

# Chapter 15

## Deaf Culture in Inclusive Schools

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this chapter is to examine the culture of students who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing within the broader context of inclusive schools, specifically as demonstrated through their learning experiences, socialization, and identity issues in such an environment. The chapter will include qualitative data in the form of observations and in-depth student interviews to allow the reader insight into the shared cultural model of students who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing. The goal is to provide a holistic picture of cultural phenomena through the points of view of d/Deaf and hard of hearing students themselves. The description of the culture of this group of students may prove useful in shaping effective inclusive environments for students who are d/Deaf and hard of hearing.*

### INTRODUCTION

While today's schools attempt to promote inclusive environments, more and more students who are deaf and hard of hearing (DHH) attend their home zone public schools. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education estimates approximately 87% of DHH students currently spend at least part of their school day in a general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Inclusion, in contrast to mainstreaming, entails an environment that adapts to the needs of the child. While inclusion is becoming more common, as an alternative to self-contained or residential settings, there has been little attention to the unique social and cultural needs of DHH students; these particular needs often serve as barriers to successful inclusion. The benefits of inclusion for DHH students include the ability to attend school close to home, lowering stigma and increasing opportunities for local social relationships to develop, and gaining exposure to spoken language and interactions with hearing peers; these are further enhanced through accessibility, universal design, and individual supports (Jokinen, 2018). Yet inclusion with hearing peers does not necessarily promote relationships.

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While the majority of DHH children are born to hearing parents, and thus have limited access to the Deaf culture and American Sign Language (ASL) unless they attend a residential school or engage with the Deaf community (Murray et al., 2018), deaf students in a public school setting are more likely to identify with hearing cultural norms. Development of a Deaf identity is influenced by both family and school variables. Family variables may include home language and interaction with other DHH individuals. School variables include access to and awareness of cultural diversity. Therefore, the lack of exposure to Deaf culture and other Deaf people have implications for how a DHH child comes to view himself or herself (Leigh et al., 2009).

An ethnographic study exploring the culture of students who are deaf and hard of hearing and who are educated at a cluster site analyzed the language and cultural patterns associated with the social behavior of DHH students, as well as indications of self-identity evidenced through these patterns (Woods, 2020). The goal of this study was to contribute to the literature on the impact of inclusion for students who are deaf and hard of hearing by providing their unique perspectives. This chapter will review the findings of this study and their impact on the directions for inclusive environments for DHH students. Objectives for this chapter include:

- Identifying the cultural model of DHH students who are immersed in the broader culture of a public school.
- Describing the impact of cultural identity embraced by DHH students.
- Exploring the shared cultural practices of DHH students in a public school.
- Identifying ways to promote Deaf culture within an inclusive school.

## **Background**

In review and critique of the research on the social inclusion of students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH), earlier reviews on this topic have examined the implementation and results of inclusion with DHH students, focusing on teacher preparation and student achievement, with little attention to how culture impacts the inclusion of DHH students (Woods, 2020). While the academic concerns of inclusion are often a research priority, little has been done to address other subjective quality of life measures such as communication, social interaction, and participation (Schick et al., 2013).

## **History**

Residential schools have been providing DHH students education in an environment that was more understanding of the Deaf experience since 1817 (Murray et al., 2018). A fully inclusive environment for DHH children is naturally provided in a school for the deaf. These programs provide DHH students with language and communication-rich environments, socialization, and cultural awareness for development of a positive self-concept. Residential schools are the point of contact for Deaf culture. Students who attend residential schools become enculturated into the Deaf community (Slobodzian, 2011).

Educational legislation and reforms such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which advocate for students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), have led to the closure of many schools for the d/Deaf and d/Deaf bilingual programs across the United States (Alasim, 2018; Valente & Boldt, 2016). Rigid interpretation of the LRE clause, however, has neglected to recognize the issues related to the

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unique experience of being Deaf, with preference given to placement in a general education classroom over special programs (Woods, 2020). In fact, the National Association of the Deaf expressed concern that the elimination of a continuum of placements will ultimately deny needed services to many DHH students (Innes, 1994). Alasim (2018) also attributes this change in the education of DHH students to early identification and intervention of hearing loss, technological advancements, parental expectations, and financial pressures.

With roots in the civil rights movement, Skrtic (1995) notes that the trend towards full inclusion began with the era of mainstreaming (1960-1980) followed by the era of inclusion (1980s to present). While these terms are often used interchangeably, they are philosophically quite different; mainstream programs imply that the student will adapt to the environment, while inclusive programs adapt the environment to the needs of the student (Slobodzian, 2011).

Through this shift in placement patterns of deaf students from residential to public school programs, a variety of service delivery models have emerged (Woods, 2020). Today, two inclusive models predominate based on a continuum of services. Push-in and/or pull-out services may be provided by a teacher of the d/Deaf in a resource room setting. While a push-out model requires removal of the student from the classroom for one-on-one or small group support, a push-in mode consists of the teacher of the d/Deaf working with the DHH student or students within the general education classroom. This is an increasingly common inclusive service model across many school districts (Rabinsky, 2013). This may also include support facilitation, where a teacher certified in teaching students with exceptional needs provides services to an individual student or a small group of students with disabilities in the general education classroom, while the general education teacher provides instruction in course content. Cluster sites are also growing, allowing school districts to centralize services, increasing the number of DHH students in a particular program (Slobodzian, 2011). Rabinsky (2013) cites several advantages to such clustering, including a school climate that naturally incorporates Deaf culture.

## **Deaf Culture**

While educationally DHH students are categorized as special education students, many advocacy groups argue that Deaf students constitute a cultural and linguistic minority (Jokinen, 2018). Issues of student diversity and inclusion in schools rarely address the culture and language of Deaf people (Golos et al., 2018). With different linguistic forms, communicative strategies, and presentation of self, Delpit (2006) might attribute this to the fact that Deaf students often do not ascribe to the “culture of power” within schools.

Deaf people share a language and a culture. Some of the unique features of Deaf culture include a visual lifestyle, networking, and deep connections (The Deaf Community, 2019). Deaf people value sign language and utilize specific communication norms and behaviors, such as consistent eye contact, visual strategies to gain a person’s attention, and technology to overcome barriers (Woods, 2020). Bauman’s (2014) DeafSpace concepts recognize the importance of space, proximity, mobility, light, color, and acoustics to further emphasize how the culture is built around these sensibilities. The culture is maintained and promoted through art forms such as storytelling, poetry, Deaf clubs, and school reunions.

The issue of educational placement for DHH students is a very controversial topic in the Deaf community, with many Deaf individuals viewing the residential school as the main source for the transmission of their culture and the movement towards inclusion and least restrictive environment mandates as a means of eroding that culture (Nikolarazi & Hadjikakou, 2006). There is a growing trend of parents of

DHH children viewing the mainstream classroom as more challenging and a better source of preparation for the future than schools for the d/Deaf (Angelides & Aravi, 2007). The implications of either setting can affect the overall academic and social development of DHH students.

## **Social Inclusion**

Several studies have addressed the socialization of DHH students in mainstream schools and schools for the d/Deaf. Angelides and Aravi (2007) found that while greater opportunities for learning and a higher level of education are provided at mainstream schools, this academic advantage appears to come at the cost of socialization and culture. Students in mainstream programs experienced problems with regards to communication and alienation, which were seldom issues for students in special schools. These findings align with those of Olsson et al. (2018), who found that both DHH students who attended special schools reported being happier in school to a greater extent than similar students attending mainstream schools.

Studies by Rabinsky (2013) and Frank (2003) describe quite different findings, including greater opportunities for interaction with hearing students and teachers and more opportunities for DHH students to make friends than in residential schools, which often have a much smaller student body. Overall, the social outcomes of mainstreaming vary for DHH students; while some DHH students socialize with hearing peers, some interact more with teachers, and some report feeling like outsiders, rarely being included in social events, and not being able to have conversations and make friends with other students.

Not surprisingly communication modality and use of amplification may affect the inclusion of a DHH student. According to Most (2007), DHH students who were mainstreamed experienced more feelings of isolation and loneliness, those with greater speech intelligibility experienced better social integration with their hearing peers. Marschark et al. (2012) found that DHH children's perceptions of social success were significantly affected by whether they had d/Deaf or hearing parents, use of sign language in parent-child communication, and school placement, yet children with cochlear implants did not experience greater social success.

According to Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development, adolescence is a critical period of role exploration and identity formation. McKee (2008) observed that a strong Deaf identity contributed positively to self-esteem in Deaf adolescents and adults. While DHH students in a public school setting, DHH students are more likely to identify with hearing cultural norms, Doherty (2012) found that a large proportion of DHH students in mainstream schools felt that they did not belong with hearing or Deaf people; these students experienced insecurity, isolation, and low self-esteem, and reported negative interactions with DHH peers due to differing values and identities. With more opportunities for interaction between hearing and deaf students in an inclusive setting, DHH students may reflect on their identities and experience conflict (Schick et al., 2013). Regardless of whether they decided to participate in the Deaf or hearing world, Golos et al. (2018) highlighted the importance of connecting DHH students with other Deaf community members.

The general education teacher's attitude, knowledge, and skills is another factor in the social inclusion of DHH students (Luckner & Pierce, 2013). Gibb et al. (2007) found that teacher support positively impacted DHH students' social relationships. While this could be true for almost any student, for DHH students a positive student-teacher relationship had a significant effect on peer acceptance and hearing students' perceptions of DHH students (Alasim, 2018).

Even teachers with positive attitudes towards inclusion and confidence in their abilities unknowingly direct significantly fewer questions to and require fewer utterances of DHH students when compared

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to hearing students in their classrooms (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Teachers must be aware of the cultural and linguistic needs of DHH students to promote social inclusion (Woods, 2020). Jarvis and Iantaffi (2006) found that both practical and narrative approaches can be used to encourage a shift in teacher's perceptions about DHH students on a cognitive and an emotional level; these include wearing ear plugs, listening to simulated sound tracks of classroom talk, and reading about DHH student experiences. Inclusion can further be promoted by eliminating many of the decontextualizing rituals of school that insist on verbal mediation of actions, such as roll call (Delpit, 2006).

A unique role is shared by the educational interpreter in an inclusive classroom for d/Deaf students, with language mediation as the primary, yet not only responsibility (Woods, 2020). In fact, Alasim (2018) found that the interpreter played a part in the lack of initiation of peer-to-peer contact between DHH and hearing students, with reduced spontaneous interactions between these two groups of students.

Deaf children are indeed part of the larger problem of the over-representation of language and cultural minority students in special education classes (Valente & Boldt, 2016). While the challenges of DHH students and other English Learners (ELs) are not identical, much can be said in favor of a bilingual-bicultural approach that recognizes the need for both English and ASL within an instructional setting for the Deaf (Woods, 2020). This approach recognizes the responsibility of everyone in the school community in fostering communication across differences (Valente & Boldt, 2016). Notions of culture and disability are intertwined, yet it is possible to organize a culture where deafness does not isolate (McDermott & Varenne, 1996). Culture is reflected in how difference is noticed, identified, and made consequential.

An effective inclusive school following a bilingual-bicultural approach would allow deafness to be viewed as another form of diversity and the native language, American Sign Language (ASL), to be incorporated into education in the same way Spanish or another language might be (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). In fact, co-enrollment programs consisting of classrooms with equivalent numbers of d/Deaf and hearing students, instructed by both a general education and special education teacher, benefit both the academic achievement and social communication of all students involved (Xie et al., 2014).

Skeptics and critics who argue against inclusion for DHH students cite the limitations to the social inclusion, which not only requires training in awareness of deafness and Deaf culture, but a shift in thinking from traditional classroom instruction and dominant cultural norms.

Inclusion may not be the answer for every d/Deaf child, or for any child with a disability, however, it can serve as a flexible framework to guide program design for particular students and settings (Woods, 2020). Deaf children have the same potential for academic, social, and emotional well-being as their non-d/Deaf peers when they are provided full access to language, however, without the support of an appropriate educational setting, deaf children are still subject to poor educational and social outcomes (Valente & Boldt, 2016).

Questions regarding the culture of DHH adolescents attending a cluster school will contribute to our understanding of full inclusion; exploring the culture of DHH students in a cluster school offers new insights into a minimally explored topic that is highly relevant to the current and likely future status of deaf education (Woods, 2020).

## **MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER**

An ethnographic study by Woods (2020) included 16 DHH high school students receiving an inclusive education. These students represented the continuum of DHH students in terms of range of hearing

loss, use of amplification, and multi-cultural status. Over the course of the three-month study, students were observed and interviewed to better understand the shared cultural model present at this cluster site.

In terms of the cultural identity they embraced, the DHH students in this study defined themselves as Deaf. Regardless of their degree of hearing loss, the majority of the informants indicated pride in being Deaf. In addition, when asked to describe their culture, many students embraced more than one cultural identity and felt they had the best of both worlds (Woods, 2020).

Only the two students from Deaf families shared experiences within the local Deaf community, however, a favorite high school experience was taking a trip to Gallaudet University, the world's only university designed specifically for DHH students, with the high school ASL Club. These DHH students expressed amazement at how many other d/Deaf and hearing people are out there.

While some DHH students indicated they enjoyed hanging out with hearing peers, overall, the majority of students expressed that their friendships with hearing peers were rather superficial (Woods, 2020). Several students also stated a preference of inclusive classes over DHH classes, expressing a desire to be challenged and focus in class.

Overall, the identity embraced by these informants was clear; they were proud to be Deaf and use ASL (Woods, 2020). Yet, when asked to describe the culture of the school, many of the students expressed ambivalence. They recognized that they were in an environment dominated by hearing culture and expressed varying degrees of comfort within that culture; some were patient while others were frustrated.

In general, most students expressed relative comfort and acceptance with being a DHH student in a public school. Yet while they identified as Deaf, they were ultimately connected with the hearing culture. Many of them recognized this and expressed that conflict.

The students in this study proudly distinguished themselves as unique through their deafness and their language (Woods, 2020). Their value for ASL that was most prominent; not only did the students express the importance of their language in meeting their own communication needs, but they repeatedly referred to a desire to expand awareness of ASL among their hearing peers. Even beyond the school environment, the students desired to teach others their language.

Deep connections that are so important to the Deaf community were apparent among the students. The students looked out for each other both literally and figuratively. Deaf students without relied on their DHH peers who had a good amount of residual hearing to assist with communication and alert them of danger. The fact that some DHH students served as interpreters for their DHH peers is another example of group cohesion and being mindful of each other. Such simple acts of kindness and trust were natural (Woods, 2020).

True to Deaf culture, many of the students in this study used technology to overcome communication barriers. Emphasis on the visual environment was apparent, with students using visual attention-getting strategies and consistent eye-contact when engaging with others.

Teachers that stood out received sign names. Consistent with Deaf culture, the DHH students themselves created these names for their teachers (Woods, 2020). Because the school has been a cluster site for DHH students for many years, previous DHH students had given certain teachers sign names, which they learned and shared with students each year. This is a great example of how Deaf culture has become intertwined with the school culture.

The students were skilled storytellers; their stories were often shared experiences that they laughed over. They were also observed playing games. Interestingly, the students' version of a popular game derived from the school for the d/Deaf, which two of them had attended. These public school DHH students were using rules created at the school for the d/Deaf, demonstrating transmission of the culture.

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Overall, Deaf culture was evident in the students' value for ASL and use of specific communication norms, with a reliance on the visual world (Woods, 2020). The degree of their connections with each other and desire to meet others who are Deaf emulated the strong networking within the Deaf community. They were even observed participating in social activities that maintained cultural traditions.

The students in this study revealed a cultural portrait of DHH students who use ASL to communicate (Woods, 2020). They use this language to describe themselves, with the words, "Deaf," and "proud Deaf," used most frequently. The students represented the continuum of students with hearing loss, yet regardless of being a CI user, a DML, or Deaf of Deaf, they ascribed to a Deaf identity.

The shared cultural practices of this group of DHH students were not limited to their use of a common language (Woods, 2020). Their visual strategies, use of technology, and in-group socialization further embraced the norms of Deaf culture. A clear value was placed on not just ASL but closeness within the group. The Deaf community is small and tight-knit and this was reflected in the Deaf school community.

Students shared a common educational history and thus shared problems within that environment. Frequently cited as issues in a public school were communication difficulties, the pace of the classroom, and interpreting issues (Woods, 2020). Yet these students valued supporting each other; a DHH student with a CI, residual hearing, and intelligible speech was not outcasted, but instead recognized for his or her ability to facilitate communication. Another highly valued idea was expanding awareness of ASL, perhaps to alleviate some of the communication barriers that were so common.

The beliefs of this group of students centered around pride in their deafness. While they described challenges, not one student expressed feeling limited by the school environment. In fact, the majority of informants shared that they appreciated the academic push that they believed they were receiving in a public school, and they recognized the need to focus as a priority.

Given the shared language and communication, practices, problems, values, and beliefs of these DHH students in an inclusive school, their culture is very much aligned with Deaf culture (Woods, 2020). The adolescents in this study self-identified as Deaf. In spite of the fact that most of them have not ventured out into the Deaf community yet, they appear to embrace many aspects of Deaf culture.

The ethnographic methods used to in this study allowed the researcher to generate a narrative providing an overall perspective on the culture of the students who were the focus of this study. The researcher was able to determine that the DHH students in this inclusive high school share features of a culture that is very much in harmony with Deaf culture, with a subtle influence and overall attitude of acceptance of the dominant school culture, however mis-aligned that might be with their actual communication preferences, values, and beliefs (Woods, 2020).

As a cluster site, the 16 DHH students were surprisingly well-represented across this large campus. While none of the staff at the school were d/Deaf themselves, there were a handful that belonged to the local Deaf community. The presence of ASL interpreters in a classroom, on the morning TV announcements, at a school performance, or on the sidelines at a football game was commonplace. These norms demonstrated that DHH students were clearly accepted as part of the school community.

Moving beyond acceptance towards understanding was another step. The school built an extremely large ASL program, and the linguistic and social significance of ASL for Deaf people was thus shared by many hearing students and teachers at the school. However, acceptance and understanding were not displayed consistently. In academic courses, DHH students were less frequently called on to contribute to the lesson; most teachers of core classes did not engage with the DHH students or the interpreter. In fact, there did not seem to be conscious awareness of the role or presence of the interpreter.

DHH students at this inclusive high school shared a cultural model that embraced many aspects of Deaf culture. The students were extremely insightful in expressing their beliefs and identities as adolescents with hearing loss, many of whom had not yet even discovered the larger Deaf community (Woods, 2020). They shared practices and problems, as well as strategies and tools, which connected them through shared culture.

## **Issues, Controversies, Problems**

A fully inclusive environment for DHH students would incorporate language, socialization, and cultural awareness. While many schools with DHH students attempt to emphasize the need for a communication-rich environment by providing ASL classes and perhaps an ASL Club for all students, as well as a team of interpreters and DHH teachers, the socialization opportunities described by DHH students themselves are often quite limited (Woods, 2020). Their cultural awareness, true to historical trends, stems from participation at the residential school for the deaf; reiterated by Murray et al. (2018), the residential school is a crucial space for the development and transmission of both ASL and Deaf culture.

The dominant perspective surrounding DHH adolescents can greatly impact both how they perceive themselves and how they interact in the Deaf and hearing worlds (Woods, 2020). As part of a larger hearing culture of hearing peers, and with most of their home lives reinforcing that hearing culture, many DHH students in inclusive schools experience identity issues. Although such issues are typically heightened among adolescents, small groups of DHH students in a cluster site may find enough similarity among themselves to positively influence their cultural identity. While perceptions of what it means to be d/Deaf may vary among those around them, a shared cultural identity can develop.

Even at a cluster school, the existence of a truly inclusive learning environment may be lacking. Based on the observations of Slobodzian (2011) and Woods (2020), DHH students may experience communication conflicts, issues with accommodations, and inconsistent expectations. The pace of the classroom and interpreter lag time are not clearly recognized as potential issues by most teachers. Antia et al. (2002) propose that ignoring misbehavior, not holding students accountable, and misconceptions about DHH students' abilities all stem from teachers' lack of attachment to and understanding of this population of students.

Meaningful communication is a priority for DHH learners both inside and outside the classroom. Communication experiences may vary from written, spoken, and signed; these all impact student participation. DHH students are asked to contribute in the classroom less often than hearing students; even the most well-intentioned teachers call on DHH students less frequently, thus projecting lower expectations (Eriks-Brophy & Whittingham, 2013). Alasim (2018) explained the significance of collaboration between the teacher and interpreter to facilitate the participation of DHH students; while an interpreter was present in every class observed in this study except for ASL classes, there was limited communication between the teacher and the interpreter.

In spite of the apparent differences in teacher expectations, DHH students do not seem to perceive a less challenging environment (Woods, 2020). This corresponds to the findings of Angelides and Aravi (2007), where students who had attended both types of schools reported a higher level of learning at a public school, while complaining about the quality of the education at a residential placement.

Yet, this academic advantage does appear to come at the cost of social advantage. While the social outcomes of the DHH students may vary, some also have negative experiences with their hearing peers, resulting feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem. These social conflicts may result in identity conflict.



## **Solutions and Recommendations**

Analysis of the shared culture of DHH high school students at a cluster site supports the need for a multicultural education and to better align the context of the general education setting with the linguistic and cultural needs of DHH students.

A multicultural education entails developing both pride in group membership as well as an understanding of others (Slobodzian, 2011). While cluster schools make authentic attempts at improving the participation and interaction between DHH and hearing students through ASL programs, Peterson (2009) notes that not only do the majority of introductory ASL students fail to distinguish ASL from English, but they are unaware that Deaf culture exists. Beyond recognition of the language, then, schools can promote Deaf culture through visibility of art forms such as storytelling, poetry, and performances (Woods, 2020).

Along with a cross-cultural learning experience, members of a culture should have the opportunity to learn about themselves. Some DHH students have cultural connections through previous attendance at a school for the deaf, yet all school environments that serve DHH students can offer access to Deaf culture. Cultural and linguistic experiences in the classroom are not limited to incorporating ASL stories, having discussions about Deaf culture, and inviting Deaf adults as guest speakers (Golos et al., 2018). As Cawthon et al. (2016) describe, role models, particularly those whose cultural identities match their mentees, provide unique contributions to the social capital of deaf youth.

Social capital, which recognizes the value of relationships and social networks, not only impacts identity formation, but it can facilitate inclusion and promote diversity (Byatt, 2019). The relationships between the DHH students in a cluster school are their capital; trust and reciprocity are present. Yet their relationships outside of their cluster can be viewed through a liminality framework, where the DHH students are close to but perhaps not fully included with the dominant group of hearing students (Devine et al., 2015). Allan et al. (2009) described how students with and without disabilities achieved greater understanding of differences and solved obstacles to inclusion through guided discussion; such changes in perspective demonstrate how social capital can generate positive outcomes for all students.

Another important cultural consideration is the construction of the physical environment as DeafSpace; as Bauman (2014) highlights, these concepts promote community building, visual language, and personal well-being and safety for those who are d/Deaf. With increased cultural sensitivity, the challenges that an environment presents for those with hearing loss can be altered to recognize d/Deaf experiences. This can often be as simple as rearranging classroom seating so that everyone can participate or adjusting lighting for clear visual communication, while also minimizing eyestrain.

In addition to addressing cultural, linguistic, and social inclusion, there is the need to further address the academic inclusion of DHH students. While many DHH students hold the perception that the academic rigor of an inclusive program is greater than that of a residential school, there is still a disparity in the expectations for DHH and hearing students. This indicates a dire need for better teacher preparation in working with students with hearing loss.

The teacher of the d/Deaf has a unique role in educating other professionals about the needs of DHH students, yet there is also a need for stronger teacher preparation programs within deaf education. Teacher candidates should be prepared for a variety of models of service, as well as communication modalities. Specifically, DHH teacher training should focus on the complex needs of DML students, a growing population within the field. As noted by Cannon and Luckner (2016), these potentially multilingual students should have access and exposure to their home culture(s), Deaf culture, and hearing culture, and yet they often leave school without proficiency in even one language and/or understanding of one

culture. Teacher preparation should consist of coursework, field experiences, and mentoring with a focus on DHH students from diverse backgrounds in order to improve outcomes for these students.

Administrators' and educators' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs regarding inclusion of DHH students can be impacted through professional development. From understanding the complex, professional role of the educational interpreter in facilitating communication and as a cultural broker, to high-impact teaching practices and building expectations with and for DHH students, regular discussions among school personnel on topics and issues pertinent to the education of students who are DHH can enhance teacher knowledge and ultimately student experience.

The needs of DHH students can further be addressed through implementation of specific Deaf Education competencies as part of general education teacher certification and educational leadership certification leading to a Deaf Education Endorsement. Competencies should address the unique academic and social needs of DHH students with a focus on awareness of ASL and Deaf culture. Suggested competencies are outlined as follows:

1. Knowledge of culture, including Deaf culture, as a factor in DHH students' learning
2. Awareness of communication modalities, including American Sign Language, used by DHH students
3. Understanding of learning environments and social interactions and their impacts on DHH students
4. Knowledge of instructional planning, strategies, and evidence-based practice in Deaf Education
5. Awareness of resources and technologies, including amplification options available to DHH students
6. Knowledge of literacy and assessment issues with DHH students
7. Understanding of professional learning including roles, responsibilities, and collaboration

These recommendations are made based on the perspectives of DHH students at a cluster school, which revealed both areas of success as well as potential areas in need of restructuring within an inclusive setting, specifically a cluster site, for DHH students (Woods, 2020).

## **Future Research Directions**

Many DHH students have a keen awareness of their identities as Deaf individuals. True to Erikson's (1950) stages of development, adolescents experience a critical period of identity formation. Studies at elementary, middle, and high school cluster sites for DHH students might further reveal how a student's Deaf identity develops. The perspectives of younger DHH students could reveal experiences that impact identity formation. Such studies may prove interesting in understanding cultural awareness and transmission among DHH students in public school settings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The students in this study shared a cultural model that revealed an affiliation with Deaf culture (Woods, 2020). Given that this was a cluster site, the school climate naturally incorporated elements of that culture. ASL was highly visible across the campus, teachers knew their sign names, and use of technology and visual supports were part of the daily routine. Yet, while many educators praise the idea of DHH cluster sites, the perceptions of the students in this study place doubt on the overall effectiveness of this model (Rabinsky, 2013).

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All of the informants in this study, even those who were functionally hard of hearing, described themselves as Deaf (Woods, 2020). As noted by Golos et al. (2018) the dominant perspective surrounding DHH adolescents can greatly impact both how they perceive themselves and how they interact in the Deaf and hearing worlds. This small group of DHH students found enough similarity among themselves to positively influence their cultural identity. While perceptions of what it meant to be d/Deaf varied among those around them, they all declared pride in a shared cultural identity (Woods, 2020).

While identity issues were not readily apparent, the existence of a truly inclusive learning environment was. Similar to observations of Slobodzian (2011), the DHH students in this study experienced communication conflicts, issues with accommodations, and inconsistent expectations. It was meaningful communication that was so consequential for these DHH learners both inside and outside the classroom. Students described a variety of communication experiences, written, spoken, and signed, that all impacted their participation. The fact that DHH students were asked to contribute in less than half of the classroom observations in this study supports the findings of Eriks-Brophy and Whittingham (2013), where even the most well-intentioned teachers called on DHH students less frequently, thus projecting lower expectations. Alasim (2018) explained the significance of collaboration between the teacher and interpreter to facilitate the participation of DHH students; while an interpreter was present in every class observed in this study except for ASL classes, there was limited communication between the teacher and the interpreter.

While the social outcomes of the DHH students in this study varied, some shared negative experiences with their hearing peers. Contrary to the findings of Doherty (2012), however, none of the informants indicated resulting feelings of insecurity or low self-esteem. In contrast, they either retaliated or appeared to be unbothered by these experiences.

While studies have indicated that DHH students with intelligible speech and those with cochlear implants often experienced more social successes than their DHH peers who did not use amplification and relied solely on ASL for communication, that was not necessarily the case in this study (Most, 2007; Xie et al., 2014). While CI users and DHH students who used speech shared that they helped with communication by assuming the role of an interpreter, they were not observed to be more approachable by their hearing peers. Given the efforts of the school in promoting ASL, this was often the opposite. This aptly demonstrates the awareness of language and culture amongst both groups of students, as well as their subtle intertwining (Woods, 2020).

Culture is an enigma. When viewed on a continuum, from high to low context, the general education classroom, which is generally rule- and task-oriented, with knowledge viewed as transferable, is certainly low-context. Individuality is emphasized with the goal of accomplishing things on a given schedule. Relationships often seem compartmentalized, with brief opportunities during transitions for interpersonal connections. In contrast, Deaf culture would certainly fall on the high context end of the spectrum. Similarity and shared experiences, as well as collective needs, are valued. There is emphasis on implicit understandings, long-term relationships, and strong boundaries regarding acceptance (Woods, 2020)

Thus, a high-context pocket of Deaf culture can exist within the low-context school culture. The DHH students in this study were clearly accustomed to learning in such an environment, naturally developing shared strategies for communication as they shifted between both high- and low-context cultures (Woods, 2020). While this did not appear to be as natural for them, there were some very visible attempts by outsiders to understand and even be involved in the culture of the DHH students at the school. This validates Groce (1985) who noted that the hearing world's response to deafness is not always the same.

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## **KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS**

**Cluster Site:** A cluster site, or regional program, is a centrally located school where services for students who are deaf and hard of hearing in that district, including both resources and staff, are consolidated.

**Deaf or Hard of Hearing Multilingual Learner (DML):** The label DML recognizes the cultural and linguistic diversity of a student who is d/Deaf or hard of hearing and whose home language is not English or ASL.

**Ethnography:** As a form of qualitative research, ethnography allows for examination of the patterns of shared behavior, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group.

**Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) guarantees that each child eligible for special education services is entitled to an education at public expense that is designed to meet the child’s unique needs as dictated by the IEP.

**Inclusion:** Students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom and the environment is adapted to meet each students’ needs. An inclusive environment encourages participation rather than just placement in the classroom.

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** This component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires that students with disabilities be educated in the general education classroom to the maximum extent possible.

**Mainstreaming:** Students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom and are expected to adapt to the environment with minimal accommodations.