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American Sign Language: Culture, Community, & Identity

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Chapter I: Introduction

How does American Sign Language influence the discovery of self and identity? Does having American Sign Language as a young child in the home as well as in school improve the quality of life a deaf person perceives? American Sign Language is, as the name suggests, native to the United States. It has it has linguistic origins in Langue des Signes Français (French Sign Language). It is a manual language with it's own linguistic complexities and rules. The hands, body, and facial expressions are used to communicate without using sound. American Sign Language is considered to be a creolization of Langue des Signes Français, not a dialect (Padden et al, 2010). Before 1817 and the establishment for the first school for the deaf, there were only a few vague documentations of limited Deaf communities in the United States (Groce, 1985). Since the founding of the first school for the deaf those schools have become epicenters for socialization and the development of Deaf culture. Since deafness affects people of any race, class, or orientation deafness is found anywhere, creating a diverse community.

Scholars in this field have used the following terminology when writing academic papers. There is a difference between the spelling of "deaf" and "Deaf", which needs explaining. Lowercase d, deaf, is the description of not having full hearing. Therefore someone can be deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. Uppercase D on the other hand, Deaf, is an identity. As in the sense of "I am Black" or "I am Gay", "I am Deaf" shows an allegiance to a cultural group- the Deaf community. While there is not complete

agreement in the Deaf community about membership many view deaf people who are solely oral, and do not use American Sign Language as not part of the community. One of the requirements of participating in the culture and community is that everybody is expected to sign. People who are deaf and are raised in the oral tradition tend to not participate in Deaf social clubs and Deaf communities because they are seen as culturally hearing and are unable to communicate with the Deaf. There is even a sign used by the Deaf community to represent this perspective. The sign for HEARING is placed on the forehead to indicate that the deaf person thinks like a hearing person (Holcomb, 2013). If an oral deaf person were to decide to want to learn American Sign Language they would be eagerly welcomed and encouraged. I have found that the Deaf community sees it as a homecoming, someone being rescued from the clutches of oralism.

There are four different categories of people in the Deaf community that need to be identified, those who are Deaf of Deaf, Deaf of Hearing, CODA/SODAs, and allies. They each have different experiences that shape their participation and changes the makeup of the Deaf community. Those who are Deaf of Deaf are those who themselves are Deaf, as are their parents. This means that their first language is American Sign Language. They grow up in a home that is culturally Deaf and share a cultural experience with their parents. This is only 10% of the deaf population due to genetic differences that result in deafness. These people are also sometimes referred to as “multigenerational Deaf”. They can trace their Deaf heritage back to Deaf ancestors, creating a very tight network of Deaf families.

The Deaf of Hearing person is deaf and has hearing parents. They do not necessarily share a common experience with their parents and typically grow up with a hearing culture within their home. They often have limited communication if their parents decide not to learn American Sign Language and send them to a school where American Sign Language is employed. This is 90% of the population of deaf people who become deaf from illness or accident.

CODA/SODAs are Children Of a Deaf Adult, or a Sibling Of a Deaf Adult. They are hearing and their parents or sibling is Deaf. They often learn American Sign Language prior to spoken language and attend hearing schools, although there are a select few of Deaf schools who are now accepting CODAs and SODAs. These individuals often become part of the Deaf community through interpreting, teaching, or other jobs in the Deaf community. Their participation depends on their skill in American Sign Language, which varies due to their dedication to the Deaf community and their family's involvement.

Allies of the Deaf community exist in several forms and are hearing. They are interpreters, Deaf educators, business people, audiologists and several other kinds of people. They serve a supporting role by helping to either share knowledge about the Deaf community to hearing people who would be otherwise unaware, or provide services like interpreting and education. They take a backseat, supporting the community in ways that need. These hearing people are classified as "HEARING-BUT-_____". Common identities are HEARING-BUT-teacher for the Deaf, or HEARING-BUT-husband is Deaf. It gives identity to hearing people in the greater Deaf community who are not CODAs.

Oralism is a place of contention historically as well as presently. In Richard Winefield's book, *Never the Twain Shall Meet*: *The Communications Debate* he outlined how oralism came to be in deaf education in both Europe and the United States. It began to emerge in the 1860's with the Clarke and Lexington schools for the Deaf. Edward Gallaudet, who helped set up the first school for the deaf, The American School for the Deaf in 1817, and helped bring sign language to the United States saw that some children may benefit from the use of oral education. For this reason he is partially regraded as a traitor to the signed cause. He wanted to incorporate some of the oral lessons for those students so that it would be useful to them. Then in 1880 there was the International Convention of Instructors of the Deaf in Milan, Italy. It is important to note that none of the educators were deaf themselves. At that time there were no Deaf teachers for deaf children. There was testimony on both sides, for oralism and for signed language. Gallaudet's personal perspective was that half of the delegates were Italian and came from a different place. For years Italy had been giving more than twice the amount of money toward deaf education and were strongly advocating for oral education. So when the convention went to vote, they voted overwhelmingly to support Oralism. This resulted in a switch to oralism in the United States. In 1886 the Conference of American Instructors of the Deaf passed a resolution for all schools for the deaf to offer speech instruction to their students. The passing of these resolutions made oralism a more popular choice among schools as they attempted to mainstream their students to function in hearing society. At this time deaf people were still viewed as objects in the care of others. They were not viewed as independent or capable of input on their own lives.

Similar to the experience that Deaf people on Martha's Vineyard faced in diminishing rights, (Groce, 1985) mainland Deaf Americans were seen as inferior.

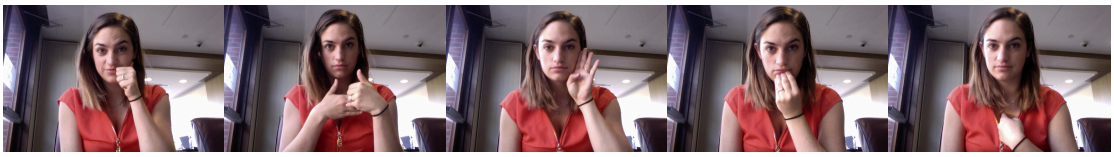
Oralism was also never outlawed, American Sign Language is not recognized as the official language of the Deaf community. Deaf people do not have protection under the law to be educated in American Sign Language. Yet the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, ensures that Deaf Americans have equal access to information through signed language. Some countries have passed laws identifying their signed language as the official language of the Deaf, including Norway (Magnuson, 2000). Recently in 2012, there was a petition sent to the White House to ask that American Sign Language be recognized as the language of the Deaf. It reached the threshold of required signatures which means that the government will formulate a response. Until then there will be great variability in deaf education. During the oralism movement signing in the classroom resulted in corporal punishment. The students who lived in the dorms kept the language alive by passing it along to the newest generation of students residing on campus. Parents are often concerned that their children are going to be unable to communicate if they use American Sign Language due to the fallacies that spread in the 1880's.

Oral schools teach lipreading and speech exclusively- signing is not allowed. Pure oral education is the instruction of deaf students using spoken and written English. They practice lip reading and speech skills in an attempt to mainstream them into hearing society. Oralism still thrives today with schools around the nation offering a sign-free environment. Their pedagogical belief is that learning American Sign Language inhibits

deaf people from learning how to speak and write with correct English grammar. Let's take a step back as I encourage you, the reader, to silently mouth the words "today" and "Tuesday", consider how similarly they are pronounced, and how they are both indicators of time. The difference between "I will see you today" and "I will see you Tuesday" are different and have different implications. Oralism results in confusion for deaf learners, adding difficulty to the learning process. Deaf schools on the other hand use American Sign Language for teaching and children and their families can elect to have their children take speech classes while at school.

Finally, American Sign Language is interpreted, not translated. The grammatical structure differs from English. If you were to translate American Sign Language it would be called "Gloss". Since some of the grammar of American Sign Language resides in expression, it does not provide the entire interpretation.

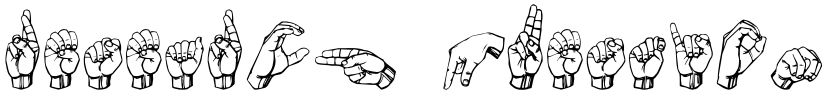
Example: English: I eat brown bread everyday.
Gloss: EVERYDAY BREAD BROWN EAT I
ASL:



Context

When I was four-years-old I was enrolled in a preschool program that had half children with disabilities, half without. My teacher used sign language as a mode of communication. As a child it stayed with me and when I arrived at college I elected to take American Sign Language for my language requirement. I took levels one and two

beginning in my freshman year but after that there were no other options to continue and take higher level courses. I was then encouraged by my American Sign Language teacher to work at a school for Deaf children. I was given a wonderful opportunity to work at that school where I was able to learn in depth not only about American Sign Language but also Deaf culture, community, and identity. These experiences allowed me access as an insider to the community, enabling me to form relationships as well as observations of Deaf culture in context and experience.

Research Question 

My research question has evolved over time during this project. When I first began my research the question I formulated was: To what extent does early American Sign Language intervention contribute to deaf children's success in reading? There was a twofold problem with my question, firstly it became more of a quantifiable question, which would not have been able to be researched qualitatively as I was hoping to do. Most importantly I had fallen into the hearing hegemonic trap of believing that reading skills were the most important and therefore a good way to evaluate success. As I began to search for literature, specifically literature that supported American Sign Language as constructive when it came to reading, I found information on reading skills, but not how American Sign Language connected to developing reading skills. The literature mainly focused on the use of technology such as; cochlear implants, hearing aids, and other assistive technologies. The articles then detailed how they were or were not helpful. Finally I discovered that I had aligned myself with the very group of researchers I had

hoped to not be like. The oppressive institution of the hearing researchers apply their cultural relevance of literacy as a marker of success to a different cultural group. I realized that what was really important was the discovery of community, culture and identity as a Deaf person through the use of American Sign Language. That discovery of learning American Sign Language can allow access to a community that can both serve as a support system as well as a place to learn culturally relevant lessons. Deaf culture is unique and cannot be taught without active participation. Due to this uniqueness, Deaf identity often is discovered though the language and community, finding a place where the Deaf finally fit in. For clarity when talking about those who are Deaf I did not focus on the population that lost their hearing as adults, rather I focused on those who were pre-lingually deafened or in the process of accumulating language. Those who are post-lingually deafened have already accumulated English and the ability to speak, they have a different experience because their primary identity is hearing, not Deaf. Those who were hearing who grew up in hearing culture do not contend with the same cultural mismatch.

Significance

Deaf people have had a tumultuous history, because of mistreatment by the hearing population. Best thought of as an ethnic group, they have been discriminated against by the majority, which in this case is the hearing population. Deaf people have been systematically excluded from society, denied an education and discriminated against in the workplace. Although progress has been made, both legally in the form of the Americans with Disabilities Act and socially, they continue to struggle in a society that

does not fully understand them. Deaf education has changed dramatically in the United States over the years. From American Sign Language's inception in the 1800's it has been developed and taught in schools for the deaf. It was followed by the oralism movement that almost extinguished American Sign Language. Today there are three general types of pedagogical schools for the deaf; oralism, American Sign Language, and a combination of the two. There has never been agreement in the Deaf or hearing community about how deaf children should be taught. Today oral schools still exist, not allowing a bilingual, bicultural approach to education, language, and life. Many of the adults that were educated under the oralism movement are now grown with grandchildren. Their struggles have mostly gone undocumented, with the majority of research being done by hearing researchers on reading and writing test scores as well as speech abilities. What is missing in scholarship is the life experience of Deaf learners. Although Deaf culture is a resilient one, there needs to be steps taken to make sure it is not permanently eroded like other minority cultures. The transformative power American Sign Language has on a Deaf individual's life can be profound. Sharing these stories has the power to transform a community and save a culture and a language from being lost to future generations.

Thesis Statement

My thesis argues that American Sign Language is a part of Deaf identity and needs to be taught to deaf children and their hearing families immediately upon discovery of hearing loss. Not only does American Sign Language serve as a form of communication that is the most practical, it also serves as a cultural bond amongst the

community. I argue that by not allowing deaf children access to American Sign Language and forcing them to learn lipreading the children lose access not only to basic communication but also to an education. I also argue that American Sign Language is a critical component to identity and self. By limiting deaf children's exposure to American Sign Language, it also limits their ability to discover that very self and identity. Without the ability to sign, deaf children face a loss of exposure to their culture and cannot reach out to people in their community who could share their experiences and could teach them about how to be Deaf in a hearing world. Policy implications include hearing parents of deaf children should be required by law to be fully informed about all the options that their child has, including American Sign Language and the Deaf community. Additionally a person should be employed by the state to provide a full picture to the parents.

Methodology

The methodology of this project is ethnographic research. I have spent three years in the field doing ethnographic observations and taking notes. Through my work in the community I was slowly accepted more and more. I became a member, and entered a new category of hearing people, the HEARING-BUT category. With that identity I was trusted with personal stories and experiences, that otherwise are kept private. These stories often contain stories of oppression or abuse by hearing people which makes sharing it with hearing people a sensitive piece for some.

The interviews were located in three different types of locations, a classroom on my campus; Trinity College, and the home of the interviewees. The classroom at Trinity

College was chosen because it was private and provided ample space to set up all of the equipment needed. Trinity College was offered instead of an interview in the home, which while making some people comfortable, may make others less so. One of the interviews took place in the home of two of the interviewees. I drove out to their house with the equipment and set it up there. The only difficulty I have found was that in the homes the lighting was not as bright, resulting in some of the signs being difficult to distinguish in the dim light. Additionally a few of the interview were done over video chat due to geographical limitations.

I have conducted group and individual interviews with adults and children who are part of the Deaf community that lasted an average of fifty minutes each with my contacts. There were two different types of interviews, one in person, and the other recorded over video conferencing. The interviews were conducted in American Sign Language, and when done in person due to their visual nature, they were recorded by cameras and not a voice recorder. One camera pointed at the interviewer, and the other one toward the interviewee. The interviews were based on a set of skeleton questions (Appendix 1), although those questions although often morphed and developed on their own. These questions aimed to discover how Deaf learners identified themselves and how they felt about their language and culture. The interviews were then interpreted and transcribed by myself due to the need to keep identities private. I asked people I knew personally if they would be comfortable with me interviewing them on their experiences. These people were from relationships that I had formed during my three years in the community. Some of the people who I interviewed were recommended by a mutual

acquaintance. One of the difficult aspects of these interviews is that there is a good amount of equipment, two tripods, two videocameras, and two chargers, so a crowded public space without access to electricity limits the variability of space. Since there is no Deaf "homeland" where I can go to interview people some of these interviews were recorded over Skype. This did not really cause a significant challenge when it came to transcribing interviews. I did not find the internet interviews to be any shorter, or for that matter any less fulfilling. I interviewed seventeen people involved in the Deaf community. They were living in states across the United States and to physically interview them in my monetary and time constraints was impossible. The Deaf community in Connecticut is not particularly large, so reaching out to people outside of the state was a legitimate option that allowed me more access to the culture.

The people that I interviewed were adults and children that I met through my association with the Deaf community. I was invited to Deaf social clubs, which sometimes took place in local coffee shops, providing a place for conversation and a chance to meet new people. I invited over thirty adults to be interviewed, and resulted in seventeen people in total. Due to the fact that the Deaf community itself is quite small privacy was a main concern of mine. All of the identities have been kept private, with pseudonyms being assigned to all who were involved as well as renaming communities and geography.

The adults I initially interviewed were exclusively Deaf of Hearing. It is a cultural classification because of its links to language and identity. They are the majority of the Deaf population, as 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. Most of the time

hearing parents are unfamiliar with American Sign Language and Deaf culture. For that reason I focused on the Deaf of Hearing population for the first part of my research. When I was given the chance to expand my research in a second semester I was able to incorporate other members of the community into my research. Those who are born Deaf of Deaf on the other hand often have American Sign Language as their first language and have less difficulties communicating with their parents at home. The problem is that this is only 10% of the Deaf population which makes accessing this group difficult. For this study it made it difficult to locate that 10% of the population. With Connecticut having a small Deaf community finding enough people who were Deaf of Deaf was difficult. Because of this I was unable to interview an equal number of Deaf individuals who had Deaf parents. At the end, I interviewed sixteen people in total. Nine were Deaf, four were Hard of Hearing, and three were hearing. One was six-years old, one in her teens, four in their twenties, three in their thirties, one in their forties, two in their fifties, and four in their sixties. Six were Deaf of hearing, six were Deaf of Deaf, one was Deaf of interpreter, two were CODAs, and nine were Deaf educators. For a comprehensive table see Appendix 2.

The seven Deaf of hearing adults I interviewed were in their 20's to 60's. Were all educated in what is considered the dark ages of Deaf American culture, when schools stopped teaching in American Sign Language. The schools banned it, using corporal punishment by rapping their hands when it was used. American Sign Language was driven underground, kept alive in the families of Deaf of Deaf, as well as secretly in the dorms. They had varying experiences with Oralism, from complete to some. These adults

though eventually adopted American Sign Language as their preferred mode of communication.

The six Deaf of Deaf people ranged in age from their six to their 60s. Many Deaf of Deaf families trace their Deaf heritage back, with entire generations of Deafness or reoccurring Deaf individuals. Due to this the Deaf of Deaf community is very small and intertwined. The Children Of Deaf Adults are a small population. They are not always drawn to work in the Deaf community, and sometimes do not have a lot of stake in it, apart from communication with their parents.

I also interviewed eight teachers in various stages of teaching in deaf schools. Six were Deaf, and two were hearing. They all came from different schools and backgrounds but ended up teaching at various deaf schools across the country. Their views and understanding of teaching were crucial to my understanding of deaf schooling in the United States today.

My field notes and personal observations were done at a school for the deaf, where I was active and participatory in the school environment. My field notes were either written during breaks or after I left the school for the day. I elected to not take notes in the school for three reasons. Firstly, American Sign Language requires one to communicate with the hands, and holding a pen and notebook make that increasingly difficult. Plus with my eyes down on paper I would miss conversations and observations about what was happening. Also although if I whispered I could have been able to record my thoughts on a voice recorder, speaking in front of Deaf people without signing is considered to be extremely rude. Secondly I felt it would be distracting to the students in

the classroom if I was writing or speaking in the corner. Finally I felt by saving my note taking for later I was able to participate more actively with the students and teachers, and therefore learning more. I also have served as a Teacher's Assistant here at Trinity College for American Sign Language, levels one and two. Through that position I have been able to engage in conversations with the both the teachers and the students, broadening my knowledge of American Sign Language and conceptions about Deaf culture. I am now widely accepted as part of the Deaf community, as someone who has dedicated a large amount of my time to learning the language, the culture, and the history.

This project has limitations as described. The main one was that it had to fit into a single academic year. This thesis began as a single semester project, and afterwards was approved to extend it to another semester. After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval the research could then begin. There were a limited amount of interviews due to scheduling conflicts and location. The research is not really finished in that there is more to be done, expanding the amount of interviews with more people, something that was limited by time, location, and the population.

Literature Review

There has been a growing recognition of the cultural mismatch between the Deaf community and the schooling experience Deaf children face by researchers. A key fact about deafness needs to be communicated and understood: nine out of ten deaf children are born to hearing parents (NIDCD, 2010). These children are born to parents who typically have no understanding of what will eventually be their children's experience.

Deafness is comparable to ethnicity because of its shared language and cultural practices. There are certain practices that are impolite in hearing culture, that are considered not only polite, but mandatory in deaf culture. An example of this is that touching someone in hearing culture is usually reserved for family members or close friends, whereas in Deaf culture, touching to get someone's attention or to move someone out of the way happens often. In fact to not get someone's attention or not alert them to move to the side is very rude, because leaving deaf people out of the loop is a frustrating feeling they often experience. Carol J. Erting (1985) wrote that, "Hearing and deaf interactants have different experiences with and definitions of deafness and language, resulting in expectation for each other's behavior that often clash." Her article was about her research teaching American Sign Language in preschool. She became aware of the cultural conflict as she was expected to teach sign language to Deaf parents of Deaf children. Through her work with the parents she was able to identify the sources of the conflict, which in the end boiled down to culture. The desire of parents to have their children be like themselves is a feeling all parents experienced, to have their children, look, act, and speak like themselves. Erting's article helped provide a base for my work, when it comes to explaining what it means to be Deaf vs. deaf. "Deaf" refers to a cultural identification, whereas "deaf" refers to a lack of hearing. Parents are the ones who have the authority decide how to educate their children, through mainstreaming them in public hearing schools, sending them to an oral school, or to a deaf school that uses American Sign Language only. Although Erting's article was very comprehensive and it showed perspectives of parents, deaf and hearing, and educators, it failed to include the historical

influences on Deafness in the United States. The Deaf community has been pushed aside, isolated from information, and forced through harsh times of oralism. There is a reason that there is a lack of trust between hearing educators and Deaf parents, often Deaf adults own negative experiences with education have colored their interactions with schools and educators.

Much of research on deaf education today is based on a study that found that fifty percent of deaf students graduate from high school without passing a fifth grade reading level (Traxler, 2000). The research was looking at the results of the Stanford Achievement Test to evaluate how Deaf students were doing in reading. Much of the research since then has focused on the audiological perspective: that is, studying how using hearing aids, or cochlear implants early on in deaf babies increases their ability to read and write. What is limited though, is the research on how having access to American Sign Language early on has benefits for deaf children. Hearing children often are taught baby sign by their hearing parents because communicating with sign language always emerges before speech.

Harris and Terlektsi's 2011 study on the other hand focused on reading and spelling abilities of deaf adolescents with assistive technology of cochlear implants and hearing aids, which continues to focus on literacy being attainable only through oral learning. They set a precedent in their first sentence, "Attaining functional literacy is a key to success in a literate society, yet... those who are born deaf... find this a difficult if not impossible achievement." (Harris, 2011 p.1). My research only partially aligns with this perspective. Having functional literacy is important in participating not only in a

society that values literacy, but also because it is the main, although not preferred form of communication between the deaf and hearing. Writing notes between each other, when it comes to ordering food, buying things, and asking questions all has to do with how well the communications will proceed. In addition most of the well paying jobs have a large writing component. One of the problems with Harris and Terlektsi's research is that it is based on studies done by hearing researchers, about hearing children. As outsiders of the Deaf community hearing researchers are unable to recognize the cultural norms and values of the Deaf and therefore impose their hearing norms and expectations from the dominant culture. The entire article did not mention American Sign Language once, and when talking about the Deaf population, sign language at least needs to come into the conversation. This research does help inform my own research, because not only does it show that cochlear implants do not show better improvements over hearing aids, but it shows that there is still a lack of literacy even with the electronic assistance, which means hearing ability does not mean literacy skill.

The experience of that the Deaf community can be compared to the experience faced by many Native American groups in the United States. Joseph H. Suina (2004) wrote about how how Native American language teachers are struggling for language and cultural survival in the face of extinction. Not only were numerous Native American languages driven to the brink of extinction or destroyed completely by English speakers but by association the culture, community, and sense of self identity also suffered. One of the problems attributed is the fact that the homes of the young often do not have a fluent native speaker (Suina, 2004). This is something that is common in the homes of deaf

children because 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. They almost never have a native, let alone fluent adult in the household to learn language from. This informs my study because the article talks about how the Native American elders are trying to pass knowledge onto the next generation of children to preserve the language, culture, and sense of community. Historically in Deaf culture the older students passed on American Sign Language to the younger ones in the dorms. As enrollment and dorm living in Deaf schools has dwindled so has this way of sharing language. For Deaf culture it is no longer sustainable and the elders in the community need to find an alternative way to pass down the language and culture.

Culture clash is explored in more detail in other ethnic minorities in eduction. Angela Valenzuela's book *Subtractive Schooling* written in 1999 documented the plights faced by Mexican-American youth in schools in the United States. The book examines how schooling in the United States slowly strips away Mexican students' culture by devaluing it in the school system. The school not only limited the history of the students taught in the school but students were educated to think that Spanish was a second class language that had no place in school or academics. Due to the indoctrination these students faced in schools they were slowly stripped of pride in their culture. Similar things have happened to the Deaf community in education. In the oral movement when American Sign Language was banned by schools the students had to hide the language, leaving a generation with limited access to their identity. Pride in being Deaf was not available at the time. The stripping of Mexican culture in school is very similar to the stripping of Deaf culture that occurred in Deaf schools across the nation. Accessing

identity become harder when you become ashamed of your culture, or even just unaware of it.

Miriam Magnuson wrote in 2000 about the importance of early sign language acquisition with deaf infants. The article researched two infants, one whose family began sign language lessons when they discovered their son was deaf, at four months. The other family discovered his hearing loss when he was two years old. The first child was linguistically advanced, and was described as calm, happy, and communicative. The second child on the other hand had developed a simple system of gestures with his family which made it difficult to communicate with anyone outside of his family. His behavior was in stark contrast to his signing counterpart who did not have socialization problems. The article showed how it was difficult for the parents of the second child to discipline him; that it was hard for them to enforce positive behaviors. These are issues that I have observed in classrooms with young deaf of hearing children. The schools must take extra responsibility of teaching manners and behavior to the students. The study was based in Sweden which makes it a different situation. In Sweden sign language is recognized by the government as the first language of the deaf (Magnuson, 2000) so they have a different perspective on the value of sign language. This literature informs my research because it is a stark example of how aquiring sign language can change the schooling experience. It also showed the importance of early intervention of sign language and its benefits.

It is hard to find a comprehensive study about American Deaf culture, let alone a textbook written by Deaf man who comes from a multigenerational Deaf family, but that

is exactly what *Introduction to American Deaf Culture* published in 2013 by Thomas K. Holcomb is. His three-hundred and eighteen page textbook provides an insider look on the Deaf community. The book breaks down different aspects of identity, community, and culture, and interspersed throughout the book is Thomas K. Holcomb's personal experiences. He openly claims that he is not an anthropologist but has gathered his topics for the book both from his experience as a multigenerational Deaf person as well as a professor of Deaf studies. His book has a clear explanation as to why there is limited literature about Deaf people by Deaf people. He attributes it to the collectivist oriented community which frowns upon lowering the rest of the community to raise oneself up. The book was incredibly informative and was able to provide many definitions on hard to define aspects of Deaf culture. The author also uses his website with videos recorded to give a visual representation of what he writes about in his book. It is difficult to explain through words a poem in American Sign Language, which is why the online component is so important. The small personal anecdotes that the author provides is the most valuable part of the book and I wish that he would have taken more time to provide more.

Many of the multigenerational Deaf families trace their heritage back to Martha's Vineyard. Martha's Vineyard is a well known island in the Northeast, but it has much more meaning for the Deaf community that most people are not aware of. Nora Ellen Groce's book, published in 1985, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* shows the history of Deafness on the island, where it was not considered a disability and the majority of the islanders, deaf or hearing, knew sign language. The community stood together and was not divided. Once mainlanders began

moving on to the island they disrupted the utopia that had existed, the Deaf members of the community were no longer considered equal contributors. Martha's Vineyard was a historical example of what it means to not have the stigmas associated with being Deaf. This book was informative from a historical perspective, but does not offer any solutions to the lack of Deaf communities in existence today.

Overall these sources of literature help provide scholarly evidence for many of the stories that are told within the Deaf community. They provide scholarly literature on the history of Deafness, from communities to the development of American Sign Language and culture. The literature showed personal stories, and the dangers of limited access to language. It also provided a basic foundation of academically defining different aspects of Deaf culture. The literature then made it possible to form not only the questions for the interviews but putting those answers in context to make sense.

Oralism is a place of contention historically as well as presently. In Richard Winefield's book, *Never the Twain Shall Meet*: *The Communications Debate* he outlined how oralism came to be in deaf education in both Europe and the United States. It began to emerge in the 1860's with the Clarke and Lexington schools for the Deaf. Edward Gallaudet, who helped set up the first school for the deaf, The American School for the Deaf in 1817, and helped bring sign language to the United States saw that some children may benefit from the use of oral education. For this reason he is partially regraded as a traitor to the signed cause. He wanted to incorporate some of the oral lessons for those students that it would be useful. Then in 1880 there was the International Convention of Instructors of the Deaf in Milan, Italy. It is important to note that none of the educators

were deaf themselves. At that time there were no Deaf teachers for deaf children. There was testimony on both sides, for oralism and for signed language. Gallaudet's perspective though was that half of the delegates were Italian and came from a very different place. For years Italy had been giving more than twice the amount of money into deaf education and were strongly advocating for oral education. So when the convention went to vote, they voted overwhelmingly to support Oralism. This resulted in a switch to oralism in the United States. In 1886 the Conference of American Instructors of the Deaf passed a resolution for all schools for the deaf to offer speech instruction to their students. The passing of these resolutions made oralism a more popular choice among schools as they attempted to mainstream their students to function in hearing society. At this time deaf people were still viewed as objects in the care of others. They were not viewed as independent or capable of input on their own lives. Similar to the experience that Deaf people on Martha's Vineyard faced in diminishing rights, (Groce, 1985) mainland Deaf Americans were seen as inferior.

Oralism was also never outlawed, American Sign Language is not recognized as the official language of the Deaf community. So Deaf people do not have protection under the law top be educated in American Sign Language. Yet the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, ensures that Deaf Americans have equal access to information through signed language. Some countries have passed laws identifying their signed language as the official language of the Deaf, including Norway (Magnuson, 2000). Recently in 2012, there was a petition sent to the White House to ask that American Sign Language be recognized as the language of the Deaf. It reached the

threshold of required signatures which means that the government will formulate a response. Until then there will be great variability in deaf education.

Chapter II: Deaf of Hearing

The Deaf population who are born to hearing parents is the majority, 90% of the Deaf population. They grow up in a home where even the simple things are complicated, and they do not share a natural form of communication with their parents. The people interviewed for this chapter are Deaf of Hearing whose parents did not make an effort to learn American Sign Language for various reasons. Their individual stories do not represent the entire experience of the Deaf of Hearing community. Some families embrace the use of American Sign Language and begin to learn as soon as they can. The chapter identifies how they suffer from isolation from family, and why limited communication with the hearing community is so difficult for the Deaf of hearing. Their discovery of American Sign Language provides access to a community willing to assist them.

Isolation from Family 

Because 90% of deaf are born to hearing families, most deaf children grow up in a home where communication is a challenge between family members. Parents in these families can be in denial about their child's deafness or simply don't understand the importance of establishing strong communication skills. Depending on their hearing loss, deaf children can experience varying degrees of success in school and society but they all agree that without sign language, information is lost in the process.

Home sign is when families use a manual language they create on their own to aid in communication. Although home sign is used sparingly these same families reject the use of American Sign Language. Some families adopt this form of visual communication with their children, as in the case of a woman who I will call Kathleen's, family. Kathleen is Deaf and in her sixties now. She has attended a Deaf school as a child, and then went to a Deaf university. She has worked in schools as an aide, and as an American Sign Language educator to mostly hearing people, she has two children, who are both hearing, and a hearing granddaughter. Her parents are still alive and she visits them frequently.

> "My mother, she signs a little bit, we have home sign we use [examples of signs the family made for things around the home]. My father though, he talks like this [lips barely move], it makes lip reading very hard, so we write back and forth."
>
> -Kathleen

But Kathleen's father was not willing to learn to use even home signs, limiting their communication to the written word. As a result, before Kathleen was old enough to become literate and communicate in written English, she and her father had a very limited relationship. Kathleen's mother made a basic effort to sign when signing was not a popular decision. When Karen's parents went to the school to ask the president where they could learn American Sign Language they were told not to, that it would be detrimental to hear speech development. They folded and never learned how to sign, despite their daughter knowing how. Due to the strong oralistic theory in those days most families did not. Others, like John were not as lucky as Kathleen. John is Hard of Hearing, in his forties, and is married to a Deaf woman. They have three hearing children

who are grown up. He grew up in New York and has lived in Connecticut for the last twenty years.

> "My mother can't communicate with me. I feel crushed. But I saw Deaf [of Deaf] friends their parents sign eloquently, deeply, comprehensively for one hour, two hours, that was so cool to me then."
>
> -John

The experience of not being able to communicate with his family continued throughout John's life, but John also had the chance to observe Deaf of Deaf families where the parents knew how to sign. He was able to contrast his experience in a Deaf of Hearing family against a Deaf of Deaf family. He described seeing those family members sign in detail things happening on the television, an experience he was unable to have at home. When he would ask his mother what happened on a television show her responses were one-dimensional just saying the character was sad, happy or mad. This story existed in every interview I had, of parents not making the effort to communicate with their children. Billy is in his twenties and is Deaf. He recently finished college at a Deaf university. He grew up in a rough hearing family that had almost no understanding of Deaf culture.

> "One of the staff in the dorm was hearing, and he signed fluently. I didn't know he was hearing for a while. Then, one day, someone told me. I was shocked. I didn't realize at that age that hearing people could sign. I remember being so angry that night. Why couldn't MY family sign, if this man could, they could have."
>
> -Billy

Billy just wanted to have that ability to communicate with his parents, like most children do. He did not even know it was an option until he met the young man who could sign and hear. For him that possibility of having hearing allies or people who were

HEARING-BUT did not exist. Hearing people automatically meant isolation, and in this case it was his very own family. Similarly John's frustration with his isolation within his own family became evident when he described a yearly family reunion that he goes to, often alone.

> "Every time I go to my mother's sister's to see all the relatives, they are all talking. I just sit there and eat my food. When I'm finished I just go and watch television. That's all, they just talk and don't tell me anything. They ignore me."
>
> -John

John, someone who identifies as Hard of Hearing, and says that he has clear speech, feels disconnected from his family. Individuals who have a more profound hearing loss are not afforded the same access that John has. There are greater implications than just lonely and boring family reunions. What is at stake when a family is not communicating with their child due to barriers in language? The child can face a feeling of isolation and loneliness even within their own home. John's story about the family reunion is a common experience that Deaf of hearing children experience. Marie, Kathleen, and Christine all mentioned similar experiences of feeling alone. When hearing people talk they can have multiple conversations occurring across, diagonally, or parallel, without eye contact, making it almost impossible to follow visually the conversation.

> "In Deaf culture, you always have eye contact, and face the person you're talking to, hearing people? They can be looking up, looking down, everywhere and still be talking to the same person. This makes it so hard to tell who is having the conversation if you're lip reading."
>
> -Christine

It is hard to become properly involved in a discussion if it is hard to understand who is speaking to whom. A hearing person becomes easily frustrated when there are too many

voices overlapping prompting requests for one person to speak at a time. This is a frustration that Deaf people who are alone in their family have to deal with constantly in non-signing homes. It becomes harder to form those relationships with occasional relatives if what they are saying is hard to understand. Many of the ways to communicate in Deaf culture are easily adaptable, where hearing people can use them without a lot of disruption. Marie gave an example that if her mother had adopted the Deaf style of attention getting it could have simplified their relationship.

> "My mom didn't know anything about Deaf culture, she didn't know that flicking the lights was used to get attention, so she'd always get frustrated, going all the way up the stairs, or walking across the room." -Marie

Culture clash exists within the homes of hearing parents and Deaf children. Techniques used in Deaf schools and Deaf homes, flickering the lights is a way to get attention, much like whistling or shouting up the stairs in hearing culture. It saves the frustration that Marie's mother faced and while may seem minute it is in fact a clash of cultures. Subtle challenges like this, happening consistently, can be frustrating and chip away at bonds between parents and children. Struggling to communicate at home with their children can be frustrating for both the children and the parents. The frustration can build and erupt in ways that are harmful.

When the older generations were growing up, not only were their parents uninformed about American Sign Language but they were also discouraged from learning it. This perspective was pervasive in the 1960's, years after the Milan Conference of 1880. Kathleen's parents experienced it when they approached her school.

> "My parents went to the school when I was... 14 I think, and asked if they could take sign language classes so they could communicate with me. The

> principal said NO NO NO, told them, if you learn sign language and you sign at home, your daughter she will not learn speech, and then she will never be successful in society. So they didn't, they never learned."
>
> -Kathleen

Kathleen's parents initially approached the school because she had brought a friend home from school who knew sign language. Her mother had observed them happily signing together. When Kathleen went into the kitchen she saw her mother crying, and when she asked her why she was crying her mother responded that she felt sad because Kathleen was communicating in a language that she herself did not know and she felt alienated from her daughter. This conception is one that seems common in families of hearing and Deaf. The disappointing factor is that Kathleen's parents after this experience wanted to learn American Sign Language to communicate with their daughter but the school stopped them from taking that step. They were so close to supporting their daughter with American Sign Language which would have changed their entire experience.

> "I was visiting my parents recently with my daughter and granddaughter [they are both hearing], my granddaughter was signing "mama, papa, milk, cow" in a sweet baby sign. I saw my mother crying, I went and asked her, what is wrong? She told me she felt so bad, so guilty that she never learned sign language."
>
> -Kathleen

The guilt Kathleen's mother felt, is disappointing because, had Kathleen's school supported her parent's choice to learn sign language she could have had a way to communicate easily with her parents. In my personal conversations with Kathleen she has regularly expressed her love of American Sign Language and how easy it is for her to express herself. Her conversations with her parents are limited because in the way she can express herself the best her parents cannot understand. To express an extremely

emotional feeling through written words when that is not your best form of communication makes it even more difficult. Kathleen has openly expressed to me how she is not confident with her grasp of English and recognizes how that affects how hearing people view her.

Many hearing families decide not to teach their children American Sign Language because they are afraid of losing their child to a culture and a language that is not their own and with which they are not familiar to. The experience of my interviewees suggests that the loss occurs anyway. The chasm that builds between the parents and child when they cannot communicate effectively and affects all parts of their life. From academics to social and emotional health, a lack of competent communication skills makes good parenting nearly impossible. In almost any other situation it would be considered unacceptable not to teach your child language. If hearing families did not teach their child language, instead just pointing as communication and then sent them to school, there would be an investigation of child abuse. An analogy might be this: If a child was born without legs, would they hesitate to obtain a wheelchair for them, or would they force them to try to walk as if they had feet and result in crawling everywhere? Yet children often come into deaf schools with limited language skills because their parents do not know sign language. It is not because they do not have access to support in learning the language. Most states in the U.S. have programs which provide support, including free American Sign Language classes where a teacher will come into a home to teach how to sign. Deaf schools often offer Family Sign Class and Community Sign Classes at flexible times. These schools serve as support centers for the Deaf community. None of these

classes and opportunities are required though, and their availability are not always well known.

Limited Education 

The older adults I interviewed were educated during the "Dark Ages of ASL" when American Sign Language was officially discontinued for pedagogical reasons in almost every school. This began in the 1860's and aggressive steps were taken in the 1880's to eradicate sign language. This meant they received some form of oral education. John who is Hard of Hearing, and in his mid forties told a story from his experience in an all-oral school that he attended.

> "I will never forget - one day, all of my friends, we were sitting in rows in the classroom. The teacher was standing in the front, reading a book to us. It was a story and she was just [voicing-not understood by the students] we were all not paying attention, just looking around the classroom for a full hour. I never knew the name of the book, what the story was about, anything."
>
> -John

This was just one experience of the few he mentioned. This is different from merely not understanding a lesson. He was in a class where the information was not being made available to him. While we can hope that the book read in class that day was not instrumental in his life, how far behind do deaf children fall in school because of situations like this? According to research, deaf children are behind their hearing peers in literacy (Traxler, 2000). There are many opinions about the use of technology to improve their literacy skills, but the focus instead should be on their lack of language introduction as children. Deaf children enter school and have to learn language first, whereas their hearing peers enter schools with language and can start building academic knowledge

immediately. Mainstreamed Deaf children, those who attended a hearing school, often were pulled out for additional support, but received mostly an oral education. Darcy was deaf grew up in the suburbs and was the only Deaf person that she knew until she left to attend a university for the Deaf.

> "I didn't learn anything. From when I was what, 4 years old... to about 18, I learned nothing. I would sit there in class looking around. THAT was oral education"
>
> -Darcy

Darcy's view of oral education was strong and unwavering. Darcy told me with disappointment that it is the sad truth about children who are mainstreamed and that she felt that many are still sharing the same experiences she has today. She said when she arrived at college she realized how far behind she was in comparison to her signing peers. She then had to play a game of catchup. By learning American Sign Language in four years she finally had access to the ability to learn, her community, and her identity. But it all came so late in life that she missed eighteen years of opportunities.

> "It makes me angry sometimes, angry that they limited me so much in my education. I sometimes wonder how much I really missed all those years, and to see it happening now, it hurts me, and makes me really mad."
>
> -Kathleen

That anger at limited education is a feeling many people share, not only in deaf education. Kathleen worked for over ten years at a deaf school. She was able to see both sides of the deaf education experience as a student and as an educator, and she saw many of the mistakes occurring again with this newest generation of students. One of her comments was that so many children are being pulled out of classrooms for speech therapy or communication or physical therapy, and that leaves the teacher in a constant

state of playing catch up their their students. Often the specialists are not on a rotating basis and students lose valuable class time with the same core studies teacher each week. This means that different students receive more access to the information. John took advantage of his Hard of Hearing status and his ability to hear some things to assist his classmates.

> "Sometimes we would sign to each other, I was lucky, I had enough hearing, but there was this one kid, he was profoundly deaf, he couldn't hear anything. When the teacher wasn't looking he would sign asking what she said. We would try to explain it as fast as he could, without getting caught. Because you know what happened when we got caught? We were hit, hit on the hands."
>
> -John

His dedication, along with his classmates, to try and teach their peers even with the danger of being physically hit was stressful and left lifelong psychological effects. While corporal punishment is on the decline in the United States, Deaf children are still under the stress of having to attend oral schools with limited access to learning.

> "My English is pretty good, it's not as good as yours, but its good. When I was younger, in Oral school, I remember spelling. C-O-R-N. Okay I kind of understood but not really. Then when I went to my Deaf school, C-O-R-N was associated with the sign CORN, and that made sense to me, something clicked into place, and I understood."
>
> -Kathleen

Kathleen's expression, her smile as she shared her experience, showed what it meant to her to have access to language fully. Her access to language through American Sign Language meant that she could more fully understand what she was learning to write. Making those connections to understand the content are vital. Without learning what vocabulary means the words are useless. Schools and teachers do a disservice to their Deaf students by not making comprehension a priority.

Communicating with the Hearing Community

The relationship between the Deaf community and the hearing community is a complex one. Due to the fact that the majority of deaf people come from hearing parents, and the world is majority hearing, there will always be some kind of relationship because Deaf worlds do not exist in the United States. The relationship can either be a partnership where the hearing community takes a supporting role as an ally but not a voice, or they can continue to act as oppressors, regardless if they know they are oppressing the Deaf community or not. Due to this disconnect and lack of understanding many who were seen as professionals in deafness limited opportunities for these partnerships to emerge. John's parents, like Kathleen's, tried to approach the school about sign language.

> "The Arlington School for the Deaf told my parents 'do not learn sign language" they think it's bad if you learn ASL because of conflict with writing grammar. So my parents said, "okay". They tried only talking...My parents *refused* to learn sign language at all. Even *today*. My mother said that I'm "hearing"- but I'm not. ... our communication is limited."
>
> -John

John's parents desperately wanted him to be hearing. They sent him to an oral school, spoke to him at home, did all the things the professionals told them to do to could to encourage an oral language. John can hear a fair amount but he does not identify as hearing, despite his parents best efforts. His parents did not want to accept the truth that he was never going to be able to hear like them. When he married his wife, who is Deaf, he asked his parents if they would learn sign language if their children were to be Deaf. They said no. He spoke about how much it angered him that they could not accept him

for who he was. His children were hearing, but all signed. The negative associations with American Sign Language still stigmatize the community, as Marie pointed out.

> "People think if you sign, it means you're less educated."
> -Marie

This is Marie's perception of hearing people's perceptions of Deaf signers. This is a common misconception about Deafness with a few reasons behind the myth most hearing people fall prey to. Apart from the negative research that identifies deaf students as poor readers, many Deaf people struggle with English grammar. This is partially because American Sign Language has a different grammar structure than English. Akin to other languages, the grammar structure can often be the hardest part to grasp. Additionally, in American Sign Language, words like is, it, am, do not exist in sign form but in expression and body movement. Since writing is the main form of communication between the Deaf and the hearing, and hearing people put so much emphasis on literacy as a way of evaluating intelligence, they often think that the Deaf are less educated, instead of thinking of them as a group of people whose second language is English. Since American Sign Language does not have a written form, Deaf Americans write in English, learning two different grammatical structures. Hearing Americans are required to only learn one set of grammatical rules, that applies directly to vocalization of the language and the written form. This does not seem to be taken into account.

Some Deaf people, however feel comfortable enough or have no other choice than to depend on voice, and lipreading. It takes specific circumstances for lipreading to be a success, from someone who does not have thin lips, to proper lighting, to not having an accent.

> "I'm hard of hearing, and speak good English, so when I go to stores I use my voice to communicate, but sometimes, if it is really loud, they are speaking too fast, or the worst, they aren't facing me, I have no idea what they are saying. Then they (hearing people) resort to humiliating yelling, holding their fingers up in my face, or rolling their eyes as they repeat it again."
>
> -Christine

Through my participation in the Deaf community I have heard this story in many forms countless times, often accompanied with a question if I can explain why hearing people behave in this way. When the overcompensation occurs it makes it even more difficult to lip read as the mouth movements become exaggerated resulting in lips harder to read then before, making the most mundane conversations frustrating. Deaf people cannot spend their time educating each and every hearing person they come across. This is an example of hearing people being unaware of Deaf culture and their attempts to fix the problem only exaggerates it.

Discovery of ASL

A popular story told in Deaf culture is the story of a deaf person finally gaining access to American Sign Language after a life trapped in oralism or hearing culture. It is often described as a reawakening or discovery of identity. These stories are told with different characters and places but carry the same experience. Until Darcy was eighteen she attended a public, hearing, school. She then attended a Deaf university when she was eighteen for the first time entering the Deaf community.

> "I went to oral school my whole life, and then I went to FSD, a Deaf school. That was the first time I was exposed to ASL. Phew, it was amazing, I just tried to absorb as much as I could. I felt, felt like I was home."
>
> -Darcy

Darcy's experience was moving and the look in her eyes as she described it to me was meaningful. There is a sign where the fingers are loosely bent that moves back and forth in front of the lips as you gently blow on your fingers with your eyes squinting, almost if you were drying nail polish. This is the sign used to express a deep emotion and is culturally important, and she used it when she said she was exposed to American Sign Language for the first time. That awakening in identity is important. I had the chance to see Darcy tell that story again, in front of some students when they asked her what Deaf school she went to. They were shocked, asking her in American Sign Language why she did not know sign language if she was Deaf. These students learned through her story how fortunate they were to have American Sign Language as a big part of their lives.

This is an experience that even more recent generations still have, a young woman in her early thirties attended a catholic school for the deaf that used the oral method. She decided to go to a Deaf university, one of the most renown university for the Deaf in the world.

> "I am hard of hearing, I can hear a lot, and I speak well, right? Well even though I can easily be in the hearing community I wanted to go to Gallaudet. I arrived on my first day and wow. I can't describe the feeling. I was at a place with people like me. I immediately started to learn, and I picked up so quickly, it felt natural, it felt right." -Christine

The look on her face when she signed about picking up the language put a smile on my face instantaneously. She clearly found joy in what she described as her natural language. This is a person who identifies as hard of hearing, and someone who can easily fit into the hearing community without an extremely large barrier. She still felt that feeling of home, and how the language felt right. Kathleen spent some time living in the dorms at

her Deaf school, where students lived if the commute was too far. This was a very tightly knit Deaf community, away from the hearing teachers.

> "I remember sitting in the dorm when I was a little girl, watching the older girls tell stories. Those stories were so beautiful, and there was so much skill in ASL, that is the nicest memory I have."
>
> -Kathleen

This is one of the reasons the Deaf community is so tightly knit. They are often ostracized from their own families. Being able to share not only a language but also day-to-day things with ease is why the Deaf community thrives through American Sign Language. They are able to be part of a different family that understands their struggles and experiences. Deaf social clubs, schools, and other organizations serve as place to socialize and help them to share their lives. Billy clearly remembers the first day he entered the dorm at the residential school for the deaf he was attending.

> " I sat down in front of the TV, and saw these words running across the bottom of the screen, I asked the other students what they were, and they laughed and said "closed captions". I thought, oh this is a special TV for deaf people. But they told me no, all TVs can do this. Then all of a sudden lights flashed in the room and I looked around. Again they explained to me that the doorbell flashed the lights. I didn't realize there was so much available for Deaf people."
>
> -Billy

He then lowered his head into his hands, fingers tightening across his scalp. All of these options were not available to Billy, even though they were real, existed, and would provide access that he was missing.

Deaf culture has often been categorized as a culture with, ironically, an oral tradition (Holcomb, 2013). The tradition of handing stories down to the next generation has been attributed with keeping the language alive. Deaf stories are highly interactive,

often changing with the storyteller's audience, and asking for input. As a social interaction it allows participation in stories that in a hearing household the deaf child would have been excluded from. As a cultural minority, Deaf people are always looking for a chance to socialize and meet others. I personally have experienced this very phenomenon. Any discussion with a Deaf person I had just met delved deeply into who you were, who you know in the Deaf community, if you are hearing, who your teacher is and if you have any Deaf relatives. At the end of the discussion you leave having identified your whole self and learning completely about someone new. This cultural practice has been explained to me in this way: because the Deaf often feel so isolated, when they find someone who knows their language and community it is a cause for celebration and should be cherished and extended as long as possible.

Challenges to communicate with family, within the classroom and with hearing people is a common occurrence in the experiences in the people I interviewed. These problems were easily identified, and they had no problems quickly providing me with multiple examples of their conflicts. They were able to present different experiences that other people dealt with at ease. Situations that their peers had encountered they they had remembered. Because the majority of people fall into this category there are a plethora of stories told through first person and passed along among the community.

Dealing with the isolation from family, even as an adult has taken a toll on some of the relationships that Deaf people have with their families. Not only did they not feel as if they fit in at home, but they also had to contend with a formal schooling experience where they faced the same difficulties. Their ability to communicate with the hearing

community was not only limited by language but cultural misunderstandings that left both parties frustrated. When they discovered American Sign Language their access to information and relationships opened up allowing them to develop knowledge as well as friendships and families.

Chapter III: Deaf of Deaf

Deaf children who grow up in Deaf families experience a vastly different childhood than those who grow up in hearing families. Parenting varies from parent to parent, so this does not stand as a blanket comment on parenting styles of all Deaf parents, but instead the way that they communicate with their children. Learning does not only exist in schools, but also in the home. By answering the constant questions children have, to assisting them with homework, Deaf and hearing parents are involved in constantly educating their children. Those simple conversations help to inform their children, giving them knowledge that they can use in their education. There are not a lot of representations of Deaf people being successful in the media or public life except for a few actors and actresses. It is important for children to have positive role models who are Deaf like they are so that they can see the possibility of success. This chapter focuses on the perspectives on school that Deaf of Deaf people had, and the affects it had on their lives. Unlike most of their peers they were raised in Deaf culture, making it normal for them. Family communication was based in American Sign Language from the beginning. Deaf identity formation is different, since they are born into Deaf culture they have access to their identity much earlier than their Deaf of Hearing peers.

Family Communication 

It is the simple things that are taken for granted. We learn so much from our families, from who we are, to how to cook, to what a rainbow is. For the majority of Deaf children this is not the case. The Deaf of Deaf, however, have access to this information. They are able to freely communicate with their parents. Those who do have Deaf parents though can learn with ease in daily interactions with their parents.

> "You know if a hearing mother of a deaf child is taking their child to the grocery store and they don't communicate she will just take their hand and drag them along. Then the kid will get to the grocery store and finally understand, oh this is where we're going. But not know what "grocery store" meant. Compared to when I was a kid, my mother would say "Oh we're going to the store, the food store. You know: G-R-O-C-E-R-Y." then when we got there I would see all the food and understand the connection." - Isabella

It may not seem very complex or profound, telling a child that they are being taken to the grocery store to buy some food. The truth is, however, that since learning takes place in even the smallest and informal of spaces not having access to their parents knowledge impedes a child's ability to learn. Thus, Deaf of Deaf children enter school with an advantage over their Deaf of hearing peers. They have a foundation of language which facilitates the learning within the school.

There was recently a story that went viral in the Deaf community as well as in the parenting community. There was a Deaf woman who was in a prolonged battle with Children's Services because the social worker did not think that she could properly take care of her children because she was Deaf. I asked Isabella what she thought of the

situation, she first began by telling me that she knew the woman, they were not friends, but she was friendly with her.

> "Deaf people are really good at watching children. I have a big family, and I can watch them all and continue to have a conversation (in ASL where maintaining eye contact is key) I can tell when they are misbehaving, and when I need to intervene, seeing out of the corners of my eyes." -Isabella

Deaf people are very visual. Instead of depending on their hearing to inform them they adapt and use sight to stay aware. This means for Isabella it is much easier for her to keep an eye on the children as well as carry on her conversation according to her. There is a lot of family care involved, when Deaf families speak another language than the majority of the population. They have to depend on kinship structures and the community for things like childcare.

I had been lucky enough to witness Isabella telling multiple stories to the younger children as she read them books. I have never seen such a beautiful story as I have when she signed it. Her reading of "The Snowy Day", a children's book written by Ezra Jack Keats is is one that has stayed with me. When Isabella told the story in American Sign Language it took on a whole new meaning for me. She made sure to hold the book so that all the children could see the pictures. She signed it in American Sign Language by using classifiers. Classifiers is the use of specific handshapes that represent the object or action. In the book the child realizes that his footprints are leaving shapes in the snow. The child then tries to manipulate the shapes in the snow by pointing his feet, and sliding his feet to create different patterns. Isabella was able to use the "B" handshape (fingers flat together with the thumbs tucked across the palm) to show the feet walking normally, then turned in, out, and sliding. She then asked the students if they could imagine other ways that

they could mark the snow. They were eager to use their own hands in the shape of a "B" to show different ways, from hopping, diagonally angled feet, and moving backwards. Participation in reading, asking questions about what is happening the book and what the children think is happening is a technique used in both hearing and Deaf schools. The children watching Isabella were sitting on their seats, leaning in, completely engaged in what she was doing. She held their attention captive, which is an impressive feat for four and five year olds. I was so impressed with Isabella's story that I asked her where she had learned to tell stories like that. That is when she told me about how her parents and older siblings used to tell her countless stories when she was a child and that is where she developed her story telling skills. Her family and the Deaf community around her helped her develop her storytelling skills.

Deaf social clubs were incredibly popular in the past, but today they are losing more and more members. The younger generation is not participating in the clubs as much as their parents did. For the older generation the clubs had great meaning. Before the inventions of video chatting, and video phones, Deaf communication was limited to TTY, a text telephone. By placing the phone on the machine they could type in and it would send tones which would be changed into more text for the Deaf person on the other side. It was an impersonal way of communicating and Deaf clubs provided that face to face social factor that was missing. Deaf people would drive hours to meet and socialize for hours on hours (Holcomb, 2013). To exchange gossip, news about the Deaf schools, and to just catch up. They would bring their children to socialize, who would observe Deaf adults socializing, fingers flying back and forth. These daylong events were

spent in the Deaf world, where everyone in the vicinity would sign, providing many role models for Deaf children to model their behavior after.

While the rest of the people featured in this chapter are Deaf and have Deaf parents, Alice is Deaf, with a hearing mother. The reason that she is in this chapter is due to the fact that her mother elected to communicate with her in sign language. This puts her in an American Sign Language house, even if it was not a Deaf one. This story is surprising, and I had never heard of it before. I asked around to people I knew of how many students they knew who had hearing parents who learned how to sign. They all told me they could not think of anyone who used American Sign Language at home to communicate with their children. Alice now works in a Deaf school, after attending a Deaf university.

> "My mother, when she found out I was Deaf, immediately learned how to sign. Now she's an interpreter. I was luckier than my classmates, I could go home, and talk to my mother." -Alice

This was the first time that I had heard of hearing parents actively learning American Sign Language. Alice's mother not only learned American Sign Language, but also immersed herself in Deaf culture. By putting in the time and effort to learn how to be an interpreter she would have learned about Deaf culture. While she would never be a Deaf role model she would be able to communicate clearly with her daughter. Parents knowingly send their children to a school for the Deaf where they will be instructed in American Sign Language to use it to communicate and learn. One would think that these parents would be interested in learning and utilizing American Sign Language. Since their children will develop the ability to communicate in American Sign Language.

Schooling Perspectives 

Schooling can be a different experience for students who have Deaf parents. Everyone can remember a time when they brought homework or a project home from school and their parents helped them figure out a tough problem or create a diorama. Parents assisting in homework is typical behavior among middle class families in the United States. For children whose parents do not sign and have no way of communicating with them have two choices, either to forgo helping their child all together or do their work for them instead of explaining it. Either way their child loses an opportunity to learn something new. Deaf parents on the other hand are able to assist their children because there is no communication barrier between them.

Over the last three years when I have observed Deaf students who are successful in the classroom they have primarily been children who have Deaf parents. They enter kindergarten able to spell their names, share their emotions, and tell stories. In comparison, there are children who enter the school who do not know their name, let alone how to spell it. I imagine a scenario where a hearing child from hearing parents enters kindergarten and does not know their name. Child Protective Services would descend on the family and remove the children for neglect. Yet it is considered acceptable when a deaf child arrives with no language at age four and no punitive measures are taken. Deaf children who are raised in Deaf homes have access to language just like their peers. There has been substantial research about how babies, deaf and hearing, can start communicating with signs before they can start vocalizing, sometimes months in

advance. Because of this, there are hearing parents who teach their children “baby signs”, simple ones like “milk”, and “hungry” to improve communication. Deaf babies of Deaf families, however, have increased exposure to language. Isabella not only has a Deaf family, but has eight older Deaf siblings. The grew up in a large family in a fairly large Deaf community. Her parents were both teachers and many of her siblings are now married with their own Deaf children.

> “I was advanced, I skipped 3 grades. But I was held back in 5th grade because I wasn’t old enough to go up to the middle school.” -Isabella

Isabella’s story is impressive, and is also a comment on her peers and how far behind they are that she can skip three grades in school. Ability levels always vary in classrooms, but the variance that I have seen between those who have Deaf parents and those who have hearing parents is large, and upsetting. This sentiment is shared among educators I have spoken with. When remarking on a certain child’s proficiency in the classroom the usual response is “oh her parents are Deaf”. I asked Kathleen why she thought a certain group of students did so well in the classroom. Her response was that they not only had Deaf parents, which gave them early access to language, but also gave them support at home.

Historically it was associated that if you were deaf you were mentally challenged and little was expected of them to succeed. Deaf schools used to focus mainly on skills like cooking, cleaning, and other manual jobs instead of encouraging them to grow academically. The expectations were incredibly low for the students, and some of those expectations exist still today. If the bar is set so low they do not have to accomplish much to succeed in the context of the school, but they are not prepared to succeed in the larger

society. These students face low expectations in schools and by educators, accepting low reading scores, and low scores on tests. Much of the motivation comes from the encouragement that they receive from home. Alice's mother had a strong emphasis on education.

> "I did really well in school, I think it is because my mom signed at home. She made sure that I had access to books, and was reading, and was always talking to me. She helped me with my homework too. Educating me a little at a time in just normal conversations." -Alice

Her mother's ability to help her with her homework should not be overlooked. Children who are able to receive assistance at home for work do better than their peers. Sometimes parents work jobs when their children are home, making it difficult to assist them. Some of them may not have an education, so they do not have the answers for their children. Sometimes immigrant parents do not speak the language that their child is being educated in, resulting in them being unable to explain the instructions or help. This is where there is the strongest similarity. There is a lack of ability to communicate between the parents and the children about the subject matter. Parents who speak English, the same language of instruction that their children have, are able to support their children in various ways. It is the same for Deaf parents, especially when they understand some of the difficulties that they experienced in school and are prepared to understand the same issues their children may face.

Deaf culture 

Many in mainstream hearing culture do not even know that Deaf culture exists. They are unaware that an entirely different set of rules and behaviors exists. Their history

differs, as well as what is considered important and valuable. When Deaf culture is discussed in the community there are different actions that are highlighted.

Stories about Deaf of Deaf people are often told by others, who share their stories secondhand. It is so infrequent that there is information from Deaf of Deaf people that I was thrilled to interview people about what it means to be part of Deaf culture. I found that it was not as easy as I thought it was going to be. The people who were Deaf of Deaf did not have a hard fought battle to find their Deaf culture, they were born into it, Deaf culture was easily available to them. They lived in a Deaf home, attended Deaf schools, and worked in the Deaf community. Similar to White people who exist in the majority culture, and cannot easily recognize their own White culture because it is the culture of the majority, Deaf of Deaf have a similar experience. I asked Isabella, a multigenerational Deaf woman, about what she thought Deaf culture is. She could not really answer, because she could not remember a moment that shaped her life to be a Deaf one.

> "I have a different experience [than most], I grew up with Deaf culture, I don't know anything else. I'm the youngest out of nine children [all Deaf], the baby." - Isabella

Her life is filled with Deafness, and she has been surrounded by Deaf role models her entire life. It is harder for her to see what is right in front of her, for it is difficult to make the familiar strange.

Derrick is a 22 year old man who is Deaf, his parents and siblings are all Deaf. He has grown up in a Deaf home, attended a Deaf school, and a Deaf university. He has really grown up in the Deaf world. Like all of the Deaf of Deaf that I have interviewed

Derrick could not quickly answer my question about Deaf culture. It is not something that is easy for them to identity, as it is not something that is openly discussed.

> "Deaf culture is flicking lights, stomping, hand flapping, names introduced last, and long goodbyes. Especially that, when my parents tell me we are leaving a Deaf house, I add about an hour to that." -Derrick

Derrick said it with a rueful grin. I asked him more about the extended departure time. He began it by telling me that he has never remembered a time when his parents told him that they were leaving and then they actually left. When prodded to ask him why he thinks that it happens he had a very clear explanation. The Deaf clubs his parents used to go were a limited chance to socialize. They were not able to socialize regularly, so when they were there they stayed as long as they could. He said that they were so used to sticking around for as long as they could that they did it every time they met up with anyone who was Deaf. I asked him how he felt about it, and he smiled again. He responded that he was so used to it that he finds it strange when they say goodbye and immediately leave. Nora is fifteen and Hard of Hearing. She is an athlete and really likes taking pictures. She is very chatty, and will lead anyone she meets on an endless conversation. Because Nora attends a Deaf school and has Deaf parents there is a cultural match between her home and her school. Techniques that work well for Deaf people are used, easing communications.

> "My house is like school here, my parents use the lights and stomp on the floor if they want our attention, the captions are always on. When I talk to my friends (with hearing parents) they tell me it's not like that at home, that's sad." -Nora

Nora lives in a multigenerational Deaf house, with both sets of her grandparents being Deaf. She has constant access to her family and to Deaf culture. She has grown up with it,

and for her, it is completely normal to have a Deaf family, not a differing factor. The attention getting techniques of stomping on the floor to send vibrations to others in the room simplify communication and are not disruptive to Deaf people. This limits the frustrations that hearing parents often feel when it comes to trying to communicate with their Deaf children. These techniques are learned by the children, used, and distributed to Deaf of hearing children who attend Deaf schools.

Identity 

Identity is fluid, and people act out different parts of their identity according to who they are with. It is shaped by environment, attributes, and culture. Some people have a very firm grasp of their identity from a young age, others discover it later on with help from a community. The disenfranchised often have stories about finding their identities and how it was a life changing event. So what happens when you are born into your identity and supported to explore it from the day that you are born, when you develop your identity with less conflict, and it is not something that you have to formally learn about? Does this make you view the world in a different way?

Hector is a friendly Deaf six-year-old, placed in advanced math and reading classes, his family is mostly Deaf. His father is Deaf, his mother is a CODA, Child of A Deaf Adult, and he has two Deaf siblings. In response to asking Hector how he communicates with his family he gave me a quizzical look at first. He did not understand what I was asking, which was essentially if they spoke English or signed American Sign

Language. After some prodding and explanation he responded with one eyebrow up and the other one down as he slowly signed:

"Sign... the same as your family?" -Hector

When I shook my head with a grin and reminded him that I was hearing, I was not Deaf, his eyebrows furrowed, and slowly asked if my family spoke with their voices. Then as six-year-olds often are he was distracted by a toy and went off to play. Because of his perspective he believed that even someone who was hearing would have parents who signed. When I brought my mother to the school, one little girl asked if my mother was Deaf, and when I responded no, she asked who in my family was Deaf. These children live a life where at least someone in their life is Deaf. As a six-year-old Hector's view of the world is very small, and focused. Since I was able to understand his perspective I asked him another question: whether there were more Deaf people in the world, or hearing. He quickly answered, Deaf!, so I asked him why. He responded by pointing out the school and his family then listing Deaf people he knew on his fingers. He then teased me and said that I was the only hearing person. Isabella is in her thirties, and unlike Hector has had more time to develop her identity.

> "Well first I identify as a woman, secondly as white, why? Because this is how people see me. Unless you see a hearing aid- but I don't wear one. Thirdly is deaf. But inside? I know I'm Deaf." - Isabella

Some may misconstrue that Isabella's Deaf identity is not as strong, when in fact it is the complete opposite. She did not have to seek out her Deaf identity, she was born Deaf, unlike most of her peers who discover their Deaf identity once they attend a Deaf school, she had it from the moment she was born. She sees her identity more shaped by others

who see her as a woman and as white. Because her experience was not so much of a struggle, her identity as a Deaf is not as thrilling as it is for those who had to battle for it.

The normalcy of deafness extends beyond just Isabella's experience. Trudy Suggs, a mother of four children, all of whom are Deaf, is a writer and a public speaker. She has presented and written about numerous different topics, including Deaf identity.

> "To me, being deaf is just like being a female. While it might not fit the greater society's preconceived notions of what perfect is (read: white, hearing, male) here in America or elsewhere, being deaf is not an issue in my family, just like being female or being a southpaw is not an issue."
>
> (Suggs, 2011)

She critically identified how by being Deaf does not fit mainstream America's perceptions that being hearing means perfection. Struggling with the majority culture imposing values on minority cultures results is a reoccurring issue. When children are able to grow up in their home with their Deaf identity supported and normalized they are able to find better comfort in who they are.

As these interviews show, the benefits that occur in a Deaf home give a child access to identity, culture, community and most of all knowledge. To take Deaf children from hearing parents is illogical, but to provide those families with the tools so that they can reach out to their children. If properly informed, learning about Deaf culture is not as daunting as it seems. Sadly this population of the Deaf community is so small that their perspectives are difficult to locate. There is almost no literature on what it is like to grow up Deaf in a Deaf family. Most of the research and autobiographies are about hearing children growing up in Deaf homes. So even if a hearing parent wanted to understand a

Deaf of Deaf family they would have no access unless they were able to find one, and bring along an interpreter. These families almost always exist in and around Deaf schools.

The simple connection to family, and sharing a common language made it easier for the Deaf of Deaf people to communicate with their family, opening up opportunities. With the family being able to serve as a support system for their children, they not only serve as an additional source of knowledge but also provide their children with a decent start in their educational career.

Chapter IV: Deaf Schooling

The first day that I began working at the school, which I will call the Northeast School for the Deaf, was a compete disaster. It had snowed a lot, I did not know to check the weather station to see if the school was closed, and I arrived early only to find it locked and no one there. As I waited for over thirty minutes I was preparing to leave when someone finally drove up. In halting American Sign Language I tried to ask if the school was open. The woman who was hearing, saw my struggle and voiced to me, telling me that the school had a late start. I felt relieved, and she allowed me in. The principal who had interviewed me for the internship position found me in the lobby as I waited for students to arrive. She then kindly showed me the classroom that I was going to assist in, introducing me to the teacher who was going to serve as my crash course teacher in Deaf schools. Ms. Taylor was young, hearing and very enthusiastic about her small class. She was more than happy to inform me of anything that confused me. I was intent on returning more successfully the next time. My second day I arrived without a snow delay and was ready to start fresh. As a new person I received a lot of attention. Because the Deaf community is so small newcomers are often asked a multitude of questions. My first few weeks were a constant conversation of introducing myself and explaining no, I was not deaf, and I did not yet have a sign name. My willingness to admit that I knew only a minimal amount of sign language accompanied by my young age made the students and staff happy to teach me how to communicate, as well as teach

me rules. The hallways and the rooms were always filled with fluttering, fast moving fingers as students and staff interact in a flurry of conversation. Classrooms have the alphabet along the top of the walls, handshapes creating letters. Many hearing people assume that Deaf schools must be a painfully silent place, but they could not be more wrong. From the vocalizations that naturally happen to the clapping and snapping of hands, to the firm tapping of the tables to produce vibrations and visual attention, the rooms are filled with noise. Giggles and laughter fill the classrooms and the playgrounds. My voice is off for the hours I spend at the school. I find when I speak I am more reliant on speech rather than sign and I would replace the American Sign Language grammar with English grammar. In many ways a Deaf school is like a hearing school: students misbehave, skip in the hallways, go to art class and take tests. In other ways it is completely different, as students have to learn multiple languages and use different techniques. The community feeling at the school for the Deaf feels much more strong than hearing schools I have been to. Events occurring on campus are a huge social event for the community to come together in ways I have never seen the hearing community do.

Due to a lack of federal law instituting how Deaf education is supposed to work there are a variety of options available to parents of Deaf children. There is no set of instructions, no steps, and parents of Deaf children are informed by different parties trying to pull them every which way. Schools have to find alternative communication methods, and are expected to provide different supports to the children. Within the education of the Deaf there are different styles employed. Different graduate schools

teach different techniques on how is best to educate Deaf students. I interviewed nine educators of the Deaf, with six being Deaf and three being hearing.

Teaching Deaf students is a different experience than teaching hearing students. Deaf schools serve as a cultural haven. They are revered in Deaf history as the sole places where American Sign Language survived the onslaught of oralism. The language, passed on in secret by the older boarding students to the younger ones, survived this way and is considered one of the most treasured folktales. Those who participated are very proud of their contribution. Although American Sign Language is no longer banned, there are still a number of strong oralistic influences in Deaf schools.

The school that I have volunteered at for the last three years is a total communication school, they integrate English, American Sign Language, in speech and writing to try and provide true literacy and communication skills. They serve deaf and hard of hearing students and their families in multiple states and multiple countries. I began working there originally because of my interest in becoming fluent in American Sign Language as well as my interest in education. I became drawn in to the culture, the people and the language. I worked there twice a week for four semesters, and lived there for one month one summer. The staff is comprised of a combination of Deaf and hearing people. Yet two very distinct groups formed within the school. The teachers tend to be hearing, whereas the aides are primarily Deaf. The Deaf aides tend to associate with other Deaf aides and the hearing with the hearing. Less often do the two groups interact with each other. I found myself as a hearing unpaid college intern socializing more with the Deaf staff than the hearing ones. I have learned a substantial amount of information from

language to culture. I include the aides in the category of educators because of the work I have seen them do with the students. From serving as a substitute for the class, to working one on one with students they serve an important role in providing access to education. The staff who work as therapists and other non educational positions are almost all hearing and function with a limited comprehension of American Sign Language. The only reason they are allowed to work at the school is because they promise they will learn American Sign Language; this includes the nurses in the infirmary as well. The upper levels of administration, however, tended to be Deaf, and all were fluent if not native in American Sign Language. The school serves around 800 students who are Deaf and hard of hearing and about fifty of them reside on campus as it is a residential and day school.

Deaf Schooling Options 

American Sign Language only schools are considered Deaf schools, places where Deaf culture and language can thrive. Communication even among the hearing staff at these schools is in American Sign Language- not necessarily their native language. There is an expectation of American Sign Language first, English second.

Oral schools came into being in the late 1800's with strong support from Alexander Graham Bell, who believed that through technological advances and training, deaf people could assimilate into hearing society by using English to communicate. Oral schools as told in the previous chapters by the people I interviewed were a painful experience. Deaf students were forced to practice sounds they could not hear over and

over again, having their hands slapped if they signed. These schooling options still exist, although most of them have disposed of the corporal punishment aspect of it. Sarah, a teacher who is also a CODA, Child of A Deaf Adult, at the school spent a few months at an oral school when she was receiving her teaching certification.

> "There was this one little girl would beg me, every day to sign in class. I knew I couldn't and it broke my heart." -Sarah

The school where she works now does not have an oral perspective and she is not forced to stay in that single style. She now teaches at a Deaf school with an emphasis on using American Sign Language to help her students learn how to read.

Other schools fall in the middle, where they try to utilize multiple styles of communication. These schools end up using Signed Exact English to teach, which becomes the language that the students use. Signed Exact English, SEE, is supposed to be helpful when connecting signed language to English. There are signs for "is", "it", and endings like "-ing" and "-ed". It uses English word order over American Sign Language grammar. I was once observing a student introduce themselves to one of my students, when I saw them do so very interestingly. My student was a hearing college student learning American Sign Language, and he signed MY NAME J-O-H-N. The deaf elementary student responded, MY NAME IS A-N-A. The difference is subtle, it is the added "IS" sign, which occurs in Signed Exact English, and never in American Sign Language. This is indicative of a bigger problem, that the language is being eroded and will lose it's cultural significance. Language and culture are intertwined and the erosion of English into American Sign Language is akin to hearing culture into Deaf culture. Introducing yourself in Deaf culture is different from in hearing culture; it has a

completely different set of rules from hearing culture which is why the student using Signed Exact English is disheartening. In hearing culture you start off with your name, and in Deaf culture it is the opposite. Often you learn the name of the person you are conversing with at the end of the conversation. You begin by identifying if you are hearing or deaf. In my case, as a hearing individual who signs I then identify that I learned American Sign Language for two years at Trinity College. I then identify who my teachers were, and where they taught, explaining where I went to school, and why I am involved in the Deaf community. I am an exception: most people who know American Sign Language have a family member or a close friend who is Deaf. Because I do not I have to explain why I elected to learn. Towards the end of the conversation I exchange my name, and my sign name with the other person, almost as an afterthought. This is one of the basics that hearing students learning American Sign Language learn first and is taught that it is of cultural importance. Those who use the English outline are quickly identified as a different group.

Another difference in Deaf schools compared to hearing schools is that every deaf child has an IEP, Individualized Education Program, this is mandated by federal law for any child with a disability. This means that they have been identified as students needing additional support, and is the reason that the students are able to be enrolled in a Deaf school. Experts, teachers, and parents get together to discuss the IEP to ensure that everything in it is still applicable and to see if any changes need to be made. These three groups often clash, making it difficult for all the voices to be heard. But they do have the student's best interests at heart. In Deaf schools like the one I worked at they were well

equipped to support their students in ways that hearing schools never could, with assistive technology and a community that can understand and support them.

Instructional Strategies 

There are several different teaching styles that are designed for deaf children. Visual Phonics is one of them. Different sounds in the English language have been changed to be represented by signs and by drawings. The idea is that this system serves as a bridge for deaf children and their reading skills. Through my observations this system is much more heavily used by the hearing teachers, and is seen as a barrier to learning by the Deaf teachers. Kathleen, who is Deaf of Hearing, has worked at Deaf schools for the last twenty years. She has been working as an one on one aide for students with behavioral issues who needed extra attention. Additionally she has served as a long term and occasional substitute. Through her vast experience in her own education as well as working in schools she has seen many different strategies.

> "The children have to come into school, learn ASL, English, Visual Phonics, all at the same time, no wonder they are all confused. You need to teach them ASL FIRST. So they can have a foundation. Then teach them English."
>
> - Kathleen

Through my observations of Visual Phonics (ICLI, 2011) being practiced in the school it adds another dimension of learning for the students. Students are able to identify different images, link them together, be able to sign them, pronounce them, and match them with English words. As an outsider I found the system very confusing. The following is an example from one of my first observations, when a student asked me for assistance in

confirming that his answer was correct. He was trying to "write" in Visual Phonics the word "SNAKE". He was able to gesture the sounds using Visual Phonics, and draw them correctly, but when I asked him what the sign was for the word he signed DON'T-KNOW. I then asked if he could draw it for me. He just signed DON'T-KNOW again. I personally do not have any training in Visual Phonics, it is not a free program. Schools must have their teachers trained in Visual Phonics by certified trainers. I can only comment on my observations of the students. While some succeeded, and some failed, my struggle was to reconcile the time spent on teaching visual phonics. I do not know if it can be used to its full potential if the students using it do not have a properly developed primary language.

> "Have you noticed that the only teachers that use Visual Phonics are the hearing ones? None of the deaf teachers think it is worth anything."
>
> -Kathleen

This was the perspective of a Deaf staff member at the school. She felt that Visual Phonics was another form of oralism taking place in the schools. They focus so hard on Visual Phonics, a third code that students are expected to learn how to decipher with the desire to help students with reading skills. Visual phonics though does use a tool that the Deaf students already have, the use of manual language. Her sentiment was shared by other Deaf educators in the school, that Visual Phonics was just another form of oralism. I had seen every other hearing teacher I had worked with use Visual Phonics with their students, and also had not seen any of the Deaf teachers use it.

From my observations students were constantly being pulled out of the classroom for various reasons. From communication, occupational therapy, physical therapy, visits

to the health center, reading specialists, audiological tests it is a wonder that these students were left any time to learn. Several years ago I had a conversation with a teacher, Ms. Taylor, who constantly had her students pulled out of her classroom. She lamented that it was frustrating having students leave halfway through lessons, or arrive partway through. It was complicated to keep track of what they had finished, and what still remained. I have observed on an almost daily basis students arriving with five minutes left in an activity and either being completely bewildered or told to just wait until the next activity started. Add those minutes to the time it takes for the student to come to and from the specialists office and the student loses valuable learning time. Elementary hearing students on the other hand tend to spend the entire day together as a class. If students are missing valuable class time with their teacher practicing communication their academic skills are going to struggle.

> "Before when I was in school, we would take speech classes *after* school, not during it. Now the students are always being plucked out of the classroom."
>
> -Geneva

I was unable to locate any research on the effects of removing Deaf students so frequently from their classes and the affects it had on their academics. If that is attributed to the lower test scores that are often focused on when discussing Deaf students' abilities. Extended class time and loss of time due to testing is a point of contention for schools across the nation Deaf or hearing. Deaf students are bused in from across the state and the reasoning provided to me is that they do not want to be holding the Deaf students longer than they need to after school. Not all towns have audiologists and speech pathologists so it provides access within the school. It does not seem fair to take the Deaf students from

learning content in their classrooms that they will be tested on in exchange for speech lessons that they could take after school. This disruption of continuous class time affects not only the individual student but the classroom as well. I felt the coming and going of students and staff resulted in a chaotic feeling. I felt that I was always looking up to see who had entered or departed the classroom meant that my focus and the students' as well was disjointed.

> "I have a really complicated system to remember who is going to miss what parts of each lesson. Each student has a folder with work to finish later, when they miss part of a lesson. It is really hard when they miss the beginning of the lesson though." -Randy

Randy had developed a similar system to the one that Ms. Taylor had during my first year at the school. Teachers have to keep track of the information that the students miss so that they can catch up later on. This game of catch up happens in other class times and as additional homework. This is a huge limitation to learning time and the access to knowledge that sets Deaf students back in comparison to their hearing peers in public schools.

Teaching Differences 

Hearing is on a spectrum, from perfect hearing to completely deaf, where there is no sound input, so not one communication method works perfectly for every person. Excluding people who are blind, anyone can understand American Sign Language. Hearing people can understand sign language completely if they learn it, but deaf people will never be able to understand 100% of spoken language. The use of American Sign

Language as the primary language ensures that all students have access to the transmission of knowledge.

Through my observations in learning spaces for the Deaf there have been many different teaching styles that the teachers have employed. From some teachers that elect to speak the entire time using a microphone and FM system, to those who use "SimCom" which is simultaneous communication (signing and talking at the same time) and finally those who are completely voice off, using American Sign Language for communication.

The FM has its successes and failures. The way the system works is the teacher wears a microphone clipped to their shirt and the students have receivers attached to their hearing aids so that the audio is fed directly to their ears. There is a connecter on the ceiling at the entrance of each classroom, when the student walks underneath it they link up to the classroom. This has led to oftentimes comical, yet extremely confusing situations for the students. The FM will occasionally link up to the wrong classroom leaving the student having audio input from another room. The older students will sometimes realize it but there have been more times where I have noticed the sound coming from one of the student's hearing aids was not relevant to the conversation. I was in a kindergarten class where the teacher was Deaf and was not voicing, when I heard a voice coming from one of the students hearing aids. As I bent down to listen I could clearly hear a teacher that teaches in a classroom at the other end of the hall. The student whose hearing aid was connected to the other classroom had no idea that it was even happening. The FM system is not a cure all and educators have to be careful about being too reliant on it.

I served as a substitute in a fourth grade classroom for a few hours in the fall of 2012 while a teacher was in a meeting. It was a small class with four students, and there were no other aides. The teacher had left an activity for me to lead including writing about their morning, and practicing cursive. The students already knew who I was, but I introduced myself and explained why I was there that morning in American Sign Language, with my voice off. As I began the lesson one of the students, Michael, spoke to me with English, telling me that another student, Elliot, did not have his FM on. Elliot's FM was a a pendant style one that he wore around his neck. I signed back to Michael telling him it was fine and he should not worry about what Elliot was doing. Michael continued to insist, saying he needed to wear it because of the microphone that teachers wear. I then asked him why Elliot would need it if I was not voicing, only signing. He wanted to confirm I was hearing and seemed puzzled as to why a hearing person would not voice. He eventually relented, but that experience showed me a different perspective that I had not seen before. He aligned teachers, hearing teachers specifically, as those who would use their voices and the FM system if they were teaching. It made me think about the hearing teachers, how the ones that I had observed did use their voice most of the time.

The SimCom system seems as if it is an easy solution. Giving visual input and audio input at the same time for the students to practice their American Sign Language and English. The problem with this communication method is that American Sign Language and English have two completely different grammatical structures meaning one of them has to win out. For people who have English as a first language it often becomes

easier to fall back to that structure. I spoke with a child of two deaf adults who equated SimCom to trying to write and speak at the same time, but not writing the same words that you are speaking.

Using American Sign Language only does mean that the students who have enough hearing will not receive input. Excluding the blind, American Sign Language is accessible to everyone. Hearing people can use American Sign Language, without any limitations to their ability to communicate. Deaf people on the other hand will not have complete access to spoken language. Because of this there have been attempts to increase ways of communication instead of building on the foundation of American Sign Language.

> "I teach children, and when I am reading them a book some of them can sign each sentence. (Signed Exact English) But when I ask them what does it mean, can they express it, they cannot. They don't understand what it means. If I sign it to them, they can understand and expand the concepts themselves."
>
> -Isabella

Isabella's concern about the children only regurgitating information and not being able to understand and manipulate it is a problem that hearing teachers of hearing students also struggle with due to the new age of testing. Thinking critically is valued less, as success on tests and exams increase. The ability to show success through test scores outweighs the ability to think critically and be creative. How much of the multiple communication methods and pulling from the classroom results in a stilted education.

Although there are issues when it comes to attempting to manage several different tactics the emergence of new ones may be beneficial. I was enrolled in a graduate course in the summer of 2012 about Deaf literature and storytelling. The course covered the

rules that come with Deaf stories and poems, although they are not the same rules as the ones that exist in hearing stories and poems there are structures that need to be followed. Deaf poetry and stories are a way to relate literature in a culturally relevant way. Although I never was able to observe it, the school I was at was in the process of implementing a new project where Deaf literature and storytelling was going to be worked into the curriculum. The respect afforded to Deaf literature by incorporating it into the schooling process shows a level of value given to Deaf culture by the institution itself.

Community & Culture 

Although Deaf schools are increasingly challenged with balancing American Sign Language, English, and education, they do provide a perfect place to foster the community and culture. The schools function as gathering points for the Deaf community. This means graduates often return to sporting events and other events on campus even if only as an alumni. The reason they return is that they are able to communicate freely with others, and the culture of everyone is the same, Deaf. I have spent evenings at the school for sporting events and plays, where I am one of the few hearing people in the room. I attended several basketball games, and something that I noticed each time was that the gym was filled with Deaf members from the Deaf community. Aides, alumni, employees, workers, and their friends filled the bleachers. Every time I went I was introduced to someone new, someone else that I should know. There were exchanges of new information on families, who was engaged, married, and

pregnant. For me, someone who is fluent, and the children who are not aware of all of the vocabulary we were able to learn different signs for a variety of basketball terms. The space became a place for casual learning to occur.

The homecoming weekend at the school is a huge affair. There is a soccer game and then the crowing of the King and Queen of homecoming. They have an alumni march with all of the present alumni carrying a flag with their year on it, children and spouses present, and anyone who is Deaf. The day is filled with introductions to new people, and catching up. Inside the gym there are tables with Deaf business people, from homeopathic healing, to deaf racing clubs. The homecoming weekend is a prime example of the school providing a supportive environment.

> "I have seen so many students find their Deaf identity in school, elementary to college, the private, safe environment to become who they want to be. -Kathleen

Deaf schools often help students in developing their identity by highlighting famous Deaf people and educating the students with Deaf literature in the form of poems and other forms of art. Some of the teachers at the school invited Joel Barish, a Deaf man who travels around the world to meet other Deaf people and create videos about their lives. Not only are Joel's videos informative in a medium that is easily accessible for the students but the Deaf students were able to meet with him as well. I was present for the presentation and saw that the students were so invested and excited to ask him questions about how he traveled, how he communicated with everyone. Their deep interest in talking with him was about more than just the countries he visited but also how his experience was as a Deaf man. Their ability to ask him questions and see a positive role

model is invaluable. This is where the schools serve as an hub where Deaf people from different walks of life can come together and share their life experiences with each other.

The classes that participated were all in middle school. I was curious so I asked the teachers why they decided to dedicate the time to have the presentation. They told me that they decided to invite him because of his ability to be a role model for the students. They then continued on to explain that they are all hearing and there is only so much that they can do when it comes to developing the students' Deaf identity. They cannot aptly describe what it means to be Deaf and to live in a hearing world. One of the questions they asked was how he was able to travel as a Deaf person. He then explained the different ways that he coped with cancelations or miscommunications. They were able to actively learn lessons about how to work out problems in real life situations through his experiences. Deaf children who are mainstreamed in public schools will not receive the same lessons.

With all of the different schooling options available, the result is myriad of experiences for Deaf children. The way that the schools themselves educate the students change how the students experience education, but also Deaf culture, community, and identity. Even within schools there is variance among the teachers and educators. Depending on which teachers a student receives they will have a different experience. The community that is made available to the students who attend Deaf schools provide them with not just a community where they can feel at home, but they also have access to socialize with different kinds of people.

Chapter V: Conclusion

There is not a lot of research about how important American Sign Language is for Deaf people. Deaf of hearing people suffer from isolation from their own family when both they and their families do not have access to American Sign Language. This lack of understanding creates rifts within the relationships, making it more difficult to communicate. This is avoidable by families being properly informed in the beginning and taking advantage of the multitude of free classes available. For those Deaf students who are in schools that do not use American Sign Language may continue to have limited access to their education. The same issue exists for children who arrive at kindergarten with no language and have to start from the very beginning before they can begin acquiring knowledge. Communication with the hearing community is fraught with problems, but most of these conflicts stem from language and communication issues that could easily be solved. All of these negative experiences pale in comparison to the stories of the discovery of American Sign Language. The joy, and finding of self described by individuals is an experience all Deaf people should have access to.

Deaf of Deaf people are raised by a family who shares their linguistic and cultural background. They live in a home where their cultural identity is understood and developed. Many of the techniques used in the Deaf world are replicated in Deaf homes, allowing clear access to information. There is not a struggle to find identity which makes

their lives more simple. These families help preserve and disperse Deaf culture around and within different parts of Deaf communities and this includes the Deaf schools.

Deaf education has served at times willingly and other times, unwillingly, in the preservation of Deaf culture. The use of American Sign Language in schools or in their dorms helped keep a culture alive. These schools have served as a safe haven where the Deaf community can be understood and supported. The conflicts are that there is not agreement on how Deaf children should be educated and there is no federal law that outlines Deaf education, leaving variability in curriculum standards.

In Deaf culture, American Sign Language is the key to communication, allowing the Deaf community not only the ability to understand but also to share. It is about education, family, work and all other aspects of identity. The desire to communicate is a human condition that creates bonds important to our very lives. Families who do not adapt to their deaf child's needs by learning American Sign Language run the risk of not meeting those basic needs and deny them a community and culture that understands their identity. By working in tandem with the Deaf community, parents can gain early access to American Sign Language and give them the gift of strong family bonds. With this kind of dedicated commitment, Deaf children will have the kinds of opportunities that can truly make a difference in their lives. Hearing families of Deaf children should not only have access to the information, but they should be required to learn about the different options for their deaf children so they can be better informed to make whole choices for their children.

There are steps that need to be taken to better understand and preserve aspects of Deaf culture, community and identity. These aspects of the Deaf world are maintained through the community and the existence of Deaf schools. Right now there are no clear outlines when it comes to Deaf education and opportunities vary from state to state. There are no programs designed to send in someone who is trained and certified in all aspects of Deafness to provide a comprehensive view of the Deaf world. By providing requirements to give children access to language it would improve the deficits children face when they enter the classroom. Additionally, the future of expanding awareness of Deaf culture and promoting stronger educational guidelines depends on an increase in autobiographies, self-ethnographies and general literature about what it means to be Deaf of Deaf compared to Deaf of hearing. The Deaf community and it's allies must focus on these steps to help keep it's culture and language alive.

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Appendix 1

Typical questions asked in interviews:

What is your name?
How old are you?
Are you deaf/hard of hearing/hearing?
Is your family deaf?
Does your family sign?
What schools did you go to?
What does deaf culture mean to you?
What does deaf identity mean to you?
What does deaf community mean to you?
Do you think these three things have changed?
Should deaf babies learn sign language?
Do you know any jokes or stories?

Appendix 2

	Name (Pseudonym)	**D/HH/H** (Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Hearing)	**Age**	**Identity** (Deaf of Deaf, Deaf of hearing, Deaf of Interpreter, CODA, Teacher for the Deaf)	**Interview** (In-person, video chat, either alone or partner)
1	Kathleen	D	60's	DH / TD	Person (1)
2	John	HH	50's	DH	Person (2)
3	Christine	D	30's	DH	Person (1)
4	Marie	D	50's	DH	Person (2)
5	Darcy	D	60's	DH / TD	Person (1)
6	Billy	D	20's	DH	Internet (1)
7	Isabella	D	30's	DD / TD	Person (1)
8	Alice	HH	20's	DI / TD	Person (1)
9	Derrick	D	20's	DD	Person (2)
10	Nora	HH	10's	DD	Person (2)
11	Hector	D	0's	DD	Person (1)
12	Geneva	HH	60's	DH / TD	Person (2)
13	Sarah	H	40's	CODA / TD	Person (1)
14	Elizabeth	H	20's	TD	Person (1)
15	Laura	D	60's	DD / TD	Person (1)
16	Randy	H	30's	CODA / TD	Internet (1)

Deaf: 9 **Hard of Hearing:** 4 **Hearing:** 3
0's: 1 **10's:** 1 **20's:** 4 **30's:** 3 **40's:** 1 **50's:** 2 **60's:** 4
DH: 7 **DD:** 5 **DI:** 1 **CODA:** 2 **TD:** 9
Person: 14 **Internet:** 2 **Individuals:** 11 **Pairs:** 3