Deaf Culture as an Asset in Preparation for Postsecondary Education and Employment

Introduction

Deaf individuals are part of a complex cultural and linguistic community. Aspects of Deaf culture are potential assets for individuals as they transition from secondary to postsecondary settings, which is particularly important given the deleterious effects of internalized audism on resilience.[7] However, existing structures that prepare students for postsecondary outcomes do not always incorporate Deaf culture as a resource. This research brief provides an overview of Deaf culture and its potential as a source of protection for deaf individuals as they prepare for postsecondary education and employment opportunities.

Deaf culture encompasses the following aspects:

- Reliance on sight, with some evidence of greater visual acuity and sensitivity[22] and communication via visual languages (e.g., American Sign Language)[16]
- The shared experience of oppression, negative attitudes, historical prejudices, and reduced or nonexistent accessible services at school or work[15]
- A culture of solidarity,[6] in which a group experiences itself as a collectivist whole in the face of oppressive forces (deaf individuals have a high regard for role models, deep connections, and networking).[4,13]

Identification with Deaf culture is a protective factor for deaf individuals. A strong sense of identity as a deaf person is an asset that can contribute to an individual's resilience, well-being, and self-esteem.[3,7] The following is important:

- Deaf identity is not static; it is fluid and may evolve over time.[12]
- Deaf youth who spent more time with deaf peers in secondary school settings had higher levels of self-esteem and stronger self-worth.[17,23] Feeling connected to a community is an important factor in persistence toward degree completion and future employment success.[1,20]
- Deaf youth who used sign language in conjunction with speech reported reduced stigma associated with being deaf than youth who used speech as their sole mode of communication.[10] Young adults who have positive perceptions about being deaf have stronger psychological resilience than those who have negative perceptions about being deaf.[7]

What are some current challenges to incorporating Deaf culture strengths into transition planning?

- **Information gaps**. There can be inadequate information sharing among parents, programs, and service providers.[19] Lack of coordination, communication, professional expertise, resources, and strategies among different agencies can result in program gaps and service delivery failure.[14]
- **Policies and structures.** Many current policies do not incorporate Deaf culture into transition planning.[14,15] Some current structures are not designed to adequately accommodate the diverse range of communication modality options used by the Deaf/hard-of-hearing community.[14,15]

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- **Professional capacity.** Some professionals display cultural insensitivity.[21] There are more reported inconsistencies and gaps between transition plans and actual services for Deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals than for their hearing peers.[3]
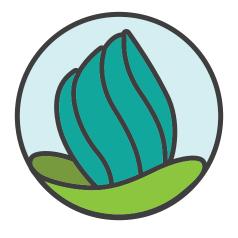
Deaf Culture As a Resource

- **Identity.** The opportunity to develop a deaf identity through interactions with the deaf community, exposure to Deaf culture, and sign language development can be an asset.[8]
- **Language accessibility.** Language accessibility and cultural affiliation in the home environment play an important role in self-concept development for deaf individuals.[9]
- **Parental influence.** Parental influence has been reported as a positive contributor to deaf students' postsecondary outcome.[4,19] More specifically, deaf individuals with deaf parents were reported to have a higher level of self-determination and self-efficacy than those with hearing parents.[22]
- **Educational context.** Individuals who attend schools or programs for deaf students tend to value Deaf culture more than those who attend mainstream schools.[21]
- **Accommodations.** Being prepared to discuss and pursue accommodations also appears to be a significant factor in successful transition outcomes.[5] The quality of accommodations and services may affect how likely individuals are to complete a program and be prepared for the workforce.[5]

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