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| Speak Up – Kōrerotia  Deaf education in Aotearoa New Zealand  10 May 2023 | |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s access radio station Plains FM and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana,  E ngā reo,  E ngā hau e whā  Tēnā koutou katoa  Nau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”.    Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.  Kia ora everybody and welcome to “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. My name is Sally Carlton, the host of the radio show Speak Up – Kōrerotia. Today we’re going to be talking about deaf education in Aotearoa New Zealand and how things have changed over the years and what they look like today.  We’re going to have two interviewees, our first interview is with Kay Drew who is hearing and a child of deaf parents and who taught for many years at the Van Asch Deaf Education Centre in Christchurch. Kay is going to talk with us about the institutional history of the Van Asch Deaf Education Centre (or VADEC) and also how teaching and communication practices have changed over time, before talking to us a wee bit about the current focus on New Zealand Sign Language.  And then our second interview will be with Sara Pivac Alexander of Te Herenga Waka Victoria University Wellington, who will talk to us a bit about her work at the university and the importance of New Zealand Sign Language. And she is deaf and she uses New Zealand Sign Language as her first language.  So we also have Rachel McKee, also from Te Herenga Waka, who is acting as interpreter for this show. In the first interview with me and Kay, she is just signing for the video recording, and the second interview with Sara, you will hear Rachel’s voice as she interprets for Sara.  So some kind of detail just before we jump in with our interviews: According to the Census in 2018, approximately 22,000 New Zealanders, including about 4,600 deaf New Zealanders, use New Zealand Sign Language every day. New Zealand Sign Language became an official language of Aotearoa in 2006 and every May we have New Zealand Sign Language Week which acknowledges and celebrates the role of this language in our country and in our culture. So this Speak Up – Kōrerotia show today is just one small contribution to raising the visibility and awareness of New Zealand Sign Language in the country.  So Kay, it’s really lovely to have you on the show today, we’ve sent many emails so it’s really nice to see you finally in person. |
| Kay | Thank you very much for asking me. |
| Sally | Could you please tell us a little bit about your connection to deaf education, just to set the scene? |
| Kay | Well I think my connection began when I was born, I was born to two deaf people whom I just adored, they are now of course passed on and they were early pupils of the school which was then called Sumner School for Deaf Children. I also, I’m a very proud CODA which is a child of deaf adults, that’s what we call ourselves and I’m also… I’m always welcomed into the deaf community, which to me is a very happy occasion. I also taught for over 30 years at the school. |
| Sally | Kay, is it unusual for a hearing child to be born of two deaf parents? |
| Kay | Yes it is and it isn’t. Deafness is a hereditary factor in some cases and therefore if they have deaf parents and the deafness is hereditary, then often the children are born deaf. In my family, it was… deafness was not known until my third grandson was born and he was born profoundly deaf, that came as a huge surprise to us because we had no knowledge that there was a deaf hereditary gene tucked away somewhere. So he became, strangely enough, not a signer, he had a cochlear implant. So deafness and communication can be very varied. |
| Sally | I’m really looking forward to hearing more about, I guess the different pathways or the different ways that people have learnt to live their lives as deaf people. |
| Kay | Yes. Maybe we could go right back to the beginning, that’s when everything starts, at the beginning. Way back in 1877 a very important educational act was passed here in New Zealand. There were two people who promoted it, it was a Colonel Brett and William Rolleston. They were both members of the Canterbury Provincial Council and they said children in New Zealand at the time had to have an education. So they put it to the central government and the government at the time was very forward thinking. So they made a law in 1877 in which it said all children would be educated, it would be free, it would be secular (meaning it was not run by religious groups) and it would be compulsory for all children from 5 to 14 years of age. So when that began, then these two gentleman I just mentioned before, found there were deaf people in the community and there was a need to educate them because of the Act, it was compulsory.  So a school had to be found or some place where they could be educated. So what happened then? They looked overseas and they found there were two very important modes of communication in the world at the time. One was the German method and one was the French method. The German method was where you lip read and you were taught articulation, which was speaking. The other method was the French method where you signed, just signed completely. They did a lot of research and they decided on the German method. So therefore they had to find somebody who would teach the children… the deaf children of New Zealand with the German method.  So they found a very interesting man called Gerrit Van Asch, he was from Holland and he came from a farming family but he was very interested in teaching deaf children. He went to Manchester in England, which for many years became the teaching, the guru place for training teachers of the deaf. However at that time he went there, he didn’t speak a word of English so he had to learn English and to learn how to teach deaf children through the German method.  So that all got sorted and he was brought out to New Zealand. He came with his family and they settled in Sumner in a house called Beach Glenn in Heberden Avenue. Then after they settled there and then some children started to come as boarders. In those early days, the little ones went to the school, some of them are quite young, and they became boarders and they went home twice a year. So then the role expanded a bit. So Boys’ House was built in the Sumner area and so the boys were in the Boys’ House and the girls were in Beach Glenn, kept them apart in those days.  I can go now to my mother and father. My father was enrolled in 1902, he was the second day pupil of the school. My mother was enrolled in 1907 and she came from Dargaville, very way up in the top end of the North Island and family history tells us that her mother, my grandmother, brought her all the way down from Dargaville to Sumner. Took one look and said she couldn’t let – I think my mum would have been about five or six – couldn’t leave her in this boarding situation, it was too hard. So she went all the way back to Dargaville and there she was spoken to very sternly by my grandfather who said Nora, that was my mother’s name, has to be educated, it’s the law.  So they did the journey back again and my mother was there for… I’m not quite sure when… probably be 14 when she left, I can’t remember. She became the head girl and she was very popular because her mother would send parcels of food and lollies and things so it was lovely. And my dad was more like a… I think he might have stayed a few nights in Boys’ House because he told me the story about climbing the hills around Sumner and trapping rabbits and things. Anyway, that’s enough of their story.  My father was taught by Van Asch and my father had no residual hearing whatsoever and he told me how he had a big hearing trumpet put in his ear, he couldn’t hear a word and Van Asch would speak into that and then he would talk to dad and try and get dad to say the vowels and the consonants of the words we spoke. So that was the beginning of the oral method which was talking and lip reading.  Lip reading, many people think that lip reading is God’s given gift to deaf people; it’s not. Lip reading is a very difficult skill to learn because people don’t use their mouths correctly, people have moustaches and beards and lately they have masks and there’s no way you can read someone’s lips. Some deaf people are very proficient at it and very good. I remember trying to… dad telling me how Van Asch used to get him to talk or to use plosives which are the ‘p’ sounds and he’d have a piece of paper, a little tissue in front of his mouth and if he could do that ‘p’ sound, the paper would move.  So there were no hearing aids in those days, some children developed very good speaking skills and some didn’t. My father’s voice, because he never heard a thing, was quite difficult for most people to understand, whereas my mother had some residual hearing so it was easier for her to communicate and to be understood. |
| Sally | That was a super fantastic introduction, thank you. |
| Kay | Good. |
| Sally | One question, why was it in Christchurch? And I recognise the name Rolleston from Rolleston Avenue. Is that the connection there? |
| Kay | Yes, William Rolleston became the superintendent of the Canterbury Provincial Council and he wanted it… because they found there were… I think was it, quite a number of deaf children here. He wanted to set the school up in Christchurch or in Canterbury. So they looked around and they thought Sumner was a good place. It was close to Christchurch and it was a warm valley, that was the reason that they got there, one of the reasons yes. |
| Sally | You stressed that word ‘warm’, is there a reason for that? |
| Kay | I taught there for many years, I don’t think I would say it was that warm! |
| Sally | No I wouldn’t either! |
| Kay | No, I don’t know… when I read that I thought I’m not too sure about that but in those days it may have been warm. We have terrible prevailing winds here in Christchurch, maybe that was a sheltered area. |
| Sally | Kay, when I was looking through the website, one thing that struck me was that the school roll obviously peaked at certain times, particularly as a result of rubella epidemics and presumably that had an impact on children being born, I would think. |
| Kay | Yes rubella, before it was… Today, rubella can be prevented but rubella is really quite a dangerous disease for pregnant women. In the first three months of pregnancy, that’s when the foetus is developing the hearing organs and they can be damaged quite severely or not. There was a huge outbreak in the ‘40s and that’s where there was a lot of deaf children being born. But also the roll was increasing rapidly, even through the ‘30s it was increasing rapidly, mainly boarders going.  So the school… oh I forgot to say, I think it was 1907 the main building – it was a big, big building that was built at the end of the school near Evans Pass Road, it was rather austere, it was designed in England and I think they got the sun… you know, they see the sun a different way up there than we do down here; they have everything facing south, we want everything facing north – so the building was sort of built around the wrong way. I taught in that building as a very young teacher, the classrooms are upstairs and downstairs were the boarding establishments… were the boarders where they slept, the dormitories and the kitchen.  So that building became very important for the boarders to stay in but it became… got to the stage with the outbreak of rubella, there just wasn’t the room. So at the time the principal was Mr Pickering, Mr Herbert Pickering, Bert he was, that’s right, and he decided that they just couldn’t carry on anymore. So the idea was worked out or decided that a school would be built in Titirangi in Auckland and it would be called the Kelston School for Deaf Children. So that was established in about 1940.  Pickering was a great principal, he also set up classes to train teachers in speech and language and he also got classes for training deaf teachers or teachers of the deaf as well. So he was a very innovative man. |
| Sally | Fantastic. Kay could you tell us a wee bit about how teaching practices changed over time. When were you teaching at the Van Asch Centre? |
| Kay | I was in the German method, I was not allowed to sign and I always was able to give good lip patterns because that was how we communicated with the deaf. I always remember this story. I had a group, one of my first… my first class, lovely children and they started to sign between each other. So I joined in the conversation, they were horrified that a teacher could actually understand the signing.  So what had happened, we think going back in time there was a person called Dorcus Mitchell who was teaching four deaf children in Charteris Bay which is in Lyttelton. Reverend Bradley was the Father and he brought Dorcus Mitchell out from a school for the deaf and dumb (I hate that word), from London. So she came. We think she may have introduced some of the rudiments of BSL, which is British Sign Language. So the sign language was there.  As the children became… when they worked together, they signed to each other. That was never allowed in the classroom. So because it’s a living growing language, the signs increased over time. So that was sort of the beginning of it.  When I was in this classroom it was delightful, later on things changed. In about the ‘70s a thing called… well a process was called total communication. Now I was responsible for introducing it. It was very hard, I’ll tell you why. We used AUSLAN, which is Australian Sign Language, and why did we use that and not New Zealand Sign Language? AUSLAN had a lot of resources.  At the time, because New Zealand Sign Language had been stifled and not allowed to develop but it was underground, we had very few resources. So I had to learn AUSLAN and use it in a signed English mode which means my name is Kay Drew which means that I am signing every word that I say. That is not a sign language; that is a signed English language. That was the… I think the deaf community was very upset here in New Zealand when that was introduced and they used to ask me why and I said well maybe this is the first step in getting New Zealand Sign Language recognised, and I think it was.  Because as time went on signed English was phased out but the important thing was that because New Zealand Sign Language is a growing living language, they could use some of the signs from AUSLAN. Like the English language, because it’s a good living language, it’s always using new words, so New Zealand Sign Language is the same. So they were using many of the AUSLAN words, they would use BSL words. So the language is growing and growing.  Another thing that really promoted sign language was the World Games for the Deaf and that was held in 1989, it was the 16th World Games of the Deaf. It was the first time it had been held down under and there we organised classes to train interpreters. It was a mammoth task and Rachel, she was one of the main people to help to train different people. We had different people who knew some sign language, we had deaf people who knew sign language in classes teaching people to communicate with those that were coming to the games. It was about 32 nations came, it was great. So that promoted New Zealand Sign Language even more.  Plus we had… the school employed deaf teachers to come and that was huge, that was wonderful and as there is now, there are deaf teachers and deaf tutors for New Zealand Sign Language, there are deaf teacher aides I presume. So we’ve come a long way since the German method. |
| Sally | And when was it that Sign Language was, I suppose, formally implemented in place of oral methods? |
| Kay | That would be total communication you mean. The signed English. |
| Sally | I suppose so, so it went from oral method to total communication… |
| Kay | To New Zealand Sign Language, that’s correct. |
| Sally | And when was Sign Language I guess the predominant… |
| Kay | It was sort of, I think it was a flow through. It wasn’t a cut off point which was better because a lot of people had spent a lot of time learning signed English, it was just a gentle flow which made it a much easier transition. |
| Sally | And so by say the 1990s, mid-1990s, New Zealand Sign Language was the predominant method? |
| Kay | It was paramount, it was paramount, yes. We didn’t… but then you’ve got to realise that technology has improved greatly. When my parents went to school in the 1900s, there was no hearing aides whatsoever. So now we have great technology can be used in the classroom, it can be used for everyday purposes and of course there’s the cochlear implant. So a lot of things have happened. |
| Sally | Would you mind explaining for people who may not be familiar with a cochlear implant, what it actually is? |
| Kay | Now you’ve got me on here, let me think. I should know because my grandson has got it. Inside the ear there’s an organ called the cochlear, now that’s your organ of hearing and what happens in a birth defect or it doesn’t develop properly, there’s little hairs inside the cochlear that are not there. Those little hairs are, they transmit sound to the brain. So the cochlear implant, there’s a wire – I’m speaking very basically here – into the cochlear and that replaces those hairs that are not there and there’s a very… I think my grandson has now got a Bluetooth one, so he can do all sorts of things and listen to all sorts of things with it. It’s quite a magical device if you want your child to be an oral speaker. There is a choice, you can become an oral speaker or you can become a New Zealand Sign Language speaker, it’s up to the parents’ decision. |
| Sally | And I imagine as well as things like hearing aides and cochlear implants, there’s also a range of resources that technology has opened up, not least internet and video technology and various other things that enable education. |
| Kay | Yes they do. Now I’ve been away from education for a few years as you know so I’m not up to date with the technology but I am quite sure the hearing aides now would be far more superior than when I started way, way back in time. Technology is a great thing. Children today, I have found… I had a visit to the school and I found that most of the children from Van Asch are now mainstreamed and I think I’m right, there’s just preschool children at the school now. So mainstreaming isn’t a new idea at all, it’s come back. It works for quite a number of children but it won’t work with all the children, you do need to have a tremendous amount of support, especially for New Zealand Sign Language users, they need interpreters, they need teacher aides and if they have residual hearing, they need every bit of technology that’s going.  So I feel very strongly that there must always be a place for those children who cannot be educated properly in a mainstream situation. The school needs to remain open. I have just come back as you know from being away for quite a number of years, I see there is a lot of bilingualism sort of starting here in New Zealand and that’s fine, with Māori people and I’ve always had the greatest of respect for the Māori language and Māori culture, I’ve taught many Māori children. I also have the greatest respect for deaf children, their language and their culture.  I just feel and I’m… I just feel that with the renaming of the school, that the words ‘Van Asch’ have disappeared. Van Asch is a very historical name as I explained earlier in the interview. Now the school for the deaf has its culture, it has its beautiful stories, it has its traditions, it has its language and I really would like to see ‘Van Asch’ placed in the name of the school, at the moment it is not there. They have a beautiful name and I like the meaning of it but we need to maintain that historical feature. I’ve spoken to some of the members of the deaf community and they feel quite strongly about it. I know the whole thing was debated very well and the outcome but we need to respect that there are two cultures. There are the Māori culture and there is the deaf culture and these are the things that I think we need to think quite seriously about. |
| Sally | It certainly is interesting and I think and we’ll touch on it later with Sara as well, is the idea of New Zealand Sign Language co-existing along English and Te Reo. |
| Kay | It’s trilingual, it’s trilingual, yes. |
| Sally | And also this idea of languages as a living culture and English adopts so much te reo, I imagine Sign Language is probably also adopting Te Reo as well. |
| Kay | Of course, yes. |
| Sally | Yes it’s interesting isn’t it, the flow towards the future and also… |
| Kay | And this is what it should be, we shouldn’t be at odds with each other, we need to work together but each respect the culture of the other. |
| Sally | I’d like to say thank you so much Kay for taking the time, it’s been really nice to hear the personal experiences you’ve brought to this kōrero as well as your knowledge as a teacher as well. |
| Kay | Thank you, it’s been a pleasure, thank you very much and thank you Rachel. |
| Sally | And we’ll move now to the interview with Sara where we talk more about New Zealand Sign Language and more about current education practices, particularly as they are being taught at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University Wellington.  This is Speak Up – Kōrerotia and now we’re talking with Sara Pivac Alexander and we’re going to be hearing the voice of her colleague Rachel McKee, both from Te Herenga Waka Victoria University Wellington. Sara, it is so lovely to meet you and you as well, Rachel. And Sara, I’ve seen your face in my foray into learning Sign Language on the dictionary so it’s like meeting a celebrity from my point of view. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Oh thank you that’s very nice and also I’m very excited to be here to talk with you about Sign Language today, so thanks for inviting me. |
| Sally | No problem, it’s really lovely to have you guys here. We’ve already spoken a wee bit about the education of… deaf education in the past, moving up to where we are today. I’m really interested to hear from you, Sara, about teaching New Zealand Sign Language at the university level. To start off with, could you maybe tell us a little bit about what is it that you do in the Deaf Studies Centre at Victoria University? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Okay, well I’m a senior lecturer here at Victoria University of Wellington and we teach two different groups of students. One group is where we focus on hearing students, undergraduate BA students, mostly first year undergrads, first and second year and we offer a minor in NZSL Studies to those students. So many of those will be studying other subjects, maybe law or psychology or education and they add NZSL into their degree.  Then the second cohort of students that we teach here, we offer a course, a programme called the Certificate in Deaf Studies teaching NZSL and that programme targets the deaf community where we’re training deaf people how to teach NZSL. So the first group of hearing students, we teach that on a regular timetable through the year and they are in small groups of 20 students per class and it’s a really interactive style of teaching, very hands on. With the deaf students who are training to be Sign Language teachers, they come for block courses a week at a time through the year because they come from all over New Zealand so it’s a different sort of format. |
| Sally | That’s great and could you give us an idea of what a class might look like for those two different groups of students? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | So a Sign Language class at university for a start, we don’t use any voice from day one. So it’s total immersion for those hearing students and usually it’s a bit of a shock for them to have a deaf teacher, they didn’t realise they were going to be learning NZSL that directly or being thrown right in the deep end from day one. But they quickly realise that it’s quite accessible, we have a lot of tools that we use to help students understand, of course: we’ve got PowerPoints, we’ve got gesture, we use roleplays, a lot of actions and you know, keep it simple step-by-step so the students can be involved.  And the focus for those course is really giving them practical communication skills like dialogues, how to ask a question, how to answer a question and how to actually communicate with someone in a practical way. So there’s a lot of group work and practice activities, more so than bookwork which you might find in other foreign language classes.  We also have to set up the classroom environment a little bit different than a normal university class which would have desks and chairs. We push those to one side and we have the students just sitting in a horseshoe so they can see each other, so they can get up and move about which can be a bit of a shock at first, but we find that the students pick that up really quickly and usually they report that their classes are a lot of fun and a lot more sort of participatory than a lot of other language classes they’ve done so they make pretty quick progress.  Those classes also have a one-hour lecture a week with Rachel in spoken English where they’re learning a little bit more background about deaf culture and community, grammar of the language and it’s easier to convey in English, whereas the other classes with me and deaf tutors focus on practical communication skills. So they have three hours of language practice and one hour of lecture, so to have that balance of theory and practical. So yeah, they learn a lot during their courses. |
| Sally | That sounds really great. You mentioned there about an hour a week where they get some grammar and they also learn about deaf culture, can you tell us a wee bit more about what do you mean when you’re talking about deaf culture? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well the word itself ‘deaf culture’, there are many deaf perspectives on it and of course that’s changed through time as well. I guess it means basically deaf people’s ways of doing things and the fact that there are visible and invisible elements to that culture. There’s the signing, the language itself, there’s communication behaviours – how do you, for example, start a conversation or get a deaf person’s attention in different contexts? So those are linked to language and then on the more invisible side we can identify there are particular values that deaf people have, the way that deaf people believe certain things or have certain attitudes, we would call that part of deaf culture and it takes a while to really unpack. People often think they’re just learning to sign without necessarily realising that they’re also learning about a deaf world view and deaf values and that deaf people might have particular perspectives on things. So it’s important that they learn to respect that as well and sometimes that’s easier to convey, you know, in a lecture session and with readings. In my classes, I’m teaching them directly in Sign Language, in their second language, so it’s a bit difficult to go into depth into those topics. |
| Sally | It’s a really important point and it’s really cool to hear that you cover that as an extra element. I remember when I was doing my first class in Sign Language and one of the first things we learnt was this sign here for ‘alarm’ and it’s so simple but it really made me think, you know what, it’s really so important isn’t it? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes exactly. |
| Sally | Yeah it was just a really simple thing but you think yes, that’s a whole window into somebody else’s understanding of the world. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | That’s right, another example like that is when we talk about family. I would explain to people that I have a deaf family, I have deaf parents, but most deaf children, their parents would be hearing and so it’s teaching them Sign Language but at the same time, about the social experience of deaf people. In the lecture session, that can be expanded a bit more so that students are you know, learning about those perspectives as well as the communication. |
| Sally | Sara, you mentioned that your parents are deaf but that many deaf people may have hearing parents. How do you think the experiences differ there and how do you teach people about those? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well the thing I guess that’s the same is that whether you are a deaf person with deaf parents or hearing parents, you are still a Sign Language user and so that’s the main thing I’m focusing on in teaching. But it just means that my childhood experience was different because I had access to everything, all the communication at home. I had parents and a sister so everything was accessible in Sign Language so I didn’t experience the same barriers that a lot of deaf people do. If deaf people have hearing parents who are good signers, they might have that access but often they don’t and so there’s a lot more struggle around communication as a child and so 95% of children have hearing families and so that’s a more common experience, that feeling of struggle. |
| Sally | Goodness, I hadn’t realised the percentage difference was quite so big. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yeah and it’s… so it’s really important that parents of deaf children have access to Sign Language from birth. So Deaf Aotearoa offers a service called First Signs where they have deaf tutors going in and working with families, helping them to develop Sign Language skills and just everyday communication skills. That service has been going for a number of years now and it’s really important and there’s still a need, I think, for more of that kind of thing because in society generally, of course, not many people know Sign Language and then you know, there’s the issue of preschools for example. There’s only one in Auckland, one in Christchurch where deaf children can go and have access to Sign Language. So we still need to get the message out there and for people to understand that it’s important for deaf children to have that very early access to communication because that’s what gives them access to information and to feeling included. |
| Sally | There’s all that work, isn’t there, around the first 1,000 days being critical to a child’s life? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes exactly. |
| Sally | How about Sara, when you have the deaf students coming to Te Herenga Waka and learning how to teach New Zealand Sign Language to children? What’s that experience for them and I’m particularly wondering about the getting together of people from all across New Zealand, coming together and sort of experiencing this together. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well the course like I said, it’s part time and it’s taught over two years. So they come together and they are, you know they’re taught directly in Sign Language so the course is directly accessible because it’s… all of the teachers are Sign Language users and for most of those adults, they say wow, that’s the first time they’ve had that direct accessible education experience where they don’t have to try and accommodate communication or use interpreters. And I myself was in the course a long time ago and then I became a Sign Language teacher but it was my first experience of having a fully deaf class with deaf teachers and you know, getting a different sense of what was possible.  So when those deaf students go back to their home situations, they have a different sense, I think, of capability. They come for a number of different courses and the first of those focuses on deaf culture and community and we unpack, you know, what does that mean and people have a chance to reflect on that and how they would explain it, to for example, you know hearing people that they meet or parents of deaf children. What does it mean, you know, to have a deaf culture.  Then we have a series of other courses, some… the next one focuses on the structure of Sign Language linguistics and most deaf people are quite amazed about that because even though they are Sign Language users, they have not had the opportunity or formal training to sort of talk about the structure of Sign Language and they learn a lot about English at school but most deaf people have not had the opportunity to sort of study Sign Language and how it works and the fact that it has rules.  And then after that the programme focuses on sort of language learning topics, how to use a second language curriculum, how to plan lessons, how to teach and so on and at the very end, the last course is that all of those students will do practicum teaching where they have to reflect on their teaching and improve on practical skills. So quite a few of those people do end up working in deaf education and when they do work in deaf education, there’s you know, ongoing benefits to others such as other teachers of deaf or parents. So our course is kind of like a seed with a ripple effect outwards from that. |
| Sally | Very nice. And do those same teachers also undergo teacher training through the universities as well, or do they solely come to learn how to teach Sign Language? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yeah they only come for the NZSL teacher training. So the course is specific to second… it’s designed specifically for deaf people for that purpose. If they went to other courses, it would be a lot more difficult to navigate because there’s no Sign Language content or they’re not designed for deaf learners. So this course is much easier for them to access and to succeed in. |
| Sally | Great. And approximately how many people do you have enrolling in both the Sign Language teaching and the hearing students learning Sign Language? And I’m quite interested to know are you seeing the numbers changing over time at all. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | So for the hearing undergraduate students, we take in 60 new students every year in the first year and we have 20 usually in the second year at any given time. So it’s about 80 hearing students. For the deaf group who are training as teachers, we often have around 20. So altogether about 100 students a year that we are teaching.  As to the numbers, the numbers for the undergraduate hearing students has been pretty stable, we did see a little drop off with the Covid effect but the courses are really popular at the university so the numbers are pretty strong. With the deaf students, we’ve actually seen the numbers go up and partly that’s because Ko Taku Reo Deaf Education, more and more of the staff are wanting to send their staff for professional development so that’s been really positive for us. |
| Sally | Yeah great. Is there anything else you’d like to add here around the teaching of New Zealand Sign Language that you do at Te Herenga Waka? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well I can comment just briefly on the, I guess the impacts of that teaching. |
| Sally | Yes please. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | What we’ve observed is we see a lot of our former students who go out once they finish their degree and they go into a whole range of fields such as they might become teachers, they might… teachers of deaf children or regular teachers. Some work as teacher aides, we’ve had others go into speech language therapy, people go into public service as policy analysts and then there’s another group of students who aren’t necessarily involved in deaf-related services but they might just be in other fields like theatre or law or just regular teaching and so it’s fantastic to see those people bringing their knowledge of NZSL into their various fields that they go into and they become advocates for NZSL or at least pass on that awareness to others that they’re working with.  So for example, this coming NZSL Week, one of our current students is a manager at Macs Brewery and she took initiative with Deaf Aotearoa to set up a Sign theme event on Wellington on a Plate. So they’re running a special event for Wellington on a Plate where you’re also going to learn NZSL. So you know, bringing Sign Language awareness into her job is a really good example. |
| Sally | That’s really cool to hear. And in fact it works quite well as a nice segue into the next set of questions that I had for you which were around advocacy and the various advocacy roles that you have. There’s quite a list of them, if you could tell us a few of the boards and organisations that you’re involved in or have been involved in, that would be wonderful please. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well I’ll focus on the current ones. I’m at the moment I’m a board member for Wellington Deaf Society which is also known as the Deaf Club and their role is to provide social recreational activities for the Wellington deaf community. So I’ve been a board member for five years of that organisation and they… I also have had a strong role in the New Zealand Sign Language Teachers’ Association which promotes professional development and advice for NZSL teachers. So we run workshops and events that are relevant to teaching skills.  But just to go back for a moment to the Wellington Deaf Society: We have 14 deaf societies or deaf clubs around New Zealand and those organisations are really considered the heart of the deaf community, they are the places where deaf people congregate the most and come to hang out and socialise and use NZSL.  The first Deaf Club was set up in 1922 in Christchurch and when I grew up, the Deaf Club was a really important part of my parents’ life, my dad was a former president and so for us the Deaf Clubs are a very important place where NZSL is actually maintained and sustained. So when people come to the Deaf Club, that’s where they’ll see NZSL and deaf culture kind of live, and I know that you know, they have been very important for the older generation to keep deaf clubs alive. We’re seeing a lot more threat to them so I feel a responsibility to support that because when there are children who are deaf who are growing up, they need places to go to meet other deaf people and also for parents of deaf children to understand and meet deaf people. So yes, really important. |
| Sally | Yes and I suppose part of the advocacy that you’re doing is increasing awareness and advocating for the continuation of these sorts of services. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes. Yeah I mean advocacy can take many forms of course, like through my work in teaching students, teaching hearing students, teaching deaf students. Both of those populations go out into the world and take that knowledge with them. At the Deaf Club it’s more about you know, keeping a place, a home for the deaf community and these are organisations have really important roles. The Sign Language Teachers’ Association has a really important role because that in turn supports more people to learn NZSL, so that of course feeds into you know, awareness and use of the language in society.  So yeah, I have… I do have quite a lot of meetings in my life where I’m involved in different activities around Sign Language and I’m often asked for my perspective or advice because of my different roles – my role as a university teacher, my linguistic knowledge and so on. So yes, I do get pulled into a number of things and I do what I can.  A couple of years ago Deaf Aotearoa asked me if I would be one of the NZSL Week heroes on the poster so I was one of the poster girls that week, so that’s also a form of advocacy is you know, promoting NZSL and encouraging people to learn it and normalising the language. |
| Sally | On this same sort of topic, what’s your view on the hearing community learning Sign Language and the role that the hearing community has in helping the hard-of-hearing community integrate better through being able to speak even just a few signs? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Well that is a good question. We really welcome hearing people to learn NZSL and it’s really great that they can be included in our deaf way of life and the important thing there is about attitude. So it’s not just about knowing the language but it’s contact with deaf people and understanding deaf people’s goals and knowing, also learning from that their boundaries about where to… who should be advocating, understanding their privilege as hearing people. So yes, we do need to be careful in terms of hearing people who know Sign Language maybe just being aware of those boundaries. And remember the phrase, you know, “Nothing about us without us”. I think that applies to everything in life, you know, whether it’s politics… You want to establish something for deaf people? Make sure there are deaf community people involved in it from the start. If you’re designing a health programme, you need deaf voice in that or Sign Language students who are going out into their work places, it’s really important that they include deaf voice in everything they do. |
| Sally | I can see some strong parallels between what you’re saying there, Sara, and conversations around Pākehā learning te reo. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes, yes very much so, definitely. Because we’re a minority language group, it’s similar issues. So we want to share our language but at the same time you need to share back and there’s responsibility that goes with that. |
| Sally | Definitely. Anything else on the advocacy side of things or can we finish up with talking a wee bit about the Deaf Studies Research Unit? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes okay sure, let’s move on. |
| Sally | Just as we finish up our kōrero then, I’d be keen to hear what kind of work you do at the Research Unit and again, what its role is, I suppose, in this advocacy space. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | So the Deaf Studies Research Unit is the only one of its kind in New Zealand and we’re very lucky to have it here. It was set up in 1997 and the first project that it was established for was to document NZSL as a form of a dictionary and in grammar. So that information about the language could be shared and that helped enormously in validating the language. So all of that work where you’re describing and documenting a language counters, you know people’s perhaps misbeliefs that it’s not really a language or its not important. So having that evidence is really important background to advocacy so people can access our research and information.  I guess the other important role is that the Deaf Studies Research Unit has directly produced a lot of resources that helps people learn NZSL. So for example you’re probably aware of the online dictionary. Back in the mid-1990s, the first paper dictionary was published in 1997, a great heavy tome of a thing and that had an impact on people realising that it really was a language.  So we do research in quite a number of areas, topics to do with the deaf community. We’ve looked at deaf children in mainstream education. After the Christchurch earthquakes we did a project where we documented deaf people’s stories about that. Also we have done research about how people are learning NZSL online. So we’ve got quite a broad scope of research. |
| Sally | Really fantastic. I saw one, would have been in Christchurch I think, that work into the experience of the deaf community after the earthquakes is really important, it certainly gets circulated a wee bit as well. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes it’s on the website and people can share that story. Also there’s part of that video was in a Te Papa exhibition as well about the earthquakes. So they had narratives from Christchurch people and they were able to add some of that data and add it to the Te Papa exhibition about the Christchurch earthquakes which was nice. |
| Sally | Given that you’ve just mentioned data there, one question about data that I’m interested in: Can you tell through the Research Unit, particularly I imagine the online dictionary, how people are accessing it and are you seeing any changes over time as well? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes we have a database manager for the online dictionary and she monitors that and we know that the numbers, since the dictionary was launched, have really taken off. Of course when it’s NZSL Week the numbers skyrocket, through the year it’s quite stable. Yes not surprising. But I think as far as I know, in deaf education that online dictionary is used as an everyday resource for teachers or teachers who want to teach a little bit of Sign Language in their schools use it and even… When our website goes down just for a few minutes or something, we get complaints or emails from people saying oh I was relying on that to use for my class which does show you that people out there quite widely are using it. So we need to get it back up and running every time that happens. |
| Sally | Yes how fantastic. And one thing that I really like about it, not only is there the option to watch the signs, the video signs and then to slow them down, but also the words are in English and in te reo, a trilingual dictionary, really cool. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes, we also one other feature is that there are example sentences in the dictionary so that you can see how a sign is used in a real context which is an added value thing. You can do other things from the dictionary, like you can select signs that you want and put them into a sheet if you want to make a handout for a class like vocabulary sheets with the signs on them. We know that many schools use that and people who are teaching NZSL. So the NZSL teachers all over New Zealand are using that and all the New Zealand Sign Language students are using it for their homework, so yes it’s a really good reference tool.  There are about 7,000 signs in that dictionary now and the number is just slowly, we build on that as time goes by. |
| Sally | That was one of my questions actually, is does it change as time goes on. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes we recently added another 200 signs to the dictionary but before we add signs of course, there’s always a careful process of validating with the deaf community. So we’ll talk to different deaf groups around New Zealand, show them signs and go through a formal process of validating say Auckland and Christchurch and Wellington and… or we’ll also get feedback from people in rural areas. We can do that more online now and if the agreement on a sign reaches a certain threshold, we’ll include it. If people say no, we’re not really sure about that sign then we’ll wait a bit longer and see if the sign spreads and takes hold. So we have you know, a formal process for deciding what goes in the dictionary.  We also, a couple of years ago, started a new website called NZSL Share and the purpose of that is to collect new signs or neologisms for signs that are not commonly used there but where deaf people can upload signs which might have, you know, specialist meanings or more rarely used signs and so we’ve got about over… about 1,000 signs in there which may not yet be in the dictionary. Some of them will take hold and some of them might disappear. So there’s always new signs coming up, you know to do with new domains like politics or issues of the day or one example now, people are talking about the war in Ukraine. Before people were not talking about Ukraine so much and then suddenly this is an issue and so you’ll get the sign Ukraine coming up and people say oh you should add this to the dictionary.  Another example is Covid of course…. |
| Sally | I was just going to say that one. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | That was a completely new thing that came up in 2020 and so that’s now in the dictionary. |
| Sally | That’s the great thing about the online element, I suppose, is it can be refreshed as needed. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yeah definitely, yes if you’ve got a print format it’s very static, it’s hard to add to. So it’s not… there’s still a lot of course background work and processes that go on and decisions and ongoing funding that’s needed to allow that to happen, it’s not an easy process. There’s a lot of costs involved, technical costs involved in doing that. So if you want to maintain an online dictionary, you still have to obtain support for that on an ongoing basis. |
| Sally | Is there anything else you’d like to tell us about the dictionary? It is super interesting. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | I think we’re very lucky to have a dictionary really of this calibre in New Zealand and also the fact there have been so many deaf people involved in contributing signs to it. I remember when I was a young girl, my parents were involved in community meetings when the dictionary was originally being made and they were recording signs. So my parents were the original contributors and I’m still working on it so that’s lovely and I know that so many people use it and find it valuable. |
| Sally | It’s a really interesting insight into how languages change as well. I imagine that Sign Language, probably more than spoken languages in many ways, but spoken languages too are constantly evolving. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Yes Sign Language has over many years and you know, styles have changed and more recently I think we’re seeing a lot of quite rapid change. A lot to do with online communication. So deaf people in New Zealand are now getting access to overseas sign languages like American Sign Language. You know, consuming online content and so there’s more borrowing from some of those resources. So Rachel was involved, our team was recently involved in looking for example, at the proportion of American Sign Language signs that have entered the vocab of New Zealand Sign Language which is, you know, all languages do that, they borrow from elsewhere, so same process. |
| Sally | Yes really interesting. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | One thing to add, remember before in the old days, Sign Language was not on media, it wasn’t online, the only place you could see it used was at the Deaf Club or when deaf people met each other face to face at deaf events. We used to have things like national Deaf Games and so deaf people’s opportunity to interact was much more limited and so you saw maybe less variation. But now Sign Language is much more out in public face and it’s on media and so there’s a much greater exchange of Sign Language and that sort of contributes to new development as well. |
| Sally | Yes. Sara, I’d like to say thank you so much and to you too, Rachael, thank you. I’ve learned a lot and I’m sure our listeners have as well. Have you got anything you’d like to say as we wrap up? |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Just say learning sign language is really fun! And if you’re not sure you could use… Try online at learnnzsl… [www.learnnzsl](http://www.learnnzsl) and it’s free and anyone can access that website to have a go at learning and also access our online dictionary. Even if you learn a little bit, that still helps communication with deaf people and it will make their day. If you meet a deaf person and you know some Sign Language, it’s a big plus. Even when a bus driver signs “Thank you” to me, it feels great. So even those small things can make a big difference to deaf people. |
| Sally | It goes to show doesn’t it, there’s just those… it can be just those small things that give people some dignity and some sense of belonging. |
| Sara  (spoken by Rachel) | Exactly, that’s true. |
| Sally | Well thank you both very much, I’ve really enjoyed this and yeah, we’ll have for the first time both an audio and a video Speak Up – Kōrerotia show so that’s something exciting for me as well. |