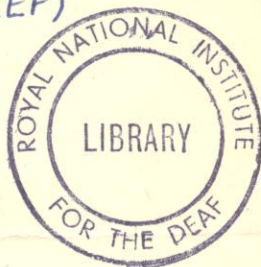


Please return to Sir Richard Pagel
11 Collesmore gardens
W.8

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(REF)



LANGUAGE FOR THE DEAF

To the Editor of the British Medical Journal

SIR,—The recent correspondence in the *Times* on the subject of "language for the deaf" may have attracted the attention of the medical profession. Interesting, however, as was this correspondence, there is reason to fear that since it dealt almost exclusively with *methods* of teaching, it has only served to obscure the real object of special education for the deaf. The object of such education is to enable the born deaf (totally or partially) and those who have become deaf (totally or partially) before full spoken language has been acquired, to understand and use the English language *as it is written*.

There is difference of opinion as to how this object can most rapidly be attained—that is to say, those best able to judge do not agree as to the best medium to be employed. The pure oralist would allow no finger-spelling or signing (the two are quite distinct) in the classroom, and would do his best to stop signing out of school. The pure manualist would say that since the speech of the deaf is rarely pleasant or very intelligible, and since lip-reading is an unreliable medium, it is a waste of time to teach either.

Between these two extreme views there are the opinions of experienced teachers who favour this or that combination of mediums. Good results have been attained by any of these methods. One is tempted to say, "That which is best administered is best." All the educated deaf, however, and all those who have spent their lives helping them, are agreed on two points: first, that the object of special education for the deaf is to give to every deaf child a thorough understanding of and power to use the English language as it is written. Secondly, that, be the method what it may, the deaf child must have at least ten years of steady special education, starting not later than the age of 5 years.

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is much
so old!

Whether the deaf child speaks or whether he finger-spells, or whether he does both, such mediums are useless to him in his manhood unless he possesses a full command of that immense intricate arrangement of symbols which we term "the English language." To give language to the deaf is a task of high scientific character. To take a deaf child through simple nomenclature of things and qualities, to teach him the different modifications to express juxtaposition of things, comparison of qualities, etc., to unfold to him the absolutely necessary but strangely intricate combination of symbols whereby verb tense is expressed, to lead him through idiomatic and figurative language—this work possesses a fascination undreamed of by any other body of teachers in the world. It is unfortunate that few men and women of first-class intellectual attainments are found to undertake it. The field is comparatively small and the financial rewards are modest.

Sir, there are deaf men and women of average adult intelligence in England to-day who are unable to read an ordinary book or newspaper. There are deaf boys and girls leaving school to-day who will never understand the English language—that is, they will never be able to visualize from a written description and they will be unable to follow arguments expressed in adult language. They could have learnt to do so: they were not given the time: they started too late.

The saddest cases are those of the children of the professional and leisured classes. These people are not visited by the attendance officer, and they are not compelled to send their children to a special school. These people can afford to, and they do, consult general practitioners and specialists. These people can afford to, and they often do, buy one or other of the instruments by means of which, as advertised, "the deaf can hear."

Useful as some of these instruments are in some cases of acquired deafness among adults and to somewhat improve the speech of deaf children, they can never take the place of special instruction in language. Consider: it takes a normal child five years of 365 days each, working at it as he does all his waking hours, to acquire such a knowledge of English as we associate with children of that age. It takes him five more years, working at it all his waking hours, to acquire the language of a 10-year-old child. Is it likely that through the eye, possibly assisted by some indefinite sound hearing, a deaf child can get a command of English in less than ten years?

[5 years]

Yet parents are advised to "wait and see"—"he is not totally deaf"—"he must not mix with the deaf and dumb"—"perhaps hearing will develop"—"let's measure it by means of the audiometer week by week"—"response appears to be hopeful"—"this or that vowel associated with this or that word is heard this week and certainly it was not a month ago"—"let him mix with hearing children"—etc. At long last (his child reaches the specialized teacher, and eventually is obliged to leave school. He has not had time to acquire the English language, and now he never will: he might have done it; he might have taken a degree. The world of science and literature might have been open to him.

The outward behaviour of a deaf child, frustrated in his efforts to express his own thoughts and to obtain adequate answers to the natural questions of childhood, resembles closely that of a mentally deficient child, and the greater the intelligence the greater the frustration and the more pronounced the unusual behaviour. The more hearing power possessed by the child the less his chance of getting early to a school for the deaf—the only place where there are people specially trained to teach him.

I would ask, therefore, that in all cases of apparent subdevelopment of spoken language partial deafness should be assumed as the most probable cause, and the child given a chance of starting at once to learn the English language. The speech clinic is not the place for him; neither can the elocution teacher tackle such a problem. At a school for the deaf a few weeks will show whether the child can learn language. In any case no harm will have been done.—I am, etc.,

London, N.W.1, Feb. 24.

BLANCHE F. NEVILLE.

There is good reason to believe that if the deaf child were educated from, say, the age of 2, in a special (boarding) school where all conversation was carried on in N.S.L. he would acquire as complete a vocabulary (of signs equivalent to words) as a hearing child of equal intelligence & that he w^d also learn how to use these signs in the normal English word order & idiom. It w^d then be easy for him to learn the written English equivalents and

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to make much greater progress in speech
& lipreading than is possible under the
present "oral" system.

All explanations could be given to him
in a language (N.S.L.) which he fully
understood; he could formulate his own
questions; and he would ^{also} fully understand
the objects of his education.

If N.S.L. were taught - as a form of play,
to all children, in all countries - it
would ~~not only~~ greatly widen their
understanding of language & ^{of the meaning}
of words, and their powers of expression.
It would give the world (in less than
one generation) an auxiliary international
language. It would also break down
the barriers between the deaf & the
hearing members of all nationalities.

RSP