

# The experience of deaf students in secondary mainstream classrooms

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**Aim:** *This article aims to explore the classroom experience of students of secondary age who are deaf and who are being educated in mainstream secondary schools in England. In this approach, there is considerable emphasis on hearing the authentic voice of the students separate from the influence of their teachers and parents.*

**Method:** *In-depth interviews were conducted in the students' homes. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed and employed to identify themes in the data, adopting a 'Grounded Theory' approach. Further analysis of the themes led to a consideration of what implications there may be for the students, for the adults who support their learning, including educational psychologists, and for policymakers.*

**Findings:** *The findings indicate that both the medical and social models of disability may need to be reappraised in terms of the framework they provide for guiding schools in educating their students. An alternative model, the risk and resilience model, is considered, which recognises the importance of the active contribution which the students may make in maintaining their placement in their schools.*

**Conclusions:** *The evidence arising from this investigation suggests that the learning outcomes for deaf students in mainstream classrooms are finely balanced. Not to learn from the students about their experience would be to overlook a rich source of information on how schools and teaching might be improved and the underperformance of deaf children addressed.*

**Keywords:** *Disability; deafness; resilience; voice of the child; advocacy.*

## Introduction

**D**IAGNOSING AND LABELLING a person as deaf is controversial. The National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) does not consider deafness to be a learning disability (National Deaf Children's Society, 2013). It claims that, with the right help, there is no reason why deaf children cannot do as well as other children. With this in mind, it is challenging to find that statistics show that many deaf students underachieve in school compared to their hearing peers. In 2015, 58.9 per cent of deaf children failed to achieve the government's benchmark of 5 GCSEs at grades A\* to C compared to just 35.8 per cent of other children with no identified special need (National Deaf Children's Society, 2016). These figures suggest that deaf students are not keeping up with their hearing peers in terms of academic attainment, a finding also reported by Ofsted (2012).

This investigation examines the experience of deaf students in secondary mainstream settings and reports on their perception of their classroom experience; in particular their learning opportunities, the support they receive and what, in their opinion, might prevent them from learning.

By the time deaf students have entered secondary school, they will have been assessed by a number of professionals, most often in the presence of their parents. Students are not usually asked whether they wish to be diagnosed or labelled as deaf or how they would prefer to be regarded by those around them. Each of these professionals may leave an impression on the students and their parents which influences how the students perceive themselves and how those supporting them may understand their roles (Hintermair, 2006). In the classroom, students are constrained in the way they can

behave towards their peers and towards the adults who are involved in their learning. The provision in the classroom that a deaf student would prefer, in the form of specialist teachers, teaching assistant support or specific arrangements may differ from what is being delivered to them (Antia et al., 2002).

An important aim of this investigation is to present the students with an opportunity to voice their opinion.

### **Models of disability**

In an attempt to clarify why professional opinions differ from each other and from the views of the students, three theoretical models of disability will be described: the medical model, the social model and the risk resilience model.

#### **The medical model**

In the medical model, disability is regarded in terms of an individual impairment, for example deafness, where the provision needs to be structured according to a diagnostic label. Assigning the diagnostic label does not just establish the fact of a hearing loss but gives access to specialist provision that is not available to other children who have not been so diagnosed. The language of the medical model is reflected in the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice: 0 to 25 years (DfE & DoH, 2015). There is an expectation that some teachers, such as teachers of the deaf, have an expert role in providing advice for deaf students. The assumption is that students diagnosed as deaf have special educational needs which relate to their deafness and hence require specialist teachers.

#### **The social model**

The British social model has three key features (Shakespeare & Watson, 2010). It regards the disabled as an oppressed group and distinguishes between the impairments people may have and the oppression they experience. Secondly, it understands disability to be the result of social oppression rather than something that is directly related to impairment. Thirdly, the model moves the central focus away from the individual

with a disability and suggests that it is not the impairment, for example deafness, that leads to difficulty but the barriers that society erects that prevent people with impairments taking a full and equal role in society. Unlike the medical model, the social model distinguishes between impairment and disability. The emphasis is seen to shift from providing specific support to address an individual's disability to discerning in what way society might prevent the person from fully participating in all that is on offer.

However, Oliver (2013), originally a proponent of the social model, has recently issued a caution:

'At no point did I suggest that the individual model should be abandoned, and neither did I claim that the social model was an all-encompassing framework within which everything that happens to disabled people could be understood or explained'. (Oliver, 2013, p.1024).

He believes that the social model of disability could be criticised for two reasons: firstly, it appears not to acknowledge impairment, and secondly, it presents disabled people as a group which oversimplifies the complexity of their lives. Oliver suggests that there is a need for the social model to be 'reinvigorated or replaced with something else' (Oliver, 2013, p.1026).

#### **The risk and resilience model**

In his exploration of deafness, Jacobs (2010), building on investigations by Reiff (2004) and Wong (2003), concluded that the risk and resilience model may offer a better explanation of the data than either a medical or a social model. Jacobs suggests there has been a shift towards the risk and resilience model. The focus is on how individuals respond to the risks they encounter on a daily basis and how they enhance their psychosocial development. Mainstream classrooms may present deaf students with a number of challenges that put them at risk. Showing resilience, as a way of coping

with risk is not new (Fergus & Zimmermann, 2005; Gilligan, 2000; Rutter, 2012), but relating it to the experience of deaf students in mainstream schools is more recent.

Young et al. (2008) was commissioned by the NDCS to investigate resilience and deaf children. After a review of the literature, it became clear to Young and her colleagues that there was very little published work relating specifically to deaf children and resilience. They suggested that what it means to be resilient and deaf is not fully understood but relating resilience to deafness might offer new insights. The link between deafness and resilience has been explored further by Zand and Pierce (2011).

### **Methodology**

This investigation sought to elicit the participants' classroom experiences by listening to and recording their own words. A 'voice of the child' approach (Grover, 2004; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Lundy, 2007) was used to gather evidence from which to increase understanding of the experience of deaf students in the classroom. The data was gathered during one-to-one interviews with the participants. The experimental design had the intention of maximising the contribution of the participants and minimising the input of the parents, teachers and the investigator. Therefore schools or local authority hearing impaired services were not approached. An enquiry to the National Deaf Children's Society resulted in contact with their regional directors who included an advertisement in their local newsletters describing the research and inviting parents of deaf students to make contact. The criteria for selection were that the students should be deaf, of secondary age and communicating primarily in spoken English rather than sign. Ten students came forward.

A pilot study established the viability of the intended approach with particular emphasis on the willingness of the students to articulate their thinking and ensuring that the recording process did not intrude into the session.

The interviews took place in the participants' homes. A preliminary discussion with the parents and participants ensured that the

parents were fully informed and in agreement with the procedure (British Educational Research Association, 2011). Only the researcher and the interviewee were present in the room and the interviews were recorded for future transcription and analysis.

### **Analysis**

The data was analysed using a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The process of analysis began with discovering themes and sub themes. Once the themes, drawn from the content of the transcripts, had been determined, they were grouped into three higher order categories. The higher order categories provided the framework within which the themes are discussed.

When ascribing themes, it was recognised that researchers, using the same data, may arrive at different descriptors (Dey, 1993). A particular concern is bringing preconceived thoughts to the theme identification, which prevent fresh thinking and new ideas (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). A critical friend (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) listened to the recordings, commented on the accuracy of the transcripts and gave an opinion on whether the themes were appropriate in the light of the students' comments. The labels attached to the themes were based on what the participants included during the interviews (Suddaby, 2006). They were not drawn from findings or conclusions of studies discussed in the literature review.

### **Results**

The results are presented according to the main themes identified as a result of the analysis: (1) barriers to learning, (2) normalisation and (3) personal responses. The subthemes were subsumed into the main themes.

#### **Barriers to learning**

The participants in the investigation described a number of interventions which resulted in their learning being enhanced in the classroom. They also describe situations which have a negative impact, and in effect create barriers to learning.

All participants make reference to the technology that supports their hearing in the classroom. They demonstrate their expert knowledge of the use of radio aids in terms of the technicalities needed to achieve effective use and maintenance. However, it became clear that sometimes they need to intervene to sustain their learning by advising their teachers on the best deployment of technology in differing classroom arrangements:

**Alicia:** ‘I can’t hear my friends because my teacher is speaking and so it’s very hard for me and it’s very noisy too. So I ask the teacher, “Can I have the microphone? And I put it in the middle of the table and I can hear everyone on the table’.

**Edward:** ‘...well if the teacher has to go outside and talk to the other teacher in private, then I have to press the middle button which is the mute button to switch it off.

In a recent investigation, Connolly et al. (2013) concluded that adolescent students were reliable judges in relation to noise in their classrooms. Most of the participants made reference to the acoustic environment:

**Faith:** ‘Drama is a very practical lesson, so obviously you’ve got less control if you like of the class. Then they can get really excitable and shouting; then it sometimes gets harder to hear what everyone is saying’.

**Bryan:** ‘...too much noise ...when we are doing group work and there’s like five or six different groups in the classroom. That would make it a bit more difficult for me to hear my own group’.

Participants are familiar with the concept of deaf awareness and they have sufficient experience of the classrooms to be aware of teachers who showed good deaf awareness and

those whose lack of deaf awareness leads to failing communication and a barrier to their learning. They were aware of the importance of teachers not only knowing a student is deaf but also understanding how to respond to that knowledge:

**Yusuf:** ‘....But the teacher he was like, ‘Are you deaf?’ I went ‘Yes’ and he went ‘You have to sit in the front row’. And I was like, ‘I don’t want to because in the front row you’re too close and I can’t exactly look up the whole time to look at your mouth’ – so I preferred it in the second row and then the teacher would be like, ‘No, no, no, you have to sit in the front row’ and I had to spend the whole year in the front row’.

**Faith:** He’s been my form tutor for five years but when I went in Year 7, he said to me ‘I’m going to treat you as normal, just like everyone else. I’m going to make no allowances for the fact that you’re deaf’. To me, yeah, that can be a good thing, because you don’t like being seen as different from everyone else but then there are times when actually, yes, you do need those little allowances. Do you know what I mean?’

With commendable sensitivity, Irene has to explain to her female teacher that the beads on the necklace she is wearing are rattling against the microphone and preventing her from hearing what is being said:

**Irene:** ‘Please can you take off all your jewellery? I’m not saying it doesn’t look nice on you. It’s just that it does affect how I can hear you’.

Xavier points to an ineffective invention on the part of a teacher which prevents his participation in the lesson:

**Xavier:** ‘...sometimes when we were watching a film, I had to put up my hand and say, ‘Can we put subtitles

on?’ and then hear people groaning ‘Oh, Why?!’ and then sometimes the teacher would shout and say, ‘Well, we’ve got a deaf student in the class’. Sometimes I would just ignore them and it got to a point when I didn’t even bother putting up my hand because I didn’t want to cause any disruption in the class or anything’.

Irene refers to a training session on deaf awareness which did not lead to a corresponding improvement in the classroom:

**Irene:** ‘...you might have had a meeting about... like awareness of being deaf but they don’t actually necessarily always take it on board’.

### Normalisation

The students in this investigation do not identify themselves in the interviews as being ‘deaf people’. What they want is to be regarded as normal people who happen to be deaf. Statutory learning and disability services are based on the principle of normalisation (Bradshaw & Carnaby, 2002). However if the delivery of the service follows a medical model, the student may perceive themselves to be singled out for reasons related to their deafness which they may not appreciate

**Faith:** ‘Having TAs has been really helpful and without them, I would probably have done a lot worse than I have, ‘cos I do really well. But you’re getting to that age now where you just want to be the same as everyone else – not having to wear a radio aid, not having to have a TA. – so there used to be a spare seat next to me... And she used to sit next to me all the time. And now I just need that space a little bit. I’ve asked her to move just that bit further away so that I can sit next to my friends’.

There are examples in the data of a failure on the part of teachers to enter into a meaningful dialogue with deaf students. Bradshaw &

Carnaby (2002) describe communication as a two-way process whereby each person involved in the exchange will influence the interaction taking place. Debra was disadvantaged in class because no one had thought to communicate with her before deciding where she should sit in class. She chose to sit in the middle of the classroom but was moved to the side by her teacher.

**Debra:** ‘But then after a term, they changed everyone’s seat and they decided to put me at the side of the classroom so I could see everyone’s voices. I found that harder. ... and I think they just did it without even asking me, assuming that I’d agree to it but I didn’t really find it helped much’.

Gemma has some difficulty in conveying to her teacher a simple request:

**Gemma:** ‘Sometimes when ...you want to tell the teacher that ...the microphone has been switched off accidentally – and you are asking a question and they say, ‘Put your hand down’, and you’re just trying to tell them that the microphone has been switched off’.

Because she arrived late, Faith did not engage with her lesson:

**Faith:** ‘... It’s quite difficult when you get there late, ‘cos I have a teacher of the deaf I see, like and one lesson I turned up late and.... she (the teacher) had already started the lesson and everyone else was sat down.... I did not have time to give her the radio aid so I missed the majority of the lesson ‘cos it was too embarrassing to get it out and give it to her in front of the whole class’.

Although involvement of the teacher of the deaf may be included on a student’s Statement of Special Educational Needs, the participants in this investigation make little reference to this resource. Where reference is made to the

teacher of the deaf, it appears to relate to practicalities rather than learning as such.

**Alicia:** ‘The lady that comes – I’m not sure what she is but she works for a deaf impaired society and she sees children that are like me – and knows what’s going on – like, “How’s your hearing aids? Are they working?”’

**Carl:** ‘...she gives me tests every now and then; she checks on me – see how I’m going, checks the radio aid to see if that’s still working’.

However all the participants commented, usually favourably, on their relationship with their teaching assistants:

**Harrison:** ‘She explains it to me and describes it so...if I don’t still understand her she describes it to me in a better way.

The participants are aware of the crucial role that friends play in their classroom experience, and the support that good friends can offer. Friendship may be seen as a theme because students made clear their reliance on these relationships when describing their experience in the classroom. Their friends make suitable allowances for their deafness, but accept them as friends in a normal way.

**Irene:** ‘...at school, if people who I’m friends with treat me like if I’m not deaf, because we’re just so close ...like they do everything I ask them to do. Like face me when we’re talking. And we just talk’.

**John:** ‘They’re good because they don’t... they put that I’m deaf aside and they treat me normally, they treat me like them’.

However, during the interviews, students give accounts of bullying behaviour which relates directly to the fact that other students are

aware they are identified and labelled as deaf. Deaf children have been shown to be especially vulnerable to bullying (Bauman & Pero, 2011).

**Faith:** ‘They said’, OK, you’re deaf, but you can hear perfectly fine. You have a radio aid, you have implants. Don’t make excuses ‘cos you’re deaf’.

**Carl:** ‘It’s mainly girls. They call me a lot of names. They hurt me. Not as bad as they call me names... they make rumours.... I tell the teachers if they do something – but they... they still do it again. They can even get told off by the headteacher and still they carry on’.

**Alicia:** ‘She’s mean and she says mean things about my deafness. Like ‘Oh how did you not hear? Can you hear me now?... when they say that, I’m like, “Oh, I don’t want to be deaf anymore. Why can’t I be like anyone else?”’

### Personal Responses

The extent to which participants could contribute to and shape their school experience is dependent on their personal responses to what is happening to them.

Students demonstrate their capacity for analytical thinking in relation to their learning.

**Irene:** ‘...I just think like they should have like one day – just a special day – about what it’s like to be deaf and about all the deaf awareness. And then that will get everybody to understand, but that could be really hard to like organise because it’s a school, and how people will feel about it. Yeah, that’s one thing that I would *love* to happen’.

Participants are aware that, in ensuring that they can hear effectively in class, they need to draw attention to themselves and their needs. However in doing so, they are aware of their emotions and become more anxious.

**Faith:** ‘... it can be quite embarrassing, putting your hand up in front of 29 other students and saying, ‘Actually, miss, I don’t understand what you have just said. Can you say that again?’

Participants sometimes cope by ‘withdrawing’ psychologically from the immediate demands of the classroom:

**Carl:** ‘I either stare out of the windows... daydreaming... not exactly daydreaming, just gazing out of the windows, looking, not concentrating on what I am doing or I’d look at something in the room that looks eye-catching to me and then I stare at it’.

**Irene:** ‘... it’s like I’m just sitting there and then I just have to get my water bottle out and have a drink of it and then think, just think a bit, just take that minute away from that atmosphere and then go back into it and then just take it easy and also to tell the teacher what’s happening and then they’ll take it into account’.

Resilience has been referred to as ‘the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences and avoiding the negative outcomes associated with the risk’ (Fergus & Zimmermann, 2005, p.399). Mainstream classrooms may present deaf students with a number of challenges that may put them at risk. In this extract the student presents a vivid account of how she copes with the unkindness of other students.

**Debra:** ‘Well. ‘Cos I’m deaf I can’t speak properly and that then comes from people like copying my voice. I’m just like, ‘Well I can’t help it, can I, because I’m deaf. How would you like it if I did that? You wouldn’t really’.

John discusses how he would deal with worries and whether he would share these with his parents. He indicates that he prefers

to deal with the issues himself if possible and would not always involve his parents:

**John:** ‘...because they can be like ... they can be –as I say if someone has been mean to me at school, they would go straight in, demanding to see the parents and that. They’re way too forward for me...’

‘I would try and deal with it, like, I’d tell someone that I knew wouldn’t go rushing into things, wouldn’t go doing this and doing that. I’d sort of tell someone I can trust’.

### Discussion

An important aim of the investigation is to ‘turn up the volume’ of the student voice (Exley, 2014). Giving opportunities for students to reflect on their classroom experiences provides insight into their thoughts on current practice and how they understand their deafness and its relevance to their learning.

The NDCS statement that deafness is not a learning disability opens a debate about how deafness should be described. If deafness is not a learning disability, then how might the experience of deaf students in mainstream secondary schools be conceptualised?

A model that moves away from earlier linear models of disability and attempts to capture the more dynamic relationship between personal, social and environmental interactions has been proposed by Simeonsson et al. (2000).

In a similar way, the World Health Organisation (WHO) published a document, The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), which claims to put the notions of health and disability ‘in a new light’ (WHO, 2002, p.3). It acknowledges that disability is not something that happens only to a minority of humanity but is something that every human being can experience. ICF aims to shift the focus from cause to impact.

There is no evidence from the interviews that deaf students would prefer their deafness to be side-lined, as it might be from a close adherence to the social model.

In the interviews, the participants were all aware of the possible limitations which result from their deafness. They wish to be seen as 'participants' in their own education (Ulvik, 2014) rather than deaf students who require a label and interventions allotted to them by others. The students prefer to be seen as normal people who happen to be deaf.

The participants recognise that they need support in the classroom but they do not wish to be singled out just because they happen to be deaf. Thus they do not report a close relationship with teachers who are specifically trained to support deaf students. They do not wish to be ordered to sit in a particular place in the classroom or to be excluded from any aspect of school life because they are deaf. Against this background the medical model would appear to be in contradiction to what the students themselves would prefer.

### **Recommendations**

What the participants have consistently described in the investigation are the ever present risks that they face in their day-to-day classroom experience. If the nature of these risks has not been prominent in the literature on deafness, it is possibly because students have not been provided with a suitable context in which to voice their experiences. The evidence suggests that not all mainstream teachers have the time to listen and hear what the deaf students are saying. It is not that the students do not try to influence their teachers by telling them what they experience, rather it is that the teachers may not understand the significance of what is being said. Deaf children in mainstream classrooms need protected time in such a way that they feel safe voicing their concerns and can be reassured that action will follow.

The evidence provided by the participants is that there is a view within their schools that they need to be singled out in their classrooms because they are deaf. The students are directed to sit according to the instructions of their teachers and not where they would be most comfortable, they may be identified to visitors as 'the deaf student in the class' (Transcript: **Xavier**) and there is an over-emphasis

on practicalities, such as the use of radio aids. The consequence for the deaf students is that they and their peers are constantly reminded of the deafness and of the difference from the norm that this implies.

### **The role of teachers of the deaf**

There is evidence that deaf students do not themselves recognise the role of the teacher of the deaf and how it might impact on their learning. This observation parallels that reported in a previous investigation by Jarvis (2003). She suggests that the lack of comments by the students in relation to the teachers of the deaf may be explained by the fact that much of the work of the teacher of the deaf is indirect and not related to face-to-face support. In the light of the outcome of the present investigation, it may be beneficial for teachers of the deaf to reappraise the nature of their role. They might become more personally involved with the deaf students, leaving the students in no doubt as to why they are there and the support they might offer in their learning. The teachers of the deaf could claim an enhanced role in facilitating opportunities for students to convey to their teachers in their own voice how they might best be taught.

### **Teaching assistants**

Students have much to say about teaching assistants. Teaching assistants are present in the classroom because they are the main way the schools and local authorities provide support for students who are perceived to have learning difficulties.

Students appreciate having the support of an adult but they would prefer that the relationship is not based on their deafness. The expertise of a teaching assistant needs to be more about interpersonal skills related to communication, rather than the medical and technical aspects of deafness. They also need to be sensitive to the fact that their presence may disrupt the formation and maintenance of friendships.

### **Members of the community**

Deaf students are not always perceived, either by themselves or by others, as full



members of the school community in terms of the academic learning and their social and emotional development (Powers, 2002). The participants provide evidence that they do not always see themselves fully included in mainstream schools, either in terms of their classroom experience or in respect of their relationships with others.

### **Implications for EPs**

Educational Psychologists have a statutory role in the assessment of students who are deaf and are therefore in a position to influence outcomes relating to placement and provision. The statutory framework is largely based on a medical model in which diagnosis and labelling of individuals might be encouraged. By challenging such an approach, educational psychologists might better serve their clients by describing their individual needs and supporting the changes that the students can so eloquently suggest when given the opportunity.

Educational psychologists have an additional role as advocates for their student clients (Fox, 2015). In this role, they are in a potentially powerful position to persuade others of the extent to which students are able to contribute to their own educational progress and how resilient the students can be in maintaining their placement in a mainstream setting.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence arising from this investigation suggests that the learning outcomes for deaf students in mainstream classrooms are finely balanced. The deaf students are aware that small changes make a disproportionate difference to the way they feel about school and the outcomes that can be expected. These small improvements may seem tanta-

lingly close from the student's perspective. However all too often, it is their own intervention that will make the difference and direct learning towards a positive outcome.

The students are confronted with daily challenges, some of which their hearing peers do not experience. The students do not want to be diagnosed as deaf or to be labelled as deaf, either by their teachers or their peers, in order to support their learning. Rather they wish to be seen as fully participating members of their school community with the same rights to support as any other student.

The data from the participants in this investigation reflects in many instances their insight, adaptability and resilience when facing daily challenges. Not to learn from the students about their experience would be to overlook a rich source of information on how schools and teaching might be improved and the underperformance of deaf children addressed.

The last reflection is from John:

**John:** ...sometimes people can remind you. They can say, 'Oh, do you want help with that hearing aid?' – they can just remind you so much – because sometimes you can be lost in everyone treating you like a normal person – you can just completely forget. But sometimes, it can just be... if a teacher asks like, 'Do you want help?' like because I'm deaf- it can just bring it back and you can think, 'Oh, that's me. I'm John and I'm deaf'.

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