.asli.org.uk](https://www.asli.org.uk)

\(^2\) National Register for Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People [http://www.nrcpd.org.uk/](http://www.nrcpd.org.uk/)

\(^3\) The Achievements of Deaf Pupils in Scotland (ADPS) [http://www.adps.education.ed.ac.uk/](http://www.adps.education.ed.ac.uk/)
provided in BSL would both foster development of knowledge and scaffold acquisition of English, in whichever forms (spoken and/or written) were appropriate.

- **early intervention and family support in BSL**

  Deaf children often start school at a disadvantage because they have not acquired spoken language in the same way, or to the same extent, as their hearing peers. The disadvantage becomes greater over time when children continue to lack a fluent first language.

  One remedy for this would be to ensure that all deaf infants with a severe or profound hearing loss (with or without cochlear implants) are encouraged to develop use of both BSL and English from birth. Bilingualism is an intellectual benefit to anyone, but bilingualism that includes a signed language is particularly important to deaf children as the visual/spatial modality is totally accessible to them. Spoken language is never totally accessible to deaf children; even those with cochlear implants do not hear in the same way that a hearing person does. Developing use of BSL does not preclude the development of English (spoken or written) but can actually assist that process (Grosjean 2010).4 The professionals involved with the family need to understand and support this.

  Establishing early intervention programmes where all deaf children are encouraged to learn BSL and all parents of deaf children receive positive information about the use of BSL and free BSL tuition could make a real difference to the starting point of deaf children when they begin school. The support provided needs to be free, ongoing, readily accessible and, tailored to meet the developing needs of each individual deaf child. Current provision by third sector organisations5 is frequently limited by short-term project funding and is neither permanent nor consistent nationwide. It is possible that the British Sign Language (Scotland) Bill may help promote BSL positively to the parents of deaf children, though it is action resulting from the Bill that will achieve this, not the Bill itself.

  Where child/family support programmes have been piloted and/or established successfully by third sector organisations, these can provide models for the delivery of statutory support

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4 Bilingualism, biculturalism and deafness’ published in The International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13670050903474051](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13670050903474051)

5 Both the National Deaf Children’s Society (NDCS) and Deaf Action run projects in Scotland
aimed at ensuring consistency of information and service provision across the whole of Scotland.

- **BSL as a positive choice**

Anecdotal remarks that deaf children choose to be taught orally might have a number of foundations, including:

1. Their parents have opted for an oral approach, as advocated by the majority of health and educational professionals they encounter
2. They have little or no knowledge of, or exposure to, BSL
3. Exposure to, or mention of, BSL may have been framed negatively

In the current system, BSL as a medium of instruction tends to be presented as the option for children where all other strategies have failed. This makes it an unattractive option that few parents or children would select; deaf children who need to access the curriculum through BSL are sometimes grouped together with other children with more complex needs, a situation which fails to provide the stimulating educational environment they require.

Though education in BSL will not suit all deaf children, it needs to be provided as a positive choice so that those who are likely to benefit from this medium of instruction are more likely to take advantage of it. If teaching through the medium of BSL was valued on a par with teaching in English or Gaelic, this could potentially transform the current ‘second class’ attitude towards the language.

- **BSL as the medium for instruction**

Offering equal educational opportunities in BSL for deaf children necessitates that the staff who deliver the education are fluent in BSL. Currently, most of those who teach or support deaf children in BSL have insufficient BSL skills themselves.  

6 This is clearly going to impact on the quality of the education they can provide and the academic attainments of those they teach. The ‘teacher of the deaf’ qualification should require a mandatory of BSL at

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6 The lack of BSL fluency is picked up on in The Long and Winding Road: A Roadmap to British Sign Language and Linguistic Access in Scotland published by the Government in 2009

SCQF Level 8, though teachers should be encouraged and supported towards qualification at higher levels. Similar levels of fluency should be required of all people working with deaf children who use BSL. Any interpreting provision should be delivered only by interpreters who are qualified and registered with either NRCPD or SASLI.7

For children who are most comfortable communicating in BSL, the importance of good language modelling at school is especially important as this may be lacking in the home environment. The involvement of Deaf BSL users within education helps expose pupils to fluent BSL and positive adult role models.

In order to facilitate full participation in a class, deaf children should ideally be taught directly in BSL rather than via a BSL/English interpreter. Where teaching is interpreted, there is an inevitable time delay in the message that the deaf child receives due to the interpreting process. This slight delay can impact on the deaf child’s ability to engage in classroom activities on a par with their hearing classmates. Education in BSL needs to be considered in a more holistic way, rather than as an ‘add on’ to existing educational provision.

- **examinations available in a standard BSL format**

Deaf children who wish to access examinations in BSL should do so on an equitable basis to their hearing peers. Current provision tends to be through a school staff member signing the questions to the pupil, whose responses (in BSL) are video recorded, transcribed and sent off for marking. It is possible for PDF versions of examination papers to have BSL translations of the questions embedded alongside the written English versions; a format that would help maintain the integrity of the examination process. This would enable pupils to refer to whichever language they found more helpful at any point during the examination and to review a question in BSL as many times as necessary. Deaf children should be prepared for this style of examination just as other pupils are prepared for the examination process.

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7 SASLI – the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters [http://www.sasli.co.uk/](http://www.sasli.co.uk/)
• the importance of peers and personal identity

Successful education not only concerns academic achievement but also the development of the physical and mental wellbeing of pupils. Like hearing children, deaf pupils need to develop their own identity and sense of self. School might be a somewhat negative experience for those who are the only deaf child within a mainstream setting; this can be an issue for all deaf children regardless of their preferred language. Two-thirds of deaf children in a recent study (Fordyce et al 2013)\(^8\) reported social isolation and bullying as part of their school experience. Children should have the opportunity to interact with ease, with others like themselves, in whatever language they are most comfortable using. Fostering a strong identity as a deaf person within a deaf peer group might reduce these negative experiences and help counteract the higher incidence of mental health problems noted within the deaf population.\(^9\)

• ask the experts

The views of Deaf people need to be taken into account, as they are the ones who have experienced current education provision. A number of Deaf people in the UK have successfully navigated their way through the education system and emerged from it to become qualified teachers themselves. These professionals can provide an invaluable insight into both their personal and professional experiences of the education system.

The Government should seek to make good use of existing research and learning opportunities, considering data from a UK-wide perspective and looking further afield at countries where education for deaf children has been more successful.

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\(^8\) Post School Transitions of People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing accessed at http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/education/rke/centres-groups/creid/projects/postsch-trans-dhh/postsch-trans-dhh

\(^9\) SignHealth at http://www.signhealth.org.uk/about-deafness/