

Up until 1984, hearing impaired children in Plymouth were educated in Hartley House School for the Deaf. However, the shift in placement policy over the past decade towards integration for children with substantial hearing losses resulted in a huge decline in numbers at Hartley House. Although a purpose built building of only 8 years' standing, housed within a minute's walk of Eggbuckland Comprehensive and Eggbuckland Vale Primary School, Hartley House was closed.

The hearing impaired children were transferred to either the secondary unit within Eggbuckland Comprehensive School or to the primary unit attached to Eggbuckland Vale Primary School.

Not all teachers were in favour of the move, and several parents expressed their apprehension. Despite many protests the trend towards educational integration rolled forward, taking with it Hartley House School for the Deaf.

The past two years have seen a gradual assimilation of the deaf children into Eggbuckland Vale Primary School.

It has not been easy, due mainly to the class sizes within the school. Most teachers have a teaching ratio of 1:37, making it very difficult to place the hearing impaired child with a teacher who has the time to give him/her more than the usual amount of individual attention and also the sympathetic understanding he needs in order to feel accepted and therefore part of the class.

In such large classes, the high levels of noise can cause serious problems for our hearing impaired youngsters, due to the inability of standard hearing aids to discriminate between desirable and undesirable sounds, although the level of background noise that the child has to contend with has been greatly decreased by the acquisition of individual radio hearing aids linked by frequency direct to the child. I'd like to add here that although these radio aids are an absolute necessity if the child is to function to the best of his ability in and out of the classroom, the D.E.S. provide only limited funding for the purchase of these essential aids. We have therefore to rely on the generosity of local charities, or on parents to organise fund raising events. Devon Education Authority do, however, pay for the maintenance and repair of the aids.

The hearing impaired pupils at Eggbuckland Vale Primary School are lucky compared to many throughout Britain. There are four teachers of the deaf plus two auxiliary helpers within the school to give the children the additional support they need in the classroom and during withdrawal time in the unit. Many units in Britain have only one or two specialist teachers employed to support the hearing impaired children. This is not enough if the children who are severely and profoundly deaf are to succeed within an 'ordinary' school.

At Eggbuckland Vale, the staffing level of teachers of the deaf allows the children to have additional support within main-stream lessons as well as being withdrawn for language work in the unit. If this additional support was not available in main-stream lessons many of our profoundly deaf children would sit staring at the teacher and pick up very little of what was being said.

All the hearing impaired children at Eggbuckland Vale have gained much from their move into mainstream education with unit support. They now have access to a wider curriculum (the low number of children at Hartley House School had resulted in a more restricted curriculum); the children have more opportunities to learn from a greater variety of people; I believe we now expect more from our hearing impaired children as a result of being in constant contact with hearing children.

Socially, the children have moved forward in leaps and bounds. They now have to 'take turns', 'borrow and give back', 'share' and generally learn to cope in a community of hearing people.

They are surrounded by the natural and colloquial speech of their hearing peers and so have much more opportunity to 'hear' and use spoken language.

Of course there were some sad departures with the closing of Hartley House. Some parents who are themselves deaf, no longer involve themselves so willingly in school happenings. Hartley House School for the Deaf was very much viewed as part of the deaf community, along with the deaf club, etc. Deaf parents always felt that they could walk into Hartley House at any time during the school day. However, now that their deaf children are attending a 'school for hearing children', they are not so relaxed about calling in.

The opportunities for the deaf children of hearing parents to meet deaf adults has therefore been greatly reduced. This is very sad, as I do feel it is necessary for deaf children to have adult deaf models; to realise that there is a deaf community in Plymouth who converse using sign language and who have their own culture. And if they want to, they can be a part of this community in the future.

A central purpose of education is to enable people to increase their choices and enlarge their opportunities in life. Through integration in Eggbuckland Vale and Eggbuckland Comprehensive School we

hope to do just that for our hearing impaired children. If they want to move into the 'Deaf World' on leaving school, they can. Sign language is taught in the unit, and opportunities are presented throughout the year for deaf children to meet socially and communicate in any way they want. However if the child wants access to a wider community then his/her school life at Egguckland will have substantially assisted him/her in coping in a hearing, speaking world.

At Egguckland Vale, we are educating not only the hearing impaired children to adapt to the ways of the majority, but also the hearing children, their parents and teachers. We are educating them to make the necessary allowances for deafness and to show special consideration towards people with a hearing handicap.

For successful integration to occur, both hearing and hearing impaired pupils must respect each other's differences and try to meet each other's demands and needs.