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Signs of Equity: Access to Teacher Education for Deaf Students in the Republic of Ireland

Abstract

In today's education system in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland), deaf people are de facto excluded from primary level initial teacher education (PITE) and entry into the primary teaching profession. This is largely because of a requirement that entrants to PITE demonstrate a high level of competency in the Irish language (*Gaeilge*), a subject from which deaf children are often exempt while in school (Department of Education and Science 2009). As a result, there is an almost complete absence of deaf individuals teaching in primary schools for the deaf. This situation is particularly unsatisfactory given the need for linguistic modeling for deaf children acquiring sign language (Hall 2017), especially since at least 90 percent of them will have hearing parents who are unlikely to have prior experience in sign language (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004). Furthermore, the social benefits of having deaf adult role models for deaf children (Johnstone and Corce 2010) are not gleaned in a system where there is no avenue for deaf adults to work in the field. This paper outlines the situation in Ireland, examining, in particular, the policy barrier for entry to PITE and the implications of this barrier for the deaf education system.

THIS ARTICLE WILL deal with primary school teaching since it is in that sector that the barrier for deaf students exists. At

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the postprimary level, where no such barrier exists, there has been a growth in the number of deaf teachers over the last two decades (Danielsson and Leeson 2017). Hard barriers for entry to teaching, although not unique to Ireland, are not ordinarily on the grounds of language. For example, in Italy there was a decree (Regio Decreto 4/05/1925, n. 653) mandating that those who taught in the elementary school system would be of “of healthy and robust constitution” which prohibited deaf people from entering the profession. There is a similar requirement in Ireland regarding medical fitness to teach, though for deaf teachers at postprimary level, this does not appear to have acted as a barrier. Given the imbalance in the proportions of hearing over deaf teachers of the deaf internationally (Danielsson and Leeson 2017), this article holds relevance for an international audience.

The article begins with a discussion on the teacher education landscape in Ireland and an outline of the barriers facing deaf people from accessing this profession. This is followed by a rationale for deaf teachers of deaf children situated in the broader literature on deaf education and social justice. I then discuss the findings from a consultation process with stakeholders in 2011 for how this situation might be addressed in Ireland and finally, I outline the project plan for making access to PITE available for deaf students. Other jurisdictions with similar difficulties accessing teacher education may benefit from the outline of the barriers in place and how these were overcome.

Education and Teacher Education in Ireland

In Ireland, primary school teachers work with children from approximately five to twelve years of age, and postprimary teachers work with children from approximately thirteen years of age until approximately eighteen years of age. While there are subject specialist teachers at postprimary schools, in primary school, a single teacher teaches the entire curriculum to his/her class of pupils. The teaching profession in Ireland is regulated by a professional body called the Teaching Council, established as a statutory body (Government of Ireland 2001) in March 2006. To teach in either of these settings, an individual must be recognized as a teacher for the appropriate setting with the Teaching Council. To teach at a primary school, individuals must register under Route 1 of the Teaching Council Regulations (Government of Ireland

2016), demonstrating that they have obtained a teaching qualification awarded by an accredited teacher education program. The barrier for deaf individuals to become primary school teachers in Ireland lies at the point of entry to PITE programs.

Entry to PITE programs in Ireland is extremely competitive (Heinz 2013) with a rate of applications versus places of over two to one (Darmody and Smyth 2016). Most applicants to PITE are coming straight from postprimary school. At the completion of postprimary education, there is a series of summative high-stakes exams conducted over a fifteen-day period over three weeks, known as the “leaving certificate examinations.” In some subjects, course work in practical subjects, or oral examinations in languages is completed ahead of these examinations. Students typically sit for examinations in six to eight subjects and can do so at a higher level, ordinary level, or foundation level. The results in their best six subjects are used to calculate points. Better grades are awarded more points, and more points are awarded for subjects taken at a higher level than at an ordinary level, or at an ordinary level than at the foundation level. The same number of points are awarded across all subjects with the exception of students taking higher level mathematics who receive an additional twenty-five points (an incentive introduced by the government in recent years to improve the uptake of higher level mathematics in postprimary school). These points are used to rank students in order of academic performance and to offer university places accordingly. This academic ranking is the primary means by which university places are offered—students do not write admission essays or personal statements as they do in the United States. The maximum number of points that can be achieved is 625 (a maximum of 100 points available per subject with an additional twenty-five points awarded if a candidate has taken higher level mathematics). Typically, entrants to PITE in Ireland have achieved in excess of 450 points in their “leaving certificate examinations” and are known to be high-caliber students (Coolahan 2003; Heinz 2013).

In addition to the high points required, there are several particular subject requirements to enter PITE to become a primary school teacher. These additional prerequisites are set down by the Department of Education and Skills in consultation with the Teaching Council.

For primary school teaching, there are subject-specific minimum entry requirements for English, mathematics, and the Irish language (Gaeilge) (Department of Education and Skills 2017). Perhaps surprisingly, the requirement for Irish is higher than that of either English or mathematics. In addition to the high level of Irish expected on entry, it is listed as a mandatory element for programs of teacher education at primary level and students must undertake a compulsory four-week Irish language study residency in a part of the country where Irish remains the first language of the local population (The Teaching Council 2017)—a region known as the Gaeltacht. Gaeltacht areas are typically along the far western coasts of Ireland in Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Cork, and Kerry, with small pockets in Waterford (on the southern coast) and Meath (inland near Dublin). Gaeltacht areas are regularly used by Irish language learners since they provide a rare opportunity for immersion learning of that language.

The emphasis on high levels of Irish competency among primary school teachers is to ensure not only the delivery of the Irish language curriculum but also to facilitate the use of Irish as an incidental language of communication throughout the school day, increasing the use of Irish both inside and outside the classroom (Department of Education and Skills 2013). Children begin their formal learning of Irish upon entry to primary school (aged four or five), and it remains a compulsory subject until they leave postprimary school. Teachers who received their teacher education *outside* of Ireland (and therefore without the Irish language components of PITE) can receive conditional registration to work as primary school teachers, but are obliged to fulfill the Irish language requirement within three years (www.ilrweb). While the important status and role afforded to the Irish language in the Irish education system have been excellently summarized elsewhere (Coady and Ó Laoire 2002), a few important points warrant discussion here. First, the Irish language approached near extinction during the colonial years in Ireland owing, in part at least, to measures taken by the colonial rulers. One example was the Statutes of Kilkenny in the fifteenth century, which forbade the speaking of Irish by English people, or by the Irish living among them (Crowley 2000). Later, under the Penal Laws, the 1695 Act to Restrain Foreign Education prevented Catholics from teaching or

organizing schools (Crowley 2000). English-speaking schools were established from the mid-1700s. The net effect was that for parents to have their children educated in Ireland, they needed to send them to an English-speaking school. It is important to highlight that there was resistance to these measures, more notable in the form of Hedge Schools, a “clandestine form of education” (Crowley 2000, 84) where, among other subjects, Irish was still taught. However, the famine in the 1840s did significant damage to the survival of the Irish language owing to deaths and mass-immigration, which disproportionately affected the poorer areas of Ireland where the Irish language had remained strongest (Cahill 2007).

Perhaps as a response to this history, once Ireland gained its independence, the importance of the Irish language to national identity was consolidated through a range of policy measures. For example, Irish was introduced as a compulsory subject in school, and it was required of those working in certain professions such as law and those entering the civil service (Crowley 2000). Much of this renewed status has resulted from an attempt to revive the language in the wake of Irish independence and afford a central role to schools in that process, though this at times is a source of tension (Coady and Ó Laoire 2002). Thus, one of the great ironies of the Irish education system is that ensuring the rights of hearing children to access conversational Irish language through their school day has inadvertently impinged on deaf children accessing Irish Sign Language through their school day.

The high status of the Irish language can be juxtaposed against the relatively precarious status of Irish Sign Language. The Constitution of Ireland recognizes the Irish language as the national language of Ireland, and its first official language, with English being the second official language. While Irish Sign Language was officially recognized through legislation in 2017 in Ireland, the purpose of the Act is to provide rights to Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpretation and other services for Deaf ISL users, but it does not grant ISL the status of an “official” language of Ireland alongside English and Irish in the constitution. Nonetheless, this official recognition of ISL as a language is a significant step forward from the mention of sign languages in the Education Act 1998, where it is listed alongside a suite of other therapeutic services. The legal status of ISL is improving, but it is not

equivalent to the other languages of the country, and access to services remains problematic.

Barriers to PITE for Deaf People

The barrier to PITE for deaf people arises because, in tandem with requiring Irish competency of primary school teachers, there is a tradition of exempting deaf students from studying Irish during their primary and postprimary schooling. Up until September 2019, this exemption has been granted under a Department of Education and Skills policy (Department of Education and Science 2009). Among other reasons (such as having moved to Ireland after the age of eleven), the circular pertaining to this process outlines particular pupils as eligible to apply for an exemption, the third of which reads:

Pupils who have been assessed as having a general learning disability due to serious sensory impairment, and are also failing to attain adequate levels in basic language skills in the mother tongue. (Department of Education and Science 2009, 2)

Many exemptions for learning Irish were granted to deaf children under this condition. While exemptions from Irish for children with special educational needs may not always be warranted (Tynan 2018), in practice, exemptions are extremely common for deaf pupils. In fact, schools for the deaf in Ireland do not offer Irish as a subject. The circular pertaining to exemptions was revised in 2019 and now provides an automatic exemption to children in special schools or special classes, including those serving deaf children.

In spite of this, we have the somewhat unfortunate anomaly whereby deaf students are still required to have Irish to enter PITE yet, if qualified as teachers elsewhere (outside Ireland), they would *not* be required to know Irish to work in the deaf education sector. Deaf students subsequently have the option to travel overseas for their teacher education and return to Ireland to work in the deaf education sector, but this has rarely been pursued. While the reasons for this have not been explored, it is possible that international study includes additional expenses that can be ultimately prohibitive for individual students. In short, the lack of a domestic route into PITE has meant the almost complete exclusion of deaf people from working in the primary education sector as teachers in Ireland.

As a result, deaf children in deaf education settings in Ireland are routinely and usually exclusively taught by hearing teachers in their primary years, many of whom begin their post with no competency in ISL. Indeed, many also begin without any background in deaf education, since there is no mandatory qualification for teachers working with deaf children in Ireland, though it is common practice for teachers to later seek out a postgraduate qualification in deaf education. The limitations of such a system are apparent when we consider the rationale for deaf teachers of deaf children.

A Rationale for Deaf Teachers of Deaf Children

It is almost twenty years since Shantie and Hoffmeister (2000) outlined their rationale for deaf teachers of deaf children in their article entitled “Why Schools for Deaf Children Should Hire Deaf Teachers: A Preschool Issue.” The landscape of deaf education in Ireland (and elsewhere) has changed considerably since its publication, most notably with the advent of universal neonatal screening (Cone-Wesson 2005), earlier intervention (Yoshinaga-Itano 2004) and improvements in technology such as bilateral cochlear implantation (Litovsky, Johnstone, and Godar 2006), which was implemented in Ireland in 2014. Many deaf children are now educated in mainstream schools, and in Ireland, they almost exclusively use spoken language to access the curriculum in that setting (Mathews 2017). Nonetheless, sign languages still play a valuable role, especially in early development for deaf children (Fengler, Delfau, and Röder 2018) and indeed, the dangers of language deprivation for deaf children would warrant that early access to high quality sign language remains pertinent for many, if not all, deaf children (Hall 2017). However, since the overwhelming majority of deaf children grow up in hearing families (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004), they often have limited access to linguistic role models in the form of signing deaf adults. This is one of the key reasons Shantie and Hoffmeister note that “the role of the teacher of Deaf children carries with it not only the teaching of information but being a model for the acquisition of language” (Shantie and Hoffmeister 2000, 40).

This linguistic modeling is particularly important during the early years of a deaf child’s life because of the critical period for language

acquisition (Lenneberg 1967). For deaf children (with hearing parents) acquiring sign language, this linguistic modeling often comes via deaf adults. In a Deaf mentor program in the United States, a review found that deaf children from families paired with both a hearing tutor and a Deaf mentor had improved language outcomes over those children paired with a hearing tutor only (Watkins, Pittman, and Walden 1998). The positive role of Deaf mentors in early intervention has also been recognized (Yoshinaga-Itano 2013). In Ireland, early language modeling is available via a home tuition grant that can be used to hire a tutor to teach the deaf child and their family ISL. Thus, children are in a position to start acquiring ISL from an early age. However, their access to the curriculum at school through ISL is compromised owing to the lack of fluent ISL users in that setting. For children's continued linguistic and educational development, access to ISL in the classroom is imperative. This is perhaps also the reason why, historically, deaf adults have played an important role in the education of deaf children.

In the United States, when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet established the first school for the deaf in 1817 in Connecticut (now the American School for the Deaf), he did so in conjunction with Laurent Clerc, a young Deaf man and a teacher from the school for the deaf in Paris (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). In Ireland, Thomas Collins was the Deaf pupil for whom the first school for the deaf in Ireland was opened in 1816 (Pollard 2006). Collins went on to become a teacher in this same school (Pollard 2006). In St. Mary's School for Deaf Girls in Cabra before the 1950s, it was common for senior Deaf pupils to receive in-service training to become teachers within the school (Griffey 1994). Indeed, it was common internationally for past pupils to become teachers within the schools for the deaf, and up to the middle of the 1800s, roughly 40 percent of teachers in schools for the deaf in America were deaf themselves (Baynton 1996), though they did not always rise to the same level of authority as the hearing professionals in their midst. In Ireland, a few did. Benjamin Payne, educated in the same school as Collins, went on to become a Deaf teacher there from 1862 until 1875, at which time he was appointed as the principal of the Cambrian School for the Deaf in Wales (Pollard 2006). Throughout the early history of formal education for deaf children,

the value of Deaf teachers was recognized, though this changed when the priority of deaf education shifted to spoken language acquisition (Valente 2011).

While the oral education system was introduced in Ireland in the smaller Claremont School in the mid-1880s (Pollard 2006), its widespread implementation in Ireland came during the 1950s when the larger Cabra schools changed their educational methods (Crean 1997; Griffey 1994), much later than our international counterparts. Internationally, the shift to oral education systems has seen the exaltation of the hearing teacher as the ideal language model with a simultaneous problematizing of Deaf teachers (Baynton 1996). While this trend has been challenged with a return to using sign languages since the bilingual-bicultural movement of the 1980s (Mahshie 1995), providing a population of fluent sign language users to work in the primary deaf education sector offering a balance and alternative to oral programs, in Ireland the lack of a clear path for providing teachers fluent in ISL to the deaf education sector has inhibited such a choice. Significantly, the absence of deaf candidates to PITE programs in Ireland has had the opposite effect, creating an absence of language models for those children using ISL as their dominant language as well as slow progress in the implementation of bilingual programs. Overall, this has the effect of reinforcing spoken language as the most desirable language choice among parents since communication through sign language means, for many children, few school placement options and restricted communicative partners (Mathews 2017).

The current absence of deaf teachers does not equate with a lack of need within the system more generally. While there has been an increasing trend toward mainstreaming deaf pupils in Ireland in recent years, attendance at both classes and schools for the deaf still makes up a considerable number of deaf children, approximately 10–15 percent (Mathews 2017). In 2007, a survey was conducted among all the classes for the deaf attached to mainstream primary schools across Ireland (Mathews 2010). Six out of seven mentioned that they used ISL as a language in the classroom, though given the absence of fluent language models as teachers, I assume that much of this access was provided by way of auxiliary staff called Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). At present, access to ISL is frequently provided through the employ-

ment of deaf individuals as SNAs (Mathews 2018). SNAs are similar to paraprofessionals in the United States, they do not hold teaching qualifications, and they are specifically instructed not to engage in teaching activities in the Irish context. However, they can provide communication support to deaf children (Department of Education and Skills 2014). Subsequently, they fulfill a role that is complementary to, but not substituting for, that of the teacher. Because of this, there is a particular need for *teachers* who are fluent users of ISL to be employed in the education system, not only as a means of providing access to communication and the curriculum in the classroom but to act as language role models for young deaf children acquiring that language. They also play an important role in assessing ISL skills and planning to address shortfalls in language acquisition in this modality. Deaf adults, for whom ISL is their dominant and native language, are ideally positioned to fulfill this role.

Deaf Role Models

Many other benefits in addition to language modeling arise from the presence of deaf teachers in a classroom with deaf students. Perhaps the most important is that they can act as adult role models for deaf children (many of whom will have hearing parents) and that this can help children create “a realistic and positive projection of their own future” (Jiménez-Sánchez and Antia 1999, 219–20). Deaf teachers have been shown to command better discourse in their classrooms with deaf students than hearing teachers do (Smith and Ramsey 2004). Deaf teachers also provide links to the Deaf community for children, their parents, and the larger school community as well as knowledge about Deaf culture and the history of the Deaf community. Reviewing the literature on role models for deaf young people, Cawthon, Johnson, Garberoglio, and Schoffstall (2016) highlight a number of specific advantages relating to having deaf (rather than hearing) role models: a positive shift in parental attitudes toward the potential of the deaf child, acculturation into the Deaf community, navigational capital (such as strategies for dealing with the day-to-day stresses of being in a minority community), facilitating accessible communication, and a strengths-based view of deafness. In conclusion, they summarize, “while the contributions and other forms of support of

hearing advocates are essential for deaf individuals, there is a specific function of deaf role models that cannot be replaced. Deaf role models [offer] a rare and unique form of support” (Cawthon et al. 2016, 123).

This “rare and unique form of support” has been evidenced in a review of the Deaf Role Model Project run by the National Deaf Children’s Society UK. In their review, Rogers and Young (2011) create a compelling argument for the need for deaf role models for deaf children, their parents, and other professionals. They point to the research on reducing isolation in young deaf people and maximizing exposure to native signers. They also stress the important part deaf role models play in challenging negative stereotypes of deaf people, promoting positive attitudes among hearing parents toward deaf people, and modeling appropriate communication strategies for hearing parents to use with their deaf children. While their review is of a project set up specifically with the goal of providing role models, they highlight that “role model status may be something perceived and attributed, rather than deliberately sought out or created through a job description” (Rogers and Young 2011, 4). So deaf people working as teachers is where their students may see them as role models as well as teachers.

Many of the benefits outlined above are currently provided to deaf children in classroom settings by deaf SNAs. However, it is critical to recognize the benefits of deaf adults working as teachers in the school environment as compared to SNAs, a role that is specifically described as nonteaching in nature (Department of Education and Skills 2014). Jiménez-Sánchez and Antia (1999) highlight that classrooms where deaf adults are teaching assistants or volunteers working under the direction of a hearing teacher (the system currently practiced in Ireland) do not obtain the same benefits that result from having deaf *teachers* working in the classroom itself. They highlight that for children to view deaf and hearing adults with equal roles is empowering for these students. Furthermore, having deaf adults working as teachers in the school environment can bring about changes in hearing teachers’ understandings of deafness and reduce the potential isolation experienced by both deaf adults and students in public school settings (Jiménez-Sánchez and Antia 1999).

Equity and Social Justice

In their discussion on social justice and educational leadership, King and Travers (2017, 148) acknowledge that there is likely to be variation in how social justice is conceptualized depending on local factors, but that generally is understood as “a set of moral values or beliefs centered around justice, respect, equity, and equal opportunities for all regardless of race, ethnicity, creed, (dis)ability, gender, class, economic status, and other marginalizing circumstances.” According to the National Office for the Equity of Access to Higher Education:

[t]he pursuit of equality in higher education is central to our aspirations to create an inclusive and democratic society. Education has a key role in promoting equality of opportunity and participation in the civic, cultural, and social life of a nation. Its role relates to the promotion of collective as well as personal advancement. (Higher Education Authority 2008, 14)

As such, access to PITE is as much a matter of equality, equity, and social justice as it is of education. As a commitment to address these issues of inequality and to provide equity of access to higher education generally, the National Access Office has published the National Access Plan, setting targets for participation in third level among students with disabilities. However, Deaf students continue to experience exceptional difficulties in accessing higher education. While the number of deaf students in higher education has more than doubled between 2003 and 2013 (Higher Education Authority 2015), they remain *less likely* to enter the third level than students with other disabilities (Higher Education Authority 2015). They remain among a specific target group in the National Access Plan for 2015–2019 (Higher Education Authority 2015). The target enrollment for deaf students in the National Access Plan for 2013 was not met. Furthermore, deaf students are the *only* group of students with disabilities to see an actual drop in number year-to-year in the last three years (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability 2015).

These issues must be placed in the context of larger debates on the homogeneity of the teaching profession in Ireland (McDaid and Walsh 2016) and internationally (Villegas and Irvine 2010), in particular the

primary education sector. While the theme of diversity is common in the realm of teacher education, this is often as it relates to accommodating diversity among the student population (Pugach and Blanton 2012), rather than the teaching population. For example, the 2012 special issue on “Diversity Frameworks in Teacher Education” in the *Journal of Teacher Education* is primarily about preparing teachers for meeting the needs of their diverse students. The diversity of the teaching population receives scant attention.

This points to larger, overall systemic difficulties within the area of teacher education and its endeavors to promote social justice on the one hand while simultaneously being a product *and* producer of a system built on historical inequity. While many Deaf studies academics have drawn parallels between the Deaf community, the deaf education system, and postcolonial theory (O’Connell 2013; Ladd and Lane 2013; Anglin-Jaffe 2015; Myers and Fernandes 2009; Ladd 2003; McIlroy and Storbeck 2011) there has been less engagement with postcolonial discourses in the realm of teacher education (Domínguez 2019). Speaking about education in the global south, Domínguez (2019) calls for an “epistemic innovation” in teacher education:

Let us be blunt: for all of its “innovations,” and eagerness to account for a diversifying world, teacher education remains a deeply colonial endeavour. Worldwide, it is a process undertaken by predominantly White institutions, preparing predominantly White novice educators, and, though steeped in discourses of diversity and multiculturalism, still presuming the centrality of Eurocentric thought and ideology. (Domínguez 2019, 47)

He argues that while we have spent considerable time trying to establish the best approach to accommodate hyperdiversity in our schools, we are making little progress and that “[w]e have identified and named Whiteness as a concern, but seem to spin endlessly around it, impotent to alter its gravity” (Domínguez 2019, 49). Domínguez has prompted me to wonder—have we named “Hearingness” as a concern in deaf education?

Concerns with colonization, “Hearingness,” and deaf children are largely focused on the fields of audiology and speech and language therapy, that is, the more medical fields associated with the sector. Nonetheless, Valente (2011) argues that the history of deaf educa-

tion is one of “phonocentric colonialism.” He lists the professionals involved in this colonizing process, and among them are teachers of the deaf—the implication, of course, is that these teachers are hearing. Valente (2011) contextualizes this by explaining the decline of the role of deaf teachers of the deaf from the mid-nineteenth century onward in the wake of oralist education policies. The privileging of spoken language over sign language under oralism from the late nineteenth century onward has resulted in a precarious role for deaf teachers of the deaf. Their position has become even more insecure with the widespread mainstreaming of deaf pupils into local schools in the late twentieth century where the goals of “inclusion” in these settings are often (though not always) synonymous with the goals of oralism in the previous century: namely to surround the deaf child with speaking role models and limit the need for sign language (Mathews 2017). In the current educational philosophy of social inclusion, it is very ironic that while the vast majority of deaf students come through the mainstream education sector as students under the premise of *inclusion*, they are currently *excluded* from that sector (at the primary level) to work as teachers. It is further ironic that this exclusion is happening on the grounds of language whereby the maintenance of one minority language (Irish) is inadvertently oppressing another minority language (ISL).

The Proposal

As a result of the barrier to PITE, and the subsequent difficulties faced by deaf people in acquiring ISL when they do not have access to fluent language models as teachers in schools, a consortium of charities representing deaf people (the Education Partnership Group)¹ consulted in 2010 with the Conference of Heads of Irish Colleges of Education and agreed that a proposal be developed to address this problem. The main purpose of this proposal was to consult with stakeholders and then outline how access could be provided to PITE, including a cost estimate of such a project. In 2011, the author of this article was recruited by the Education Partnership Group to undertake a consultation process with key stakeholders and to produce a project plan. In general, the proposal for access involves the replacement of the Irish language requirement with an equivalent requirement for

Irish Sign Language and the establishment of a Bachelor of Education ISL pathway in one teacher education college. For the remainder of this article, I will outline the key issues that emerged during the stakeholder consultation process.

Consulting with Stakeholders

Key stakeholders for the consultation process were identified by the Catholic Institute for Deaf People, one of the key funders for this project. Meetings were held between April and June 2011 with the intention of identifying current barriers in place and establishing any potential difficulties with the proposed solution of replacing the Irish language requirement with an ISL prerequisite. Details on the more practical aspects of cost and infrastructural requirements were also elicited during the consultation process.

Many organizations were included in the consultation process, including the Teaching Council, representatives from several Colleges of Education, the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (Union), the Department of Education and Skills, and representatives from student-support services in the third level. Deaf teachers (with postprimary qualifications) and the one Deaf teacher with a primary qualification currently working at the primary level were also involved in the consultation process. Meetings ranged from twenty minutes to an hour in length. Brief notes were taken during the meetings and expanded immediately afterward. At the request of those consulted, they were assured that they would not be identified by name in the finished document, but rather that general themes emerging across the meetings would be discussed. As such, while extensive notes were taken during meetings, they were not recorded or transcribed. Notes were analyzed to draw out a list of every issue identified across the interviews (twenty-nine issues were raised overall). These were then further analyzed to group them into recurring themes. The issues identified could be grouped into three common themes across meetings with stakeholders. These include a positive disposition toward the proposal, PITE route development issues, and postgraduation issues. These themes, along with a descriptor used to guide classification of issues, are listed in the appendix.

Positive Disposition

It was evident across the majority of stakeholder consultations that the proposal was welcome, and most acknowledged that the exclusion of deaf people from teaching deaf children was an anomaly that needed to be addressed. Other positive comments included that this initiative would assist the government in meeting its targets to improve the number of students with disabilities at the third level (Higher Education Authority 2008); that it would provide positive role models for deaf children that could later have a positive impact on their self-efficacy; that it provided positive role models for the community at large to see the achievements of people with disabilities; and that it was an issue of social justice whereby the advances made in equality legislation needed to be followed up with initiatives such as this to remove barriers facing people with disabilities in practice. In spite of the generally positive disposition, there were several stakeholders who highlighted that the minimum entry requirements to initial teacher education are set by the Department of Education and Skills and that any progress hinged on first securing the support of that Department. Furthermore, the positive disposition extended to deaf teachers working in deaf education settings only: there was considerably less support for deaf teachers to work with hearing pupils in mainstream settings.

PITE Route Development

While most meetings began with an acknowledgment of the barrier and a need for change, the stakeholder consultation process was dominated by discussion of the potential challenges in developing a PITE route for deaf people. Challenges relating to three key areas emerged: the admissions process, systems issues, and finances. Regarding the admissions process, there was concern expressed by many of the stakeholders over both the potential quantity and quality of deaf candidates for a PITE route. The number of places for publicly funded PITE programs are controlled by the Department of Education and Skills in an attempt to balance teacher supply and demand. Given that the demand in the deaf education sector is comparatively much lower (in 2019, there were six mainstream primary schools that had a facility

for deaf children as well as two schools for the deaf nationwide compared to over 3,000 mainstream primary schools), stakeholders were concerned that the number of entrants into a PITE program for deaf people would be kept low, and advised against running the program every year. This was to ensure that the deaf education “market” would not be “flooded” with teachers who might not get employment. A maximum of six students was proposed in a pilot intake cohort before a long-term commitment to this initiative would be made.

There was also concern regarding the quality of the candidates, owing to the very high caliber, by international standards, of hearing students gaining entry to PITE programs. An international review of initial teacher education in Ireland carried out in 2012 concluded that “the academic standard of applicants is amongst the highest, if not the highest, in the world” (Department of Education and Skills 2012). Stakeholders expressed concern that if deaf students came in with lower academic scores from secondary school compared with these high-caliber hearing students, they might not be able to keep up with the demands of the program. Furthermore, they expressed concern that if deaf candidates had to meet the same points threshold at entry as their hearing peers, that we may have no eligible candidates, in particular given the summative exam nature of the leaving certificate (heavily reliant on written English) and the fact that it may not be the most accurate representation of deaf students’ abilities. To address these issues, it was suggested that a small number of places be ring-fenced through a derogation process to be filled only by deaf candidates, thus ensuring that they would not be competing with hearing students for places on this program. This would be coupled with the minimum academic entry requirements set down by the Department of Education and Skills, as well as the university, to ensure that candidates have what is deemed a minimum academic standard required to undertake third-level education.

A third, unique yet recurring concern regarding the admissions process was what should be done about the Irish language requirement. It was accepted that the requirement for Irish needed to be waived, but it was also put forward by many stakeholders that a replacement of the Irish language requirement with an equivalent level required in ISL (rather than an outright exemption) would be most

appropriate. This presented a number of difficulties. First, ISL is not on the secondary school curriculum and thus is not one of the leaving certificate examinations. Subsequently, a new method of assessment would need to be introduced to determine a minimum level of ISL for candidates to enter a PITE route. The second difficulty was identifying who would develop and administer such an assessment, and how a minimum level currently required for Irish might be mapped onto a newly developed assessment for ISL so that each was equivalent. When proposed by the author, it was agreed by stakeholders that the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin was the most appropriate place to develop and administer such an assessment given their experience in assessing ISL at the university degree level in their interpreter programs. While it was not known at the time of the consultation process, the issue around mapping would later be resolved when the Irish language leaving certificate requirements would be mapped onto the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, against which ISL had already been mapped (Leeson et al. 2016). This allowed for a relatively seamless equivalency between the leaving certificate requirements for Irish (60 percent or above on the higher level paper) and ISL (60 percent or higher at level B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

The second key set of challenges under the PITE route development theme related to systems issues, such as issues relating to professional accreditation, university structures, and infrastructure. Many of these challenges related to the landscape of teacher education in Ireland and dealing with the professional regulation of Colleges of Education. It was identified early in the stakeholder process that any amendment to a PITE program to accommodate deaf students would warrant its re-accreditation through the Teaching Council. Furthermore, it was also likely to need accreditation through the university itself. Specifically, new modules intending to replace the volume of modules dedicated to Irish in PITE programs would need to be designed. The logical conclusion was that these would be replaced with modules on ISL and the teaching of ISL.

Separately, much work would be needed in preparing the university structures (notably in the colleges of education) to accommodate a cohort of deaf students. This was particularly the case given the

almost complete lack of deaf students in that sector to date. Lecturers would need deaf awareness training, the physical infrastructure of the college would need to be assessed (for example, to determine if loop systems were in place), interpreters and other supports would need to be considered, and a large-scale deaf awareness initiative would be needed to remove the stigma of deafness. Many stakeholders pointed out that colleges of education had typically not participated in the Disability Access Route to Education (a government initiative to increase the number of students with disabilities in third level by offering reduced points threshold for admission to programs) and that there was considerably less experience in that sector in working with students with disabilities than other university programs. Subsequently, when the colleges of education *did* have students with disabilities enroll, stakeholders noted that there was a problem with nondisclosure because students were anxious that they might be perceived as unsuitable for teaching careers.

The third key set of challenges in the PITE route development is related to finances. The consultation process was taking place during a wave of severe austerity measures following the recession in Ireland, and cuts had been implemented to public sector salaries in 2011. A recruitment embargo was in place. Overall, stakeholders felt that any project demanding significant financial investment was unlikely to succeed, but that given the overall goodwill toward the initiative, if a cost-effective proposal could be developed, it might be approved. Also, any proposal should start as a pilot initiative. Proposing a pilot would allow the government and other stakeholders some leeway in agreeing to a project when they were unsure if they were able to make a long-term commitment. Subsequently, a cost estimate was carried out in tandem with the stakeholder consultation, and the final proposal took into account cost-effective PITE route delivery. In essence, the stakeholder consultation emerged with the sense that this was a worthwhile initiative coming in a challenging fiscal environment, and that running it as a cost-effective pilot was its best chance.

Postgraduate Issues

The theme of postgraduate issues captured concerns about employment, health and safety, and classroom communication. Much of the

discussion on employment centered on the need for a restriction on deaf teachers teaching in mainstream schools. Since graduates of a pathway for deaf students would not have Irish, they would not be eligible to teach in mainstream settings. The possibility of having another teacher teach the Irish language component of the curriculum was rejected given that Irish is also to be used as a language of communication throughout the day, and is thus not simply a subject within the primary school curriculum. Therefore, the nature, wording, and scope of such a restriction was identified as an important issue beyond graduation. Given this restriction, some stakeholders brought up concerns over the position in which a mainstream school's board of management who were recruiting new teachers might find itself if a deaf person applied to a position for which they were not eligible; and if this could be perceived as discrimination, creating the potential for legal action. Employment legislation in Ireland states that candidates can be refused job appointments if they are unable to carry out the essential duties of a job—delivery of communicative Irish through the course of the day is such a duty; therefore, discrimination suits should not be an issue.

Given the restrictions to be imposed on deaf primary school teachers in terms of their employability, there was considerable discussion over where [deaf] teachers may be employed and the extent of employment opportunities open to them. This is largely related to the limited number of deaf education settings within which graduates of this program might be employed. Furthermore, there was discussion around the increasing numbers of students in mainstream placements and the subsequent decline of students attending such deaf education settings. One stakeholder made the comment that given early intervention and the increasing cochlear implantation, there may not be a need for education through sign language going forward. There was also discussion around the visiting teacher service (an itinerant teaching service provided to deaf children in mainstream schools) as a potential source of employment for deaf teachers. Some stakeholders were concerned that because the key role of the visiting teacher is to provide support to parents and teachers, the overwhelming majority of whom are hearing, that the communication barrier between the visiting teacher and those individuals may be prohibitive. This could

be addressed through the provision of interpreting, but in the absence of a funded access-to-work scheme for deaf people similar to that in Britain (British Government n.d.) the provision of interpreting to this extent may be seen as an unreasonable accommodation, and beyond the scope of employment equality legislation (Government of Ireland 1998). Overall, there was concern about the limited employment prospects facing potential graduates of a PITE route for deaf people. Nonetheless, there was agreement that this was not a satisfactory reason to prevent access to PITE in the first place and that hearing people also faced similar risks of unemployment.

Given the absence of deaf teachers in the primary sector in Ireland, many of the stakeholders also had concerns over the day-to-day reality of deaf teachers in classrooms. Some of these concerns may seem questionable to an international audience where there is more experience of deaf teachers, but concerns were expressed genuinely with an eagerness to learn about international practice. These included health and safety issues such as what might happen in the event of a fire alarm, responding to vocalized alerts from students, classroom management without the use of voice, and overall, whether deaf teachers might not be deemed “fit to practice.” Fitness to practice is usually determined at the point of entry to the profession and has been identified as a potentially hard and soft barrier for students with disabilities (Treanor 2012). Many of these concerns were allayed by the fact that deaf teachers are already working in the sector at postprimary, and that deaf teachers work successfully in the primary education sector outside of Ireland. There were also classroom communication concerns over the implications for hearing parents/deaf teacher communication dyads as well as the implications for oral deaf children in deaf education settings if the teacher used only sign language. It was argued on a number of occasions to stakeholders that the current system means that children who use sign language have limited access to that means of communication, but the overall consensus was that “two wrongs don’t make a right” in this regard and that a continuum of language and communication options would need to be presented to deaf children in deaf education settings. There was some discussion around the role of coteaching in this regard, and some evidence presented

from international settings operating bilingual-bimodal classrooms (Kreimeyer et al. 2000).

A PITE ISL Pathway. Taking on board the issues identified by stakeholders outlined above, the final proposal suggested that access to PITE for deaf people would be most easily achieved by creating a pathway (hereafter referred to as a BEd ISL) into an existing PITE program for deaf people using ISL. Entry to the BEd ISL would be made available through a derogation process under a national central application system for third-level education where a set number of places would be reserved for deaf candidates. Since the most significant barrier facing deaf people in gaining admission to PITE is the Irish language requirement, it was proposed that this would be replaced with an equivalent ISL requirement. Rather than granting access to all PITE programs across the country, it was proposed that access would be granted to a single PITE program. This would allow for the congregation of ISL users into a single program that would facilitate peer-learning and further development of ISL competency, as well as improved social interaction between deaf students. Furthermore, the development of a consolidated program would allow for modules relevant to deaf education to be taught, thus contributing to a cohort of teachers who are not only skilled in ISL but also knowledgeable about deaf education. Finally, such a program would allow the concentration of support resources (such as interpreting) in a single location, thus providing the most cost-effective delivery of access.

Progress Since the 2011 Consultation Process

Since the 2011 consultation process, there has been a considerable restructuring of PITE program providers nationally, in particular, the incorporation of four providers into a single faculty under Dublin City University. The author of the proposal was also appointed as a lecturer in this university around the time of that incorporation, which facilitated the considerable progress made in developing a BEd. ISL. In 2016, the program was presented for validation within the university, and in 2018, after considerable negotiation, it received permission from the Department of Education and Skills to replace the Irish

language requirement with a requirement for Irish Sign Language, to be assessed by the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin. Accreditation from the Teaching Council was granted in late 2018, allowing the university to start the student-recruitment process for intake in 2019. The program also secured considerable funding from the Higher Education Authority PATH initiative (Program for Access to Higher Education) aimed at diversifying access to initial teacher education. This will allow for a suite of capacity building activities within the university and the Deaf community to improve the student experience overall.

Conclusion: Possible Outcomes of the BEd ISL

They are numerous possible outcomes of the BEd ISL for the education system, deaf children, and the Deaf community at large. The most significant change to the education system as a result of a BEd ISL is that it would ensure a population of teachers for deaf education settings who are not only competent ISL users but who have also studied modules relevant to deaf education. As well as this, it will increase the exposure of their hearing peers to issues relating to deaf education. Through increased interaction with other students who are themselves deaf, as well as the possibility of studying modules in relation to deaf education as optional special education courses, these hearing students will bring a new awareness to mainstream schools of the issues facing deaf children. Furthermore, it would allow for our educational initiatives such as team-teaching and coenrollment models practiced at present in the United States and the United Kingdom (Kreimeyer et al. 2000) but unfeasible in the Irish context due to the lack of deaf teachers or teachers fluent in ISL. The ultimate effect on deaf children is that there would be a greater understanding of the needs facing those children within both mainstream and deaf education environments. The provision of deaf role models also brings with it a host of benefits (Johnstone and Corce 2010; Rogers and Young 2011; Shantie and Hoffmeister 2000; Smith and Ramsey 2004;).

For the Deaf community overall, the creation of access to PITE would mark a significant milestone in their equity of access to third-level education as well as their involvement in the deaf education system. Barriers preventing deaf people from accessing PITE have been

a source of frustration for many decades. In the history of Irish deaf education, there are notable deaf people who have taught in schools for the deaf (Pollard 2006). Unfortunately, since the establishment of the Irish Republic and the subsequent changes in requirements for teacher training, notably the introduction of the Irish language requirement, deaf people have been systematically excluded from this sector. The great irony of this situation is that the Irish language requirements came about as a response to the near extinction of the Irish language as a result of a range of oppressive measures instigated during the colonial period. In order to maintain the role of one minority language (Irish) in the education system, barriers are preventing access to another minority language (ISL) in the same system. The result, in contrast to other countries, is that deaf adults can make little impact on the education of deaf children. Progress in this area will bring Ireland in line internationally in terms of the practice of deaf education, as well as providing an exemplar to other countries instigating their own journey of providing access to initial teacher education.

Epilogue

On January 24, 2019, a designated pathway into the existing bachelor of education (primary teaching) was launched as a pilot by the Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor at an event in Dublin City University. Over twenty people applied for the six places available in the program. Entry requirements set down by the Department of Education and Skills included a minimum requirement in English and Mathematics and a minimum threshold of performance in the Leaving Certificate Established examinations. The traditional requirement for competency in the Irish language (Gaeilge) was replaced with an equivalent requirement in ISL.

Of the twenty applicants, six who met the other minimum requirements were invited to attend the ISL examination, and four completed those examinations. The ISL competency examination was a new examination developed by the Centre for Deaf Studies in Trinity College Dublin for this initiative. Each of the four applicants was offered a place on the BEd ISL pathway, and all four accepted. On Monday, September 23, [2019?], they commenced their studies as the first Deaf ISL-using students in a BEd (primary) program in the

history of the Irish republic. They are supported by a team of four ISL interpreters and notetakers while they attend class with their hearing peers. They also have two lecturers (one Deaf and one hearing) who deliver their lectures through ISL in a series of dedicated modules for this pathway. This cohort is set to graduate in 2023, after which the Department of Education and Skills will decide if a further cohort will commence. Subsequently, while this development is a historic one and marks a considerable shift in the role of Irish Sign Language in primary education of deaf children, the future for deaf children accessing their education through ISL remains somewhat uncertain.

Appendix

Themes Identified during Stakeholder Consultations and a Description of each Theme

Theme	Description of Theme
Positive disposition	This theme captures reasons given by stakeholders for why the initiative to bring Deaf people into PITE is a positive move.
PITE route development	This theme captures issues identified in the preparation of a PITE route for deaf people. Subthemes include admission, system issues, and finance.
Postgraduate issues	This theme captures issues relating to the futures of graduates upon completion of the program. Subthemes include employment, health and safety, and classroom communication.

Note

1. The Education Partnership Group is a consortium group comprising representatives from the main charities and educational institutions serving deaf people in Ireland, including the Catholic Institute for Deaf People, Holy Family School for the Deaf, the Centre for Deaf Studies at Trinity College Dublin, the Irish Deaf Society, and DeafHear. Subsequent to this proposal being completed, it has been joined by representatives from two parent organizations, Sharing the Journey and Our New Ears.

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