

## Transcript of Inside Education Programme 120

(18 December 2011)

Seán Delaney (SD) interviewed Elizabeth Mathews (EM).

SD: Could you summarise the opportunities that currently exist in our education system for students who are deaf or hard of hearing?

EM: Most of the opportunities that would exist for hearing children exist for deaf and hard of hearing children as well. In general, they would have four different options in terms of where they go to school. At primary level the first option would be their local mainstream school so they might go there with their siblings or neighbours. The second option open to them would be to attend a unit for deaf children that's attached to a mainstream school. So that's like a special class for a small group of deaf children within a mainstream school. The third option then would be the schools for the deaf, which would have been the traditional option for most deaf children in years gone past. There's three schools for the deaf still in Ireland. Two in Dublin: St. Mary's for deaf girls and St. Joseph's for deaf boys, both in Cabra; and there's a third school then in Limerick. And the fourth option then would be for children who are deaf but might have another disability and they might attend a special school for children other than schools for the deaf. So, you know, it might be a special school for children with learning disabilities, so depending on the individual needs of the child, there's a wide variety in terms of where they go to school. Those same options would exist then at post-primary level, to a lesser extent the units attached to mainstream schools; there's fewer of those at secondary level than there would be at primary. There's about ten at primary school level. There's maybe only three or four at second level now and they open and close depending on the need of a local area. But again the same continuum of mainstream and deaf schools and other special schools would exist for post-primary students. Going onto third level then students can apply through the DARE programme to go to a third level. They can attend third level universities or ITs. And we would see deaf people progressing to all of those areas. And then there's a number of educational opportunities specifically for deaf people in the further education sector. So the Irish Deaf Society, for example, would run a wide variety of classes that's taught by deaf tutors through Irish Sign Language (ISL) for deaf people. And then other further education opportunities as well. So there's quite a wide variety and a lot of it would be the same as what's available to hearing children, except that we provide additional supports for deaf children when they're there.

SD: You've provided a really comprehensive summary of what's available there Elizabeth across all the levels. And if we take it a step further then, across those levels, how are the needs of students who are deaf or hard of hearing different from other students.

EM: I suppose the major issue there would be in terms of language use and again there's variety across deaf children at the primary sector, whether or not they'd use speech or sign language as their method of preferred communication. So their particular needs then when they come into the classroom would be around their language needs. If they're using sign language, they would need to have some provision of sign language in the classroom. If that's in mainstream, it's almost taken for granted that the teacher won't have sign

language. We don't expect that mainstream teachers are adequate signers so you're talking about bringing someone else into the classroom that would provide communication through sign language.

SD: Would that be a special needs assistant?

EM: At present, em, that is how it has been dealt with in the past. You would have a special needs assistant who provides communication support. I think that there may be some changes to that en route. I'm not a hundred per cent at present but it might evolve into a new role where it would be specific to communication support for children who are deaf.

SD: And what about then at post-primary and third level?

EM: Again the same issues would present, I suppose, in terms of language and communication. At post-primary we see other, more, I suppose socially oriented issues, deaf children that might begin to become a little self-conscious of themselves as teenagers. You know, they might be a little bit more reluctant to have supports attached to them in the classroom, more so than they would have been in primary school. So there's a need for sensitivity at that stage from teaching staff to make sure that they don't draw undue attention, and yet at the same time, to make sure that deaf children are getting the supports that they need in post-primary. In third level then, access to interpreters can be a difficult issue because of the shortage of ISL interpreters that we have in Ireland. So some students might opt to take a note-taker or a speed-text operator, in particular, if they don't use sign language we would have deaf people moving onto third level who haven't signed in the past and would like to continue using English as their mode of communications. So the supports, I suppose, are really tailored for each individual student as they come into each educational environment.

SD: And Elizabeth, what can a teacher do, if they hear in September that they're going to have a child who is deaf or hard of hearing enrolling and they want to provide the best possible support they can do, what would you recommend?

EM: I suppose that the first thing that the teacher should do and this might happen without the teacher even needing to organise it would be to have contact with the child's visiting teacher; the visiting teacher service for deaf children kicks in as soon as we identify a child as being deaf and they would liaise between the family home and with schools and they help with providing advice and support to parents and teachers. So the visiting teacher would be able to help a new teacher, I suppose, someone who's about to teach a deaf child for the first time with strategies that they should use in the classroom. They'll help them to get various assistive technologies, if that's needed. You might have a radio-aid system for your child or you could have a sound-fail system in the room. If the child has a hearing aid or a cochlear implant, the visiting teacher will give information to the teacher about how to make sure that those are working properly, about what it means to have a child with a hearing aid or a cochlear implant in your class. So, that would all be done in tandem, I suppose, with the visiting teacher service. Teachers of course then should, keep an open line of communication with the family as well and with parents at home. A lot of teachers that I would have met

over the years would do that with a home-school diary where they'd keep parents informed of what happened during the day with a child and that's particularly important with deaf children who have language delay because a child mightn't be in a position to come home and communicate adequately with their parents about what happened in the classroom during the day. So, if you have a home-school diary like that, it helps with improving language and communication in the home and with keeping parents up to date with what's happening in the school as well.

SD: And is every deaf student or hard of hearing student assigned a visiting teacher?

EM: Yeah, all deaf children who are identified as having a permanent deafness would be assigned to the visiting teacher service. Now the amount of, I suppose, time that the visiting teacher allocates to that student would depend on a case by case basis really, depending on the severity of the needs that the child has. But children with permanent deafness would have access to a visiting teacher.

SD: And to what extent do such students communicate by speech or by sign language?

EM: That's quite varied. It depends again on the degree of deafness that children will have, and the age of onset. For children who are born profoundly deaf, or who would have what we call pre-lingual deafness and they lose their hearing before they develop language - so they might have meningitis as infants or something like that - for those children it's quite difficult for them, not impossible but quite difficult for them, to develop spoken language. And we'd usually see a lot of parents who would use sign language in particular with that group of children in the early years to improve communication in the home and to give a headstart in language development for their child. A lot of children who are deaf though, the vast majority of them in fact, ninety per cent, are born to hearing families so many of them will try, maybe in tandem with sign language, to have spoken language acquisition as well. So, you see variety across families.

SD: How does provision in Ireland compare to provision for deaf and hard of hearing students in other countries, Elizabeth?

EM: It's quite difficult to make international comparisons, I suppose, because each country has its own system. And then even within individual countries, for example in the United States, policy and provision in the state of California can be quite different to in different states. So it can be hard to make international comparisons. I think one thing though about the Irish system though that's quite unique in comparison to other countries is that we don't have many primary school teachers in this country who are themselves deaf and that would be quite different to other schools where you would have, you know, schools in the U.K. or in the U.S. where you would have deaf people working as primary school teachers in the deaf education sector. In Ireland, mostly because of the Irish language requirement, we haven't had deaf people becoming qualified primary school teachers, which means that we don't have native, or near native users of ISL in the deaf education primary sector.

SD: That's Irish Sign Language.

EM: It is, yeah, sorry. So for that reason the Irish context is quite different, I suppose, to other countries where you would have the presence of deaf adults in the primary school system. In the secondary school system we have a number of deaf adults working as secondary school teachers. But like I said because of the Irish language requirement it hasn't trickled down to primary just yet. But it's something that's definitely in discussion with the Department of Education at the moment and hopefully we'll see some changes to that in the coming years.

SD: Indeed, yeah. And I'm sure even as role models that would be important for the students.

EM: Yeah, it's incredibly important in particular for deaf children growing up that they would know and meet other deaf adults. If you read the deaf education literature, a lot of deaf people will talk about their own childhoods and not having met deaf adults before and thinking as children that they would either grow up to become hearing or that they would die when they were young because they had never met a deaf adult before. And that's quite a sad situation if you think about that, that deaf people who were surrounded by hearing adults literally didn't know what would become of them as adults. So it's quite important for them to have access, to positive deaf adult role models, in particular because most of them will come predominantly from hearing families and they mightn't have that, that access that you would take for granted, I suppose, for other children.

SD: How has technology impacted on how deaf and hard of hearing students can participate in the education system?

EM: Oh, there's been significant developments, I suppose, in terms of the technology side. From the audiology side of things hearing aids would have been the only method of acoustic technology for deaf children for a long time. But with the development of cochlear implants now in the last number of decades, that's really revolutionised children, I suppose, being able to access sound and move into mainstream education environments where that mightn't have been a possibility for them before this. As well as that in terms of technology like sound field systems, which benefit hearing children as well in the classroom and I'm sure it's something that the listeners would be used to, the idea of sound field systems. And for teachers as well. But that has significant benefits for deaf children where ...

SD: Could you just say a little bit about what they are exactly?

EM: Sound field systems. It's essentially using a microphone in the classroom where your teacher will have a small microphone and it will be amplified, the sound is amplified into a number of speakers that are positioned around the classroom so unlike using a radio aid where the sound is sent from a microphone directly to a deaf child's hearing aid so nobody else in the classroom hears an amplified sound. When you use a sound field system, it's amplified throughout the classroom so the hearing children will also receive an amplified version of the teacher's voice. So, it's quite good in terms of addressing vocal fatigue in teachers which is something I'm sure in the primary sector teachers are well used to dealing with. But for

deaf children that has made a big difference in terms of them being able to access the teacher's voice in the classroom. One of the difficulties with the advances in technology, though, is that sometimes we lose sight of the fact that it's still difficult or that there can be things we miss out on. So, one example I tend to use a lot of the time is, if teachers in a classroom and they have a sound-fail system that they're using and they're asking a class a group of questions like they might ask, "what's the capital of France?" And a child at the back answers "Paris." "What's the capital of Italy?" or "What's the capital of Sweden?" And the hearing children are getting all of the answers as well. But for the deaf child it's only the teacher's voice that's being amplified so they hear all the questions but they don't hear any of the answers unless the teacher remembers to repeat it. So, sometimes technology can mask other difficulties for deaf children and we think everything is solved. So there's still a degree of concentration required, I suppose, from everyone involved.

SD: And, are there, we've concentrated a lot on what's going on inside the classroom. Are there particular challenges, say in terms of the playground?

EM: I suppose like, for most children it's the interpersonal relationships outside of the classroom in the playground and if children themselves, hearing children this is, if children themselves aren't deaf-aware they mightn't realise why a particular child needs, for example that you might need to tap them on the shoulder to let them know that you're trying to get their attention if you're just calling their name and they don't respond. Some hearing children might think that, you know, they're being ignored or that this deaf child is just rude because they haven't responded to me but that's very easily rectified with a little bit of simple deaf-awareness training for children. And I think that for the most part, from my own observations, hearing children are very quick to accommodate and acclimatise to having deaf children in the classroom and in the playground around them.

SD: Okay. I hadn't even thought about the importance of other pupils being deaf-aware. That's very interesting. Your own interest in this area of working with deaf and hard of hearing students, how did that come about?

EM: Well, I work in this profession, from a purely professional interest which is quite uncommon. I think most people that work in the deaf education sector or who are at least working with the deaf community tend to have a familial connection. They've got a family member or relatives or friends or someone who's deaf. For me it started with an interest in sign language. I was just absolutely captivated by it as a child. It was my own primary school teacher actually, in second class, brought in a video of the Helen Keller story. And as a child it was my first time to see sign language and I was completely captivated by it and wanted to know more about it. And when I was studying in university then I had the opportunity to study sign language but had to learn about the history of deaf education as part of the component for that particular class. And once I learned about the history of deaf education and sort of, some of the contemporary debates in the field, I became absolutely hooked on it. So it developed from there. I did a master's on deaf education in the U.S. and returned to Ireland to do my PhD and I've been working in the field since.

SD: And if teachers wanted to do something like that, that could actually help them to be better, like would you advise them to learn sign language or is there something else that they could do if they were interested in developing professionally in this area?

EM: I would recommend to any teacher to learn sign language whether or not they have a deaf child in their class. If they have an interest in it, I think it's a fantastic thing to pursue and there's classes held nationally so you should be able to get a sign language class in your local area. There's several reasons why it's a good idea. You never know when you might have a deaf child in your classroom. Or even a hearing child with deaf family members and while you probably won't have enough Irish Sign Language to be able to communicate with a deaf adult after just doing a few classes at an introductory level, you might have enough just to have a general "hello," "how are you doing?" and that's quite nice to be able to have that degree of communication with deaf people. It also improves on, I suppose, your understanding of what it is to learn another language and as adults when we've come through the education system, sometimes we forget that it can be difficult to learn another language and especially difficult to learn through a language that is a second language for you. So when you're sitting in a sign language classroom and your teacher is not using any speech, you learn how much concentration is required to work in a second language and that's often the case for a lot of deaf children. And a lot of non-national children in the Irish context as well. So, from a professional development and from a personal development level, it's beneficial I suppose for teachers to have that experience.

SD: And how rich is sign language as a language in terms of, you know, using different tenses or in terms of synonyms and things like that? Is it, well can you comment on it?

EM: I can. It's sometimes difficult to comment on it for radio because I want to give you examples, which you'll only be able to see. But Irish sign language is a complete and full language. It has its own grammar and syntax and structure. So yes, we have tenses, yes you have synonyms, and idioms and all of the things that you would expect to find in spoken language. It's different to sign languages used in other countries. So it's different to British sign language or American sign language. It's an incredibly complex language to learn. I think sometimes people go to sign language classes with the misconception that it's going to be quite easy to learn, that it's a lot like gesture, and that having kind of good pantomime skills is going to help. And while those skills will help, it's certainly a lot more complicated than that and the linguistic research into the field has proven that. So I'm still trying to master my use of ISL and I've been learning it for years.

SD: And finally Elizabeth, and you've kind of touched on this. I'm just thinking that this, as you've said, is a radio programme, and one group of people who might be very interested in hearing the content are the people who can't listen to it: people who are deaf and hard of hearing. How do they manage, or what can radio do, if it can do anything, to be more accessible to such listeners or potential listeners?

EM: Well, I think earlier this year we had one of the first examples of a radio show that had been interpreted into Irish sign language and it was put up as a video podcast, you know, with an

ISL interpreter, so that deaf audiences could access the full radio programme because it had been provided in ISL. A probably more cost effective method of doing that, if you're not able to do that, if smaller radio stations aren't able to afford the use of an ISL interpreter, would be to provide a captioned service. So if you're putting up a podcast have maybe a transcript of the interview, or something similar to that. I know yesterday I translated an article that had been written for an Irish language newspaper on an issue of deafness. Again that would have been inaccessible to many deaf people who don't speak Irish. So just making those things more accessible to that audience is something that I think, radios in particular can work on and it's something that we've seen some developments on in the last couple of months. But there's certainly a good bit more to do.

SD: And that was Doctor Elizabeth Mathews from the Deaf Education Centre on the Marian campus in Cabra, in Dublin. And I'll do my best to get a transcript of the interview up on the website as soon as I can.