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Are Students Still "Alone in the Mainstream"?

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Pam Millett, PhD, Reg CASLPO

In 2004, Gina Oliva, a deaf woman, published the book *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School*,[1] in which she described her experiences as a child with hearing loss who was educated in her local school. The central theme of the book is "I was the only one," and the book received a great deal of attention at the time as something of a condemnation of mainstreaming as an educational philosophy, with her use of the word "solitaires" to describe students who were educated at schools where they were the only student with a hearing loss. The most interesting, though, is that the book describes the author's experiences starting school in 1955, yet her words continued to resonate for readers in 2004 and since. According to recent data from the UK, 84% of students attend their local schools with itinerant teacher support.[2] While we, unfortunately, do not have similar data for Canadian students, my own experience working in 18 different school boards across the province is that this number is likely even higher in Ontario. We know that communication and academic outcomes for students with hearing loss continue to improve,[3,4] and that many students attend their local schools with little fanfare. However, Oliva argued that mainstreaming is not always positive and that there are significant downsides concerning social relationships and identity – is this still true today?

There is a small body of research on deaf and hard of hearing students' social skills in inclusive settings. Unsurprisingly, the research documents the challenges with social skills and social interactions for many students regardless of their educational environment. The studies that examine mainstreamed educational settings specifically tend to use standardized measures of social skills, often gathered from teacher reports. Very little of this research has focused on students' perceptions and experiences expressed in their own words. For example,[5] in a study of social participation as reported by teachers, noted that "Friendship of students with the same difficulties can also be defined in a different light, such as when we think of the homophily principle, presuming that we all prefer friends who are much like ourselves." However, the researchers also describe several barriers to participation in social activities with hearing peers (e.g., noise levels), so it was not clear that students preferred being with other students with hearing loss, or that this was their "default" because they could not communicate effectively with hearing students. Eriks-Brophy et al. examined the academic, communication, and social outcomes of a group of teenagers and young adults.[6] While they found that 67% of respondents reporting having a friend who also had hearing loss, the study was conducted within the context of a comprehensive program of family and educational services. If this context did not exist and families were not involved in plans for deaf and hard of hearing students, would the same results have been found?

The research literature does not tell us whether it is helpful or advisable for students with hearing loss to interact with other students with hearing loss, but the anecdotal experience of parents, educators, and students themselves certainly indicates that it is. Teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing within larger school boards often create opportunities to bring students together by hosting a picnic, carnival day, baseball game, or other fun events to which all students in the board with identified hearing loss are invited. These events are wonderful opportunities for students to meet others of the same age; parents and siblings sometimes attend and have the chance to make friends and share experiences. Hearing technology manufacturers and local clinics sometimes provide support for these events, and this is greatly appreciated since there is no real budget for these kinds of activities, but the value offered to students is immeasurable.

Opportunities for school-aged students to connect are often very region-specific, but it is worth finding out if there are events in your community or region. For example, in Ontario, the parent group Voice for Deaf Kids hosts an annual summer camp for children with hearing loss, including students, parents, and siblings. Their Teen Outreach Program (TOP) also provides opportunities for teens to connect, including a dedicated program of events at the annual conference. The parent group Silent Voice in Ontario also offers sign language summer day camps where students can attend with their hearing siblings to interact and learn sign language. There can be "grass roots" kinds of organizations in your local community, such as Deaf Access Simcoe Muskoka, which offers various activities and programs for adults, families, and children. If events are happening in your community that your clients' families might be interested in, putting up a flyer in your waiting room or a link on your website is much appreciated.

The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association has recently launched the Young Adult Network, a group of deaf and hard of hearing adults between the ages of 18 and 35, which aims to connect individuals with hearing loss with each other, but also to provide a platform for advocacy initiatives (because the challenges associated with being the only person you know with hearing loss do not stop with high school graduation). Phonak has created a Teen Advisory Board, consisting of teens from Canada and the United States who serve as advisors for both Phonak and as role models for the broader community of teenagers and young adults. Students can follow them on Instagram and other social media platforms. These initiatives allow students to see other students talk about their own experiences, both positive and negative.

The key message from Oliva's book is that "alone" can be a problem. Child and youth mental health has gained increased attention over the past few years, but it has become not only important but sometimes life or death with the pandemic. For example, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act Alliance was one of the first groups to identify issues related to disability when the pandemic arrived and hosted a webinar very early on, which focused on highlighting potential pandemic-related educational problems and challenges for parents to consider. The parent group Voice for Deaf Kids has been hosting webinars on various topics related to online and in-school learning during the pandemic. They have also produced a Mental Health Guide in collaboration with Canadian Hearing Services and clinicians and researchers from Ontario universities, which focuses on information specific to children with hearing loss. Vancouver Coastal Health's Deaf, Hard of Hearing & Deaf-Blind Well-Being Program website contains a wealth of resources specific to deafness. Togetherall (formerly Big White Wall) is an online platform to access mental health support anonymously and connect with others for peer support. It is evidence-based and supported by medical and mental health professionals. Togetherall reported a 234% increase in new user registrations at the beginning of the pandemic (March to April of 2020), and use has only increased since then.

Most of us are not mental health professionals or psychologists, but we can support students with hearing loss and their families to meet and interact with others who have similar life experiences where we can, and we can be aware of resources that might be helpful for students and families; particularly at a time where we can all relate to feeling alone.

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