

October 2020

Response to the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement's call for evidence in Northern Ireland.

Who we are

The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) is the national charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and young people. We represent the interests and campaign for the rights of all deaf children and young people from birth until they reach independence. NDCS supports the deaf child through the family as well as directly supporting deaf children and young people. We estimate that there are approximately 1,500 deaf children and young people in Northern Ireland.

We have a team based in Belfast providing Family Support, training for families on topics such as: early years, learning about deafness, starting school, education rights & responsibilities and technology. We provide Family Sign Language and 'Communication is Fun' courses. We also campaign to drive up the standards of services for deaf children and their families and undertake research to inform the sector. In addition, we provide training and resources for professionals working with deaf children with the aim of supporting children to achieve their potential.

Main Causes of educational underachievement

Our focus is on educational underachievement of deaf children. Deafness is not a learning disability, yet deaf children are at risk of falling a whole grade behind their hearing friends. Research shows that every category of deafness, including mild hearing loss, has a negative effect on attainment.

When early identification of deafness is followed quickly by high quality specialist intervention, deaf children can achieve the same outcomes as other children.

However, the Department of Education's own data from 2017/18 shows that only 48% of deaf school leavers obtained 5+GCSEs A*-C2 including English and Maths, compared to 71% of the total: an attainment gap of 23%. In 14/15 the gap was 18%, so the situation has worsened rather than improved in the intervening years.

The vast majority (91%) of deaf children are born to hearing parents, most with no experience of deafness. Deafness is a low incidence disability, and so the 78% of deaf

children in Northern Ireland who attend mainstream school may be the only deaf child in the school, and perhaps even the only deaf child the teacher has ever had in their classroom.

Therefore specialist advice, support and interventions are essential for both families and for education professionals, particularly in the early years when the foundations are laid for a child's language, cognitive and social development.

Key to this is the Teacher of the Deaf service. They provide highly specialist support for families in the early years and help to ensure deaf learners in school have full access to the curriculum. However, the 2019 report by the Consortium for Research into Deaf Education (CRIDE) found that the number of qualified Teachers of the Deaf in employment fell by 11% over the past year. It has fallen by 28% since the CRIDE survey started in 2011.

Families, teacher and early years' practitioners require improved access to theoretical knowledge and practical skills for supporting deaf babies, children and young children, which means that we need a properly resourced Teacher of the Deaf service, with specialised staff.

Main Impact

When deaf children don't get the right educational support it means:

- struggling to communicate
- falling behind at school
- failing to achieve their potential.

This has a long term impact. Deaf adults more than twice as likely to be unemployed than non-disabled adults. Research suggests deaf young people are more likely to be NEET (31% of deaf 16-24 year old working, compared to 53% of total workforce of that age)

5 Key Interventions (ranked, from list)

- Effective school leadership
- Effective classroom teaching **4**
- Greater family engagement **2**
- Greater focus on children and young people's mental health, well-being and resilience **5**
- Addressing income poverty
- Raising aspirations
- Greater focus on early years development including language development **1**
- Improving local employment opportunities
- Stronger links between school and community
- Greater investment in schools - capital/ buildings
- Effective intervention for Special Educational Needs **3**
- A relevant and engaging curriculum
- Provision of educational opportunities or lifelong learning skills for parents

What has worked

From NDCS's experience and research, the following are effective interventions:

As highlighted by the 1001 Critical Days manifesto, the period up to a child's second birthday lays the foundations for future development. Support to deaf children aged 0 to 2 is an area where we can achieve the widest impact.

The home learning environment is the biggest predictor of a child's future success, and has a greater influence than in early education and childcare. Hours spent in informal individual early childhood education and care settings (e.g. with relatives and friends) as opposed to formal settings has been associated with better language development at age four. Teachers of the Deaf can support this by imparting knowledge and techniques.

Parent implemented programmes positively impact children's language and social skills development in the early years. Parental engagement with intervention is a highly significant predictor of successful outcomes for deaf children.

A complete first language has long term cognitive, social and cultural benefits. There is no evidence that learning a signed language interferes with spoken language acquisition or vice versa, so supporting parents' communication choices is important.

Consistent, early use of hearing technology is key to oral language development. Families of children with milder degrees of hearing loss are less likely to be identified early, to use hearing technology consistently and to receive consistent messages about the impact of the hearing loss on outcomes. Restricting access to services based on degree of hearing loss is not helpful.

There is no evidence that all deaf children have a preferred learning style. Research supports a curriculum which is tailored to individual need and capitalises on children's interests, supports effort, memory, attention and learning. There should be a focus on how providers are responsive to the individual needs of the child/family rather than on the 'right' pedagogy for deaf children.

Deaf pupils do better when their families are engaged and have the information they need to support their decision-making and help them make informed choices. However parents may show limited involvement in steering or shaping EY provision believing the provider knows what is best for children.

Impact of Covid

Most support from specialist education professionals was cancelled or postponed for months. We continue to be concerned about how deaf children will receive specialist support from visiting Teachers of the Deaf in light of social distancing rules. There is a need to consider how public health risks are balanced against the risk to individual deaf children if they do not receive the specialist support they need – guidance needs to set out how these

risks can be balanced and mitigating actions that can be taken. We believe that Teachers of the Deaf must be a part of any catch-up package for deaf children.

Audiology appointments for deaf children with hearing aids have been cancelled or postponed, as has cochlear implant surgery. There are delays in some children being diagnosed as having a hearing loss. They will miss out on opportunities for urgent early intervention. We believe that the Department of Health and the Department of Education must work together to ensure that intensive early intervention can ameliorate the effects of late identification.

Home learning materials were not generally differentiated for deaf children's needs and so not appropriate for them. Not all online learning is fully accessible, as many videos do not have subtitles or a British Sign Language translation. Too often, accessibility is an afterthought. There is a lack of direction on this issue.

Communication for deaf children and young people, including those who use sign language, relies on being able to see someone's face clearly – whether for lip-reading or understanding non-verbal communication more widely. Face coverings therefore present significant challenges for deaf children and young people. We are currently conducting a survey on young people's views on the impact of face coverings.

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