

Negotiating Inclusion, Identity, And Communication Modalities: A Comprehensive Examination Of Deaf And Hard-Of-Hearing Students' Educational And Social Experiences In Mainstream Schooling

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ABSTRACT

The education of deaf and hard-of-hearing students within mainstream schooling environments has long been positioned at the intersection of inclusive education policy, linguistic diversity, disability studies, and sociocultural theories of identity. Over recent decades, the expansion of inclusive education frameworks across Europe and beyond has led to an increasing number of deaf and hard-of-hearing learners being educated in general education settings. While policy discourse often frames inclusion as a self-evident good, empirical research suggests that the lived realities of inclusion are complex, multifaceted, and deeply contingent on communicative access, social participation, and the recognition of deaf cultural identities. This article presents a comprehensive, theoretically grounded analysis of the academic, social, and psychosocial experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream educational contexts, drawing exclusively on established empirical and theoretical literature in the field.

The study synthesizes findings from qualitative and quantitative research exploring stakeholder perspectives, student self-reports, identity construction processes, classroom participation, and health-related quality of life. Particular attention is given to the tensions between oralist and sign language-based educational approaches, the role of assistive technologies such as hearing aids, and the emergence of digital and social media spaces as alternative arenas for communication and belonging. The article situates these discussions within broader debates on language modality, accessibility, and educational equity, critically examining the extent to which mainstream schooling environments succeed or fail in addressing the diverse needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing learners.

Methodologically, the article adopts a narrative integrative review approach, allowing for an in-depth examination of conceptual frameworks, methodological trends, and thematic convergences across studies conducted in different sociocultural contexts. Rather than merely summarizing existing findings, the analysis engages in sustained theoretical elaboration, interrogating assumptions underlying inclusive education practices and highlighting areas of conceptual ambiguity and empirical contradiction. The results reveal persistent challenges related to communicative barriers, social isolation, and identity negotiation, alongside evidence of resilience, agency, and adaptive strategies employed by students.

The discussion underscores the necessity of moving beyond simplistic notions of inclusion toward a more nuanced, relational understanding that foregrounds language rights, cultural recognition, and participatory parity. The article concludes by outlining implications for educational policy, teacher

education, and future research, advocating for models of inclusion that are responsive to the linguistic, social, and cultural realities of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. By providing an extensive and detailed synthesis of the literature, this article aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly and professional debates on inclusive education and to inform more equitable and sustainable educational practices.

KEYWORDS

Deaf education, mainstream schooling, social inclusion, identity construction, communication modality, hard-of-hearing students.

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream educational settings represents one of the most enduring and contested issues within the field of special and inclusive education. Rooted in broader movements advocating for educational equity and the dismantling of segregated schooling systems, mainstreaming has been promoted as a means of ensuring equal access to educational opportunities for all learners, regardless of sensory, linguistic, or physical differences. However, for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, inclusion is not merely a matter of physical placement within a general education classroom. Rather, it encompasses complex questions of language access, social participation, identity affirmation, and pedagogical responsiveness.

Historically, deaf education has oscillated between competing paradigms, most notably oralism and manualism, each reflecting divergent assumptions about language, disability, and social integration. The legacy of these paradigms continues to shape contemporary educational practices and policy decisions, often resulting in hybrid approaches that attempt to reconcile spoken language development with recognition of sign languages as legitimate linguistic systems (Mayer & Trezek, 2023). Within mainstream settings, these tensions are particularly pronounced, as deaf and hard-of-hearing students are frequently expected to adapt to environments designed primarily for hearing learners.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated that the academic and social experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools are highly variable and influenced by a constellation of factors, including degree of hearing loss, communication preferences, availability of support services, teacher attitudes, and peer relationships (Hadjikakou, Petridou, & Stylianou, 2008; Marschark et al., 2012). While some students report positive experiences characterized by academic success and meaningful social connections, others describe feelings of isolation, marginalization, and exhaustion associated with constant efforts to access spoken communication.

The problem at the heart of inclusive deaf education, therefore, lies not in the principle of inclusion itself but in the conditions under which inclusion is enacted. The literature reveals a persistent gap between policy rhetoric and lived experience, suggesting that inclusion without adequate communicative and social support may inadvertently reproduce forms of exclusion within ostensibly inclusive settings (Iantaffi, Jarvis, & Sinka, 2003). This article seeks to address this gap by providing an exhaustive examination of the literature on deaf and hard-of-hearing students' experiences in mainstream education, with a particular focus on inclusion, identity, and communication modalities.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative integrative literature review methodology, designed to synthesize and critically engage with a body of peer-reviewed research addressing the educational and social experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students. An integrative approach was selected to allow for the inclusion of diverse research designs, theoretical perspectives, and methodological traditions, thereby enabling a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the field.

The review is grounded exclusively in a predefined corpus of scholarly sources, encompassing empirical studies, theoretical analyses, and policy-oriented position statements. These sources were examined iteratively, with attention to their research questions, conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and key findings. Rather than aggregating data in a purely descriptive manner, the analysis emphasizes interpretive depth, drawing connections across studies and situating findings within broader theoretical debates.

The methodological process involved multiple stages of close reading and thematic analysis. Initial readings focused on identifying recurrent themes related to academic inclusion, social participation, communication access, identity formation, and well-being. Subsequent readings engaged more critically with underlying assumptions and points of divergence among studies, including differences in how inclusion is conceptualized and measured. Throughout the process, reflexive attention was paid to the sociocultural contexts in which the studies were conducted, recognizing that educational experiences are shaped by national policies, cultural attitudes toward deafness, and linguistic ecologies.

RESULTS

The analysis of the literature reveals several interrelated thematic domains that collectively illuminate the complexities of inclusion for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream schools. One prominent theme concerns academic access and participation. Studies consistently indicate that while many deaf and hard-of-hearing students are capable of achieving academically in mainstream settings, their success is often contingent on the availability of appropriate accommodations and pedagogical strategies (Hintermair, 2010). These may include assistive listening devices, captioning, sign language interpretation, and differentiated instruction.

Another central theme relates to social inclusion and peer relationships. Research suggests that social integration poses significant challenges for many deaf and hard-of-hearing students, particularly in environments where spoken language dominates informal interactions (Jarvis, 2003). Students frequently report difficulties participating in group discussions, casual conversations, and extracurricular activities, leading to feelings of social disconnection. At the same time, some studies highlight the agency of students who actively develop coping strategies, such as selective participation or seeking out supportive peer networks (Israelite, Ower, & Goldstein, 2002).

Identity construction emerges as a critical dimension of students' experiences. Adolescence, in particular, is a period marked by intensified identity exploration, and for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, this process is shaped by their positioning within both hearing and deaf worlds (Kent & Smith, 2006). The literature underscores the role of school experiences in influencing whether students come to view their deafness primarily as a disability, a cultural identity, or a fluid combination of both.

The results also point to the growing significance of digital communication and social media as alternative spaces for connection and self-expression. For many deaf individuals, online platforms offer opportunities to engage in accessible communication and to participate in deaf cultural communities beyond the constraints of their immediate educational environments (Duong, 2020; Martzos, Dinopoulou, & Okalidou, 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this integrative review underscore the inadequacy of narrow, placement-based definitions of inclusion. Inclusion, as experienced by deaf and hard-of-hearing students, is deeply relational and communicative in nature. Without meaningful access to language and interaction, physical inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. This raises critical questions about the responsibilities of educational systems to adapt to learners, rather than expecting learners to conform to existing norms.

One of the most significant tensions identified in the literature concerns the role of sign language in mainstream education. Despite growing recognition of sign languages as fully developed linguistic systems (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2019), their integration into mainstream classrooms remains inconsistent. The marginalization of sign language not only limits communication access but also constrains opportunities for cultural affirmation and identity development (Clark & Daggett, 2015).

The discussion also highlights the emotional labor required of deaf and hard-of-hearing students navigating mainstream environments. Constantly monitoring communication, advocating for accommodations, and managing social dynamics can have cumulative effects on well-being, as reflected in studies linking classroom participation to health-related quality of life (Hintermair, 2010). These findings challenge educators and policymakers to consider inclusion as an ethical commitment to reducing such burdens.

CONCLUSION

This article has provided an extensive and theoretically informed examination of the academic and social experiences of deaf and hard-of-hearing students in mainstream educational settings. Drawing on a diverse body of literature, it has demonstrated that inclusion is a complex and contingent process, shaped by communicative access, social relationships, and identity negotiations. While mainstream education holds the potential to offer rich learning opportunities, this potential can only be realized through intentional, linguistically responsive, and culturally affirming practices.

Future research should continue to explore the intersections of language, technology, and identity, particularly in light of evolving digital communication landscapes. Educational practice must move beyond minimal compliance toward models of inclusion that genuinely value deaf and hard-of-hearing students as linguistic and cultural contributors to school communities. Only through such an approach can inclusion fulfill its promise as a pathway to equity rather than a reconfiguration of exclusion.

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