

---

## M.G. Hardie-Davis: What Charles Dickens can teach us about Deaf education

---

*Posted on October 26, 2018*



In 1868 Charles Dickens published a little-known novelette entitled 'Dr Marigold' where the education of a deaf beggar girl exceeded all expectations. The moral of this brief tale seemed to be that achievement was more likely to occur when high aspirations were motivated by mutual respect and understanding between teacher and child. My own experience of teaching deaf children validated that premise.

In the tale, Sophy was a beggar girl who was adopted by Dr Marigold, a tinker who taught her to read and write, an achievement rare for these times.

The tinker was unlikely to have had much education himself and was certainly not qualified to teach, yet somehow he cultivated a relationship with the child that empowered her to be active in her own learning.

This instinctive interaction is at the core of true teaching and learning (of *educere* rather than *educare*) when it is effective enough to form the basis of social and cultural advancement for the child.

At the point where Dr Marigold felt unable to take Sophy's progress any further he was determined that she should continue to learn. To that end he took her to be assessed by the professionals in a 'Deaf and Dumb Establishment' in London where, on finding that Sophy could indeed read and write, they exclaimed, "this is most extraordinary".

When asked what he wanted for his daughter Dr Marigold replied: "I want her Sir to be cut off from the world as little as can be, considering her deprivations and therefore able to read whatever is wrote with perfect ease and pleasure".

It is significant that Inclusion and Literacy remain two key issues in the education of deaf children today. The pity is that Dickens didn't go more deeply into this subject and produce a full novel on the education of a deaf child along the lines of *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*.

If he had done so, a deeper understanding of the issues facing deaf children in terms of literacy and social inclusion may have been secured and developments to address them may then have gone much further down the line than they are now.

Fast forward just over a hundred years to 1979 when, quite unaware then of Dickens' brief illumination of the way forward, I met my own 'Sophy'. Not in the singular but in the form of nine prelingually, and profoundly deaf children in a school in Liverpool. I was a fully qualified teacher with a B.Ed from Liverpool University, but not yet qualified to teach deaf children (though studying for my BATOD Diploma as a useful way to learn the theory alongside the practice of specialist teaching).

So there I stood before my first class, a willing but uncertain young deaf teacher with no sure idea of where or how best to start. Thus began, by trial and error, a pathway to a mutual understanding, which enabled both teacher and children to learn from one another.

It was by this process that these children taught me how to teach. Not by creating a teacher dominant environment in the classroom, but by acting as a facilitator to learning.

Lest it be presumed that I would have a natural empathy with the children because we shared the same disability – that was not the case. There is a vast difference between those who were born deaf and those who lost their hearing after the acquisition of speech and language as I did when I was treated with streptomycin for TB meningitis at the age of seven.

In fact, the children were initially suspicious about me actually being deaf because I could speak very well. After 'testing' me in all sorts of ways and realising that I was indeed deaf, just like them, they were delighted. They had never believed a deaf teacher to be possible and our empathy and rapport came from our willingness to learn together.

The immediate problems were twofold: first, I was unable to communicate with them effectively because I was not born deaf and I did not know sign language. Secondly, I had no idea how intelligible and meaningful speech was acquired without experience of clear sound because that is the way I became literate.

Much less was I able to understand how the lack of sound could be overcome when encoding and decoding a language such as English with so many exceptions to the rules of grammar. How did they think? Was it with a few words or pictures or a mixture of both?

These pupils I was responsible for did not have the benefits I had had from having once experienced perfect sound. Unlike me they could not use tools like phonics to guess at how words were shaped for speech and literacy.

The first priority was soon obvious. I had to work on establishing a clear line of communication with these children before either my class or myself could learn anything at all.

The school in Liverpool had an oral/aural policy which I respected until I found the pupils were struggling with it. Formal assessments showed their standards of reading and writing were very low yet they were clearly intelligent and lively children with wide interests.

After watching them 'talk' to each other so vibrantly with their faces and their hands then turn to me and stiffly make what use they could of the little English they knew I decided I had to learn their language first to be on a par with them. Basically, I did a deal with them. I asked them to teach me their language and I would teach them mine. And that's when the fun began.

Yet, even within an increasingly clear and enriched communication environment it is almost impossible for me to convey how I taught reading and writing to deaf children to the standard they required to pass CSE English at the age of sixteen. They were the first ever in that school to do so.

The reason is simply due to the fact that there is no one right method that can be singled out as a perfect route to literacy. Each child is different with distinct learning needs that have to be met.

I believe it is the teacher's responsibility to keep an open mind; to develop a flexible and wide range of communicative expertise; to take their cue from the pupils as to how best to meet these needs if they are not making progress by the oral/aural method of communication alone.

Another essential is to be highly proficient in the teaching of English. When assessing their levels in reading and writing try to work out the best way to take them forward by making reading and writing linked and mutually reinforceable.

It took me many years to hone my expertise and it was easier to demonstrate this to student teachers later by allowing them to observe me teach. During one session a student teacher asked me why I had explained the same thing differently to two pupils sitting next to each other.

I was not even aware I had made the adaptation. I even found it hard to explain why I differentiated between these two pupils. It was an instinctive reaction familiar, I believe, to those with a natural vocation to teach.

Respect for the children is fundamental. The control of my developing sign language was in their hands. The respect this gave them empowered them and motivated them to work equally hard on English.

But first, the damage done to their confidence had to be jettisoned. For literacy skills to flourish I did not insist on good speech or indeed any speech at all that they found hard to use.

Nor did I ever attempt to correct their reading as part of a speech lesson, which was a common approach at that time and imposed a double dose of inhibitions on the child that obviated any chance of gaining pleasure from reading.

Instead, the focus was placed on reading for meaning by allowing the pupils to read passages as a whole in their own time then explain what meaning they had accrued from that reading. From that I was able to determine their level of understanding of the text and what was identified as the difficulties we would have to work on.

Although the standard of reading and writing were both low, the hardest thing to eradicate was an almost total lack of confidence in the skill of written English. Their vocabulary was limited and their grammar non-existent.

They would write a single word and look up for approval and repeat the same process ad infinitum. This focus on a single word at a time prevented them acquiring the gestalt, the pattern of words and how they grouped together to convey meaning. I had to break this fear.

What facilitated this was the way I reacted to the pupils corrections of my own fledgling signing. I laughed, thanked them and tried again. They laughed with me. I assured them that making mistakes was normal and that we all learn from our mistakes just as they could see was happening with me.

Also, the material I used was what the children gave me of their own concrete experience so that what they wrote about was based on that and on their own interests. The aim was to capture the vibrancy they demonstrated when talking to each other, and increasingly used with me too.

They were encouraged to transfer it to paper in any way they wanted with words, drawings, cartoons anything that produced a flow and no corrections were ever made until they got the idea of writing in an uninhibited flow.

The problem with that was the flow often became a flood as some of the pupils began to think that quantity was better than quality and this had to be gently curbed

by introducing systems like the Fitzgerald Key to ensure a subject-verb-object basic structure.

English then began to be taught like a foreign language using sign language so they could see where the differences lay. They were encouraged to maintain their own dictionary of new words by using a suitable dictionary and were tested on spelling these each week.

When the structure of a sentence was established, attention turned to grammar. Conjunctions came in to link two sentences into a longer sentence. Adjectives and adverbs were exploited to enrich the quality of the writing, paragraphs as a way of cutting up the flow started to be used for both chronological and debate type essays and then each child began to develop their own style of writing (as could be seen from their diary writing that was never marked, as it was evidence of the written language skills that they had and had not mastered which indicated the next set of objectives for each child).

Corrections were introduced when the pupils were confident enough to see that they were helpful. The basis of correction was to address only one aspect of the child's writing at a time. It depended on what element of each child's writing would, if corrected, improve the quality of the writing as a whole.

As every child was at a different stage there were regular sessions for the self-correction of written work along with group corrections on comprehension questions set on each chapter of the shared book so that the learning process could be shared in a supportive manner.

Individual reading was encouraged but the daily group reading sessions formed the core of teaching reading and writing formally so that the two were firmly linked and mutually reinforced.

The selection of books was based on what the children were interested in as a group and/or the use of classics written at different levels of difficulty. I produced my own simplified versions of such books when necessary.

Whenever possible we watched a subtitled film of the book or went to see a play in the theatre in advance so that when they read it they would understand the flow of the story and the context of the characters within it and thereby manage to look closer at the details in that context.

Let me be clear – I am writing from my own personal experience as a teacher. I do not advocate any one form of communication over another. All methods are relevant and their use should be determined solely in response to the needs of the child, not the policy of the school.

Criteria used to determine progress in literacy, including the National Curriculum Targets of Attainment, provide the evidence that the approach to any individual child is successful or not as the case might be and responses made accordingly.

Those deaf people who found learning through the oral/aural system suited them were in the correct placement. Having said that, in my case, it was not the policy that gave me speech and language as I had already acquired such skills before I lost my hearing.

What I most benefited from was having a deaf peer group in small classes and good visibility for lipreading. The children I taught for over a period of 34 years could not benefit from the same approach but they succeeded in spades when the right method for them was applied. In addition, as their literacy skills increased so too did the intelligibility of their speech because English had become more meaningful to them.

At the end of the day, employment opportunities, independence and social integration are the achievements of literacy and that is what will determine a deaf child's future, not so much the quality of their speech. It is our individual and collective responsibility as teachers to make sure this happens. Let Dickens point the way.

**Copyright: BATOD. Posted here by kind permission.**



**M.G. Hardie-Davis CBE secured the BATOD Diploma to teach deaf children in 1980. Throughout her career the main thrust of her interest was on raising standards of literacy with a focus on written English skills, papers on which she presented at various ICED venues. In 1992 she became the first deaf Headteacher in the UK and also the Disability Commission's representative on the General Teaching Council. She was active in pioneering inclusion initiatives with local mainstream schools that covered the full age range up to her retirement in 2012.**