

---

## **Analysing the dynamics of inclusive practices through the mass media coverage of deafness, multimodal communication and performance in professional contexts.**

**Théophile Munyangeyo**

Trinity Centre for Global Intercultural Communications; *School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies*; Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Republic of Ireland

---

**Citation:** Théophile Munyangeyo (2022) Analysing the dynamics of inclusive practices through the mass media coverage of deafness, multimodal communication and performance in professional contexts, *International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies*, Vol.8, No.2, pp.1-24

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Multifaceted diversity and related inclusive practices are increasingly becoming very significant in designing social policies and managing the workforce in the workplaces. This paper discusses the cultural shift in the public perceptions of deafness and hard of hearing in a synchronic perspective. Using Buzzsumo's content analyser, we identified the content published during the British Strictly Come Dancing 2021 television show around "Rose Ayling-Ellis", "sign language" and "deaf" as specific keywords. We examined the data in tandem with the social engagement, the concept, the purpose and the impact of inclusive practices through the mass media coverage of deafness, multimodal communication and performance in a professional context. The findings revealed a significant increase in social engagements with Sign Language and Deaf; and Rose Ayling-Ellis was an important driver of the content and related topics. Using the content analysis and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as theoretical frameworks, this study confirms that multimodal communication strategies have allowed the (dis)ability dimensions to transcend the empathic assumptions in the society and the workplace and embrace significantly meritocratic achievements in a very competitive and yet inclusive contest. The paper concludes that ability/disability is an elusive dichotomy that is often related to societal and cultural interpretative deficiency. But for the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion framework to lead to meaningful changes within the society and the organisations, it should be supported by equitable interventions designed to facilitate and warrant the level playing field.*

**KEYWORDS:** mass media coverage; deaf studies; multimodal communication; Sign Language; Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC); equity, equality, diversity, inclusion.

---

## **INTRODUCTION**

Voices for action on disability and inclusion have been heard around the world, asking to address urgently various forms of stigma that people with physical, communicative or cognitive impairments face in their daily lives. For Deaf communities, deafness is neither a disability nor a hearing impairment. It is and should be rather perceived as simply a deafness and hard of hearing case. Nevertheless, in many social and political

contexts deaf people have faced the same stigma of inability with people with disability. In many cases, policies against discrimination and injustices have used the disability as a collective social perception of any limited ability. They have therefore put in place policies to remove barriers to work, travel or take part in various public events. Nevertheless, such policies on inclusion are often driven by the attitude of ensuring a better representation of people with any limited ability. These policies are informed by empathy with the aim to enhance mental wellbeing through tackling social and professional isolation. However, the old assumption that inclusion in the workplace is about doing the right thing is no longer tenable. Disability or limited ability does not need to be associated with a specific league in competitive performances and this study will show that an equitable design of access mechanisms and tools can better support inclusive and social justice agenda in professional contexts.

Beyond the activists' advocacy for equality, diversity and inclusion; public and private institutions have adhered to inclusive practices. The Equality Act 2010 (GOV.UK, 2013) in Britain overwrites previous anti-discrimination laws and combines them into a single Act. It facilitates the understanding of different ways in which individual treatments can be unlawful and clearly sets out institutional duties of creating an environment of equality, diversity and inclusion. This Act provides a legal protection to people against various forms of discriminations, including those associated with disability.

The implementation of the principles of equal rights and opportunities for people with disabilities have made it possible to better understand the communication challenges that Deaf people face on daily basis. This justifies the crucial role that sign languages have been given, alongside other communicative modalities. As the World Federation of the Deaf celebrates its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary during the International Week of Deaf People (20 to 26 September 2021), this global organisation's estimates suggest that there are over 70 million Deaf people around the world. On 23 September 2021, as the International Day of Sign Languages, Kozik (2021) argued that "Sign language is key to real inclusion". This statement is echoed by Jenny Nilsson, member of Human Rights Watch Disability Rights Advisory Committee and Ombudsman for children with disabilities in Sweden when she recommended that "Sign language should be respected just as any other language. It's our fundamental right and it enables us to communicate and be equal members of our communities" (Kozik, 2021). On the same day, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres joined the debates and confirmed that "sign language protects linguistic identity and cultural diversity of all users [and] early introduction and quality inclusive education in Sign Language are essential for their full and effective participation, as guided by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (United Nations, 2021).

Notwithstanding all actions taken to recognise and promote sign languages, especially through the mainstream media coverage, one would wonder whether the implementation of the disability policies has in fact enhanced socio-professional integration of Deaf people. Certainly, the information and awareness in the public domain have put the sign languages and multimodal communication on the applied linguistic maps, and this has been a good success. The awareness of different sign

languages and other communication modalities, such as the cued speech, speech reading or lip-reading, hearing aids, gestures and other Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) modes have triggered created curiosity and interests within the Deaf Studies research community. Nevertheless, the big questions would be how effective are these interventions to support deaf people through the professional inclusion? How far have people moved away from the simplistic perception of a deaf person as someone who cannot hear anything and therefore can only communicate orally and henceforth has inability to perform a range of activities that require auditory skills without an interpreter, including responding to the rhythmic stimulation? The aim of this study is to identify articles published around the British Strictly Come Dancing (SCD) 2021, analyse their social engagement through the specific keywords of “Rose Ayling-Ellis”, “Sign Language” and “Deaf”; and establish a correlation between them and the public’s perceptions of (dis)ability, multimodal communication, inclusion and performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW, CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Although available figures provided by the World Federation of the Deaf, which has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of the International Disability Alliance (IDA) indicate that deaf people exceed 70 million worldwide, the exact number is actually difficult to know due the complexity of definition of “deaf” since different cases of deafness and hard of hearing can simplistically be referred to as deafness in socio-cultural contexts. Medically speaking, whilst some people might have lost hearing at birth, others might develop hearing impairment later in their life. “There are 11 million deaf or hard of hearing people in the UK. This figure includes those with mild to moderate or severe hearing impairments as well as those who are profoundly deaf. There is diversity within deafness, and the needs and perspectives of Deaf people and those with hearing loss vary” (Equality and Inclusion Unit, 2021). This variety of deafness is recognised by the Royal National Institute for Deaf People (RNID), which estimates that “In the UK, 1 in 5 adults are deaf or have hearing loss, and 1 in 8 have tinnitus”.

This paper does not intend to explore various forms of deafness and hard of hearing nor does it aim to discuss different needs of physically disabled people, deaf people and those with hearing loss. The aim of the paper is to analyse the correlation between the design of equitable interventions that facilitate and warrant the level playing field and the individual performance. By using the case study of Rose Ayling-Ellis’ performance during the Strictly Come dancing 2021 competition, the paper analyses the mass media coverage of the dynamics of the event to unveil the signs of cultural shifts in the social perceptions of deafness and inclusive policies and practices to support social equality. There is no shortage of literature on disability and inclusion in general (Andrews, 2020; Brown, 2016; Ginsberg and Rapp, 2017; Samaha, 2007; Barnes and Mercer, 2003; Barnes, Mercer and Shakespeare, 1999; Morris, 1991; Oliver, 1996) and on deafness in particular (Alasim, 2021; Angelides and Aravi, 2015; Brennan, 2003; Atcherson and Yoder, 2002; Branson and Miller, 2002; Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan, 1996; Taylor and Bishop, 1991). However, more recently, the British Strictly Come Dancing (SCD) 2021 has brought to light an aspect of inclusivity by bringing in the

competition Rose Ayling-Ellis as its first ever deaf contestant. It is interesting to notice how deaf people and the society in general have very diverging perceptions and interpretations of deafness vis-à-vis the conceptualisation of the ability/disability dichotomy. The assumption was that the public would appreciate the organisers' efforts to champion equality, diversity and inclusion; but at the same time keeping the low expectations in terms of the outcome. In an interview with Emine Saner of *The Guardian* after the competition, Rose Ayling-Ellis herself responded to the question whether she thought people were surprised seeing a deaf person on a dance show by agreeing and confirming that "for deaf people, the thing we have to live with is that people have such low expectations of us. [...]. A lot of people were probably thinking, 'How's she going to hear music, how is she going to dance?' I always felt like I have to give 120%, so that I can seem capable of doing it the same as everyone else." Nevertheless, the mainstream media covered the deaf person in a dancing competition as a socio-cultural revolution towards equal opportunity, even though through some headlines you could still sense people thinking that this was still a SCD's attempt to show how inclusive they are, can and should be.

There were some articles that were rightly stating that "Listening is not just with your ears" (Glynn, 2021), talking about "Stars urge Hollywood to take urgent action on disability inclusion" (Ali, 7 April 2021) and McIntosh (September 2021) publishing some common misconceptions of deafness in "How will Strictly's first deaf contestant hear the music?". But still, many people were wondering whether "Strictly Come Dancing inspires deaf signing course for teens" (BBC, 22 November 2021) or whether Rose Ayling-Ellis was actually going to be a serious contestant. But as the competition became fierce and Rose Ayling-Ellis continued to shine steadily, the new headlines were: "Rose Ayling-Ellis praised for deaf tribute dance" (BBC, 15 November 2021); "Strictly Come Dancing: Deafness 'not a barrier' to the arts" (BBC, 8 December 2021); "Strictly Come Dancing 2021: Rose Ayling-Ellis becomes first deaf winner" (BBC, 19 December 2021); "Strictly exclusive! Winner Rose Ayling-Ellis on the glitterball, Giovanni and the joy of being deaf" (Saner, 19 December 2021) and "Rose Ayling-Ellis's Strictly Come Dancing win gives deaf children huge confidence boost" (Saner, 25 December 2021). Winning the competition has contributed to the public perceptions' shift from disability to ability vis-à-vis the deafness. The question was whether the public interests in associating Rose Ayling-Ellis' performance with deafness, sign languages and excellence could have a cultural impact on the perceptions of Deaf people. We decided to carry out this research to analyse the publication content, the search intent and their impact in the context of Rose Ayling-Ellis' presence on a national TV programme during the Strictly Come Dancing competition.

Because our study aims to find correlations between and patterns in how keywords and related topics have driven social engagement, the content analysis was one of the theoretical frameworks used to collect and analyse quantitative data, allowing us to understand the search trends during a specific period of time. As the content analysis can also be used to analyse the meanings and relationships of concepts and themes, it was also referred to in the identification and analysis of qualitative data by examining the correlation between search keywords, themes and concepts within both primary and secondary data. In this regard, Riffe et al. (2019) and Krippendorff (2004) were used as

a reference. Finally, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 2013) has been used to inform the discussion part, whilst analysing the correlation between basic, psychological and self-fulfilment needs through the SCD competition and the winning stage by Rose Ayling-Ellis.

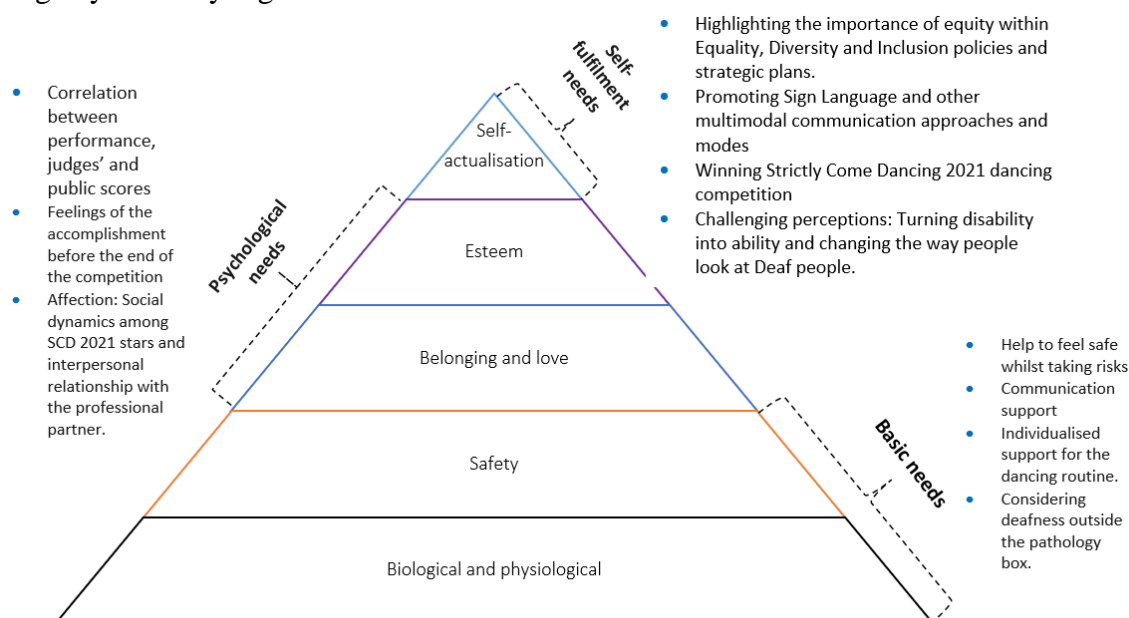


Fig.1: Designed from the content of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 2013)

## METHODOLOGY

As a cloud-based platform Buzzsumo facilitates the identification of social and search engagement. It helped with the discovery of trending stories associated with keywords and allowed us to explore the public's questions and intent while monitoring the social engagement. Using the content analyser Buzzsumo we focused on the search intent and publication content around the SCD 2021 winner Rose Ayling-Ellis' presence on a national TV programme. We examined the articles published by the press over the last 12 months, covering the period of January 2021- January 2022.

The process of data collection and analysis took some steps, such as identifying data (volume of mainstream media coverage), defining data (search intent and social engagement), identifying the population (public or mass media consumers), explaining the context (British Strictly Come Dancing 2021), setting the boundaries (a period of 12 months) and clarifying the content to be measured (keywords as Rose Ayling-Ellis, sign language and deaf). Through a thematic perspective, the Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs framework was also used to analyse different factors of perceptions within the entry behaviour context, motivation, performance, outcome, cultural insights and positive impact.



## RESULTS

To analyse the publication content and search intent around Rose Ayling-Ellis' presence on the national TV programme *Strictly Come Dancing* 2021 using Buzzsumo's content analyser, the use of keywords has generated the following data:

### Keyword: "Rose Ayling-Ellis"

- Number of articles analysed/written: 1,517
- Number of articles written in October / their social engagement: 176 / 122,918
- Number of articles written in November / their social engagement: 357 / 257,834
- Number of articles written in December / their social engagement: 815 / 527,452
- Total engagement on social media: 1,016,257

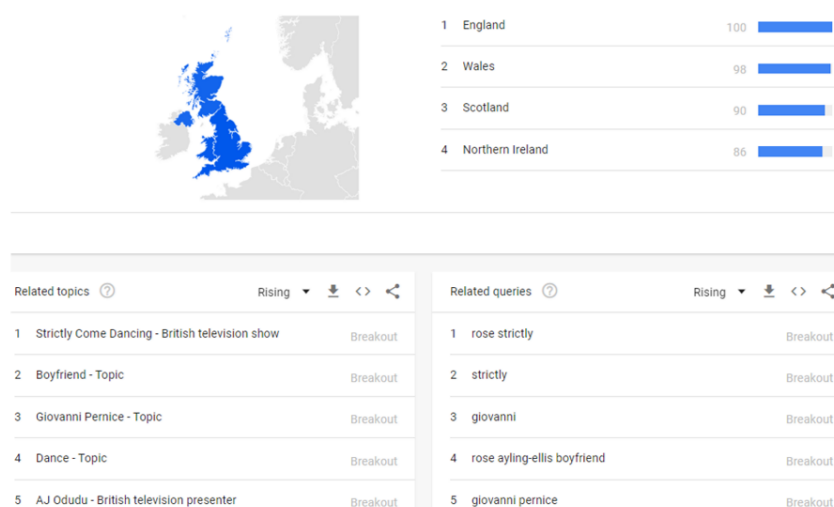
During October - November 2021, there was a 103% percentage increase in articles published, a 110% increase in social engagement. The period of November – December saw a 128% percentage increase in articles published, with a 105% increase in social engagement.

*Fig.2: Engagement with Rose Rose Ayling-Ellis keyword*



- Search trend for 7 - 13 November 2021: 35
- Search trend for 14-20 November 2021: 60
- Percentage change between the two dates: +71%

Fig.3: Rose Ayling-Ellis keyword interest by subregion with related topics and related queries

**Keyword: “sign language”**

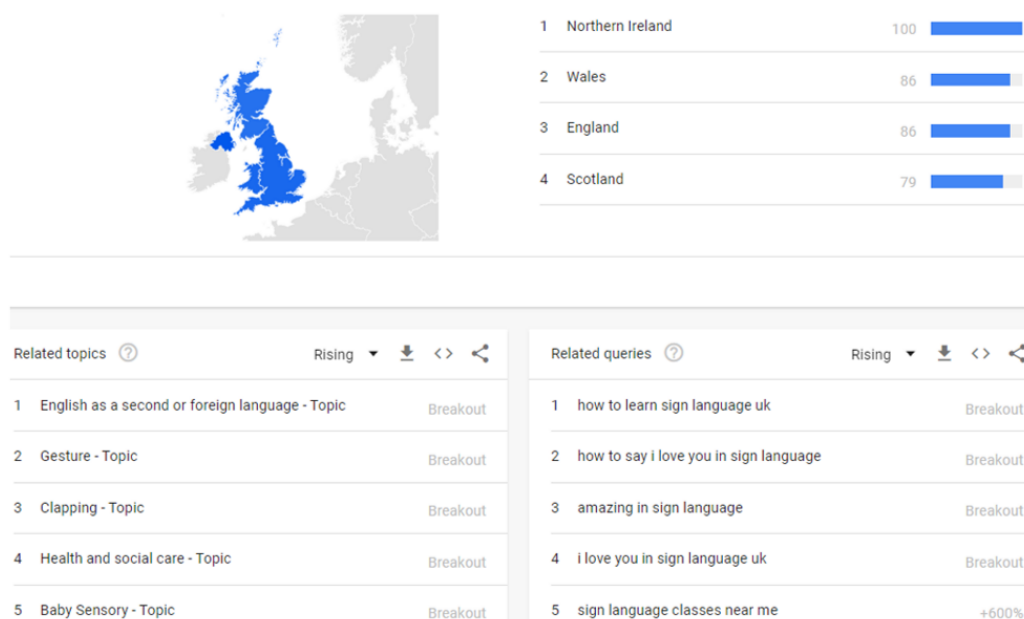
- Number of articles analysed/written: 19,821
- Number of articles analysed/written in Oct / their social engagement: 1,793 / 157,465
- Number of articles analysed/written in Nov / their social engagement: 1,531 / 156,315
- Number of articles analysed/written in Dec / their social engagement: 1,795 / 63,905
- Total engagement on social media: 3,293,026

Interestingly, the data show that during October – November, we actually saw articles focusing on sign language decrease by 15% but an increase by 17% during November-December.

Fig.4: Engagement with *sign language* keyword

- Search trend for 7 - 13 November 2021: 64
- Search trend for 14-20 November 2021: 100
- Percentage change between the two dates: +56%

Fig.5: Sign language keyword interest by subregion with related topics and queries

**“Rose Ayling-Ellis” AND “sign language”**

- Number of articles analysed/written: 51
- Number of articles analysed/written in October / their social engagement: 9 / 28,645
- Number of articles analysed/written in November / their social engagement: 20 / 28,676
- Number of articles analysed/written in December / their social engagement: 14 / 19,092
- Total engagement on social media: 82,171

The data show that articles mentioning both keywords saw an increase of 122% in October - November and a decrease in December.

**Keyword: “Rose Ayling-Ellis” AND “Deaf”**

- Number of articles analysed/written: 209
- Number of articles analysed/written in October / their social engagement: 16 / 3,320
- Number of articles analysed/written in November / their social engagement: 30 / 66,613
- Number of articles analysed/written in December / their social engagement: 98 / 123,268
- Total engagement on social media: 228,179

Data show that the period of October- November saw a 88% percentage increase in articles written about “Rose Ayling-Ellis” AND “Deaf”, with November - December seeing a 227% percentage increase. That means Rose/Deaf saw 158 more articles than Rose/sign language as well as 178% more engagement.

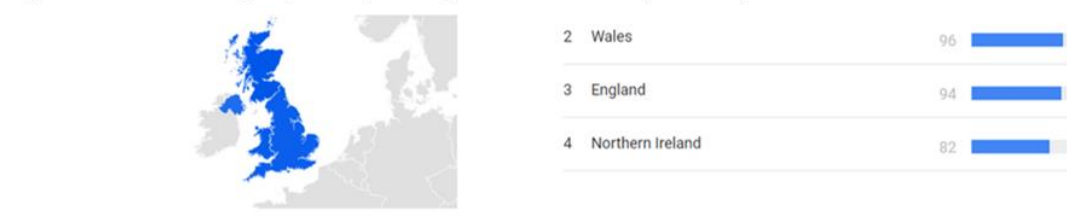
**Keyword: “Deaf”**

- Search trend for 7th - 13 November 2021: 79
- Search trend for 14-20 November 2021: 88
- Percentage change between the two dates: +11%



*Fig.6: Engagement with **deaf** keyword*





Interestingly, although we saw articles for sign language decline in November 2021, people searching for sign language saw a 56% increase. During the same period, searches for Rose Ayling-Ellis peaked and saw a 71% increase in search trends. This means, although mass media coverage for sign language declined - but maintaining a relatively high number regardless-, British public intent around sign language has increased.

*Fig.7: Interest with **deaf** keyword by subregion with related topics and queries*

Related topics		Related queries	
	Rising		Rising
1	Strictly Come Dancing - British television show	1	rose strictly deaf
2	Giovanni Pernice - Topic	2	rose strictly
3	Visual perception - Topic	3	deaf girl strictly
4	Braille - Alphabetic writing system	4	deaf dancer strictly
5	Dance - Topic	5	is hawkeye deaf
	+2,200%		Breakout





Looking at related topics, which are defined as “Users searching for your term also searched for these topics” below we can see that Rose Ayling-Ellis was a significant driver in engagement.

*Fig.8: Trending with Users searching for your term also searched for these topics*

Related topics 		Rising   
1	Subtitle - Topic	Breakout
2	WAP - Song	Breakout
3	Rose Ayling-Ellis - Actress	Breakout
4	Little finger - Topic	Breakout
5	Japanese Sign Language - Sign language	Breakout





Focusing on related queries which are defined as “Users searching for your term also searched for these queries”, we can see that intent focused around British public wanting to learn sign language as a whole, “how to learn sign language UK” seeing an 800% increase alone.

*Fig.9: “Users searching for your term also searched for these queries”*

Related queries 		Rising   
1	what is makaton sign language	Breakout
2	basic sign language uk	Breakout
3	wap sign language	Breakout
4	how to learn sign language uk	+800%
5	help me sign	+600%


When looking at “Deaf” as search trend, we see in the following that Strictly Come Dancing is the number one related topic - along with films such as *Eternals* and *Hawkeye* that feature Deaf main characters.

*Fig.10: Association of deaf search trend with related topics*

Related topics 		Rising   
1	Strictly Come Dancing - British television show	Breakout
2	Contestant - Topic	Breakout
3	Eternals - Film	Breakout
4	Hawkeye - Television miniseries	Breakout
5	Samuel Arnold - Actor	Breakout

Looking at related queries we can also see the main driver was Rose and Strictly Come Dancing:

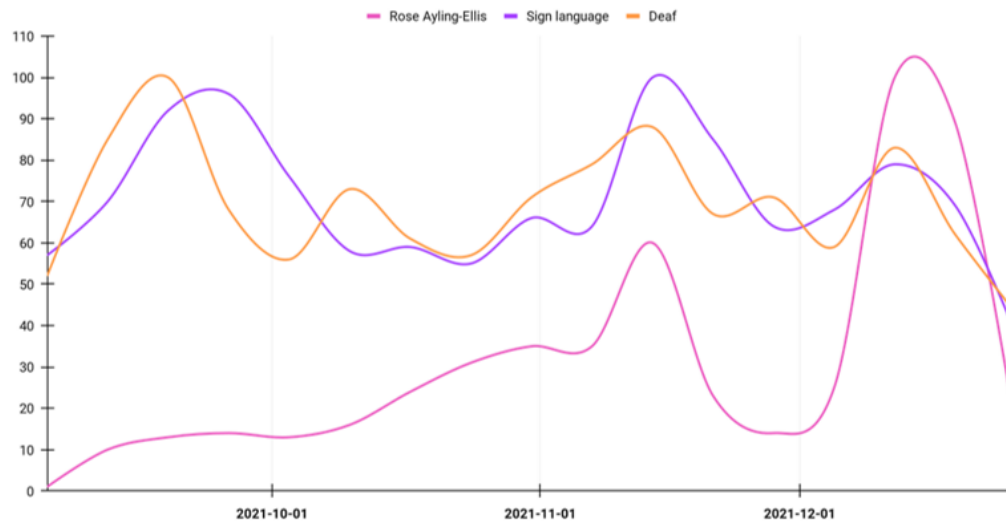
*Fig.11: The influence of Rose Ayling-Ellis and Strictly Come Dancing on*

		 (Ctrl) ~
1	rose strictly	Breakout
2	rose strictly deaf	Breakout
3	strictly come dancing deaf	Breakout
4	strictly come dancing	Breakout
5	deaf girl strictly	Breakout

The graph below shows the search trends for Rose, sign language and deaf from September 2021

**Fig.12:** Search trends for *Rose Ayling-Ellis*, *sign language* and *deaf* from September

Google Search Trends (UK)

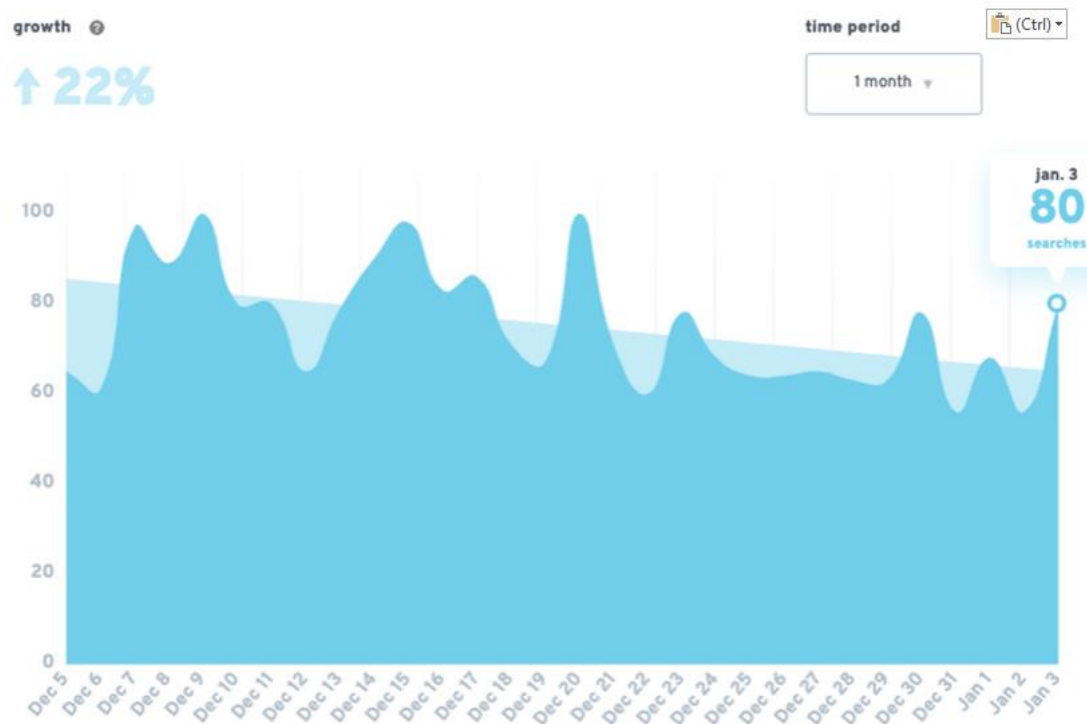


The graph below shows Buzzsumo articles written about the keywords shown:

**Fig.13:** Articles written about the *keywords*



The graph below shows trending searches for “deafness”, highlighting that in the last 30 days, including post *Strictly Come Dancing* 2021 period, we have seen a 22% increase in searches for this concept; with the related topics being sign language

**Fig.14:** Searches for *deafness* during 30 days of *post Strictly Come Dancing* period

## DISCUSSION

Many scholars have written on the power of expectations in driving or hindering motivation and achievement (Trusz, 2018; Khattab, 2014; Rubie-Davies et al., 2010; Bohlmann and Weinstein, 2013; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Dweck, 2000; Otsuka and Smith, 2005; Raviv and Reisel, 1990; Raviv, 1982; Nash, 1974). Normally, the level of performance is measured against expectations. Therefore, defining expectations is a fundamental step in guaranteeing performance. Hence, in a competitive event, clarifying expectations forms the basis on which contestants will be assessed at the end of the event or task. However, in the management of cultural and social practices, it often happens that expectations are implicit, or even tacit, especially when it comes to the implementation of inclusive policies and social justice agenda. In this case, such expectations can relate to different assessment factors and criteria, such as the quality and quantity of tasks to be performed, the behaviour to be displayed, the stakeholders' perceptions and the level of their satisfaction, and many more. In the case of expectations being based on perceptions, the performance is subject to greater interpretative variations.

On an individual level, low expectations lead to very modest or rather limited achievements, because setting goals should normally be based on expectations. But when individual expectations exceed social expectations, the performance often challenges socially imposed goals and leads to excellence. Consequently, achieving performance requires a series of impulses and synergies that contribute to motivational behaviour on the individual level. To display an excellent performance in a competitive environment, it is therefore necessary to optimise individual efforts and energies. This

discussion section aims to present the main actors, factors and issues associated with the expectations and performance in the context of Rose Ayling-Ellis's participation in *Strictly Come Dancing* 2021, to better analyse the process of the competition and the positive impact of her achievement on the stakeholders.

### **Public's low expectations**

Rose Ayling-Ellis is no stranger to British TV screens. Her first character role was in *The End* in 2011, a short film of 25 minutes directed by a Deaf filmmaker Ted Evans. In 2017, Rose Ayling-Ellis secured a role in the BBC's *Casualty* where she played the character Bianca Sinclair. In May 2020, Rose Ayling-Ellis joined *EastEnders*, a very popular BBC soap opera where she is playing Frankie Lewis. Interestingly, even though she is not new to the British TV screens, the data collected through the content analyser indicate that before the announcement of the *Strictly Come Dancing* 2021 competitors, Rose Ayling-Ellis was almost unknown to the mass media environment and hence to the social engagement. Surprisingly, this was not the first time having a Deaf person in the dancing competition, because the American version of the show, *Dancing with the Stars*, had already had a Deaf activist Nyle DiMarco as a contestant and winner of the 2016 series together with his professional dance partner Peta Murgatroyd. But still, Nyle DiMarco's achievement did not put Rose Ayling-Ellis in the spotlight before halfway of the competition. The mainstream media did not even make references to the US 2016 series. One can only suggest that her roles as a character were confining her into the world of art where the genre allows the manipulation of events or features to beautify the end-result. When Rose Ayling-Ellis was announced as a dancing contestant, many people who had seen her on TV screens previously as a character discovered for the first time that she was in fact deaf.

What seemed like the mainstream media's lack of interest in this regard reinforces the suggestion that the low expectations people were holding against Rose Ayling-Ellis. Perceived in the public eyes as an inhibiting disability, deafness took precedence over any consideration of performance in terms of the competitive capacity that involves responding physically to the musical beats. For many people, talking "about Deaf people is to focus on the fact of their condition – that they do not hear – and to interpret all other aspects of their lives as consequences of this fact" (Padden and Humphries, 1988, p. 11).

In an open letter signed against prejudice and discrimination towards disabled talents in Hollywood, more than 80 actors and entertainment industry professionals argued that there is an "urgent need to act on disability inclusion. [...] Due to years of misrepresentation in the media, social barriers, and chronic ableism, the deaf, hard of hearing, neurodiverse and disabled communities continue to be underrepresented and disrespected in the entertainment industry." In an interview with BBC (8 September 2021), Ella who lost her hearing at 11 stated that "It's the first time I've seen a deaf person in that kind of reality show. She's not playing a character; she is showing herself as a deaf person and it's beautiful."

In order to move away from that character status and challenge the perceptions that she might have been chosen to represent a certain category of people for the sake of



Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Rose Ayling-Ellis had to rely to and use her high aspirations to test the public's low expectations. In her own words, she confirms that "My ambition is to amplify deaf voices and to stop people assuming deaf people can't achieve. The challenges of dealing with people's lack of understanding made me more determined and want to work harder" (Buglass, December 2021). In a separate interview with McIntosh (September 2021), Rose Ayling-reiterated this determination by saying, "I feel like I have a purpose, because I'm deaf, and to be the first deaf person on Strictly, I feel like it's a good chance to break the stereotype of what deaf people can and can't do."

### **Challenging perceptions: synergies and strategies**

On a personal level, it should be noted that in any form of performance, the major difference between expectations and perception is related to individual aspirations and the state of mind the person himself. Apart from the considerations relating to a possible involvement of external factors which could impose the social objectives, the individual expectations remain hypothetical. They take their shape and form through the actions that are triggered by the impulses connecting the aspirations to the desire to perform with excellence. The gap between expectations and excellent performance as two motivational variables determines the level of individual satisfaction or disappointment. Hence, the direction of shift in societal perceptions is determined by the quality of performance and the positive outcome. When individual goals and performance exceed by far societal perceptions and expectations, the individual reaches a very high level of satisfaction.

Reaching this level of high satisfaction that Maslow (2013) would refer to as self-actualisation requires strategies to challenge the low expectations and associated inhibiting societal perceptions. In *The Inner Game of Work*, Gallwey (1999) argues that we all have a Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) and a Negative Emotional Attractor (NEA). Both PEA and NEA are the fundamental factors in driving the inner game to either enhance or hinder motivation to perform. However, for the PEA to operate, our psycho-physiological state of being needs to be open to new ideas, changes and challenges. This is the case with Rose Ayling-Ellis, whose competition goals have been associated with motivational strategies based on both internal and external factors.

Since deafness has been perceived as a negative factor linked to her assumed inability for communicative interaction, Rose Ayling-Ellis relied on her Positive Emotional Attractor (PEA) and used communication strategies to disable the concept of disability. Even though she recognises that "not all deaf people are the same, every deaf person will have their own unique experience with music" (McIntosh, September 2021), she nevertheless points out that she "will be focusing on reading my partner's body language plus counting in my head, which will help me with timing. So, for me it's a combination of everything" (ibid.). In an interview with the National Deaf Children's Society, Rose Ayling-Ellis explains how "she often has to perform using Sign Supported English (SSE) to reflect her own communication style and make it clear for audiences" (Buglass, December 2021). She also said: "When I use SSE [Sign Supported English], it's like thinking of two languages at the same time while performing, so a BSL [British Sign Language] monitor checks my BSL is clear on-screen" Buglass, December 2021).

As Lane (1999) said, “subscribing to the disability construction of culturally Deaf people, undermines the Deaf agenda” (p. xii). In this study, the data have shown that at a time when disability has been one of the key factors that produced the main elements of the interpretation of public expectations vis-à-vis the process and the outcome of Strictly Come Dancing 2021 competition, Rose Ayling-Ellis’s performance has shown that only socio-cultural perceptions can constitute an inhibiting factor for engagement and achievement. Such an inhibition undermines individual aspirations, especially for people that the society considers disabled. The process and outcome of a Deaf contestant competing through Strictly Come Dancing 2021 gives hope for a positive change, pointing to the right direction vis-à-vis the shift in socio-cultural perceptions of (dis)ability, engagement and performance.

### **Potential impact of the competition process and outcome**

Many researchers have published on the power of the role model in inspiring, influencing, raising aspirations and changing behaviour in a positive way (Kwon and Ahn, 2021; Horsburgh and Ippolito, 2018; Morgenroth, Ryan and Peters, 2015; Armor and Duncombe, 2012; Asgari, Dasgupta and Stout, 2012; Asgari, Dasgupta and Cote, 2010). Outside the research domain, it is well-known that in all institutions, both social and professional, there have been many initiatives to create and support mechanisms for role modelling. Actions to promote the role modelling generally aim to encourage inspiration, raise aspirations and enhance motivation and performance.

However, even though the conceptualisation of the role model seems to have been institutionalised, the importance of the role is determined by the aspirations, which are triggered by the performance and achievements of others. That said, the role model can be played unconsciously or can depend on individual goals and performance that challenge expectations. It is from this perspective that we analyse Rose Ayling-Ellis’s performance in tandem with the potential impact on behavioural social changes.

### **Inspiration to the Deaf community**

In an article published by Vinter (2021) in *The Guardian*, one can read that “It is hoped that the EastEnders actor’s victory in the dance contest will give the public a better understanding of deafness”. Quoting a 15 year old Deaf person Scarlet Davies, Vinter (ibid.) wrote that “Rose has had such a massive impact on young people. She reinforces the message that we shouldn’t let other people dictate to us because of our deafness. [I] feel that I don’t need to worry about my deafness getting in the way of my future. She also makes me believe that I can do anything in life and my deafness will never stop me.” Apart from the data we have collected around Rose Ayling-Ellis’ impact on the popularity of sign language and on the social engagement with Deaf as associated, not to disability but rather to communicating through signs, there have been other surveys that point to the same direction.

A New research carried out after the SCD 2021 competition by the BBC One show in December 2021 indicates that “more than three-quarters of deaf children think the programme has given the public a better understanding of deafness” (ibid.). Furthermore, a survey involving Deaf children and their families by the National Deaf Children’s Society also reveals that “Ayling-Ellis’s visibility led to two-thirds of deaf

children feeling more confident about wearing their hearing aids, with seven in 10 saying they felt happier talking about their own deafness” (ibid.).

### **Sign language promotion**

Globally, the legal recognition of sign languages has been achieved and this constitutes an important achievement for deaf people and deaf-led initiatives by organisations. These actions were also supported in general by equality, diversity and inclusion activists. While sign language is recognised as a language of communication alongside national and official languages, its recognition has however not been accompanied with promotional and outreach initiatives that other main languages enjoy. Since the popularity of a language in a globalised world is often underpinned by utilitarianist perspectives, which are facilitated by language policies and education, it is understandable that the absence of British Sign Language programmes in education and training hinders its promotion. This might provide the reason why on daily basis deaf people face multiple interactional difficulties because the British Sign Language suffers either from the lack or the shortage of interpreters. It is therefore normal that the use of a sign language to facilitate communication during a mega event like Strictly Come Dancing 2021, which attracted 11 million TV viewers, is a good means of promoting this language. According to Vinter (2021), since November 2021, “interest in learning BSL has now exploded, thanks to Strictly, with some teaching centres reporting waiting lists for BSL courses”. This was expected, and the impact seems to confirm expectations.

If the recognition of sign language does not coincide with its popularity in terms of its use, its promotion should be facilitated by educational policies. Quoted by Vinter (2021), Martin McLean, senior policy advisor at the National Deaf Children’s Society, argues that after Rose Ayling-Ellis’s performance and winning “What’s important now is keeping this going because increased awareness and understanding of deafness can only be a good thing.” By the time of writing this paper, a bill that recognises the British Sign Language as a language of England, Wales and Scotland reached its committee stage on 7 April 2022 in the House of Lords and its third reading is scheduled on 27 April 2022. There are calls to approve it without any further amendments. The biggest and very important highlights of this bill (Pyper and Loft, 2022, p.4) are its three clauses: Clause 1 would provide legal recognition for British Sign Language (BSL) as a language of England, Wales and Scotland.

Clause 2 would create a duty for the Government to prepare and publish BSL reports, describing what government departments have done to promote the use of BSL in their communications with the public. The first of these should be published by 30 April 2023. Subsequent reports should be published at least once every three years. Clause 3 would require the Government to arrange for guidance to be published about how to promote and facilitate the use of BSL. This guidance could, for example, include advice for government departments on best practice for communicating with BSL users. Finally, the Department for Education has already “confirmed it would be holding a public consultation at the start of next year on the possibility of launching a new GCSE in sign language, despite a moratorium on new subjects.” That is the kind of action that can make a significant positive impact on the promotion of sign language.

**Challenging misconceptions about deaf people and inclusion strategies**

As it is the case with most physical or cognitive disabilities, societal perceptions have often associated deafness with a pathological condition, which is closely related to complete hearing loss. From this perspective, deafness has been seen as a reflection of a communicative deficiency leading to inability. This perception seems to suggest that the pathologic dimension should not allow a Deaf person to engage in certain activities that require communicative interaction without an interpreter present. As a result, attitudes of empathy have dominated relations between the public and Deaf people. This might actually justify the reasons why many initiatives, actions and investments to support Deaf people have focused their attention on medical interventions for therapy or treatment of deafness. It is therefore not surprising to realise that equality policies for the integration of Deaf people, as it is in fact the case with all other forms of diversity, have encouraged representation rather than participation.

It is hardly surprising then to notice that research data in this study have revealed low expectations of Rose Ayling-Ellis' performance among the public. However, she clearly demonstrated that what was perceived as a disability was rather a socio-cultural issue of misconception. If this case shows that the pathological dimension of deafness relates to the societal and cultural deficiency in perceptions, Rose Ayling-Ellis' performance is a good call for a redefinition, not only of deafness as a pathology, but also and above all of social constructs and inclusion policies which are based on empathy. Otherwise, the society runs the risk of continuing to support inclusion efforts which, in fact, continue to lead to exclusion.

For inclusion policies on diversity to be effective, they must be based on the principle of equity. According to Milken Institute School of Public Health (MISPH), "While the terms equity and equality may sound similar, the implementation of one versus the other can lead to dramatically different outcomes for marginalized people. Equality means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome" (MISPH, 2020). Quoted by Maeda (2019), Paula Dressel also argues that "The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone equitably, or justly according to their circumstances." It is very true that diversity inclusion should be underpinned by an appropriate design; and "Human beings are the real experts in adapting to diversity. Inclusive design puts people at the center from the very start of the process, and those fresh, diverse perspectives are the key to true insight." (Maeda, 2019).

It is clear that the adjustments made to support Rose Ayling-Ellis by providing communication tools, including interpreting facilities, hearing aids and other forms of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) modes have allowed her to succeed with excellence. "Equity is a solution for addressing imbalanced social systems. Justice can take equity one step further by fixing the systems in a way that leads to long-term, sustainable, equitable access for generations to come" (ibid.). Rose Ayling-Ellis' case indicates that as long as all social justice policies in place continue to follow the triadic dimension of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion without Equity,

they will always be condemned to fail since they rely on the perspectives that ignore an important aspect of fairness, which is underpinned by the level playing field. Her case is a call for a critical reflection on inclusion policies in general and in particular equitable support to people with disability.

## CONCLUSION

We should give the concluding remark of this study to Rose Ayling-Ellis to share with us her positive note of hope for an expected meaningful impact of her performance. In her interview with McIntosh (September 2021), she says: "I just hope a lot of good will come out of it, that will improve deaf people's experience. They [the deaf community] will hope that a lot of people's attitudes will change, and that deaf people get better experience, get more jobs, get more involved in the industry, and it becomes more inclusive."

In the face of negative societal attitudes toward Deaf people, Rose Ayling-Ellis hopes her performance will help steer clear of the pathological logic of inability that excludes people with hearing impairments. Notwithstanding the very low expectations that the public had of her at the beginning of Strictly Come Dancing 2021 competition, Rose Ayling-Ellis' performance has influenced not only the mass media through the volume of publications and related social engagements, but also the public in relation to the rise in popularity of sign language, as well as the inspirational testimonials collected through surveying Deaf people and their families. Finally, Rose Ayling-Ellis' influence has also reached policymakers and public institutions and bodies, including the British Department for Education, which has expressed its commitment to the promotion of sign language through education. For Rose Ayling-Ellis, deafness is just a hearing loss that should not trigger negative attitudes vis-à-vis the disability. The society should rather contribute to the normalisation of deafness as one of the elements of difference in diversity.

### Contribution to the body of knowledge and future research

Research in equality, diversity and inclusion in relation to (dis)ability has so far mainly focused on policies in general. Gordon and Tavera-Salyutov (2018) have conducted a diachronic review of the disability rights legislation, looking into how the moral plea for professional inclusion has led to significant global movements for disability rights. They concluded that a socio-political change unfolding is noticeable through various inclusive agendas. This issue of moral value and legislation, which inform equality and associated initiatives and promote diversity and inclusion has also been investigated by other researchers (Köllen, Knuuttila and Bendl, 2018; Wu et al. 2018). Beyond the moral values of doing the right thing and legal imperatives, other scholars have recently examined the way people with disability are and should be included in the global labour market (Hernández-González, 2022; Suresh and Dyaram, 2022; Spoor et.al. 2022). However, if the adherence to institutional, national and international legislation on human rights and inclusivity is perceived as the key guarantor of diversifying the workforce, does it really translate inclusive initiatives into sustainable outcomes? For people with disability to be fully integrated into the professional ability framework, they need more than legislation and pitiful attitudes coupled with empathic empty



promises. For some critics, only interventions which are informed by justice and fairness principles can “create a powerful force that drives sustainable outcomes” (Dahanayake et al. 2018) in promoting and managing inclusive practices. Nevertheless, there is still a gap in literature in relation to the design and the implementation of intervention frameworks. This paper suggests a framework that integrates personalised inclusive dimensions across the continuum and intersection of the ability/disability dichotomy.

Apart from contributing to the debate on inclusion policies and strategies, as well as their implementation, especially by underlining the role of equity in advocating for equality, diversity and fairness in social and professional contexts, this study has also highlighted the fact that mass media can play a big role in changing people’s attitudes. By simply giving Rose Ayling-Ellis a public platform to display her talents, the impact is felt in all social realms. This gives us the opportunity to think about designing a framework focusing on the factors and the process that have led to Rose Ayling-Ellis’ performance and subsequently challenged societal perceptions and expectations.



**Fig.15: A designed framework highlighting factors and process that enhance performance and excellence**

This framework allows to appreciate the synergies and strategies used by Rose Ayling-Ellis. It hence facilitates a better understanding of the dimension and impact of her performance success. Nevertheless, McIntosh’s question (2021) she published on common misconceptions of deafness in “How will Strictly’s first deaf contestant hear the music?” remains an unfinished business. Rose Ayling-Ellis has explained her multimodal communication strategies and how effective they have been throughout her Strictly Come Dancing 2021 journey. But further research might be needed to investigate the appropriate participatory inclusive design and the listening and



communication tools needed, including Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) modes. Better designs of inclusive mechanisms should meaningfully support Deaf people in taking part successfully in contests such as dance competitions where a rhythmic routine is expected to be underpinned by the hearing capacity.

## References

- Alasim, K. (2021) Inclusion and d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students: A Qualitative Meta Analysis, *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*. Available online at DOI: 10.1080/1034912X.2021.1931818 [accessed 28/12/2021]
- Andrews, E. E. (2020) *Disability as Diversity: Developing Cultural Competence*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Angelides, P. and Aravi, C. (2015) A comparative perspective on the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing individuals as students at mainstream and special schools. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 151(5), pp. 476–487.
- Armour, K. and Duncombe, R. (2012) Changing lives? Critical evaluation of a school-based athlete role model intervention. *Sport, Education, and Society*, 17, 381–403. 10.1080/13573322.2011.608941
- Asgari, S., Dasgupta, N., & Cote, N. G. (2010) When does contact with successful in-group members change self-stereotypes? A longitudinal study comparing the effect of quantity vs. quality of contact with successful individuals. *Social Psychology*, 41, 203–211.
- Asgari, S., Dasgupta, N., and Stout, J. G. (2012) When do counterstereotypic ingroup members inspire versus deflate? The effect of successful professional women on young women's leadership self-concept. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38, 370–383.
- Atcherson, S. R., and Yoder, S. Y. (2002) On the Irony of Audiology. *Audiology Today*. 14 (5), 38.
- Barnes, C. & Mercer, G. (2003) *Disability*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Barnes, C., Mercer, G. & Shakespeare, T. (1999) *Exploring Disability: a sociological introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- BBC (15 November 2021) Strictly: Rose Ayling-Ellis praised for deaf tribute dance. Available online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59287964> [accessed 26 December 2021]
- BBC (22 November 2021) Strictly Come Dancing inspires deaf signing course for teens. Available online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-59374332> [accessed 26/11/2021]
- BBC (8 December 2021) Strictly Come Dancing: Deafness 'not a barrier' to the arts. Available online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-59562456> [accessed 26 December 2021]
- BBC (19 December 2021) Strictly Come Dancing 2021: Rose Ayling-Ellis becomes first deaf. Available online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-59599740> [accessed 26 December 2021]
- Bohlmann, N.L and Weinstein, R.S. (2013) Classroom context, teacher expectations, and cognitive level: Predicting children's math ability judgments. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 34, pp. 288-298

- Branson, J. & Miller, D. (2002) *Damned for their Difference: the cultural construction of deaf people as disabled*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Brennan, M. (2003) Deafness, Disability and Inclusion: the gap between rhetoric and practice. *Policy Futures in Education*, 1 (4), 668-685.
- Brown, E. (2016) Disability Awareness: The Fight for Accessibility. *Nature*. 532, 137–139.
- Buglass, L. (December 2021) 'Strictly Come Dancing' winner Rose Ayling-Ellis — things you didn't know. Available online at <https://www.whattowatch.com/features/rose-ayling-ellis-things-you-didnt-know-about-the-eastenders-actress> [accessed 06/01/2022]
- Carter-Wall, C. & Whitfield, G. (2012) *The role of aspirations, attitudes and behaviour in closing the educational attainment gap*. York, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Dahanayake, P., Rajendran, D., Selvarajah, C. and Ballantyne, G. (2018), "Justice and fairness in the workplace: a trajectory for managing diversity", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 37 (5), 470-490. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-11-2016-0105>
- Dweck, CS (2000) *Self-theories: Their role in motivation, personality and development*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press.
- Equality and Inclusion Unit, University of Leeds (2021) Deaf Awareness. Available online at <https://equality.leeds.ac.uk/support-and-resources/disability-2/deaf-awareness/deaf-awareness/> [accessed 03/01/2022]
- Gallwey, W.T. (1999) *The Inner Game of Work*. New York: Random House
- Ginsberg, F., and Rapp, R. (2017) Crippling the New Normal: Making Disability Count. *Alter* 11 (3), 179–192.
- Gordon, J.-S. and Tavera-Salyutov, F. (2018), "Remarks on disability rights legislation", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 37 (5), 506-526. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-12-2016-0114>
- GOV.UK (2013) Equality Act 2010: guidance. Available online, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance> [accessed 28/12/2021]
- Hernández-González, C.A. (2022), "Market reactions to the inclusion of people with disabilities", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 41 (3), 404-417. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-01-2021-0025>
- Horsburgh, J., Ippolito, K. (2018) A skill to be worked at: using social learning theory to explore the process of learning from role models in clinical settings. *BMC Medical Education* 18, 156. Available online at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1251-x> [accessed 28/12/2021]
- Khattab, N. (2014) How and when do educational aspirations, expectations and achievement align? *Sociological Research Online*, 17 (4), 7.
- Köllen, T., Kakkuri-Knnittila, M.L and Bendl, R. (2018), "An indisputable “holy trinity”? On the moral value of equality, diversity, and inclusion", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 37 (5), 438-449. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-04-2018-0072>
- Kozik, K. (2021) Sign Language Is Key to Real Inclusion. Available online at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/23/sign-language-key-real-inclusion> [accessed 03/01/2022]

- Krippendorff, K. (2004), (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), Content Analysis: an introduction to its methodology. London: SAGE Publications.
- Lane, H. (1999) The Mask of Benevolence: disabling the deaf community. San Diego: Dawn Sign Press.
- Lane, H., Hoffmeister, R. & Bahan, R. (1996) A Journey into the Deaf World. San Diego: Dawn Sign Press.
- Lee S, Kwon S and Ahn J (2021) The Effect of Modeling on Self-Efficacy and Flow State of Adolescent Athletes Through Role Models. *Frontier in Psychology*. Available online at <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.661557/full> [accessed 04/01/2022]
- Maeda, J. (2019) Design in tech report 2019: addressing imbalances. Available online at <https://designintech.report/2019/03/11/%F0%9F%93%B1design-in-tech-report-2019-section-6-addressing-imbalance/> [accessed 28/12/2021]
- Maslow, A.H. (2013), A theory of human motivation. Mansfield: Martino Publishing.
- McIntosh, S. (September 2021) Strictly Come Dancing: How Rose Ayling-Ellis will hear the music? Available online at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-57867412> [accessed 29/12/2021]
- Milken Institute School of Public Health (2020) Equity vs. Equality: What's the Difference? Available online at <https://onlinepublichealth.gwu.edu/resources/equity-vs-equality/> [accessed 30/12/2021]
- Morgenroth T, Ryan MK, Peters K. (2015) The Motivational Theory of Role Modeling: How Role Models Influence Role Aspirants' Goals. *Review of General Psychology*. 19(4):465-483.
- Morris, J. (1991) Pride Against Prejudice: transforming attitudes to disability. London: Women's Press.
- Nash R. (1974) Pupils' Expectations for Their Teachers. *Research in Education*. 12(1):47-62.
- Oliver, M. (1996) Understanding Disability: from theory to practice. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Otsuka, S & Smith, I (2005) Educational applications of the expectancy-value model of achievement motivation, *Change: Transformations in Education*, 8(1), 91-109.
- Padden, C. & Humphries, T. (1988) Deaf in America: voices from a culture. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Raviv A, Raviv A, Reisel E. (1990) Teachers and Students: Two Different Perspectives?! Measuring Social Climate in the Classroom. *American Educational Research Journal*. 27(1):141-157.
- Raviv A. (1982) The effect of the significant adult on the formation of the pupil's role expectation. *Research in Education*. 27(1):9-21.
- Riffe, D. et al. (2019) Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research. London: Routledge Communication.
- Pyper, P. and Loft, P. (2022) British Sign Language Bill. London: House of Commons. Available online at <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9446/CBP-9446.pdf> [accessed 15/04/2022]

- RNID (2022) Together, we'll make life fully inclusive for deaf people and those with hearing loss or tinnitus. Available online at <https://rnid.org.uk/> [accessed 08/01/2022]
- Rubie-Davies C.M. et al. (2010) Expectations of Achievement: Student Teacher and Parent Perceptions. *Research in Education*. 83(1):36-53.
- Samaha, A. M. (2007) What Good Is the Social Model of Disability? *University of Chicago Literature Review*, 74 (4)
- Saner, E. (19 December 2021) Strictly exclusive! Winner Rose Ayling-Ellis on the glitterball, Giovanni and the joy of being deaf. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/19/strictly-exclusive-winner-rose-ayling-ellis-on-the-glitter-ball-giovanni-and-the-joy-of-being-deaf> [accessed 26 December 2021]
- Saner, E. (25 December 2021) Rose Ayling-Ellis's Strictly Come Dancing win gives deaf children huge confidence boost. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/25/rose-ayling-elliss-strictly-come-dancing-win-gives-deaf-children-huge-confidence-boost> [accessed 26 December 2021]
- Spoor, J.R., Flower, R.L., Bury, S.M. and Hedley, D. (2022), "Employee engagement and commitment to two Australian autism employment programs: associations with workload and perceived supervisor support", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 41 (3), 508-524. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2020-0132>
- Suresh, V. and Dyaram, L. (2022), "Diversity in disability: leaders' accounts on inclusive employment in the Indian context", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 41 (3), 454-473. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-05-2020-0133>
- Taylor, G. and Bishop, J. (1991) (eds) *Being Deaf: the experience of deafness*. London: Pinter.
- Trusz, S. (2018) Four mediation models of teacher expectancy effects on students' outcomes in mathematics and literacy. *Social Psychology of Education*. 21, 257–287
- United Nations (2021) Sign language protects 'linguistic identity and cultural diversity' of all users, says UN chief. Available online at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/09/1047012> [accessed 29/12/2021]
- Vinter, R. (2021) Rose Ayling-Ellis's Strictly Come Dancing win gives deaf children huge confidence boost. Available online at <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/25/rose-ayling-elliss-strictly-come-dancing-win-gives-deaf-children-huge-confidence-boost> [accessed 28/12/2021]
- Wu, F.Y., Nitttrouer, C., Nguyen, V., Hebl, M., Oswald, F.L. and Frieden, L. (2022), "Now protected or still stigmatized? A 25-year outlook on the impact of the Americans with Disabilities Act", *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion*, 41 (3), 383-403. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EDI-06-2020-0173>