Listening Eyes, Speaking Hands

The Story of Deaf Education in New Zealand

by Renata Hopkins

It's lunchtime at a school in Christchurch, and groups of students are chatting. If they wanted, some of these students could talk without making a sound. That's because they also speak New Zealand Sign Language, one of our official languages. But when deaf students were first taught in New Zealand, sign language wasn't used at all. In fact, it was banned!

New Zealand's First School for the Deaf

New Zealand's first school for the Deaf opened in Sumner, Christchurch, in 1880. Over a century later, in 1995, it was renamed the van Asch Deaf Education Centre, but in the first few years, the school was known as the Sumner Deaf and Dumb Institution.

Wait – it was called *what*?

In 1880, deaf people were often referred to as deaf-mutes or deaf-and-dumb. "Dumb" was a way of saying that someone didn't speak, but of course, the word could also be an insult. For that reason, the label was eventually seen as offensive. And besides, the Deaf *did* speak. They had their own language of signs and facial expressions. Still, some people felt that the Deaf should communicate the hearing way. This meant lip-reading and speaking orally – a method called oralism. It was thought that if deaf children did these things, they could participate more fully in society.

Big D, Little d

You've probably noticed that big D on Deaf (especially when used as a noun, not an adjective). Some deaf people prefer it this way. On its website, Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand/Tāngata Turi explains that deaf people are positive about being deaf: "It's a way of life for them, not a disability." Put another way, these people think of themselves as "culturally Deaf" in the same way that a person identifies as Australian or Japanese. There are around nine thousand people in New Zealand who identify as culturally Deaf. Most use New Zealand Sign Language as their first language and are involved in the deaf community. Those who prefer a lower-case d have often lost their hearing in later life and still consider English their first language. They may identify more with the hearing community.

MSC0030250_0002

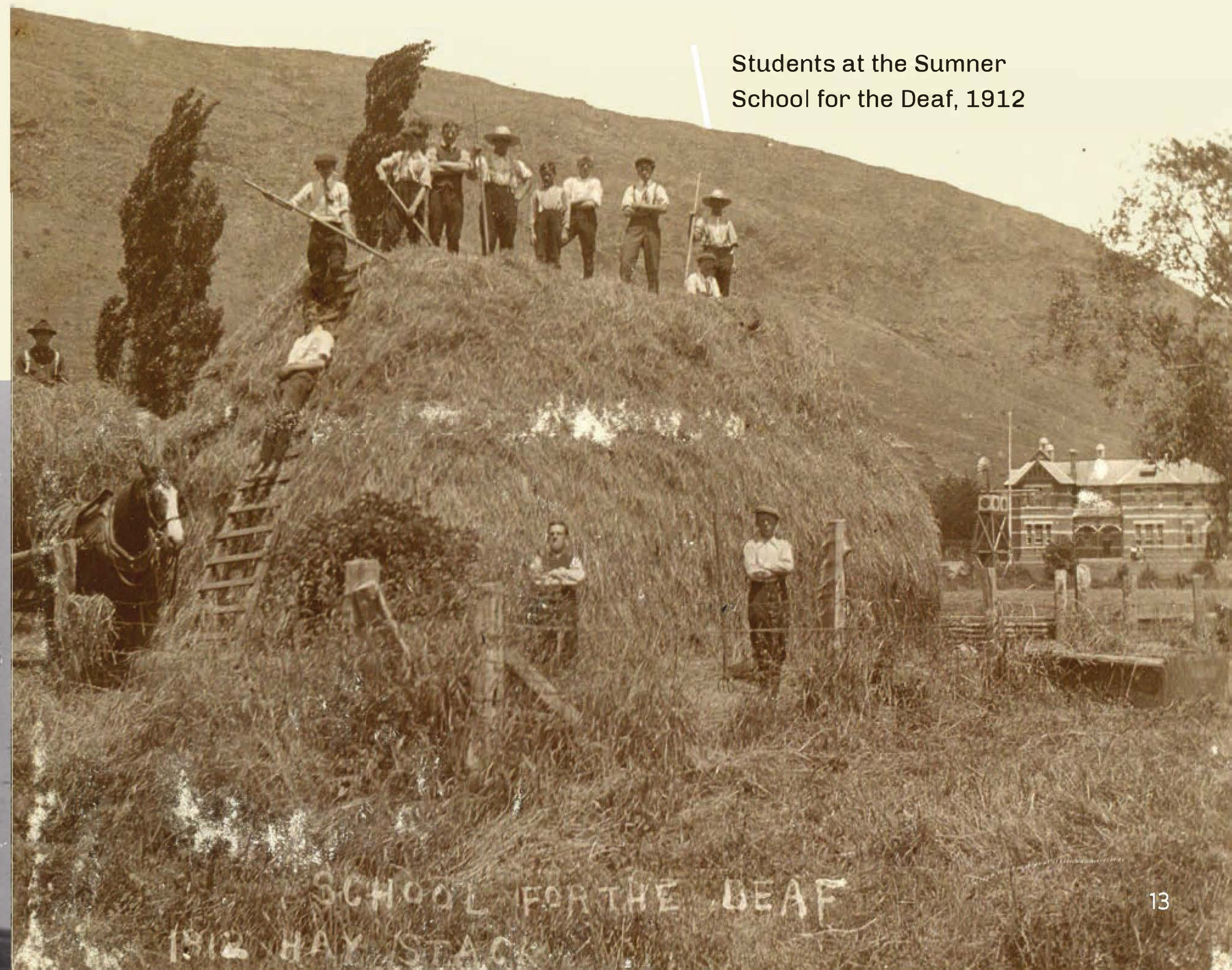
In 1880 (the same year the school at Sumner opened), a conference on deaf education was held in Italy. Some of the people who attended thought that deaf students should be taught sign language; others thought that they should be taught oralism. A vote was taken, and oralism won. For the next hundred years, this method of teaching became the focus of deaf education in New Zealand, and deaf children were taught to lip-read and speak aloud. The first principal at the Sumner school was Gerrit van Asch. He believed in oralism and didn't allow signing in class.

Gerrit van Asch with a group of students

Living and Learning at Sumner

Children travelled from all over New Zealand to live at the Sumner School for the Deaf (the school was renamed this in 1907). The students – some as young as three – went home only for a few weeks at Christmas. This might seem strange now, but it was seen as a chance for deaf children to be together. Before they came to Sumner, some of the students had never met another deaf person.

Formal lessons were about learning to talk. The work was difficult and repetitive, and it required a huge amount of concentration – imagine making a sound you can't hear. Students would carefully watch their teacher's mouth to copy lip patterns, and they would feel for vibrations by placing a hand on their teacher's throat. They also spent a lot of time learning breath control.



Students at the Sumner School for the Deaf, 1912

MSC0030250_0003

Students milking the school's cows

Many Sign Languages

Sign languages, like most languages, vary between countries. New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) shares some signs with other sign languages, but many of its signs are used only here, including those for Māori words and concepts. NZSL also has regional variations. For example, the sign for the word "hospital" in Auckland is different from the one used in Christchurch.

The school also made sure that the students gained practical skills. In the early years, boys were taught how to farm, and girls were taught how to do housework. All of the students worked in the school's gardens, milked the cows, and did the laundry. In later years, boys did woodwork and metalwork, and girls learnt to knit, sew, and cook. The school hoped this would help their students to get jobs after they graduated.

The Language That Wouldn't Be Silenced

Despite the ban on signing, the students continued to do it whenever they could. Janet Stokes, who now works at the school's museum, has been told lots of stories about this. "Signing was very underground," she says. "In the dormitories, where the kids slept, they would be signing like crazy. But when the matron came in, they would stop. At playtimes, lunchtimes, they were all signing. But in class … not a thing!"

In the late 1960s, ideas about deaf education started to change. New research showed that deaf students learnt better if they spoke and signed. Deaf people in New Zealand began to push hard for sign language to be part of our education system.

In 1979, Total Communication (TC) was introduced, a method that used formal signs, gestures, finger-spelling, body language, listening, lip-reading, and speech. TC was not the same as the sign language used today; it was more of a signed code for English. Some people found it clumsy and long-winded, and deaf people kept pushing for our own native sign language to be recognised. Finally, on 6 April 2006, the New Zealand Sign Language Act came into effect, and NZSL became an official language.

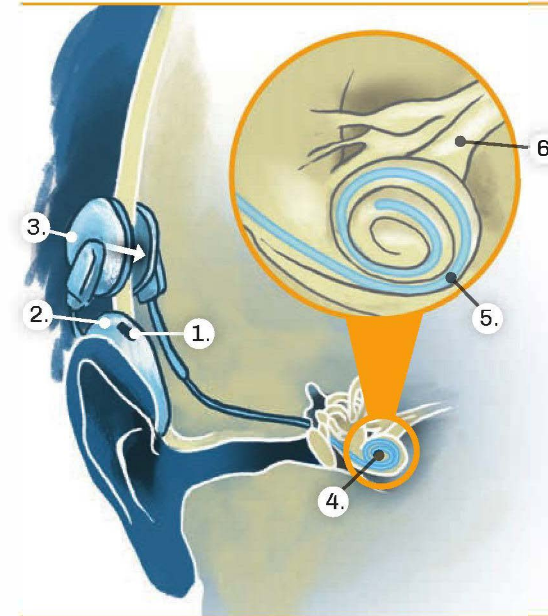
A class at the Sumner School for the Deaf in the 1960s

Deaf Technology

Technology has meant some big changes for the Deaf, especially digital technology. Texting, video phones, and applications that allow online video chatting have made it much easier to communicate. New Zealand also has a telephone system called Relay, which allows the Deaf to hold conversations with the hearing (the deaf person types or signs into a device, and a sign-language interpreter verbally passes the message on).

Students using a group hearing aid in 1936

These days, hearing aids are small enough to fit inside or behind the ear. But the first hearing aid to be used at the Sumner school needed its own room! Students used it as a group, wearing earpieces that plugged into a central transmitter. Janet Stokes recalls some older deaf people saying that it sometimes gave electric shocks. No surprise it wasn't popular! The next development was hearing aids small enough to be carried on the body. Students wore earpieces that connected to a battery pack and amplifier, which were kept in a pocket or bag.



Cochlear Implant

1. The microphone receives sound.
2. The speech processor turns this sound into digital information.
3. The transmitter relays the information to the receiver (these are connected by magnets).
4. Electrical impulses are sent along the implant to electrodes.
5. The electrodes stimulate nerve cells inside the cochlea.
6. The auditory nerve sends signals to the brain, which interprets the signals as sound.

Cochlear implants are another important development. These hearing devices bypass damaged parts of the ear to directly stimulate the auditory nerve and send signals to the brain. Implants are different from hearing aids, which make sounds louder. Although cochlear implants are important tools for the Deaf, they don't restore perfect hearing, and background noise can be a challenge. They also work better for some people than for others.

Looking to the Future

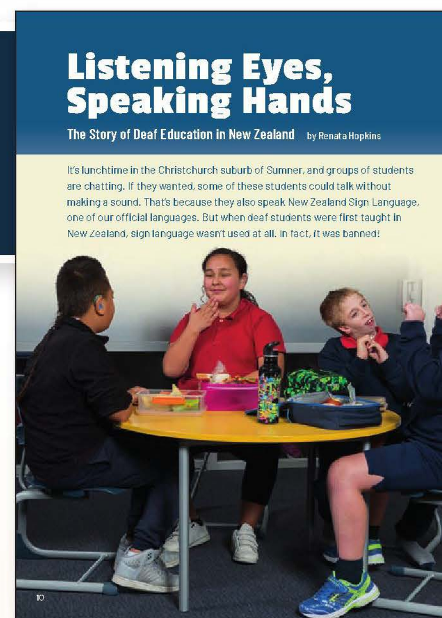
Digital hearing aids, cochlear implants, chat applications – these things all mean that deaf people are better connected than ever before and they have better access to information. Everyday life has become easier.

But not all deaf people want to experience the world in the same way. They want to make the most of what new technology has to offer – but use it in their own way. Some deaf people are more visual. They like the way digital technology allows them to communicate online. Others like the way hearing devices and cochlear implants help them to connect with the hearing world. The most important thing is that deaf people have options. "That way," Janet says, "we're in control of our language and identity. And when this happens, we're more comfortable with ourselves."

Listening Eyes, Speaking Hands:

The Story of Deaf Education in New Zealand

by Renata Hopkins



Text copyright © Crown 2018

The images on the following pages are copyright © Crown 2018:
10–11 (main image) by Simon Baker
17 (diagram) by Simon Waterfield

The images on the following pages are used with permission:
12 (bottom), 13, 14, 14–15 (bottom), and 16 copyright © van Asch Deaf Education Centre
11 (D sign) and 15 (kia ora sign) copyright © Deaf Aotearoa New Zealand/Tāngata Turi

The image on page 12 (top) used with permission from the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, reference 1/2-000-912-G

For copyright information about how you can use this material, go to:
www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use

Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 461 7 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Simon Waterfield
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione

SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 NOVEMBER 2018

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	change, cochlear implants, culturally Deaf, Deaf, deaf education, education, Gerrit van Asch, hearing aids, identity, New Zealand Sign Language, oralism, Relay, sign language, Sumner School for the Deaf, technology, Total Communication (TC), van Asch Deaf Education Centre

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
TE TĀHUHU O TE MĀTAURANGA

New Zealand Government