Isolation and aspiration: Deaf adults reflect on the educational legacy of special schooling

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This small-scale, qualitative study invited deaf adults to reflect on their schooling and to consider the ways in which placement decisions impacted their educational opportunities, achievement and identity. It aimed to document the experiences of deaf adults who had attended special schools for deaf children and to elicit their thoughts on the current state of education for deaf children and their hopes for the future. The findings, based on the participants' narratives, alluded to current debates about the growing numbers of young deaf children in mainstream schools and the impact of this trend on the changing nature of Deaf culture. They also explored a tension around the balancing of the need for deaf children to access Deaf culture and sign language, whilst maintaining the positive achievements of inclusive practice, including raised expectations, family and community belonging, and high academic achievement. This article advances a possible solution to this tension in the form of deaf-centric community hubs.

Keywords: deaf; hearing impairment; special education; inclusive education; Deaf culture

Introduction

Special schools for deaf children have traditionally served as foci for the Deaf community, providing sites of cultural and linguistic socialisation (Padden and Humphries, 1998, 2009; Lane, 1989; Ladd, 2003). The capitalised 'Deaf' signals identification with Deaf culture and this will be discussed in more depth throughout the article. From the mid-1970s, the rationale for special schools started to be questioned in response to the calls to end segregated education (UPIAS, 1976). The population of deaf children also changed as a result of improved technology, such as cochlear implantation, which resulted in a reduction in the need for specialist provision (Miller, 2008). However, there has also been an increase in the number of deaf children with complex needs, and approximately 40% of deaf children have an additional need (Mitchell, 2004). Currently, the majority of children whose primary need is hearing loss are now educated in mainstream schools (Mitchell and Karchmer, 2006; Shaver *et al.*, 2014; Frederickson and Cline, 2015). Today, special schools for deaf children also educate those with additional or complex needs. This change in the

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population of deaf children, combined with the move towards inclusive education, means that many special schools have closed (Jordan and Goodey, 2002) and those that survive are faced with the threat of closure.

According to Moores (2010), the education of deaf children has been the subject of a 200-year controversy surrounding communication and language issues. The schools differed in their approaches to communication and language, with some schools strictly adhering to 'oralist' methods that emphasised spoken language and prohibited signing and other schools adopting a more mixed approach (Lane, 1989). The oralist approach dominated from 1880 to 1960 (Moores, 2010), and from 1960 onwards there was growing recognition of the importance of sign languages in the education of deaf children. In this study the participants attended schools from all over the UK and Europe. Some were oralist in approach and others were more supportive of sign language. Some of the participants also attended mainstream schools for part of their education.

An important part of mainstream provision for deaf children is the use of specialist classrooms within mainstream schools, which began to be used more extensively after inclusive education gained momentum in the 1980s (Miller, 2008). These resource bases provide specialist support within a wider inclusive environment and were intended to provide the support needed for deaf children to be included in the curriculum (Watson, 2013). Deaf children in mainstream classrooms are supported through input from Advisory Teachers and peripatetic Teachers of the Deaf. They may also be supported by specialist teaching assistants and educational interpreters (Berry, 2017). Currently, special schools for deaf children continue to vary in approach, with some following auditory, oral approaches and others following a bilingual, bicultural approach. Schools may also vary in the degree to which they adhere to the National Curriculum, with some following it closely with additional specialist support (Mary Hare Grammar School, 2020) and others following a differentiated curriculum (Exeter Deaf Academy, 2020). In the UK, schools can be found dispersed across the country. Whereas in 1982 there were 75 special schools for deaf children (Moore, 2008), in 2010 there were only 23 schools (CRIDE, 2011), showing the decline in numbers during this period.

Part of the reason for these closures was the criticism levelled at segregated education, for low standards of achievement and expectation (see e.g. Ofsted, 2003), and isolating children from mainstream culture (Wright, 1990). However, some closures were met with resistance from parents and members of the Deaf community (see e.g. Riley, 2015). This continued support for schools suggests that there is a need to explore the role of dedicated, special schools for deaf children in shaping educational experiences and forming identification with Deaf and mainstream cultures. This small-scale, qualitative study therefore invited deaf adults to reflect on their schooling and consider the ways in which placement decisions impacted on their educational opportunities, achievement and identity. It aimed to document the experiences of deaf adults who had attended special schools for deaf children for all or part of their education, and to elicit their thoughts on the current state of education for deaf children and their hopes for the future. The findings that emerged from the participants' narratives alluded to current debates about the growing numbers of young deaf children in mainstream schools and the impact of this trend on the changing nature of

Deaf culture. They also explored a tension around the balancing of the need for deaf children to access Deaf culture and sign language, whilst maintaining the positive achievements of inclusive practice—including raised expectations, family and community belonging, and high academic achievement. This article advances a possible solution to this tension in the form of deaf-centric community hubs.

Deaf identities

Different terms relating to hearing evoke distinct meanings and tend to be ascribed to different contexts. Whereas in some contexts the term 'deaf' may appear old-fashioned, even prejudicial, in other contexts it is proudly adopted as a cultural marker of identity (Ladd, 2003). 'People first language' might signal hearing status in the form of 'people with hearing loss' or 'children with hearing impairment' in order to convey the message that hearing is not the defining aspect of that individual. However, others might argue that deafness is not an impairment but a cultural variant, akin to other markers of diversity (Wrigley, 1996). The degree to which medicalised language influences the context will an impact. Also significant is the degree of identification with Deaf culture, including sign languages. There is a history of discussion of these terms in the academic literature, ranging from Woodward (1972) to Padden and Humphries (1988), Wrigley (1996), Ladd (2003) and Leigh and Andrews (2017). Bat-Chava (2000) analysed different dimensions of deaf identities, highlighting four groupings: deaf; Deaf; negative/ambiguous identity; and bi-cultural identities. Some researchers have argued for a reformulation that recognises the positive cultural attributes of signed language and shared heritage that deaf people have. Bauman and Murray (2010, 2014) have rephrased this as 'Deaf gain' in distinction from 'hearing loss'.

However, other researchers have sought to introduce greater complexity into the debate and to move beyond the binary constructions of deafness vs 'hearingness'. For example, Ohna (2004) highlighted the dialogical way in which identity might be formed for deaf people through their relationships with hearing people. McIlroy and Storbeck (2011) emphasised the fluid nature of deaf identities, coining an additional term 'DeaF' (with a capitalised 'F') to signal this shifting nature. In this article, the participants had varying levels of hearing loss, and varying degrees of identification with Deaf culture. When asked how they described themselves in relation to their hearing loss, they all preferred the term 'deaf'. Even those with a strong identification with Deaf culture preferred not to use the capitalisation. For example, Harry, who had grown up in a deaf family, explained: '[. . .] *big "D" and little "d" deaf I don't think it makes any difference. It's just a label, I think it's more important to be culturally deaf*'. Similarly, George mentioned: '[. . .] *I know some deaf people like to say "I'm big D" but for me, I'm not really that bothered*'. Both Stuart and Emma rejected the label of 'Big D Deaf' because of their use of English, and so identified more strongly with the 'small d deaf'. It was important to adhere to the constructions of the participants, hence in this article the 'small d deaf' term is used when referring to the participants and deaf children in general, and the 'big D Deaf' when referring to Deaf culture or the Deaf community. This conceptualisation challenges a monolithic construction of deafness and deaf identity (Myers and Fernandes, 2010). This is also used by organisations

that seek to recognise diversity within the community, such as Deaf Child Worldwide (2008). All the participants in this study attended a special school for the deaf for part of their education, but their experiences and ways of articulating and integrating their hearing into their identity were diverse.

Special schools for deaf children

The educational challenges for learners who are deaf tend to be related to language and communication barriers (Frederickson and Cline, 2015). The majority of deaf children have hearing parents (Mitchell and Karchmer, 2004), so do not have the opportunity to acquire a natural sign language in infancy from their parents. Current statistics suggest that there are approximately 52,800 deaf children in the UK (CRIDE, 2018). However, there is diversity within the description of 'deaf or hearing impaired', with researchers referring to the group as 'heterogeneous' (Spencer and Marschark, 2010). This heterogeneity includes variety in terms of level of hearing loss, age of onset of hearing loss, communication preferences, ethnicity, parental hearing status and educational experiences (Maller and Braden, 2010). Despite these differences, historically there was an assumption that deaf children needed to be educated together, using specialist techniques, and this can be linked to broader social trends towards the institutionalisation of certain groups (Braddock and Parish, 2001). Special schools were established in the UK and across the world to meet this perceived need (McLoughlin, 1987). The schools tended to be residential, with pupils drawn from wide geographical areas. From one perspective, special schools for deaf children have been critiqued on the basis of low standards, in terms of quality of teaching, academic achievement and pastoral care (Ofsted, 2003), and for their use of punitive practices (McDonnell and Saunders, 1993; Ladd, 2003). In contrast, special schools for the deaf have been recognised and celebrated for their role in bringing deaf children together and thus creating a community of signers (Reilly and Reilly, 2005; Padden and Humphries, 2009). For this reason they are argued to be central to the formation and evolution of Deaf culture (Jancowski, 1997; Ladd, 2003). The practice of collecting together deaf children in these schools has been seen as a key factor in the establishment of cohesive Deaf communities (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999; Woll and Ladd, 2003). Special schools for deaf children have been argued to be important cultural sites for the passing on of Deaf cultural heritage and sign language to future generations (Ladd, 2003).

In the UK, prior to the 1981 Education Act (DES, 1981), the majority of deaf children attended a special school (McLoughlin, 1987). These schools had their own identities based on how closely they ascribed to policies such as oralism (the promotion of spoken over signed languages) and how permissive they were over sign language use (McLoughlin, 1987; Quinn, 2010). The work of sign language researchers from the 1960s onwards, such as Stokoe (1960), established that signed languages were genuine languages with their own grammar, not inferior gestural systems, as had previously been thought. This had an impact on the status of national sign languages, such as British Sign Language (BSL), the language of the Deaf community in the UK, and their role in the education of deaf children. Academic studies and biographies present the schools as important social resources for deaf people, who might

have been isolated within hearing families, and argue that they were places where they could communicate easily and naturally for the first time (Padden and Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1989; Sheridan, 2001; Ladd, 2003; Emery, 2009). However, for some, like the poet David Wright, educated in the early twentieth century, the assumptions over sameness relating to hearing loss resulted in individual academic ability being overlooked (Wright, 1990).

Changes in educational policy in the twentieth century, such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) in the USA and the 1981 Education Act (DES, 1981) in the UK, shifted thinking away from categories of impairment to 'special educational needs' and began to change the assumption that all deaf children needed to be educated together, irrespective of other educational capabilities and factors (Hodkinson, 2010). The Disability Rights movement (UPIAS, 1976) and international calls for ending segregated education, such as the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), focused on promoting the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education settings. This resulted in the closure of many special schools for deaf children from the 1990s onwards. As a result, in the UK, the majority of deaf children (78%) now attend mainstream schools (CRIDE, 2017); only 3% currently attend special schools for deaf children (CRIDE, 2017) and 6% attend special schools generally (DfE, 2019). However, there is regional variation in provision in the UK (Berry, 2017). It is likely that the remaining 13% of pupils will have additional support from: teachers in a resource room for part of their time, peripatetic Teachers of the Deaf, teaching assistants and educational interpreters. The label 'deaf' covers a wide range of students, from those with mild to moderate hearing loss, who might not need much additional support in class, to students with severe to profound loss, who might need more support.

Despite these changes, many dedicated schools for deaf children continue to survive, suggesting that these schools have a role to play in the education of some young deaf people. Whenever a school is threatened with closure, grass roots activism from the Deaf community is mobilised (Ladd, 2003; Emery, 2009), suggesting strong feelings of loyalty from parents, pupils, staff and the Deaf community towards these schools. Schools for deaf children varied in ethos and in method. In the UK, there were many schools for deaf children that focused on promoting spoken language and did not allow sign language use; however, even at these schools, deaf children often used BSL to communicate outside of the classroom (Quinn, 2010). Other schools embraced BSL as the language of the children and allowed its use, alongside English, in the classroom (Fullwood, 2019).

Special schools for deaf children can be seen to function in an ambivalent way in relation to mainstream discourses of 'inclusion' and 'multiculturalism' (Corbett, 1996; Jancowski, 1997). Research has highlighted problems with segregated education, including isolation from mainstream culture and lowered educational expectations. In tension with this is the claim that deaf children need the exclusivity of a dedicated school in order to access the supportive function of the deaf community and sign language. Inclusive education has also been critiqued, with one of the key proponents of early inclusive education in the UK, Mary Warnock, changing her position and arguing that inclusion might not be suitable for all children (Warnock, 2005). Komaseroff and McLean (2006) argue that inclusion can reinforce barriers for deaf students.

The participants in this study experienced the changes from segregation to inclusive education first-hand, with some of them living through special school closures and trials of integration into the mainstream. These experiences of inclusion and segregation were explored in the interviews. In the following section I will describe the details of the methodological approach taken.

Methodology

As the aim of this study was to document the experiences of adults who had attended a special school for deaf children, an interpretive approach was adopted to capture the meanings the participants attributed to the placement decisions taken around their schooling (Schwandt, 1998). The approach was intended to align with a transformative paradigm utilising interpretive methods (Mertens *et al.*, 2011.) In keeping with the principles of participatory research and the ideal of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton, 2000), the researcher (a hearing woman) worked with a deaf colleague to review the research aims and develop the interview questions to ensure they would work well in BSL and met the priorities of members of the Deaf community. In-depth interviews formed the main focus of the data collection. Drawing on principles of narrative inquiry, emphasis was placed on the details that the participants considered to be significant (Bochner and Riggs, 2014). The narrative approach enabled priority to be given to the emotions of the participants. Interviews focused on the interactive relationship between the participants' personal experiences in school and the external social forces that structured school policies and cultures (Goodson and Sikes, 2001), such as national educational policies, paradigms of 'deaf education' and social attitudes to deafness. A conceptual framework was designed by drawing on Corker's (1996) work on Deaf identities and communities. The concept of 'ripples and whirlpools' was adopted to describe the complex nature of identity and relationships between individuals and social practices and institutions (Corker, 1996). A loose interview schedule was devised with prompts around themes of 'inclusion and exclusivity', 'identity and difference', 'Deaf culture and sign language: social and peer learning' and 'achievement: opportunity and aspiration'.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher, a hearing woman with BSL skills. After initial greetings and conversation in BSL, the interview questions were delivered in English with simultaneous interpretation into BSL by a qualified, professional interpreter. Interviews were audio and video recorded in order to capture both BSL and the interpretation. Only one interview was conducted in English, with no BSL interpretation, at the interviewee's request due to their preference for spoken English. The researcher was known to the participants through community work but was not an employee of the school and thus not an 'insider'. Steps were taken to mitigate against any issues relating to the presence of an interpreter. These included ensuring that the participants were happy with the translations and incorporating elements of BSL, such as body language and facial expression, into the transcripts. Particular attention was paid to the risk of the signed language being sidelined in favour of the dominant language (Temple and Young, 2004). On one occasion a participant challenged and corrected the interpreter when he felt his response had not been correctly

translated. In that instance the participant felt able to assert the BSL meaning over the incorrect English interpretation.

Inviting participants to reflect on their schooling meant that they were drawing on memories from the past but also actively constructing a new story in the moment of the interview. This retrospective design fits with an interpretive methodology that considers 'truth' and 'meaning' to be fluid and constructed through language. As storytelling is an important element of Deaf culture and sign languages (Rayman, 1999; Ladd, 2003; Padden and Humphries, 2009), many of the participants relished this opportunity. The data was not taken to be an accurate record of the past, but to be powerful testimonies of personal experiences and the impact they had on individuals. In order to allow this process to emerge authentically, sufficient time was allowed for responses to questions and the participants were enabled to direct the order of events that were recalled. Whilst a loosely chronological approach was held within the interview schedule, moving from first schooling experiences, to transitions, to current employment and hopes for the future, a linear approach was not dictated and participants were encouraged to move forwards and backwards between events they considered significant.

The study was conducted within a special school for deaf children with a long history and where all the participants were currently employed. Pearson *et al.* (1992) argue that responses about the past are influenced by personal beliefs about individual stability and change. They also argue that recalled memories can be greatly influenced by the psychological and environmental state of the respondents. Hence, the participants' responses may have been influenced by their current feelings about the school where they worked, its importance, its cultural value, its academic performance and the state of the school buildings. This was an important dimension to the research and both an advantage, as the participants had valuable insights and also a limitation, as the focus was on one type of setting, although mainstream schools were discussed by the participants. A further limitation was the small sample size, meaning that the experiences are not necessarily shared with other deaf adults. Pearson and Ross (1992) emphasise the influence of implicit and explicit theories held by respondents made up of narratives, schemata and scripts about society and themselves. It was these narratives about themselves and the position of deaf children within society, both in the past and the present, which were the focus of the study.

Participants

Ten deaf adults were interviewed and pseudonyms are used throughout this article. As gender did not emerge as an important aspect of the study, the gender of the pseudonyms has been changed to protect the identity of the participants. Some roles were also changed. Time was taken to carefully explain and discuss issues around confidentiality and informed consent with the participants in their preferred language, and information was provided in video format in BSL and in English. The majority of the participants were in their thirties and early forties, but one was in his twenties and one in his fifties. At the time of the interview, all the participants were employed at the same special school for deaf children in England. They were united by working in deaf education, but they had different roles that shaped their views.

Fraser was in his forties and bilingual (English/ BSL). He had attended a special school for the deaf for most of his education and expressed frustration about low standards of education. Despite achieving highly and going to university, he described how he would have preferred to take a different route if more opportunities had been available to him. He argued: '*I think the school had very low standards and expectations for deaf children.*' However, he credits the school with developing his sign language skills and his identification with Deaf culture. He argued that the large peer group of signing deaf children enabled him to develop fluency in BSL.

Lucy was also a teacher in her forties and had congenital deafness. She had conversational-level skills in BSL but her preferred language was spoken English. She had had a cochlear implant as an adult and had attended mainstream school for her primary education then a special school for the deaf, which emphasised oral methods and did not allow sign language use in the classroom. She had attended university and did not consider her deafness to be the defining part of her life. She also said she did not consider herself to be fully involved with the Deaf community: '*I'd say it's a minor part of my life. . . I've got a hearing husband, I've got hearing children, I've got hearing friends.*' She was satisfied with the standards of education and the opportunities she had had, although she described social challenges and frustrations at being apart from her family.

Three teaching assistants—Margaret, George and Peter—also took part in the study. Margaret was in her thirties, had grown up in Eastern Europe and attended a school for the deaf there. She was trilingual, with BSL as her second language. Peter was the youngest participant, in his twenties, and had attended mainstream school for the first five years of his life and then two different schools for the deaf for the remainder of his education. As the youngest participant he had experienced more time in a mainstream classroom. He expressed dissatisfaction with both the mainstream and the special schools he attended. He mentioned: '*I saw myself as quite clever, so in mainstream school the lessons were really good but it was really hard for me to learn a lot, it was just too many, I couldn't keep up, couldn't hear, then I went to the deaf school, much smaller, but I was ahead of everyone academically so everybody was behind me. I had to wait a lot in deaf education so nothing's perfect.*' This sense of failure to meet the needs of deaf students was conveyed by all the participants. George was in his thirties and also employed as a teaching assistant. He had attended a school for the deaf for his whole education until he moved to a mainstream college for his tertiary education. He appreciated the opportunity to attend the mainstream college but found it a hard transition from the segregated world he had experienced at school: '*It was very successful, it was just a very. . . [sic], it was a culture shock.*'

Emma and Harry were BSL tutors and were both passionate and articulate advocates for BSL and for deaf children. They were both bilingual, but Emma's first language was English whereas Harry's was BSL. Emma intensely resented being treated as lesser, and this was a significant part of the experience of deaf education for her. Her anger at missed opportunities and low expectations was palpable in her animated signing. Harry was in his thirties and his parents were also deaf. He had attended mainstream primary school. Harry described how growing up in a deaf family shaped his identity: '*I grew up in a deaf family so I had that deaf identity very early on,* [. . .] *I grew up in the deaf club, I knew who I was, I knew I was deaf.*' This is in contrast to Emma,

who had grown up in a hearing family and explained: '*It was weird, I remember back then I didn't think "I'm deaf" I was just Emma.*'

In his interview Harry referred to the '*deaf world*' and the '*hearing world*' and emphasised the importance for him of being able to move between the two worlds. He described why he chose an oral school despite having limited speech skills and strong BSL: '*I decided that, you know, I'd then be able to access both worlds in the future if I went to an oral school.*' This visualisation of separate worlds was consistent with all the participants and was frequently used to explain decisions about education and to convey frustration about the injustices encountered as a result of being deaf.

William was a support worker and was in his fifties. As the oldest participant he had experienced an exclusively segregated education and had attended a special school for deaf children from the age of 2 to 16 years. He had grown up in a deaf family and so had learnt BSL from his parents as his first language. The school he attended adhered to the oralist method and had a strict no signing policy. At the time it was believed that sign languages were gestural systems that distracted deaf children from learning spoken language and therefore steps were taken to prevent children from using sign language, including physical punishment. William described the profound impact this had on him: '*I became very angry, more angry as time went on because the teachers were saying "don't sign, speak" and everyone just, you know, nodded along.*' As a result of this experience, William was a passionate advocate of deaf rights. He expressed his frustration at the limitations of his education and his hopes for change in the future. He explained: '*I want it* [deaf education] *to be the best, I want equality, [. . .] I want diversity, we don't want to go back to where we were before, we need to have a really positive environment for deaf children. I want the best for them, you know, we're fed up of a sub-standard education, we want the best and reduce the stress.*'

William's experience highlights the psychological damage done by a punitively enforced oral-only education system as described by Ladd (2003). His testimony also reveals the changes that have occurred since the time he was at school, including the changing status of BSL, which was recognised as an official language of the UK in 2003, and improvements in technology, including amplification and the use of cochlear implantation. These changes have had an important impact on deaf children's access to language, both BSL and English (Berry, 2017). For Lucy, Harry and Emma, who grew up in an era in which mainstreaming was becoming more popular, being able to speak was considered an opportunity for more options, higher achievement and higher status. Peter, as the youngest participant and most recently educated, still experienced frustrations and tensions around mainstream and special provision, suggesting that despite many years of inclusive practice, exclusion was still a significant part of the experience of being deaf. Much has been written about how and why deaf children experience exclusion in mainstream contexts (Jarvis, 2002; Iantaffi *et al.*, 2003; Wauters and Knoors, 2008; Berry, 2017). Deaf children in mainstream settings experience barriers in access to communication, with resulting social and educational implications (Jarvis, 2002), and Peter's experience exemplified this. Applying the theory of 'ableism' (exclusionary practices towards disabled people), Komaseroff and McLean (2006) argue that Deaf children, whose first language is a sign language, might be unable to access the curriculum and participate equally in mainstream classrooms.

Findings

The procedure for analysis of the narratives (the BSL videos and English transcripts) followed a 'three-dimensional space' approach outlined in Ollerenshaw and Cresswell (2002) to 're-story' the raw data. This approach took account of the following dimensions: personal, social, temporal and environmental. After careful rereading and analysis based on these dimensions, patterns and tensions were grouped to form interim texts (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).These patterns and tensions included: anger and frustration at missed opportunities; the experience of an impoverished curriculum and education; segregation from family; the importance of access to Deaf culture and sign language; transformation through encounters with other deaf people; the importance of a Deaf peer group; Deaf identity and aspirations for the future of deaf education and pedagogy. More details about these patterns and tensions follow.

Missed opportunities

All the participants expressed feelings of frustration over poor standards and lost opportunities. Fraser conveyed this as a loss: '*There were a lot of opportunities I missed out on.*' Emma expressed her dissatisfaction: '*The school* [...] *was rubbish, the education wasn't good. I didn't do any exams.*' This feeling that the standards were lower than in the mainstream was shared by most participants. Only Lucy felt satisfied with the standard of education she had received. Some of the participants also reflected on unsuccessful mainstream experiences. For Peter this was expressed as a site of tension, in which neither the mainstream setting nor the special school for deaf children got it right. Emma reflected in anger on the low expectations of her ability because of her deafness. She expressed disgust at the assumption that all deaf children are the same. She said '*deaf children, they're not sheep. I think that having them all together, you don't have to have them all together, you know sheep, they've probably got their own personalities and different things going on* [...]'. This frustration at the experience of segregation was shared by all the participants.

In addition to poor standards of education, many of the participants also expressed feelings of dislocation from their families and local communities. They described looking around schools that were long distances from their homes and feeling anxious about leaving home and family. Margaret described the negative impact on family life when she explained: '*I rarely saw my sister* [...].' For many participants, the comparison with the experiences of their hearing or deaf siblings was significant. For Peter, whose brother was hearing, this was expressed as an unfavourable difference: '[...] *mainstream curriculum offers you loads of subjects. Like my brother's got* [...] *chemistry, biology, I just did science, basic science, I didn't have geography, I didn't have history*'. This frustration with a limited curriculum was also shared by Harry. He described the mainstream schools he attended as offering a richer, more interesting curriculum: '*we've learnt more interesting things at my other schools like Egyptians, history, you know, Queen Victoria* [...]'.

Access to Deaf culture

Despite these widespread frustrations at low standards and segregation, all the participants stated the importance of attending a special school for deaf children for providing access to the Deaf community. For many participants, enrolment at a dedicated school for deaf children was a point of transformation in their lives, leading to self-actualisation and the development of positive self-esteem. For example, Stuart described his entrance to a special school for deaf children as a turning point in his life. He explained: '*My personality changed* […] *I suddenly had the communication, I could communicate with people and I was within a community the same as me.*' Harry argued that this was an important aspect of the development of a positive deaf identity. He described his theory that deaf children need to '[…] *meet other deaf people in order to know who they are.* […] *It is important for them to mix with other deaf children in order to develop that identity* […] [to understand that] *there is nothing wrong with you, there's just something wrong with society who doesn't understand you*'. Similarly, Lucy recognised the importance of explicit education in Deaf culture for the same reason. She argued: '[…] *I think they need to know about the history of sign language, the history of deafness, why there are deaf schools, you know, that you need to make them feel why they are here and why they are different. Quite a few of our deaf youngsters don't know what deafness is, it's a struggle with them* […].' The participants also described instances of peer support and peer-to-peer transmission of sign language. Harry explained: '*I think we always helped each other but deaf always do that at school,* […] *all the deaf children supported everyone* […] *it's the deaf way* […].' Harry, and the other participants who came from families with deaf family members, also described how they acted as informal tutors to children who had limited sign language skills.

Aspirations for the future of deaf education

When asked what they felt about the future of schools for deaf children and whether they should continue, most of the participants expressed the desire for specialist schools to stay open. George, for example, expressed concerns about deaf children's futures if all special schools for deaf children closed. He linked this to a decline and disappearance of BSL. He also felt that deaf children needed specialist support and a protected environment away from the mainstream to develop the confidence to function in mainstream society.

The participants who had grown up with deaf parents recalled the role of the Deaf club in facilitating pastoral and social support for deaf people. William explained: '*my second home was* […] *the deaf club*'. Harry linked his attendance at the Deaf club with his development of a '*strong deaf identity*'. He also credited his confidence and overall wellbeing as a child to having attended the Deaf club with his family and being part of the Deaf community. However, he reflected on the decline of attendance at Deaf clubs nationally.

However, despite these arguments in favour of immersion in Deaf culture and a deaf peer group, many of the participants were critical of the exclusive nature of schools for deaf children and argued for the need for deaf children to be able to function in mainstream society and to be able to move between both Deaf and hearing

cultures. Harry reflected on the changing nature of the relationship between Deaf and hearing cultures. He described how in his childhood he had experienced a distinct separation between cultures but that he now observed a breakdown of these barriers. He argued: '*I think the two worlds are coming together and integrating more. In the old days you didn't ever sign outside.* […] *Now everyone's signing really freely, it's much more open, it's changed* […].' This perception of young deaf people needing to be more flexible with regard to culture was shared by many of the participants.

When asked to reflect on the challenges currently faced by deaf children, Harry argued that many of the problems in accessing a rich curriculum can be linked to literacy issues. He explained: '[…] *sometimes I feel that they just need to read it in English but they say: I can't read English,* […] *and I'm like, well, it's an English world out there, I'm sorry* […] *but they are very resistant to English*'. Peter emphasised the need for deaf children to learn English early on in order to develop their competencies in it. He argued that this made moving between languages easier. '*So it is easier if you know English and then you can learn BSL* […], *and then you can change the register thing* [sic] *and give a range of what you're doing.*'

Hearing world vs deaf world

Reflecting on her experiences growing up, Emma argued that she had never wanted to feel limited by the exclusive nature of the deaf community within a specialist school. She argued: '[…] *I wanted to mix with hearing people, I wanted to mix in with them, I didn't just want to be in that small deaf little world. I needed to learn how to survive in the hearing world.*' The metaphor of the 'hearing world' vs the 'deaf world' articulates both the barriers and the protective nature of the deaf community. In the context of an inclusive culture, this metaphor appears to perpetuate segregation. It was consistently used by the participants as a way to relate experiences of exclusion but also as a way to express hopes for a more connected future. Stuart, for example, argued: '*I think you should be able to be in both worlds, I don't think you should be one or the other because hearing people might not understand deaf people and likewise so if you can be in both, that would be better because you can bring the two worlds together.*' The history of separate special schools for deaf children and Deaf clubs may have constructed a perception of an exclusively deaf environment. In this way the 'deaf world' was both protective but limited. With the growth in mainstreaming and the closure of many special schools, the boundaries of the 'deaf world' began to weaken. The participants used the concept to explore and challenge its limitations.

Discussion

The participants expressed frustration that their individual needs and educational abilities were overlooked at the expense of the label of 'deaf child', suggesting a deficit perspective was influential (Hauser *et al.*, 2010). The tensions expressed by the participants resonate with Norwich's theory of 'dilemmas of difference' and continua of pedagogic needs (Norwich, 2002). However, alongside this deficit perspective, the participants also expressed the importance of a recognition of their commonality with other deaf children through their distinct shared language (BSL) and heritage. Ladd

(2003) describes this as 'Deafhood'. These tensions between 'common' and 'unique' needs (Norwich, 2002) are still inherent in current educational provision and practice. There is a clearly marked achievement gap for deaf children internationally (Powers *et al.*, 1999; Rydberg *et al.*, 2009; Qi and Mitchell, 2012; NatSip, 2014; Dammeyer and Marschark, 2016) and research highlights the increased risk of mental health problems for deaf children (Fellinger *et al.*, 2009a and 2009b). This is despite a widespread move away from segregated education for most deaf children.

The participants emphasised the protective role of the deaf peer group, including access to early sign language, Deaf culture and adult Deaf role models. Research has found that large deaf peer groups enable the development of complex sign languages (Sengas and Coppola, 2001; Reilly and Reilly, 2005; Anglin-Jaffe, 2013). The participants described the transformational nature of meeting other deaf people for the first time. This is supported by authors such as Sheridan (2001), who documented the significance of meeting with other deaf people in an all-deaf learning environment. DeClerck (2007) cites Soto's (2003) description of the process as a 'deaf awakening'.

The participants' recognition of the importance of Deaf culture in the education of deaf children supports the trend towards a bilingual–bicultural approach. This bilingual–bicultural model was particularly popular within Scandinavian countries between the 1980s and early 2000s, and aims to recognise and value national sign languages, support deaf pupils' self-esteem and incorporate Deaf culture into the curriculum (Swanwick and Gregory, 2007; Swanwick, 2010; Swanwick *et al.*, 2014; Dammeyer and Marschark, 2016). Emma and Harry in particular emphasised the need for explicit teaching around Deaf culture, and this corresponds with calls for culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995) for deaf learners (Stone, 2000), and developments such as the National Deaf Studies curriculum, which aims to develop positive cultural experiences for deaf children in order to support their bilingual identities (National Deaf Studies Curriculum Working Group, 2006).

The participants also emphasised the need for explicit support for context switching, which the participants described as 'moving between the hearing world and the deaf world'. Swanwick (2017) explores the value and potential of explicitly supporting deaf children with 'trans-languaging'. She argues that it has potential to be beneficial for deaf learners, but only within an inclusive context in which teachers have the bilingual skills necessary to support their learners to develop literacy in a language-rich environment (Swanwick, 2017). However, as has been described by the participants in this study, many deaf children experience barriers to early language learning (Spencer and Marschark, 2010), limited curriculum and teachers without higher-level sign language skills (Swanwick, 2017).

These national and international trends influenced the participants' experiences. At the same time, individual and personal aspects were also significant. Corker's (1996) work on Deaf identities and communities provided a conceptual framework to enable exploration of these social and psychological dynamics. Corker's (1996) image of 'ripples and whirlpools' describes the complex nature of identity for deaf people, and the relationship between deaf individuals and the institutions with which they interact. Corker (1996) described how the 'self' for deaf people is formed in relation to interactions with others and institutions that are positive in terms of self-actualisation and protective of mental health, which she termed 'ripples' and negative in terms

of damage to both self-concept and self-esteem, which she described as 'whirlpools'. In this study the whirlpools of anger and frustration were apparent through the low standards and limited opportunities described by the participants. The data revealed that dichotomies around special and inclusive education overlapped with metaphors of a divided world around hearing status. These divisions offer a disservice to deaf children, and a flexible system may serve the diversity of needs of deaf children better. Corbett (1996) argued that special schools for deaf children were hearing dominated through the imposition of a majority language, which positioned deaf children as outsiders. Ladd (2003) has called for the de-colonisation of deaf education to occur. Remodelling deaf education around Deaf culture and around the positive concept of 'Deaf gain' (Bauman and Murray, 2010) rather than hearing loss is one possible solution. The participants in this study, however, were aware of the power and significance of mainstream culture to gain access to employment and therefore emphasised the need to be confident within both hearing and Deaf cultures. This aligns with McIllroy and Storbeck's (2011) conceptualisation of 'DeaF', with the capitalised 'F' signalling the fluidity of that identity. With the changes in the nature of deaf identity for younger generations, patterns of educational provision need to be designed to reflect this increasing complexity.

Deaf-centric hubs

The bilingual–bicultural model has argued for early language learning as a right for all deaf children (Swanwick, 2017). This model can be applied in special schools or within mainstream provision if delivered by peripatetic teachers of the deaf through a resourced provision (Miller, 2008). The participants stressed the supportive function of other deaf children for cultural transmission and peer learning. This has been identified in other contexts around the world (see e.g. Reilly and Reilly, 2005). One aspect emphasised by the participants was the importance of having a 'safe space' from which to withdraw from sometimes hostile social experiences. Resource bases are often used as refuges for deaf children in mainstream schools (Miller, 2008). Resource bases may provide security, but they do not allow for the congregation of a large deaf peer group. Some of the participants reflected on the importance of the Deaf club in providing a deaf-centric space for pastoral support and socialising. Ladd (2003) described the history and function of the Deaf club as protective and culturally important, and Valentine and Skelton (2008) analysed the development of 'deaf spaces' on the internet as an evolution of the physical Deaf club.

In this study, special schools for deaf children held cultural significance beyond educational provision. However, with the closure of many of these schools alongside the decline of Deaf clubs, there has been a reduction in the opportunities for access to culturally significant places for deaf children and adults. Recent statistics also suggest a decline in the number of resourced provisions for deaf children within the mainstream (NDCS, 2019). With this decline in provision, it seems that there is a need for further evolution of a social space that meets the needs of deaf children and adults.

One possible solution for this could be organised around the existing community provision in schools and other social spaces, such as libraries or community centres,

by harnessing the power of social enterprise. In the UK, many community centres are being re-established in existing facilities or housed in purpose-built multi-use spaces (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). There is potential for these community centres to house a further iteration of the special school for the deaf and the Deaf club, which meets the need for a congregation of deaf peers, specialist provision, pastoral support and social activity. These deaf-centric hubs could provide expertise on visual learning methods, sign language tuition for children and their families, and could also facilitate a meeting place for Deaf people of all ages akin to the Deaf club. Working in partnership with mainstream schools and peripatetic teachers of the deaf, these hubs could enable access to a broad mainstream curriculum with local friends and support for family relationships. Hubs could be set up in relation to the numbers of deaf children in particular areas who would benefit from access to BSL and would not preclude the wider context of deaf children with cochlear implants and hearing parents. Local authorities and social enterprises could be engaged to coordinate the range of services and facilitate multi-agency working. Further scoping research could be undertaken to collect regional data about demand and service usage in order to consider the validity of the idea, as caution is required when suggesting new practice based on data from a small, qualitative sample.

With hubs within communities providing linguistic support, social space and access to a peer group, young deaf children could be supported to spend part of their learning and socialising space there, with the majority of their time being in mainstream educational spaces local to their families. From this hub, 'ripples' could expand allowing deaf children to engage as bilingual and bicultural learners moving between different languages and modalities and developing positive identities. The aim would be to challenge the perception of a hostile, inaccessible 'hearing world'. Empowering young deaf children to see the whole world as theirs to inhabit would be a profound but welcome change at the heart of deaf education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the deaf adults in this study eloquently related their experiences in special schools for deaf children. Their narratives confirmed research that positions these schools ambivalently in terms of discourses of inclusive and multicultural education, and also in terms of Deaf culture. The predominant experience was of regret and frustration for missed opportunities and limited life chances. However, this was balanced by an optimism for change and awareness that deaf children could become skilful 'trans-languagers' with the recognition of their cultural and language needs. In this article I have argued for a remodelling of deaf education with an awareness of the importance of the deaf peer group and sign language as central, from which positive educational experiences can 'ripple' outwards.

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Open Research

Due to ethical concerns, the research data supporting this publication cannot be made openly available.

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