Successful deaf readers: deaf professionals' perspectives on their childhood learning-to-read experiences

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Successful Deaf Readers:
Deaf Professionals' Perspectives on their Childhood Learning-to-Read Experiences

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT 3

INTRODUCTION 3

LITERATURE REVIEW 6
Potential Factors Affecting the Reading Development of All Children 6
Concerns Regarding the Reading Skills of Many Deaf Children 8
Potential Factors Affecting the Reading Development of Deaf Children 9

METHOD 12
Research Topic 12
Participants 12
Procedure 13
Tables 1 and 2 14

RESULTS 16
Theme 1: Participation in Sports/Recreation Activities 16
Theme 2: Availability of Reading Material at Home 17
Theme 3: Literacy/Educational Activities Supported at Home 18
Theme 4: The Communication Environment at Home 20
Theme 5: Parent Involvement in Education 21
Theme 6: Acceptance and Adaptation to Deafness 22
Theme 7: A Sense of High Expectations Regarding Educational Achievement 24

DISCUSSION 25

APPENDICES 33

REFERENCES 36
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project was to discover if there were any common themes or factors that exist, or are perceived to exist, in the childhood reading experiences of successful deaf readers serving as participants in this study. Despite the availability of research concerning poor reading abilities among many deaf children, there has been little exploration into the experiences of successful deaf readers. Through in-depth interviews, detailed information was collected from five deaf adults holding Ph. D. degrees and working in the field of education regarding their learning-to-read experiences. Information was then analyzed and placed in thematic categories related to participation in sports/recreation activities, availability of reading material at home, literacy activities supported at home, the communication environment at home, parent involvement in education, and a sense of high expectations regarding educational achievements. This paper includes insight from the participants themselves, conveying information to parents and educators regarding potentially significant variables and useful strategies to consider for practice in fostering the successful reading development of young deaf children.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, there has been discussion regarding the poor reading skills of a large percentage of deaf children. In recent times, reports have focused on the difficulties many deaf students have with reading and writing English, scoring low on tests of reading achievement and lagging behind their hearing peers in reading skills and academic achievement in general (Wilbur, 2000; Lartz, 1999; Schimmel, Edwards & Prickett, 1999; Anthony, 1998-99; Luetke-Stahlman, Hayes, Nielsen, & Corcoran, 1996; Andrews,
Winograd, & DeVille, 1994; Padden, 1990; Allen, 1986). Considering that an individual’s academic, social and occupational success is heavily dependent on their reading ability, and that this success is likely to enhance the overall quality of life for individuals, it is critical to support the continuous investigation of desirable factors and effective strategies for teaching reading to deaf children so that they may become skilled readers. For many deaf people, the most accessible doors to a world of knowledge and opportunity are opened when reading from a book, magazine, encyclopedia, newspaper, or on the Internet. Educators agree that it is essential for deaf children to have access to favorable learning-to-read experiences that will effectively develop and advance their reading skills. However, considering the range of diversity among deaf children (or any children for that matter) regarding personal characteristics, family backgrounds, and social experiences, it is difficult, if not impossible, to know the appropriate combination of favorable experiences for any one child. It would be inappropriate to suggest just one prescription for reading success suitable to all children. As a result, educators and researchers continue to investigate factors, and combinations of factors, in the hopes of more clearly understanding what varieties may positively influence reading success to satisfy the individual needs of children.

Deaf children have a unique situation in learning to read English because they do not have complete access to spoken language as hearing children do. This is important to understand considering that printed English is a representation of spoken English. Deaf children have either limited, or no access to spoken English as they do not hear it around them as hearing children can. Such severe limitations on language input complicate the development of grammatical competence and reading ability (Swisher, 1989). Hearing
children often have much less difficulty in learning to read because they have auditorily absorbed so much spoken English starting from birth, or even in the womb. By the time hearing children begin to learn how to read, they already have a significant amount of knowledge and understanding of the common sounds and strings of conventional English. This knowledge is mostly acquired incidentally, and without effort, by simply living in a world of sound. Therefore, hearing children have a much easier time in learning how the sounds of English transfer to the printed word. In other words, they have already acquired the principles in print-sound mapping. It is quite understandable then that one result of having either no auditory input or fragmented access to spoken English is that many deaf children have difficulty learning to read.

And yet, there are successful deaf readers. In fact, there are successful profoundly deaf readers. With the understanding that English print represents the sounds of spoken English, and given the seemingly endless reports of underachievement in the reading abilities of deaf students, cases of successful profoundly deaf readers are both interesting and unexpected. Of course their success is certainly ideal, and of paramount importance to the educator is finding out how these individuals have exceeded in obtaining a mastery of English print and what factors have contributed to their success. Involvement and input from deaf people, especially regarding their experiences, insights, and opinions ought to have significant weight in qualitative research that seeks to investigate and discover best practices in deaf education. From this position, this project is designed with the objective of collecting and analyzing detailed information obtained from successful deaf readers themselves, through in-depth interviews. Through the shared experiences of the participants, this research attempts to expose a deeper and more comprehensive sense of
the perceived elements of experience that have helped them to achieve a level of English mastery that research reports most deaf people do not obtain. With emphasis on a collaborative approach, deaf and hearing researchers and educators can collect valuable insight from a considerably rich resource that will likely lead to measurable improvements in the quality of deaf education, with a particular focus on the reading skill development of deaf children.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Potential Factors Affecting the Reading Development of All Children**

There are a variety of factors, investigated and suggested by researchers and educators that are believed to have important effects on the reading development of all children. Phonological skill, parental involvement, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are a few of the more common factors discussed in literacy research.

In the article “Successful Readers: Motivation and Social Factors,” Alexander, Wigfield, and Oxford (2000), point out that research has shown reading achievement is highly correlated with motivation. The authors discuss several factors believed to stimulate motivation in reading and achievement in second language comprehension. Positive parental support, a sense of competence, interest in content to be learned, and opportunities to choose literacy activities are some of the elements that the authors maintain will help to instill motivation in young children, and ultimately lead to reading success.

In a 2004 report on current research in the field of literacy from the Center for Illiteracy Control, Marie Cheak and Jenni Wessel state that the home environments of
successful readers tend to be filled with literacy activities. Parents play the critical role in initiating activities at home that will nurture successful learners. The authors suggest several tips for parents to create a literacy rich environment that will establish a solid foundation for learning to read. They are: offer authentic contexts that provide purpose, expose children to vocabulary, read to children frequently, help children connect to the text, talk about the stories, offer lots of opportunity for children to play with letters of the alphabet and with language, read stories over and over again, and dramatize stories.

Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborn (2003), in their research sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, emphasize that a warm, loving relationship between a parent or a caregiver and child is the key to helping children develop into successful readers and writers. Like Cheak and Wessel (2004), the authors state that young children need a variety of literacy opportunities and they provide many suggestions for activities in the home. The authors assert that the necessary elements in providing opportunities for children to become skilled and confident readers consist of building spoken language by talking and listening, learning about print and books, learning about the sounds of spoken language, learning about the letters of the alphabet, and listening to books read aloud.

In describing their 2004-07 project “Precursors to Reading Development and Reading Disorder,” Nation, Bishop, Angell, and Taylor state that in a broad sense, there are two sets of skills that children need to become skilled readers. The first skill is learning how to decode and recognize words and the second skill relates to reading comprehension. The authors report that an important finding has been in the relationship between word reading and phonological skills and phonological awareness. In fact, there is a significant body of research crediting phonological skills as a crucial factor in
determining reading success in general. This postulation certainly makes the situation of deaf children, particularly profoundly deaf children, more perplexing. The authors do acknowledge though, that there is more to language than phonology. Nevertheless, their point is well-taken that children with impoverished spoken language vocabulary may be at a disadvantage when learning to read.

Concerns Regarding the Reading Skills of Many Deaf Children

The poor reading skills of many deaf children are clearly recognized and unsurprising, particularly considering the fact that printed English represents spoken English. In the field of deaf education, it is common to come across published articles with statements such as these: “Most profoundly deaf children read poorly” (Goldin-Meadow & Mayberry, 2001); “It is no secret that deaf children have difficulty reading written English” (Schimmel, Edwards, & Prickett, 1999); “The majority of children who are deaf read well below the national average for hearing students” (Lartz, 1999; Holt, 1993); “Most deaf or hard of hearing students do not read proficiently” (Luetke-Stahlman, Hayes, & Nielson, 1996); and “The average literacy level of deaf adults in America is below a fourth grade level” (CADS, 1991); “Over 30 percent of [deaf students] leave high school functionally illiterate compared to a functional illiteracy rate of less than 1 percent among their hearing peers” (Marschark, 1997). These examples represent just a handful of countless comments and reports concerning the current status of reading ability among the deaf and hard of hearing population. However, there are successful deaf readers - even individuals who are profoundly deaf can read successfully.
Potential Factors Affecting the Reading Development of Deaf Children

Goldin-Meadow and Mayberry (2001) addressed the issue of profoundly deaf children learning to read, even without a deep understanding of the phonological code on which printed language is based. The authors asserted that some profoundly deaf children can still become good readers without the use of phonological encoding. They also expressed that it is questionable as to whether those successful deaf readers who seem to have phonological awareness developed this skill before or after learning to read. In addition, the authors suggested that knowledge of ASL or any manual language may help deaf children learn to read English.

The case of Jeffrey, a four and a half year old child in “A Deaf Child Learns To Read,” could be significant to the hypothesis above that knowledge of any manual language may help deaf children learn to read English (Rottenberg, 2001). Despite not sharing a first language with his hearing parents, Jeffrey became a confident and competent early reader. After his deafness was discovered, just before his first birthday, his parents began taking courses to learn Signed English. He was enrolled in a total communication school program where Signed English was the primary mode of communication. Although the use of manual communication may have been a significant factor in Jeffrey’s reading success, the author gave equal consideration to several other conditions in his learning environment. Those identified components include early quality interactions with others, engaging in daily literacy activities, having many opportunities to explore books and other print materials at home and school, early introduction and availability of sign-print books, ample reading materials in general, adult interaction with Jeffrey as he read, and non-obtrusive reading environments.
Rottenberg (2001) also highlighted some of the common qualities of successful young readers in other case studies involving hearing children. She then pointed out that the few case studies have revealed similar characteristics among early deaf readers. The typical characteristics identified are curiosity, positive interactions with interested adults during daily literacy events, and self-regulated reading behaviors of the children. Jeffrey displayed each of these qualities as well.

In his book *Psychological Development of Deaf Children*, Marschark (1993) reviewed thirty years of research regarding the reading abilities of deaf children of deaf parents compared to deaf children of hearing parents. Marschark found that, overall, deaf children of deaf parents were generally better readers than deaf children of hearing parents for reasons he attributed primarily to deaf parents being more sensitive to their children's communication needs. However, of further interest, Marschark discovered that deaf children who are better readers, regardless of parent hearing status, tend to be those who were diagnosed with a hearing loss early, had early access to language (usually through sign language), and were exposed to English. Additionally, he concluded that having a parent who signs well seems to be more important in predicting reading success than whether the parent is deaf or hearing. As in Jeffrey's case above (Rottenberg, 2001), use of manual communication appears to be a potentially significant factor in promoting reading success.

In *The Family Environment and Achievement of Deaf Students: A Discriminant Analysis*, Barbara Bodner-Johnson (1986) examined family environment factors related to the deaf child's school achievement, particularly within the academic content areas of reading comprehension, mathematics concepts, and mathematics computation. She
investigated the differences in the family environments between students whose skill achievement in mathematics and reading was high, and those whose achievement was low. The parents of 125 children across seven northeastern states were interviewed for the purpose of identifying family characteristics and practices that relate to child academic performance. Bodner-Johnson’s study revealed that parent’s adaptation to deafness and press for achievement were primary discriminators between high and low reading performance of their children. Deaf children who did well in reading tended to have parents who integrated them into the family and who held them to high educational and occupational expectations, to a greater degree than families of children with low reading performance.

To clarify the focus on specific research variables in literacy-related studies, some theorists make a distinction between “inside-out” skills and “outside-in” skills. Nation, Bishop, Angell, and Taylor (2004) explained that the former refer to skills that are in areas intrinsic to the child, while the latter are those skills that are provided by the environment. Phonology and syntax are intrinsic, inside-out skills while vocabulary, reading experience, and opportunity fall into the category of outside-in skills, those provided by the environment. Such categorical thinking helped to determine the interview protocol for this study as the research focuses primarily on environmental factors that may have positively influenced the reading development of participants in this study. Additionally, environmental factors identified by researchers in the literature review above have been incorporated into the interview questions for the present study.
METHOD

Research Topic

The purpose of this research project was to learn about various aspects of the learning-to-read experiences and environments of skilled readers who are deaf, through interviews with the individuals themselves, to get a broad picture of factors that may have been influential in fostering their reading success. In general, the focus of the research interview was on the participants' learning-to-read experiences, insights, and opinions. More specifically, in considering the proposed factors influencing literacy that were reviewed in the literature above, the research interview sought to investigate the extent and conditions of elements such as parental involvement in reading development, personal motivation, and literacy experiences at home and school.

Participants

This project includes in-depth interviews with five successful deaf readers. The criteria for subjects invited to participate in this study was that they a.) have a PhD, b.) are deaf, and c.) work in the field of education. Participants have been identified as “successful deaf readers” under the confident assumption that individuals who have worked toward, and received a Ph.D. have also achieved an impressive level of mastery of the English language that researchers report most deaf people do not attain. This assumption is based on the understanding that the requirements for obtaining a Ph.D. demand long and arduous work that involves an intense amount of reading and writing. Above average reading ability is clearly a fundamental attribute for completing a PhD program. In addition, a professional career in the field of education would likely require an individual have above average reading and writing abilities.
For the purposes of this study, it was determined that a total of five subjects would be interviewed. The names of deaf individuals satisfying the criteria were identified from their known status in the Rochester area educational community by the researcher and advisor to this project. To begin the sample selection process, an initial group of 6 potential subjects, three male and three female, were mailed formal letters of invitation to participate in this research study. Each invitation letter was given a number (001, 002, 003, 004, 005, 006), to be used for identification and confidentiality purposes for subjects interested in participating in the research. Individuals were asked to respond to the researcher if they were interested in participating. Five out of the six individuals responded to the invitation. The individual who received invitation number 003 did not respond to participate in the study.

Procedure

The interview protocol was designed to elicit information about participants' personal learning-to-read experiences and environments as well as their perceptions of various aspects they believe have helped them become successful readers. The interview guide approach (Patton, 1990) was chosen for the purpose of keeping data more systematic than in an informal conversational interview, yet still flexible and open enough so that the wording and order of questions could be varied to some extent. By using the interview guide approach, as Patton explains, "the tone of the interview still remains fairly conversational and informal."

Participants in this study were first asked to sign a consent form. All names have been kept confidential with the assignment of an identification number. Participants were asked to provide personal background information by answering several short-answer
questions in writing. The one-page background information form asked questions such as, “At what age was your hearing loss discovered? Are any members of your family also deaf? When and where did you learn sign language? Did you attend a school for the deaf or a public school?” See Tables 1 and 2 below for a brief description of participant characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age Deafness Discovered</th>
<th>Progressive Loss</th>
<th>Current Degree of Hearing Loss</th>
<th>Parents Deaf or Hearing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At Birth</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Both Deaf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4 Years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Both Hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>004</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 Months</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Both Hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>005</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>At Birth</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Both Hearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>006</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5 Days</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Profound</td>
<td>Both Hearing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant #</th>
<th>Learned Sign Language From a Parent?</th>
<th>Schooling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>001</td>
<td>Yes, from deaf father at birth, but did not use until age 13. Used spoken communication with parents</td>
<td>Oral residential school, age 4-13, then fully mainstreamed without any support services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>002</td>
<td>No, parents did not sign. Spoken communication was used at home</td>
<td>Public school without any support services until age 9, then attended a residential school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>004</td>
<td>Yes, learned Signed English from parents at age 2</td>
<td>Started in self-contained classes and then later fully mainstreamed Sign language used throughout schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>005</td>
<td>No. Learned sign from an older deaf brother. Family members learned some sign later. Some “home signing” was used</td>
<td>Started in self-contained classes and then later fully mainstreamed Sign language used throughout schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>006</td>
<td>Yes, mom learned Signed English. Also learned from deaf classmates at about 1 yr. old</td>
<td>Started in self-contained classes and then later fully mainstreamed Sign language used throughout schooling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next, participants scheduled a one-time interview. A pilot interview between the researcher and advisor to this project (who also satisfies the participant criteria) was conducted to allow the researcher to determine an appropriate interview approach, to get a
sense of how much time the interview process would require, and to get feedback on the impression of questions asked. The results of the interview with the advisor were not included in the actual research study. The five participant's individual interviews each lasted between one hour and one hour and 15 minutes and were videotaped. Three out of five of the interviews took place in the participant's work office, one took place in a private videotaping room located on a college campus, and one took place in the participant's home. An extensive list of questions was generated by the researcher and was further refined through the input of Stephanie Polowe-Aldersley (April, 1996). The interview consisted of questions requiring the participant to reflect on various aspects of his/her childhood learning-to-read experiences. Questions were asked primarily focusing on early learning-to-read experiences at home and at school. A few examples of questions that were asked are, “What type of reading/language activities took place at home when you were a child? How would you describe your parents' involvement in your reading development? How would you describe the communication environment at home? Was your family a good resource for information to you? Have you ever taken advantage of tutoring services for reading and/or writing? Overall, what do you think has helped you to become a successful reader?” (See Appendix A and B for the complete listing of background and interview questions.)

When all of the interviews were completed, data was analyzed to discover if there were any common themes or factors that exist, or were perceived to exist, in the childhood reading experiences and environments among the participants in this study. Each videotape was transcribed for analysis. The researcher coded all transcriptions. Codes were reviewed and common themes and factors were identified.
RESULTS

During the analysis, information was placed into thematic categories. The results are presented by seven major themes that emerged among the participant interviews. These themes represent categories of similar experiences between three or more of the five participants. For the purposes of associating quotes with subjects, the participant’s identification number is used.

Theme 1: Participation in Sports/Recreation Activities

This theme emerged out of the interviews with the males in the group. It was interesting that this theme was discovered in three out of five participant’s interviews since the responses below were not a result of a direct question asked by the interviewer/researcher. The topic was brought up by participants in the interview through the flexibility of the interview guide approach and the flow of conversation with the interviewer. It is important to note that while the two female participants did not mention being involved in sports related activities, it does not imply that they were not involved in such activities. This was not a specific question asked during the interview.

Participant 001: “I developed a passion for sports because of my father. I was involved in some activities in high school: football, baseball, track, golf, basketball in the community. A lot of sports activities but not school clubs. That was my way of interacting with hearing peers.”

Participant 002: “I was a leader in my home neighborhood [mostly hearing kids]. I would say I was respected, maybe because I was a little older and I was very physically fit. I exercised. I really took care of myself. We played a lot of sports games in the neighborhood. We’d play football, sometimes baseball. We played outside a lot. At the school for the deaf I was very involved in student activities, clubs, theater, and sports.”

Participant 005: “I grew up with other hearing kids. I went to the Boys’ Club of America for recreation. My 3 brothers and I went there after school. We grew up playing baseball, football, and basketball. I knew all of the kids, had played with them, and was friends with many. Some of them knew fingerspelling. They could communicate with me well because we did so many things together – sports, camps, Boys Club of America, etc... Everyone in my family (7 children) was involved in sports and we were very competitive. We played a lot of sports games in the backyard.”
Theme 2: Availability of Reading Material at Home

Educators frequently emphasize that availability of reading material is an important factor necessary for promoting literacy in children. From the background information form and interview, it was found that four out of five of the participants had at least an average amount of reading material at home. Participant 001 described in writing that as he was growing up his home environment included many children’s books as well as encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, and atlases. The others described their situation as follows:

Participant 002: “I remember being surrounded by books. Some books I inherited from my brother and sister. My parents bought some children’s books, so there were books available. We had a set of encyclopedias at home. I remember looking through them and being fascinated with the pictures and information. That was probably the best exposure to reading for me. The world opened up for me and I could read whatever I was curious about.”

Participant 004: “I had books everywhere. They were very accessible to me. I had a very language-rich environment. They [parents] would take me to the bookstore and buy me whatever I wanted. If I wanted many books, they would buy them for me. At the library, I would borrow 20 books at a time.”

Participant 006: “I didn’t have shelves full of books but I had a few that I would keep near my bed on the table. I had a children’s dictionary and I was fascinated with the pictures. My mother bought it for me. I enjoyed that. My mother didn’t have a lot of money so we had one dictionary and that was all.”

Participant 005 explained that he grew up in a family with seven children, they were very poor, and therefore they didn’t have many books at home. However, his parents did subscribe to the daily local newspaper.

Participant 005: “I can remember often looking at the pictures and reading the captions below but I didn’t really read the articles when I was young. My father had a 9 to 5 job and would always read the newspaper first thing when he came home. I would look at the sports, read the comics and try to understand them. But, reading the articles? I didn’t do that until much later when I was older.”
Theme 3: Literacy/Educational Activities Supported at Home

Of the five participants, four described literacy and educational activities that were supported at home. Participant 002 stated that he couldn’t recall any family activities at home related to language. However, he did remember that every so often he would read the newspaper (current events and sports section) and magazines (Time, Newsweek, National Geographic) that his parents received from subscriptions. The other participants described activities that included other family members.

Participant 001: “When I was born, mom knew early education was important. She would always read and tell me stories, orally. My mother was very easy to lipread. Her frequent stories were fascinating and wonderful! She was a wonderful storyteller – stories like nursery rhymes. I had a lot of early exposure. She’d read the stories and then talk about them. I often went with my mother to visit her friends and she would tell them stories about the books she was reading and I would be fascinated. My father was wonderful when it came to telling sports stories, playing board games and math games. We played a lot of board games. I loved Scrabble and Monopoly.”

Participant 001 later describes another home activity that began around the time when he was in 8th grade, after moving from an oral residential school to a public school:

Participant 001: “My mother would make me read books for one hour everyday. After that hour then I could go out and play.”

This participant also explained that he loved to go to the library. He would go almost every night to do his homework or to look for additional information. He described the library as his second home during high school and college. He felt very comfortable working in the library, surrounded by books.

Participant 001 “I enjoyed the library environment because I could always look for new information or read magazines and it was a quiet place. There was a lot of privacy and I could have my work spread out all over the table and focus. It was different than being at home where I would be tempted to watch TV, to eat, or to go out to play.”
Participant 004: “At home my mom would always sit with me. Almost everyday for about an hour she’d read with me. Then, when we were finished reading, we would act out the stories. So I just loved it. At the library I would take out 20 books at a time and then I would lie down in my parents’ bed and read them. I really enjoyed that. We went to the library about once a week.”

Participant 005: “We lived only 2 blocks from the library. My oldest sister always took the 3 of us boys to the library with her because she would baby-sit us while our parents worked. My sister was a book worm so that’s why she would always take us to the library with her. We went every week. I didn’t borrow books but I would read magazines like Sports Illustrated. My sister took out lots of books. My brothers and I would play hide and seek, look at pictures, and hang out.”

While participant 005 might not have found the library to be very exciting, it does seem that it was an activity he accepted without question and ultimately found ways to remain entertained while he was there. The library became a familiar and comfortable place to visit. Other activities that took place at home are also described.

Participant 005: “I also remember my family would often play Boggle. I always got the lowest amount of points. I usually got 3 or 4-letter words. I rarely got 5 or 6-letter words like the rest of the family. It was more competitive for them, but a challenge for me. Also when I was growing up, especially during elementary school, my 3 oldest sisters liked to play ‘teacher’. In our basement we had 3 or 4 desks so it was like a classroom set up there. My sisters would always test me and my two older brothers on math skills. Not other subjects, it was always related to math. They would test our math facts and time us. They would give us star stickers and I would compete against my 2 older brothers. It helped me develop a strong foundation for math facts.”

Participant 006: “I remember we labeled things around the house like the window would have a small label on paper: w-i-n-d-o-w. Lots of things around the house were labeled. I was young, probably about 2, 3 and 4. My mom left the labels on the objects in the house. I remember my mom would sit and read with me sometimes when I was really young. The two of us would sit side by side and my mom would sign the stories to me. I was also crazy about magazines. At the grocery store I would ask my mom to buy magazines like the kind about movie stars and celebrities and TV programs. Remember BOP magazine? My mom would buy me those magazines. My mom also tried encouraging me to read the newspaper but I found that really boring.”
Theme 4: The Communication Environment at Home

The participants did not all share similar communication environments at home. In fact, there appeared to be three different types of environments among the five participants. Despite the difference, each participant seemed to feel strongly, in one way or the other, about the communication at home. The two participants who had at least one hearing parent who signed well both described communication at home as very open where they were frequently and actively engaged in conversation. At least one family member was valued as a good resource for information. A third participant had a very unique situation where he grew up in a signing environment with two deaf parents, but he never signed himself until he was 13 years old. It seems he was more of an observer of the signing environment while he actually lived his experience through speaking and lipreading. Frequent and active exchanges with his mother were through oral communication. Despite this method of communication that may seem somewhat perplexing to an outsider, this participant described his communication environment as “wonderful, relaxed, open, free flowing, and exchanging.” He explained that he was frequently and actively engaged in conversations at home, especially with mom. He felt she was a great resource for information and he never felt isolated or left out of conversations, except with hearing members of the family.

Participant 002, whose parents did not sign at all, and participant 005, whose family members did not attempt to learn sign until much later, clearly had a different feeling about communication at home.

Participant 002: “I don’t remember having any discussions (with parents) about how I was doing in school or that I felt isolated. Really, there was no communication at home. It was very basic. The communication at home was all oral. My parents did a lot of talking and I did a lot of hit and miss lipreading. I could express my needs but I didn’t get much from
them receptively. I don’t remember being engaged in conversation. Not much access to communication. It was one-way communication.”

Participant 002 later explained that he doesn’t feel his parents were strictly in favor of the oral method, but rather they were encouraged by other professionals to use oral communication at home. He added that he believes his mother still grieves now over the fact that they didn’t learn sign language. Participant 005 shared similar feelings about the communication at home while he was growing up.

Participant 005: “I did not feel like a full member of the family. My 2 brothers and I were close but not as much with my 3 older sisters and parents. For example, at the dinner table while the rest of the family was talking, my brothers and I would have our own conversation with each other in sign. While they ate at the table, my brothers and I would go into the living room to eat and have our own conversations. I didn’t feel the same bond with the rest of the family. Communication was frustrating with my parents. Even today I wish they had learned to sign.”

Theme 5: Parent Involvement in Education

Of the five participants, four specifically described their mother as being actively involved in their education. Participants 001 and 004 explained that their mothers were always thinking ahead and were very focused on their education. Participants 005 and 006 had similar experiences.

Participant 005: “My father wasn’t involved in our education but my mom was actively involved. She would meet with teachers to make sure that my [deaf] brother and I were progressing in school. She went to all the PTA meetings with teachers. She was very assertive related to getting rights for my brother and me to get the best education.”

Participant 006: “My mother showed up to most of the IEP meetings. She fought to make sure I had strong support. Some of the teachers didn’t like my mother because they thought she was too strong of an advocate. She wanted the best!”
Participant 002 did not share an experience similar to the others. However, he articulately describes his home life from a valuable and illuminating perspective.

Participant 002: “I grew up with very caring and loving parents. That’s important. I always knew they cared, always, despite any isolation I felt. I always knew they cared. I don’t remember my parents being very involved with my education. As I explained before, they were a middle working-class family: you go to school for the sake of going to school. Then when you’re finished you’re supposed to go to work. I don’t think they saw the value in going to college because college cost a lot of money.”

Theme 6: Acceptance and Adaptation to Deafness

Each participant conveyed that their parents displayed a sense of adaptation to their deafness, although in different ways. Participant 001 was the only subject whose parents were both deaf. His situation is unique considering that 90% of deaf children have hearing parents. As deaf individuals themselves, his parents were already adapted to deafness and were likely prepared for the possibility that their son might also be deaf. The discovery of participant 001’s deafness simply meant that he was even more like his parents. He was “one of them.” Therefore, his parents’ reaction to his deafness would not be similar to that felt by hearing parents who likely never anticipated that their child might be deaf.

Participant 001: “My parents were very loving, my family was very close.”

Participant 002’s parents never learned sign language. Not learning sign language might be perceived by some to imply that these parents did not fully adapt to their son’s deafness. However, participant 002 explains that his parents were advised to use speech only to encourage their son to develop spoken communication skills and to function as a hard-of-hearing person. While it should not be overlooked that participant 002 felt isolated
as a result of his parents’ not learning sign language, his parents seem to have shown their acceptance and adaptation to his deafness in other ways.

Participant 002: “I was lucky. My parents were one of two families to visit me (at the school for the deaf) every other weekend. Many kids’ parents did not come to visit them. My parents made the effort to visit me every other weekend with another family that lived in their neighborhood whose child was also at the school for the deaf. Looking back, that’s a good example of how I know they cared. I was a valuable member of the family. They came every other weekend. That’s 200 miles one way.”

Participant 005 also stated that his parents did not use sign language as a primary means of communicating with him. However, he conveyed a sense of his parents’ adaptation to his deafness through describing his mother’s full support for his involvement in activities with other deaf individuals.

Participant 005: “She encouraged my involvement with other deaf people. I started going to camp with other hearing kids through the Boys Club of America when I was 7 until I was about 9. Then I went to a deaf camp through the Lions Club when I was 9 and 10. When I was 11 I went to a Catholic deaf camp. When I was 12 I went to Sweden through the Children’s International Summer Villages Program. They had a deaf group in the program. There were kids from 13 countries and there were 4 of us representing the US. We went to Sweden and stayed for 2 months. We met deaf students from England, Denmark, Poland, Finland, Kenya, and Italy.”

Adaptation to his deafness also seemed apparent as he explained his mother’s active involvement in his educational progress. In addition, he emphasized that his mother had the same expectations for all of her children, deaf or hearing.

Participant 004 described her parents’ acceptance and adaptation to her deafness as communicated through their pro-active behavior. When her deafness was discovered, her parents did a lot of research. They became strong advocates for her and they were not afraid to fight for her rights or to speak up when they felt they needed to. Her parents didn’t pity her, but rather encouraged her independence. In referring to the meaning of deaf education in general, participant 004 stated that her parents really “got it.”
Throughout the interview, participant 006 conveyed the sense that her mother adapted positively to her deafness through describing her mother’s motivation to learn sign language, the open communication environment at home, her mother’s strong advocating regarding her education and her high expectations she held for her daughter.

**Theme 7: A Sense of High Expectations Regarding Educational Achievement**

Whether at home or school, all five participants had someone in their life that held them to high expectations regarding education and hard work.

Participant 001: “My parents were wonderful. They weren’t high achievers but they worked hard and so I learned from them and internalized that. My mom had high expectations for me. My dad was satisfied.”

Participant 001 continued to explain that his parents, especially his mother, were always very encouraging, proud of him, and always believed he could “do it.”

Participant 002 perceived the value in learning and high expectations after he left the public school and entered a school for the deaf at the age of nine.

Participant 002: “I think I really grew when I went to the school for the deaf. That’s when I started to feel like ‘I can do it!’ I was encouraged to do well and had good role models. I realized that I could also go to college – clearly enlightenment. My parents were from a blue-collar middle socio-economic class. Education was not really the top priority, but work was. At the school for the deaf, they truly valued education and thought I was smart and should go to college. Two different sets of values and of course I chose education.”

When asked what particular qualities her parents had that she believes made her life experience positive, participant 004 answered that one of the qualities was having high expectations. In addition, she explained that her family never pitied her because of her deafness. She was included as a full member of the family and her parents didn’t expect any less from her than they did from her older hearing sister. Participant 005 and 006 shared similar experiences.
Participant 005: “My family had high expectations related to academics. All of my brothers and sisters and I, except my youngest brother who has Down’s syndrome, have at least a master’s degree. Even my mother and father have master’s degrees. My mother never told me, ‘You have to go to college!’ It was just expected. Each of my brothers and sisters before me went so I had to. I had no choice, really. If I didn’t go to college I would be looked down on. If I didn’t go to college that would mean something was wrong with me. My mother had the same expectations for all of her children, deaf or hearing.”

Participant 006: “Teachers told my mother ‘Don’t expect your daughter to read beyond a 4th grade level.’ Mom said, ‘I disagree. I will not let that happen to my daughter. My daughter can and will read above a 4th grade level and will continue to progress.’ Mom often argued with the teachers about that. Even the teachers of the deaf (public school) had low expectations. Mom wanted the same high expectations for me as others had for hearing students.”

DISCUSSION

This research project began with the goal of investigating only the learning-to-read experiences of five successful deaf readers. However, it was more difficult for the participants to remember specific aspects of their learning-to-read experiences in early childhood than originally anticipated during the design of the interview. For example, several of the participants could not remember at what age they had learned to read. In retrospect, what seemed to be a simple question is not an easy one. Unless our parents have told us when we began reading it is unlikely we will remember on our own, especially if it was learned earlier than later. Another question, important for the purposes of the study, was found to be challenging and asked how and how often family members read books with them. It is fair to say that an individual might not be able to clearly remember activities that took place, say in their toddler years. Therefore, a complete picture of the types of literacy activities that occurred at home in early childhood might not have been elicited from participants for the reasons that memory serves everyone differently and such topics may have not been discussed with parents. For future
references, it would probably be more reasonable to present these questions to the parents of the subjects.

In looking at the whole of each completed interview, it might be more appropriate to say that the stories shared describe elements of an even broader topic than reading achievement. The five individuals interviewed did not only reach a level of English mastery that research reports most deaf people do not obtain. They have also achieved a high degree of academic and professional success. Therefore, it is not surprising that their reflections described more than their learning-to-read experiences. Their stories also revealed practices supported at home and school that the participants' believe can be attributed to their successes in general.

As suggested in the literature review, there are a variety of factors that researchers and educators believe can have a significant influence on the reading development and academic success of all children. Looking at the themes identified in this study, it seems that several of the factors proposed in the literature review were present in the childhood experiences of the five participants in this research study. While the participants each described unique life experiences, similar elements were perceived among their shared stories.

The three male participants in this study were each actively involved in sports related activities. Alexander, Wigfield, and Oxford (2000), although referring more directly to literacy related activities, state that a sense of competence is an essential factor for instilling motivation in young children. While sports involvement is not clearly associated with literacy, it may be argued that an overall personal sense of competence and belonging to a group could transfer to other situations and life challenges to help foster
motivation and strive for achievement. Nettles, Mucherah, and Jones (2000), in their article “Understanding Resilience: The Role of Social Resources” cite participation in extracurricular activities, such as after-school sports, as access to an important social resource that can have a positive influence on children’s academic performance. Each of the male subjects in this study clearly valued their involvement in sports-related activities and described the experience in terms of the social value of interacting with others outside of the home.

At home, in describing the literacy environment, only one participant defined her surroundings as “language-rich”. However, all reported that they had access to available reading material as well as parents who could be considered reading role models. All participants reported that at least one parent read at home, typically either from the daily newspaper or magazines. Since children often emulate the behaviors of their parents, it was likely a benefit to see a parent frequently reading whether for pure enjoyment or for obtaining information. Most participants explained that their home environment included at least some children’s books as well as the newspaper and magazine. While the amount of resources available varied among participants, it seems that each had some degree of choice of reading material. Even participant 005 who explained that his family was very poor and could not afford many books indicated that his family did subscribe to the daily newspaper, which in itself is full of a variety of content to choose from. Participant 005 chose to read the sports section and the comics. Later, starting in middle and high school, he became more interested in reading articles about current events. Having some degree of opportunity and freedom to explore print material and choose topics of interest were common factors shared by participants.
In addition to having available reading material, most of the participants described various literacy activities supported at home. The activities described ranged from labeling objects around the house to keeping a diary to playing Boggle. Activities that three or more participants shared in their experiences included reading stories together, reading the newspaper or magazines, and going to the library frequently.

When asked how they feel about reading today each participant replied with either “I really enjoy reading today,” “I love it!” or “I’m an avid reader.” However, they didn’t all love to read as a child. Only two of the participants described a strong childhood passion for reading and going to the library. One described herself as growing up with an average interest in reading. Two participants stated that they would much rather be outside playing sports and socializing with friends than reading a book. While it’s not surprising that children might choose to play outside and socialize over reading a book, it is interesting to note that these two participants also described the communication environment at home as frustrating. Their parents did not use sign language as a primary means of communication and both expressed some sense of isolation in the family for not being able to participate in all conversation and have meaningful exchanges. Therefore, being outside as much as possible and playing games that fostered a sense of competence and belonging with other children may have been more appealing than feeling isolated inside the house with a book and/or a family member who couldn’t communicate in sign.

It’s also not surprising that some of participants have developed more positive attitudes toward reading as adults. Completing a homework requirement to read 15-20 pages of “Moby Dick” or “Great Expectations” every night is quite different from choosing a book
of personal interest and reading at your leisure. In addition, reading is probably more enjoyable and relaxing for most people when there isn’t an essay or test that follows.

Parental involvement is a factor that is frequently studied and written about in literacy research. More specifically as it relates to a child’s education, positive parental support from caring parents who have high expectations for their children and who are involved in their children’s schooling are regarded as critical components in influencing academic achievement (Nettles, Mucherah, & Jones, 2000). Each participant in the present study expressed in their own way, directly or indirectly, that they had caring parents. Participant 002 described his parents as loving, caring, and kind. While he does not remember them being actively involved in his education, he points out that his parents did make a very difficult and unselfish decision to send him (at nine years old) to a school for the deaf that was located 200 miles away from home. Going to the school for the deaf was described as “an enlightenment – finally the sun had risen!” Although he may not be able to claim that his parents showed their support through active involvement in his education, he expressed that he fully respects them for making the very difficult but caring decision that ultimately changed his life. The other four participants described their mothers as actively involved in their schooling. Three participants specifically described their mother’s activities as meeting with teachers periodically, attending parent-conference or IEP meetings, and keeping track of their child’s progress to ensure they were getting the best education suited to their needs. These participants expressed that they respected and appreciated the assertiveness and educational concern from their mothers.

Closely related to active involvement in education is the concept of high expectations. Here, high expectations are defined as expecting at least above average
achievement. Each of the participants was influenced by someone in their childhood who had expectations for them to perform and achieve above the average. Similar to Bodner-Johnson's study (1986), it was discovered that the parents of participants in the present study accepted and adapted to their child's deafness and had high educational and occupational expectations and standards for achievement.

This paper has focused on the "outside-in" skills developed in individuals through the resources present in their immediate environment. Environmental factors and experiences undoubtedly exert a powerful influence on individuals. However, it is important to acknowledge the presence of innate factors that influence the personal character and behavior of individuals. Three participants explicitly expressed that they believe that some elements of their success are due to innate characteristics. For example, participant 001 explained that, by nature, he has always been a very organized and goal oriented person who doesn't like to fall behind. He described this aspect of his personality as internal and innate, not influenced by his surroundings. He further explained that personal characteristics can sometimes interfere with learning, even in an ideal environment. For example, a child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) might have difficulty in performing some tasks and developing certain skills.

Although each theme found in the data analysis was not always consistent across all five participants, it is apparent that some complex combination of these factors had a positive degree of influence and a significant role in fostering the achievements of each individual. There was no single factor that could predict the reading success, or the academic and professional success of the five participants. The combination of elements specific to each individual's childhood experiences contributed to their personal drive,
faith, and courage, their sense of competence, and their strong desire to achieve well above the average.

When asked what qualities influential individuals in their life had that they believe helped to make their learning experiences positive, participants answered with these descriptions: caring, sincere, assertive, encouraging, patient, supportive, high expectations, confident that I could succeed, showed a genuine interest in my educational development, encouraged my independence, didn’t pity me, down to earth, had a sense of humor, answered my questions, acknowledged me as an individual.

At the end of the interview, each participant was asked his/her opinion on what reasons they believe might explain why a significant number of deaf children today are poor readers. The four individuals with hearing parents each strongly believed that too many deaf children do not have full access to communication. Having access to communication at home and at school could foster significant potential and achievements by opening the doors not only to a world of knowledge and everyday incidental learning, but to more meaningful and authentic communication exchanges. These are the roots that develop human relationships. The impact of not having adequate access to communication is tremendously detrimental to the education and overall well-being of any individual. In addition, it was emphasized that acquiring a solid first language is critical for any child. For many deaf children, this would mean learning sign language first (a language in which they would have full visual access) before mastering English (a language in which deaf children do not have full auditory access resulting in fragmented input).

A second reason suggested by three of the participants as contributing to the poor reading abilities of many deaf children was that too many parents and/or school personnel
have low expectations for deaf children. Deaf children are often mistakenly considered less capable than hearing children and are consequently treated differently. Raising expectations to appropriate levels would significantly benefit deaf children academically, particularly in promoting the development of reading skills.

Additional reasons for the poor reading skills of many deaf children cited by two of the participants were a lack of parental involvement and lack of deaf role models in young deaf children’s lives. During the interviews, three individuals clearly expressed that they highly valued and cherished the opportunity to have deaf role models in their lives. The presence of deaf role models contributed in developing their sense of identity, pride, and confidence which has had a critical role in their pursuits and achievements.

Deaf people themselves are the most valuable resource to researchers and educators who desire a deeper understanding of the impact and effects of societal factors impressed upon deaf individuals. The importance of learning through the personal experiences, insights, and opinions of deaf individuals could not be overemphasized. While themes exist, or were perceived to exist in the lives of the participants in this study, their individual anecdotes contributed to a deeper understanding and appreciation for the diversity and uniqueness among the childhood experiences and environments of deaf individuals. The personal reflections, insights and themes presented in this study provide a reference of valuable and insightful information regarding potentially significant variables and useful strategies for parents and educators to consider for practice in fostering the successful reading development of young deaf children.
Appendix A
Background Information Form

Identification # 000

Gender: Male / Female

Today’s date: ______________________

At what age was your deafness discovered?

Have you had a progressive loss?

What is the degree of your hearing loss?

Did you use hearing aids or an FM system growing up? Do you use hearing aids now?

Are your parents, siblings, or any other relatives also deaf?

When and where did you learn sign language? Who did you learn sign language from?

Growing up, what was the primary means of communication used at home?
(For example: ASL, Signed English, Spoken Communication, Sign with Speech, Written)

Did you attend a school for the deaf or a public school?

If you attended a school for the deaf, was the school oral or manual? Did you live in the dorms or travel daily from home to school?

If you attended a public school, were you in classes with other hearing children? Were you in a separate class with deaf children only? Were support services available?

What mode of communication do you prefer to use today, professionally and socially?
(For example: ASL, Signed English, Spoken Communication, Sign with Speech, Written)
Appendix B
Videotape Interview Questions

Do you remember how old you were when you started learning to read?

Did family members read books to you? Frequently, sometimes, never?

How were books read to you? Signed or read out loud? Was this an exciting experience for you?

Did you discuss the book before or after it was read to you?

Who taught you how to read? Family members or teachers?

Do you remember about how old you were when you learned to read?

Did you have a favorite book(s) as a child?

How would you describe the reading environment at home? Were there many children’s books available to you? Did you have many opportunities to look at and read books?

Did you have reference books in the house, such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, thesauruses, or atlases?

How would you describe your parents’ involvement in your reading development? Extremely involved, moderately involved, or not involved very much?

Were your parents actively involved in your education at school? How?

Do you remember any specific language-type of activities that took place at home?
Make trips to the library?
Write notes back and forth?
Make grocery lists together?
Read the newspaper together?
Play word games? (Study word definitions for school or have spelling bees)
Read magazines, comics, newspapers, or books regularly?

For your own enjoyment, did you ever keep a diary, journal, write poetry, creative stories, write articles for school newspapers?

Did your parents read often? Books, newspapers, magazines, etc...

How would you describe the communication environment at home? Were you frequently and actively engaged in conversations with your family members or did you often feel isolated and left out of conversations? Was your family a good resource for information to you?
As a child, were you extremely curious, somewhat curious, or not very curious?

At school, did you participate in class activities and discussions a lot, or were you more quiet and passive?

In general, how did you feel about homework assignments and projects? Did you generally enjoy the challenge, or did you find most of it boring?

As a child, after you learned to read independently, how would you describe yourself as a reader? Did you LOVE to read, enjoy it, think it was just okay, read well but didn’t really enjoy it, or disliked reading?

As a child, were you involved in any special types of reading programs in school?

Is there anyone you feel really helped, inspired, or encouraged you to become a good reader?

Do you feel you had many good teachers who praised you and encouraged you or do you feel your teachers were more critical of your skills?

What qualities did influential individuals in your life have that you believe helped to make your learning experiences positive?

Is there any particular situation or event that you remember as being very memorable in the process of learning to read? Ex: a PAH! Experience?

Have you ever taken advantage or tutoring services for reading and/or writing?

As an adult, how do you feel about reading today? (For work and leisure)

What types of reading do you enjoy now?

Do you think that knowing sign language has made your understanding of English easier?

When you are confronted with challenging reading material today, what strategies do you use to better comprehend the text? Take notes, re-read, sign the information to yourself?

If you could go back in time and change your learning-to-read experiences, what would you change?

Overall, how would you summarize what has helped you to become a successful reader?

In general, what has motivated you to be a successful deaf professional?

Why do you think that a significant number of deaf children are poor readers?
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