

A Qualitative Approach to Study the Identity Development of Deaf Students in India

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *This research aimed to explore the deaf identity development process and to compare the identity status of deaf children in India, based on their exposure to inclusive and segregated educational institutions. The first section of the paper presents the Deaf Identity Development Models proposed by other researchers, while the second section deals with the information acquired from the deaf students in the study sample.*

Method: *Forty pre-lingual deaf students were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The study tool was an adapted version of the Deaf Identity Development scale. The data was analysed qualitatively through content analysis. Identified themes were presented along with the verbatim statements.*

Results: *The findings revealed that the age of onset of hearing loss, degree of hearing impairment, parents' hearing ability, family's socio-economic status, parents' education, family environment, the attitude of parents, social exposure, present and past experiences and social acceptance of the deaf child contribute tremendously to the development of an identity. The study also found that most of the deaf students who had not attended special schools possessed a culturally marginal identity, whereas students with prior special school experience possessed a bicultural identity and were better adjusted in the inclusive schools as compared to their counterparts.*

Conclusion: *Further research is suggested, with a special focus on how people with different degrees of congenital hearing impairment experience and negotiate their identity in context.*

Key words: *deaf identity development, hearing impairment, influential factors, deaf culture, inclusive school*

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INTRODUCTION

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity”-Erik Erikson

Identity is a representation of the self and in its absence an individual is like a person without life. Its formation is a dynamic and complicated process (Howarth, 2002). Formation of identity is an on-going process which is greatly influenced by one’s prior and current experiences and also by the behaviour of others towards one (Glickman,1996).

In the initial stage of life, the deaf child lives in a protected world along with his/her family members. If the family decides to educate the child, there are two options - either to send the child to a special school for the deaf, or to a mainstream school where all the children study together without discrimination, (which however generally doesn’t happen in a real world scenario). During this whole process, a child develops his/her identity. The focus of the current study is on how, at this initial stage, the family and teachers react and contribute towards the identity formation of a deaf child.

Identities of the Deaf People: Background

The advent of Deaf culture (in this paper, the upper case ‘Deaf’ is referred to a particular group of deaf people who share the same culture whereas lowercase deaf is referred to the audiological condition of not hearing) and ongoing developments in research related to identity studies fuelled by cultural multiplicity, have highlighted the concern for ‘deaf identity’. Around the 1980s, parallel to the racial and ethnic identity development movement, the cultural minority movement came into existence. Protest against the marginalisation displayed by the hearing community towards the deaf community gave rise to the theory of identity development of deaf people (Glickman, 1993; 1996). People belonging to the deaf community started demonstrations advocating for the acknowledgement of Sign Language as a valid language. Based on this, several research projects were conducted and a Deaf Identity Development model has taken shape. In 1979, Schowe, a deaf scholar, presented ground-breaking insights into the subject of identity and deafness, and highlighted the significance of social engagement with respect to identity formation and its process. His work in this area has provided a platform for other researchers to investigate the diversity of cultural, physiological and social circumstances, and their interactive, cumulative effects

on deaf people's lives. Glickman (1996) theorised that with the passage of time and different experiences, individuals gain a better understanding of themselves and pass through predictable and recognisable stages which ultimately help in their identity formation. Identity is recognised as part of psychological functioning which is a significant aspect for a sense of welfare and positive personal progress. It includes self-representation or self-perception which develops during various social activities. The more the individual gets involved in social engagements (which include social expectations and cultural contexts), the more the process of identity restructuring takes place. It is a process that is complex, very dynamic and continuous.

To assess the deaf identity, Glickman (1993) constructed a tool called the Deaf Identity Development Scale (DIDS) and explored a continuum of identities; these were categorised into four major deaf identities.

Minority Identity Development Theory

The identity of a person is described by various educationists as the 'complete representation of the self' (Howarth, 2002), which is greatly related to an individual's previous and present experiences and includes direct and indirect engagements of an individual with the surrounding social environment. Minority Identity Development models cropped up at the time of the civil rights movements, wherein the huge change in the identity of people belonging to racial and ethnic minority backgrounds who live and grow up in the context of oppression and discrimination was observed between the pre- and post- liberation phases. The understanding of such Minority Identity Development models has contributed to theories of multicultural/cross-cultural therapies. The typical Minority Identity Development model proposes four significant stages of identity development:

- Pre-encounter/ Conformity Stage: People perceive the world as being non-minority or anti-minority and disrespect the minority identity.
- Encounter/ Crisis Stage: This is the stage after the pre-encounter stage where people become aware of what a minority is, get to know about minority norms and values, and also start to value themselves as a minority.
- Immersion/ Moratorium Stage: In this stage, people reject non-minority culture and accept the minority values completely.

- **Internalisation/ Identity Achievement Stage:** This is considered to be the last stage where people achieve a secure minority identity and show inclination towards the minority culture.

The models of Minority Identity Development are based on the assumptions that people belonging to an ethnic, racial or marginalised community (based on gender, disability, class or sexual orientation) face discrimination and oppression by the non-marginalised community.

Theory of Deaf Identity Development

Identity has always been the central issue of debate and discussion with respect to deaf people. As the deaf community possesses cultural norms which are different from those of people belonging to other cultures, it gives rise to a separate cultural and linguistic identity. Basing his research on deaf identity development, Glickman (1993) emphasised that there is a cultural difference between deaf people and hearing people, and stated that the Deaf culture must be acknowledged in the society, just as other cultures of minorities are accepted.

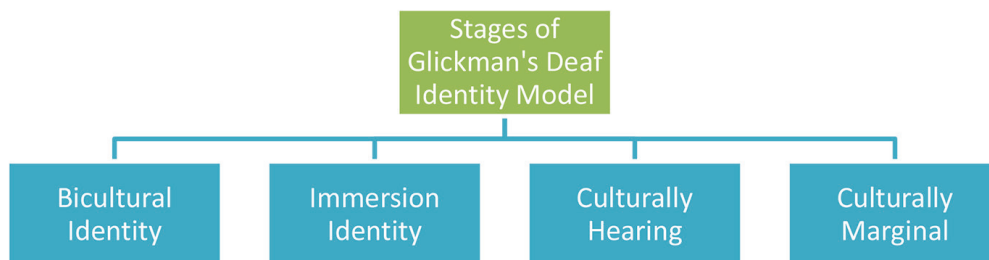
The Deaf Identity Development model is based on another model of Minority Identity Development, and is similar to the Black Identity Development model. A series of social movements within the disability rights and cultural diversity movements encouraged people belonging to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community to take a lead in adopting a position of equal respect for them in the society. Such activities were observed as the 'Deaf Cultural Movement'. The Deaf Cultural Movement gained momentum in the 1980s, which motivated educationists to study and explore the Deaf culture and identity. The first research study published in the area of deafness and identity crises was by Schowe in 1979, in which the researcher studied the pattern of identity development among deaf people in relation to their ways of adjustment to deafness. Schowe's work (1979) highlighted the 'identity crises' amongst deaf people and revealed that the deaf individual who compares self with the hearing norm, experiences marginality. Similar findings were reported by Weinberg and Sterritt in 1986.

In the current research, the author presents some of the ground-breaking insights on the deaf identity models and the development of identities amongst the deaf sample in this study.

Glickman's Deaf Identity Model (1993, 1996)

Glickman, with the objective of measuring the cultural identity in deaf individuals, constructed a Deaf Identity Development Scale and also proposed a model with four major developmental stages. The main idea behind proposing the model was to focus on the "cultural difference" between the hearing and the deaf community. This model proposes 4 stages that inform how a deaf individual thinks about himself/herself, the community and the hearing world (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Stages of Glickman's Deaf Identity Model



The identified stages are as follows:

Bicultural Identity: The deaf attribute worth equally to both the cultures - the hearing and the deaf. The person is fair enough in appreciating and rationally determining the differences between the two cultures.

Immersion Identity: The deaf are completely immersed in the deaf world and unable to accept/adjust to the hearing world, finding their own culture the best.

Culturally Hearing: The deaf people try to become more like the hearing people. They avoid deaf people in general and associate themselves more with the hearing world.

Culturally Marginal: The identifying characteristic is that these deaf people have a sense of isolation. They try to fit themselves in both cultures but never become comfortable in either.

Holcomb's Deaf Identity Model

After Glickman's Identity Model, Holcomb (in 1997) proposed a model with seven identity categories, based on the exposure a deaf individual receives with the deaf community. The seven categories are:

Balanced Biculturalism: Deaf people with their identity have a balanced approach towards both cultures, i.e., the hearing and deaf cultures, and are said to be comfortable with both communities. Deaf persons with this identity may or may not wear hearing aids or speak fluently, but their ability to use sign language, oralism and residual speech allows them to adjust well with both cultures, so generally no preference is shown for either of these two groups.

Deaf Dominant Biculturalism: This category consists of deaf individuals who function well within both the groups, be it hearing or deaf, but given the opportunity would prefer the deaf community.

Hearing Dominant Biculturalism: Deaf people with this type of identity are comfortable with both groups - hearing and deaf – but are more inclined towards the hearing group. If asked their preference, they would definitely choose hearing people over the deaf.

Culturally Separate: In this category deaf people purposely keep limited contact with people belonging to the hearing world. Most of the time, they try to avoid interactions with hearing people. They prefer to attend deaf events/ society.

Culturally Marginal: This category is formed by deaf individuals who find themselves neither part of the hearing world nor part of the deaf community. They are neither perfect in sign language nor good enough in oralism and speech. They experience difficulty in communicating with both communities. They have very limited social skills.

Culturally Isolated: This group consists of individuals who lead a life of loneliness and isolation, and remain aloof in the mainstream. They reject sign language, the deaf culture and may also have oral failures. Most of the time, they choose not to be affiliated with the deaf community.

Culturally Captive: The main characteristic of the deaf individual belonging to this identity is one of growing up without any knowledge of the deaf community.

In 1999, Melick proposed a model with four progressive phases. In the first phase, the deaf person identifies himself/herself as ‘an outsider’ and attempts to exhibit the characteristics of a hearing person. In the next phase, the deaf person gets exposed to the deaf world; this phase is identified as a connecting phase. And, in the third phase, i.e., the transitioning phase, the deaf individual starts accepting and adopting the Deaf culture. After the third phase, the individual enters into the last or the fourth phase, i.e., self-definition. In this phase, the deaf person

understands his/her identity and standing in the community, and does not allow anyone to make him/her feel like an outsider.

Review of Related Literature

Chapman and Dammeyer (2016) carried out a study on the significance of deaf identity for psychological well-being and found that deaf people with bicultural and hearing identity had better levels of psychological well-being than those with a marginal identity. This study revealed that other factors like additional disability, educational status and feelings of discrimination have an independent and interactive effect on the psychological well-being of deaf people.

A study by Carter (2015) on “Deaf Identity Centrality: Measurement, Influences and Outcomes” found, through an online survey with 346 deaf people to assess aspects of their deaf identity, that age, the onset of deafness, degree of hearing impairment and mode of communication (sign language or oral) influence Deaf Identity Centrality. This study also revealed that the degree of Deaf Identity Centrality influences the self-esteem and self-concept of the deaf individual, and ultimately leads to a happy and comfortable adjustment in the deaf community.

Cornell and Lyness (2005) in their study titled ‘Therapeutic Implications for Adolescent Deaf Identity and Self-Concept’ discovered a positive correlation between deaf identity and self-concept. The findings of the study revealed that deaf people who associate themselves with both cultures have better self-concept, whereas deaf people with marginal identity experience low self-concept.

Singleton and Morgan (2005) highlighted the importance of bilingual deaf education and acknowledged that a child with bilingual skills possesses linguistic, cognitive capabilities with a better understanding of his/her own identity. Such clarity in understanding equips the deaf person with all the skills needed to participate and associate himself/herself with the hearing and Deaf cultures.

Nunes, Pretzlik & Olsson, (2001) researched deaf children’s social relationships in mainstream schools, and found that though deaf students are not rejected, they may feel isolated and are more likely to be neglected by their peers. The researchers used peer ratings, sociometric status and an interview schedule as tools to collect data. It is suggested in this study that the school can play a proactive role in removing the communication barriers and help to develop a positive attitude towards hearing impaired students.

Bat-Chava (2000), through the use of cluster analysis, observed the existence of three identities, i.e., culturally hearing identity, culturally deaf identity, and bicultural identity. The 56 deaf people in the sample were interviewed and it was found that those with culturally deaf and bicultural identities have higher levels of self-esteem.

Glickman and Carey (1993) in their study titled "Measuring deaf cultural identities: A preliminary investigation" developed a tool, the Deaf Identity Development Scale (DIDS), to study and measure how deaf people identify with the deaf community and Deaf culture. The tool has 60-items, developed and translated from English to American Sign Language (ASL) and back for validation. The tool was administered to 105 deaf university students and 56 other deaf people (between 27–75 years of age). From the initial administration of the DIDS to compare 2 samples of deaf students, the findings of the study revealed that DIDS can be employed to distinguish different deaf cultural orientations.

The review of literature demonstrated that in previous research (e.g., Glickman and Carey, 1993; Bat-Chava, 2000; Nunes et al, 2001; Singleton and Morgan, 2005; Carter, 2015; Chapman and Dammeyer, 2016) it was found that the deaf people who have exposure to the hearing and Deaf cultures have higher self-esteem, self-concept, good psychological well-being, and live a better life as compared to the individuals who have a marginal identity. Furthermore, the literature also explains the factors that influence deaf identity development. Some of the factors identified in past research were age, the onset of deafness, degree of hearing impairment and mode of communication. In the meta-analysis of the literature reviewed by the author of the current article (mentioned in the references section), it was found that little research has been conducted on the identity development of deaf people in India.

Despite having good cognitive skills and good Intelligence Quotient, deaf students in Indian inclusive schools have, in general, low academic performance, low enrolment and high drop-out levels (Uddin, 1995). The poor self-concept, self-esteem, self-respect and self-identity reported in more recent research studies have become a matter of concern for educationists and researchers to explore this area (Aruna and Reddy, 1996; Kumari and Bhatt, 2014; Chapman and Dammeyer, 2017). It was acknowledged in other research works (Foster, 1989; Glickman, 1993 & 1996; Bat-Chava, 2000) that educational placements have a significant role in the process of identity formation of a deaf child. In the present research, an

attempt is made to explore the current scenario with respect to the deaf identity of deaf students studying in inclusive schools of Delhi, India.

Research Questions

This research was based on the premise that deaf children vary in the degree of awareness of the culture which contributes to their identity formation. The research questions were:

- Are there identifiable and foreseeable stages in the identity development of deaf children?
- What are the factors which influence the process of identity formation in deaf children?
- How did the educational placement experience contribute to the formation of identity in the life of a deaf child?

Based on these research questions, the objectives were formulated.

Objectives

- To study the identity of the deaf students studying in inclusive schools of Delhi, India.
- To compare the identity status of deaf students on the basis of their different educational placement experiences.
- To explore the factors influencing the process of identity formation in deaf students.

METHOD

Study Design

This was an explorative descriptive study with qualitative methods employed in data collection and analysis. The paper discusses the process of identity development with special reference to the identity formation of a deaf child in the hearing world.

Participants

The study population consisted of all the prelingually deaf students studying in government inclusive schools in the Delhi region. They were children with

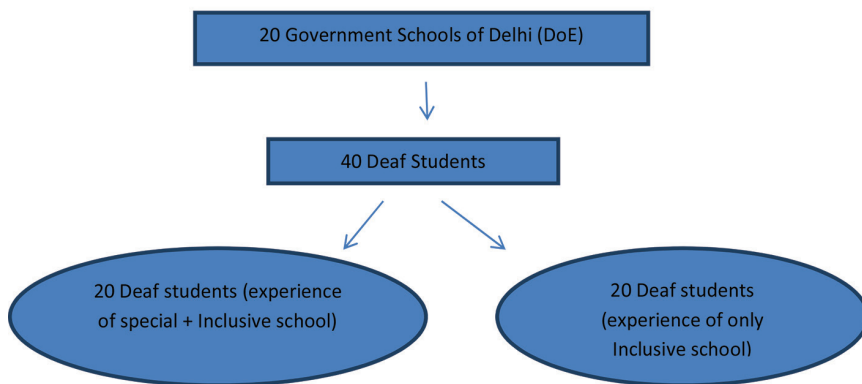
moderately severe, severe and profound hearing impairment, who had hearing parents.

The study sample was selected through a non-probability sampling technique (purposive sampling) and comprised 40 deaf students. The inclusion criteria were:

- a) Children brought up in a hearing-oriented environment (with a hearing family);
- b) Those who were prelingually deaf; and,
- c) Those studying at the upper primary level (12-16 years age group) in inclusive government schools in Delhi.

Among the deaf students in the sample, 20 were educated in inclusive schools and had never been to a special school, whereas the other 20 students had attended special schools in the initial years of their life and were studying in the inclusive school at the time of the research (see Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2: Sample Design



Study Tools and Techniques

To find how social engagements have shaped the identities of deaf students, the researcher conducted several informal and in-depth verbal and non-verbal engagements over a period of 6 months. The life stories of deaf students were elicited in this way, giving the participants the opportunity to describe their present and past experiences with and within their families, the community and school. After doing an extensive study in the area of deaf identity and as per the socio-economic-cultural aspects of the deaf individuals in India, the researcher

prepared a Deaf Identity Scale, which was an adapted version of Glickman's Deaf Identity Development Scale. The scale has four dimensions (Culturally Hearing, Culturally Marginal, Immersion and Bicultural) with statements based on three factors in each dimension. The factors covered were:

- a) Culturally Hearing Dimension: Medical view of deafness, inclination towards the oral-aural mode of communication and interest in being a part of the hearing world.
- b) Culturally Marginal Dimension: Disaffection with the hearing world, neutral attitude towards the mode of communication, and disaffection with the deaf world.
- c) Immersion Dimension: Discontentment with the hearing world, minority agenda, proud association with Deaf culture.
- d) Bicultural Dimension: Acceptance of hearing and Deaf cultures, self-knowledge, advocacy of both hearing and Deaf cultures.

The tool had 8 statements in each dimension; hence there were 32 statements in all, with a 3-point Likert-scale for responses. The responses were assigned the scoring: 'Agree=3', 'Don't Know=2', and 'Disagree=1'. To score the tool, a mean score of each dimension was calculated and the subject was said to have an identity having the highest mean score dimension. The content and face validity of the tool was established by 4 experts (2 were from the Disability Studies domain and 2 had research expertise). The reliability (external consistency) of the tool was measured by the test-retest method and found to be 0.79. There was a difference of 50 days between the first and the second administration of the tool for consistency check. Table 1 presents the tools and techniques used in the study.

Interviews and literature survey were used as data collection techniques in this study.

Table 1: Tools and Techniques used in the Study

Sl. No.	Tool/ Technique	Objectives	Type of Items
1.	Deaf Identity Scale (DIS)	To study and compare the identity (identity status) of deaf students attending the Inclusive Schools	Demographic details (8 items) and Statements (32 items)
2.	Interview	To explore the factors influencing the process of identity formation in deaf students	Informal, unstructured, face-to-face interactions

Data Analysis

The collected data was analysed through content analysis and the percentage and frequency analysis method.

RESULTS

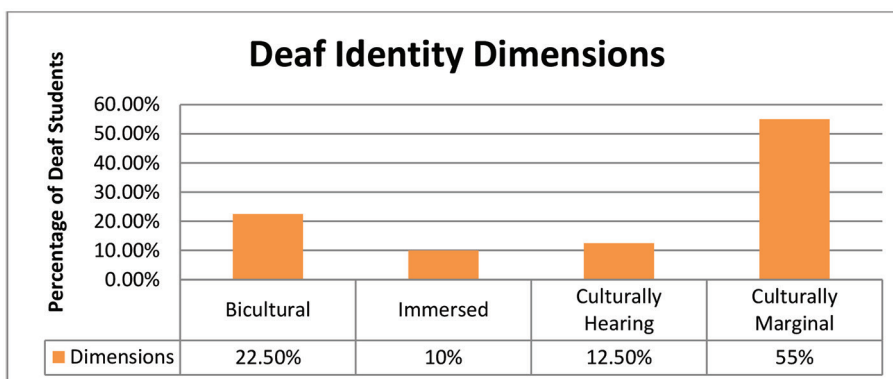
The analysis of the data is presented below and organised according to each research objective.

Objective 1: In order to study the identity of deaf students in inclusive schools of Delhi, India, 40 deaf students were selected through the purposive sampling technique. The Deaf Identity Scale was administered by the researcher and the findings are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2

Table 2: Analysis of Deaf Identity Scale

Sl. No.	Sample	Categories	Percentage
1.	40	Bicultural	22.5% (9/40)
2.		Immersed	10% (4/40)
3.		Culturally Hearing	12.5% (5/40)
4.		Culturally Marginal	55% (22/40)

Figure 2: Percentage of Deaf Students representing Identities



Interpretation: The data revealed (see Table 2) that more than half of the students, i.e., 55% of the students studying in inclusive schools of Delhi, had a culturally marginal identity. Dissatisfaction with the hearing and Deaf world was found

in 30% of the responses, and a neutral response of 25% towards the mode of communication was also observed. This illustrated that in an inclusive setup, students with severe to profound hearing impairment were feeling neglected and isolated (this was interpreted through the verbatim recordings made during the data collection, that are presented further on). Most of the deaf students who had never been to a special school were still at the initial stage of their identity development. It was found that deaf students like to keep limited contact with the students belonging to the hearing world, and behave as though they belong to neither the hearing world nor the deaf world. The data revealed that deaf students like to live an isolated life and do not enjoy Deaf and hearing cultures. They also find deafness a terrible disability. Most of the students acknowledged that it was hard for them to make hearing friends. During an informal conversation in the lunch break one of the deaf students said:

"I take lunch most of the time alone or sometimes with my bench-mate. My bench-mate understands what I want to say to some extent, but not fully. But she has her hearing friends; she likes to talk to them most of the time rather than to me. She has got many options to talk with and make friends, but I have only one."

These students reject sign language, deaf culture and also have oral failures. They were not able to relate to any of the cultures, neither the hearing culture nor the Deaf culture. The students appeared to be confused about their identity and were not sure whether they like or dislike the hearing or the deaf world. One of the deaf students acknowledged:

"I have not met with any deaf person ever. I am the only deaf individual in my family. But yes! I want to meet someone who is like me and want to ask how life is for them. How shall a deaf person make others understand his/her feelings?"

It was also observed that the social and academic adjustment of deaf students in inclusive schools was very poor. Hence, it was interpreted that the identity formation and association of self with some culture or group of people is very important to live a healthy balanced life. The data showed that 10% of the students had Immersed identity (see Figure 2). This meant that despite having hearing parents, 10% of the students identified themselves as belonging to the deaf world only and were found to be unhappy in inclusive schools. These were the students who had prior experience of being in a special school. Discontentment with the hearing world was observed in the responses. During casual interactions (in sign language) with the researcher, it was found that these students were not happy

in communicating through the oral-aural mode and demanded that the teaching must also be done in sign language in inclusive schools. A proud association with the Deaf culture could be sensed in the discussions. They expressed concern regarding their existence in an inclusive setup. One of the students communicated in sign language:

“I can’t hear what my teacher teaches. My teacher can’t understand my signs completely. I ask her my queries by writing the question in the notebook. But I can’t ask all my doubts through writing every time in class, due to which I miss lots of her teaching. We must have an interpreter in the class or I should be sent to a special school where I can find many of my kind.”

The data (see Figure 2) also showed that there were 12.5% of the students (5 out of the 40) who had a culturally hearing identity, which revealed that some deaf students were happily adjusted to the hearing culture and with hearing people. They showed interest in being part of the hearing world, were keen to learn lip-reading, and exhibited acceptance of oral-aural mode of communication. Furthermore, there were 22.5% deaf students (9 out of 40) who had a bicultural identity, which indicated that close to 25% of the students had a balanced approach towards both the communities and were using hearing aids, signing, and oral-aural modes for communication with hearing friends. Acceptance of people of both communities and advocacy of both cultures was observed. The students were found to have good self-realisation and believed deafness to be a biological problem. One of the students said:

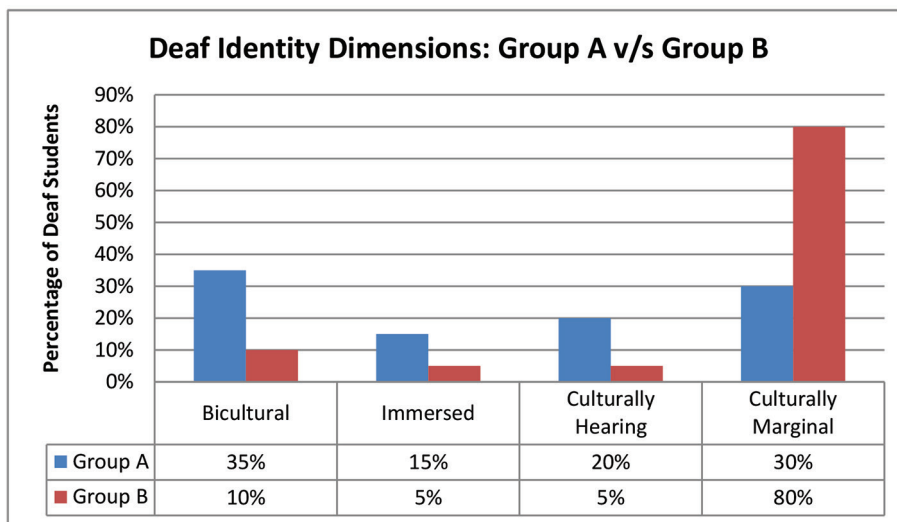
“I have a hearing problem and I know it, but with time I will learn to interact with hearing people and soon my life would be as normal as of others. I have already made some friends here, they help me.”

Objective 2: In order to compare the identity status of the deaf students currently studying in inclusive schools but who also have past experience of studying in a special school, the 40 deaf students were placed in 2 groups on the basis of their educational placement experience. Twenty deaf students with special and inclusive school experience were put in Group A, and 20 deaf students with only inclusive school experience were placed in Group B. The Deaf Identity Scale was administered to the sample by the researcher. The findings are presented in Table 3 and in Figure 3 with the interpretations.

Table 3: Analysis and Comparison of Group A and Group B: Deaf Identity Scale

Sl. No.	Groups	Categories	Count	Percentage
1.	Group A (with past experience of a special school and now in an inclusive school)	Bicultural	7/20	35%
		Immersed	3/20	15%
		Culturally Hearing	4/20	20%
		Culturally Marginal	6/20	30%
2.	Group B (with no experience of a special school)	Bicultural	2/20	10%
		Immersed	1/20	5%
		Culturally Hearing	1/20	5%
		Culturally Marginal	16/20	80%

Figure 3: Analysis and Comparison of Group A and Group B: Deaf Identity Scale



Interpretation: Table 3 shows that 35% of the students in 'Group A' had bicultural identity whereas in 'Group B' only 2 students or 10% were found to possess bicultural identity. This indicated that the students who had an association with a special school in the past or any kind of association with Deaf culture (deaf

teachers, Indian Sign Language (ISL), etc.) seemed to be better adjusted to both cultures. It was observed that these students associated themselves with both the Deaf and hearing cultures, as they had accepted the norms, lifestyle and life pattern of both cultures. It was also noticed that students with bicultural identity had a number of hearing friends in the inclusive school, and were trying to use different modes of communication to make other people understand them. These students were taking part in the class activities and were sharing their belongings with hearing students. During the casual interactions with these students, it was also seen that they did not feel offended at being called or labelled 'deaf'. It was very normal for them to be categorised as 'deaf'.

On the other hand, there were 30% of the students in 'Group A' and 80% in 'Group B' who had culturally marginal identity (see Figure 3). It showed that students who had never associated with or been made aware of Deaf culture, were leading a life of isolation and confusion. Most of the deaf students who had never attended a special school before joining an inclusive school were possessed of a culturally marginal identity; they were unable to relate to or feel attachment for any of the cultures. These students were found to be living in a world of their own, busy scribbling on paper or on the bench, hiding their faces in most of the group discussions in class, were not good at any form of communication (neither sign language nor oral-aural) so they were unable to have healthy interactions with others. Since they were in an inclusive setup where most of the students were children with hearing, they did not have any friends. It was observed that these students were attempting to be comfortable in the classroom but were failing due to the communication gap. It was also noticed that when a deaf child was exposed to Deaf culture, in most of the cases he/she developed a good understanding of both cultures. There were more culturally marginal students in 'Group B' as compared to Group A. Therefore, one can conclude that identity is explained very well with the Social Identity theory. A deaf child constructs his/her identity based on the response he/she receives from society. It is said that identity is a negotiation which is carried out by the individual between self and surroundings (Berger et al, 1966).

Objective 3: To explore the factors influencing identity formation in deaf students, the researcher reviewed the literature and, using Indian Sign Language, had informal interactions with the deaf students about their life, family, neighbours and society. The signs were transcribed into text and content analysis was done. The following themes were identified by the researcher as the contributing factors that influence the identity formation process:

- a) **Age of Onset of Hearing Loss** - It was observed that the age of onset of hearing loss determines many aspects of the deaf individual's life, including the inter-individual differences. Auditory capacity and speech understanding are the two main components that completely depend on the age of onset of hearing impairment, and determine the identity and personality formation of the deaf child. The early onset of hearing loss leads to an identity which may be culturally immersed and culturally marginal; if the hearing loss occurs late in life, it leads to an identity that is bicultural and culturally hearing. Therefore, it was observed that the late onset of hearing loss causes less damage to personality and identity formation.
- b) **Degree of Hearing Loss**- The degree of hearing loss was also found to be one of the influential factors of the identity development process. The greater the severity of the impairment, the more marginalised is the identity of the deaf child.
- c) **Educational Experience**: The educational placements provide an opportunity for the deaf child to interact and become aware of the Deaf culture or hearing culture. It was observed in this study that awareness and exposure to both cultures are important for the balanced development of the deaf child. Acquaintance with the Deaf culture is as important as the introduction to the hearing culture. Most researchers acknowledge the benefits of having a bicultural identity amongst deaf people. Hence, if it is so beneficial, it becomes important for the stakeholders to expand the scope of interaction with both hearing and deaf people, for the deaf children.
- d) **Parental Hearing Status**: Through interactions with the sample about the hearing status of their parents and their behaviour towards them, it was observed that deaf parents were more sensitive and understanding towards deafness as they had experience of it themselves. Consequently they educate their deaf child about Deaf culture, while the child gets exposure to hearing culture through interactions with the neighbours or in school. In this manner, the growth of such children is found to be balanced. On the other hand, it was felt during the interactions that the hearing parents are more concerned and focussed on the disability of their child rather than on his/her abilities and either became over-protective towards the child or neglectful. The analysis of the research data as well as the literature confirms that parental acceptance of the child with his/ her disability is observed among very few hearing parents (Abu Shaira, 2013; Monika and Mishra, 2013). Therefore, the

hearing status of the parent is acknowledged as an influential factor in the identity development of the deaf child.

- e) **Family's Socio-economic Status:** It was observed that financially well-settled families can provide better opportunities to deaf children to explore more about both cultures, which helps them to gain a satisfactory bicultural identity. The families with poor socio-economic status are not able to pay much attention to the personal and identity needs of their deaf child.
- f) **Parent's Educational Status:** The literature revealed that the educational status of the parents was also one of the factors in identity development (Abu Shaira, 2013; Monika and Mishra, 2013; Long et al, 2021). Through interactions with the sample, it was also found that better educated parents were more sensitised towards the disability issue and were more aware of the causes, consequences and possibilities of their deaf child. Thus, it is interpreted that the educated parents were better with respect to the identity formation and self- image of their children, as compared to the parents who had low educational backgrounds.
- g) **Family Environment:** The existing literature revealed that the family environment plays an important role in the process of identity formation of a child. The child who is neglected by the family would have poor self-image and identity crises as compared to the child who has a loving and caring home environment (Arana and Reddy, 1996; Cornell and Lyness, 2005). Moreover, if the care, sympathy and love needed by a child are provided at home, the child gets the strength needed to fight against all odds. This finding of the literature review could also be observed in the conversations with the sample (deaf students) during the data collection phase. Most of the students in the sample acknowledged the dearth of love, support, care and motivation from their near and dear ones. Therefore, a positive family environment is very important for the deaf child to develop a positive identity.
- h) **The Attitude of Parents and School towards Disability:** The family's deafness orientation is also a deciding factor in the identity formation of deaf children. The communication philosophy of the parents - whether to choose sign language or oral-aural method of communication - also contributes to the identity development of the deaf child. Not only this, the attitude of the school towards disability also plays a major role in influencing the identity of the child.

- i) **Social Acceptance:** It was also found during the interactions that the acceptance level exhibited by the known and unknown people around the deaf child also contributes a lot to the identity development process. The deaf child who has high acceptance among both the deaf and hearing people lives a more balanced life as compared to the child who faces low social acceptance.

DISCUSSION

There are some people (with disability) who like 'identity first' language, i.e., the choice of being addressed by the society with their diagnostic term first, as they believe the word 'deaf' represents empowerment, rights and culture (Friedner, 2011). However, there are people (with disability) who prefer to be identified first as a person and then by their disorder, and reject their disorder as the way to define them. In Deaf culture in India, it is observed that people with deafness prefer the 'identity first' language and choose to affirm their identity (**deaf**) when they are addressed (Friedner, 2011). The researcher agrees that each child with impairment must be accepted as a human being with disability and not as a 'disabled person', but at the same time society must acknowledge and accept the way that people want to be addressed. Hence, in this research, the researcher addressed students with profound hearing loss as deaf students.

Furthermore, as the global society is moving towards an inclusive world wherein the target is to transform even the general schools into inclusive schools (Ydo, 2020; <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374246>), this study proves to be beneficial in providing a better understanding of the need and means of addressing the identity formation of hearing impaired students in the inclusive setup. During the researcher's engagements with deaf children over a period of 6 months, it was observed that the majority of discourses were either focusing on normalcy, or differences or on the Deaf culture. The study found that the mode of communication plays a significant role in the identity development of a child. Almost all the deaf students mentioned the concern of communication, when the researcher engaged with them. It was noticed that the students who were using only the oral mode of communication were more prone to feelings of shame, depression, isolation and alienation, than the students who were raised in an environment where they were allowed to use sign language and address their challenges by different means. Furthermore, the researcher found that even today, among many families and in schools (special and inclusive schools), deaf

children were prohibited from using sign language. The reason for the objection was the fear that 'the child may develop a culturally deaf identity or may get lost to the world which is limited to deaf' (Bat-Chava, 2000), which could lead to non-integration of deaf children with the hearing ones. It was noticed that in India, the prime objective of Deaf Education continues to be 'preparing a deaf child to speak, lip read, use the residual hearing, use technology to hear others' and is not about making them responsible and contributory citizens. All the efforts are geared towards making the deaf child ready to be like other hearing people or adapt the identity which is very similar to that of the identity of hearing people' (Zhang and Wang, 2009). The irony of the present system is that the stakeholders in education are still confused regarding the identity that the deaf child should develop, rather than discussing and brainstorming on inclusive methodologies which can be adapted to improve the current situation.

This research noted that the early experience of a bilingual approach adopted in special schools helped the deaf children to be aware of the Deaf culture and allowed them to choose their own identity. With respect to the development of the identities, the study found that the deaf students are raised with more than one identity. Sometimes, in deaf students, two different identities were contested, or coexisted or overlapped. Consequently, the researcher feels that categorising the children with deafness into one of the 4 identities and then arriving at a result, seems to be unjust to some extent.

Limitations

- The use of a self-developed Deaf Identity Development scale rather than a standardised scale is seen as a limitation of this study. However, the researcher argues that due to the non-availability of a culture-free scale, this scale had to be constructed based on the requirements (issue under study) and characteristics of the sample.
- As the instrument used in the study is a self-administered tool, the respondent's choice of self-representation may impact the results of the study.

Strength

- The strength of the research lies in its mixed method approach- the qualitative (in-depth, informal interactions over 6 months) and the

quantitative (the Deaf Identity Development scale). Identity assessment is a complex phenomenon to be studied with the Deaf Identity Development scale which is a quantitative measurement instrument (with a one-time measure which reflects only a snapshot of the issue under study); hence the researcher employed qualitative tools to make the findings more valid and reliable.

CONCLUSION

The role of the Deaf culture in developing identity in deaf individuals is this research's main area of concern. In other words, every culture must be given due importance and must not be dominated by the majority (Fraser, 2007). The Deaf culture has its own language which is not of less value than any other language and is equally capable of expressing abstract ideas and thoughts. From the age of 12, children become reflective about their community, culture, state and nation, and their interactions with society make them conscious about their identity (Piaget, 1968; Emler and Reicher, 1995). At times, identity consciousness changes into identity crises due to conflicts (Erickson, 1968). Similarly, deaf children when growing up as non-hearers in a hearing society, with no contact with the Deaf community, may face identity crises and develop lower levels of self-esteem (Spence, 2010). This research is hopeful that the caregivers (especially the hearing ones) and other stakeholders understand the process of identity development of deaf individuals, and help their deaf children to have positive experiences so that they may also have positive self-image and self-concept and become responsible and contributing members of society.

In anticipation of the world where there are cultural differences which are well-acknowledged, accepted and understood, the researcher concludes the paper by stating that the person with a disability has the right to a dignified identity in society and this must be acknowledged.

Implications

Various studies have highlighted how the identity of an individual affects the life-outcome variables, for example, self-esteem, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and so on and so forth (Fraser, 2000). It is suggested that:

- For the educational inclusion of deaf students in an inclusive setup, there is a need for all the stakeholders (parents, teachers, school management,

curriculum makers, policy makers, etc.) to understand, acknowledge and accept the Deaf culture. The school curriculum must have some chapters related to Deaf culture in order to sensitise other students and spread awareness.

- Provision for teaching and learning sign language should be an option for all (hearing impaired and non-hearing impaired students) at the upper primary or secondary level of schooling. This would bring equity in word and action too.
- Technological assistance could be given in the form of CDs (compact discs, recordings) of lesson plans of all the subjects in sign language, until the time that all teachers are trained in sign language. Alternatively, the school should appoint a sign language interpreter. However, having only one sign language interpreter may not help the child and the school, so other alternatives could be explored like providing opportunities to the hearing students to learn sign language. This would be a healthy approach to help the deaf students and make up for the lack of interpreters. Also, creating a buddy system in class may help in classroom learning (Kathuria, 2018). Sign language could also be offered as one of the optional language subjects in the school curriculum for all students. A scarcity of resources, teachers and interpreters are observed in low- and middle-income countries. The question of hiring an interpreter for only one or two deaf students may be unaffordable. However, considering the global learning crisis (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2019/01/22/pass-or-fail-how-can-the-world-do-its-homework>), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), and the local laws and policies, it is relevant to pay attention and provide services as per the needs of the students, even if there is only one student who requires help.
- There is an urgent need to prepare teachers at pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes to cater to the identified needs of children with disabilities. There should be a component on 'development of transitioning competency skills' in the teacher education programme, to prepare teachers competent in transitioning activities such as participating in a multi-disciplinary team, assessing and teaching social skills, teaching job-seeking skills, assessing vocational preferences, managing maladaptive behaviours, writing Individualised Educational Plans, teaching daily living skills, teaching money management and skills related to providing career education and exploration, etc.

- Facilities for guidance and counselling must be provided to the students with disabilities in the school setup, on a compulsory basis. In addition to this, a short and compulsory training programme for regular teachers must be organised on development and up-skilling of guidance and counselling skills, so that need-based assistance can be provided from time to time to the students.
- Teachers, parents and other stakeholders must be made aware of the factors which are responsible for identity development, as identified in the research, so that timely interventions can be planned for the deaf students.
- The teachers should organise curricular and co-curricular classroom/school experiences to promote healthy social functioning.
- The special schools for the deaf and the inclusive schools must work as a team. There should be sharing and exchange of information, physical resources and human resources. Teaching strategies used by special schools must be adopted by the inclusive schools to make learning possible for deaf students in the inclusive classrooms.
- Disability research must focus on ways to promote the healthy identities of people with disabilities in this complex world.

Through this research, the investigator presents the argument for a more flexible and dynamic understanding of Deaf culture and the process of deaf identity formation with respect to people with hearing impairment (profound). It is suggested that future research could have a special focus on how people with different degrees of biological impairment experience and negotiate their identity in context.

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