

Development of Deaf Identity: An Ethnographic Study

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This ethnographic study explores the identity development of 9 deaf participants through the narratives of their educational experiences in either mainstream or special schools for the Deaf. This exploration goes beyond a binary conceptualization of deaf identity that allows for only the medical and social models and proposes a bicultural “dialogue model.” This postmodern theoretical framework is used to examine the diversity of identities of deaf learners. The inclusion of the researcher’s own fluid cross-cultural identity as a bicultural “DeaF” participant in this study provides an auto-ethnographic gateway into exploring the lives of other deaf, Deaf, or bicultural DeaF persons. The findings suggest that deaf identity is not a static concept but a complex ongoing quest for belonging, a quest that is bound up with the acceptance of being deaf while “finding one’s voice” in a hearing-dominant society. Through the use of dialogue and narrative tools, the study challenges educators, parents, and researchers to broaden their understanding of how deaf identity, and the dignity associated with being a deaf person is constructed.

This study aims to explore ethnographically what it means to be a deaf person, as conveyed by the stories of deaf adults. Prior research has established that deaf persons’ educational experiences have a profound impact on how they perceive themselves (Leigh, 2009). In this paper, we—a team of one deaf and one hearing researcher—will explore in detail the life stories of a range of deaf persons (six oral deaf and three signing Deaf participants) in terms of their identity development from their educational experiences in South Africa.

Context

There are two points of focus in this study. The first is to gain a deeper insight into deaf identities. To which

end, this paper presents a qualitative exploration of the conventional distinction between deaf (culturally hearing) and Deaf¹ (as a sign language community) identities and moves into the unexplored bicultural identity of being DeaF² (McIlroy, 2010) through their educational experiences.

Second, this research includes and integrates an auto-ethnographic account of the first author’s personal transition from a hearing world into Deaf culture and the development of his identity as a bicultural/bilingual DeaF person.

In addition to these areas of focus, this study is important because it recognizes the growing influence of the wealth of research into deaf identity, such as a similar study conducted in Greece by Hadjidakou and Nikolarazi (2006). To date, no study has been done in South Africa regarding deaf identity.

Deaf Identities

The “representation of the self” is the classical way of describing identity (Baumeister, 1997); it is based on how children’s family and school experiences become internalized as part of one’s identity formation. Taking this idea further, Hadjidakou and Nikolarazi (2006) add that identity is a socially constructed process, which is expanded upon by relating past and present experiences into one’s identity, thus being shaped by the narratives or stories that we tell others (Sikes & Gale, 2006). Therefore, this study adopted the narrative approach as used by Leigh (2009) and Stobek & Magongwa (2006) to explore deaf identities through analysis of the interview transcripts. The narrative approach is an ethnographic tool that uses the life stories or narratives of participants to thematically explore how identity is constructed.

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The pioneering study by Bat-Chava (2000) provided evidence of fairly static clusters of four deaf identities: deaf, Deaf, negative/ambiguous identity, and bicultural identity. Similarly, Ohna (2004) conceptualized four phases of Deaf identity development. In synchronic order, these phases are “taken for granted,” “alienation,” “affiliation,” and the bicultural “deaf in my own way” (Ohna, 2004). The “deaf in my own way” phase takes on particular significance in this study, as it informs our exploration of how deaf persons dialogue with themselves and their worlds.

Hence, the “deaf in my own way” identity is an embodiment of a postmodern perspective where postmodernism, as a philosophical orientation (Solomon, 2000), confronts the oppressive and political overtones of modernism. This stance disbelieves the conventional conceptualization found in the medical–social binary that allows only a medical or a social cultural difference perspective. Furthermore, as Lyotard (1984) argues, postmodernism actively negotiates between multiple meanings and often competing discourses, to redefine identity as fluidly constructed, with multiple identities coexisting in the rich multicultural postmodern landscape (Corker, 1996; Leigh, 2009; Wrigley, 1996). In the context of Deaf studies, this frame of reference equips researchers and deaf persons who seek to expose and resolve or bridge the cultural divide between the two opposing worlds of hearing and deaf.

However, with this phase comes the considerable risk of being misunderstood as a “... cultural sell-out or a liar or an Oralist ...” (Ohna, 2004, p. 29). Such criticism implies that cultural values have been compromised, as when a deaf person is perceived by both the hearing and Deaf communities as being an outsider, by virtue of being neither Deaf nor hearing enough. Despite this danger of failure, the “deaf in my own way” phase is an important postmodern construction of identity that displays and demands a strong sense of maturity and of self. Instead of being egocentric, the identity of a “deaf in my own way” person is centered on self-reflective coexistence in and between hearing and Deaf worlds. Therefore, this phase presents authentic deaf identity as that of a bilingual bicultural person who fits into both worlds as necessary. Such a person is able to navigate the interface between the two cultures precisely because of

his or her fluid bicultural identity. This conceptualization fits well with the dialogue model mentioned in the Abstract, which is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Introducing the Dialogue Model

This discussion of the postmodern dialogue model begins with the disability theorist, Shakespeare’s (Shakespeare & Watson, 2002) claim that “there is no qualitative difference between disabled and non-disabled people because we are all impaired in some form, some more than others.” This point draws our focus to the concept of our humanity and moves us into the realm of ontology. Ontology is that branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of reality and refers to the status of being in which a person exists (Soanes, 2004), whether they are able-bodied or disabled.

In the context of Deaf studies, identity has traditionally been defined around the disability–difference binary (Davis, 2002). From this perspective, identity is constructed as either a “disabled deaf person or as a Deaf person with a difference” (Davis, 2002, p. 9), either of which “always implies being deaf is a second-class identity” (Davis, 2002, p. 88). The assumption has been that only two identities are possible for deaf persons, namely deaf or Deaf, and that all deaf persons fit into one category or the other. Therefore, ontology is a valuable starting point into the later discussion of how deaf identities are constructed beyond this traditional identity of being deaf or Deaf.

May (1983) first describes the essentialist perspective of ontology as a position of “to be *or* not to be” that includes one identity while excluding the opposite; May then proposes that this statement be rewritten as: “to be *and* not to be,” a position in which persons embrace the fullness of their humanity. Within the deaf studies context, Breivik (2005, p. 202) frames identity in terms of “hybridity” based on diversity and heterogeneity, a concept echoed in Brueggemann’s idea of “inbetweenity” or living “between spaces” (Brueggemann, 2009). This frames identity as a quest for belonging instead of as a narrow quest for self-definition based on difference in terms of being either deaf or Deaf. Moreover, Ladd (in Bauman, 2008) views Deafhood as a concept to explore

how deaf persons handle the bicultural existential tension between minority and majority cultural values. This tension presents a mixture of characteristics of both cultures without a clear understanding of how the processes work upon and within us. It is this situation which gave rise to the ethnographic focus of this study to be discussed in the next section.

Traditionally, the identity journey can take a deaf person to one of two possible sites of identity. The first option is to strive to be as much like a hearing person as possible in order to blend into the oral language world (Leigh, 1999, 2009). This entails constructing their identity around their hearing impairment which is seen as something to be overcome, as framed by the medical model. The second option is to define themselves primarily as a member of a socio-linguistic minority in recognition of Deaf rights; this option is portrayed by the social model (Gesser, 2007; Padden & Humphries, 2005; Reagan, 1995; Shakespeare, 1996; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002). These two choices illustrate the long-standing antagonism between the medical and social models' construction of the identity of deaf persons (Reagan, 2002; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). The maintenance of these rigid cultural boundaries is characteristic of what has been called the "first-wave deaf identity politics" (Davis, 2002), where an essentialist binary forces the choice between oral or sign modes of communication. Davis (2002) also observed that this binary has dominated the politics around Deaf education over the past 130 years.

Fernandes and Myers (2010) suggest that Deaf studies and Deaf education need to reflect the complexity of deaf lives more accurately by going beyond the rigid oppositions between deaf and hearing people and between sign and speech. This binary model is problematic in Deaf education because as Brueggemann (2009) observes, it thrives on opposition and the rhetoric of exclusion. The consequence is that deaf persons themselves tend to stay locked into those oppositions and are afraid to enter the gap between the binary poles (Fernandes & Myers, 2010). This article addresses the need to understand the lives of deaf persons living in this space as well as those who have found new identities between these fixed terms. This approach is facilitated by the auto-ethnographic input from the researcher as a full participant.

As postmodernists theorists contend, there is no single best way to communicate and understand the world (Hlynka & Yeama, 1992). This philosophical shift has great significance for the education of deaf children especially since the postmodern perspective challenges deaf and hearing communities to redefine identity as a fluidly constructed ontology (Corker, 1996; Leigh, 2009; Wrigley, 1996). Instead of a fixed state of identity, the postmodern self-concept offers people a multiplicity of identities in which they may coexist. A whole range of identities in terms of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, languages, social status, and other dimensions becomes available. Thus, as Foster (2001) concludes, one's disability remains an important and integral part in the fluid construction of deaf identity (see also Shakespeare, 2002). In the case of deaf persons, being deaf would be construed or held onto as being a core element of identity (Leigh, 2009). Nonetheless, a person is not defined essentially and rigidly by his or her disability as tends to occur within the medical model (Reagan, 1995) and also, ironically, within the social model, despite its ardent pursuit of social and political emancipation from an audist discourse.

The postmodern approach thus provides an important departure from the medical and social models' insistence on defining identity fundamentally in terms of disability via either the acceptance or the rejection thereof. Hence, there is an increase or decrease of dignity according to the presence of internal dignity and tolerance of oneself as a deaf person. At the same time, the identity crisis between dignity (trust) and gap or void (distrust) as "the representation of the self" (Baumeister, 1997) is negotiated anew in each situation as they go through their lives.

We propose to place and rename this postmodern ontological framework within Deaf studies with the more concise title of the "dialogue model." The essence of the dialogue model is reconciliation through critical self-reflective bicultural dialogue, which embraces postmodern tensions between contradictory identities. This model is developed in the remainder of this paper.

The increasing awareness and understanding of what it means to be deaf, which extends beyond the outdated "first-wave of identity politics" (Davis,

2002), is far more nuanced than the medical/social model. The newer approach allows for an appreciation of the complexity and range of deaf ontology. The dialogue model is in alignment with the current shift into the “second-wave deaf identity politics” (Davis, 2002) in its celebration of marginal discourses (Corker, 2000) through a fluid network of identities. According to Ladd (2003), this concept of second-wave deaf identity politics refers to a greater tolerance and acceptance of diversity within and across deaf and hearing communities. We add that this is a significant shift away from the first-wave deaf/Deaf binary with only medical and cultural perspectives of deafness. The second wave serves as a platform for discussing the bicultural identity.

This approach also fits well with the postcolonial perspective of reconciliation and dialogue between former oppressor and victim (Geertsema, 2004). It is significant for Deaf studies that Shakespeare (2000) suggests that a feature of oppression is the “loss of voice,” which has also been a feature of deaf identity politics (Wrigley, 1996). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa provided a symbolic and public platform on which previously voiceless victims had the opportunity to retell their stories in their own words, of their shame, oppression and human right abuses and experiences (Allen, 2006). It is this cathartic retelling that, as Thornton (2005) suggests, often provides evocative narratives of dissent against authority and “unfreedom” (p. 7). This narrative process provides rich data for ethnographic research.

Taking this point further, Taylor (1992, p. 51) argues that

... if Deaf persons were to believe that they are disabled, it is because they experience contempt and shame before others (hearing) in the public space especially at school, and therefore their dignity is compromised.

This example foregrounds the theme of the dialogue model’s stance of reconciliation through constructive dialogue. This attitude of tolerating difference fosters the (re)claiming of dignity and is of considerable value to minorities such as deaf and Deaf persons.

It needs to be emphasized that the dialogue model is not positioning itself as a metatheory to explain deaf identity in its entirety. Rather, it serves as an interpretative model for theorizing how the world is experienced by deaf people in a way that extends beyond the static medical/social binary. The dialogue model is particularly useful in understanding the struggles of minority groups such as deaf persons, who fall through the gaps between the medical and social models. It is also a useful research tool for understanding how deaf persons make sense of the “disconnections and displacements” (Breivik, 2005) in their lives through their narratives (Leigh, 2009). Furthermore, Leigh (2009) noted that deaf persons generally used the standard labels typical of first-wave medical and social model rhetoric that is deaf, hard of hearing, or Deaf.

We propose a bicultural “DeaF identity” (Mcilroy, 2010), which represents the cultural space from which they transition within and between both the Deaf community and the hearing community. Hence, the capital F in DeaF highlights the deaf person’s fluid postmodern interactions and engagement and dialogue across the conventional dividing line between Deaf and culturally hearing identities and communities as an authentic bicultural DeaF person.

What we wanted to find out is how a bicultural DeaF identity is assumed. We explored this through the fluid interactions with the (typically hearing) family in which many deaf persons grew up through the use of cross-cultural bilingual dialogue in sign language and a spoken or written language. And how this identity is assumed by established Deaf persons who transition into bicultural DeaF identity through their interactions with hearing community as they renegotiate their identity as biculturally DeaF by building on the opportunities of both communities they live within on their own terms.

Moreover, the dialogue model seeks to position itself as a “rediscovery and affirmation of the ordinary” (Ndebele, 1992; Taylor, 1992). This is evidenced in the life stories and rhetoric of DeaF persons as they construct new knowledge and a way of living as an alternative to the medical and social discourses (Jankowski, 1997).

In discussing how bicultural identities may be understood, Ladd (2003) defines Deafhood as a process

of claiming one's Deaf identity with dignity. To this point, we add that the DeaF identity goes beyond this to claim the bicultural identity domain, with the assertion that "I am DeaF." Wrigley (1996) and Breivik (2005) discuss the importance of *being* deaf to which we would add that being DeaF is the lifelong journey of a deaf person through his or her identity narratives. This article explores how DeaF as a new culturally defined identity goes beyond the old rhetoric to understand bicultural deaf lives.

Method

This ethnographic study explores the identity development of nine deaf participants through their identity narratives. The value of narratives in qualitative research is succinctly captured by Sarup (in Preston, 2001) in the statement that "our identity is developed at the same time as we tell our life-stories." The resulting narratives provide an ethnographically rich body of data. In this article, the data were collected through interviews focused on identity narratives through the lens of the educational experiences of nine South African deaf adults, who had attended either regular mainstream schools or schools for the Deaf. A unique feature of article was the intentional inclusion of the researcher's own narrative as a bilingual DeaF participant to provide an auto-ethnographic "gateway" (Marshall & Rossman, 1989) into exploring the lives of deaf, Deaf, or bicultural DeaF persons. The aim was to provide an insider's perspective for deeper understanding and authenticity into the diversity of deaf lives.

Participants

All nine participants were deaf. All of them had already left school and consented to sharing their identity narrative and development as a deaf person with the researcher. Prior to the filmed interview session, each participant completed a detailed personal information form, which included the participants' self-description of their identity as a deaf person and family background and if sign language is used at home as their first or second language. The researcher is the last participant, named Guy. See Table 1 for participant's self-descriptions.

Of the nine participants, six were female and three were male. In terms of ethnic diversity, two participants were black (a male and a female) and seven were white. The average age of the participants was 33 years (the youngest was 24 years and the oldest 55 years). Two participants grew up being exposed to Deaf culture from either a Deaf parent or a Deaf sibling and seven of the participants came from hearing parents who raised them orally. This adequately reflects the profile of the larger deaf community in South Africa in which the majority of deaf persons have a hearing family background.

With regard to education, five participants attended a mainstream school and one attended a school for the Deaf and then a mainstream school. Of these six participants who attended mainstream schools, three participants had been placed in a separate "hard-of-hearing" unit and three participants (including the researcher) went to classes with hearing learners without any support. There were three participants who attended a school for the Deaf. In terms of transition between schools, two participants moved from a mainstream school to a school for the Deaf and one moved to a school for the Deaf to a mainstream. Only one participant attended a school for the Deaf throughout his schooling.

In terms of hearing status, all the participants categorized themselves on the personal information form prior to the filmed interview session as "severe to profoundly deaf." Six participants relied on their hearing aids constantly and used oral means to communicate, whereas two of the mainstreamed participants wore hearing aids sporadically. Three participants primarily use South African Sign language (SASL) in their daily routines. In addition, one participant, the researcher, uses both hearing aids and sign language regularly. Five of the mainstreamed participants classified themselves as newcomers to sign language and indicated a strong interest in SASL or were busy learning it and had limited exposure to SASL through meeting members of the Deaf community on a regular basis. Participants were asked to record their preferred identity. This list consisted of six hard of hearing and deaf and three Deaf self-proclaimed identities. None of the participants identified themselves with an "ambivalent identity" on this form, although this category emerged

Table 1 Self-described profile of the participants

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Age (years)	School history	Self-described identity	Deaf in family	Sign language Y/N
1. Deb	Female	White	23	HI unit in mainstream	Hard of hearing	None	No
2. Flo	Female	White	44	HI unit in mainstream	Hearing impaired	None	No
3. Tumi	Female	Black	25	School for the deaf (primary) then mainstream with support	deaf	deaf sister	No
4. Liz	Female	White	36	Mainstream unit (primary) then school for the deaf	Deaf	Deaf sister	Yes 1st
5. Sibu	Male	Black	28	School for the deaf throughout	Deaf	Deaf sister	Yes 1st
6. Ian	Male	White	23	HI unit in mainstream	Hearing impaired	deaf sister	No
7. Amy	Female	White	55	Mainstream throughout	deaf	None	Yes 2nd
8. Val	Female	White	24	Mainstream primary then school for the deaf	Deaf	Deaf father	Yes 1st
9. Guy	Male	White	45	Mainstream throughout	deaf	None	Yes 2nd

later in the study. Nor did anyone describe themselves as “bicultural” even though this option was available on the form.

As mentioned earlier, a feature of this study was the inclusion of the primary author as an auto-ethnographic participant to provide a gateway for exploring deaf identities. This approach assisted with the exploration of the lives of the nine deaf, Deaf, and DeaF participants. The coauthor’s own experiences with identity and education provided ideas for interpreting the narratives of the other participants in that he was familiar with his own identity processes and educational experiences as a deaf person with a mainstream school background. He later began learning sign language and exploring Deaf identity and developed the concept of DeaF as a possible deaf ontology and identity site. This identity shift was initiated by his investigation into deaf identities and offered an opportunity to include this identity narrative as an auto-ethnographic text for analysis along with the other texts.

Procedure

The ethnographic interview is an appropriate research tool in complex and sensitive fields of research (Chattergee & Kumar, 1999) such as the current study.

It was used to collect the participants’ personal narratives and their responses to deaf identity-related issues. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), the in-depth semistructured interview format provides an opportunity for participants to respond to the interview questions freely from their own points of view.

From the focus of exploring deaf identity narratives about school experiences, this study clustered the interview questions into three distinct but interconnected thematic categories to assist with the first step of thematic content analysis. The first section of the interview explored the thematic category of each participant’s most significant moments of “*being deaf*” from their key early childhood experiences and what they told others about what it means for them to be deaf. The second category invited participants to explore “*school impact*” as a narrative pathway to understanding the nature of their communication and interactions with teachers and their peers. In the third category, the questions focused on the theme of “*deaf identity development*,” and participants had an opportunity to reflectively describe and discuss how their understanding of their identity as a deaf person had evolved. After this, at the end of the interview, the author explicitly checked with each participant to find

out if they were satisfied with their responses or needed to add anything more to their narratives.

The filming of the author, as an auto-ethnographic participant, provided data that were insufficiently self-reflective in line with the questions. Filming oneself proved to be less useful for narrative analysis than anticipated. Consequently, the author wrote out his responses to each of the three questions, following the same schedule and timeframe as that provided to the other participants. This proved to be a more effective and detailed way of recording the author's responses, and these data were included in the analysis.

The first four participants (Amy, deaf; Liz, Deaf; Val, Deaf; and Deb, hard of hearing) were invited to participate in this research on the basis of their varied backgrounds with regard to the following dimensions: sign and spoken communication, hearing status of parents, educational experience, and one's own perceived identity as a deaf person. Then, four additional participants (Flo, hearing impaired; Tumi, deaf; Ian, deaf; and Sib, Deaf) were selected by asking the original four to recommend additional potential participants following a simple snowball sampling for the next round of narrative interviews (Bryman, 2008). From these recommendations, four new participants with varied backgrounds were identified.

The interviews were recorded in individually filmed interview sessions. The interview schedules took between 22 and 42 min to complete. A SASL interpreter was present during the interviews to provide a consistently clear and accessible communication platform between the participants and first author, who wears hearing aids and communicates in English and uses sign language well. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher from either oral English or SASL into printed English transcript. Each participant had the opportunity to read through the transcript of his or her interview, discuss any discrepancies with the researcher, and approve the accuracy of the transcript from their perspective.

This study obtained written consent from each participant giving their permission to record the interview session on videotape. This consent for recording also included gaining the participants' permission to use the footage at research-related conferences. It was also stressed that the presentation of their

recorded interviews would remain within the domain of the conference hall to protect the participants.

The eight participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity while maintaining the humanness of their narratives. The researcher's first name (Guy) has been used wherever his narratives are quoted or discussed. This has been done to make it explicit to the reader that at those points, the researcher was also in the role of a self-reflexive auto-ethnographic participant.

Analysis

The data were analyzed following two steps, which will now be briefly discussed. First, the data were organized into categories through the use of the discourse-neutral Thematic Content Analysis method (Wilbraham, 1995). This involved coding the texts into thematic categories of "content-based themes" around deaf identity narratives (Wilbraham, 1995). From the analysis of the three themes, the subthemes and tentative generalizations that were uncovered in the texts will be discussed (Leedy & Ormond, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The second step involved applying a deconstructive (Derrida, 1974) Critical Discourse Analysis reading (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Janks, 1999) of the interview texts. The purpose of this final step was to interrogate the ideology and power relations inherent in the narratives. The deconstructive discourse analysis was conducted to further explore and understand each participant's narratives within the context of first- and second-wave deaf identity politics.

Results

The analysis of the interviews yielded the three thematic categories of being deaf, school impact, and deaf identity. Each of these categories had two or more subthemes. For the category of significant moments of *being deaf* (hereafter referred to simply as "*being deaf*"), the subthemes were personal narrative, inclusion versus exclusion, coming out and communication options. For the category of *school impact*, the subthemes were academic advancement, exclusion, pride and reconciliation. The third category of *deaf identity development* had two subthemes: self-description of

identity and identity transition. The latter included the following additional subthemes in order of appearance: exclusion, surprise, social acceptance and “the right school,” connection, pride, being authentic, anxiety and finding a community, journey, dignity, dialogue, and a new set of connections.

Thematic Category 1: Being Deaf

The first thematic category of *being deaf* addressed the focus of this study by exploring how these participants made sense of their lives through important events. This theme follows the same arrangement of the four identity categories shown in Table 1 of deaf, Deaf, ambivalent and DeaF. Prevalent in all these interviews was the evolution of a personal narrative (about significant moments) that captured their awareness of being deaf.

Within this theme of a *personal identity narrative*, it emerged that two of the mainstreamed deaf participants commented on being unaware of themselves as different and deaf.

Flo: I have never really thought about it.

Deb: It never really bothered me that I was hard-of-hearing.

Several of the participants highlighted the importance of a transition they had made or were in the process of making in their lives. Underlying this transition are the emerging themes of *discovering* that they are deaf and different and their struggle for *inclusion versus exclusion*.

Deb: I usually knew that my peers had a problem with my hearing loss. My class mates made me feel like I was a mistake.

For some participants, their earliest significant memory consisted of a traumatic event marked by *exclusion* and the discovery of the limitations of their hearing and social acceptance.

Tumi: ... when I was growing up, I did not know what it meant to be deaf. I think it is a part of me. But my turning point was when I discovered that I could not participate in music.

And

Guy: When I was younger, I often felt that being deaf was bad and that I stood out of the crowd like

a sore thumb at swimming because I could not follow what was going on.

In contrast, the subthemes of *coming out* and *communication options* were highlighted in the narratives of these participants (Liz, Val, and Sibü) of the significance of learning sign language in their cultural transformation as they overtly embraced a Deaf identity. More importantly, the transition into a Deaf identity occurred during their school years; for Liz and Val, it happened when they moved from mainstream hearing schools to a school for the Deaf. Sibü also recorded that his transition as a Deaf person occurred during his school years where he attended both primary and high schools for the Deaf.

Liz: Then we found a school for the Deaf where I started learning sign language. I was shocked at first because they saw me as an outsider. That was when I realized that I had to learn to sign to fit in, and they taught me sign language.

Sibü: I moved to the high school over there because there were no schools in my area catering for deaf learners at high school level. That is why I am strongly in favor of Deaf community at school because this allows us to sign extensively. And I fitted into the Deaf community and that is where I learned about being a strong Deaf person.

For Val, despite having had a deaf parent, she reflected on the significance of moving from a mainstream school to a school for the Deaf as an anchor of her identity:

Val: I went to a school for the Deaf, had new Deaf friends, so we had the same identity because we are all the same.

In contrast, Ian, a mainstream participant, said that despite his postschool exposure to Deaf culture and sign language, he has not considered his deafness as a significant part of his identity. In his narrative, he returns to the hearing cultural orientation by placing more emphasis on the cochlear implant. This seems to indicate a possible identity direction that he was to explore in the near future to resolve this ambivalent identity.

It is interesting to note how three other participants (Amy, Flo, and Guy)—despite having remained in mainstream schools also began learning sign language only after leaving school when they were exposed to the unexplored territory of Deaf culture and identity issues as a deaf adult.

Amy: The interesting thing is I don't really see myself as being different at all, so I think the significance of being "deaf" came as I got older.

Last, as research-as-participant, the transition Guy undertook from his previously unchallenged "hearing" cultural centre to the adoption of a Deaf identity is recorded in his increasingly public process of "coming out" as a bicultural DeaF person.

Guy: I remember the first time I met Deaf people at church and saw the power of sign language. I was not ashamed of them or myself anymore. Now I wanted to learn sign language and be one of them.

In summary, there was a noticeable difference in the structure of the narratives between deaf and Deaf participants. The Deaf participants answered with a more structured narrative in line with the expected pro-Deaf culture, SASL, and Deaf identity rhetoric, which continued to have significant impact in the next theme.

Thematic Category 2: School Impact

Following on from the first thematic category of being deaf, the second category focuses on the impact of school on identity development. From the outset, most participants discussed the early impact of their family as supportive of their integration into hearing culture through the acquisition of oral skills. The participants were divided here into those who attended a mainstream school (Amy, deaf; Deb, deaf; Flo, deaf; Tumi, deaf; Ian, ambivalent; and Guy, DeaF) and those who attended a school for the Deaf (Liz, Deaf; Val, DeaF; and Sib, Deaf).

The first group of participants (Amy, Deb, Flo, Tumi, Ian, and Guy) unanimously described their mainstream education from a position which they perceived that superior academic expectations and future opportunities would be available to them if they

adapted to the hearing world, in general, with a culturally hearing-deaf identity.

In order for this ambition of *academic advancement* to be realized, participants who had attended mainstream schools needed hearing aids, speech therapy, special classes, FM systems, and so on. They all commented on these issues in their interview. They also described how supportive teachers and friends had made it possible for them to cope. However, as Flo stated succinctly, all this effort and support toward integration into a hearing classroom came at a price: her *exclusion* from the Deaf community and herself as a deaf person.

Flo: I spent all my years in speech therapy, and in class it was work, work, and work. There was no time for play. And I realized I was not one of them [hearing learners]. I had to work much harder; I had to read up to catch up. And [I had] very little time to socialize then. It was only much later on in my life that I understood what I had missed out [and] I never really thought about it too much about what it meant to be a deaf person, at that time.

Other participants (Deb, Guy, and Tumi) picked up on this theme of exclusion by expressing their frustration about teachers who did not understand their needs as a deaf learner. As a result, these participants described their mainstream school experiences in the following ways:

Guy: I absolutely hated the listening tests, spelling tests, comprehension tests and orals. In particular, I hated it with a passion when teachers dictated notes for the class to copy down, because I always came last and came home in tears because I had been tactlessly reminded that I could not hear.

Although the subtheme of *exclusion* is evident in the academic sphere as noted above, participants' also noticed the effects of social exclusion by their peers, as Deb and Ian explained:

Deb: I was excluded: the other students did not really want me to be a part of the group. They did not listen to me in group discussions when I had an idea. It was not important to them what my idea was.

More specifically, Deb and Ian both highlighted a fundamental insight about exclusion, which deb succinctly expresses:

Deb: I think that they excluded me because of my lack of acceptance of myself.

Here, the subtheme of the *exclusion* was fuelled by the participants' lack of acceptance of themselves as deaf. This line of argument suggests that the lack of understanding of oneself as a deaf person and the lack of truthful self-evaluation (by pretending to be hearing and using bluffing as a coping mechanism) are seen by peers and some teachers as an inauthentic representation of self to others in the class. This lack of or latent unresolved acceptance supports the peer group attitude of exclusion—which is based less on a person's difference (being deaf) but rather more on their not fully honest attempt at inclusion due to their mimicking of the hearing. This exclusion was either subtly or openly expressed by the group as “You are not one of us.” Guy reflects here on this critical self-discovery:

Guy: This was a turning point in my life. Now I was learning to accept my hearing loss and make a decision for myself to rather wear these larger hearing-aids that help me instead of worrying about what others see and think about me. After all, I reasoned at the time, the fact that I cannot hear is my problem, if you cannot accept what these aids look like and what they do for me, it is their problem.

In addition, the researcher-as-participant discovered:

Guy: Discovering for myself that I am not alone and being deaf is not the end of the world since I found Deaf people who proudly affirmed themselves to be Deaf. [It was] this revelation [that] blew my mind.

However, the participants who attended a school for the Deaf (Liz, Val, and Sibü) expressed concern that the quality of education was erratic. Having teachers who could sign was not necessarily sufficient for them. In addition, they stressed that there is a corresponding need for teachers to have higher expectations of Deaf learners and provide more challenging education to satisfy their intellectual curiosity.

In contrast to the theme of exclusion experienced in mainstream schools, a strong sense of *pride* was experienced by the three Deaf participants (Liz, Val, and Sibü) who had moved to and stayed at a school for the Deaf. In addition, this subtheme of *pride* appears to emerge directly from the Deaf participants' connectedness with other Deaf people around them through SASL at school.

Sibü: Wherever there is an opportunity to communicate in sign, I use it because it helps me a lot to understand and be part of the world. I am proud to be Deaf and SASL is my language.

After the participants had acquired sufficient sign language skills and settled into their new school context, the following clip shows how the growth of an associated subtheme of *reconciliation* emerged:

Liz: I feel grateful to my parents for teaching me to be oral when I grew up. So now, with Sign Language I was able to socialize with the Deaf community and fit into both worlds.

From this quote, it can be seen that her increasing engagement and dialogue with both communities feeds the development of a bicultural identity. Significantly, each of two Deaf participants elaborated on reconciliation between hearing and Deaf communities at school, which suggests that this is a valid and noteworthy theme and a potential link toward becoming bicultural through cross-cultural dialogue.

Thematic Category 3: Deaf Identity Development

The subthemes for the category, deaf identity development, were *self-description of identity* and *transitions of identity*. The third theme of deaf identity development continues the discussion that began in the first theme by looking at how the nine participants presently understood themselves and how they went through a transition of identity. Four perceptions of identity emerged. Participants described themselves as having an identity that was either (1) culturally hearing (e.g., hard of hearing/deaf), (2) culturally Deaf, (3) a negative identity as outlined by Bat-Chava that we renamed as an ambivalent identity, or (4) a bicultural Deaf.

Subtheme: self-description of identity. Following this order, Deb, Flo, and Ian each described themselves as having a “deaf or hard of hearing or hearing impaired” identity. Deb expressed this point as a matter of fact:

Deb: Well, it is a term that I have been brought up with. My parents would speak about me as their “hard-of-hearing daughter”, which is the term that they would use. So I am used to that word. That is what it says in the dictionary. Why should it bother me?

Flo described her identity in terms of what she believed she is not:

Flo: For me, because I have realized that my experience of deaf is people who have not had contact with Deaf people. What you are saying about Deaf culture and about identifying with others with a hearing problem, but that comes in with it, the culture, and identity. Yes, but I have never belonged to that culture. So that is why I have never seen myself as: “Deaf.”

In terms of the second identity category, the two Deaf participants (Liz and Sibü) described themselves as a Deaf person in the following way:

Liz: As a person, I am proud of who I am. I am not ashamed of my deafness I am very proud of being Deaf. So I don’t see it as life is unfair. I have a strong belief in myself as a capable person. Deaf with a big D, absolutely!

Sibü: ... and I realized that is also exactly who I am, I am Deaf too.

The third identity category has elements of a (third) ambivalent identity, which Ian expressed stated:

Ian: I see myself as more hard-of-hearing, but sometimes I feel I am part of both worlds, but I am not really completely a part of either.

Looking at the fourth identity self-description, of DeaF, Amy describes herself as a person who finds Deaf culture and the ways of the Deaf community and learning sign language to be a new and exciting

adventure. This awareness is fostering in her an increasing respect for Deaf persons as “competent.” Although she acknowledges that she is deaf, she is unsure which term best describes her at the moment, as deaf or Deaf. However, she expressed a desire to continue exploring how to fit into both hearing and Deaf worlds for her.

Amy: I am not quite there yet because I am not fluent in Sign Language yet. I think that I am more comfortable now and I aspire to be bilingual-bicultural. Remember, that I did not grow up in Deaf culture so I am very much part of the hearing culture.

Guy explains how his identity as a bicultural DeaF person works:

Guy: Now I am much more comfortable with using the term “DeaF.” I have taken the D and F to explain that I belong in the Deaf community as an oral deaf person, who speaks well and signs, which I prefer with my Deaf friends, and I co-exists in a hearing world as an oral DeaF person who speaks, and is upfront about using an interpreter and hearing-aids. This is where I am right now.

Val offers another bicultural perspective as an established Deaf person coming from a Deaf family and a school background as a sign language user:

Val: Before I was like a hearing person and people used to treat me as a hearing person, but now, it was hard to accept that this is who I am. The problem is that I was a bit confused here. I believe that inside I am a Deaf person. I am comparable with other Deaf people, I mean I can use Sign (Language) fluently.

Despite the fact that the participants clearly had a self-described identity, they also revealed their process of transitioning.

Subtheme: transitions in identity. We noticed the significance of this subtheme of transitions from the interviews of the participants. Making a transition from one identity to another suggests an ongoing reflective process of discovering ones identity. The same order of identities of deaf, Deaf, negative identity, and

bicultural DeaF is used in exploring the theme of transitions across the nine participants. Starting with the three deaf participants, Deb, Tumi, and Flo, Deb described herself as a “very happy hard-of-hearing person” who is “coming out of her shell,” which she attributes to the less restrictive environment of university. Although she is aware of Deaf culture and community, she has held back from transitioning to any group based on her experiences of *exclusion* at school.

Tumi raises a relevant question that reveals her struggle with regard to making a transition to a Deaf identity:

Tumi: One thing I never understand is, why do people make such a big deal about Deaf, and Deaf identity, that's something I always never understand. You know, it's like if you are deaf, you are supposed to have like a Deaf identity, um, I don't have that, I didn't have that kind of like, deep Deaf attitude, it surprises me.

This element of *surprise* suggests that Tumi has grown up largely unaware of the cultural side to Deaf identity, which she said she would have learned more about if she continued in a school for the Deaf. She shows that she has chosen to remain a hard-of-hearing/deaf person and not to make an identity transition.

Flo outlines that her contact with Deaf people and Deaf culture has been limited. To the extent that she states:

Flo: But I have never belonged to that culture. So that is why I have never seen myself as, um, “Deaf.”

This honest description links back to her earlier concern that to grow up Deaf is associated with an inferior education and to have limited opportunities in life and treatment as an inferior person. In the following extract, she realizes that being deaf and learning sign language were not enough to gain entry to the Deaf identity that she was keen to acquire:

Flo: I am more comfortable with hearing, because that is what I have been exposed to all my life. I wanted to be part of the Deaf community. But,

because I did not sign and I did not go to the “right school” [her words] they never really made me feel a part of them, so I kind of felt isolated at the same time. I am not one of them. And that's how they made me feel. And, although I have done a sign language course, and it is so difficult when I don't have the opportunity to practice what comes naturally to them. So, I found that hearing people were more accepting of who I am, as opposed to the Deaf community, strangely enough.

From her experiences of exploring Deaf identity, she has returned to the hearing community, disheartened that the Deaf community was less *accepting* of her than was the hearing community. She concluded that it was better to return to a familiar “hearing” community than not to belong to either community and continue to “sit on the fence” [her words] between (for her) two disparate and irreconcilable identities.

In the second identity category of Deaf identity, the two Deaf participants (Liz and Sibü) explained their transition process of becoming a Deaf person in the following way. For Liz, there was a moment of epiphany when she *connected* with other deaf people at school through sign language and found her own space within herself and among her peers as a Deaf person. Sibü added that:

Sibü: When I was at (name deleted) school for the Deaf, an American person introduced me to the concept of Deaf identity and culture, because up to that time I did not know about this concept because I thought having my own black (Xhosa) culture was enough. So I was confused. When I got here I realized that I had learned to respect myself and this was clear to me now that there is a separate Deaf way and culture and community which exists through signing and I realized that is also exactly who I am, I am Deaf too.

As can be seen from these narratives a strong measure of *pride* runs through the identity of Deaf persons. This sense of pride in oneself, the open declaration of being a Deaf person, and the public affirmation of Deaf culture and sign language, presents a different narrative to the first cluster of the three deaf persons in this subtheme of transitions.

It is interesting to notice how Ian, who embodied the third category of an ambivalent identity reflects on how being *authentic* to oneself functions as the driver of his transition beyond this state of ambivalence.

Ian: I think am starting to explore it, as I read more about deafness and Deaf culture I start to learn to accept myself more and I am starting to come to grips with whom I am.

In the fourth identity category of the bicultural DeaF, which includes Amy, Val, and Guy, Amy emphasized the contribution that meeting other deaf people had made in changing her perception of herself of being “alone in the hearing world.” In addition, her *anxiety* about losing her remaining hearing has diminished, and the value of finding a supportive *community* is expressed in the following:

Amy: I am more comfortable with that [now]. It is comfortable, yes. I don’t have to fight this fear, to ... difficult to describe, I don’t have to [pensive pause] worry about what would happen to me in that case. “Would I crawl into a hole and die?” Yet I am surrounded by people who have no hearing who are happier than most hearing people I have met.

It was in this moment of personal epiphany that she discovered that there are many other competent deaf people out there who are content with their lives as deaf people. She admits that her identity as a deaf person is currently in a process of transition, though her goal is not necessarily to become a Deaf person. As she commented:

Amy: I consider myself very much a deaf person but I don’t know which deaf: deaf/Deaf or DeaF. I love it but I need to find which (fits for me).

Adding to this, Val shared how her transition of identity from deaf to Deaf at a school for the Deaf was a difficult and lengthy process. Once fluency in sign language had been established, her identity within the Deaf community became anchored as a permanent and active identity. Val elaborated on the impact and implication of this transition:

Val: I feel confident, I always try to promote Deaf Rights and with the deaf children that I teach to be

proud of themselves for being Deaf because I have similar experiences to them and I want them to learn from my experiences and challenges of being Deaf and fitting into both worlds.

The final narrative of transition explored the auto-ethnographic narrative of Guy. He describes his *journey* of identity development from an oral deaf identity to becoming a bicultural DeaF person. For Guy, the discovery of the Deaf community and Deaf culture through sign language resulted in significant changes to his identity. The central feature is the gradual *acceptance* of himself as a deaf person without claiming to be Deaf. In this narrative, Guy described his state of anxiety about not really belonging to the Deaf community during this transition:

Guy: I was disoriented because I was lost between the two worlds, and felt adrift and alone in terms of which I was. I did not feel I belonged in either world and was stuck in this doldrums of no-identity. This was a period of desolation of about a year and a half. Only once I confronted the reality of where and who I was, as well as who I was not, only then was there new opportunity for growth into the DeaF identity.

Thus, although on the journey to achieve a Deaf identity, which he acknowledged later as elusive, Guy discovered a new sense of *dignity* associated with being DeaF. From this platform, of his awareness of Deaf issues and through the private and public embracing and disclosure of his deaf experiences, he began to use cross-cultural *dialogue* to negotiate a new set of *connections* between himself and his networks. These networks consisted of hearing family and associates as well as Deaf friends, peers, and general community. This process helped Guy to recognize his bilingual identity as a DeaF person. This bicultural identity that he adopted is situated—paradoxical as it may seem—separate from both deaf and Deaf communities but also reaches within both communities as the social context requires.

In summary, the results showed that the well-established identities categories of deaf, Deaf, and ambivalent identity continue to be expressed through the

three themes of narratives. What is of particular interest has been the process of transition of three participants into a bicultural DeaF identity, which will be explored further in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

Looking again at deaf identity first, the narratives showed that participants tended at an early age not to be conscious of themselves as “a deaf person.” As a result, they did not make an issue of it until they experienced increasing alienation at school. This increasing exclusion features in their narratives as well as the feelings of frustration and loneliness while trying to survive in the classroom. Being deaf meant that school, in particular, was a place where a deaf person struggled to communicate. This lack of connection contributed, not surprisingly, to the search for identity beyond the cultural values of the hearing community. This transition into Deaf identity was usually assisted by the participants’ discovery of sign language and contact with other Deaf persons.

Another finding that emerges from four of the narratives is that identity transitions are not simple or quick since a transition to a distinctly different culture is required. Not all participants were willing or able to make such a dramatic and profound shift in identity.

The narratives of the deaf and Deaf participants displayed rhetoric that was typical of first-wave identity politics. In this framework, identity is defined by both hearing society and deaf people in essentialist terms according to the binary of disability (deaf) versus difference (Deaf). This finding is in line with Ohna’s (2004) first phase of deaf identity, “taken for granted,” in that participants who were deaf described themselves in their early years as having taken their deafness for granted. Evidence of discourse based on the medical model is also noticeable from their narratives in terms of exclusion and frustration. Deaf participants in mainstream classes deduced erroneously that they were the only deaf person around or that being deaf was a tragedy.

This experience seems to coincide with the exclusion and loneliness reported in the study of Kent (2003) on deaf learners currently in mainstream set-

tings in New Zealand. There are further parallels with *Alone in the Mainstream* by Olivia (2004). Olivia’s work provides a confirmation of this subtheme when she describes her experiences of being cut off from her peers until she realized that “I was just deaf” (Olivia, 2004, p. 61).

When deaf participants in this article reflected on their school experiences, it was clear that the strength and impact of their memories of loneliness persisted and continued to mould their identity in the present. Yet, one of the participants (Flo) showed that despite being deaf and learning sign language and meeting Deaf people, she remained on the perimeter of Deaf culture as an outsider. This illustrates that acceptance into the Deaf community cannot be taken for granted.

In contrast, three of the participants described how, when they moved to a school for the Deaf, they experienced a profound change in identity. To use Ohna’s third phase, of “affiliation,” they entered the Deaf community after a phase of alienation in which they had not been comfortable in either the hearing or Deaf community. This follows the definition given by the social model, namely of Deaf as a linguistic minority. This group of participants unanimously endorsed sign language as their means of communication both socially and in the classroom. It was from this linguistic-cultural basis that the confidence of Deaf participants became apparent in their disclosures of finding a place of belonging within the Deaf community as valued learners. Yet, despite showing their proclivity toward a bilingual-bicultural identity, the Deaf participants emphasized their affiliation to a solely Deaf identity; this finding reveals the prevalence of the first-wave identity politics of Deaf participants, who sought to maintain their unilateral Deaf advocacy stance.

A caveat needs to be added here. This study does not infer that any of the identities is superior to the others, nor is there a developmental track in which we place any of the identities as the final goal of deaf identity development. Instead, from a narrative framework, each identity and the narratives from the participants are valued on their own terms rather than being placed in opposition to others.

Three participants (Deb, Flo, and Ian) illustrated their ambivalent state of identity by drawing attention to their temporary experiences of exclusion. However,

one of the deaf participants may be described as identity ambivalent. This participant (Ian) showed a reluctance to change from his preexisting lifestyle and culture even though he disclosed dissatisfaction with his current identity position and his feelings of loneliness and alienation within the family or classroom when he is excluded from participating in social interactions. This subtheme of loneliness and alienation was apparent in the narratives of mainstreamed deaf participants, which echoes with Ohna's (2004) alienation phase and attendant state of ambivalence. Loneliness is observed in participants with a marginal cultural identity (Glickman, 1996), especially when they experience a deep sense of insecurity of their identity despite being in an inclusive school environment. These findings support the conclusion reached by Bat-Chava (2000) of a free-floating, ambivalent "negative identity" in which a deaf person realizes that they do not belong in either the hearing or Deaf community.

In particular, this participant lucidly described how his own lack of acceptance of his deafness was directly related to the lack of acceptance which he felt from his classmates. Hence, he experienced exclusion until he authentically acknowledged his deaf identity to himself and to others. This seems to suggest that it does not matter which identity a person has chosen (deaf or Deaf) as long as the person is authentic about who they are and in their relations with others. Having said that, it is paradoxical that the participants expressed considerable deliberation around their current and other identities. In other words, the medical/social binary has insufficient power to explain postmodern identities. And we concur with Ohna's (2003) conclusion that the idea of a carefree linear road toward a safe and secure cultural identity, as described by the first wave of identity politics, should be abandoned.

Instead, this study highlighted that identity transition is an intensive process of self-discovery. This nature of this transition became evident from the narratives of three participants as they described their bicultural journey. The shift from one cultural group to a new group is a difficult transition of identity to make. Two of the DeaF participants (Guy and Amy) retold their narratives around a crucial event that had given them the impetus to switch from a deaf/

culturally hearing identity to a bicultural DeaF identity. They also elaborated on the magnitude of this cultural shift via their descriptions of living in the Deaf community while they were acquiring sign language with their new Deaf peers during this identity transition. Meanwhile, the other DeaF participant, Val, also commented on the difficulty and magnitude of this bicultural transition, but from the perspective of a Deaf person's point of view, instead of the deaf perspective and entry point of the other DeaF participants.

Last, the auto-ethnographic frame of reference provided by the research-as-participant (Guy) added to how this journey to self-discovery of himself as a bicultural DeaF person is unlocked by making new networks and connections through cross-cultural dialogue.

Conclusions

The authors identified the need for a paradigm shift away from the binary conception of deafness presented by the medical and social models toward understanding deaf identity as a fluid phenomenon. In addition, they proposed the concept of bicultural DeaF identity. In order to develop a fluid DeaF identity, critical self-reflection and cross-cultural dialogue are two of the narrative tools that deaf people can use to become authentic bicultural DeaF individuals, who are deaf in their own way (Ohna, 2003). The findings of the current narrative study support the call to embrace the contemporary postmodern "second wave of identity politics" (Davis, 2002). The power of this new wave is that it "celebrates marginal discourses" (Corker, 2000, p. 231) and transitions that exist within the multiplicity of the narratives of deaf persons.

It was noted that the Deaf participants usually began their narratives with an explicit collective affirmation ("we") of their Deaf identity. This sense of collective pride emerged repeatedly as a theme of Deaf pride and as a rhetoric of empowerment (Jankowski, 1997). Examples of such statements are "We can do anything but hear ..." which echo I. King Jordan's words during the Deaf President Now movement. However, the Deaf Pride narrative is restrictive as an essentialist discourse in that it does not tolerate movement beyond Deaf identity politics with an acceptance of the bicultural lives of deaf persons. In other words,

there is an increasing need and opportunity for deaf persons, scholars of Deaf Studies, and also parents and teachers to recognize that being bicultural DeaF is a valid and authentic identity option. It allows for the construction of an identity that corresponds more accurately with the transitions necessary in the post-modern world of multiple and fluid identities.

Moreover, each of the Deaf participants indicated their inclination toward building relations with the hearing community, which is a finding at odds with the strong exclusion experienced at schools and society. A possible reason for this finding is their confidence in knowing that they belong in the Deaf community and having a stable empowered identity, which in turn allows their magnanimous attitude of reaching out to others to develop. Yet, there is a broad acknowledgement of their personal difficulties and barriers to learning, which they explicitly do not want the next generation of deaf learners to experience.

In addition, there is a tacit recognition of the reality of the Deaf community as a minority that signs, living surrounded by the majority of people who speak. Traditionally, the Deaf community rejected dialogue with hearing or deaf persons, citing possible contamination from other cultures and their discourses, especially when the medical model was encouraging paternalistic treatment of deaf people (Branson & Miller, 2002).

Significantly, and without any exceptions, all the signing participants reported an identity as a part of the Deaf community; they also reported, often without being prompted, that they do not regret their choice to join the Deaf community. But nor did the Deaf participants in the current study impose a moratorium on dialogue with the hearing society. On the contrary, Deaf participants displayed a clear willingness toward building stable connections with hearing society, with particular focus placed on strengthening bonds with close family members and teachers (many of whom are hearing persons). This sentiment correlates with the fluid bicultural DeaF identity proposed by the researchers.

Recommendations

The proposed dialogue model has offered supportive evidence that a bicultural DeaF identity is not a paradox,

as the medical/social binary might claim as an attempt to dismiss biculturalism (Leigh, 2009). Instead, the recognition of the concept of DeaF identity represents a new and valid bilingual-bicultural deaf ontology. This study suggests that a bicultural DeaF identity is a way that some deaf people negotiate the cultural space between the concepts that view being deaf as either a disability or a cultural difference.

As seen in this study, there is no longer a static deaf/Deaf narrative (Sheridan, 2000), but rather, a multiplicity of personal and often interrelated stories that reflect the diversity and complexity of themes and struggles that deaf persons experience along their identity journey.

This finding reinforces the need for intensive and extensive reassessment of teacher training and Deaf education to shift educators' understanding of deaf identities beyond the limitations of the medical and social-cultural perspectives. This is of particular relevance in the South African educational context in that the South African Constitution (Section 5(a)iii; Section 10 and Section 29(1) and (2)) affirms the dignity of all learners, including deaf learners, to receive equitable and accessible education. This article also has significant implications for researchers in Deaf Studies and the parents of deaf children (Deaf Federation of South Africa, 2006). It requires researchers, as well as teachers, to broaden their understanding of deaf identity beyond the deaf/Deaf binary to the second wave's recognition of multiple and fluid identities.

The bicultural DeaF identity offers an opportunity to increase our understanding of the complexity and richness of deaf experiences through dialogue, as was demonstrated in these narratives. Researchers, parents, and teachers have much more to discover about the multiplicity of what it means to be deaf.

As Foucault (in Besley & Peters, 2007) suggests, by truthfully and authentically confessing who one is to others, we affirm and own our identity. Therefore, our task is to tell the truth about ourselves. In particular, we acknowledge that there are many deaf persons whose narratives have not yet been expressed, and additional research in this area is warranted. Our task, especially in a diverse, multicultural nation such as South Africa, lies in "uncovering the diversity of deaf/Deaf/DeaF epistemologies" (Ladd, 2003).

Notes

1. It has become standard academic practice to use the “deaf/Deaf” term as a marker of cultural identity. With the use of “deaf,” emphasis is placed primarily on the hearing status in terms of the person’s hearing loss, whereas the “Deaf” moniker places stress on the person’s cultural affiliation with the Deaf community.

2. The term “DeaF” serves as a linguistic marker of a fluid nature of the bicultural deaf person’s identity that is situated between both the Deaf and the hearing worlds, hence the emphasis of the F in DeaF.

Conflicts of Interest

No conflicts of interest were reported.

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