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But I feel more at home in the Deaf world even if I can talk: D/deaf adolescents’ experiences of transitioning from a mainstream school to a Deaf school in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1990s, the majority of D/deaf students enter schooling in a mainstream setting. Little has been written about their experiences and how a change in school settings impacts their learning and social identity. In this study, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with nine students, and the results show that their time in a mainstream school setting has led them to construct a marginal or negative social identity, but after transitioning to a Deaf school, the social identity has shifted towards a positive one. According to students, this is due to feelings of belonging as equal members of the social group where they are given the opportunity to develop language skills that allow them to communicate without restrictions. The students also report improvement in academic achievements as a result of the sign bilingual school setting. Parents and D/deaf students need to experience the different language settings to make an informed decision.

KEYWORDS

D/deaf students; Deaf school; mainstream; school placement; transition; social identity; identity work

There seems to be an ongoing debate about where and with whom D/deaf students should be educated (Byrnes, 2011; Marschark & Knoors, 2012). Research has provided divergent arguments and conclusions concerning the academic and social outcomes of D/deaf students in a mainstream school environment on the one hand, and in a specialised separate school environment (Deaf schools) on the other hand (lantaffi et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2002; Marschark & Knoors, 2012; Olsson et al., 2018). In Sweden, as in many other countries, most D/deaf children have hearing parents (about 95%) and are enrolled in a mainstream school (about 85%) when starting school (Holmström & Schönström, 2017; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004; Roos, 2009). Parents receive information...
about school alternatives from habilitation centres, cochlear implantation (CI) clinics, organisations and other professionals before deciding whether to enrol their D/deaf child in a mainstream school or one of the five regional Deaf schools (Adams Lyngbäck, 2016; Svartholm, 2010).

As stated in the Swedish Education Act, the municipalities are responsible for organising schooling (SFS, 2010:800). In mainstream schools, the D/deaf students are most commonly the only D/deaf student, although some of the 290 Swedish municipalities have arranged for peripatetic specialists or small specialised units for students with hearing loss (Holmström & Schönström, 2017). To be accepted to a Deaf school, the student must have a hearing loss and the need to attend a bilingual education in a sign language environment. The need is based on pedagogical, psychosocial, medical, and social assessments where a moderate to severe hearing loss together with other factors is assessed (SPSM, 2021; SFS, 2010:800). The most notable difference between schools is that enrolment in a mainstream school focuses on speech as the mode of communication, whereas the Deaf school provides sign bilingual (Swedish Sign Language [STS] and written Swedish) education, which means that choices about language for the D/deaf child heavily influence school placement.

School placement has an impact on what kind of social identity a D/deaf person constructs (Leigh, 2009; McGuire, 2020; Nikolaraizi & Hadjikakou, 2006), and a positive social identity has a profound impact on psychological well-being, academic achievement, and self-esteem (Carter, 2015; Chapman & Dammeyer, 2017; Weinberg & Sterritt, 1986). This article aims to contribute with students’ experiences of transitioning from a mainstream school to a Deaf school and how that transition impacts their identity work and social identity. This perspective is largely underrepresented in the research field, just as there is an overall sparsity of research where young D/deaf people have an opportunity to contribute with their knowledge and experiences (Byrnes, 2011; McGuire, 2020; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). The more educators know about identity processes in relation to school environments, the more likely they can pre-empt the socio-emotional aspects of learning and contribute to decisions about deaf education and decision making by those who choose for the student.

**Deaf identity development and identity work**

There are many ways to describe the D/deaf experience, and relating it to social identity is one. Glickman (1993) developed one of the first theories concerning deafness and minority identity development composed of four identity stages. The four stages; *culturally hearing, culturally marginal, immersion (culturally Deaf), and bicultural*, are developmentally related and has been further developed (e.g. Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman & Carey, 1993; Holcomb, 1997) with a distinction between *bicultural-deaf* and *bicultural-hearing* as a response to the technological enhancements and growing use of cochlear implants (Goldblat...
Bicultural identity is the preferred goal, and the models build upon the binaries of deaf or hearing and deaf or Deaf.

There has been a shift in understanding the identity concept, from development in predetermined stages to the notion of identity work. This process is not just one finding out but of shaping one’s own identity/identities (Hintermair, 2008). The research field concerning Deaf identity has gone through a similar development. Scholars have introduced alternatives that correspond with the postmodern concept of identity work where an active individual has the power to shape or change their social identity, and where being bicultural is not viewed as necessarily the most balanced and ‘best suited’ form of being D/deaf (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011; Ohna, 2004; Powell-Williams, 2016; Skelton & Valentine, 2003). In this aspect, one can identify and be ascribed an identity differently in different contexts, which also implies that the recognition of others is crucial in forming a positive social identity (Kermit, 2019).

Skelton and Valentine (2003) conclude that a complex and fluid identity process with competing identities and a somewhat negative notion of feeling in-between marks the experiences of the young people participating in their study. To fully capture the identity process of D/deaf people, there is a need for a broader view. This understanding is the foundation for Ohna’s (2004) identity model, where Deaf-in-my-own-way represents the fact that identity ‘is something that has to be negotiated discursively, and can no longer be tied to a social category or social norms’ (p. 32). This perspective resonates in research by McIlroy and Storbeck (2011), who introduced the term DeaF where the capital F stands for fluidity. Being Deaf is held onto as being a core element of one’s identity, but not what is essentially and rigidly defining a person.

The idea of identity as a social construct in a web of different actors and environments is an idea that compares to the concept of intersectionality where the identity process is a combined impact of different features like gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, physical and psychological abilities, etcetera (Ben-Moshe & Magaña, 2014). D/deaf students, just as any other people, are becoming aware of this during their adolescence, a time when a considerable part of the identity project is carried out in close interaction with peers (van der Merwe, 2017). Thus, this article proposes a view of identity work as a process where different events, transitions, and transformations in life can spur reactions leading to changes in one’s identity.

**Method**

This article is based on a study conducted by the two interviewers in the first half of 2020. One of the interviewers is also Author 1 of this article. Author 2 is the Stockholm University researcher responsible for guaranteeing the adherence to the university’s guidelines on ethical research practice in studies conducted by students within the departmental framework of professional
teacher training programs which are then published in DiVA, an institutional repository for research publications at Swedish universities.

**Procedure of recruitment and participants**

Contact was initially made with the head of the department controlling the five regional Deaf schools to gain approval for access to students. After approval was granted, potential participants who met the criteria of having moved from a mainstream school to a Deaf school and were now attending middle school were identified by contact persons at each school. Participants were informed about the study using an information sheet from the interviewers and provided with an information and consent form. Nine students and their guardians consented. The participants were between 13 and 17 years old when interviewed, and attendance in the Deaf school ranged from 1.5–4 years. Two out of nine students had D/deaf family members, but only one of them used STS at home to communicate with the family. The other eight students used spoken languages, either Swedish or Swedish and another spoken heritage language. All of the students used some form of hearing assistive devices, but differed in the extent of use and had previously been the only D/deaf student in their mainstream school (see Appendix 1).

**Data collection procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting between 30–50 min (see Appendix 2). Before the interviews started, the participants were once more informed about the aim of the study and how the information provided during the interviews would be used to ensure they understood what it meant to participate. They were reminded that they could withdraw their consent during the process and that their identities would be kept confidential (Vetenskapsrådet [Swedish Research Council], 2017). The students chose whether to sign or speak during the interviews, and some used both modalities to ensure they could convey what they wanted without limitations. Both interviewers were fluent in Swedish and STS, and the dynamic use of the two modalities following the students’ lead was adopted. During the interviews, the interviewers paused to summarise what had been said to let the students correct, add, or clarify if needed. The interviews were audio- and video recorded and transcribed into text. Once transcribed, the recordings were deleted, and these transcriptions are stored at Stockholm University in The Swedish National Data Service (SND) consortium.

**Data analysis**

The thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013) in a six-step process was applied to the data. Steps 1–3 (familiarising yourself with the data,
generating initial codes, searching for themes) were first analysed individually before being discussed and examined together. The process was informed by Schlossberg’s (1981, 2011) transition model, also known as the 4S model (Situation, Support, Strategies, and Self), which applies to any transition, whether expected or unexpected. The model is a tool for analysing how individuals initially react to and possibly adapt to transitions in life, and the 4S’s are factors that can facilitate or impede adaptation to transition events.

After completing steps 1–3 with the first five interviews, four more interviews were conducted and analysed the same way. During steps 4 and 5 (reviewing potential themes and defining and naming themes), the data were grouped and tested to ensure a fit between the data and the potential themes; Situation, Support, Strategies, Self, and Social Identity. During step 6 (producing the report) the whole data set was analysed, and there was a good fit between the data and the themes. However, the themes did not fully convey the students’ experiences to the degree that could illuminate the research questions regarding the process and transformation the students had undergone. The material as a whole revealed a narrativizing style with a clear division between before and after the move. To make sense of the students’ experiences the data needed to be approached the same way. This article draws on the most salient findings from the study, and the themes are revised and renamed.

**Results**

This section presents themes that relate to the students’ moving from one place in time to another and from one linguistic and cultural context to another.

**Leaving the troubling mainstream**

The students’ experiences in a mainstream school setting were diverse. While a few students looked back on their time in a mainstream school with a positive or neutral feeling, most students brought up events or periods of being neglected and rejected. The students made a point of dividing their experiences into being either academic or social.

Even though there were a lot of us we hung out as a big group during recess and everyone was like together after school. And like, everyone understood so it didn’t feel bad to not hear and all. [I switched schools so that] it would be easier with my hearing and all. (P1)

The student considered their time in a mainstream school pleasant solely because of the social recognition as an equal peer among the other students in their class. However, during lessons, it was tedious wearing technical aids connected to their assistive devices, and there was a sense of being in the way or being a burden. Considering their need for support in a mainstream
school, they anticipated a move to a Deaf school to be more accessible. This student was the only one who mostly had positive memories from being a student in a mainstream school. In contrast, the remaining students gave voice to a socially unpleasant and periodically degrading time in a mainstream school. Even though the teachers and the instruction, the academics, were sometimes considered to be acceptable, the students still saw their experience, in a social sense, to be not only bad, but the worst, and that the mainstream school was not at all a good place for someone in their position.

But then later I was bullied in school. A lot of them pointed at me and laughed and I threw my hearing aid away a bunch of times. I felt put down in a way since I didn’t feel the same as everyone else and they looked at me. I hate when people look at me in a way that they pity me. I do not like that. (P3)

This student felt pitied and belittled and directed their frustration towards the hearing aid. By throwing it, they were trying to get it away from their body, attempting to detach the stigmatising association. The aid took on the characteristic of what was causing the teasing, pointing, and stares, and the student tried to remove the most prominent evidence of differentness.

A majority of the students felt a lack of both social and academic inclusion. They acknowledged the efforts made to provide them with different adjustments to be able to receive and be a part of the class instruction. However, regardless of attempts at accommodation, they felt a lack of adequate support.

Well, yeah, the teachers had microphones. But they forgot to charge them. And they were always turned [with their backs] towards the whiteboard when they were talking. They didn’t think about me. And there were 25 students in the class sitting in rows, and I sat at the front so I couldn’t hear what they were saying behind me. Yeah, it was hard. And what I did hear was like the pens scratching and irritating noise and my brain focused in on those sounds so I didn’t hear what the teacher said. I missed so much. (P9)

The student accounted for multiple actions causing difficulties during lessons where they did not have the power to control the situation. The microphones were misused and the classroom positioning led to them not hearing what the other students said. Uninvited sounds intruded on the teacher’s voice, and the student missed out on important information. The students connected these marginalising situations to not being socially included since their needs did not matter to their teachers or peers.

All students relied on hearing through assistive devices and technical aids like hearing loops and microphones, but some came into contact with STS on different occasions in the form of mother-tongue instruction online or at school one hour per week or intensive teaching one week per year. Two students had access to a sign language interpreter in class, although they could not use STS to express themselves in these school contexts. They thought they could somewhat understand the language, but without being provided
with a platform for learning the language, it is questionable whether the stu-
dents understood what was signed. STS was, in almost all cases, seen as
merely a tool to facilitate spoken communication. With only one exception,
the students had not been exposed to authentic signing environments with
groups of people who were D/deaf.

The above accounts of the students’ difficulties took many different forms:
neglect, disrespect, bullying, unwanted attention, pity, and feeling unlike
others, all of which contributed to experiences of being out of place and not
belonging. The taxing use of technology, also foregrounded in these accounts,
was often more of a problem than the negative social consequences.

**Entering the unknown**

When it comes to understanding the students’ experiences during the process
of changing schools, it is beneficial to think in terms of power over the decision
and judgment of knowledge. Some families did not know Deaf schools existed.
The students who already knew about Deaf schools mostly regarded choosing
schools as a parental decision, even though professionals brought it up in some
of the students’ cases. The students expressed not knowing either what the
decision would entail or having a right to be informed.

> When I went to a hearing school and found out that I was going to move, I didn’t think
> that I needed it, but when we moved here I really felt that it was good. Because I didn’t
> have like … when I went to a hearing school I had no idea what it was like because they
> are different environments and all. (P1)

Never having met another D/deaf person or sign language before moving gives
an inadequate frame of reference for imagining what it would be like in a Deaf
school. If one does not know what it means to be a student in a Deaf school
regarding academic and social inclusion, one cannot comprehend the need
for such an environment. Not feeling the need should not be confused with con-
tentment. Leaving the known and familiar behind for something unknown can
still be hard.

> Ah, I just thought that before I came here that ‘this can’t really work out much better’
> … because since I was bullied for six years I thought ‘this is normal, this is what
> happens, it’s completely normal and this can happen again’. Of course it didn’t, it
didn’t happen. But before that I thought that I maybe should hide my hearing aids
> or something. But then when I got here I saw that everyone had hearing aids, everyone
> had something so everyone was the same. (P4)

Having been treated so adversely for so long brought this student to think that
this was to be expected even in another school. The negative experience per-
meated their self-understanding, again symbolised by the hearing aids and
the consideration to conceal them. When seeing how every student had
them, the sense of likeness could be expressed: everyone’s the same. What
was not imaginable was that this likeness could be experienced, that the acceptance by others lay inside these experiences’ others shared. To know something through receiving information about it and to experience it on one’s own are two different things, and the educational setting in the Deaf school has to be experienced for the students to fully grasp the idea of not being the only D/deaf amongst hearing peers.

**Feeling at home in a visually oriented school**

The students accounted for various amounts of stress entering the new school, primarily because of insufficient skills to interact in sign language. Initially, it was a struggle, but with adjustments like interpreting from signing to speech and support from assistant teachers, the students could quickly follow classroom instructions independently. In addition, the change in school settings led to improved grades. The students showed a diverse use of signed and spoken language, emphasising that it was their choice and not the choice of other (hearing) people.

I mean like we are kind of between … some of my friends are like stone-deaf and they can’t speak and then I sign with them and others are kind of hearing impaired and then it depends a little on who it is but sometimes we sign and sometimes we talk and sometimes we use sign language if we don’t hear. (P5)

Some students never felt comfortable using their voice, and have, after moving to a Deaf school, turned to use STS in almost all interactions with other people. As in the excerpt above, other students have developed language skills to be able to choose what works best in differing situations. Where previously speech was the only option available, they are now afforded a choice which gives them linguistic and social agency. They have the competence to adapt to a broader range of communication practices and to use the language that allows them to convey their thoughts, feelings and knowledge to the fullest. It is no longer a matter of requiring accommodations to participate.

Yes, they were fun and nice. They understood that before, I had gone to a hearing school for a long time and I didn’t know sign language. So they were really nice and helped me a lot with how you sign. I am happy! The school is a really good school. All the teachers and students have an understanding for what it’s like. The students here don’t tease other students because of being hearing impaired or having other problems. It is really a relief. (P9)

The above quote sheds light on several issues central to transition. It seems to not only be the D/deaf likeness or hearing aid likeness but that others have similar exclusion experiences which instils a sense of recognition in this student. They have realised that the deaf-hearing differentness, not differences in general, was the cause of the exclusion and teasing. There is an overall description of kindness and good intentions to help, teach and be welcoming
connected to a mutual experiential source. To ‘understand what it is like’ means that many of these students and personnel face hardships and difficulties outside of this school. On the inside, this struggle becomes a shared characteristic. A type of expression of values connected to the school culture is created by the experiences of those who share this space, values not shared with their family or friends at home.

I don’t feel at home with hearing people. Except for my parents … Yeah, not like friends and all, no, but those who have a CI, hearing aids or who are deaf and those who know sign language are the ones I feel very comfortable with. Then I can talk without any problems. (P8)

The social identity, in this case, forms around the trait ‘not hearing’, which is understood as a signal or placeholder for using the same gestural-visual language. At the same time, they are acknowledging parents as a group they feel ‘at home with’. The ‘not hearing’ is not about the sensory difference only; it includes groups who use technology as well as D/deaf without technology and those who apparently hear and know sign language. This excerpt is emphasising a shared cultural characteristic through language use ‘without any problems’. The importance of being able to communicate smoothly and in a way that allows them to show their personality is something the students highlight when discussing feelings of belonging. The expectations of others are also exhibited in the accounts.

Yes, like … I don’t feel like a hearing person or as a part of the hearing world, but yeah, I don’t know … Maybe it’s wrong to say it but I feel more at home in the Deaf world even if I can talk. But, I don’t want to say the wrong thing, I don’t want anyone to be sad. I know that my dad wants me to be hearing. He always wanted me to go to a hearing school. And I felt like well, I don’t want dad to be sad, but I don’t want to be sad either. So, how? (P9)

The hesitation and ambivalence about this statement are powerful. Maybe it is wrong to say this. The question is, in whose view? People who hear or people who are D/deaf or both? But I feel more at home in the Deaf world, even if I can talk. It is almost like the student is questioning the appropriateness of entering the Deaf community, leaving the hearing one behind as well as changing the relationship with the family feeling this way. The student explains how the move to the Deaf school has given them a feeling of connectedness for the first time in their life through the opportunity to learn a language that allows them to interact with others as equals.

Along with the positive feelings comes a strong sense of not wanting to offend anyone. Their father so wants them to be hearing, maybe not in the ability sense so much as in the ‘same as him’ sense, using his language. The student is experiencing how a parent longs for their child to belong, as hearing, both in the shared family trait of hearing and language and in being
a part of the majority society. Feeling at home in a context that is not where a parent feels at home is difficult to reconcile.

I think it is more like a positive middle. I have both and I can hang out with deaf and hearing people and I’m in the middle and it isn’t just a focus on the deaf, I can communicate with hearing people too. And I know [another language] so there are more people I can socialise with. (P2)

To most students, it was not about being either D/deaf or hearing, but rather a both/and-view of identity. Described as above the student moved in and out of different groups but felt centred and not marginalised anymore. The addition of the groups found in the Deaf school allowed students to add to their experience in navigating in different groups and cultural contexts. Previously others who saw the students as deviating in how they acted and looked surrounded them, which resulted in a negative self-image. When surrounded by others like themselves, they were for the first time able to experience how that negativity source dissipated. Even though the students all had their individual stories, they unanimously stated that they have found a place where they belong.

**Discussion**

This article aimed to bring forth D/deaf adolescents’ experiences of transitioning from a mainstream school to a Deaf school during their years in compulsory school education in Sweden. The students approached the interviews in a narrativising way with a very distinct ‘before’ and ‘after’ the move, indicating that it significantly influenced who they saw themselves to be and who they could become. This raises several important and decisive issues that will be discussed.

First, it is necessary to discuss how the D/deaf students experienced their time in mainstream schools and how they expressed that this negatively influenced their sense of self and social identity. Regardless of age, gender, ethnicity and hearing status, the students in this study shared some discouraging experiences in their quest for belonging and being recognised as equals. In a study conducted by Ford and Kent (2013), the students described being the only D/deaf in class as a daunting experience, which resonates with what the students in the current study expressed. From the students’ perspective, learning is a social enterprise, which can be explained through socio-cultural and socio-linguistic theories (Bruner, 1996; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000), where the feeling of being socially included outranks the need to experience an academic inclusion. There seems to be a hierarchical relationship where academic inclusion can only be obtained when social inclusion is achieved. The majority of the students emphasised how they were seen as different, not good enough, someone who could never fit in with the others and therefore not socially included.

The lack of social inclusion expressed itself in many ways, and one crucial finding in the study is how the students felt rejected by peers and teachers.
This finding contradicts what Nunes et al. (2001) state about D/deaf students in a mainstream setting not being subjected to more rejection, although possibly a higher rate of neglect, than hearing peers. The students in this study placed a considerably stronger emphasis on being rejected as individuals. They affectively described what that rejection looked and felt like in terms of bullying and being singled out as a target of ridicule.

Kermit (2019) puts it in terms of recognition and how being recognised, especially by peers, is crucial for well-being and obtaining an authentic identity. The students in the present study had, in various ways, sought that kind of recognition during their time in a mainstream school but had not gained it. Despite their efforts, they were, in almost all cases, pushed to a peripheral position (Holmström, 2013) which led them to construct an identity position that could be described as marginal or negative (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1993). This goes to show that ‘being there is not enough; it is no guarantee of respect for difference or access to the material, social, cultural and educational capital that non-disabled people expect from schooling’ (Komesaroff & MacLean, 2006:97). If merely being there is not enough, and D/deaf individuals’ struggles for recognition are not enough, what is needed to bring about equal treatment of D/deaf students in a mainstream school?

The students’ experiences give an insight into what it is like for a young person in a school system that builds upon a deficit perspective and the type of harm it imposes. It becomes apparent that the current Swedish school system is in many ways failing the D/deaf students, and they do not get equal opportunities to learn, grow and construct a positive social identity. A minimal number of all D/deaf students in a mainstream setting get exposure to STS or any form of signed communication (Holmström & Schönström, 2017), which the students in this study also report. One dominating belief is that if students have access to speech, they do not need sign language (Ford & Kent, 2013). If they do not gain access to and notice the benefits of a signed language, how is it possible to determine their need for a sign bilingual education, which is one of the prerequisites for acceptance to a Deaf school? The students themselves did not feel they needed a sign bilingual school setting, clearly because they could not imagine what that would be like. All but one of the nine students felt out of place and like they did not belong in their mainstream school. They felt a need for something else even though they did not know what that could possibly be. It was not until they experienced being a student in a Deaf school that they could grasp what a linguistically accessible space meant for their education.

Many of the students and their guardians had never met another D/deaf person before they transferred to a Deaf school, and some had never seen people using a signed language. The ones who had seen or used some STS themselves shared a view of signing as an aid or support and not as a natural language in its own right. After the change in school settings, the students
viewed STS as a full-fledged language and also a language they associated with their identity position because of their transition experience into acceptability through this accessibility. This change in perception can also be described as ‘being there is not enough’ (Komesaroff & MacLean, 2006:97). The mere presence of sign language is not enough in a school setting where speech and hearing get treated as the norm. The D/deaf students were, under these circumstances, not able to recognise STS as a language because no one used it except for the sign language interpreters provided occasionally to two of the students. As a result, they could not develop their sign language skills. Thoutenhoofd (2005) describes this phenomenon as a way to meet the political demands of inclusive education. The use of a certified sign language interpreter adds credibility to the practice, but how it affects the students’ learning opportunities is not considered. Taken together, this fosters a wait-and-see mentality where teachers, other professionals and parents are waiting for some crucial moment, in essence, a failure or harm, where the child’s need for a sign bilingual school setting will be revealed.

Eight out of nine students describe how their time in a mainstream school led them to construct what can be seen as a marginal or negative social identity (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1993). The transition to a different school environment led to an inner transformation, and even though they used different terms to express where that transformation has taken them, it is clear that the marginal identity position is left behind. Every student reported a significant positive change in their sense of self and social identity. They moved from a peripheral position to a centred one which also led to feelings of being equal and connected to a social group. They did not use the exact words as scholars, but the meaning behind the words they used can be linked to different models. For instance, the student who explained their position as a positive middle suggests the notion of a bicultural identity position put forward by Glickman (1993), Goldblat and Most (2018) and Holcomb (1997). Another student who wanted to be seen as Deaf, but not only Deaf, mirrored the ideas of McIlroy and Storbeck (2011), Ohna (2004) and Skelton and Valentine (2003).

Exactly how they now define themselves, and whether the definition can be placed in or between identity development and identity work paradigms might be of less interest. These students, most importantly, have been given an opportunity in a social, educational and cultural context to construct a positive social identity, which is, as aforementioned, affiliated with higher self-esteem, psychological well-being and positive academic outcomes (Carter, 2015; Chapman & Dammeyer, 2017; Weinberg & Sterritt, 1986).

Research limitations

There is an extensive variety of experiences of D/deaf students in mainstream schools in Sweden, where the majority of these students receive their
education. This article focuses on one subset of this population which started schooling in regular classes and transferred to a specialised learning environment for accessibility reasons and is not a generalisation of the experience to the group as a whole but of their particular experiences as shared characteristics of students who attend first mainstream schools and then transition to Deaf schools.

**Conclusions**

Although limited by local and national agency requirements, school choice is, in the end, a parental decision in Sweden. It is vital that early support for families effectively provides them with what they need to make informed decisions. This is the responsibility of a democratic society emphasising the child’s rights by adopting the UN convention into Swedish law (SFS, 2018:1197). It is not about a lack of support (help, good will, extra technology or personnel); it is a lack of hearing that needs to be addressed together with determining which language is wholly accessible to them, both socially and academically. To know the difference between a support question and a ‘do not hear’ question, we must learn from the experiences of those who live these lives.

D/deaf learners who do not access language early enough and thoroughly enough are still lagging behind in terms of academic achievements (Hendar, 2009; Hendar & O’Neill, 2016; Holmström & Schönström, 2017; Rydberg et al., 2009). One of the reasons is the reluctance to place children in ‘separate’ or ‘segregated’ school settings where sign language is the language of instruction, often with reference to the ideal concept of inclusion (Adams Lyngbäck, 2016). This study of D/deaf students’ experiences shows how social inclusion through being recognised as equal members of the social group and being able to communicate fully is preferable to academic inclusion in a local school close to home.

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**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Notes on contributors**

*Liz Adams Lyngbäck* is a lecturer and researcher at the Department of Special Education, Stockholm University. Her research projects involve studying everyday experience of
medical technologies and issues of body, culture and language particularly in relation to deafness. She is currently focusing on examining life conditions emerging in relationships between Swedish learning immigrants and Swedish speakers and between the deaf and hearing, particularly related to education and social justice.

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**References**


### Appendices

**Appendix 1**  
Table 1. Participant demographic details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age span</th>
<th>Years in Deaf school</th>
<th>Previous school setting</th>
<th>Hearing assistive devices</th>
<th>Language use in the home</th>
<th>Familiar with STS before move to Deaf school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>13–14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Hearing aids, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish and STS</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Mainstream + one year in a special unit attached to a mainstream school. Sign language interpreter provided occasionally.</td>
<td>Hearing aids, occasional use.</td>
<td>Swedish and another spoken heritage language</td>
<td>Very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Hearing aids, occasional use.</td>
<td>Swedish and another spoken heritage language</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Hearing aid and CI, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>13–14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>CI, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>CI, occasional use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>Very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Hearing aids, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>BAHA, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>13–14</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Hearing aid and BAHA, frequent use.</td>
<td>Swedish</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Mainstream in this context means being the only D/deaf student in a mainstream school.
Appendix 2

Interview guide

Introduction and general background questions. What is your name?
   How old are you?
   Where do you live?
   Do you use a hearing aid, CI or another type of device? (Could you describe a bit about how and when?)

Family, leisure time and communication. Could you describe your family?
   Which languages do you use at home? (Do family members know sign language?)
   Which languages do you use with your friends?

School and communication. How long have you attended this school?
   Did you know sign language before you started here?
   Can you talk a bit about what it was like at your previous school?
   What were lessons and recess like in respect to communication?
   Why did you switch schools?
   What did you think about before you switched schools?
   Was there anything that you were anxious about?
   Was there something you looked forward to?
   Do you remember what it was like in the beginning at your new school?
   What were lessons and recess like in respect to communication?
   What is school like now?
   What are lessons and recess like in respect to communication?
   If you compare before and after switching, what has changed?
   What do you think about being a student in a (bimodal/bilingual) Deaf school?

‘Identity’
   There are different groups: hearing, those who use sign language, those who use hearing technology, etc. What do you think about this type of grouping?
   What do you think in terms of yourself and in which situations do you feel at home/like you belong?
   How do you think others think of you in this respect?
   Has your understanding of yourself changed after you switched schools?
   Is there anything you would like to add or tell us more about?