

Feature



The best options

Is a mainstream education falling short for some of our deaf pupils? **Peter Gale** urges you to speak out if you feel that improvements could be made or other options considered

I have thought long and hard about sending this article for consideration. The last thing any of us needs is to stimulate an unhelpful argument between those who work in mainstream inclusion settings and those in special schools. After all, we all want the same things for deaf children. But sometimes I wonder whether those of us working in the special sector are actually lacking the courage to speak out about issues we feel really strongly about and whether some deaf children are suffering because of the absence of healthy debate. Just for the record, I know there are many highly successful deaf pupils doing well in their mainstream placements and thriving. In fact, whenever I mention a Mary Hare success I repeat that phrase, constantly trying to avoid the accusation of bias.

But I meet pupils seeking placement in Years 8, 9, 10 and 12, some of whom bring horror stories about their previous placements and the way they have come to feel about school and about themselves. I recently asked them to email me their experiences for a talk I was giving. I doubt that many of the people who have overseen these particular placements are magazine-reading BATOD members, but here are just one or two examples, which, if nothing else, might convince you that there are things we need to talk about. How about 'I had to sit at the back of the class because my surname begins with X' (letter changed to protect the innocent)? Or 'There was a unit in my school, but they said I wasn't deaf enough so I wasn't part of it.' 'None of the videos in my class had subtitles.'

These are easy examples. We can all harrumph and say that this would never happen in our service. More challenging, but possible to overcome with good management is, 'The class was noisy and the teacher moved about so I couldn't hear or lip-read them good enough. When I wore the radio aid then I didn't like the noises it made when the teacher shouted at someone or it rubbed on clothes or a necklace and it gave me headaches sometimes and distracted me when I was trying to work hard or the TA was trying to talk to me.'

What follows is harder to manage: 'I didn't have many friends in my old school due to me being deaf and I couldn't keep up with the speed of the discussion that was taking place.' All the circle time in the world will not help a young person who feels fundamentally different and alone.

Having spoken to these young people, their issues seemed to fall into three categories:

- those which could and should be easily fixed
- those which with concerted effort could be improved
- those which are nigh on impossible to change.

Ask the deaf children you work with how many birthday parties they have been to this year

Here are five things which young people have said to me and which seriously affected the success of their mainstream placements. And by the way, several of them are implant users and one or two have moderate losses, which is food for thought in itself.

'I didn't have many friends.' The lack of real friendships is a major issue for these young people and one which we ignore at our peril. Ask the deaf children you work with how many birthday parties they have been to this year.

'They didn't treat me as clever.' The cocktail of individual support and pre- and post-tutoring can make pupils feel 'thick'. Some gradually migrate to lower sets, not because of their actual ability but because of their problems accessing the curriculum or the probably mistaken belief that the language will be more appropriate for them.

'I was embarrassed by support.' It shouldn't surprise us that at an age when many pupils don't want to leave the house because they think they have a 'massive spot', they are going to be more than slightly put off by having a grown-up attached to them for large parts of the day.

'I didn't like my radio aid.' There are serious issues here, both in terms of management and auditory experience. Whether the deaf pupil is tasked with trying to lasso the headteacher at the start of assembly, or privy to other people's private conversations, or forced to listen at an excellent signal-to-noise ratio to the teacher while being helped by the teaching assistant, the radio aid, which has so much potential for good, is a real problem for many deaf learners. (By the way, is that notion of 'taking responsibility' really fair? Why should the deaf child have to go back to the unit to put the aid on charge while the others line up for lunch?)

'I hated being the odd one out.' With resource bases closing and parents requesting *the* local school, not a local school, deaf children have never been so isolated. For me, this is the one aspect of the current manifestation of inclusion which people will look back on and wonder just what we were thinking of. Whether you are enjoying a 'full English' in the Punch and Judy in Marbella or attending a school reunion, you are looking for shared experiences and people who are like you. Young deaf people *must* get a chance to enjoy experiences with real peers – people like them.

Deaf youngsters are still saying that teachers move around too much

And what was the biggest issue for these deaf children in mainstream schools? They couldn't hear. To anybody outside the profession this would be pretty much a given, but it might come as a surprise to some of us. As ToDs we know the benefits of the aids and the implants and the assistive devices. Unfortunately, all too often, these benefits are lost to nightmarish acoustics, with 30 metal pencil cases clattering away and teachers speaking approximately twice as fast as the student can process. If you think I'm over-egging it, look at the research into monaurally deaf children and the impact of their loss on educational outcomes. And historically, they were treated as normally hearing. Despite some really good training and some dogged work by ToDs, deaf youngsters are still saying that teachers move around too much and speak while facing the board.

So there we are. I've done it. I will now wait for the response from colleagues across the country. But as I've hinted at above, I'm probably preaching to the converted and the vast majority of readers of this Magazine would not allow what I describe (or at least the things they have the ability to change). But these deaf teenagers were telling their truth and it needs to be heard. And of course, for every young person who, with or without the help of family or professionals, has managed to find the way to our door, there must be others feeling like this who see no prospect of anything different.

I'll leave you with the words of a 14-year-old girl that I found the most moving of all the responses I received. I quote her, not to blow the trumpet of my school, but because of the aching sadness her words show in the placement which did not work out. She says, 'I didn't have any friends and was very lonely because I was deaf and kept getting bullied by people saying deaf names. I didn't have confidence to make friends with other people because I was too scared they wouldn't accept me or like me. At Mary Hare I like to do lots of activity with my friends and being able to socialise with them and talk about girl things like I couldn't do

before.' A significant challenge lies in her words. She's not asking for the world, just to have some friends and be able to talk about 'girl things'.

What do I conclude from all of this? Well, I'm not suggesting that all deaf pupils should be returned to special schools. But I am suggesting that there is some practice out there which is not as good as it could be. All of us, whatever our setting, need constantly to be challenging ourselves to improve our practice and that, of course, includes Mary Hare. My other point is that whatever setting you work in, if the writing is on the wall and the child needs something different, be confident enough in your success with the majority not to stand in that child's way. It may not be your fault that it hasn't worked out, but to know that to be the case and to allow things to carry on, even resisting the young person's cries for help, cannot be right.

Peter Gale is the Vice Principal of Mary Hare School.

Editor's note: As Peter suggests in this article, some readers will find the content controversial. As he also suggests, he hopes for a response. I too, as Editor, would welcome responses so please let me have your thoughts for possible inclusion in a subsequent edition.



The screenshot shows the website for The British Association of Teachers of the Deaf (BATOD). The page has a yellow header with the BATOD logo. A large black arrow points from the top right towards the 'REGISTER' button. Overlaid on the page is the text 'have you registered yet?' in a large, bold, black font.

On your first visit you need:

1. your BATOD membership number (it is on the label on the Magazine mailing)
2. the post code your magazine comes to
3. an email address that you will need to quote when you log in each time.

Click REGISTER and follow the instructions. The site will send you a password that you will need next time you log on (you can change it then!)

On your next and subsequent visits you need:

1. the email address
2. your password.

Click LOGIN - you are able to access the members' information and 'hidden' files for members only.