

Does Listening Help? The Impact of Deaf Children's Literacy

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Acknowledgements:

First Peoples of Australia

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Deaf Australians

I would also like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the members of the deaf community in Australia, who preserve their rich heritage, culture and our language, Auslan (Australian Sign Language). We also acknowledge our custodians of Auslan, promoting awareness, equality and access through our sign language. Through Auslan, we inspire future leaders in our deaf community to continue our legacy and heritage.

About Deaf Australia:

Deaf Australia is the national peak representative organisation for deaf and hard of hearing people and people who use Auslan. Deaf Australia has a presence at local, state, national and international levels. Only deaf and hard of hearing people are voting members of the organisation, which makes Deaf Australia a true consumer representative organisation.

Deaf Australia is the Australian member of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) which has consultative status with the United Nations (UN). WFD has over 135 national member organisations representing over 70 million deaf people throughout the world. WFD advises that less than 2% of deaf children are receiving adequate education.

Some of Deaf Australia's successes include:

- Advocated for the introduction of the National Relay Service (NRS) that allows people who are deaf, hard of hearing and/or have a speech impairment to make and receive phone calls. The Commonwealth government established the National Relay Service in 1995 and it continues to the present day.
- Advocated through the Australian Human Rights Commission for the removal of restrictions on text messaging between telecommunication carriers when mobile phones were first rolled out across the country in the late 1990s. These restrictions disadvantaged deaf people. Today, telecommunication carriers reap millions of dollars annually through text-based service.
- Closed captioning on television has been enshrined in the Broadcasting Services Act since 2005. As many as 30% of the Australian population use captions on a daily basis – and not just deaf people.
- Developed the Auslan National Curriculum, which has been implemented in primary and secondary schools throughout Australia. In 2018, over 17,000 Victorian students were learning Auslan.

- Created an international written symbol for 'sign language', which was adopted by member organisations at the recent WFD Congress in Paris, July 2019. This symbol will be used to represent sign language in the international arena.

About Auslan:

Auslan is a language in its own right. It is a visual form of communication that uses hands, arms, facial and body movements to convey meaning. Like any language, Auslan has its own grammatical system, and has a structure different from English. It is a natural language that has been developing organically over time.

For deaf people who use Auslan, it is their primary or preferred language because Auslan is a visual language and is the most natural and accessible language for them. The Australian Government recognises Auslan as a 'community language other than English'. However, this does not mean that deaf people automatically have the right to use it.

Most deaf people who use Auslan also demonstrate varying levels of proficiency in English. There is evidence that when deaf children access Auslan early in life, their English proficiency is increased ¹.

Presentation:

Approximately 95% per cent of deaf children are raised in families that have little or no prior knowledge of deafness and often are anxious about how to bring their deaf child up. Families ask wide ranging questions such as 'will s/he be able to communicate like us?' or 'will s/he be able to function well in the world?', or 'what if s/he can't respond to danger?' and so on.

Deaf Australia recognises that this is common, and parents need to be positively reassured. Their fears should be alleviated in ways that focus on opportunity and growth through effective coordination of support across the deaf sector.

Many deaf children and their families need Auslan services and programs. However, these are not readily available due to inconsistent and inappropriate government policies and supports. Over the years, there have been entrenched government policies and support for hearing services, at the expense of Auslan services and consequently, deaf children's language development has suffered ².

During 2015/16, Australian Hearing provided over 29,000 Australians under 21 years of age with hearing devices. These 29,000 recipients of free hearing devices did not also receive free Auslan acquisition services. Australian Governments (both federal and state/territory) have contributed \$883 million per annum for hearing services. Of that, no funds were allocated to Auslan programs.

Acquiring a fluent first language is a fundamental right of every child, and this has been enshrined in various laws and conventions. Most notably, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly states that **'language' does not mean spoken language only, it means spoken, signed and other forms of non-spoken languages**³.

I draw attention to two United Nations Conventions, namely the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: They state:

'Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance, protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity'⁴.

'... the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'⁵.

¹ S. Penicaud, D. Klein, R. Zatorre, 'Structural brain changes linked to delayed first language acquisition in congenitally deaf individuals, 2013

² Kyle Miers, 'NDIS – Community of Practice', June 2019

³ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 2

⁴ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 8.2, 1989

⁵ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32.1, 1989

Identity means the *'full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedom and human diversity'* ⁶. To enable that identity, we need to *'facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community'* ⁷.

Australia is a signatory to these two UN Conventions.

Acquiring a fluent first language, which for many deaf children will be Auslan simply because Auslan is the most accessible and quickly acquired language for them. The confidence to express themselves in this language and belonging to a social network that includes other fluent Auslan users with whom deaf children can identify, is crucial to this development of identity.

First language fluency in Auslan and social relationships with deaf people also enables deaf children to learn the skills they need to navigate a predominantly non-deaf, hearing environment that is frequently hostile to deaf people. It is also important to understand that the acquisition of Auslan as a first language will assist the development of English language skills.

To be clear, we are not saying that English speech and listening skills are not important. They are.

However, it is necessary to understand two fundamental things:

1. A deaf child is deaf. What they hear with hearing aids and cochlear implants is not the same as what a hearing child naturally hears. Hearing aids and cochlear implants can provide access to some sound, but they do not 'cure' deafness, they do not provide full access to speech sounds; and
2. Speech is not the same thing as language. The ability to speak does not automatically result in fluent language and literacy skills. It is not possible to predict whether or not speech and listening programs will work well for any particular child. This means that while some deaf children can and do achieve good speech and language skills in the current speech and hearing services approach, many more do not.

Access to speech and listening support services are not enough by themselves to achieve fluent first language acquisition and a strong self-identity. Deaf children need access to a full range of services that enable them to develop **both** English speech and listening skills **and** Auslan, and a strong self-identity that enables them to be who they are – deaf children.

Professor Fernand De Vareennes, a Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN) has quoted in his plenary presentation at the recent WFD Congress in Paris:



'By denying a child access to language development, it is a clear breach of their human right and can lead to damage'.

Many overseas research studies have shown that deaf children who acquire language fluency through the use of a sign language as well as speech and listening services in the early developmental years have achieved positive cognitive growth, self-esteem and confidence throughout education and into adulthood ⁸.

The current Australian practice of a speech and listening only approach towards deaf children amounts to language deprivation, which is associated with the lack of language stimuli necessary for language acquisition processes in an individual ⁹.

Some of the current practices that highlight deficiency in the education for deaf children include:

- The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has seen deaf children dropping out from taking the assessment. It has been reported that schools are encouraging parents to withdraw their deaf child from taking the assessment in fear that the school's overall scores will be dragged down by deaf children's poor scores ¹⁰. The lack of identifiers (cohort) for these tests makes it more difficult to identify

⁶ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 24.1(b), 2007

⁷ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 24.3(b), 2007

⁸ Christine Yoshinaga-Itano, 'Principles and Guidelines for Early Intervention after Confirming that a Child is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, 2013

⁹ William Vicars, 'Deaf Children: Language Deprivation', October 2000

¹⁰ Kyle Miers, 'Policy on the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy for Deaf People in Australia', 2014

what areas of focus the child needs to work on or what the school needs to improve in the delivery of curriculum.

- Significant numbers of ‘Teachers of the Deaf’ who work with deaf children do not possess basic Auslan skills to serve as educators and language models. This, in turn, has deprived deaf children of the linguistic tools necessary to be able to learn ¹¹.
- The ‘inclusive education model’ is often counterproductive for deaf children as they are usually the only deaf child in the school. The lack of a peer group with shared experiences leads to poor health and wellbeing. This becomes more obvious as the child gets older and high school becomes increasingly difficult as they undertake higher level subjects, see a variety of teachers and the speed of learning increases.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) may offer solutions for families of deaf children to learn Auslan, but service provision is fragmented and under-developed. There is a lack of structure and mechanisms that allow deaf children to achieve positive personal and social development. The NDIS also has no influence in the education sphere and learning Auslan is an individual goal of each family/child rather than a systemic progression. This lack of a bridge between the NDIS and the education system needs to be addressed.

The California Legislature passed a bill that requires the Education Department to use benchmarks for tracking the progress of deaf students in language and literacy development rather than benchmarking speech and listening skills. The student undergoes annual assessments to ascertain their literacy level, and the assessor will recommend a course of action to ensure that their literacy continues to improve. This improvement is often through the use of sign language ¹².

There has been significant investment in technologies in the deaf sector. Most of this investment has to do with hearing and listening devices and little to do with communication and language needs.

Technology to enable children to learn Auslan has not been effectively researched or invested in, and this has caused significant gaps in the way children (and their families) can access and learn Auslan effectively. Limited numbers of Auslan training CDs/DVDs and online resources have been developed in the past 10 years or so. CDs/DVDs are rapidly phasing out due to ongoing operating system upgrades and hardware improvements. Additionally, these Auslan resources do not offer linguistic development, only vocabulary development.

This situation highlights the lack of investment in technology that can be used to promote linguistic development.

Deaf Australia acknowledges that ‘communication’ is a subjective topic. Often decisions are made on the advice of professionals who believe that a certain course of action is the best option and who often also have significant investment in those options. There is a continuing failure to ‘ask’ the person who is deaf about what works or does not work. With this failure, deaf people are being exploited for the sake of industry’s reputation and profit, and these experiences have lifelong negative impacts on deaf people’s wellbeing, both socially and emotionally.

Since December 2018, Deaf Australia has partnered with Huawei on an initiative called ‘StorySign’. This initiative is geared towards pre-school aged children to help them learn Auslan through popular children’s stories. Huawei has developed an application (app) that can translate English text into Auslan.

The ‘StorySign’ app encourages interaction between family members and the deaf child using Auslan, by reading popular children’s books together. Communication at home is considered to be the most critical key to success for a child’s education and development.

Access to communication remains the key issue that must be considered in all aspects of a deaf person’s life. Effective communication is what enables each person to develop language fluency and literacy, to be educated and effectively participate in the wider community where Auslan and technology play an enabling role to promote this inclusion. For deaf people, inclusion means the capacity to participate in a meaningful way and does not negate the need for communication support.

¹¹ Deaf Australia, ‘Early Intervention & Education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children – Addressing challenges in pursuit of better outcomes, 2012

¹² State of California, ‘SB-210, Special Education: Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children: Language Benchmarks’, July 2015

As mentioned, technologies play an important enabling role for deaf children (and adults) to actively participate in education, work and community life. Deaf people who use Auslan are increasingly using smart phones/tablets to participate meaningfully in the community. However, these technologies require our resourcefulness to make participation happen. For example, utilising several apps and devices, which unfortunately cost more, just to meet basic communication needs.

Regulations that require communications to be fully accessible and equitable are lacking, which creates barriers preventing deaf people from accessing information and services in the same way as non-deaf people. Several laws, policies and regulations have effectively discriminated against deaf people and they must be reviewed to conform with UN Conventions that enable full participation¹³ and¹⁴. Problems include:

- Lack of or poor-quality captions on television, cinemas and websites;
- No Auslan programs on television despite SBS and ABC having inclusive Language and Diversity policies;
- National Broadband Network (high speed connectivity is needed at all times for Auslan communication);
- National Relay Service (there is no Video Relay Service that operates 24/7); and
- Lack of capital investment and research into accessible communication technologies.

The use of communication technology means that technology must be provided alongside the necessary capacity to achieve its purpose. This means that a simple thing like the ability to purchase and access batteries, connection/connectivity, applications, subscriptions, upgrades or other requirements is needed without imposing undue financial hardship for the person. Otherwise, the person is in possession of technological resources but not able to effectively use them.

Deaf people have varying degrees of hearing and there is no 'one size fits all' approach in addressing their needs. There are many elements of need and however nuanced it may be, each individual needs to be treated individually and with the utmost of respect for their functional need to be able to participate in the best way they can. This can be done with singular or multiple forms of support, which may include technologies and aids. It is our duty to empower the person's capacity to participate by ensuring they receive individually tailored supports.

Deaf Australia, as a national representative organisation, believes that society must accept this organisation as an integral part in any decision-making process that affects deaf and hard of hearing people. Deaf Australia believes and adheres to the philosophy: **'Nothing about us without us'**.

¹³ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 23.3, 1989

¹⁴ United Nations, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Preamble (e), 2007

Call to Action:

1. Make Auslan a primary language for deaf children.
2. \$88 million per annum to strengthen the capacity to deliver Auslan supported programs and services across the following areas:
 - a. Deaf children and their families to access and learn Auslan;
 - b. Teachers of the Deaf to obtain proficiency in Auslan in order to work with deaf children;
 - c. Training for Auslan-English interpreters to obtain appropriate skills in various settings (including education);
 - d. Conducting research and developing resources; and
 - e. Enhance service capacity to provide wider supports using Auslan (e.g. counselling, mental health, employment, et cetera).
3. Improving the use of communication technologies to enable access to a range of supports for deaf people living in rural and remote areas.