
Uniqueness of Deaf Education

The educational and developmental needs of deaf and hard of hearing children are distinctive and unique. This distinctiveness and uniqueness has been recognised¹ in a number of international policies and legal documents, including

- European Parliament Resolution on Signed Languages – DOC A2-302/87 17th June 1988 (Reiterated 1998)
- The Salamanca Statement – UNESCO 1994.
- Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly Resolution. Doc 9738 17th March 2003.
- The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 2007.

In itself, deafness is not a learning disability. There is no reason why the academic achievements of deaf children should differ in any respect from the academic achievements of hearing children. There are various aspects to the uniqueness of deaf education;

- Education is for life. The life experience of Deaf people is unique. The challenges faced by Deaf people, in participating as equals in both their social and work environments, are unique to them.
- The acquisition of language is the cornerstone of all education. The language needs of deaf children, and the challenges they face in the acquisition of language, are unique.
- Communication and interaction with teachers and with other children is essential for full and equal participation in education and is an integral aspect of academic and social development. The communication needs of deaf children, and the methods by which they communicate, are unique.
- Awareness of identity, community and culture is central to social and emotional development. The development of such awareness in a deaf child includes developing an understanding of what it means to be deaf, an understanding of Deaf culture, of the Deaf Community, and of the linguistic identity of the Deaf Community.

Acceptance of the uniqueness of deaf education imposes responsibilities on policy makers and creates challenges for service providers. The outcomes for many of today's deaf children will be influenced by the responses to these responsibilities and challenges. It seems clear from the foregoing that responses should incorporate some core priorities, including

- Access to teachers who have specialist skills, including the ability to communicate fluently in Irish Sign Language, a comprehensive understanding of deafness, Deaf Culture and deaf

¹ For example, Article 24, paragraph 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities imposes a responsibility on 'State Parties' to facilitate 'the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community' and to ensure that 'the education of persons, and in particular children, who are blind, deaf or deafblind, is delivered in the most appropriate languages and modes and means of communication for the individual, and in environments that maximise education and social development'.

education, and knowledge of learning styles of children who are deaf or hard of hearing; the knowledge and expertise required of the teacher holds true regardless of the technology or language modality used in teaching deaf children.

- A curriculum that develops an awareness and understanding of what it means to be deaf, including an understanding of Deaf Culture, of the Deaf Community, and of the socio-cultural and linguistic identity of the Deaf Community.
- Access to education in Irish Sign Language (ISL), including recognition of the importance of this language as the medium of communication among Deaf people; in this context it should be noted that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents and most deaf children arrive in the classroom without any signed language competence. Thus, access to Irish Sign Language teaching is essential.
- A learning environment that promotes and facilitates communication and interaction between children, and between children and teachers
- Opportunity for regular interaction with Deaf peers and with Deaf adults
- Regular monitoring of progress and outcomes.

There have been some significant recent developments that give added emphasis to these core priorities. The introduction of neonatal hearing screening in Ireland, which commenced in late 2010 and was fully implemented in all maternity hospitals by July 2013, is a very significant positive development. This almost completely eliminates late identification of deafness, facilitates the introduction of a comprehensive early intervention programme, and should make a significant difference to the language development potential of deaf children at school entry age. This development, combined with progress in hearing aid technology and early cochlear implants for deaf children, represent significant changes in the future potential for language development.

All of the foregoing underlines the importance of regular monitoring of progress and outcomes. The range of possible outcomes for today's deaf child is vast. Parents of Deaf children need to be made aware as a matter of priority of the contrast between the opposite ends of this range which can for some be stark, as is evident from a cursory review of the lives of Deaf adults. At one end of the spectrum there is the prospect of a full and successful life, participating confidently as equals and contributing socially and economically to Irish society, while enjoying their interaction within the Deaf Community, at home and abroad. At the other end of the spectrum, there can be isolation, dependence and loneliness, which can lead to mental illness, prevalent currently among too many Deaf adults.

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