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March 6, 2016

Deaf Children and Youth, Inspiration and Acceptance:

A Study of Deaf Children's Culture

Ideas of deafness from most of the adult hearing world are typically plagued with images of isolation and exclusion. Madeline M. Maxwell suggests “educational traditions” typically further these views by constructing d/Deaf people, and I would argue in particular d/Deaf children as needing to be integrated into “the hearing world” (97). In the past, study of deaf children has mainly focused on their integration into hearing society rather than the culture and feeling of the children themselves. Historically deaf people “were considered outcasts in society” (Foss 427). In the late 1880s (hearing) reformers emphasized speech therapy and the assimilation of deaf children into hearing schools (Foss 427). Fortunately, by the 1960s and ‘70s Deaf people successfully created a movement to promote the acceptance of Deaf culture (Foss 427). Readers of this essay should note the distinction between *deaf* and *Deaf* (with a capital “D”), the “capitalizing [of] the word *deaf* connotes a cultural identity...the lower case *deaf* [is] a descriptor for audiological status” (Maxwell 97). (Capitalized) Deaf recognizes a distinct culture, similar to an ethnic background with its own language. American Sign Language (ASL) is ranked one of the most popular languages in the United States (Foss 427). Through analyzing the importance of peer relationships, language, and pride for Deaf children and youth it is apparent that they too have their own separate and distinct culture even from that of the adult Deaf community. This essay will prove that Deaf children and youth are active in promoting the acceptance and

understanding of deafness in the lives of other deaf children and youth, and in the lives of hearing individuals.

Connection and friendship are an important part of most children and youths daily life. While an integral part of childhood for the hearing community, forming close friendships and bonds is even more central to children's Deaf culture. Important to note is "that the vast majority of deaf children are born into hearing families who have no experience with deafness or sign language" (Sutton-Spence 266). In addition, most teachers of Deaf children (including in Deaf schools) are hearing (Maxwell 98); therefore, joining Deaf culture is dependent on other Deaf children and youth. This also is the basis for creating a distinct children's culture. For instance, prior to the 1980s in residential Deaf schools, "children from Deaf families often provided the first introduction to the Deaf cultural world for deaf children coming from hearing families" (Sutton-Spence 267). Radha, a fifteen-year-old girl living in Mumbai attending a local school for the Deaf, explains the importance of peer relationships with other Deaf children in her life (Limaye 391). Radha truly values having a strong friendship with Deaf peers. Going to a Deaf school allows her to feel a part of a community and has enabled her to accept her deafness rather than face the difficulties she did in a hearing school (Limaye 391). In addition to Radha, Sandhya Limaye also interviews eighteen-year-old Hasina (392). Hasina has accepted her deafness and wants to belong to the Deaf community, but she feels her mother looks down upon her Deaf friends (397). For both Hasina and Radha their parents encourage them to create friendships with hearing children but they find that this is difficult, as hearing children are not understanding of their needs and often become impatient (397). Going to a school for the Deaf provides Radha with a strong sense of belonging she says, "I feel that I am home... the thought of my contributing to the group gives me confidence" (404). Interacting with other Deaf children

allows both Hasina and Radha to feel a part of a community but also to accept their own deafness. They often struggle with feeling inadequate as result of the way the hearing world, including their hearing family, has devalued them. For both Hasina and Radha other Deaf children and youth helped to encourage their acceptance of their own deafness. Creating strong bonds with other Deaf youth allows them to feel accepted and to understand Deaf culture.

In Vancouver, British Columbia, elementary teachers from B.C. Provincial School for the Deaf organized an American Sign Language competition (Naylor 2016). Students were given the chance to go south of the border to present their deaf poetry, stories and art work (Naylor). This amazing opportunity allows these Deaf students the chance to interact with Deaf children on a larger scale. The children are keen to see how American Deaf schools compare to their own; although, when asked what they are most excited for about their trip the chance to make new friends appears their highest priority (Naylor). Grade seven student Bella Aikin is excited about getting to sign the story she had written and meet new friends in America (Naylor). The children show the value they place on belonging to the Deaf world and creating new friendships with other Deaf children. They valued the chance to explore the experience of other Deaf children outside of their country. Similar to these children, Radha expresses great interest in attending Gallaudet, a college in America for the Deaf (Limaye 402). Radha's reason for wanting to attend Gallaudet was "to get more exposure" to deaf culture (Limaye 402). Like Radha's interest in going to the United States to gain exposure in Deaf culture, the BC children were also excited about the prospect of meeting Deaf children outside of Canada. Deaf children value the opportunity to understand global experiences with deafness, and appreciate that being Deaf can connect people worldwide. Friendships and an international understanding of Deafness are very important to children and youth in creating their own distinct Deaf culture. Friendships allowed

the children to accept and understand their own culture, as well as be active in the reshaping of their own Deaf culture as separate from the culture of Deaf adults.

Carin Roos' observation of young Deaf children (ages three to six) in Sweden, shows the importance of language in developing Deaf children's culture. While language is central to the adult Deaf community, young children's use of sign language is both separate and diverse. For most children, play is an important aspect of childhood especially during the ages of three to six. Roos shows that Deaf children use Swedish Sign Language (SSL) in their play to establish friendships, and even status (Roos 99-100). Roos' research shows the importance of language on Deaf culture as the connection between friendship and play. Roos focuses her study on young Deaf children's use of fingerspelling, which entails the use of sign language to demonstrate the alphabet (Roos 86). The children initiated games involving fingerspelling based on the shape of the letters. They used language in an interactive way to form friendships through play. Roos recognizes "play-fingerspelling" to demonstrate the children as actively participating in Deaf culture (97). The children are reshaping language to suit their own needs and desires and creating their own distinct culture. For the older BC children and their ASL competition they are given the opportunity to share their stories, poetry and art to other children in the Deaf community. The value of sign language is clear in Bella's excitement to share her work: "I'm excited to sign my story and have people see me signing and to do a good job...." (Naylor). Bella understands ASL is central to being Deaf and wants to gain acceptance from her peers in the Deaf community.

Possibly most intriguing about the use of fingerspelling for the children is its practice to gain status (Roos 99-100). For instance, Lisbeth tests her friends by signing (or fingerspelling) her last name and asking if they remember what this means (Roos 100). The friend who responds incorrectly she teases, while commending the other for remembering (100). Lisbeth is showing

her status over the group by fingerspelling words which other children may or may not know. The children are demonstrating status over their peers but also attempting to educate each other on Deaf language. For Deaf children the peer group is influential in educating each other on language. Maxwell states, when deaf children enter schools for the Deaf they “rapidly learn to sign from other children” (102). While adults have an important role to play in the teaching of sign language, Deaf children actively play a role in the education of their peers to welcome them into Deaf children’s culture. Yet perhaps more important is Maxwell’s suggestion that children’s signing is often “incomprehensible” to the adults who deal with the children, as though children create their own language detached from adults (102). Maxwell and Roos thus Deaf children’s sign language as being separate even from the adult Deaf community.

In Peoria, Illinois fifth-grade students of Mark W Bills Middle School wanted to communicate with their Deaf classmate, Rhemy Elsey (WTOC). In order to do this, the students organized a club with Rhemy and his interpreter, Tammy Arvin, to be taught sign language (WTOC). Arvin states, “I was thrilled...that they wanted to learn some Sign Language, and that they were taking initiative to be able to communicate more effectively with their classmate” (WTOC). In this example, the hearing children demonstrate their agency in trying to become a part of Deaf culture. Rhemy’s hearing classmates took the initiative to understand Deaf culture by creating the sign language club. Through these examples it is clear that sign language encourages understanding and acceptance of children’s Deaf culture. The children in Roos’ study, the Deaf children from BC, and the language club at Mark W Bills Middle School show how sign language connects a community and enables an opportunity to promote understanding and pride for Deaf culture.

A sense of pride for belonging to this distinct community is an important factor of being Deaf. Deaf children and youth often identify with Deaf culture by creating close peer ties and immersing themselves in language similar to people with a strong ethnic identity. Hasina, from Limaye's study, is described as "sensitive about her deafness" (392). Hasina has difficulty with her mother who often looks down upon Hasina's deaf friends (392). Hasina herself has "accepted her deafness and wants to be a part of the Deaf world" although she often struggles with outsiders of the community, like her mother, not understanding the culture (392). Hasina's acceptance of her deafness and need to be a part of the Deaf community shows the pride she has for in Deaf culture. Acceptance of her Deafness comes from close personal ties with other Deaf youth in her area, as a result of attending a School for the Deaf. Hasina and Radha both show their need to immerse themselves in their culture. Radha's aspirations to attend Gallaudet College for the Deaf in the US shows her pride in being a part of the Deaf community and also her need to connect with people who understand and accept her Deaf identity (Limaye 402). Radha makes a powerful statement in the study when she says, "Why [does] everybody, including parents and teachers, tell us that we cannot do anything? They are the real problem, not deafness" (402). While Radha and Hasina both struggle with their deafness at times, they show resilience in their attempt to ignore the ideas of deafness constructed by the hearing world and show a strong sense of pride in their culture.

Friendship, language, and pride within children's distinct Deaf culture are central to promoting acceptance both for the children themselves and for hearing individuals with whom they interact. While hearing society has socially constructed deafness as a disability which requires treatment, the Deaf community asserts that deafness should be likened to "a cultural trait, akin to ethnicity" (Foss 428). As researchers study the true experience of Deaf individuals

they come to understand the beauty of the culture (Maxwell 97). The Deaf children in this essay recognize the connectedness that identifying as Deaf provides them. Being Deaf makes them part of a global community. Today, as Foss argues, representation of Deaf children and youth has improved in recent years with shows such as *Switched at Birth* which centre on the life of two teens who were switched at birth, one of them becoming deaf at a young age. The show represents deafness in a way that reshapes ideas of Deaf culture and Deaf youth. Deaf children and youth show resilience in overcoming the ignorance of the hearing world and as a result encourage understanding and acceptance among both the hearing world and for other struggling deaf children and youth.

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