

## Young deaf people are not being heard

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"Mongol". Apart from being a deeply wounding and offensive insult, it seems anachronistic – a jibe from a time of Spangles, *Pac-Man* and Adam Ant. So it leaped off the page at me as I read about a young deaf woman's experiences of being bullied by her schoolmates.

A new University of Edinburgh report, commissioned by the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), has many such startling insights, as we reveal in our news focus.

Deafness seems a disability lodged in the aspic of less-enlightened times. Even the most well-meaning teachers' efforts to help are often undermined by profound ignorance, support services may disappear the moment a young person leaves school, students can go months at a time without being able to hear a lecture, and workplaces can be rife with impatience and aggression.

A bright spot is found in universities, where deaf students' achievements are generally on a par with the wider community. Not so in further education. Although the sector takes large numbers of deaf students, they tend to do less well and many drop out long before reaching their educational potential.

The widespread failure of local authorities to provide statutory transition plans – designed to smooth the journey from school to adult life – is one reason, but another is the lack of any specialist support in some colleges. A deaf young person who does well typically relies on a strong (and often middle-class) family to fight their corner; for those without such advocates, there is no guarantee of institutional back-up. So it is disappointing that the sector's representative body, Colleges Scotland, did not take up our invitation to comment on the matter.

Deaf teenagers' needs are too easy to ignore. Their disability is not always immediately evident and often not shared by anyone else in a school. Many deaf students, too, prefer not to draw attention to their difference.

Data around the issue is sorely lacking. There may be close to 4,000 deaf children in Scotland but no one can provide more than an educated guess. And, although the number of deaf children is growing, TESS reveals this week that the number of specialist deaf teachers has slumped by 15 per cent in recent years.

Even legislative gains around additional support needs may prove a double-edged sword: the expanded definition of ASN is laudable, campaigners say, but lower-profile disabilities such as deafness are at risk of becoming lost in this increasingly broad church.

There is a danger of picking out the negatives and painting a distorted picture that obscures the success stories. But it would be even more dangerous to gloss over the widespread ignorance that so often afflicts the life chances of deaf young people.

The girl stung by the "mongol" insult reported that her tormentors wrongly thought she was dumb as well as deaf. How telling. Not only did the bullies suppress her voice – they didn't even know she had one.