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THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF DEAF STUDENTS IN IPOH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Ninety percent of children with hearing impairment are born to hearing parents. Ready or not, these new parents face challenges raising a deaf child. One of the challenges include making important decisions regarding the child's mode of communication and education – whether to strive towards hearing and speech or to choose an alternative of sign language. In order to provide the best learning opportunity for these children, the Ministry of Education in Malaysia has presented three educational options – Special education schools, Special Education Integration Programs, and Inclusive Education Programs. The parental choice of education for their child varies according to what seems the “best” for the child and family's situation. However, how well do deaf students adapt to the chosen educational choice of parents? This study explored the educational experiences (primary, secondary and tertiary) and challenges of deaf students. Six deaf adults aged between 20 – 37, from Ipoh were interviewed. Deaf adults were selected as they were able to better articulate their growing up experiences. This study employed the ethnographic approach, where interviews and participatory observations were carried out as data collection methods. Using thematic analysis, two main themes emerged from the participants' experiences– “journey of exploration” and a “journey of adapting”. During their journey of exploration, deaf students explained their struggle to keep up as they were excluded from communications. Their journey of adaptation included seeking equal relationships and meaningful connections. The results of this study provided insights to the challenges and struggles of deaf students, which would be useful to educators as they facilitate student learning and strive to provide a more supportive learning environment for deaf students.

Keywords: Deaf Experience, Educational Choices, Hearing Impairment, Malaysia, Thematic Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

There are 44,523 people with hearing impairment registered with the Department of Social Welfare in Malaysia (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat [JKM], 2018). It is estimated that about ninety percent of children with hearing impairment are born to hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). Ready or not, these new parents face challenges raising a deaf child. One of the challenges includes making important decisions on behalf of the child. Parents would need to make decisions regarding intervention for hearing restoration such as cochlear implants (Chang, 2017; Hyde et al., 2010), communication modality (Bowen, 2016; Crowe et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2019) and educational choices (Takala et al., 2018) for their children's future development. The parental choice of education for their child varied according to what seemed the “best” for the child and the family's situation.

For the deaf child's education, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has provided three education options – Special education, Integration program, and Inclusive program (Lee & Low, 2014). All these options of education are to meet the special needs of deaf students. However, a local study by Muhamad Nadhir and Alfa Nur (2016) revealed six categories of challenges faced in the Malaysia special needs education sector. The two challenges that seem most related to education for deaf students were “readiness” and “resources”. Among the barriers faced include the lack of student motivation, unpreparedness among educators and support staff, the support system, lack of interpreters, lack of teachers who have skills in sign language and contradictory teaching practices for deaf students.

A study by Khairuddin et al. (2018) further documented the shortcomings and complexity of inclusion education for the deaf students. After interviewing school staff members' and parents' experiences about the inclusion of deaf children in mainstream schools, results revealed that there was a mixed approach of communication (signed communications vs speak with amplification), and insufficient training for mainstream teachers to support deaf children. This local study explored the experiences of the stakeholders (parents and teachers). However, there were few research that documented the narratives of deaf students' educational experiences in Malaysia (e.g. Khairuddin et al., 2018). Literature from other countries revealed the school's impact on a deaf person. Deaf students expressed the strategies needed for academic advancement in the hearing classroom. Some have expressed their frustration as they faced exclusion while some wanted a reconciliation of both the hearing and deaf world. They also liked to have a sense of pride by connecting to other deaf people (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). These educational experiences partially impacted deaf students' identity (Pregel & Kamenopoulou, 2018). Therefore, this study aimed to explore the firsthand educational experiences and challenges the deaf students in Malaysia faced in their learning environment. The study results would provide some insights from the perspective of the deaf learners. Stakeholders and educators may take into consideration the deaf student's experience in the learning environment created for them.

METHODS

Research Design

The objective of this study is to explore the educational experiences of students with hearing impairment (moderate to severe levels) who grew up in a hearing family. This study employed the ethnographic approach, which used interviews and participatory observation. Little has been documented about the in-depth experiences of deaf persons due to the communication barriers between hearing and deaf individuals. A large number of deaf people use sign language as their main mode of communication. There are only few hearing individuals who are willing and can communicate effectively through sign language. Similarly, not all deaf individuals can or want to express themselves in spoken or written language. Hence, due to the communication gap, voices of these individuals are unheard. The life experiences, challenges, needs and hopes of these individuals are left unexplored and undocumented in the Malaysian context. The ethnographic approach recorded the description of deaf people's experiences where the subjective understanding and interpretation from a deaf person's worldview is explored. It provided an insider's perspective for deeper understanding and authenticity into the diversity of deaf individuals (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011). The ethnographic approach is the most appropriate research method to study marginalized or ignored population (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This population under studied is one that needs to be given a voice regarding their needs to belong to the larger part of society.

Research Participants

Six deaf adults aged 20 to 37 years old were interviewed for this study. They were from the Malaysian Chinese ethnic group in Ipoh. The researcher gained entry and has been immersed in this community for the past ten years. All participants were the only deaf person in the family. Two of the participants had experienced learning in mainstream schools for a month to two years, before they were transferred to special education. Table 1 provides further details about the participants.

Table 1: *Description of Participants*

Participant	1	2	3	4	5	6
Age	20	24	34	37	36	25
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male	Male
Marital Status	Single	Single	Single	Married	Married	Single
Hearing Loss (Left)	Severe	Mild	Profoun d	Severe	Profound	Profoun d
Hearing Loss (Right)	Severe	Profoun d	Severe	Profoun d	Profound	Profoun d
Cochlear Implant	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Hearing Aids	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Highest Education Level	Diplom a	Diploma	Diploma	Diploma	Secondary	Diploma

Research Procedures

After obtaining ethical clearance for the study, an invitation was sent out to the Ipoh Chinese deaf community known to the researcher through text messages and video messages in sign language. Participants were recruited with purposive and snowball sampling. Participants who responded were personally briefed about the purpose and expectation of the study. They were then selected based on the criterion – (1) the only deaf person in a hearing family, (2) aged between 18 to 39 years old, and (3) a Malaysian citizen of Chinese ethnicity. After obtaining informed consent, participants were interviewed in sign language between 20 to 30 minutes. A token of appreciation was given.

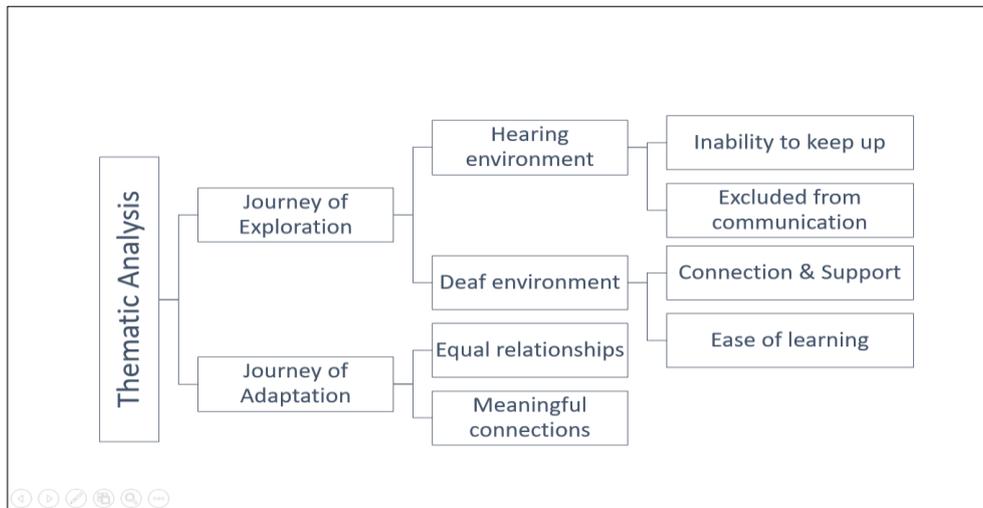
The video recording of the interviews was interpreted into spoken English then transcribed into written English by the interviewer. It was then checked by another community sign language interpreter for accuracy of information. Clarification of content was asked from the participants if there was any ambiguity. The exploration of themes was done using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

All participants studied in a deaf school (primary, secondary or polytechnic). Parents of four participants sent their child to special education from the beginning as their child struggled with listening and speaking. Two participants with better hearing were sent to a mainstream primary school as recommended by the specialist and school teachers. Participant 2 spent less than a month in the primary level inclusive program, while Participant 4 spent 2 years, before they were transferred back to the deaf school. Participant 1 had some experiences studying at a polytechnic school that had other hearing peers. She did not like it and transferred to a polytechnic that had deaf students. These participants shared their learning experience in the hearing and the deaf environment.

Two main themes emerged from participants’ experiences through thematic analysis – “journey of exploration” and a “journey of adapting”. Below is the figure capturing the codes and themes that emerged from the data.

Figure 1: *Thematic Analysis of Data*



Journey of Exploration

As all six participants were born to hearing parents, the first years of life were mainly in the hearing environment with family. When participants started school, they explored the differences between interacting in a hearing and deaf environment outside the home. The sections below elaborate on their journey of exploration in both the hearing and deaf environment.

Learning in the Hearing Environment

Two main themes emerged from participants' experience learning in the hearing environment – *inability to keep up* and *excluded from communications*. Participants 1, 2 and 4 were placed in a hearing learning environment for a period of time. During this time, they explored how it was like learning in a hearing environment and it seemed to be emotionally stressful for them. They eventually transferred to a deaf school as they were not able to cope with the hearing learning environment.

Inability to Keep Up

When participants were in a hearing learning environment, they expressed their inability to keep up. This resulted in feeling pressured by the expectations of people and their environment. Because of their inability to cope, their parents transferred them to a deaf school for studies. Participant 2 who had cochlear implants studied in the mainstream school for less than a month. She said:

“I really couldn’t hear or understand what the teacher was saying. My mother said that the teachers were not ready or equipped to teach me. So, I stopped and moved to a deaf school.” (Participant 2)

Participant 4 was sent to a regular mainstream primary school for 2 years before she requested to be transferred to a deaf school. She too shared her inability to keep up in class:

“It was very difficult as I couldn’t hear or understand what my teacher was saying. She spoke while writing on the board. Also, I didn’t have a friend to help me.” (Participant 4)

On another occasion, Participant 4 described the stress felt in class. She described her feeling of being scared as she was unable to hear or understand her teacher’s question. Her experience below looked at the stress that she felt at that time:

“My teacher got all of us to stand up and asked us to answer the question one by one. I couldn’t hear or understand what the teacher was asking. I was scared that I would get punished if I couldn’t answer the questions. I was really scared and wanted to go to the deaf school. That was the hearing school’s pressure.” (Participant 4)

While the mainstream schools were open to take in students with hearing impairment, the teacher and peer support were not set in place to enable more successful inclusive learning. The deaf students themselves too, seem not mentally and emotionally ready to face the pressures and stress learning in a hearing classroom.

Excluded from Communications

Communication with the hearing community through speech is challenging for someone who cannot hear. Without the skill to read lips or speak, deaf persons are easily excluded from spoken communications. It is not surprising that deaf persons feel frustrated trying to communicate with the hearing community. Deaf participant 2 expressed not only a sense of frustration in communication but also a hopelessness of effective communication, which left her excluded from communications.

Participant 2 shared:

“When my classmates spoke to me, I couldn’t hear and couldn’t understand. There is nothing we can do about it. So, it’s better that we go separate ways and I join the other deaf people.” (Participant 2)

Participant 1 also expressed similar pressure in trying to keep up in communication with hearing peers when she stayed at the hostel. She shared:

“When I was sent to the mainstream school (with hearing people), I was quiet. There was a lot of pressure staying in the hostel as I was asked a lot of questions but couldn’t understand. They only spoke, no signing. I was put aside because I was deaf. I was tired of being in that situation.” (Participant 1)

The exclusion from on-going communications left the deaf participants feeling frustrated and alienated. The seemingly impossibility to keep up with communications may have deterred deaf participants from further interactions with hearing schoolmates and classmates.

Learning in the Deaf Environment

Although only three participants experience learning in a hearing environment, all participants experienced learning in an environment with other deaf people like them. They explored the differences interacting and learning in a hearing dominant environment. Two main themes emerged from participants’ narratives of being in the deaf environment – *connection and support*, and *ease of learning*.

Connection and Support

Participants expressed similar experiences learning in a deaf environment. They felt more connected and had more support in learning. It seemed that having connections was important in the learning process. The main connecting point was through communicating in sign language. Participant 1 emphasized this point by stating:

“I studied in a full deaf school and I enjoyed that. It was good because you can play and get along well together. There’s no issue with communication as you can understand the signing. I prefer being with the deaf. It’s better because looking at sign language is easier.” (Participant 1)

Being connected made the participant feel supported and less isolated. However, this connection could only be achieved when both parties were able to establish effective communication. Participant 2 shared:

“When I’m with the deaf, I feel happy because we can have a good connection. We can share, learn, support and encourage each other. With the hearing people, I can’t understand them. It is difficult to know what they are saying.” (Participant 2)

Both connection and support were points highlighted by all deaf participants in the researcher’s observation of their choice of friends, and in the narrative of different school incidents. Sign language seemed to be the key to make this connection with the deaf people.

Ease of Learning

The other subtheme that emerged from participants’ experience learning in the deaf environment was the ease of learning. Participants explored and found it easier to learn in sign language and with the presence of other fellow deaf classmates. Participant 3 stated in the interview:

“I like to mix around with the deaf, because I can learn and the teacher can teach us. The teacher uses sign language in class. So, together with the deaf, I can learn better.” (Participant 3)

The usage of sign language in the classroom was helpful in learning and comprehension. Participants 2 shared:

“When I was in the deaf school, I picked up sign language. I improved my understanding and became more aware of things around me.” (Participant 2)

Although Participant 3, 5 and 6 did not explicitly say that they learnt easily in a deaf environment, they responded and comprehended better when sign language was used to convey information. They too were directly sent to the deaf school without hesitation by parents because of their inability to hear and cope in the mainstream education.

Journey of Adaptation

Participants explored the differences between learning in the hearing and deaf world. Some participants who struggled with their differences eventually adapted to their learning environment and social situation. Whether it was to adapt to the hearing or deaf environment, there are two main points that participants highlighted. They learnt to adapt by seeking and establishing *equal relationships* and *meaningful connections*. They both are social-related factors in the learning process.

Equal Relationships

Participants seemed to look for friends they can connect to and then develop an equal relationship. Rather than feeling that they are inferior or the one who always needed assistance, they wanted to have a mutual exchange of help in the friendship. In their perspective, one way of striking an equal relationship was to teach or give their friends something that only the deaf student could give – sign language skills. Participant 1 and 2 expressed this in their interviews:

“I mix more with hearing people. This is because the hearing people can teach me, and I can teach them Sign language.” (Participant 1)

“I have a close friend in class. She would always help me. If there was any miscommunication, she would write it down so that I get the right and clear communication. So, she helps me and I help her. I taught her how to sign and how to fingerspell. She learns well.” (Participant 2)

The researcher experienced this mutual exchange during the interviews and in other prior interactions with the participants. When the researcher lacked knowledge in sign language vocabulary, the deaf participants were very happy and satisfied that they could share and give something to the researcher. It gave them a sense of contributing to the relationship, especially when generally they needed assistance in communication among the hearing community.

Meaningful Connections

The second subtheme that emerged in the journey of adapting was meaning connections. Participants placed high priority in finding meaningful connections in their learning environment. Determining what defined meaningful connections with people in their learning varied among the participants. Some found meaningful connection both in the hearing and deaf community like Participant 1:

I am curious (to know) when I see deaf people sign, but I feel more connected with the hearing, because I enjoy being with them... but it is better to be with all the deaf, it's just different... I like both (hearing and deaf friends).
(Participant 1)

While, some other participants found connections meaningful in the deaf community where deeper connections in smaller groups were forged under mutual effective communication in sign language. Participant 4 shared her preference:

I felt that I like to be with the deaf, as it is easy to connect and sign. For the hearing, it was difficult because they don't, not all of them know. Not everyone is my friend. Like you have 60 students in a class, but I don't feel like I belong to anyone. For the deaf, I feel belong, the class is smaller, I feel closer. I like to be with the deaf.
(Participant 4)

These connections seemed the main highlights in the deaf participants' learning experiences regardless of being in the hearing or deaf environment. These connections seem to be most effectively established when sign language is the main channel of communication.

DISCUSSION

All in all, participants emphasized the importance of socialization (connection and support) through effective communication for learning. Other studies have echoed the same point. The social consequences (loneliness, social isolation, rejection) in the classroom derived from the communication barriers (Kemmerly & Compton, 2014; Khairuddin et al., 2018; Khairuddin & Miles, 2020). Poor communication became a barrier to obtain social support needed in the learning process (Rich et al., 2013). The lower social support deaf students had, the lower student engagement was in the classroom (Cheng et al., 2020). The communication barrier indirectly affected deaf students' learning which seems to depend on social factors of establishing connections and providing support.

This findings from the deaf students' perspective supports the main challenges observed by educators and parents in local research by Nasir and Efendi (2016) and Khairuddin et al. (2018). However, in this study, the deaf students' perspective highlighted mainly and only social related factors. This revealed how important social factors (connection and support) are to the deaf students. In order to adapt to their social and learning environment, they sought for equal relationships and meaningful connections. When there was a lack of such quality social relationships, deaf students were left socially excluded and isolated. Perhaps, among the many other reasons, this social exclusion might be one important factor to explain deaf students' poor interest and lack of motivation in academic learning. Hence, it is suggested that educators could address the communication and socialization issues in inclusive and integrative programs for the deaf students.

As for special education for the deaf, there may be better communication among deaf peers and teachers. However, the previous Malaysian researchers pointed out the lack of readiness (e.g. students lack motivation, stigma and stereotyping, lack of preparedness of educators and support staff, support system) and resources (e.g. lack of interpreter service, lack of teacher who have skills in sign language, contradictory teaching practices for deaf students) (Nasir & Efendi, 2016). It is uncertain if these factors also apply to particular special education for the deaf student. So, another suggestion for future research is to explore the current learning experience of deaf students in the classroom from the perspective of teachers, peers and the individual student. Classroom observations and interviews of the teaching and learning process would provide insightful feedback on how supportive (or the lack of) the learning environment is for the deaf student's learning.

It is recommended to assess both the school's readiness and the deaf students' possible social consequences in the proposed learning environment. An assessment would provide a better match between the student's special needs, parent's educational expectation, and school's readiness in the Malaysian context. Future research can investigate if there are existing assessments and how effective they are, especially for the integrative and inclusive programs.

Lastly, this study was limited to the Chinese participants' retrospective experiences in Ipoh schools. Future studies can explore the experiences of other deaf students from other states or races. Deaf people are from diverse backgrounds (e.g., financial status, communication modality, family expectations, mentality, cultural and family values) which may influence the deaf student's learning attitude and experience. Perhaps, new themes may emerge from the diverse background of deaf students.

CONCLUSION

This research intended to explore the educational experiences of deaf students to see how well deaf students learn in the chosen education setting by parents. Results revealed deaf students' inability to keep up and being excluded from communications in hearing classrooms. On the other hand, deaf students felt connected, supported and an ease of learning in deaf classrooms. These findings showed how communication for social connection and support is important in the learning process for deaf students. From the perspective of deaf students, the quality of social relationships (equal relationship and meaningful connection) also mattered, and had a positive impact in helping them to learn better. It is imperative that educators consider these factors as they too have a part to play in creating a learning environment for the deaf students in all three educational options – inclusive education, integration and inclusive programs.

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