

Mary's Story: The Inspiring Journey of a Pupil with Special Educational Needs and the Innovative Approaches Devised by her Special Education Teacher and Adopted by the Pupils in her School to use Irish Sign Language (ISL)

This article is based on a presentation given at the 2017 Annual Conference of the Irish Association of Teachers in Special Education (IATSE), Marino Institute of Education, Dublin.

The theme of the 2017 IATSE conference was *Ideas that work: inspiring creativity, innovation and collaboration*. Every day schools all over the country are inspiring, creating, innovating and collaborating and I felt this was an opportunity for me to share a story, a simple story, of what I as a school principal had been witnessing in our school. In this article, I share the journey of Mary, a little girl with both complex educational and medical needs who enrolled in our school in 2013. It is a story of resilience on the part of Mary, and of dedication and innovation on the part of her resource teacher, Siobhán, to improve the quality of life and of educational attainment for Mary. I hope this article might encourage other schools, teachers or principals to share their experiences, to acknowledge the bravery and courage of pupils and affirm the work of staffs who strive every day to bring about change and inspiration in schools.

Keywords: *Inclusion, language, communication, Irish Sign Language, Whole School Initiatives*

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In order to protect her identity the pseudonym Mary is used to refer to the pupil throughout this article. Ann Paul and Margaret are pseudonyms for Mary's mother

and father and for the ISL tutor. Consent has also been given by all the parents in the school of the children appearing in the video links.

INTRODUCTION

Mary was born in September 2008 with an undiagnosed congenital abnormality. This caused severe upper airway obstruction. She was born with a 'TOF' trachea oesophageal fistula and bilateral choanal atresia. Mary had minor surgeries from the day following her birth. Six weeks after her birth during a routine procedure, surgeons ran into difficulty and an emergency tracheostomy was undertaken. This had life changing results for Mary. One of the main changes was that Mary stopped making sounds. Up to this she cried normally. Mary's preschool years were with 24 hour nurse care. She had limited mobility and had constant medical intervention. One part of her condition which is central to this story is her bilateral conductive hearing loss.

Placing deaf children in local schools presents significant challenges for hearing teachers and deaf children where conditions must be appropriate to cater for the linguistic and cultural needs of the students (Mathews 2011). How a school reacts to these challenges is important. In a study of the inclusion of deaf pupils in a school in Crystal Cove Elementary School USA it was found that overt messages of inclusion stood in sharp contrast to the lived experiences that marginalised deaf children (Slobodzian, 2009). In that particular school while the principal, in theory, espoused an inclusive set of operating theories, in practice he employed a different set. Neither he nor the school aides or nurses had sign language. No funding was made available for sign language. In stark contrast, in a survey of a secondary school in Nicosia Cyprus, Angelides and Aravi (2007) found that the presence of deaf/hard of hearing students obliged teachers to differentiate their teaching. They shared innovations and developed collaboration amongst staff. They found that the inclusive practices had a positive impact on all students.

At the Inclusive Schools joint conference of the Irish National Teachers Organisation and The Equality Authority (2004) a teacher Maree O'Connor shared her experiences of bringing her own daughter with Down Syndrome to her local school. She stated that the 'will' to make inclusion succeed was the most important ingredient. Inclusion includes anyone in our schools or communities who face barriers to their full and meaningful participation, (Mc Master, 2013). Thus, schools must collaborate so the values underpinning inclusion become shared. The willingness, to change and adapt alluded to by Maree O'Connor, is very much part of an inclusive school.

Context:

Ballinspittle NS is a rural National School situated in Co. Cork, 25 miles from Cork City close to the Wild Atlantic Way and The Old Head of Kinsale. Between 2013 and 2017 there were approximately 215 children enrolled in the school with eight mainstream class teachers and 4 special education teachers. Mary and her family live close to the school. This proximity was a key factor for Mary's parents, Paul and Ann, in choosing Ballinspittle National School. The seriousness of her medical need was ultimately the deciding factor.

**WOULD MARY BE READY FOR OUR MAINSTREAM SCHOOL OR
WOULD OUR MAINSTREAM SCHOOL BE READY FOR MARY?**

Ann said that the most common concern amongst parents in Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin was would their children ever go to school. As educators we often miss this parental anxiety. Ann and Paul felt our school might think twice about 'taking Mary on'. They were concerned that the staff would have to be trained in medical care, especially the special needs assistants (SNA), and the staff would have to learn sign language. They both felt the layout of the school was possibly unsafe for Mary. Being an old campus there were a lot of steps around the building and playgrounds.

Junior Infants: 2013 and 2014.

In preparation for Mary's enrolment we first met with our Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) to arrange resource teaching hours for Mary. We also met with our Visiting Teacher for the Deaf. A sound-field system and pass-around microphone were ordered for the Junior Infant classroom. A training day on tracheostomy care was organised in August 2013 in Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin. Four teachers and two SNAs attended. An Irish Sign Language (ISL), ten-week course for all staff was organised with a tutor from the Cork Deaf Society. Additionally, two SNAs attended *ISL 101- Introduction to ISL Receptive Skills*, *ISL 102 – Conversational Productive Skills* and *ISL 103 Communicate in ISL in Everyday Life*. These ISL courses were run weekly over a two year period. All ISL training by staff was engaged with voluntarily.

Mary's first two school years were disrupted with surgery. In 2013 she had corrective surgery to extend her jaw line and improve her intake of air. This led to the removal of Mary's tracheostomy in 2014. Although her upper body strength, tone and stability were still a significant concern, the decannulation was a major milestone in Mary's medical history. The staff did not have to focus on her medical

needs as stringently. Although she still needed supervision it was a turning point in Mary's school life as we now had more time to consider her educational needs.

With improvements in her medical condition the focus moved towards communication and socialisation. Despite all the ISL intervention Mary was reluctant to sign. The extent of her bilateral conductive hearing loss was also a major concern. As her hearing loss fluctuated we were unsure how much she was hearing in the classroom. With fluctuating hearing loss children can miss a lot of what the teacher and their peers are saying¹. Mary's audiogram readings showed that she was in the moderate hearing loss range. She was not hearing a lot of the softer sounds and high pitched sounds.

The creation of an inclusive environment and the barriers that would have to be overcome were a priority for the school. According to McMaster (2013, p.19) "Inclusion is more like a spectrum than a measurable goal" and as a school community we had to find our place on that spectrum and progress accordingly. Lack of teacher training in medical care and in teaching a child with a moderate hearing loss left teachers feeling overwhelmed. Teachers were concerned that something might go wrong. The medical training provided by Our Lady's Children's Hospital, the guidance from the Visiting Teacher for the Deaf and the input and support from the SEN team within the school were invaluable. The ISL training referred to above gave the teachers more confidence. In 2013 Mary's parents had also felt that Mary was becoming withdrawn. They told us how she would become very quiet en route to school and they felt she was beginning to realise that she was the only the child in her class with a tracheostomy. She was feeling different.

Senior Infants 2015 – 2016.

Mary's hearing and communication skills were a concern to the school as was her social inclusion as all were inextricably linked. Although Mary was wearing hearing aids we were unsure of how much she was hearing. Her speech was very difficult for teachers to understand and she was reluctant to sign. This was understandable given the frustration and concentration fatigue she must have been experiencing. There was a language barrier that we needed to address. In a seminal study '*Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*,' Groce (1988) explored hereditary deafness on Martha's Vineyard. The residents compensated for this condition by inventing or borrowing an efficient sign language which was used by everyone

¹. Considerations that should be taken to ensure that deaf and Hard of Hearing pupils hear as much as possible in the classroom can be found in the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) 2016 publication, *Creating Good Listening Conditions for Learning in Education*'

hearing and deaf alike. Groce showed the extraordinary degree to which deaf people were integrated into the community and were not considered by others as having a deficit or disability. “There was no language barrier, and by extension, there seems to have been no social barrier” (p. 75) It was time for our school to remove the social barrier. We decided to explore further our use of ISL in the school.

In April 2016 Mary had a Bone Anchored Hearing Aid fitted, bypassing the inner ear. We noticed immediate improvements in both her hearing and mood in school. Our key focus now was developing the intercommunication between Mary and her peers. We focused on in-class support for Mary and used basic sign with her class. Even though there was a noticeable improvement in signing from her classmates Mary still seemed reluctant, ignoring others who tried to use it with her. She often avoided eye contact and turned away from her peers. This could have been due to a number of factors, the most obvious being that ISL was not the main means of communication at home. Mary would have her basic needs met through gestures and vocalisations at home and could make her needs known to her parents who knew instinctively what she wanted. However verbalisations that were intelligible at home were very difficult to understand at school. Perhaps Mary felt if her parents could understand her why couldn't we!

Following training by the Special Education Support Service (SESS) in 2015, we introduced the Communication Grid App Player (Smartbox Assistive Technology, n.d) as part of a total communication approach for Mary. The Grid player is an alternative and augmentative communication App that helps people who cannot speak or who have unclear speech to communicate. Sentences created are spoken out loud. On the Grid App Mary could click on pictures that represented a category of conversation and make basic sentences. With this picture support Mary's resource teacher Siobhán could understand what was she was communicating while without pictures Mary struggled to make herself understood. However, Mary was reluctant to use the App at first because the device could not be personalised. Neither was the App favoured as a means of communication at home.

Around this time we also started a Circle of Friends group (<https://goo.gl/aae2No>). Peers were withdrawn weekly with Mary and ISL was taught to the group through conversation and games by Siobhán. The aim was to promote the benefits of sign language. Signs learned were later shared in the classroom or in the yard. Initially Mary appeared reticent but gradually began to show a tolerance for signing and appeared to enjoy the games.

By the end of Senior Infants Siobhán began to notice that signing outside the Circle of Friends group only occurred when prompted by an adult. Mary was not initiating sign, she waited for others to sign to her or for her teachers or SNA to prompt her.

First Class: 2016 - 2017

It was becoming apparent that a whole school approach was needed in planning communication for Mary. Due to regular staff turnover several staff members had no ISL training. In 2016 we had 13 teachers, only 5 of whom were present in 2013 when initial ISL training took place. Continuing ISL staff training would be key to the success of any communication plan for Mary. Other planning issues included: encouraging Mary to use sign and initiate sign with her peers and all staff members, promoting our ISL friendly school programme eg. ISL alphabet, posters etc. on notice-boards around the building, expansion of Circle of Friends programme and developing the ISL link between home and school.

It was clear to us now that Mary needed various means to communicate. She was making progress verbally but it was still difficult for others to understand her. She was signing but motivation and fatigue were problematic. It is worth noting that Mary had undergone forty–five medical procedures up to this point, which may explain her fatigue. We decided to recommence the *After School ISL Club*. There were ten after- school lessons involved but this time we decided that we would do it differently. We felt that the previous set of lessons targeted teachers and SNAs only. We needed Mary to sign with her peers as well. So this time we included pupils from Mary’s class in the After School ISL Club. Fifteen pupils joined the staff. Mary’s home ISL tutor, Margaret presented the lessons.

The second initiative was the *ISL and Phrase Class Challenge*. First to sixth classes were assigned basic ISL signs over a ten week period. Siobhán would call to classes weekly and examine signing targets. A points system was put in place. Signs covered were: greetings, names, age , home , colours , animals, alphabet and associated words. Bonus points were given for extra signs. From an early stage it was obvious that the ISL challenge was popular with our pupils. The competition became fierce and the pupils were initiating their own sign, for example *Happy Easter, where do you live, may I go to the toilet etc.* Consequently, bonus points were introduced for extra signs. Like the Circle of Friends initiative we did not want this new whole school signing to begin and end in the classroom. Therefore signing on the yard (<https://goo.gl/3W1cxd>) at break- time earned extra points. Class teachers also earned bonus points by signing.

Class weekly prizes included homework passes, double lunch break and a DVD and party afternoon. At a Prize Giving Day the overall winning class got an engraved trophy and each pupil received a gold winner's certificate. There were also prizes for the top 20 ISL signers. The whole school sang and ISL- signed Thousand Years by Christine Perry (<https://goo.gl/wgQZYX>). The infants also joined in the festivities with their performance of nursery rhymes through sign language.

It became evident that the hearing pupils love sign and embraced this beautiful and elegant form of communication. Signing is now taking place in every class, at every break- time and at home as pupils research new signs with siblings and parents. Enthusiasm to participate in the Circle of Friends group grew.

Mary and her peers were using sign daily. Even though Mary may prefer to use vocalisations to communicate, she is signing daily. As any good principal would, I try and greet every child every day. Now I have gained confidence to sign with Mary when I meet her daily. While enjoying a cup of coffee recently in the staff room I looked up to find Mary and an SNA giggling. Mary was tipping her right hand off her left elbow indicating the sign *Lazy!* Mary is certainly using more sign, is far less frustrated and she is engaging through signs with her peers daily.

CONCLUSION

We will continue to promote ISL in our school. At the time of writing, the After School Club and Class Challenge are continuing with the after school club this year having thirty five pupils, eight staff members and two parents enrolled. The 2017/18 class challenge to sign three or four sentences a week was based on the SESS-Functional Language and Communication Resource. This resource covers similar themes to the Gaeilge Curriculum and we have added extra points if the children can say the simple signs in Irish as well. A Prize-Giving day will be held again later this year. Songs with sign will again be prepared for this. Two members of staff commenced ISL 101 and ISL 102 for 30 weeks this year, and two SNAs are moving up to the next level of ISL. We continue to display visual ISL prompts and notices around the school and have a dedicated ISL notice board in the school. We aim to make Ballinspittle NS a centre of excellence in the promotion of Sign Language.

LOOKING FORWARD

As I reflect on these initiatives, it is wonderful to see the changes that have occurred in our school and in the life of Mary. Our aim was to improve Mary's

communication and socialisation in our school. However it will take a sustained effort to further develop these initiatives. It will mean continued training of staff in ISL. The commitment given by the staff, parents and children in the school to ISL is on a voluntary basis. It is this commitment that is central to the inclusive culture that has been created in our school and community.

Despite the undoubted improvements in Mary's communication skills there are, and will be days in the future, when Mary and the school find this journey challenging. We will continue to work to overcome these challenges. Ann and Paul are delighted with her overall progress. With her two younger sisters at home she constantly relives her school day. They told me recently that Mary has dreams of being a teacher or a baker of cakes. A project supported by The Higher Education Authority and Dublin City University to provide access to a teaching qualification for candidates who are fluent in ISL is nearing completion and it would be a dream come true to see Mary back in Ballinspittle National School in ten years' time on her school placement.

The recent enactment of the Sign Language Act, 2017 marks a significant development in regard to the right to access state services including education through ISL. I hope that this account of a whole school initiative provides food for thought for those who like our community in Ballinspittle National School were inspired by the words of George Bernard Shaw (1921) to dream big "You see things and you say why? But I dream things that never were and say why not?"

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