

# The shape of things to come

In her keynote speech at the Conference, [Connie Mayer](#) considered the changing climate of deaf education and how this has impacted on the role of the Teacher of the Deaf

**T**he context for educating deaf students in 2012 has been transformed by universal newborn hearing screening and the attendant opportunities for earlier intervention, improvements in amplification technologies including cochlear implants, and moves to models of inclusive education. The number of deaf children identified with an additional disability has also increased, with some reports suggesting that it may be as high as 30–40% of identified children. As a consequence, Teachers of the Deaf must work in an ever more complex environment to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse group of learners. As Greg Leigh, an Australian professor of education, has suggested, 'There is currently more knowledge and skill required of a Teacher of the Deaf than at any time in the history of the field.' These shifts have implications for all aspects of what teachers do, for the ways in which we think about teacher education and professional development, and for the future role of Teachers of the Deaf in the field.

## Teachers of language

One of the central aspects of teaching deaf learners that has remained constant over time is that Teachers of the Deaf are first and foremost teachers of language. Even in the changed context of 2012, it is developing the language that is central to communication, cognition, social and emotional development, literacy and schooling that is the key concern for Teachers of the Deaf. The primary consequence of hearing loss continues to be that, in the absence of some sort of intervention, the process of language acquisition does not proceed as it should.

To acquire a language, a child must have a quality and quantity of input that is accessible and used in meaningful interaction with others who are already capable users of the language. When any one of these conditions is not met, as can often be the case for deaf learners, language acquisition is compromised and children come to school with the absence of a fully developed first language. The oft-cited exception is the case of deaf children of deaf parents who use a natural signed language (such as BSL) in the home. While this small group of children (less than 5% of the population) does acquire a language naturally, teachers are still faced with the challenge of helping them develop proficiency in the majority language (for example, English).

Therefore the traditional business of Teachers of the Deaf has been to find ways to mitigate the impact of hearing loss on language acquisition by trying to



make language accessible (ie via auditory or visual routes), and/or systematically to teach language when it has not been naturally acquired. Because literacy learning is so intimately tied to language development, teaching reading and writing and aspects of content areas (such as history or science) has also been a major aspect of the role of the Teacher of the Deaf.

At the risk of oversimplifying the complexity of the current context, it could be argued that the significance of the present shifts in the field resonate most strongly with the issue of language acquisition. While much is made of the importance of newborn screening in that it provides opportunities for earlier intervention, any impact would be greatly diminished in the absence of improved technologies for making spoken language accessible. In other words, knowing about the hearing loss sooner is not a major advantage if the options for intervention (even if they are begun very early) remain limited. Being able to provide easier access to auditory input for communication and language development via amplification lies at the heart of what makes for a truly changed context – allowing for age-appropriate language development, successful inclusion in mainstream settings and expectations of age-appropriate academic outcomes. For no group has this shift been more profound than those deaf learners who have cochlear implants.

## The changing (?) role for the Teacher of the Deaf

While making language accessible via amplification has always been a central aspect of teaching deaf learners, it has become even more important in the

## Shaping sensory support



**Connie Mayer and outgoing President Gary Anderson**

current climate in which a significant majority of deaf learners access language primarily via audition. Knowing how to manage effectively the amplification equipment is critical. Teachers of the Deaf are now dealing with a much wider range of technologies than at any time in the past, and must be able to teach others (parents, classroom teachers, educational assistants) how to manage it as well. This job is further complicated by the rapid pace at which this technology changes.

But as has always been the case, there continue to be deaf learners for whom the auditory channel must be supported by visual input (such as signed language) for language to be acquired – at identification, at certain stages of their development (for example, before implantation) or in certain communication situations (for example, in a poor listening environment such as a mainstream classroom). What differs markedly from the situation in the past is that the majority of these students are also able meaningfully to access at least some spoken language through the use of amplification (cochlear implants and improved hearing aids). ‘Voice off’ signing does not take advantage of this enhanced auditory potential; rather, some combination of spoken and signed language could be seen as most effective in supporting language development for most of these students. This requires that teachers are skilled at combining the modes effectively – something that many teachers do not feel comfortable with, and that typically has not been a focus in teacher education programmes. This gap needs to be addressed.

While teaching language is still a key concern in the current climate, the focus of this teaching has shifted. In the past, teachers devoted much attention to supporting learners in the development of basic

vocabulary, grammar and syntax in English. Structured curricula and teaching approaches were focused on this goal and, even in more natural approaches, it was recognised that language must to some extent be explicitly modelled and taught. In contrast, it is now the case that many more deaf children acquire control of basic communication in English (as a consequence of easier access), and the focus has shifted to an emphasis on developing the academic language and discourse needed for literacy and schooling (ie the use of lower frequency vocabulary, more complex grammar and syntax and less familiar genre). Rather than teaching a separate curriculum or one designed for deaf learners, Teachers of the Deaf must have a better understanding of the mainstream curricula for language and literacy education and how to differentiate them appropriately for their deaf students with an eye to achieving grade level outcomes. This also includes expertise in administering a wider range of assessments to monitor progress.

Among the growing number of deaf learners with identified additional disabilities is a significant cohort with learning disabilities (such as auditory processing disorders) who were often not well identified in the past. While challenges with respect to language and literacy learning are exacerbated by the hearing loss in this population, the hearing loss alone does not account for all of the learning difficulties they face. Learning to work effectively with these students has become part of the job.

### **Shaping support for the future**

If Teachers of the Deaf are to continue to play an important role in educating deaf children (and they should), there are aspects of that role and how we prepare future teachers to fulfil that role, that need to be reshaped in the current climate. In a context where the majority of deaf learners are educated in inclusive settings in their local schools, the norm is no longer the Teacher of the Deaf in a self-contained classroom. Most are now peripatetic teachers working as part of a collaborative team to provide an appropriate programme in a mainstream setting. As the individual who often has the most comprehensive view of the learner, the Teacher of the Deaf should have a central role on this team in planning programmes and providing support. In addition, the singular strength that Teachers of the Deaf bring to this team is that they are experts in the teaching of language and all that this entails. However, this reshaping of their role requires that Teachers of the Deaf are equipped with the knowledge and skills to assume such a leadership position.

The most important aspect of taking on this role is that Teachers of the Deaf need to know how to work collaboratively with the team of professionals who

have a stake in the education of each deaf learner. This includes classroom teachers, administrators, speech and language therapists, audiologists, and support workers such as teaching assistants, interpreters, tutors and notetakers. Teachers are also the members of the team who usually have the most direct contact with the learners and their parents. As such they are arguably in the best position to co-ordinate this collaborative team – and it often falls on them to do so. Yet less than 50% of teacher education programmes report any focus on collaboration with general educators or other professionals as part of the curriculum, and there is little professional development in this area for practising teachers. In terms of how this teamwork is managed in practice, it would be important for school authorities to revisit the role of Teachers of the Deaf and look at their changed responsibilities in the current context. It may be that some structural change is needed in how services are delivered (for example, more flexible schedules to allow teachers to meet with parents after hours), and in how responsibilities are assigned.

As part of taking on a leadership role, Teachers of the Deaf must also be given the opportunity, and take on the responsibility, for developing or enhancing their expertise in a number of key areas. These were described in some detail in the previous section, but in summary would include: managing both personal and group amplification technologies (hearing aids, cochlear implants, FM systems), supporting language development at and beyond a basic level, having knowledge of the mainstream curriculum especially as it relates to literacy learning and the teaching of reading and writing, and differentiating instruction for those deaf learners with additional disabilities.

In looking at this list, it could be argued that it is not so very different from what Teachers of the Deaf have always done. In many respects this is true. But in the current environment, each of these areas has become more complex. There is simply more to know and learn – and all of this against a backdrop of expectations that greater numbers of deaf children will achieve academic outcomes commensurate with their hearing age peers as a consequence of the changes in the field. In light of all this change, there is little doubt that this is a particularly challenging time to be a Teacher of the Deaf. But it could also be seen as the most exciting time to be a member of this profession as the opportunities for the students we teach have never been more robust.

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