

Case Study

With

Deaf Young People in Scotland



June 2024

For Scotland's Learners with Scotland's Educators

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1. Background

Following on from the completion of Actions 20 and 21 in the British Sign Language National Plan (2017-23) and publication of the British Sign Language Toolkit (2022), Education Scotland, the British Deaf Association (Scotland), Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) and Deaf young people worked in partnership to develop this case study.

1.1 Scope of the case study

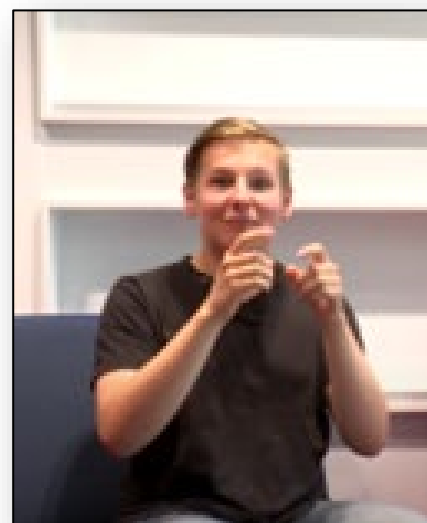
The case study provides insight on the experiences and challenges of four Deaf young people in Scotland while attending secondary school, college or university. In particular it considered:

- experiences and challenges of attending school, college or university as a Deaf young person and what supported them to effectively engage and achieve;
- benefits of language learning (including British Sign Language);
- opportunities and benefits of having Deaf and hearing parents involved in the wider life of the school and engaged in their child's learning.

1.2 Summary of key messages

1.2.1 Schools, colleges and universities

- Need for BSL/English interpreters to be provided for Deaf children and young people to attend school events, parents evenings, colleges and universities.
- Providing appropriate access to timetables at an early stage to allow for BSL/English interpreters to be booked.
- Ensuring that BSL/English interpreters and Teachers of Deaf children and young people have the 'funds of knowledge', skillset and knowledge of relevant BSL terminology to be able to support children and young people in class(es).



1.2.2 Sitting examinations

- Ensuring a mixture of options to support Deaf young people when sitting examinations as per entitlements to existing course and exam assessment arrangements. For example:
 - sitting exam(s) in BSL
 - providing BSL/English Interpreters for BSL or English translation
- Providing extra time in examinations to ensure understanding of the question(s).
- Recognising that anxiety can increase for Deaf young people as examination time approaches.
- Providing support and reassurance where required such as Deaf role models, Deaf peers.

1.2.3 Transitions

- Ensuring entitlements to bespoke transition arrangements are in place at relevant key stages to support the child, young person and their family as per the statutory Code of Practice (2017) e.g. home to nursery; nursery to primary; primary to secondary; secondary to college or university.
- Making necessary adjustments to transition arrangements where Deaf children or young people are coming from out with the UK.
- Adapting transition arrangements where a Deaf child or young person is transitioning from a Deaf school or unit to a hearing school and vice versa. Putting in necessary supports such as Deaf role models, Deaf peers, Teachers of Deaf children and young people, Classroom assistants or Deaf Instructors with BSL skills.

1.2.4 Language learning and sharing in school and outwith

Deaf children and young people:

- and their families are taught BSL free of charge, at the earliest opportunity after diagnosis, where appropriate. Early Years support and BSL development at the earliest point is very important for language development and acquisition (See Action 10 in [BSL National Plan 2023-29](#));
- have the same opportunities to learn and sit examinations in languages used in other countries;
- are given opportunities to learn about the history of Deaf/BSL culture and identity in Scotland as well as in other countries;
- have opportunities to share and exchange their BSL or other language(s) learning with their peers and with their parents;
- should have the opportunity to learn sign languages used in other countries in the same way that hearing children learn modern languages.

1.2.5 Extra-curricular clubs, activities and societies

- Support should be provided to ensure that Deaf children and young people are able to easily access extra-curricular clubs, activities and societies.
- Where numbers permit, consider setting up a group for Deaf children and young people.
- Arrangements are made to have extra-curricular opportunities specifically for Deaf children and young people.

1.2.6 Helpful and supportive approaches

- Attending a school which has Teachers of Deaf children and young people and/or teachers who can sign at Level 3 (minimum) and are working towards SCQF Level 6.
- Having a larger number of Deaf pupils in the school to build friendships and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- Opportunities to get involved in activities of interest out with the school to assist with career progression. This could include apprenticeship opportunities.
- Identifying and removing barriers which prevents Deaf young people from entering further and higher education and the workforce.
- Being allocated a dedicated person to address any issues quickly.
- Having access to Deaf role models.
- Providing relevant information on national Deaf organisations and local Deaf clubs and groups.

1.2.7 Deaf role models

Deaf children and young people should:

- have access to Deaf role models at an early stage and throughout their learning journey. This should include Deaf clubs and groups, Teachers of Deaf children and young people;
- have opportunities to visit Deaf schools to meet other Deaf pupils and Teachers.

1.2.8 Engaging parents and families

- Providing equitable access for Deaf parents to attend school events and parents evenings by arranging a BSL/English interpreter where required.
- Reducing barriers which prevent Deaf parents from participating in the wider life of the setting or school e.g. Parent Councils.
- Providing opportunities for Deaf and hearing parents to network and access peer support.
- Providing support for learning at home. Building the capacity of parents to ensure they are supported to help their Deaf child or young person with their learning at home and with homework.
- Recognising that some Deaf parents and families may need extra support with understanding English, as a second or third language, to be able to support their Deaf child or young person.

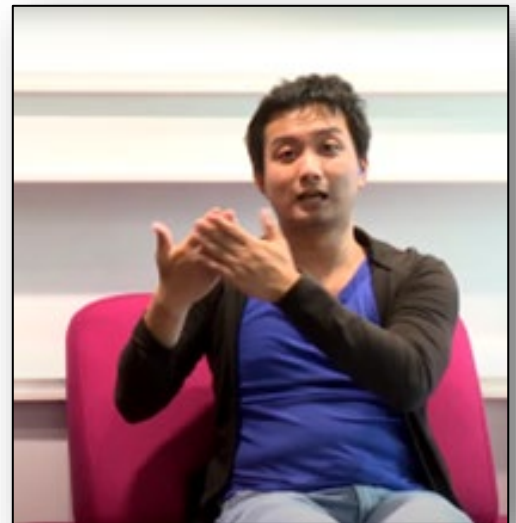
1.3 Recommendations

Strategic

- More evidence requires to be gathered through a range of methods to inform future policy developments, drivers for change and the British Sign Language National Plan. This should include the opinions of Deaf children and young people.
- Raise awareness of the British Sign Language Toolkit for practitioners and accompanying case studies through settings, schools, Deaf clubs and at parents evenings.
- Teachers, Teachers of Deaf children and young people, and support staff are trained to SCQF Level 6 in BSL to ensure fluency in communication with Deaf children and young people.
- Practitioners should seek opportunities to work with the British Deaf Association (BDA) Scotland's Deaf Roots and Pride (DRP) Transitions Project, where relevant, to support Deaf children and young people.
- Local authorities, settings and schools should refer to the BSL National Plan (2023-2029) when reviewing their local plans.

Operational

- Deaf children and their families are taught British Sign Language at the earliest opportunity where appropriate.
- Deaf children and young people have access to language and develop their literacy skills at the earliest possible time.
- All staff have an awareness of Deaf culture and identity as well as an understanding of BSL.
- Deaf children and young people have an awareness of Deaf culture and identity.
- British Sign Language is offered as part of the curriculum.
- Review the current listening and speaking examination requirements for modern languages to provide equality of access for Deaf pupils.
- Consideration is given on what support is required to help Deaf parents get involved in their child's and their own learning as well as in the wider life of the setting or school.
- BSL/English interpreters should be provided for Deaf parents as a right to access information in their language about their child's learning and development.
- Extra support with homework should be provided if required, either using Deaf role models, Teachers of Deaf children and young people or online if possible.



1.4 Participants

School/college/university

- Four Deaf BSL participants from the BDA Scotland's Deaf Roots and Pride Transitions Project – Youth Advisory Group (YAG) - took part in this case study. At the time of interviewing, one was still in secondary school, one had just finished college and two were studying at university.

Deaf/hearing

- All participants were BSL users. Three participants had hearing parents and one had Deaf parents.

Preferred method of communicating and receiving information

- Three participants preferred to communicate through British Sign Language.
- One of the three participants also liked to access information through written English.

Deaf peers (historically and currently)

- One participant who was still at school had around 35 Deaf pupils in their school. Another participant had around 25 Deaf pupils when they attended school.
- One participant had some Deaf students at college but not in their specific class(es).
- One participant mentioned that there are other deaf students in the university she attends but they are not necessarily BSL users. They are deaf but use different communication methods which may include English spoken language or lip reading.
- One participant mentioned that they had been the only Deaf person when they attended secondary school and college but also now while attending university.

2. Experiences and Challenges of attending school, college and university

2.1 School

Attending mainstream school presented several challenges for all participants. These included the sheer volume of pupils in the school but also the small ratio of Deaf pupils compared to hearing pupils. Adequately representing the Deaf unit and pupils in the school against the higher ratio of hearing pupils was not easy and caused some anxiety.

While some of the curriculum teachers at certain secondary schools could use BSL, not all teachers and support teachers were fluent. This presented a problem when classes had to be covered by another member of staff and resulted in the communication needs of pupils not being met.

One participant advised that no BSL/English interpreters had been provided at secondary school. Communication was all in written English. Having moved to the UK from another country this presented communication barriers until some English language had been acquired.

The transition from one secondary school to another was described by one participant as being initially challenging because their teachers could not sign BSL fluently and this had a detrimental impact on their learning. Catching up at the new secondary school was difficult but the support provided really helped to fill in these gaps and get their learning back on track.

2.2 College and university

Gaining access to college and university timetables at an early stage was problematic. As a result of the delay, this presented challenges in trying to get BSL/English interpreters booked in advance. This impacted on students' ability to attend lectures and classes as well as increasing social isolation and loneliness at university. The process to obtain and book BSL/English interpreters, notetakers and other communication support from the start of a college or university course was therefore a more difficult task than it would normally be. Additionally, there were challenges when trying to communicate with the lecturers to establish how best to work together and ways to raise any questions or concerns. Although a lot of support was provided from different organisations to go into the university and work on sorting the challenges, having access to the timetables earlier would have made it an easier process. This would have reduced the anxiety and prevented the initial gaps in learning during the first semester.

For another participant, while support at college was provided, a lot of communication and explanation was required to build a relationship with the BSL/English interpreter. A further challenge was to ensure that the BSL/English interpreter had the 'funds of knowledge' to be able to provide a good interpretation in the various courses. Having qualified and registered BSL/English interpreters who also had the skillset and knowledge of BSL terminology for the different courses was really important. It was therefore not possible to book just any available BSL/English interpreter. Checks had to be made that they had the understanding and were able to sign technical and complex terms.

2.3 Sitting examinations in BSL

Where subjects had been taught in BSL, pupils had choices for the examination. These were:

- a BSL/English interpreter would sign the question(s) and the pupil would sign the response(s). This would be filmed using a camera and video equipment;
- a BSL/English interpreter would sign the question(s) and after ensuring clarity, the pupil would provide the response(s) in English;
- pupils would read the question(s) in English and provide a written response(s) in English.

While some pupils made choices regarding examinations based on personal preference and available options, others opted for the language they felt was their strongest. A dilemma still exists for pupils around whether it is best for them to respond in English or in BSL. One concern highlighted by a participant was that if pupils only use BSL in examinations then they might lose their skills of responding in English under examination conditions.

Having options and being able to have a mixture was considered important to meet pupils' needs.

One participant who was given her examination question(s) at school in BSL found it easier to write down the points she wanted to make before signing the response(s). After leaving school and going to college she advised that the arrangements were different and only one option was available. The BSL/English interpreter translated the question(s) and responses had to be in English. Because of the course she had chosen, she required to learn how to sign different words and concepts in BSL and understand what these meant in English.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and for other reasons (e.g. more essay based courses), students in their first year at university did not sit any examinations. While one participant was fairly confident in writing essays in English she felt that there was a need for these to be proof read to ensure that what had been written was properly translated from BSL into English and was grammatically correct.

Having extra time in classes was viewed as really important to allow for understanding of the terminology, concepts and jargon. Additional time in examinations was also considered to be necessary to understand the question(s) being asked. This was particularly important for Deaf pupils and students who do not have English as their first or even their second language.

2.4 Helpful and supportive approaches

Attending a school which had Teachers of Deaf children and young people, or teachers who could sign BSL fluently and had an understanding of Deaf culture and identity, was considered to be an extremely helpful and supportive approach. These teachers became Deaf role models that the Deaf pupils looked up to and could subsequently model themselves on.

Having a number of Deaf pupils in a school made it easier to socialise, build up friendships and reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Where a specific person was identified as a single point of contact for Deaf pupils and students, this helped ensure support was provided and that any issues were dealt with quickly. This member of staff would then check the timetable, ensure everything was in place and that BSL/English interpreters had been booked. They also helped Deaf pupils and students to understand what was going on as they progressed throughout the course.

Having the chance to get involved in activities of interest out with school created opportunities and supported future career pathways. An example of this was the Scottish Youth Parliament. One school arranged for a participant to find out more information and eventually become a Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYP).

In university, lecturers who regularly checked in with Deaf students to ensure they were okay or whether they needed any extra help was a supportive and much appreciated approach.



Transitioning from school to college and then onto university could present challenges in terms of language requirements and complexities. The interpretation from BSL to written English was an added, but ongoing challenge, given that new language and terminology was being learned all the time. Extra support to understand concepts, jargon and the meaning of English words was a really helpful approach. Assessments, essays and examinations whether in BSL or English would have been more challenging had the support not been put in place.

2.5 Involvement in extra-curricular clubs, activities and societies

Participants advised that there were many different clubs, activities and societies at school, college and university which were available.

One participant did not attend as she already had commitments out with school and because she preferred to be in a Deaf environment.

Another participant found communication really difficult with hearing pupils and therefore found it hard to relate. Although a BSL/English interpreter would be provided, participants did not attend. A further reason for not attending was due to clubs being attended by more hearing pupils or students than Deaf young people. Being Deaf and in the company of so many hearing pupils or students made participants feel quite vulnerable. They also described experiences of being ignored or forgotten if and when they did attend.

All of the reasons above resulted in a lack of motivation to go to, or get involved in extra-curricular clubs, activities or societies. Although participants felt disappointed about being ignored or forgotten, they explained that it was something they had become used to and it was a normal part of their lived experiences of being Deaf. Participants would have liked to attend the extra-curricular clubs, activities and societies. Additionally, they would have liked to feel part of them and as motivated and enthralled as hearing pupils and students, at the prospects. Participants did attend and enjoy events out with school which were run by Deaf organisations and attended by Deaf young people. They learned a lot and received great support from meeting Deaf role models.

2.6 Transitions

Three participants had moved to Scotland from another country. One participant moved at a fairly young age and so they had limited knowledge of what transition processes were put in place. Challenges did exist because of the change from the sign language used in their country of birth. Help was provided through an identified person at primary school to learn and improve their skills in BSL. Secondary school was considered to be very different to primary school in that the pace felt so much faster. More support and an enhanced transition from primary to secondary school would have made a big difference.

For the second participant, their transition from a Deaf school in another country to a mainstream secondary school in Scotland was extremely challenging. No BSL/English interpreters were provided and written English was used to communicate. Learning BSL and English was an initial priority and therefore understanding what was happening in the school environment was extremely difficult. On transitioning to university, further stereotypical and cultural barriers were experienced in terms of the course they had chosen to study as a Deaf young person. Apart from this, the social and teaching aspects of university were very positive. Challenges did exist in understanding the new terminology and learning the signs for these.

A third participant did not attend nursery or an early learning and childcare setting. On starting school at age six, she did not have any language whatsoever. Instead, gestures were used to communicate until she moved to Scotland and was taught BSL and English. When this primary school for Deaf children closed down, she was moved to a mainstream primary. This transition was hard to adjust to and communication was challenging. In the previous school for the Deaf, everyone was on an even playing field, they knew the rules and what to do. One positive aspect was that the teachers from the Deaf school went with the pupils to the new school and this provided some stability. One particularly anxious time was

in S4 when the examinations were approaching. However, the secondary school provided great support and reassurance.

One participant explained that after her parents found out she was Deaf, a Deaf role model was assigned to her. This lady was affectionately referred to as her 'Deaf mum'. Every week she would come to their house for a few hours to teach her and her family British Sign Language. She also provided assistance and support during transitions from home to nursery and from nursery to primary.

The transition from primary to secondary was more difficult because the secondary school only had a small Deaf unit and the teacher did not sign. While the participant managed for a period of time and did have some Deaf friends, this particular school was not, in her opinion, the best fit for her. When the opportunity came to transition to another secondary school, this was an amazing experience. Transitioning again from secondary school to university also presented challenges not least because it was a very new environment. Understanding what was going on, the culture of the university and how everything works was a bit complicated at first.

2.7 Information and advice for hearing staff and practitioners in schools, colleges and universities

Participants had several pieces of advice for hearing staff and practitioners which they felt would support other Deaf children, young people and their families. These included:

- having more awareness of Deaf culture, identity and community;
- all staff learning some BSL e.g. SCQF Levels 1-6;
- not having a look of shock or fear if and when a Deaf person approaches you;
- trying to communicate in some way e.g. through digital means or written text;
- Teachers of Deaf children and young people being fluent in BSL to at least SCQF Level 6;
- staff and practitioners communicating with Deaf young people in their class, or on their course, so that they can fully understand what they need, and can provide support;
- remembering that all Deaf young people are different and their needs vary. Adapting support accordingly is therefore crucial;
- providing BSL/English interpreters;
- offering BSL in the curriculum along with other languages such as French and German to break down barriers and allow everyone in a school environment to communicate with each other on a basic level;
- being aware that where there is only a small number of Deaf pupils or students in a class, they can feel quite lonely. Small things like saying hello, how are you and trying to communicate is helpful and appreciated. Deaf pupils and students will be able to understand you and welcome the effort.

3. Benefits of learning languages

Three participants moved to Scotland from another country and two of them used a different sign language, one used gestures until being taught BSL. All four participants now felt sufficiently fluent and confident in using British Sign Language. Learning BSL was considered by participants to be a necessary life skill for language acquisition, to enable communication, reduce barriers, and access opportunities to develop and thrive at school, college, university, in the workplace, and beyond.

3.1 Transitions from foreign sign languages to British Sign Language

Families who had moved to Scotland had changed from using the sign language in their country of birth, to BSL. However, they still reverted back when communicating with family and friends back home.

While there were variations between sign language(s) used in their country of birth and BSL, transferring between the two was generally not a problem. This did not prevent participants from getting confused at times. Differences included BSL using two hands to sign the alphabet and others using one.

Participants did notice changes in both BSL and the sign language(s) used in their country of birth, and commented that these get influenced naturally as they continue to advance.



3.2 Attitudes towards language learning

Having the opportunity to learn another language like French or German was a very welcomed idea by all participants. Learning about the culture and history of other countries and how words in one language influence another was appealing.

Being able to learn other sign languages was considered to be very valuable. In particular, this was because two of the participants have travelled quite significantly across the world. Having some of the language when they travelled helped make communication easier but also assisted in understanding the practicalities of travelling and living in other countries. It also had the potential to open up career opportunities in other countries.

3.3 Knowledge of other languages including sign languages

Between them, participants had knowledge of, and/or currently use, or have used the following:

- Chinese (Mandarin) sign language
- Reading and writing in Mandarin
- International sign (not officially recognised as a language)
- Latvian sign language

3.4 Languages taught in schools

Participants advised that there were other spoken languages on offer at their school. Deaf pupils are allowed to get involved and attend classes in these languages but they cannot sit examinations in them. The reason for this is because the examination requires listening skills and has a spoken element as well. If a deaf person can use speech then they could potentially sit the examination. BSL is offered as a subject in a school which one of the participants attended but they were not sure if it was possible to sit an [examination](#) in it. This would appear to be a new development and in its early stages.

3.5 Reading and writing English

Three participants felt their ability to read English was of a good standard while one considered their reading of English could be better. Two participants considered their ability to write English to be of a good standard while the remaining two felt less confident. None of the participants considered their fluency in reading and writing English to be of the same standard when compared to BSL. All participants preferred to communicate in BSL. One participant expressed that having a good command of written English was an expectation required to study at university.

3.6 Level of BSL fluency in staff

Participants felt that teachers should be required to have a decent level of fluency in BSL to allow them to communicate with Deaf pupils. Having teaching staff trained to SCQF Level 6 was acknowledged as being good. However, participants did not feel that this was sufficient for them to have the necessary 'fluent colloquial language and the ability to connect'. Deaf pupils were having to 'adjust their register to sign with the teachers'. This was to enable the teachers to understand what was being said. Participants felt that teaching staff should have 'a skillset to match with the young people. It should not be the young people having to match with the teaching staff'.

3.7 Signing families at home

Sign languages used at home included Mandarin, Latvian and BSL. One participant still uses a mixture of gestures, family sign and BSL to communicate with her family. The skills of family members at home in using BSL was mixed.

3.8 Sharing learning with parents

Two participants advised that they did not share very much, if anything with their parents when attending primary and secondary school. Now that one participant is attending university, she looks forward to going home and sharing what she is learning and studying in her courses. The second participant sometimes asks his parents about the meanings of certain things when he does not understand them. However, he did not overly share any learning while attending college or university.

3.9 Opportunities to share and exchange language learning

Two participants had opportunities to teach hearing pupils some introductions to BSL such as the alphabet, 'hello', 'how are you', 'good morning' or some of the 'cool buzz words'. Being able to see hearing children open to and learning BSL was a lovely experience. Children were able to pick up the language very easily.

One participant remembers her chemistry teacher asking her about signs for some of the terminology. This helped to develop a good rapport between them. It was also the same when friends at school asked to learn some sign language.

Incorporating British Sign Language into a course at university was possible for one participant. This was specific to his course and may not be possible for others.

All participants felt that teaching BSL in schools as part of the curriculum would be a great idea and a 'dream come true'. This would enable hearing people to learn the language of BSL and better understand the culture of Deaf people. It was not considered necessary to be completely proficient in the language but simple communication learned through [1+2 languages](#) would make life so much better.

Additionally, this approach could potentially provide an increased number of BSL/English interpreters and improve public services because more people would have a basic understanding and so communication would be improved. Had this been introduced years ago, things would be very different today.

Participants appreciated BSL videos in public places such as airports, supermarkets and in NHS buildings to allow Deaf people to access information. Having services such as Contact Scotland BSL was also allowing greater communication.



3.10 BSL/English interpreter in schools, colleges and universities

Where a hearing teacher did not sign BSL fluently or have adequate BSL skills, BSL/English interpreters or support workers were provided in classes. While the BSL/English interpreter would generally be fluent in BSL there was no guarantee that the support worker would be at the same level or have the required knowledge about sign language for that particular learning context. Having a consistent BSL/English interpreter helped to build a good relationship and improve communication between them. BSL/English Interpreters became familiar to all the students and became part of the class or group as well.

4. Involving and engaging parents

4.1 Parental involvement in school

Only one participant advised that her mum (hearing) had been involved in the Parent Council when she was at nursery. Her mother really enjoyed this and found it to be an invaluable way of understanding how the education system worked. Another participant advised that his mum who was Deaf, tried to get involved but it became very complex and in the end she did not because the school could not get funding for BSL/English interpreters.

4.2 School events and parents evenings

Attending school events and parents meetings at school was not an issue for three participants as their parents were hearing. It was the participants themselves who needed a BSL/English interpreter to try and understand what was being said about them in terms of their progress at school.

One participant advised that at a previous secondary school, a support worker instead of a BSL/English interpreter was provided for her parents during a parents meeting. This approach was not effective because the support worker was not fluent in BSL.

When events were being held at school, participants had mixed experiences. These varied between:

- a Teacher of Deaf waiting at the entrance of the school to take Deaf parents to the appropriate class or area;
- BSL/English interpreters being provided for school shows to allow Deaf parents to have the same access as hearing parents; and
- no BSL/English interpreters being provided at school events or parents meetings.

4.3 Homework

One participant commented that he struggled with homework. This was due to him having to travel a significant distance to and from school each day and therefore it was late before he arrived home. Despite trying to do homework on the bus, this proved too difficult.

Parental support with homework was challenging for different reasons. For two participants whose parents are Deaf, support was provided where possible but helping with English homework was difficult. This was primarily due to them being from another country and English not being their first or even second language. For another participant whose parents were hearing, getting help with homework was dependent on the topic. Support with Maths was difficult as the participant did not always understand it in English. Her parents would try and gesture or use other words to support her understanding.

For another participant, homework caused a lot of tears in primary school but her parents, who were hearing, supported her a lot with this. After moving to high school, she became a bit more independent with her learning and she started to understand her way of learning. When she was not sure of anything, she would ask the teachers or Teachers of Deaf children and young people at school to help. More support with homework was therefore provided from teachers when she was at high school rather than her parents.

One participant advised that as he came from a different country, the culture in respect to homework was very different. It was expected in his home country that children and young people would work on their own to complete homework and learn independently. Support was really only sought to clarify understanding. An example of this was science. Understanding the table of elements was very difficult and so this participant requested support with it, at the time, from his parents.

5. Information and advice for Deaf and/or hearing parents

Participants were all consistent in their advice to parents who may find out that their child is Deaf. Their message to other Deaf and hearing parents would be 'don't panic and don't get upset'. Contact should be made with professionals who can provide you with information, advice and support. Undertaking some research will enable you to become more aware of British Sign Language and how it opens the door for you and your child. BSL will help accommodate future learning and so your child's potential is limitless.

Going to Deaf clubs and meeting Deaf people of all ages can be extremely helpful in finding out about available support. Communicating with other parents who have a Deaf child can also be helpful in sharing experiences and learning from each other.

Participants commented that family members or friends may naturally lose their hearing as they get older. Therefore, exposing your child and your family to the Deaf world can have benefits, particularly if they have learned to sign even a little, at an early age.

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