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Experiences of Social Inclusion and Exclusion of Deaf Children

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Graduate Program in Education

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Abstract

Previous research describes how Deaf children are at risk for being socially excluded from their hearing peers in mainstream classrooms. Whereas the inclusion of children with learning difficulties in typical classrooms has gained increasing advocacy, little is known about Deaf children's views and experiences in a school for the Deaf. In this mixed methods study, interviews were conducted to investigate Deaf elementary school children's experiences of inclusion and exclusion both at school and at home. Interviews were transcribed and through thematic analysis, four themes were developed to express these students' experiences. The children indicated they felt included by their peers at a school for the Deaf, moreover had more positive experiences compared to at schools for the hearing. Additionally, it was found that these children felt included by their families regardless of parental hearing status, but there was a preference for connection with Deaf relatives.

Keywords: social inclusion, social exclusion, Deaf children, school for the Deaf, American Sign Language (ASL)

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Social interaction is a key aspect of development for every child. It is typically during the elementary school years that social behaviors and skills are initially developed and children establish, develop, and maintain friendships (Engels, Dekovic, & Meeus, 2002). Peer relationships allow children opportunities to practice different ways of relating to each other, as well as skills such as helping, sharing, and resolving dilemmas (Hartup, 1989). These positive social interactions are associated with the psychological well-being of the child. Little is known, however, about the social challenges faced by children belonging to the Deaf population. It is important to learn more about Deaf children's experiences as this will help us to understand difficulties they may be having with social interactions. The present study aims to facilitate the understanding of the social experiences of Deaf children from their perspective.

Social interaction can be challenging because it depends on communication, social awareness, and appropriate timing of behaviors to interact effectively (Engels et al., 2002). Previous research has shown that children with intellectual or learning difficulties are at a greater risk for being socially excluded compared to their peers because they are considered different and frequently lack the necessary skills to partake in social interactions (Maras & Brown, 2000; Nowicki, 2006). Similarly, children who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing are often at risk for not developing strong social relationships because they may not have the necessary language skills, or have not learned how to engage in socially appropriate behaviors (Hauser & Marschark, 2008; Stinson, Whitmore, & Kluwin, 1996). Language is a vital skill required to participate in socialization and communicate with others. A child who uses language different from their peers cannot carry on conversations so may feel left out and unable to make friends (Luckner, Slike, & Johnson, 2012). When a healthy form of communication does not exist, children miss out on the

daily conversations, as well as the friendships formed out of such bonding experiences. Luckner et al. (2012) suggests Deaf students may benefit from direct instruction in social skills, as well as adult facilitation of peer interaction.

Methods in which children typically acquire social skills are through observational learning, opportunities to practice social skills with peers, and advice from caregivers (Segrin & Givertz, 2003). Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory proposes new behaviour can be acquired through observation and modeling (Bandura, 1977; Jones-Smith, 2016). For example, children can learn social skills from observing and interacting with peers, as well as adults modeling appropriate interaction behaviours. Social learning theory proposes learning is not purely behavioural, rather, it is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context (Bandura, 1977). Children observe people around them behaving in various ways such as their parents, peers, and teachers who act as models and provide examples of behaviour to observe and later imitate. If a child imitates a model's behaviour and the consequences are rewarding, or positively reinforced, the child is likely to continue performing the behaviour (Bandura, 1977).

Research examining the social challenges and successes of Deaf and hard-of-hearing children attending schools for the Deaf is limited. Based on previous research highlighting the elementary school years as a typical stage in establishing friendships, the importance of language for socialization, and the importance of observational learning, the present study explored Deaf and hard-of-hearing students' experiences making and maintaining friends during this developmental stage in a setting in which there is a common language. The present study aims to inquire if these children are developing strong social relationships when they are in an environment where they can practice social skills with peers, as well as where teachers provide advice and instructions through a common, shared language. Are these students able to

participate in socialization and communicate with others, thus forming bonds through these shared experiences? Through individual interviews, children were asked to speak about their social experiences of inclusion and exclusion at their school for the Deaf, as well as in their home environment with their family. Specifically, do these kids feel included or excluded by peers and/or family members.

Children's Understanding of Social Exclusion

It is worth noting that peer acceptance of children with disabilities is affected by their understanding of disabilities. Previous research has examined children's understanding of the causes of learning difficulties, reasons for excluding peers, as well as suggestions for including peers with learning difficulties. Nowicki, Brown, and Stepien (2014a) interviewed elementary school children between nine and 12 years of age on what they believed to be the causes of learning difficulties. The results of this study demonstrate that children can recognize diverse origins of learning difficulties as their statements included ideas of fate, family stress, neurological and development problems, information processing, and motivation as overarching themes for possible causes (Nowicki et al., 2014a). Despite their knowledge of probable causes and factors associated with the development of learning difficulties, children based their reasoning for social exclusion on differences between peers with and without disabilities. Specifically, children organized their reasoning into categories yielding themes based on behaviours of other children, differences in learning ability and adequate resources at school, physical characteristics, and peers' negative attitudes (Nowicki, Brown, & Stepien, 2014b). Nowicki and Brown (2013) also explored children's thoughts on how to include peers with learning difficulties, which included involving the teacher, being supportive, focusing on similarities rather than differences, and modelling appropriate behaviours. The results of that

study suggested that children are insightful and provided potentially effective inclusion strategies.

Although these students were able to generate a list of strategies they could use to socially include their peers, the reality of these kids utilizing them is not indicated. What is understood by this research is how children who are perceived as different are socially excluded (Nowicki et al., 2014b). Similarly, when a Deaf child is mainstreamed in a school for the hearing, they are likely to be perceived as different. Deaf or hard-of-hearing children tend to use a different language which makes engaging in communication difficult and limiting, and they may have a hearing aid or cochlear implant which is a physical and observable marker that shows this child is different compared to hearing peers. Nowicki and colleagues (2014a) demonstrated that young children are able to understand the causes of learning difficulties; therefore, perhaps children can learn and understand the causes of deafness and hearing loss. Unfortunately, despite children's understanding of differences, kids are still at a higher risk for being socially excluded if they are different (Nowicki et al., 2014b). When Deaf children attend a school for the Deaf, are they better able to utilize the aforementioned inclusion strategies because they perceive their peers as similar?

Social Acceptance by Peers in the School Environment

At school, children who feel included tend to be happier, perform well academically, and effectively develop social skills compared to peers who feel socially excluded (Lindsay, McPherson, Aslam, McKeever, & Wright, 2013). During the elementary school years, children establish friendships with children who are perceived as similar to themselves (Markson & Fawcett, 2007). When children are not viewed as similar, their chance of being socially accepted decreases. According to Maras and Brown (2002), it is common for children to hold negative

attitudes and beliefs towards others with learning difficulties and that frequent structured interactions between children with and without learning difficulties to be effective in facilitating social inclusion. Unfortunately, recent studies also show that inclusive classroom settings do not guarantee children with disabilities will feel included. For instance, a meta-analysis of 20 studies found that children 3- to 12-years of age preferred being in proximity to typically developing peers compared to children with disabilities (Nowicki & Sandieson 2002). When children with learning difficulties are mainstreamed in regular schools, it is important to consider the attitudes and beliefs of their peers. Similar to children with disabilities, Deaf children are more likely to struggle socially in typical, mainstream, hearing classrooms than their hearing peers (Batten, Oaks, & Alexander, 2014). A Deaf child mainstreamed in a regular school is integrated into a classroom with hearing students and may have little or no interaction with other Deaf children. These students are *physically* included in the classroom because they share the same space, and they should be *academically* included, but this does not mean they are *socially* included on the playground or in team sports. In a school for the Deaf, the Deaf child is not isolated and does not “stick out from the crowd” as being different. Rather, he or she shares a language and culture with their peers in which they are capable of participating equally and naturally (Canadian Association of the Deaf, 2015).

Johnson, DesGoerges, and Seaver (2013) noted the importance of language in school settings. Deaf students typically use visual channels for communication such as sign language, and when in a hearing classroom a translator or other assistant may be required. According to the Canadian Association of the Deaf (2015), support services for Deaf students are limited; interpreters are frequently unqualified and may not be available for the entire school day. The use of an interpreter in typical classrooms not only singles out these students, it also unfairly

causes them to split their attention between interpreted auditory explanations, visual material, and taking notes resulting in patterns of lower academic achievement in comparison with hearing peers (Luft, 2017). Deaf students who attend mainstream schools may experience their deafness more prominently as a difference or disability than students who attend a school for the Deaf. As a result, these Deaf children often report feeling more isolated in traditional classrooms (Canadian Association of the Deaf, 2015; Angelides & Aravi, 2007).

A study by Angelides and Aravi (2007) brings to light the views and experiences of Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals who attended either a school for the Deaf or a mainstream school for the hearing, or both, in order to compare the two systems from the viewpoints of those involved. The researchers originally interviewed 20 participants from which four were selected to conduct in-depth interviews based on the themes that emerged from the larger group. Three overarching themes emerged from the in-depth interviews: (a) higher academic level in mainstream schools, (b) more opportunities for communication and interpersonal relations in schools for the Deaf, and (c) marginalization and exclusion in mainstream schools. First, it was noted how mainstream schools have a more challenging curriculum and that participants who attended both school types said they learned more at the mainstream schools (Angelides & Aravi, 2007). Deaf students tended to have higher levels of academic achievement in mainstream schools compared to age matched students in the schools for the Deaf, but the authors neglected to compare the Deaf students' achievement to their hearing peers in the mainstream classrooms. Were they performing on par? A quote from one participant indicated that when they attended the mainstream school they needed extra time in their evenings to understand the lessons before they could complete their homework (Angelides & Aravi, 2007).

The additional two themes that emerged from the interviews are consistent with previous research on social inclusion and exclusion. Participants noted they had more opportunities for communication and relationships with peers at the school for the Deaf, likely due to the fact that all students share the same culture and language. Since these children share the same language, it is possible for them to communicate and interact with ease. Participants also discussed marginalization and exclusion in mainstream schools. As aforementioned, children are more likely to be friends with peers they perceive as similar to themselves (Markson & Fawcett, 2007). Overall, there seems to be a trade-off between academic achievement and social interaction depending on school type (Angelides & Aravi, 2007).

Although there are potentially instances of successful integration of Deaf and hard-of-hearing students mainstreamed in regular education classrooms, many advocates do not consider this avenue of placement to be suitable for supporting the educational, communication, social, or cultural needs of Deaf children (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Osgood, 2005). Osgood (2005) additionally brought to light the perspectives of not only Deaf students, but also educational interpreters, Deaf education teachers and regular education teachers on the inclusion of Deaf students in mainstream educational settings. Each group of participants expressed concerns relating to language deprivation, loneliness and social isolation, and oppression (Osgood, 2005). Many educators asserted that these schools offer inadequate presentation of Deaf culture to Deaf and hard-of-hearing students, and may present barriers that result in poor language development, reduced academic achievement, limited opportunities for class participation and social isolation (Osgood, 2005). The Canadian Association of the Deaf (2015) agrees that the placement of Deaf students in regular schools is alienating for Deaf children. As is evident, much of the previous research on social inclusion and exclusion of Deaf children

examined their experiences in mainstream school settings rather than schools for the Deaf. Consequently, the present study aims to address this gap in the literature and shed light on the social experiences of Deaf children attending a school for the Deaf.

Schools for the Deaf. In contrast to mainstream settings, schools for the Deaf have long been recognized as places where Deaf individuals are members of a unique linguistic and cultural group (Marschark, 2007). Since these schools provide instruction in sign language and are staffed predominantly by Deaf professionals, these educational settings provide opportunities for students to acquire a Deaf identity in relation to and through interactions with peers and adults. These school settings allow children access to Deaf role models, Deaf friends, as well as Deaf sports and social clubs (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014). For example, Nyle DiMarco, an American model, actor and Deaf activist speaks out about his educational experiences growing up as a Deaf boy in his TedTalk entitled *Making education accessible to deaf children* (DiMarco, 2018). He speaks to his experiences at both a school for the Deaf as well as mainstreamed in a school for the hearing. As the only Deaf child in the school for the hearing, Nyle struggled to make friends or find a peer who would learn more than a handful of signs to fully communicate with him. He also shared how he was a very active boy and loved to play sports, but was always benched during games. Upon completion of his one year at a school for the hearing, Nyle returned to the school for the Deaf where he succeeded academically, joined school clubs, and went on to win many sporting events (DiMarco, 2018). Within a school for the Deaf, Nyle was able to use sign language with his peers and teachers, was granted equal access to education, as well as feelings of belonging to a community. It appears Nyle experienced his deafness more prominently as a difference while attending the school for the hearing, but consequently had more opportunities for communication and forming relationships with peers at the school for the

Deaf. Thus, the present study aims to uncover current social experiences of elementary students in a school for the Deaf. Do these students have strong, trusting friendships, actively engage in sporting clubs, and feel they belong within their school environment?

The Family Context with a Deaf Child

Past research of Deaf children indicates that they experience more social difficulties compared to their hearing peers (Batten et al., 2014). Factors that influence these social interactions may stem from the home. Since 91.5% of Deaf infants are born into hearing families (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2001 as cited in Luckner & Velaski, 2004), the context in which they are raised varies. According to the interviews, some of these families may have little or no experience with deafness before the birth of their child. The inclusion of a Deaf baby within a hearing family tends to change family dynamics, and requires modifying the family's typical interactions and communication to be accessible to their Deaf infant (Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, & Sass-Lehrer, 2003).

A new trend in Western society is for hearing parents to teach their hearing babies a few signs to allow early communication before the baby is able to speak, however, parents are not teaching their Deaf babies signs. The harsh reality is that parents tend to look at their Deaf child and panic. Hearing families with a Deaf child are no different from other families in that they, too, desire to raise a healthy, competent, and happy child. In some cases, unfortunately, hearing parents' selection of communication modality to be learned by their Deaf child is often made with insufficient understanding of potential implications, and without full information about alternatives (Luft, 2017). Often parents are advised to force their Deaf child to learn how to speak and listen so as to seem "normal", even when doing so may be detrimental to the child's critical period of language development and acquisition. The medical model encourages parents

to use cochlear implants and to teach their child to communicate as if they were hearing. If this fails, however, then it is potentially a few years later and the child has missed out on the critical period of language development. As such, Deaf children born to hearing families are more vulnerable to language delays due to limited access to direct communication (Moog & Geers, 1985 as cited in Batten et al., 2014). Luckner and Velaski (2004) noted how parents frequently reported the lack of knowledge on the part of the medical professionals they saw. Due to this, some families waited 18 months or more before receiving an accurate diagnosis and proper help (Luckner & Velaski, 2004). It is understandable to assert how a delayed diagnosis would potentially delay the child's language acquisition. Language delays can affect children's development of communication strategies, intellectual abilities, and overall social functioning (Stinson & Whitmire, 2000). Conversely, Deaf parents who share a common language with their infant are more likely to communicate effectively with their Deaf child, minimizing such delays (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014). In this parent child dyad, "a child's deafness is not framed as a tragedy but rather as a difference, and perhaps more important, a difference that can be supported and nurtured" (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014, p. 28).

The reaction of many hearing parents of Deaf children has previously been described in negative terms; these parents may feel isolated and experience emotional distress when confronted with a disabled child and the fear of how they will communicate with them (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014; Luckner & Velaski, 2004). Their knowledge of and attitude about deafness are sometimes shaped by health professionals and educators, many of whom hold a medical model of deafness (Luckner & Velaski, 2004). For instance, when a baby goes to the audiologist for a hearing test, the first thing parents of a Deaf child are told is that their baby "failed" the test – they cannot hear. Right then this baby has already failed at something in life. So many times

this is highlighted in the Deaf community – Deaf people are viewed as broken, less than, termed disabled or impaired. Viewing deafness as something that needs fixing, maintains the view that it is a disability and perpetuates the cycle of social exclusion. Currently, there are more studies suggesting families are not necessarily adversely affected by parenting a child with a disability (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2010). One such study by Luckner and Velaski (2004) interviewed hearing families of children who are Deaf. They found five overarching factors these families felt contributed to being a healthy family: (a) commitment to the family; (b) learning to sign with their child; (c) support from extended family, friends, and members of the community; (d) support from the professionals working at the educational program their child was attending; and (e) have high expectations for their child with a hearing loss.

Overall, a child's language acquisition, and ultimately their overall social functioning, may be associated with early life choices and the expectations of their parents. If parents are accepting of a child's deafness and learn sign language, the child may grow up knowing they are loved and accepted for who they are. Conversely, a child raised under the medical model with the feeling or knowledge of needing to be fixed, are at a higher risk for delayed language skills and ultimately will struggle socially. Ultimately, one may ponder how parents' understanding of deafness may relate to a family's relationships with one another. Is there a connection between parental hearing status or mode of communication used within a family and a child's bond with their parents and other family members?

Goal of Present Study

Previous research has examined academic and social struggles of Deaf children mainstreamed in schools for the hearing (Batten et al., 2014; Luft, 2017). Further, research suggests that Deaf children may be subject to negative implications when raised in hearing

families, such as language delays. Little is known about Deaf children's views and experiences in a school for the Deaf or their experiences at home. To address these gaps in the literature, the present study inquired about the experiences of Deaf children who attend a school for the Deaf, in which all students share the common characteristic of deafness and use of the same language. Students were asked to share their experiences of inclusion and exclusion both at school and at home, regardless of parental hearing status. As it is suggested that much can be learned about children by listening to them (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2001), the present study interviewed Deaf children to uncover a rich understanding of their experiences. With the use of excerpts from the transcribed interviews, thematic commonalities between the students' experiences were explored to better understand these children's experiences from their perspective.

Chapter 2: Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 14 Deaf and hard-of-hearing children (7 boys, 7 girls) in Grades 4 ($n = 4$), 5 ($n = 3$), and 6 ($n = 7$) at local schools for the Deaf. Students attended one of three schools in Canada, two in Ontario ($n = 8$; 5 boys, 3 girls) and one in Manitoba ($n = 6$; 2 boys, 4 girls). Each student self-identified as Deaf ($n = 11$), hard-of-hearing ($n = 2$), or both (i.e., hard-of-hearing in the right ear and Deaf in the left ear; $n = 1$) and understood American Sign Language (ASL). Six students reported that they started attending their school in junior kindergarten or kindergarten, while eight students reported starting in the third ($n = 4$), fourth ($n = 1$), or fifth grade ($n = 3$).

Out of the 14 participants, only two were from a Deaf family with Deaf parents, while the remaining 12 had hearing parents. One participant did indicate that although his parents were hearing, he had a Deaf aunt. In his home, they spoke English, as well as signed ASL a little with him. Additionally, two participants with hearing parents indicated they had siblings that were Deaf or hard-of hearing. These children said that they signed with their fellow Deaf sibling(s) because it was easier and their sibling(s) was good at signing compared to using an alternative mode of communication with their hearing sibling(s). Aside from these cases, according to participants, the mode of communication within their homes varied. On one hand, the two participants with Deaf families indicated they were exposed to ASL from birth and that their whole family signed fluently. On the other hand, some families of children with hearing parents only spoke in English to communicate ($n = 2$), some used a mixture of spoken language, sign language, fingerspelling, as well as written notes and home-made gestures ($n = 7$), while only a

few hearing parents strictly utilized sign language within their home, regardless of their fluency, accuracy and speed ($n = 3$).

Additionally, according to returned parental demographic questionnaires, the onset of each participant's deafness was at the time of their birth or within the first two years of life. The reasons for the hearing loss varied from "*unknown*" ($n = 2$), to vague responses of "*sick at birth*" ($n = 2$), to specifically identifying "*CMV – congenital virus*" ($n = 2$; 8 parents did not respond to this question on the questionnaire) as the cause. Eight participants had some kind of hearing device such as a hearing aid ($n = 6$), cochlear implant ($n = 1$) or both ($n = 1$), and six participants did not use any hearing aid device. All of the participants indicated they first started learning to sign before 10 years of age: Six children first learned sign language at birth or by three years of age, while five learned around the ages of five and six years, and two learned closer to eight or 10 years of age.

Materials

Demographic questionnaire. A self-report demographic questionnaire was sent home for parents/guardians to complete after each interview. The questionnaire consisted of 10 total items examining the participant's home environment; specifically, the age of onset of the child's hearing loss, the hearing status of each of their parent(s) or guardian(s), as well as preferred language used in the home. Questions consisted of either yes/no answers, fill-in-the-blank, or parents/guardians were instructed to select a response by circling the most suitable choices (see Appendix A). During the interview stage, there were four focal interview questions asked of each participant as described in the following section.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained for this study from the university ethics review board, as well as the participating schools district ethics committees. These schools were chosen based on geographic proximity to the researcher, personal connections the lead researcher had, as well as in an effort to recruit from a larger sample. With these approvals, principals of the three participating schools were contacted via email. The principals were visited at their schools by the lead researcher or further emails were sent to explain the study in more detail. Principals shared the nature of the study with the teachers of the grades of interest (i.e., grades 4, 5, and 6) and gave them information packages, including letters of information and parental consent forms for students to take home. Children who returned signed parental consent forms participated in the study. Parental hearing status, as well as, presence or absence of learning or developmental disabilities did not influence or restrict a child's inclusion in the study.

One-to-one, semi-structured interviews took place in a quiet, distraction-free room at the participants' schools, although, two interviews were conducted via Skype when distance and scheduling conflicted. Interviews were conducted in ASL by the lead researcher, who is hearing and fluent in ASL, except in two instances when the child requested to speak English during the interview. An ASL-English interpreter was hired to assist throughout interviews in Ontario and a Deaf Interpreter (DI; an individual who is Deaf that interprets from sign language to sign language) was hired to assist interviews in Manitoba. Since the lead researcher is originally from Manitoba and, therefore, more familiar with signs typically used in Manitoba, a hearing interpreter was helpful to clarify unfamiliar signs used by children in Ontario. The use of a DI for this project came highly recommended by one principal, as a Deaf individual would have

greater ease in understanding a child's signs compared to a non-native signer, such as the lead researcher.

To begin each interview, the lead researcher first explained the nature of the study to each participant and asked if the child had any questions. Participants were informed that their responses would be video recorded but would remain confidential and anonymous. Students or parents who expressed they did not wish for the interview to be video recorded were still permitted to take part in the interview and the researcher took notes about what was said ($n = 1$). Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were told after the interview that they could withdraw their answers and no consequences would occur.

Interviews began with rapport building questions about what the child liked to do in his or her spare time, followed by an informal discussion about their social experiences. The process of asking small, simple rapport building questions allowed the researcher and participant to build a relationship. Having a sense of trust should increase the credibility of the participant's account if they feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Following this, specific questions were asked to prompt the children to voice their personal experiences about social inclusion and exclusion both at school and at home. Subsequently, after the rapport building questions, the digital video recorder was turned on and the four main focal questions asked were: *Do you feel included at school with your classmates? Do you ever feel left out of things with your classmates? Do you feel included at home with your family (e.g., with parents and siblings)? Do you ever feel left out of things with your family?* Prompts such as *Can you tell me more?* were used as needed. Interviews took between eight and 15 minutes. Following the interview,

students were asked to take the demographic questionnaire home for a parent/guardian to complete and were given a small gift and thank you certificate for their participation. After each interview, the researcher took notes based on any themes that emerged from the stories shared. A trained interpreter and the lead researcher later transcribed recorded interviews. The two versions were compared question-by-question to ensure precise translation.

Chapter 3: Results

After the interviews were transcribed and compared for accuracy between the two transcribers, the versions were merged and final transcripts were drafted for each participant. Discrepancies regarding content were not discovered between the two transcribers. There were only a few instances in which the trained interpreter demonstrated superior skills and interpreted the correct spelling of finger-spelled videogame or movie names the lead researcher missed. These details were added to the combined final draft of each transcript. The analysis of these transcripts began with the lead researcher reading each transcript several times to better understand each participant's personal story and feelings of inclusion and exclusion at school and home. Throughout each transcript, statements of interest from all interview questions were highlighted that offered detail into the child's views and experiences. Information in the child's responses that seemed relevant to the question was considered a statement of interest. After highlighting responses, these statements were added to an Excel spreadsheet organized by the four focal interview questions (i.e., feelings of inclusion within the home and school, and feelings of exclusion within the home and school) and participant number. The four focal questions served as a guide for organizing the responses. For instance, responses to the question, "*What are some things you like to do with your family?*" were organized based on how the child responded. If the child provided an example of being included, this statement would be added to the inclusion at home category on the spreadsheet. This process allowed for a comparison between each of the 14 participant's responses based on the four focal questions, as well as supporting comments made in response to the additional interview questions (see Appendix B for a full list of interview questions). This analysis involved a continuous, iterative process whereby statements were examined and compared for similarities and differences in search of

themes. Statements from this refined list that revealed patterns in participant's experiences, such as feelings of inclusion on the playground, were extracted. Some themes arose repeatedly; for instance, the feeling of inclusion with peers and expressing having friends, or the preference to communicate with Deaf relatives. When certain comments were found to be repeated, original transcripts were re-visited in detail to ensure all meaningful and relevant statements were included that supported these themes. This process also helped to ensure the themes identified encompassed the range of ideas expressed by the participants. The four themes that emerged from the data were (a) inclusion with peers at a school for the Deaf (46 statements); (b) an environment for belonging (22 statements); (c) feelings of inclusion within the home (36 statements); and (d) forming an identity (1 statement). Although there were numerous statements that fall under each of these themes, many of the statements were redundant (56 statements in total; 32 statements were redundant for the first theme, 15 statements were redundant for the second theme, and 9 statements were redundant for the third theme), and therefore, all non-redundant statements are presented below in each theme. Some of these themes were further refined into subthemes to highlight the depth of experiences and the depth of Deaf culture. For example, subcategories were created for "inclusion with peers at a school for the Deaf" category to reflect the different ways children felt included (e.g., during school and after school hours, as well as feelings of cooperation). As well, the category on "feelings of inclusion within the home" was further refined to reflect the different communication modalities utilized by each family and how this related to the child's feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Interrater reliability was determined by providing a rater (a second year doctoral student in School Psychology) with operational definitions of each of the four themes (see Appendix C). She was asked to sort 21 (i.e., 20% of the total number of statements) of the non-redundant

statements into the thematic categories. Statements were randomly selected by drawing numbers from a hat. The interrater agreement was 86% (18/21 statements coded alike by the two coders). The discrepant statements were placed into an appropriate category following a discussion with the lead researcher's supervisor. Each theme is discussed, below.

Theme 1: Inclusion with Peers at a School for the Deaf

Feelings of being included with peers, having strong social bonds, and forming friend groups formed the largest category with 46 statements. The focus of this theme is inclusion with peers at school given all 14 students expressed similar views when questioned about their experiences. This theme focuses on statements about interactions between students at the school for the Deaf, such as within the classroom, on the playground, and during after school hours. It also includes statements indicating feelings of connectedness, cooperation, and enjoyment when being with friends at the school for the Deaf. Five subthemes emerged: (a) general statements indicating the students had friends and felt included with them (12 statements); (b) statements specifically indicating feelings of inclusion in the classroom (4 statements); (c) inclusion on the playground (6 statements); (d) inclusion during after school hours (2 statements); and (e) feelings of cooperation (8 statements). In the first subtheme, general statements about inclusion, comments focused on how each participant felt that they had friends, felt included with them, felt connected to them, as well as thoroughly enjoyed playing and having fun with them. Experiences of inclusion were expressed: *"Yes, I have many friends and many groups of friends at school. It's so much fun playing together!"* Another said, *"I have lots of friends. We play together and do different activities at school. I like being with my friends."* In support of this subtheme, all 14 students expressed that they never felt excluded from their peer group: *"Nope, never. I am always included. We are close."* Additionally, it was clear to see the joy in these

children's eyes when talking about their friends – children smiled ear-to-ear and even added exaggerations to emphasize the amount of friends they had. For instance, in response to a question asking if the child had friends, one child with a huge smile exaggerated, *“Many friends!!! 300 or more.”* It is understood by this exaggeration that this child, in particular, felt they had many friends both within school and within the Deaf community. This kind of comment may underscore the reality of a Deaf child who is born into a Deaf family and is fully immersed into the Deaf culture and community.

In the second subtheme, children expressed they felt included in the classroom: *“Yes, I feel included. We play and all have class together”*; *“I enjoy gym games and gym class”*; and *“We do activities together at school, my favorite is going to the school pool and being together.”* For the third subtheme, children also shared feelings of inclusion on the playground: *“Playing and socializing on the playground”* and *“I am happy and excited to play on the swings. Being together makes me happy.”* For the fourth subtheme, some children referenced experiences shared with friends outside of school hours: *“Friends come over to my house and I go over to their house. We play outside too.”* Lastly, the fifth subtheme focuses on feelings of cooperation and these statements were apparent throughout many of the student's comments. Children made reference to words such as *“feel cooperative with friends”*, *“happy”*, *“close”*, *“connected”*, and *“socializing”*, as well as how they played different games and sports together, played card games, chatted in groups, and even read books together. There seemed to be a wide variety of activities these students engaged in and through their interviews expressed the ability to be cooperative with other children within the same age group. It was evident from their statements that they enjoyed being with their peers, and the friends they had at school made them happy. A comment that stood out in particular, *“I enjoy playing around with friends. They make me happy.*

I feel close and connected with them. I honestly like everything about school.” highlights the benefits of a school for the Deaf. These students explicitly told us how being together with their friends and peers made them happy. Overall, there was a strong sense of cohesion and inclusion amongst these students and they genuinely seemed to enjoy being with their friends and being at school with their friends.

Theme 2: An Environment for Belonging

This theme focuses on feelings of belonging within the school for the Deaf and statements that highlight how a school for the Deaf provides opportunities for students to feel included (22 statements). In comparison to the first theme which focuses on the children’s connections and interactions with peers, this theme focuses on how attending a school for the Deaf makes these connections a possibility. Three subthemes emerged: (a) the comparison of experiences between attending a school for the hearing and a school for the Deaf (4 statements); (b) the use of a shared language (15 statements); and (c) how a school for the Deaf is a central gathering place for Deaf children (3 statements). The first subtheme focused on feelings of belonging within the school for the Deaf and contrasts this with students’ experiences at previous schools. Throughout the interviews, previous educational experiences were not probed for; however, two girls did open up about their prior experiences before they attended a school for the Deaf. An experience was shared, *“I started at the school for the Deaf in grade 5 and went to a hearing school before that where I was never included. I used to have a personal EA, but the school would take that away and give it to another kid who really needed help, so I wasn’t able to focus and I struggled. Now I am at a Deaf school and I feel included and I belong better.”* This girl, in grade six at the time of her interview, opened up about her struggles for the first few years of her schooling. Her language and learning abilities were hindered compared to those of

her peers by relying on an EA who was frequently unavailable. It is evident she felt lonely, and was missing strong social bonds. She also added that she felt: *“I have a little PTSD around other hearing kids because I was bullied a lot before.”* She shared how her previous experiences when she attended a school for the hearing have resulted in negative feelings for her concerning hearing peers who bullied her.

The second subtheme focuses on how sharing a common language fosters inclusivity in a school environment. All 14 students in this study confirmed that they continually used sign language (15 statements) as a form of communication among their peers and within their friend groups at school. The two girls in this study who spoke about their experiences of attending a school for the hearing were able to highlight how different school environments could be more inclusive based on similarities and differences in peers, as well as how language allows one to be connected to others. Specifically, the two girls stated: *“I am included a lot. I am not told to go away anymore. This is a more friendly and inclusive environment”* and, *“I finally have real friends because I cannot really hear. I finally know someone who is similar to me and understands me.”*

The third subtheme focuses on how the school for the Deaf is a central place for Deaf children to be together. In addition to the experiences of these two girls, one boy in this study shared how his school is a safe place for him and is the place where he is happiest. It was during the rapport building stage of the interview in which the researcher commented how this child must be excited that summer was near and school would be letting out soon for the summer break. This one boy responded that he disliked summer because then he could not attend school where he was accustomed to seeing his friends every day. He said, *“I feel sad during the summer when my parents are at work and it is just me with my brother at home. He is hearing*

and does not know any sign language. He also teases me and hurts me. Sometimes I do feel lonely. My brother is not really my friend and we sometimes fight. I feel lonely because all of my friends are gone during the summer and I am alone.”

Theme 3: Feelings of Inclusion within the Home

The third theme describes feelings of inclusion and exclusion in the home environment. Each child indicated they were included with their family and felt connected with them, however, there were differences between each participant’s responses. These differences tended to center around the mode of communication utilized within the home, as well as the activities the family engaged in together. As such, this theme is divided into subcategories based on parental hearing status and the communication modality typically used within each home. Four subthemes were created based on the different dynamics of each family: (a) participants with Deaf parents and the regular use of sign language (4 statements); (b) participants with hearing parents who learned and used sign language (6 statements); (c) participants with hearing parents who used a combination of different communication tactics such as a mixture of spoken language, sign language, fingerspelling, as well as written notes and home-made gestures (21 statements); and (d) participants with hearing parents that only used spoken language (5 statements).

In the first subtheme, two participants, a boy and a girl, indicated they felt fully included at home. The boy was born to Deaf parents and had three Deaf siblings and one hearing sibling, while the girl was adopted by her Deaf parents and had two Deaf/hard-of-hearing siblings. Both participants indicated that all family members used ASL to communicate fluently with one another on a daily basis. The boy said, *“I enjoy my family”* and listed numerous activities they engaged in together. The girl shared, *“We have dinner together, go visiting*

together like my aunt and uncle, we always are doing things together and never separate from the group.” She added that during her spare time she enjoyed *“being with friends and family in the Deaf community and celebrating in the Deaf community.”* This girl not only felt included in her home, but also the Deaf community at large. In both of these households, the native language happened to be a visual language rather than a verbal one in which all family members had equal access to.

The second subtheme includes statements from three participants who indicated they were born to hearing families, but had parents who used sign language at home when communicating with them. One boy said his family was from Syria and that his family tended to speak their native language at home, but because he was Deaf and could not talk, his parents used and understood a Syrian sign language as well: *“I speak a different language. My parents and family are hearing and that’s what language they use. I cannot talk – I am Deaf. I sign. My parents understand Syrian sign language. They speak, but know some sign. They are hearing, so they all know that language as well.”* The other two participants indicated that their parents had learned ASL and signed at home: *“We sign at home, but my mom is not the best [at signing]”* and *“Both my mom and dad are hearing. My mom knows sign, but she is slow.”* It is evident that these parents had attempted to learn sign language to communicate better with their children, but the children recognized their parents were not fluent in the language.

The family structure for each of these children varied as well: Two of these participants had no siblings; one of whom lived only with her mom and the other who lived with his mom and dad. The third participant indicated that he lived with both of his parents, had a few hearing siblings, and one older brother who was Deaf. He indicated that he felt close and connected with his family, but mostly felt included by his Deaf brother – their signing together was more fluent

and “easy”. Each of these children shared one thing in common in relation to their feelings of inclusion with their families: How busy their parents were in their day-to-day life. From the children’s perspective, their parents were often too busy to include them: *“My mom is often busy going about her day”*; *“Yes, I am included. I don’t know how to explain it. Sometimes we play games, chat for fun, and plant gardens together, but I am also not included very much because my mom and dad are very busy.”* When their parents included them, one boy shared that they often utilized electronics during times of play; for example, *“I play computer games with my dad on the laptop and I play with the iPad with my mom. Sometimes we all watch movies together so I do not feel alone too often.”* These children felt included with their families and appreciated the effort on their parent’s part for learning to communicate in sign language, but they still felt excluded to a degree since their parents led busy lives.

The third subtheme includes statements from seven participants who had hearing parents who utilized a combination of communication strategies and modalities, such as spoken language, sign language, fingerspelling, as well as written notes and homemade gestures. They indicated: *“All of my family is hearing and most of the time they use speech, but some of the time they will fingerspell and sign a little”*; *“We write and I can talk with my mom, or we use Arabic sign language”*; *“I am the only one who is Deaf. We use gestures”*; and *“Most often my mom and dad will speak. Sometimes if they are far from me, they will sign because I cannot hear them. When we are in the car and it is loud and bumpy they will sometimes sign because I cannot hear.”*

When participants were asked if they felt included with their families, they all indicated that they did (7 statements). They shared how they enjoyed their family and spending time with them: *“We do many things together: Socializing, playing together, games, watch movies. Simply*

enjoy time together"; *"We are always together for sports and celebrations and visiting family together. I like going on trips and traveling with my parents"*; and *"I enjoy my family and they make me feel happy"*. One boy shared, *"When I get home from school, my parents will ask me about my day and if I want to go outside to play."* and said this let him know that his parents cared. Specifically, he said, *"I feel included in my family."* Similarly, one girl shared, *"I feel supported by my parents when they tell me to come and join them. That makes me happy."* One story that stood out was a boy that indicated he had a foster sister who was Deaf and had a stronger connection with her in comparison to his biological hearing siblings. He stated, *"I have one foster sister who is Deaf. She has hearing aids and they [his parents] are trying to teach her to speak. She knows sign and she is good at signing, but they are teaching her to speak. I mostly talk with my hearing sisters; they sometimes sign, but mostly talk. I prefer to play with my Deaf sister because it is easier and she is good at signing."*

When these children were asked if they felt excluded, they also shared that there were times when they did not feel included (5 statements). When they spoke of not feeling included, however, it appeared the children may have had a preference to play alone (3 statements) or became bored with the family activity and, therefore, felt like they wanted to remove themselves from the larger family group to engage in something else. For instance, one boy shared that since his hearing sister played a musical instrument, he found being with his family during these occasions highly boring: *"I am sometimes bored with my family. My sister's music is boring – just sitting there and just watching because I cannot hear. So I sit there and do nothing but watch."* He described how his family still did things together, but felt left out when he could not appreciate the activity such as watching his sister play music. Some children have indicated that they merely enjoyed spending time on their own: *"Most of the time I prefer to play alone"* and

“I sometimes like to be on my own to rest.” On the one hand, the majority of the participants shared that they sometimes felt excluded: *“A little bit”*; *“Sometimes”*; *“Both included and excluded”*. One girl did share that it could be difficult to get her mother’s attention. She said, *“Sometimes I have to tap my mom on the shoulder and wait to get her attention. It also makes me feel sad and lonely watching my mom and sister talking. I cannot hear them and understand what they are saying.”* On the other hand, many also shared that they had never felt ignored or excluded (6 statements) by their parents: *“No, not really ever ignored”*; *“My family is fine”*.

Statements from two girls formed the final subtheme of those with family members who were hearing and used spoken English at home (5 statements). Both girls chose to complete their interviews in English. During the interviews, these girls spoke about their feelings of being included, as well as excluded with different family members. Specifically, they felt more included by their parents rather than their siblings. One girl spoke to how she felt included with her parents, but not by her siblings. She described how they intentionally excluded her from activities they engaged in together: *“My brother and sister do not always include me. They often tell me that they are going to go and do something and tell me that I cannot join them. But, my mom and dad, they always include me. I enjoy being with my family and being included makes me happy because it is not all the time, it’s just a little bit.”* This same girl, when asked by the researcher if she ever felt left out of things with her family answered, *“Yes, sometimes. I don’t know. I am not left out all of the time, just sometimes.”* She added, *“My mom and dad are divorced...I feel more included with my dad at his house. It is only me and my sister that go back and forth between homes, so when we are at my dad’s house it is only us and so, much of the time I am more involved.”* It appeared this girl valued times of being included, especially when she was at her dad’s house. Having fewer siblings around allowed her more of an

opportunity to connect with her sister and father. Similarly, the second girl in this subtheme spoke highly about her strong bonds and enjoyment of interacting and spending time with her parents. When asked if she felt included at home she responded: *“Yes, my mom and dad will interact with me a lot. My dad also likes to joke around with me.”* They also often made time for her and adjusted their communication style to be accessible to her: *“Sometimes we go out and they talk to me a lot. I also know that when they talk directly to me, they always talk louder than they usually do because even with lip reading I wouldn’t understand most of what they are saying otherwise.”* She added, *“I enjoy being with them and feel included most of the time. When I am included it makes me more happy, and feel more a part of them and their community.”* When asked about her feelings of exclusion at home, however, she indicated that she felt excluded in comparison to her hearing siblings: *“Just a little bit. I do not know which community I am a part of.”* This girl stated that when her hearing parents included her, she felt connected to the hearing world. Conversely, since she felt her hearing siblings had a stronger connection with their parents, she felt disconnected from the hearing world.

Theme 4: Forming an Identity

For Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, there are two worlds: the Deaf world and the hearing world. The final theme revolves around the struggle some Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals face when trying to navigate between these two worlds – specifically, the struggle of finding one’s own identity when caught between the Deaf world and the hearing world. It highlights the confusion an individual experiences when they feel torn between two worlds. One girl in the study (1 statement) mentioned her own struggle in relation to her own confusion and feelings of inclusion: *“I do not know which community I am apart of...I do not know if my people are hearing people or Deaf people.”* On the one hand, since her family was hearing and she was

able to function well within the hearing world, she felt connected and a part of the hearing world. She was raised in the hearing world and for the first few years of her academic life, she attended a school for the hearing. On the other hand, she self-identified as a Deaf individual and also felt connected to the Deaf world. She also attended a school for the Deaf where she had friends she identified as similar to herself, and experienced exclusion from hearing peers from her past, as well as exclusion from hearing siblings.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Previous research has examined the social experiences of Deaf children mainstreamed in hearing classrooms (Batten et al., 2014; Luft, 2017). Further, research suggests that Deaf children may be subject to negative implications when raised in hearing families, such as isolation and language delays (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014; Luckner & Velaski, 2004). Little is known about Deaf children's views and experiences in a school for the Deaf or their experiences at home. The present study inquired about the social experiences of Deaf children who attend a school for the Deaf, in which all students share the common characteristic of deafness and use of the same language. Additionally, students were asked to share their experiences of inclusion at home with their families. It was found that these children were developing strong social relationships within an environment where they could practice social skills with peers, as well as where teachers provided instruction through sign language. These children indicated they felt included by their peers in their classrooms and on the playground. They also spoke to having experiences that were more positive at a school for the Deaf in comparison to a school for the hearing. Additionally, it was found that these children felt included by their families regardless of parental hearing status, but there was a preference for connection with Deaf relatives. Each theme is discussed in detail, below.

This study found that Deaf children felt highly included attending a school for the Deaf. An important aspect within a school for the Deaf is the use of a shared language – namely, sign language. Access to a common language utilized by peers and teachers falls under the umbrella of how schools for the Deaf are an inclusive and friendly environment where students have a sense of belonging. These students are able to participate in socialization and communicate with others, thus forming bonds through these shared experiences. They share a common language

and are in an environment that utilizes their language and molds the environment and activities, such as sporting events, to be suitable for the success of these children. Participants expressed how sharing the same culture and language provided them with successful opportunities to communicate and form relationships with peers. This finding is similar to that by Angelides and Aravi (2007) who found that when children share the same language, it greatly influences their abilities to communicate and interact with ease. Additionally, Deaf children often experience marginalization and exclusion when mainstreamed in hearing classrooms (Angelides & Aravi, 2007). Imagine if you were a child and had to go to a school where you could not understand the teacher in your classroom without the support of an interpreter. Suppose you were unable to understand even your peers, so that your only meaningful interactions at school took place between you and one other adult, your interpreter, who “filtered” all information from the environment for you. Similar to participants in the study by Angelides and Aravi (2007), two participants in this study disclosed their personal experiences of being marginalized and excluded in mainstream schools. In fact, one girl indicated she felt she had “*PTSD*” around hearing children due to her experience of being bullied. This experience was traumatizing and she continued to struggle to be around hearing children her own age. Being at the school for the Deaf, however, provided her with a safe and inclusive environment where for the first time she was able to interact with other Deaf children, in a language that relied on the visual, rather than the auditory. The advantage for Deaf students attending a school for the Deaf is that these schools are designed to promote socialization. For one, because all of the children are Deaf, participation in extracurricular functions, such as sports, is not dependent on the level of speech one may have, or on the use of an interpreter, rather, these programs are designed for Deaf children. Moreover, teachers are typically Deaf and any hearing teacher must become proficient

in sign language. As such, all teachers are able to converse with students and Deaf staff to a greater extent than their counterparts in general education. Children in a school for the Deaf can participate in every aspect of their schooling beginning very early in their academic career, which ultimately fosters feelings of inclusion and belonging.

Angelides and Aravi (2007) reported that individuals who attended both mainstream schools for the hearing as well as schools for the Deaf indicated that the mainstream schools had a more challenging curriculum and thus the opportunity to learn more. The results of that study highlighted that there was a trade-off between academic and social benefits. “By definition, least restrictive environment means the most appropriate educational placement for the child, the setting in which the child’s capacities may be developed to the greatest possible extent” (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 249-250). The hearing world in general, and educators who are not familiar with Deaf culture, tend to see the full integration of the Deaf child into the hearing classroom as providing the least restrictive environment for the education of that child. Those familiar with Deaf culture see things differently. “The least restrictive environment for Deaf students is probably the one that allows the freest and fullest communication with teachers and peers, which is a prerequisite to academic progress and psychological and social development” (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 255). Schools for the Deaf allow children the opportunity to complete their education in a language that is designed for them, while being surrounded by peers who are similar to them. Language is not only vital for academic learning, but also for socialization. The advantage for these students to share a common language allows them to communicate, understand each other, and engage in cooperative play. It is during these early, elementary school years that children establish friendships with children who are perceived as similar to themselves (Markson & Fawcett, 2007). The findings from our study point to how

attending a school for the Deaf allowed children to have opportunities to form enjoyable relationships which made them happy. Going to school made them happy because they felt they belonged and were able to see their friends. Specifically, a child disclosed that compared to her previous school for the hearing, the school for the Deaf was a *“more friendly and inclusive environment”* and because of the inclusivity of the school environment and the similarity among peers, another child said, *“I honestly like everything about school”*. This final quote speaks volumes when deciphering between what is considered to be the least restrictive environment. The comments from the two girls who spoke about their experiences at both a school for the hearing and a school for the Deaf depict personal understanding of how their deafness may have limited their ability to make friends within a hearing classroom. Their comments also showed how within an environment surrounded by those who shared this common characteristic they did not feel different, but rather understood. When children are in a place where they feel understood, it can be assumed they would feel they belong. The school for the Deaf environment is often seen by members of the Deaf community as a place where these students belong, and it can even be a safe haven when home life is not as inclusive or comforting. One boy in this study spoke about feeling lonely in the company of a hearing brother that did not know sign language without his parents and friends around. He mentioned disliking summer because when he was not in school he was unable to see his friends. It is worth noting that although this boy attended a day school program, his school had a residential program which allowed for many students to attend from out of province. It is unknown, but perhaps some of his friends were a part of the residential program and during summer months were no longer in the same city. In all, these students shared, through their experiences and views, that the school for the Deaf is a communal gathering place for Deaf students to learn and socialize together.

In addition to exploring children's experiences of inclusion and exclusion at school, home and family life experiences were also explored. It is important to keep in mind that each child comes from different cultural backgrounds, have different family structures, and each family has different communication modalities. Specifically, only two participants in this study were born into or raised in a Deaf family, while the remaining Deaf and hard-of-hearing participants had hearing parents. Since each individual presented with different backgrounds, knowledge, and experiences, we must appreciate the differing worldviews of every parent and child. For Deaf parents, the birth of a Deaf child is often celebrated, but this can depend on their own upbringing as well. "From the parents' perspective, one can understand that it meant that their child's first language would be the same as their own first language (sign rather than oral language), their child would likely understand and navigate through the hearing world in a similar fashion to them, and that there was a sense of solidarity or sameness between themselves and their child" (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014, p. 26). Interactions between Deaf children and a Deaf parent are more natural perhaps because the dyad shares the same language. Conversely, for hearing parents who likely had never encountered deafness prior to the birth of a Deaf child, their reaction may be less of a celebration. "Suddenly, their future with this new baby became one of extreme uncertainty, negativity, and confusion. How would they use their spoken language in the home? What would their family members think? How would they ever teach their child? How could they ever effectively parent a child so different from them?" (du Feu & Chovaz, 2014, p.27).

Findings from this study revealed how participants reported stronger feelings of connection to their Deaf and hard-of-hearing family members, either parents and/or siblings, compared to their hearing relatives. Their reasoning was often due to ease of communication

and fluency in sign language. Specifically, the two participants from an all Deaf family did not mention feelings of exclusion. Instead, it was evident they were able to relate to their parents and siblings – they did not see any differences between one another. Participants with hearing parents, but Deaf siblings, discussed how their relationship with these Deaf siblings were *tighter* compared to the relationship with their hearing parents and hearing siblings. The participants explicitly noted that they preferred to be in the company of and communicate with these Deaf siblings as they were more familiar with and skilled in sign language. For instance, two children said, *“I prefer to play with my Deaf sister because it is easier and she is good at signing”* as well as, *“My oldest brother is Deaf and we both sign...My oldest brother and I will play together. In the summer, I love riding my bike with my Deaf brother.”* In relation to this second quote, when asked if people in his family included him when they did things, he indicated, *“mostly with my brother.”* These connections between the participants and their fellow Deaf and hard-of-hearing family members supports the notion that children tend to relate better to others when they feel they are similar.

Findings from this study also revealed that Deaf and hard-of-hearing children felt included in their families regardless of their parents’ hearing status. There were minimal instances reported of feeling excluded. What participants did report were difficulties in communicating when sign language was not their parents’ first language. For instance, one participant reported needing to tap her mother on her shoulder and wait to get her attention, as well as feelings of being left out of conversations between hearing family members. Simply imagine a family gathering and everyone is talking and smiling – they are enjoying their time, but it is different for the only Deaf child. The world they live in is a world of silence. Conversations and jokes are shared, but the child can only observe in silence. This is a prime

example of how Deaf children can easily feel excluded when they are sitting in the same room as the rest of their hearing family. Although it may appear to others that they are being inclusive, when the child cannot hear what is being said, and thus not able to engage in the conversation or contribute their own thoughts, this may elicit feelings of loneliness. Here, a healthy form of communication does not exist and children miss out on daily conversations, as well as relationships formed out of such bonding experiences. Deep human connections are lacking and thus it is understandable if children report feeling lonely.

Similarly, participants also reported having a preference of being in the presence of fewer hearing family members. One girl spoke to feeling more included by her hearing family members when there were fewer people around. Specifically, since her family uses spoken language with her (i.e., their Deaf daughter), it would be hard for her to concentrate on and understand many people talking around her. This would pose as a challenge because one can only look at one person at a time. Additionally, listening and hearing are tricky skills for Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals even with hearing aids or other hearing devices. Despite that some of the participants were accustomed to hearing and attempted to read lips, they may not be fully functional in communicating through speech to the same degree as a hearing person. It is understandable how many people talking can be overwhelming and feel highly isolating if one were to fall behind and feel lost in the conversation. These children may be physically included in a family gathering, but may feel excluded due to not being part of the conversation.

Communication between parents and their Deaf child plays an essential role in the child's linguistic, social, and cognitive development. When parents have good communication skills and are able to engage in meaningful interactions with their Deaf child, the child gains knowledge of self and others, as well as a sense of being part of the world. Subsequently, Deaf

parents are more likely than hearing parents to communicate effectively with their Deaf child because these interactions may be more natural, wherein a diverse and rich language may be shared.

Sign language is a medium of social interaction in the Deaf world and often comes easily and naturally to Deaf people. It allows Deaf individuals to share experiences, cultural beliefs, and values. These common experiences arise, in part, directly from being Deaf, where one depends on visual, not hearing, and uses sign language for ease of communication (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Sign language is in fact a very powerful symbol of identity in the Deaf world. Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals may struggle to find their identity in a hearing world that has traditionally disparaged their language and denied their culture (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). The hearing world and Deaf world are separate and sometimes are not mixed. When an individual is Deaf or hard-of-hearing and is able to interact with both Deaf people through sign language, as well as hearing people through a spoken language, they may feel lost not knowing to which world they belong. Through one girl's interview, she shed light on the struggle of forming her own identity when feeling caught between two worlds. This girl did not know which group of people she could identify with more. She felt she was in a place of conflict attempting to understand who she was as well as in which world she belonged. Although she was the only participant in this study to mention her feelings of confusion around which world she felt was more inclusive or suitable for her, from a cultural perspective, it is understood to be a common feeling for many (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). The significance of feeling torn between two worlds and not knowing which world one belongs to weighs heavily for many other Deaf and hard-of-hearing adults as well, especially when one is a Deaf individual from a predominantly hearing family (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).

Future Directions

It is unfortunate that because the majority of the participants in this study were Deaf children of hearing families that the topic of understanding ones' identity was not explored in more depth. The girl who spoke about this was one of the last interviewees, and this topic was not a part of the initial questioning. As a result, this theme of forming and understanding ones' identity is narrow in detail, but is seen as an important area for future research looking into the Deaf community and how children and adults form their own identities, as well as in which world they feel included.

Additional suggestions for future research include looking into self-esteem in Deaf children and youth. In addition to impacts on language development and social interactions, does hearing status of ones' parents influence self-esteem in Deaf children? Is there a relationship between language, psychosocial functioning, and cognitive functioning and self-esteem? Similarly, how does the struggle of forming an identity at a young age when feeling caught between two conflicting worlds relate to self-esteem? If a child does not know which world they are a part of, how does this influence their self-esteem, especially at such a young age in which they are still figuring out who they are and who they want to be?

Schools for the Deaf allow Deaf children to encounter many Deaf role models. "It is through these contacts that Deaf children, especially Deaf children of hearing parents, may begin to understand that there is a Deaf society, a Deaf culture – a Deaf World – where they may feel at home. They also have the opportunity to learn a great deal from a Deaf perspective about how to function as a Deaf person in the hearing world" (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 244). This perspective and this transition from a school for the Deaf into a hearing world is seen as an interesting area for future research. For example, are there any issues or struggles about being

schooled separately that might carry over to functioning in a predominantly hearing world? How do these children transition to a hearing world, or do they? Some Deaf individuals are able to communicate with the hearing world, either through speech if they have a hearing device and have completed years of oral and speech therapy, or more simply through writing notes. Often, however, individuals run into snags in communication and are misunderstood. For example, lip-reading has its limitations and hearing devices can fail. In recent years, however, parents, siblings, and friends of Deaf children are more likely to sign than in the past (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996) as are professionals who work with Deaf people. The creation of the profession of interpreting, and Deaf studies and interpreting programs at universities is aiding in the merge of these two cultures and worlds.

Lastly, from personal experiences in the Deaf community, the lead researcher understands the value of art in the Deaf culture and community. Art is often understood as a means of expressing oneself in a way words could not describe. Sign language, in fact, lends itself the same ability of expressing oneself more than with the spoken word. The innate beauty of sign language is that it allows one to express themselves with their hands, face, and body in a creative, three-dimensional way. It is simply intriguing how many of the participants indicated their joy of and passion for art. As this love of art does not relate to the research questions about inclusion and exclusion, it was not included as a theme in this study. Nonetheless, as it was mentioned by six participants, it may be a worthwhile area of pursuit in future research.

Limitations

The participants in our study were in grades four, five, and six. Consequently, they were still dependent on their parents and may have wished to not say anything negative about their parents or family. Additionally, since the students were aware that they were being video

recorded, they may have provided more positive depictions of their feelings of inclusion compared to feelings of exclusion in fear that what they said could be shared with their parents/family. As a result, the findings from this study should be interpreted with caution.

Secondly, it is important to keep in mind the differences between American Sign Language (ASL) and English. Since the study was designed by native English speakers and interview questions were phrased in English, it was required for the lead researcher to interpret each question and translate them into proper ASL grammar and formatting. From a cultural understanding, it is important to recognize how ASL uses examples when trying to elicit a response from another individual. For instance, instead of simply asking a child if they have ever felt excluded or ignored by their family, one would also provide an example with the question to trigger a memory and help the child recall an example before providing their answer. The challenge here is that in research one should always remain objective and unbiased as to not impact the participants' thought process. Consequently, the lead researcher provided minimal examples at first, and only after a child answered the question, the researcher suggested a few examples as probes to aid the child in elaborating on their response. The lead researcher also noticed that some of the participants struggled to understand the intentions of some of the questions and required the researcher, as well as the interpreter, to repeat and rephrase questions. As such, it would be worthwhile to repeat this study with older students.

Conclusion

Through the experience of conducting this study, the lead researcher recognized how vital previous experience with the Deaf community contributed to highlighting meaning from these children's statements. People outside of the Deaf community who lack knowledge of the culture often understand deafness as a disability – that they are broken, they need to be fixed

(Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Deafness is not the limitation; rather the limitation is the lack of awareness in society about Deaf culture and *Deaf gain*. Once immersed in the community, one can see that for them, Deafness is an identity and a culture united by a shared language. Hearing signers and Deaf signers alike are bonded together by this beautiful language and unique culture. Deaf people have an amazing and thriving culture, but they are often excluded from the rest of the world and parents of Deaf children are not always taking advantage of the culture. Why let technology, in the form of a hearing device that could malfunction or break, be the only bridge in communication? The take away message from this study is that it is not a risk for Deaf children to grow up with sign language; however, it is a gamble for a Deaf child to grow up without it.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire Task

Please answer the following questions in relation to the elementary student participating in the present study. All questions are voluntary to answer.

Date of your child's birth (Month & Year): _____

Gender of your child: _____

1. What is your child's hearing status?

- a. Hearing b. Hard of hearing c. Deaf

2. If you selected (b) or (c), when was the onset of your child's hearing loss?

- a. At birth b. Date: _____
- c. Reason for hearing loss: _____

3. Does your child use a hearing aid, a cochlear implant, or other form of hearing device?

- a. No b. If yes, please specify which: _____

4. What is your (as the child's parent/caregiver) hearing status?

- a. All parents/caregivers are hearing
- b. All parents/caregivers are Deaf or hard-of-hearing
- c. One parent/caregiver is hearing, and one parent/caregiver is Deaf or hard-of-hearing

5. Does your child who is participating in the study have any siblings?

- a. No b. Yes – all hearing c. Yes – all Deaf d. Yes – hearing and Deaf

6. What is the preferred or primary language used in the child's home?

- a. American Sign Language (ASL)
- b. English
- c. Other: _____

7. At what age did your child first start using sign language? Please specify: _____

8. How often does your child use sign language? (Please circle one)

Always Sometimes Rarely Never

9. What grade did your child start attending the School for the Deaf?

Please specify: _____

10. Does your child have any learning or developmental disabilities?

a. No

b. Yes, Please specify: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. What grade are you in?
2. What do you like to do during your spare time?
3. What language(s) do you speak at home? (E.g., with parents, siblings, and/or grandparents)
4. How many brothers and sisters do you have? How old are they? What is the gender of each sibling? Are any of your siblings Deaf?
5. What are some things you like to do with your family?
6. Do you like doing things with your family?
7. Do people in your family include you when they do things together?
8. How do you feel when you are included?
- 9. Do you feel included at home with your family (E.g. with parents and siblings)?**
PROBE What does it look like to feel included in things with your family?
- 10. Do you sometimes feel left out of things with your family? PROBE** When do you feel left out?
11. How is school going for you?
12. What is your favorite part of school?
13. Do you have friends at school?
- 14. Do you feel included at school with your classmates? PROBE** What does it look like to feel included at school with your friends and classmates?
- 15. Do you ever feel left out of things with your friends? PROBE** When do you feel left out?
16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about being included at home? About feeling left out at home? About being included at school? About feeling left out at school? Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C

Operational Definitions:

Theme 1 – Inclusion with Peers at a School for the Deaf

This theme focuses on statements about *interactions* between students at the school for the Deaf, such as within the classroom, on the playground, and during after school hours. It also includes statements indicating feelings of connectedness, cooperation, and enjoyment when *being with friends* at the school for the Deaf. This theme focuses on *explicit* statements of inclusion and connections and gives examples of interactions compared to the second theme that focuses on how attending a school for the Deaf makes these connections a possibility.

Theme 2 – An Environment for Belonging

This theme focuses on statements that highlight *how* a school for the Deaf provides opportunities for students to feel included, such as sharing a common language and not requiring an interpreter or personal EA. This theme *compares* students' experiences between schools for the Deaf to schools for the hearing, as well as how sign language makes it easier for these children to socialize with peers at a school for the Deaf. It also touches on how the school for the Deaf is a *safe haven* when there are struggles at home.

Theme 3 – Feelings of Inclusion within the Home

This theme focuses on statements of inclusion or exclusion at home with family members regardless of hearing status.

Theme 4 – Forming an Identity

This theme focuses on statements that indicate confusion about one's own identity and to which world the students feel they belong, either the hearing world or the Deaf world.

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