

My name is Dianne Hartley, I am a Primary Teacher and Teacher of the Deaf (ToD), with additional qualifications in Special Education. For the last 10+ years I have worked in an Early Childhood Intervention Service, the last 3 years as a registered NDIS provider. At the end of 2019 I resigned from the ECIS position, and returned to the Department of Education to work as a ToD with the Visiting Teacher Service.

I know the review is not about the NDIS, however the rollout of the NDIS cannot be seen as independent of school, as students come to school having had therapy support from NDIS, and with equipment purchased through NDIS funds.

Prior to the NDIS, children with hearing loss were diagnosed very early in life - since the rollout of universal hearing screening over 10 years ago, children are screened within 48 hours of birth, and if there are concerns about their hearing, they are then referred to diagnostic audiology for confirmation of a hearing loss, within their first 4 months of life. From there they are referred to Hearing Australia for fitting of hearing aids, an ENT for further diagnosis, and some are referred on to the Cochlear Implant Clinic. During this early journey, the families were counselled and supported by the Early Support Service, informed about specialist Early Intervention services and assisted to enrol in a program suited to the needs of their child and family. ECIS programs provided a range of services and supports, with all families allocated a ToD, also access to a Speech Therapist.

However with NDIS, children are diagnosed with a hearing loss, and Hearing Australia refers the child to NDIS. After a meeting with an NDIS Local Area Coordinator (who may be a new grad speech therapist or OT/PT or early childhood teacher but most likely NOT with any specialist knowledge of understanding of hearing loss) and approved for NDIS, families are allocated an amount of funding, and told to find themselves a service provider.

From my experience there are now 3 options -

1. families chose the ONE registered NDIS specialist provider for Deaf/hard of hearing children;

2. . families choose the Dept Education specialist Deaf/hard of hearing provider (free, non NDIS service) and then find an NDIS registered ST (and OT/PT if required)
3. Families find a locally based NDIS registered ST

My concern is that many Speech Therapists have little or no experience of hearing loss, and even less knowledge of hearing equipment and the school system. Students are now arriving at school with no knowledge about the role a Teacher of the Deaf, no remote/personal microphone equipment (ie. a Roger Touch Screen, the teacher wears the microphone unit which sends a signal directly to a receiver attached or integrated into the hearing aid/cochlear implant, the unit also connects to a room based soundfield speaker system).

Therapists have little or no understanding of the education system in terms of how schools and classrooms work - from completing reports for funding applications via the PSD program, accessible building funding, SSG meetings and school wide behaviour programs. Therefore they have not assisted the parents to advocate for their child, to enrol in school, to ask about what services the school can provide the student with - including referring to the Visiting Teacher Service, applying for funding, and providing professional learning for teaching staff.

They may concentrate on articulation but not vocab, and have not worked on the student's self advocacy or communication breakdown/communication repair skills.

I am not meaning to offend Speech Therapists - I have some dear friends who are speechies and have enjoyed working closely with them over the years, and have learnt a lot from working with them.

But my worry is that the students with NDIS funding (and lets not ever start on those who have not GOT NDIS funding because there has been no one to support them with the application process) far behind the 8 ball, and this is only going to continue. The Disability standards are to ensure that Educational providers consult with students and their families/carers about reasonable adjustment to education - but if we have to start right at the beginning when students start school, or

worse part way through the year, when we finally find out that they might qualify for funding and support and NEED adjustments made - it puts both the students, their families, and teachers at a disadvantage, because they should have been supported better, and much sooner.

Students who can't hear the teacher and their classmates are NOT able to access and participate in education on the same basis as students without a disability. When they arrive at school with incompatible hearing equipment, when they have been told they need to stand next to the teacher at all times in order to hear (because they don't have a Touch Screen transmitter system), when their parents have never been told of the programs their child can access at school - they have the right to be better supported than that. In the words of educational audiologists Carol Flexer and Jane Maddel - Children cannot be held accountable for what their brains did not hear.

We need to do this better. We used to.