

**Our hands were tied Van Asch College and Kelston School for the Deaf: A case study of audism abuse at Deaf Schools**

# Context

Commissioners directed that some case studies be developed for a variety of reasons, including to highlight the experiences of particular communities of survivors, across the inquiry period.

# Trigger Warning

We honour and uphold the dignity of survivors who have so bravely shared their stories here. We acknowledge that some content contains explicit descriptions of tūkino – abuse, harm and trauma – and may evoke strong negative, emotional responses for readers. Although this response may be unpleasant and difficult to tolerate, it is also appropriate to feel upset. However, if you or someone in your close circle needs support, please contact your GP or healthcare provider. Respect others’ truths, breathe deeply, take care of your spirit and be gentle with your heart.

# Executive summary

Sumner Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, renamed Van Asch College (Van Asch) in 1980, and Kelston School for the Deaf (Kelston) were the main public providers of Deaf education during the Inquiry period.[[1]](#footnote-2) Both schools were run and funded by the State.

The two schools were chosen for this case study as survivors frequently described being denied Sign Language and Deaf culture in the classroom, suffering educational neglect, being removed from their families into a residential setting, experiencing regular physical abuse and sexual abuse perpetrated by staff and peers.

Sumner Institution for the Deaf and Dumb opened on 10 March 1880 and 78 years later Kelston opened in 1958. Both schools followed the strict oralist approach[[2]](#footnote-3) to Deaf education, with Sign Language banned until 1979.

The Inquiry primarily investigated the two schools through survivor statements both individually and in group settings, including hui held at Rūaumoko Marae (located at Kelston) in 2021 and Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae with tāngata Turi Māori in 2022. A Deaf expert reference group was established to advise the Inquiry. The resounding themes identified in survivor statements, including systemic issues, were also voiced at the Inquiry’s Ūhia te Māramatanga Disability, Deaf and Mental Health Institutional Care Hearing in July 2022 and State Institutional Response Hearing in August 2022. Many Deaf people do not consider themselves as being disabled, rather they are disabled by society and are part of a cultural and linguistic group for whom Sign Language is a key marker of identity. This is particularly so for those born Deaf or who become Deaf prior to the acquisition of language. Those who lose their hearing as an adult are more likely to see themselves as hard of hearing and disabled by this. Kiwi survivor Ms Bielski told the Inquiry:

“I cannot properly explain to hearing people what Deaf culture is, or what it is like to be Deaf. Deaf people are not disabled. I might be financially disabled, but I am not disabled in any other way.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Deaf children and young people of Van Asch and Kelston experienced audism, which is a form of systemic oppression that disempowers Deaf people, based on a view of deafness as pathology and speaking / hearing as normal. Audism manifests as discriminatory attitudes and actions by hearing or Deaf individuals towards Deaf people, and through institutionalised practices such as oralist education and employment discrimination.[[4]](#footnote-5)

For deaf children and young people of Van Asch and Kelston, the combination of institutionalisation and the audist approach of oralism had a number of outcomes: …:

Generations of Deaf students of Van Asch and Kelston were denied their own language (Sign Language) and Deaf culture in the classroom, due to the combination of institutionalisation and the audist approach of oralism.

Many Deaf children and young people experienced educational neglect due to barriers to learning imposed by the Department of Education (later the Ministry of Education) supporting hearing teachers to only teach by oral methods and later with Total Communication.

Tāngata Turi Māori, a distinct cultural identity within both te ao Māori and Deaf culture, were denied both their Deaf and Māori cultures in the classroom.

Deaf children were often away from their families at residential schools from a young age and experienced isolation and disconnection from their whānau.

Tāngata Turi Māori were impacted both by being away from their whānau, and the lack of Māori teaching staff at Van Asch and Kelston.

Parents of Deaf children were discouraged from communicating with their children using Sign Language, resulting in generations of Deaf children who were unable to communicate with their parents, including being unable to communicate complaints of abuse.

Teaching and residential staff inflicted physical abuse under the guise of corporal punishment.

Survivors were sexually abused by staff and peers.

Boarders were particularly at risk and frequent abuse in this environment was experienced.

Van Asch and Kelston and the State failed to protect Deaf children from physical and sexual abuse by both staff and peers.

Van Asch and Kelston and the State repeatedly failed to sufficiently act on complaints of abuse and multiple complaints against teaching staff over lengthy periods.

The Department of Education failed to provide adequate oversight of the Van Asch and Kelston.

Outside class and in the boarding hostels, children and young people socialised and were able to explore Sign Language, Deaf culture and identity and make lifelong friends.

Most of the Deaf survivors the Inquiry heard from have not sought or received redress for the abuse and neglect they suffered at Van Asch and Kelston.

[Quote]

“ … Māori communities were experiencing similar loss of language, identity, and mana through rapid colonisation and loss of land and resources. For those of us who are hearing and pākehā, it’s difficult to imagine the effects of this double marginalisation on turi/deaf māori.”

Dr Denise Powell

**Ko Taku Reo Board Chair**

End of information | Our hands were tied Van Asch College and Kelston School for the Deaf: A case study of audism abuse at Deaf Schools

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1. Both schools have had several name changes over time. Van Asch College was first named Sumner Institution for the Deaf and Dumb. The name changed to Sumner Institution for Deaf-Mutes, Sumner School for the Deaf, Van Asch College and Van Asch Deaf Education Centre. When the school merged with Kelston Deaf Education Centre, it changed to its current name of Ko Taku Reo. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Oralism refers to the education of Deaf children to produce oral language using lipreading, mimicking mouth shapes, using breathing patterns and vocal exercises of speech. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Witness statement of Ms Bielski (18 October 2021, para 3.8). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Lane, H, The mask of benevolence: Disabling the Deaf community (Knopf Publishing Group, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)