

# NZSL Youth Project:

An insight into the preferences and needs of the Deaf Youth community as NZSL users

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**Report commissioned by the New Zealand Sign Language Board**

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## NZSL Youth Project:

### an insight into the preferences and needs of the Deaf Youth community as NZSL users

This project provides a small insight into the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth community across New Zealand, with regards to their acquisition, use and access to New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). From the perspectives of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth themselves, as well as parents, researchers Deaf Education professionals and Deaf community members, we attempt to gain a better understanding of where the current needs are for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Youth community and to inform the decision making of the New Zealand Sign Language Board on how best to support this community with future projects and services.

The main objectives of this project were to document the experiences and perspectives of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth community, by:

1. Gathering information from the Deaf Youth community (including Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth, parents/whānau of Deaf children, Deaf Education professionals, Deaf Youth organisations, researchers and Deaf community members)
2. Existing reports to understand the gaps, preferences and needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth community as NZSL users in New Zealand.
3. Raising awareness of the needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth community in New Zealand.
4. Sharing information with the NZSL Board to inform their decision making around allocating funding to projects directed at the Deaf and Hard of Hearing youth community.

In this report, the terms 'Deaf' and 'Deaf Youth' will be used to refer to all the Deaf and Hard of Hearing participants and community members, including those who share a language (NZSL) and cultural values that are distinct from the hearing society, and those who may not use NZSL fluently or as their primary language but may still have culturally- and linguistically- diverse experiences.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

### New Zealand Sign Language Board

The New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) Board is responsible for the maintenance and promotion of NZSL. The NZSL Strategy (2018-2023) describes the language planning principles that drive the work of the Board with other Government agencies and the Deaf community. With particular focus is:

1. Acquisition – to ensure that Deaf children and young people become fully proficient in NZSL, and the Deaf community and other members of society can learn NZSL.
2. Use/Access – to enable NZSL to be used in all domains of society and to promote social equality for Deaf NZSL users by ensuring they have access to information and services through NZSL.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> NZSL Board. (2018 – 2023). New Zealand Sign Language Strategy.  
<https://www.odi.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/NZSLStrategy-DocumentDigitalF.pdf>

The annual allocation of the NZSL Fund is used to progress work that supports the acquisition and use of NZSL. Each year Community Grants are awarded to a range of local community initiatives which frequently identify Deaf Youth as a key audience. It was identified by the NZSL Board that more understanding was needed around the needs of Deaf Youth, including the impact of local school enrolments and the access/use of NZSL for this population.

For many years the NZSL Board has funded various projects to support the needs of Deaf Youth, with many of the applications supporting Deaf Youth camps, including outdoor education, promoting leadership skills, and bringing the Deaf Youth community together. Questions have been asked as to whether this support is valuable and beneficial to the Deaf Youth community? Do these events provide the Deaf Youth community with access to meaningful supports linked to NZSL, Deaf culture and identity development, social relationships, leadership, life skills and future goal planning? More specifically, what can be done under the NZSL Strategy to support the preferences of the Deaf Youth community? The focus of this report is to gain an insight into the needs and wants of the Deaf Youth community, to better align future supports and services.

### **NZSL and the Deaf Youth Community**

According to the World Federation of the Deaf, the human rights of Deaf people are contingent upon the right and the opportunity to acquire and use sign language<sup>2</sup>. It is widely recognised that early access to language fluency provides the foundation for subsequent development including social, cognitive and further language development. Sign language gives Deaf children full access to human language and thought processes through a visual modality<sup>3</sup>.

With regards to addressing the right to education for Deaf children, it is clearly stated in Article 24 of the Disability Convention that this needs to be 'in the most appropriate languages', which for Deaf people includes learning through sign language<sup>4</sup>. The Human Rights Commission NZSL Inquiry<sup>5</sup> highlighted that there are significant barriers to accessing NZSL during the early years for young Deaf children and their families, expressing that 'too little is being done too late to facilitate children's and families' access to NZSL in these crucial early years'. Going on to state that families who want or need to access NZSL to communicate with their child are largely left to develop NZSL skills on their own.

Families of Deaf children are faced with many decisions in the early years, including mode of communication, assistive technology, educational options and whether they want to introduce their Deaf child to the Deaf community<sup>6</sup>. It is suggested that these decisions made early in a Deaf child's life will end up having an influence on them as they transition into adolescence.

Adolescence and the 'youth years' in general have widely been explained as a time of rapid change, conflict, discovery, growth and turmoil. These major life transitions are often compounded for young Deaf people who can be faced with managing these challenges within a hearing world, where access

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<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Commission (2013). A new era in the right to sign: He houhanga rongo te tika ki te reo turi. Report of the New Zealand Sign Language Enquiry. Wellington, NZ: Human Rights Commission.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Commission (2013). A new era in the right to sign: He houhanga rongo te tika ki te reo turi. Report of the New Zealand Sign Language Enquiry. Wellington, NZ: Human Rights Commission..

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Commission (2013). A new era in the right to sign: He houhanga rongo te tika ki te reo turi. Report of the New Zealand Sign Language Enquiry. Wellington, NZ: Human Rights Commission.

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Commission (2013). A new era in the right to sign: He houhanga rongo te tika ki te reo turi. Report of the New Zealand Sign Language Enquiry. Wellington, NZ: Human Rights Commission.

<sup>6</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76.

to communication and information are incomplete or non-existent<sup>7</sup>. Previous research and literature has indicated that the Deaf Youth community can be experiencing a time of significant change as they transition from the supports of school life into adulthood. During this time, young Deaf people can be trying to figure out 'who they are', where their identity sits, how to access and navigate the world and relationships, as well as future life choices, all the while battling with misinformation and learning gaps<sup>89</sup>.

In addition to this, young people who may identify with other cultural groups or ethnicities, e.g. Māori Deaf community, face not only the barriers common to all who are Deaf, but also face isolation from their cultural heritage. According to the NZSL@School report (2015), 47.3 percent of students under NZSL@School at this time identified as being Māori (73 percent of these students were within the Kelston Deaf Education Centre region)<sup>10</sup>. Māori Deaf Youth have highlighted the need to identify and remove any obstacles and barriers that prevent their full participation in te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā, so they can explore and connect with their 'dual identities'<sup>11</sup>. There has been a historical and ongoing trend that Māori Deaf Youth have little opportunities to learn about Māori culture or from Māori role models<sup>12</sup>. These opportunities can be even more restricted due to gaining access through NZSL which amplify the pressures the youth community are trying to work through.

Supports for the Deaf Youth community have had a history of being limited, with very little supports and services available to specifically address issues experienced during adolescence. This is particularly limited for those seeking support after the schooling years. Historically in New Zealand, there has been a pattern of Deaf Youth services or organisations struggling to maintain their existence. Reports have indicated that the collapse of previous Deaf Youth groups and supports were likely due a lack of commitment or motivation from the Deaf Youth community, lack of sufficient training or support, as well as barriers related to funding to sustain the supports and services<sup>13</sup>.

## THE PROJECT

### Information Sources and Methodology

*It is important to note that this report is not a comprehensive review of the Deaf Youth community, but rather a representation of a small sample of the community. Therefore, there are likely to be limitations and gaps in the findings.*

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<sup>7</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76

<sup>8</sup> Gentzel, H. (2007). Deaf adolescents: finding a place to belong. A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors with Distinction. Oxford, Ohio.

<sup>9</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76

<sup>10</sup> NZSL@School (2015). Te Reo-a-Tohu kei roto i nga kura o Aotearoa Report. Ministry of Education, van Asch and Kelston Deaf Education Centres.

<sup>11</sup> Te Puni Kokiri and the Auckland Deaf Association (1995). Tautoko tāngata turi (support deaf Māori): A report for the Deaf Association of New Zealand, 1995 Auckland, New Zealand

<sup>12</sup> Kirsten Smiler, Rachel Locker McKee, Perceptions of Māori Deaf Identity in New Zealand, *The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*, Volume 12, Issue 1, Winter 2007, Pages 93–111, <https://doi.org/10.1093/deafed/enl023>

<sup>13</sup> Deaf Aotearoa (2010). Project Energise Report.

The current project commenced in February 2020, however due to Covid-19 and New Zealand going into a lockdown situation, the project was placed on hold after only five weeks. A limited number of stakeholder interviews were carried out, from education and community based groups, as well as an online survey for Deaf youth. The online survey had 16 responders.

At the end of September 2020 the project recommenced, with a timeline of 3 months, totaling 24 days for project completion.

Consultation with the Deaf Youth community was ongoing throughout October and November, including connecting with members of the community to identify and engage with select key stakeholders from within their own community. There were some reports of members of the youth community feeling uncomfortable with sharing their experiences and information related to their identity. The issue of trust was raised due to previously reported negative experiences with people, including researchers, and feeling like their information was not used respectfully. This has limited the ability to consult and engage with some parts of the community. Limitations were also recognised with the Deaf community having limited information about the background of the project and therefore being reluctant to engage.

Following consultation, interviews were carried out with members of the Deaf youth community using NZSL, in person or via technology such as a video call, e.g. Zoom, Skype. Twelve face to face interviews were completed with Youth (ranging in age from 14 years – 30 years), including three small focus groups, with a total of six being completed in person and six via technology. Five further interviews were conducted with members of the community, such as researchers, parents and Deaf community members. The interviews followed semi-structured methodology, so they were informal, but guided, to allow for natural conversation to flow and flexibility.

An online survey was also conducted and shared with the Deaf community, Parent Community and Deaf Education professionals. 11 participants completed the online survey for Youth, five participants completed the Parent survey and two participants have completed the Deaf Education survey. Feedback from focus questions were also obtained from a healthcare organisation who focus support on aged care, illness, injury and disability support, a national service provider for Deaf people in New Zealand and an Australian Deaf organisation who provide services to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community. Focus questions were also sent out to a number of other organisations in an attempt to gain further information about Deaf Youth services in New Zealand and internationally, however no responses were received.

Of the 12 Youth interviews, 7 participants reported using NZSL as their primary language in their daily lives, 1 reported sign language as their primary language at home and with their Deaf friends, while spoken English is used outside of home. Four participants reported using a mixture of NZSL and spoken English in their daily lives.

From the Youth survey, 6 out of the 11 respondents reported their preference to communicate as using a mixture of both NZSL and spoken English in their daily lives, with 3 respondents preferring to communicate through English and 2 preferring to use NZSL.

With regards to schooling, the majority of the interview participants (10 out of 12) attended some schooling in the mainstream with all of their secondary school education taking place at one of the Deaf Education Centres, based in either Auckland or Christchurch (formally known as Kelston Deaf Education Centre and van Asch Deaf Education Centre). Primary schooling consisted of solely mainstream education, attending a Deaf school or Deaf unit/provision within a mainstream school.

Two participants attended only mainstream education throughout primary and secondary school, while receiving itinerant teaching services from the Deaf Education Centres.

It is thought that by capturing the voices of the Deaf Youth community we will gain an insight into some of the life experiences of young Deaf people across New Zealand, including their acquisition, use and access to NZSL.

## SUMMARY OF THEMES

**The themes that emerged from the data gathered and illustrate an insight into the experiences and needs of some of the Deaf Youth community in New Zealand, include:**

- NZSL Acquisition and Access
- Identity and Sense of Self
- Social Relationships and Connections
- Motivation and Expectations for the Future
- Further Learning, Services and Support

## NZSL Acquisition and Access

Many Deaf Youth highlighted the age they were exposed to and acquired NZSL, including starting to use and have access to it, as being later in their childhood during their teenage years. Reports have indicated that it is not always easy to access NZSL and therefore many are missing out on early access to NZSL and the ability to use NZSL in their daily lives.

In order to define what ‘access’ to NZSL is, it is widely documented that if a child is exposed regularly and frequently to a language and picks up that language naturally without explicit training and exercise, the language qualifies as accessible to that child<sup>14</sup>. According to the NZSL Strategy (2018-2023) the purpose of planning around NZSL acquisition and use/access is to ensure that Deaf children and young people become fully proficient in NZSL whilst enabling NZSL to be used in all domains of society<sup>15</sup>.

### Youth Responses

Many of the interviewees (6 out of 12) did not start acquiring NZSL until they started attending a Deaf secondary school. Prior to this there were reports of spending their primary school years attending mainstream education, with a focus on oral/aural skills, with no or very little access to NZSL. From the remaining six interviewees, one acquired access to sign language from birth, two started acquiring NZSL at Early Childhood Education settings linked to the Deaf Education Centres and one started sign language acquisition from their family and support services overseas once diagnosed. Interviewees who started acquiring NZSL during their middle primary school years,

<sup>14</sup> Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D. J., Padden, C., Rathmann, C. & Smith, S. (2016). Avoiding linguistic neglect of deaf children. *Social Service Review*, 589-619.

<sup>15</sup> NZSL Board. (2018 – 2023). New Zealand Sign Language Strategy.

<https://www.odi.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/NZSLStrategy-DocumentDigitalF.pdf>

gained this access through Deaf support workers who worked with them in class as their language model.

NZSL access was reported to be limited outside of school, including at home, in the community and in the workplace. Some respondents accessed interpreter support and used the Relay Service if they thought this was necessary, others used written communication or the support of a hearing friend who was fluent in NZSL, or a family member. One shared that they did not feel comfortable or have the confidence to access interpreters until their mid-twenties when they felt ready in themselves to take this step of independence.

Respondents who were employed reported having limited communication and access to NZSL in the workplace. Interpreters were used for full staff meetings, however for meetings called urgently or at short notice, at times no interpreter would be available or the Video Interpreting Service (VIS) would be used. One respondent shared that they felt they should be teaching their work colleagues NZSL and to raise Deaf awareness, but they felt unsure about how to do this. At times they feel uncomfortable in the workplace as some colleagues make fun of them and their deafness. On a similar note, one respondent shared that it can be very challenging being the only Deaf person at a University as they feel like they are 'forced' to adapt to 'their' [hearing] world and way of communicating. However, it was believed that if more Deaf people had access to a University education, there would be more Deaf awareness and they would not feel forced to adapt and assimilate. There are many factors perceived to restrict the Deaf community attending University, which stem from language deprivation and limited access to education. However, as one respondent shared, for Deaf people who have additional learning or physical disabilities, they can face physical barriers on top of these factors, widening the gap and making them fall behind their hearing *and* Deaf peers.

All youth interview respondents shared that their ideal communication environment would involve full access to communication and NZSL - for everyone to use NZSL or to at least try using NZSL and to be able to access full communication visually all the time with anyone. Some respondents acknowledge that the ideal situation would involve people using what mode of communication they feel most comfortable with – as long as everyone can access the information and there is full communication. Some responses regarding full access to NZSL included:

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*NZSL is very easy, makes life easy, it's very clear with no struggles.*

*Having full access to NZSL all the time would be really positive, there would be more opportunities to develop lots of friendships.*

*This would be perfect. It would mean communication with no barriers, communication that is easy and smooth.*

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In addition to full communication access, respondents all shared that they would like access through captions – everywhere and everyday, having interpreters using NZSL on TV every day, e.g. daily news access, not just government announcements, and more awareness about deafness and Deaf culture:

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*'not just a focus on deafness as a disability, but seen as a different cultural group'*

*'this would give the opportunity to teach the world about Deaf culture so that they can understand our world and help to strengthen our Deaf community'*

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Challenges were expressed by Deaf people who have additional learning or physical disabilities, where young Deaf people with disabilities may be taught a different form of sign language while at school, rather than NZSL which can limit their access to NZSL and the Deaf community once they leave school.

Some limitations around accessing NZSL were also reported to be linked to excluding certain people from the Deaf community due to the communication mode they preferred to use or because of the technological aides they used, e.g. cochlear implants. Some reports indicated that if too much emphasis was placed on being 'Deaf' and using NZSL, it could act as a form of exclusion for some young people who were wanting to join the Deaf community, rather than focusing on the inclusion of all youth, whether you identify as Deaf, Hard of Hearing, have cochlear implants, use NZSL or some spoken language.

### **Barriers for Families**

Access to NZSL and the Deaf community was reported to be one of the biggest barriers for families, particularly families that live outside of the larger cities and in more rural areas of New Zealand. For example, a previous study found that some parents wanted their Deaf children to learn NZSL, but they did not have access to resources to be able to learn it or access to a Deaf community to support

their journey<sup>16</sup>. Some parents from this study also commented on the previous political issues surrounding access to NZSL, where they had the desire to learn NZSL, however they felt they were not welcomed or supported by the Deaf community due to having a cochlear implant. This has been reported to have changed over the recent years with more acceptance within the Deaf community. One parent who was interviewed shared that it was hard for the family to acquire and access NZSL, as there were many pressures for getting her child a cochlear implant from medical and education professionals.

Barriers to families having early access to NZSL were reported by some to stem from the education system, where educational professionals who are in early contact with the families were not seen as providing families with information and options on how to access NZSL for their children. Deaf children and young people's access to NZSL, Deaf culture and the Deaf community is reported to be even more restricted in rural areas, due to the above factors in combination with limited people resources and limited promotion of raising your child as bilingual/bicultural. Some reports indicated the need to focus on building up trust with families and finding culturally appropriate ways to connect and engage with families who have Deaf children from a young age, so they would be more likely to access NZSL.

### Parent Responses

Out of the five parent survey responses, they reported that all of their children use NZSL on a daily basis, with 4 stating 'yes – sometimes', and one stating 'yes – regularly' as they had Deaf family members and accessed NZSL at home from an early age.

4 out of 5 respondents expressed they were 'dissatisfied' or 'very dissatisfied' with their child's access to NZSL at school, with all respondents indicating that they wished they had better access, or just *any* access to NZSL. One had full time access to an interpreter, two had weekly access through a Resource Teacher of the Deaf (RTD) and/or weekly access to an NZSL Hub, and two had no NZSL access at school. 4 out of 5 shared that they want their child to have access to NZSL or an interpreter in the classroom, on a daily basis.

These four respondents all expressed barriers to accessing NZSL for their children and for the family to learn NZSL. They all self-taught and self-funded their NZSL acquisition by attending night classes, sometimes with their child, arranging for tutors to come into the home, using the NZSL Dictionary and attending Deaf community events.

### Access to NZSL in Education

Many barriers to young people acquiring NZSL were perceived to have stemmed from the current education system. Looking towards a NZSL pathway for Deaf children, quite often was not explored until other communication methods were viewed as having 'failed' or not meeting their child's needs and/or their education achievement was not progressing. Experiences shared indicated that a lot of focus was placed on trying to pursue a mainstream education, with oral/aural outcomes, including professionals who may not have provided families with full information around options for their Deaf child. Other reports from mainstream education indicated that Deaf Education professionals did not always provide access to NZSL, but rather placed emphasis on speech. These reports were also reported to occur at times when educated within Deaf school provisions/settings.

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<sup>16</sup> McMenamin, K. E. (2019). Communication choices, identity, and outcomes in children with cochlear implants. A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Health Sciences, The University of Auckland, November 2019.

This pressure was reported to make some students feel very frustrated and at times one person resorted to removing their own cochlear implant and refusing to put it back on until the teacher used NZSL. Some reports indicated the challenges they faced within mainstream education environments due to the limited access to NZSL, in comparison to the Deaf schools or provisions. One shared that their identity was challenged during their time of being mainstreamed at intermediate school, stating it was a difficult time to work through and the beginnings of realising their true Deaf identity and who they were as a young person. Another person shared that after attending Deaf units during their primary school years, it was not until they attended a Deaf school for their secondary schooling that they really started to understand their Deaf identity and Deaf culture, they *'felt at home'* and they started to recognise and understand *'who I am'*.

Some youth expressed the difficulties with learning NZSL at a later age [during their secondary schooling] and the time needed to become proficient in the language before leaving school. They shared that during this time they encountered a number of education staff who used different signs or 'old signs', which was different to what they had learnt. This made it more challenging to understand the communication and there was a need to constantly adjust to the different ways people communicated and to relearn signs, which at times became very frustrating and confusing.

Some reports from the youth community indicated a tendency to be quite tolerant and accepting of the barriers faced around access to NZSL, having a thought process that what limited support or access they did get was 'good enough'. For example, stating that they did have access to NZSL, even if this meant only having access to NZSL for small parts of the school day while their Resource Teacher of the Deaf (RTD) or Teacher Aide (TA) was present in a mainstream setting, and therefore only accessing learning, the education curriculum and relationships for very limited parts of the schools day.

From the Youth survey responses, 6 out of 11 reported having access to NZSL at school, through an interpreter, teacher aide, NZSL Tutor, or by attending a Deaf school or provision. Of these same respondents, 9 out of 11 reported having NZSL access outside of the school, through the Deaf community, with friends, family or due to the Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ residences.

Reports related to Deaf Youth who have learning or physical disabilities were reported to face additional barriers to accessing NZSL and the Deaf community as many were taught a form of sign communication during their school years that differed to NZSL. This made it harder for them to connect and feel a part of the Deaf community after finishing school.

Only two survey responses were received from Deaf Education professionals who revealed that they both felt 'dissatisfied' or 'somewhat dissatisfied' with Deaf students' access to NZSL at school and both responded that the current supports do not meet the Deaf students' NZSL needs throughout the school day. They did identify that having access to NZSL Tutors, access to Deaf peers and inclusion in the Deaf community, KIT Days and NZSL Lab/NZSL Hub were working well for Deaf students. One respondent suggested that NZSL needs to be taught to all children at school, the same as Te Reo Māori and more teachers and teacher aides need to be supported by the Ministry of Education and given opportunities to learn NZSL. The NZSL@School report<sup>17</sup> also revealed that many

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<sup>17</sup>Van Asch and Kelston Deaf Education Centres (2015). NZSL@School: Te Reo-a-Tohu kei roto i nga kura o Aotearoa Report.

staff working in Deaf education felt that they were not able to use NZSL at a level appropriate for the young person they were supporting and educating.

## Identity and Sense of Self

Engagement with the Deaf community and Deaf role models were perceived as extremely important factors to develop a positive identity and sense of self, and an opportunity to focus on what it means to be Deaf.

Engagement with the Deaf community was perceived as being very important for developing a sense of self and forming a connection with other people you feel you can identify with. Some experiences reflected the positive impact of Deaf community gatherings by creating 'Deaf ecosystems' and an environment where a group of people come together and an instant connection is made, due to the shared experiences and culture.

Engagement with the Deaf community was perceived as being extremely important, and even more so after the school years. Some respondents shared that after leaving secondary school they feel a heavy reliance on the Deaf community and one reported feeling much closer to the Deaf community than their own family. This was due to accessing and using NZSL and the ease of communication. At times they reported feeling frustrated with family when they don't understand what they are signing or saying, or have a limited understanding of their Deaf culture, issues faced and experiences. One respondent shared that during times spent with the Deaf community:

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*'I feel fully accepted, able to use a shared language, to be proud of being Deaf and my Deaf identity with full access to a language'*

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Deaf role models were identified as key factors in supporting positive identity development and supporting Deaf Youth to understand who they are. This crucial resource was identified by Deaf Youth themselves, parents, Deaf Education professionals, researchers, Deaf community members and support organisations. One respondent shared that they use Deaf adults a lot to seek help, and advice, and this support from the older Deaf community helped to build confidence in themselves. Another respondent shared that Deaf role models are very important in strengthening the Deaf community by supporting identity and cultural development, as well as social connections.

Education around identity, culture and being 'Deaf aware' was seen as crucial. Having people from the same cultural group who can understand and identify with your experiences, means that they can adapt the support to the individual's needs, 'find the right match' and work towards guiding and empowering. Some reports indicated that many young Deaf people do not discover their Māori identity or learn about Te Ao Māori until they started to acquire NZSL, in their teenage years. One

respondent shared that some Deaf people do not think it is important to learn about their Māori identity as they have lived so long without knowing about it.

An issue with the group identification of 'Deaf Youth' was raised, due to the large number of young Deaf people who are acquiring NZSL and learning about their Deaf culture and identity at a delayed age. Time spent understanding and learning about their own personal identity, including Deaf identity, was believed to be extremely important and an ongoing process that does not stop at a certain age. However, it was shared that current supports for 'Deaf Youth' tend to occur within a school or youth camp setting, which ends once you reach a certain age. Some concerns were raised as to what happens to the young Deaf community who may be too old to attend a youth camp, however would still benefit from the social connections and identity development support. In New Zealand, the Ministry of Youth Development refer to 12 to 24 years as the generally accepted age range for defining 'youth' or 'young people'<sup>18</sup>. It was acknowledged however that due to the barriers around acquiring and accessing a language, and subsequently accessing learning, development and social connections, the age restrictions around 'youth' may not be entirely appropriate for the Deaf community.

Too much emphasis on 'Deaf Youth' specific events or projects was also seen to create a distinction between people who identify as 'Deaf' or people who may identify as 'Hard of Hearing', or people who only use NZSL or people who may choose to use NZSL and spoken language. It was perceived that creating this distinction can present an impression that using more oral communication is 'wrong'. One respondent highlighted the need to be inclusive of all youth from the Deaf community, to encourage people to be a part of the community and to not drive them away.

Some reports indicated that parts of the Deaf Youth community were feeling protective around sharing their experiences and information related to their identity development. Issues of trust were raised due to previously reported negative experiences with people, including researchers and feeling possibly like their information was not used respectfully.

## Social Relationships and Connections

Relationships with other Deaf peers are often not formed until they start attending a secondary school, if other Deaf students are present, which can create gaps for positive social development.

### Deaf Community

Many of the interviewees (7 out of 12) met other Deaf youth or Deaf community members once they started attending a Deaf secondary school or provision. Prior to this there may have been limited contact with other Deaf children through Keep in Touch Days (KIT Days), however these events were described as not being fully accessible in NZSL and therefore no connections or social relationships were formed. Attending Deaf Youth camps and the Deaf Club were other ways that people made initial contact with the Deaf community, as well as having Deaf family members.

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<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Youth Development. An introduction and context for the development of youth policy. <http://www.myd.govt.nz/documents/policy-and-research/policy-document-final.pdf>

Engagement with the Deaf community was viewed as very important by all of the participants and a vital part of their lives and wellbeing. They expressed that these social connections provided them with opportunities to offload to their Deaf friends about the frustrations of managing in a 'hearing world', to have a shared understanding of lived experiences and obstacles, as well as opportunities for ease of communication. Social engagement with the Deaf community was perceived to allow the participants to feel a sense of freedom, to know what everyone in the room was saying and to be able to communicate with everyone in the room. The importance of connecting with the older Deaf community was also discussed particularly around gaining support and guidance, as this could all be accessible through NZSL. Connecting with the older Deaf community was seen as a resource to help grow and strengthen the Deaf community, by sharing the history of the community, people's personal experiences and as a form of mentoring.

The interviews and survey results reflect that even though the youth community places huge value on connections with the Deaf community, the majority attend Deaf community events 'sometimes' or 'occasionally', rather than 'regularly' and 'often'. Some limitations to attendance were linked to limited youth activities available and only attending Deaf Club events when they know that other people of a similar age will also be attending. Even though some respondents valued engaging with a range of ages at Deaf Club events, and saw this as a real asset, (such as learning about the history of the community, learning about other people's experiences and lifestyles) other youth did not feel comfortable with the way some older people socialised, and wanted to engage in more 'fun' and 'active' activities.

### Deaf Youth Camps

Deaf Youth Camps were reported by all participants to be a very valuable part of the youth journey, with the main reasons related to bringing everyone together and an opportunity to meet other Deaf Youth, while having full access to communication through NZSL. Many youth reported making social connections with other Deaf Youth and forming friendships through the camps. One respondent shared that they believed many children today are using less NZSL and are instead more 'oral based', or using a mixture of NZSL and spoken language. They expressed how nice it is to be in an environment where everyone can sign. Camps provide a shared cultural experience, where they have a set amount of time to mix with a range of other people who share the same language and cultural values. Many responses highlighted that the camps provide a time when they can '*switch off*' their devices, almost like having a 'detox' and to 'focus on being proud to be Deaf'.

However, it was highlighted that a powerful event such as this, only happens once a year and comes with age restrictions, which creates barriers for many people who rely on this event as a form of support for their wellbeing and social connections. The need for more regular events, or a more sustainable support system was highlighted, so that there was ongoing and long-term support.

Many respondents reported the powerful nature of these events and shared their concern that some young people may not be fully prepared for the 'shock' they end up facing when they return back to the 'real world'. For example, one respondent described the situation as spending one whole week together with other people who share the same linguistic and cultural experiences, having full communication access through NZSL, immersed within Deaf culture and living in the 'Deaf world', and on returning home, it all disappears. Another respondent described it as almost like a '*trick*', where you get a '*little taste*' of what your world could be like and then '*it's all taken away from you*'.

Other challenges related to leaving camp feeling extremely elated and the difficulties of how to explain these feelings to other people afterwards. For example, not being able to explain your experience to family as they don't understand what you have experienced and what it feels like.

### **Social Connections**

Many youth have shared that they experience limited social connections within both the hearing and Deaf communities. Social interactions and friendships with hearing peers were often described as superficial where basic communication is shared, without any in-depth conversations. Some were struggling to form social relationships with their Deaf peers due to not having access to other community members of a similar age. Many respondents reported meeting other Deaf Youth through school connections while expanding their social connections and meeting more youth from other parts of the country through Youth camps and Deaf Sports. . Other respondents, who attended mainstream schooling, shared that they wanted to connect with other Deaf peers and to access and use NZSL, however they were unsure how to go about doing this. According to the parent survey, there were limited or no social connections with a social group of friends outside of school, that their child could easily communicate with, across all five responses.

Some barriers were identified with social relationships within the Deaf community being linked to the small size of the community and the limited number of connections. Such as information spreading fast through the community, 'bullying' behavior, feeling unsure whether the community can be trusted to not share personal information with others and being accepting of people with other needs, use of devices such as cochlear implants or different ways of communicating. These issues were reported to make people feel like they should 'back away' and isolate themselves from the community.

One respondent shared that many young Deaf people have hearing family members with limited communication and a limited understanding of the social and cultural needs of their child. Some experiences were shared where young Deaf people with other learning or physical needs had their contact with other Deaf community members restricted due to this lack of awareness and understanding.

Learnings about healthy social relationships was reported to be limited within the Deaf Youth community and instead many youth have ended up learning from experience or through making mistakes, as they were unaware of the consequences or how to protect themselves and keep themselves safe.

Technology was also reported as a means to enable and support connections with other Deaf Youth, especially if they lived in different parts of New Zealand. However, the majority of the respondents highlighted the need for continued face-to-face communication and connections.

## Motivation / Expectations for the Future

Many youth were unsure of what they wanted for their future and found this process challenging. Many of the future goals had some relation to NZSL, strengthening NZSL and Deaf awareness for Deaf children and the wider community.

A number of respondents shared their future goals to relate to teaching NZSL to the wider community, teaching NZSL to core services such as doctors and the Police, or teaching Deaf children so that the younger generation have full access to NZSL from a very young age. Further goals were also related to achieving their Certificate in Deaf Studies. Some respondents identified other long-term goals such as writing a book, sailing around the world, completing their PhD and competing in the next Paralympics. It did not come easy for many youth to think of a goal for their future.

Family support was identified as a factor that helped contribute to future goal setting. Some reports indicated that they believed many youth may not have the support of their family, or access to communication, to know what steps to take to achieve their goal or to even start thinking about future goal setting. Youth camps were identified as being a good networking opportunity for youth to connect with others and gain information and guidance on next steps for their future.

Some respondents identified the lack of motivation for young Deaf people to engage with self-directed learning or personal development. This was identified as having links to limited communication and support within their home due to language barriers, as well as limited independence during their school years and feeling unsure how to self-lead. Some reports indicated that people's individual motivation appears to be linked to where they have come from, in terms of life experiences, their access to language and supports as to whether they have the motivation to seek further help and support, or have the belief that they can achieve. Other reports highlighted the experience of having limited knowledge and encouragement for self-learning, for example how to seek out information, how to problem solve and how to initiate contact with others.

Some respondents talked about struggling to think about their future and creating goals to work towards, especially trying to decide what they want to do for future study or career options due to the belief growing up that *'Deaf couldn't achieve'* and the subsequent barriers they faced. One shared they started off *'doing whatever'* and choosing jobs or study just because it was there, not because they were passionate about it. As they have had more time out of school, they have started to develop more goals and think about what they want to do with their life.

Difficulties with the current state of Deaf Youth groups around the country and the challenges with passing over leadership to keep the groups growing and operating was shared by some respondents. These included concerns for the wider Deaf Youth community as they hope to see more youth engaged and motivated to take over the running of these youth groups and to keep them alive. One respondent talked about the New Zealand context and the size of the Deaf communities being small, meaning that there is a need to actively encourage Deaf Youth to get together and connect more. Another response discussed the need to train Deaf Youth to understand and realise the importance of the youth community, how to help keep it alive and progressing, how to make it stronger, and how to run it from a *'team approach'*.

Having knowledge about funding and accessing support once you have left school was shared as being an important factor. One respondent talked about taking independent steps to work out how the funding they were entitled to could be used to support their own personal development and further learning.

## Future Learning, Services and Support

The Deaf Youth community identified a number of areas that would support their future functioning and wellbeing, with the majority perceiving more functional and practical learning through NZSL as having high importance. The support in these areas were described as needing to 'fill in the gaps' of learning that was missed during their childhood journey.

### Areas for Further Learning

Areas identified for further learning and support to help the youth community achieve their goals in life covered a wide range of topics, all linked towards functional learning that they saw as priorities in their everyday life (e.g. social relationships, mental health and wellbeing, communication, future study/jobs, life skills such as flatting, budgeting, driver's License, cooking etc., health issues, personal safety and my rights, Deaf awareness, positive Deaf identity development, Māori culture and identity, leadership skills and politics).

The main priority areas specified by the respondents included mental health and wellbeing, communication, Life Skills, Deaf culture and identity development, social relationships, Deaf awareness and future jobs and study. Limited knowledge around mental health issues was raised by many respondents where supports were often discovered themselves once they left school, and many faced negative experiences while attempting to gain support and guidance from mental health services and professionals.

It was expressed that many of these areas for future learning should be part of the existing education programme, however some responses indicated that the current education system is not designed for Deaf people. Instead, the belief was shared that Deaf children are forced to adapt to fit into the current system, which results in a lot of missed opportunities to achieve, educational failure and gaps in learning. Many respondents identified that many young Deaf people learn NZSL later in their teenage years and they have not had enough time to learn and prepare themselves for leaving school and living in the 'real world'. Many reported that services and regular supports are needed to focus on young people beyond 21 years old, when they can no longer access support through the education system. One respondent shared the positive experience many youth faced when they attended a community workshop on cyber bullying, or a specialised education session on 'safe relationships', however it was recognised that the impact is lost when they occur as a 'one off'. They reported the need for regular and ongoing learning opportunities around these practical topics, for youth who are no longer in school, but also a need for current students as this content may not be covered, or accessible in their existing curriculum. One parent commented that the current education system which allows Deaf students to remain at school until they are 21 years old, is a good measure of how the current system is not working for Deaf children. The perception of Deaf children needing to remain at school longer to meet their educational needs was reported to be an indication that the current system is failing these students:

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*'This does not happen for other linguistic groups, so why is it acceptable and OK for Deaf?'*

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The importance of connecting with the older Deaf community and Deaf role models for support and guidance, all accessed through NZSL, was widely recognised and highlighted across the respondents, including youth themselves, parents, educators and community members. Using the older Deaf community to connect and engage with youth, was reported to be seen as a resource that will continue to grow and strengthen the Deaf community, while being fully accessible in NZSL. Especially around sharing history, personal experiences, and mentoring:

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*'...for younger people to be able to look up to Deaf role models and help to motivate themselves to achieve like them'*

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Developing a sense of agency and knowing your own rights and entitlements was reported to be a significant gap for the Deaf Youth community. It was believed by some respondents that supporting youth to feel more confident in themselves in terms of 'who' they are, means that they will be more likely to access and use sign language to meet their human rights and entitlements. Currently, reports indicate that many young Deaf people have limited knowledge and understanding in this area and therefore can become complacent and accepting of the little support and access they get to sign language. One respondent reported the need to support agency and self-advocacy from a young age, so young Deaf children become independent and aware about their needs and rights, and feel able to speak up if they are not satisfied with their current support/access to NZSL.

Specific teaching about Deaf culture and the development of a positive Deaf identity was also reported as a learning need for young Deaf people. Some respondents talked about the specific teaching of Deaf culture and Deaf identity as being the 'turning point' in their lives as they started to believe in themselves and realise that they can achieve in life and they can advocate for their rights. Currently in the education system, there is no longer a specific 'Deaf Studies' subject taught to Deaf students and it is instead integrated into the existing curriculum. The outcome of this is expected to be variable as it appears to be up to the individual RTD to focus on this content. A further concern would be how the Deaf students in mainstream settings are accessing this learning and support, especially if they are not in regular contact with Deaf educators. Reports highlighted the belief that Deaf identity and cultural support is not a focal point of the current education system including the 'Deaf school' system. This was reported to mean a lot of turmoil for parts of the youth community when they start to become aware and learn about who they are as a whole person. Additionally, having more specific teaching around Deaf culture for the wider hearing community was also seen as important. One respondent reported their concerns about the lack of focus on teaching Deaf culture, as the focus on teaching NZSL to the hearing community grows:

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*'At times it feels like hearing people can use sign language for their own benefit, rather than respecting the culture of Deaf people. This then means that NZSL loses its value, uniqueness and sacredness'*

*'We need to share our own experiences to the hearing world to increase interest, increase more people being interested in training to become interpreters and more awareness overall'*

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### **Youth Supports and Camps**

What was made evident by the youth themselves and the wider community was that there is currently no clear place for youth to go for help when support is needed. The current services and supports identified by the Deaf Youth community were very limited, with some respondents not being aware of any – *'to be honest, I don't know of anything for youth'*. Many reported on services they were aware of in the past which focused on Deaf Youth support, but they now believed them to have dissolved and faded out, e.g. reports of Deaf Aotearoa Youth Service and Magnet. Some identified the Deaf Aotearoa Youth Board, but seemed unaware of their role and Auckland based youth identified the Tu Kokiri transition programme (Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ) and Geneva Health services. The services that people were mostly aware of were more generalised services for the Deaf such as iSign, Deaf Wellbeing Society, Deaf Club, Deaf Aotearoa, Workbridge, WINZ.

The majority of youth responses indicated that they would like accessible support through regular workshops in NZSL and/or a specialised youth service accessible in NZSL, with roots embedded in Deaf culture and Deaf awareness. The desire for workshops to be accessible in NZSL, related to the functional and practical learning topics identified, run in small group situations that meet the needs of the community, while at the same time providing opportunities for social connections. The importance of face to face learning was reported, bringing youth together for learning opportunities to encourage independence and support their success in life after leaving school. However, once again it was recognised that setting age limits is not always going to be appropriate due to the late acquisition of NZSL and the need for some people who fall outside of the 'youth' age range to fill in the learning and language gaps.

A specialised youth service was also desired to be accessible through NZSL with trained professionals who are equipped with the necessary skills to support the youth community, while also having in-depth knowledge of NZSL, Deaf culture and Deaf awareness. For example, some reported that they would like a hub or a place to go, or contact when they are seeking advice, day to day support, when they need to talk to someone about their worries or feelings or feeling like their mental health is being challenged, as well as support with life goals and personal development. Two respondents referred to the current mainstream youth service, Youthline NZ, as an example of what they would find helpful, as long as it has the NZSL access and Deaf culture components:

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*'...regular support, easy to contact whenever support is needed for a range of things'*

*'...just having somewhere to go'*

*'it would be great if this [service] was targeted and specialised for youth so it was cool and appealing and understood youth needs and how to connect, with people trained in this area'*

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It was also recognised that this would be great not just for youth, but all ages within the Deaf community, however being attractive to the youth population was very important.

Deaf Youth camps were identified by the respondents as being crucial to their needs and development. The main outcomes of the camp were focused on social connections, making friendships and having fun. Some respondents identified that more functional and practical learning could be taught during youth camps, however many wanted to ensure that these camps remain focused on social connections and fun, rather than being used as a time to learn. Respondents acknowledged that leadership skills, which is a focus of many youth camps, is great to learn and acquire, however many Deaf Youth experience significant gaps in their overall learning and therefore the majority of respondents believe that more practical learning, based on daily life activities would be more beneficial. Once these gaps start to be filled, next level skills, such as leadership can then be accessed more easily. Some respondents suggested having some time at the camps to cover more practical learning sessions that are beneficial for people's future, career related and is fun. For example, having 'taster' sessions to increase awareness of career options, what is out there and what may be a good fit for them. As many people rely heavily on the youth camps as a form of support, and they only tend to occur once a year, it was reported as crucial that:

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*'We need to be able to rely on the support (e.g. a call centre/specialised service/hub) all year round – not just as a one off – to support transition into adulthood'*

*'...there does need to be a consideration around the – what next? How do youth cope with the transition back to their everyday life?'*

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The definition of 'Youth' has also proven to be challenging for current organisations who support the Deaf community, due to variable criteria for funding as well as the Youth community being aware of what funding and supports they are entitled to, especially once they have left school. It was reported that these organisations are trying to work more closely with Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ to ensure that the services are accessible to all Deaf Youth and to hopefully limit people 'falling through the cracks'.

## DISCUSSION

- Much of the information shared through this project has strong historical ties, with discriminatory roots embedded in the medical/audiological perspective of deafness. These compounding issues have been around for generations and have led to the language deprivation of many Deaf people. As there are many contributing factors, with intergenerational links there is no simple solution or quick fix. Due to the limited access to language and the learning gaps many Deaf Youth have experienced, these factors all make it hard to assess a clear way forward.
- What we do know, however, is that according to this sample, many young Deaf people are accessing NZSL at a late age (e.g. in their teenage years), often once family and education professionals have realised their ability to acquire language via oral/aural methods of communication and/or their academic achievement has not progressed. These findings are similar to previous New Zealand studies, for example The Vitality of NZSL project, which found that a significant proportion of adults who identified with the Deaf community acquired NZSL at secondary school age or later<sup>19</sup>.
- Due to this late acquisition and that many young people have acquired NZSL through a school setting and have limited access at home, a lot of learning is required to happen in a small number of years before they finish their secondary education. Beginning to acquire and access a language at a later age means that they therefore have limited time to become proficient in their primary language, while also managing their transition to adolescence, their identity development and learnings of Deaf culture and the Deaf world.
- Acquiring, gaining access to and using NZSL, continue to be reported as a significant barrier for many young Deaf people and their families. From this sample, many families had the desire for their child and their wider family to acquire NZSL, however they did not have the support to be able to do this. This was particularly reported by parents of children who were attending a mainstream education setting. This sample indicated that many families may not always be accessing full information and resources from medical and educational professionals to help them make decisions related to acquiring NZSL and connecting with the Deaf community. These findings are similar to the NZSL@School (2015) report, where the majority of parents also wanted their child to have more connections with Deaf peers and opportunities to connect with the wider Deaf community<sup>20</sup>. It has been acknowledged that connections with early services need to be strengthened to ensure families are able to make informed decisions about their child's mode of communication, as well as encouraging more Deaf awareness and support for families early in a child's life. Subsequently, the Deaf Youth community's access to NZSL appears to be dependent on whether they acquired an accessible language at a young age, or not.

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<sup>19</sup> McKee, R. & Vale, M. (2014). The linguistic vitality of New Zealand sign language: parents of deaf and hearing impaired children: survey report. Victoria University of Wellington. <https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/lals/centres-and-institutes/dsru/NZSL-Vitality-Deaf-Community-Survey-Report-Sept-2014-.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Van Asch and Kelston Deaf Education Centres (2015). NZSL@School: Te Reo-a-Tohu kei roto i nga kura o Aotearoa Report. [http://deafeducation.businesscatalyst.com/Media/board%20of%20trustees/PDF/Other/Nzsl@School\\_Report\\_Nov2015.pdf](http://deafeducation.businesscatalyst.com/Media/board%20of%20trustees/PDF/Other/Nzsl@School_Report_Nov2015.pdf)

- As many studies have indicated over the years, decisions made early in a Deaf child's life will inevitably affect them as they transition into adolescence<sup>21</sup>. The importance of a shared language has been documented as supporting a Deaf child to be cognitively, psychosocially healthy, including the development of self-concept and identity<sup>22,23</sup>.
- Access to NZSL is reported to be even more of a barrier for many families living in more remote areas of New Zealand. Deaf children's access to NZSL, Deaf culture and the Deaf community can be restricted due to the limited access to people resources who are fluent in NZSL and limited promotion and advocacy for raising a child as bilingual/bicultural.
- Early access to NZSL was recognised as being a key factor influencing the outcomes of developing a positive Deaf identity, strong leadership skills, belief around their future success and the drive to grow and strengthen the youth community. Studies have reported that when there is access to clear and easy communication, self-concept (i.e. how we view ourselves and how we perceive others to view ourselves) develops in ways that are similar to typically hearing youth<sup>24</sup>. Communication in the family is thought to be a strong predictor of self-esteem in Deaf children, and therefore impacts on their overall wellbeing<sup>25</sup>.
- The tendency for young Deaf people to accept or be tolerant of their limited access to NZSL, could be a reflection of having experienced repeated limitations and barriers in their life, as well as being unaware of what they are entitled to. As a result they may feel satisfied with whatever support or access to NZSL they get, rather than an expectation that they should have full, equal access, on par with their hearing peers. This ties in with the belief that by supporting youth to develop a positive Deaf identity and to feel more confident in themselves, means that they may be more aware of whether their access and use of sign language meets their human right.
- The impact of being socialised by schools could be seen as contributing to the young Deaf community. Skills used to create and develop new friendships are not always widely used, as there can be limited choices as to who they can socialise with and form connections with. Teaching around forming friendships and managing relationships can also be limited due to communication barriers from a young age between Deaf children and their hearing families or educators. During adolescence, when relationships start to become more complex, this can be very challenging as they try to navigate their way with a limited foundation or skillset. Initiating contact with peers and being motivated to plan for their future can be seen as new learning outside of the school setting. Having full access to language and social communication is reported by numerous studies to promote development of a healthy, strong sense of self and resiliency development, therefore supporting executive function and social skills<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76.

<sup>22</sup> Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D. J., Padden, C., Rathmann, C. & Smith, S. (2016). Avoiding linguistic neglect of deaf children. *Social Service Review*, 589-619.

<sup>23</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76.

<sup>24</sup> Brice, P. J. & Strauss, G. (2016). Deaf adolescents in a hearing world: a review of factors affecting psychosocial adaptation. *Adolescent Health, Medicine and Therapeutics*, 7(1), 67-76.

<sup>25</sup> Gentzel, H. (2007). Deaf adolescents: finding a place to belong. A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors with Distinction. Oxford, Ohio

<sup>26</sup> Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D. J., Padden, C., Rathmann, C. & Smith, S. (2016). Avoiding linguistic neglect of deaf children. *Social Service Review*, 589-619.

- It was widely acknowledged that as more young Deaf people are educated in mainstream settings, the more they are isolated from their Deaf peers, connections with the Deaf community and Deaf role models. Adding to this is less access to NZSL, less focus on their identity development and cultural awareness, which in turn can leave people feeling less motivated to engage and strengthen the Deaf community. Many studies have identified the importance of connecting with peers, as crucial to the development and social competence of adolescents, which in turn contributes to the development of a healthy and positive self-identity, leading to higher satisfaction and motivation in school<sup>2728</sup>. This identity development and expectations of self are necessary for the successful transition from adolescence to adulthood. During the post-secondary school years, there can be a heavy reliance on the Deaf community, as they provide Deaf Youth with accessible language, supports, mentoring and an increased knowledge base around daily life.
- Having access to positive Deaf role models has been recognised as possible influencers for positive identity development, motivation and independence and setting expectations. Deaf role models can also be seen as a resource to pass on their knowledge to the younger generation, to ensure their community and language continues to grow. Deaf role models have been found to benefit families, improve parent expectations and attitudes towards deafness and increase young Deaf people's self-identity and belief in their capabilities<sup>29</sup>, while also acting as language models for NZSL access and use. Māori Deaf role models are also recognised as supporting many Māori Deaf students to gain their first introduction to Māori culture, once acquisition of an accessible language (i.e. NZSL) has started<sup>3031</sup>.
- Promoting a strengths-based approach in the younger years to recognise the strengths and capabilities of young Deaf people may support goal setting and a future-focused outlook<sup>32</sup>. This characteristic can be quite limited for many youth as they leave school and are unsure of what they want to do next, where their interests lie and what skills they want to develop. Engaging more in this process during their schooling years, when they have greater access to NZSL support, would make more sense in helping them to develop goals and initiate thinking about their future plans and what is needed to achieve these goals. International studies have suggested that Deaf Youth would benefit greatly from more career guidance, especially linked in with resources which offer diverse Deaf role models, along with encouraging formal teaching of self-advocacy and empowerment to support independence<sup>33</sup>.
- Camps are identified as being a vital part of the journey for the Deaf Youth community with many expressing that camps foster access to language and identity development, due to bringing people together for a shared social experience. These events appear to support

<sup>27</sup> Gentzel, H. (2007). Deaf adolescents: finding a place to belong. A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors with Distinction. Oxford, Ohio

<sup>28</sup> Holcomb, T. K. (1998). Social assimilation of deaf high school students: the role of school environment. In I. Parasnis (Ed.). *Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience* (pp.181-198). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>29</sup> National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2017). Research summarized! Promoting high expectations for success. <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/Key2-Expectations.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Hynds, A. (2020). Opinion: Beyond listening – Ensuring parity for Māori D/deaf\* youth. *Education Gazette*, 99(3). <https://gazette.education.govt.nz/articles/opinion-beyond-listening-ensuring-parity-for-maori-ddeaf-youth/>

<sup>31</sup> The Watercooler Issue #58. Life stories from Deaf Youth (2019). <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=428421234457129>

<sup>32</sup> National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2017). Research summarized! Promoting high expectations for success. <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/Key2-Expectations.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Marschark, M., O'Neill, R. & Arendt, J. (2014). Summary report: Achievement and opportunities for deaf students in the United Kingdom: from research to practice. National Technical Institute for the Deaf. <https://mk0nuffieldfounpg9ee.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/EDU203746820-20Nuffied20Report20SUMMARY.pdf>

youth to feel proud to be Deaf, which at other times in their life can feel more like a hindrance and a barrier. However, it was recognised that the community need outcomes like this more often, so that they continue to make these personal gains and feel connected at all times of the year.

- There is recognised value for the Deaf youth community to have access to practical life skills to support them to be well-functioning adults in society. Previous studies have highlighted that many young Deaf people leave school with limited life skills that are deemed as necessary for functioning independently in daily life<sup>34,35</sup>. While leadership skills were held in high regard for the youth community, it was recognised that the notion of ‘leading self-first’ was of higher importance, before being able to consider leading others.

## HIGHLIGHTED FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The key principles for effective action as identified by the respondents in this sample include improving early acquisition and access to NZSL, further promotion of Deaf awareness and Deaf culture to support identity development and NZSL promotion in the wider community, having a specialised youth service accessible in NZSL and practical learning to support transition into adulthood.

Future directions for effective action, as identified and shared by the respondents, are collated below.

### Access to NZSL from a young age – language deprivation is a key factor

- Deaf children and their families/whānau need earlier acquisition and access to NZSL and NZSL support. Stronger connections are needed with families/whānau and professionals for early intervention support.
- Stronger connections to ensure information and resources related to NZSL and deafness shared by medical and education professionals in the early years are appropriate and helpful for families to make informed decisions, and made available to all families.
- Educational and medical professionals need to view Deaf children as part of a linguistic and cultural group, as is described in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)<sup>36</sup>. Educating people on the benefits of NZSL, so that it flows onto the families with Deaf children, to allow fully informed decision making on accessible language/mode of communication. A previous report commissioned by the Ministry of Education discussed the variability of educational professionals working with Deaf children who may not have sufficient understanding of the sector to advise others on Deaf culture and language and that they need to ensure education professionals supporting Deaf children have ‘adequate linguistic and cultural knowledge’<sup>37</sup>. There are still many barriers here.

<sup>34</sup> National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes. (2017). Research summarized! Promoting high expectations for success. <https://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/sites/default/files/asset/document/Key2-Expectations.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Deaf Aotearoa. (2010). Project energise Report.

<sup>36</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRPD/Pages/ConventionRightsPersonsWithDisabilities.aspx>

<sup>37</sup> Fitzgerald & Associates. (2010). *Scoping support for New Zealand Sign Language users accessing the Curriculum. Part II: A New Zealand Overview*. Report prepared for the Ministry of Education.

- To support professionals working with Deaf children and youth to view NZSL as an inclusive option or necessity, rather than an option that is 'competing' with the dominant aural/oral option<sup>38</sup>.
- Access to NZSL needs to occur consistently throughout New Zealand, so children living in more remote areas have better access. Focused funding and support for families and people who live outside of the larger cities is required.
- Easier pathways are needed for families who are wanting to access NZSL – stronger links are needed with Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ and Ministry of Education to support this.
- Finding culturally appropriate ways to engage with families through local community groups to encourage more engagement and participation at the bilingual preschool level.
- Whānau Hui, previously held by Ministry of Education, needs to occur regularly to help parents of Deaf children come together. Having them on a regular basis will help parents have more time to process and adjust to the information received, as well as being consistent, creating connections and having a more compassionate approach.
- More outreach support is needed for young Deaf people in mainstream settings to ensure they have access to NZSL, Deaf culture and identity support.
- Further connections with the Ministry of Education around NZSL acquisition and access for Deaf children and young people who have additional learning or physical disabilities - to support their language development and further connections with the Deaf community, rather than encouraging the use of alternative signed communication programmes.
- Collaboration with the Ministry of Education to include NZSL in the New Zealand Curriculum, curriculum guidelines and professional development for educators, so that all students in New Zealand have the opportunity to acquire knowledge of NZSL and Deaf culture. To recognise that NZSL is an official language of New Zealand by providing NZSL in all learning environments across education, the same as te reo Maori.

### **Fostering Deaf Awareness and Deaf Culture to support NZSL promotion**

- Educating people and professionals to view Deaf children as part of a cultural and linguistic group, with an accessible language.
- Access to the Deaf community – strengthening links with education professionals to support young Deaf people and their families to connect more with the Deaf community. Or finding alternative ways to support families' connections with the Deaf community, so that it is not entirely dependent on the education system.
- Specific teaching of Deaf culture and positive identity development for Deaf children and youth is needed throughout their education, e.g. Deaf Studies. Encouraging a strong foundation in this learning to support future positive identity development and overall wellbeing.
  - exploring all aspects of their identity as bilingual children/young people in today's world
  - encourage pride and a strong sense of identity in Deaf children and to understand the different modes of communication used by Deaf people

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[https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/87088/ScopingSupportNZSL-UsersPart-II-13122010-nw.pdf](https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/87088/ScopingSupportNZSL-UsersPart-II-13122010-nw.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Humphries, T., Kushalnagar, P., Mathur, G., Napoli, D. J., Padden, C., Rathmann, C. & Smith, S. (2016). Avoiding linguistic neglect of deaf children. *Social Service Review*, 589-619.

- Learnings of history, community, Deaf role models to aspire to (international and local), various technologies.
- Need to ensure this support is consistent across all school settings, to include students who may be more isolated in mainstream settings.
- “How can we help children to achieve their maximum potential if we do not fully understand the cultural norms and rhetorical strategies, which can reach their minds with maximum speed and minimum ease.” (*Ladd.P, 2009*)<sup>39</sup>
- More specific teaching to the general community of Deaf culture and Deaf being viewed as a linguistic/cultural group, to support the value and sacredness of NZSL.
- Deaf children of all ages need access to Deaf role models. Connecting with the older Deaf community/ Deaf role models as a key language and cultural resource.
  - Involving the older Deaf community to share their experiences and help guide, assist and teach.
  - Using older Deaf community members to connect and engage with Deaf Youth is seen as a resource that will continue to grow and strengthen the Deaf community, while being fully accessible in NZSL, e.g. sharing history, personal experience, mentoring.
  - Deaf community members to mentor and guide families and support optimistic expectations.
  - Creating roles and supporting Deaf adults to become mentors for the younger generation to support Deaf children and youth.

#### Accessible Specialised Service and Supports through NZSL

- Specialised youth services throughout New Zealand need to consider how their services are accessible to the Deaf Youth community. Or the Deaf Youth community need accessible youth-specific services throughout New Zealand.
  - Specialised support for ‘youth issues’, with access through NZSL and in-depth understandings of Deafness and Deaf culture.
  - Specialised service/contact centre similar to Youthline NZ, which is confidential and run by fully trained people who can connect with the youth community. This service could be a point of contact for youth to connect with, talk about their issues, seek guidance as well as discussing their goals. Also, as a way to help Deaf Youth who may be feeling isolated. The key factors requested are that the service needs to be accessible in whatever the young persons’ preferred mode of communication is, including NZSL, with in-depth understanding and knowledge on Deaf awareness/ Deaf culture so there is a relevant and shared understanding/experience. Targeted and specialised for Deaf and ‘youth issues’ so it is appealing to the youth community with an understanding of youth needs and how to connect and engage with the youth community. This needs to be accessible across New Zealand.
  - Linked to the ‘contact centre’ was the idea of a Community Hub – a place for youth to go, to hang out and learn about Lifeskills.

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<sup>39</sup> British Deaf News Team (2016). An important moment in Deaf history: How the National Deaf Studies Curriculum changed Deaf Education. <https://www.britishdeafnews.co.uk/important-moment-deaf-history-national-deaf-studies-curriculum-changed-deaf-education/>

- Mental Health service/support, including linking in with the Mental Health Foundation so that resources are accessible through NZSL, including Mental Health Awareness Week resources and information.
  - A specialised service for Deaf, accessible for all ages, was also identified as being important, as well as removing age-related barriers to supports.
  - Adopting an approach like 'Youth Town' but specialised for the Deaf Youth community and accessible in NZSL. Youth Town provides a range of programmes to unlock young people's potential, such as activity sessions, workshops, camps, project groups and events<sup>40</sup>.
  - The option of specialised support groups, run by trained mental health professionals, so people can come together and share their struggles, identify with others and at the same time form relationships in a personal, face-to-face way.
- Deaf Youth Mental Health committee – to focus and plan around the mental health education and support for this community group.
  - Deaf Youth Camps
    - Deaf Youth camps to continue as a valuable form of support for many people.
    - Extend them to include some more practical workshop learning that can help future and career planning, but still keeping a focus on being fun and relaxed. E.g. workshops on different trades, Universities to run workshops on different courses they have available, 'taster' sessions on different career options so Deaf Youth can see what options are out there and what may be a 'good fit' for them.
  - Deaf social worker/advisory support at Tertiary institutions, particularly to support Deaf students with physical or learning disabilities.
  - Opportunities are needed to bring youth together more for learning opportunities – e.g. youth social groups, learning workshops to encourage independence and to support success after leaving school.
  - Supporting youth to learn and understand their rights around access to language to increase access to NZSL.
  - Encouraging self-advocacy and empowerment to support independence. Strengthening connections with Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ to increase awareness so they can provide better advice to a wide range of Deaf Youth about their employment or study opportunities.
  - UK-based National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS): Website, Helpline and Social Care and Advisory Service which could be adapted for New Zealand – services for parents and young Deaf people providing localised support and services linked to the availability of people, professionals and services in the given area. Focuses on a local response, with different supports for varying age groups, so the supports are appropriate and meaningful. Parents can use this service for advice and guidance and young people can also seek their own support. These services also link people in with other Deaf peers or Deaf community members who may be in the same area, to pull on the local resources. Social worker support is also available for professionals and agencies working with Deaf children so they can seek advice and guidance on issues related to deafness, communication, resources etc.
  - NDCS 'The Buzz' website which could be adapted for New Zealand – website for Deaf children and young people in the UK. It provides a resource hub to go to, to find out about local youth events, information and advice on a range of topics related to Deaf children and youth, training opportunities and local campaigns related to sign language access.

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<sup>40</sup> Youth Town website. <https://youthtown.org.nz/home>

- NDCS Me2 initiative which could be adapted for New Zealand - helps youth leaders to include Deaf children in mainstream activities by raising Deaf awareness and increasing access to sign language. Deaf mentor support to attend mainstream activities (e.g. sports/community groups) to identify what sign language/communication needs there are and how to improve access for the young person. E.g. teaching signs, creating visual communication strategies, exposing other peers in the group to sign language and supporting peer/social communication. There is also a fully developed Peer Support Toolkit, specifically for young Deaf people<sup>41</sup> created in the UK.
- Learning opportunities similar to the current 'Be. Leadership' course, but with a focus on Deafness, NZSL and Deaf culture<sup>42</sup>.

### Practical Learning to Support Transition into Adulthood

- General practical learning to support future planning and goals. Ability to access this learning through NZSL and to be connected in a group with shared experiences, without any age-restricted barriers.
- Workshops to support further learning of practical topics that help with the transition into adulthood and the daily functioning of young Deaf people.
  - Requested to occur on a regular basis, e.g. once a week, for it to be worthwhile and beneficial.
  - Key factors - Learning needs to be fully accessible, fun and frequent to bring everyone together often.
  - Small group situations so there is the ability to ask questions when needed, gain clarification and check people's understanding in the group.
- Priority Topics Identified:
  - Social relationships, mental health and wellbeing, communication, future study/jobs, life skills such as flatting, budgeting, driver's License, cooking etc., health issues, personal safety and my rights, Deaf awareness, positive Deaf identity development, Māori culture and identity, leadership skills and politics
  - The main priority areas included mental health and wellbeing, communication, Life Skills, Deaf culture and identity, social relationships, Deaf awareness and future jobs and study.
  - Needing more focus on transition support particularly life skills, to prepare for life after leaving school and to support independence.
  - Encouragement and guidance is needed in the younger years to look towards the future - to support goal setting, initiate thinking about their future plans and what is needed to achieve these goals. Starting to engage more in this process earlier during their schooling years, when they have greater access to NZSL.
  - Need for greater career guidance, with resources that offer diverse, positive Deaf role models.
  - Need to support self-advocacy from a young age, so young Deaf children become independent and aware about their current support/access to NZSL – working with Ko Taku Reo, Deaf Education NZ to develop a reporting system e.g. scaling/ traffic

<sup>41</sup> National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS). (2015). Setting up a peer support scheme for deaf young people: A step-by-step toolkit [https://apodc.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/JR0609\\_Helping\\_Hands\\_Secondary\\_AW\\_WEB1NDCS.pdf](https://apodc.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/JR0609_Helping_Hands_Secondary_AW_WEB1NDCS.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Be. Lab. Be. Leadership website. <https://www.belab.co.nz/be-leadership>

light system. Conversations to start at a young age to foster independence and awareness about their access to sign language and the ability to give feedback.

- Awareness of accessing funding (at school and once you leave school) – learning what they are entitled to, what supports they can get, how to get the supports etc.
- Politics – more learning opportunities for the Deaf community are needed in this area, so they can determine where they fit into society, learn about the political and electoral system in New Zealand and which political parties they align with. Connections with the Electoral Commission to create resources that are accessible through NZSL, including workshops to support community learning in this area.
- Health related topics such as Puberty – more resources are needed so the information is fully accessible in NZSL.
- Daily news roundup available in NZSL, so it can be recognised on television as a ‘real’ language.

## CONCLUSION

This project has provided an insight into some of the experiences and needs of a small sample of the Deaf Youth community in New Zealand. Many young Deaf people appear to be accessing NZSL in their teenage years and therefore a significant amount of learning is expected to happen in a short amount of time to allow them to become proficient in an accessible language, while also transitioning through a time of significant change.

In addition to this, some families reported a desire for themselves and their Deaf child to learn NZSL, however they did not have the support to gain acquisition and access. These limitations appear to be even more compounded for people living in more remote areas of New Zealand, outside of the larger cities.

As there are many contributing factors and historical links creating barriers for young Deaf people to acquire, access and use NZSL, it is a challenge to ascertain a clear way forward.

Deaf Youth are however identifying the gaps in their learning and recognising that they need more support through practical workshops to learn functional life skills and to help their transition into adulthood. Finding ways to limit the isolation of Deaf Youth, increasing access to NZSL from a young age and supporting positive identity development from Deaf role models were of high importance. They identified vital supports, such as a specialised youth service accessible through NZSL with trained professionals was needed, as there are no clear services or supports for the youth community to go to when professional help or guidance is required.

Overall, much of the Deaf Youth community’s access and use of NZSL appears to be dependent on whether they acquired an accessible language at a young age, or not.