

DEAF STUDENTS' CULTURAL IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATION IN A DEAF STUDIES COURSE

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Abstract

The purpose of study was to examine whether participation in a Deaf Cultural Studies classes was related to the extent to which Deaf students identify with Deaf and Hearing cultures. In particular, the study investigated the role of Deaf Cultural Studies courses in the development Deaf students' (a) cultural identity, (b) cultural involvement, (c) cultural knowledge, and (d) language competency. The Deaf Acculturation scale (DAS), which assesses the above 4 dimensions, was used to assess identification with Deaf and with Hearing cultures. The DAS includes one set of 5 scales (identity, etc.) that ask about students' acculturation in Deaf culture and a parallel set that ask about acculturation in Hearing culture. Two groups of deaf students enrolled in a large northeastern university in the United States participated in the study: (a) 75 students who were enrolled in Deaf Studies courses such as "Introduction to Deaf Studies" and "Deaf Culture and the Community" and (b) 64 students who were not enrolled in a Deaf studies course. Students completed the DAS questionnaire at the beginning and end of a 10-week term in either a Deaf studies course or in a control course. An important finding was that students who completed a Deaf studies course showed greater increases in on the cultural scales knowledge for both Deaf and Hearing cultures than did students who did not complete a Deaf studies course. Other interesting findings were (a) that all students in the sample had greater identification with Deaf culture than identification with Hearing culture, and (b) that students enrolled in the Deaf studies courses had higher identification with Deaf culture than did students who were not enrolled in Deaf culture courses.

Introduction

Increasing numbers of deaf and hard-of-hearing students are attending mainstream programs without the benefit of Deaf role models, bilingualism in ASL/English and other cultural practices; consequently the development of self and group identity may be affected. For these students, acculturation in the Deaf community is often delayed until they meet others like themselves. Deaf cultural studies may promote critical awareness of self and group identity. The present investigation examined the effect of Deaf cultural studies courses on deaf students' perceptions of acculturation into Deaf and Hearing cultures.

Deaf and other forms of cultural studies have emerged rather recently. Institutions such as Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf have developed comprehensive Deaf studies curricula. Research with hearing students has demonstrated that participation in one or more cultural studies courses can significantly increase self-awareness and understanding, including more positive perceptions of one's cultural identity, reduce prejudice, and increase academic performance. With respect to deaf students, one dimension of identity concerns acculturation into Deaf and Hearing cultures. Virtually nothing is known about how participating in a Deaf cultural studies course may affect this acculturation.

Various data have been collected on the influence of multicultural education practices on students, especially those from the underserved hearing populations.

Studies of the impact of multicultural education reveal that that being given an opportunity to explore and study the history, culture, literature, and other intellectual products of members of their racial or ethnic group can have a positive effect on the development of students' racial or ethnic identity (Duarte, 1998; Tatum, 2003, 2004). Other studies related to inclusion of diversity courses as a college requirement revealed a positive influence on student learning and development even when these courses are required (Lopez, 2004). Other work with college-level diversity courses have demonstrated the positive effect of these courses on students' ability to take the perspective of others, and students' interest in, and ability to get along with others from different racial or ethnic groups. This effect was the strongest among white students (Antonio, 2001; Chang, 2002; Gurin et al., 2002, 2004; Hurtado, 2005; Lopez, 2004; Milem, 1994). Positive identity can serve to improve interethnic relations, in part due to a strong identity, which can help students to meet others on a more equal footing (Phinney & Ferguson, 1997; Tatum, 2000, 2003; Zirkel, 2008). Tatum (1992) demonstrated that helping white students understand their own racial identity development can provide a framework that they can use to understand their own resistance to material in a course that explores the psychology of racism. These findings suggest that helping deaf students understand their own social identity and, such as a Deaf cultural identity, may also help them understand their self-perception regarding their identification with Hearing culture.

There has recently been discussion of the extent to which deaf and hard of hearing individuals identify with Deaf and Hearing cultures. This discussion falls within recent work on classification of persons according to different acculturation categories that have been used with different ethnic groups (Aponte & Barnes, 1995; Leigh, Marcus, Dobosh, & Allen, 1998; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). Two approaches to social identity are the racial identity model and the acculturation/bicultural model. Both models describe identification with a cultural subgroup and with a dominant culture (e.g. Deaf culture within hearing society, which can be regarded as a culture although it is not usually called one; Glickman, 1996; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). Either the racial identification or acculturation/bicultural model may be used to classify deaf individuals into four cultural groups: (a) culturally hearing, (b) culturally marginal, (c) culturally Deaf, and (d) bicultural (Glickman, 1996; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). While Glickman (1996) views the four categories as stages in development of identity, Maxwell-McCaw (2001) views them as the result of arbitrary cut offs in the continuums of dimensions of Deaf and Hearing acculturation.

Culturally hearing. These individuals' score relatively high on the Hearing Acculturation subscale of the Deaf Acculturation Scale (DAS) (Maxwell-McCaw, 2001) and relatively low on the Deaf Acculturation subscale of the DAS that measures identification with Deaf Culture. These individuals may show little interest in associating with deaf peers, have developed limited or no proficiency in ASL, and may not be involved in or have knowledge of the cultural activities of the Deaf community. They may value oral means of communication and may be relatively successful with it. They may not emphasize the significance of deafness as part of one's core identity.

Culturally marginal. These individuals score low on the Hearing and Deaf Acculturation subscales of the DAS. These individuals may not be comfortable or feel at home with either deaf or hearing groups. These individuals may lack communication and social skills for functioning in a reasonable way with either group (Leigh & Stinson, 1994).

Culturally Deaf. These individuals have high scores on the Deaf Acculturation subscale and low score on the Hearing Acculturation subscale of the DAS. These

individuals have positive views of Deaf culture and deaf peers and may have a little interest in interactions with hearing peers. These individuals may show considerable interest in participating in the cultural activities of the deaf community. They are proficient in using ASL and are likely to have learned it at an early age; furthermore, they may show little interest or proficiency in development of oral skills (Glickman & Carey, 1993).

Bicultural identity. Bicultural individuals have relatively high scores on both the Deaf and Hearing Acculturation subscales of the DAS. These individuals have some degree of social comfort with both d/Deaf and hearing peer groups. Individuals in this group may be committed to sign language and embrace Deaf culture, but they may also value and feel comfortable with hearing people who are seen as supportive. The concept of biculturalism implies that it is possible for one to simultaneously know and understand groups that are associated with different cultures. This concept assumes that an individual can alter his or her behavior to fit the social context (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Getron, 1993).

The purpose of study was to examine whether participation in a Deaf Cultural Studies classes was related to the extent to which Deaf students identify with Deaf and Hearing cultures. In other words, what role do Deaf Cultural Studies courses play in the deaf students' self-reported (a) cultural identity, (b) cultural involvement, (c) cultural knowledge, and (d) language competence? The Deaf Acculturation Scale (Maxwell-McCaw & Zea, 2011) was used to collect data on identification with both Deaf and Hearing cultures.

Method

This study compared scores on the DAS (Maxwell-McGaw & Zea, 2011) for two groups of deaf students enrolled in a northeastern university in the United States. In one group, 75 students were enrolled in a Deaf studies course during a quarter and in the other group, 64 students were in control courses and did not take Deaf studies. Students in both groups completed the DAS at the beginning and end of the quarter. Differences in change in DAS scores from the beginning to the end of the quarter for the two groups of students may reflect effects of the experience of participating in a Deaf studies course.

Participants in the study were 71 male and 67 female deaf students (total $N = 138$) enrolled in a northeastern university. The average self-rating for degree of hearing loss on a 4-point scale was for the 90-120 dB range (the most severe hearing loss category), and the minimum rating was for hearing loss in the 10-30 dB range. The most commonly self-reported means of communication was speech and sign (not necessarily used at the same time.)

Measures. The DAS measures the degree of acculturation with Deaf and Hearing cultures. It is a 78-item scale with ratings of items that range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) . This study used the following 8 subscales (with coefficient alpha reliabilities for the present study in parentheses: (a) Cultural Identity, Deaf (.74), Hearing (.67); (b) Cultural Involvement, Deaf (.90), Hearing (.74); (c) Cultural Knowledge, Deaf (.89), Hearing (.62); and Language Competence, Deaf (.84), Hearing (.56). Data for the two Cultural Preference subscales were not included in the analyses because of low reliability.

Procedures. Students in Deaf Studies courses who took the DAS as part of this investigation were enrolled in one of the following courses: Introduction to Deaf Studies, Civil Rights and Deaf People, Deaf Art/Deaf Artists, Deaf People and World

War II, Deaf Culture and Community, Deaf Heritage, and Deaf Theater History. Common elements in these Deaf Studies courses were that they provided students the opportunity to pursue and critically analyze and integrate scholarly articles related to the historical, anthropological, psychosocial, linguistic, artistic, literary, legal/political and multicultural elements of the Deaf experience. The courses employed a cultural studies framework to examine the Deaf experience and social/cultural constructs. The courses taught students to not view deafness as a pathology or disability and encouraged students to develop critical consciousness of power-relationships and social justice, as well as an understanding of individual and social identity with specific reference to the Deaf experience. In focusing on the Deaf experience, the courses provided students an opportunity study how meaning is created and shared via the power of cultural institutions and values and how institutions and values impact the formation of identities, social roles, and expectations. The students who were in the control group were enrolled in English or mathematics courses. Students completed the DAS in during these courses with paper and pencil.

Results and Discussion

To determine the impact of participation in the Deaf Studies classes on responses to the DAS, a 2 (Course: (a) Deaf Studies, (b) Control) X 2 (Acculturation: (a) Deaf, (b) Hearing) X 2 (Test: (a) Beginning of quarter, (b) End) MANOVA was performed on individual mean scores for the eight subscales (Cultural Identity Deaf and Hearing subscales and the other six subscales). That is, a student's subscale score was the mean score for the items in the subscale. In discussing results, all findings mentioned were statistically significant at, minimally, the .05 level. Because the main effects for Course and Culture were statistically significant for the MANOVA, follow-up univariate mixed ANOVA's were performed on scores for each of the four pairs of subscales, and post hoc comparisons of means were performed on significant interaction effects.

Students in Deaf Studies courses had higher Deaf and Hearing acculturation Cultural Involvement scores than students in the control courses. The mean scores for Cultural Involvement were 3.9 for Deaf acculturation and 3.2 for Hearing acculturation for the Deaf Studies students, and 3.6 for Deaf acculturation and 3.1 for Hearing acculturation for the control students. Although there was not an overall difference between mean Cultural Knowledge scores for the Deaf studies and control group students, students in Deaf studies increased scores on the Cultural Knowledge subscales (Deaf and Hearing) from the beginning to the end of the quarter, but students in the control group did not. This pattern of results yielded a significant Course X Test interaction effect. In addition, the mean end-of-quarter Cultural Knowledge score (3.0) for the Deaf Studies students was significantly higher than these students' mean beginning-of-quarter score (2.9) and than the control group students' end score (2.9).

All students identified more closely with Deaf than with Hearing culture. Mean Deaf acculturation scores, for both the Deaf studies and control students, were higher than mean Hearing acculturation scores for all four pairs of subscales (Identity, Involvement, Knowledge, and Language Competence). For example, the overall mean score for Deaf acculturation was 4.0 and that for Hearing acculturation was 3.4.

One interpretation of the finding that students in Deaf studies had more Cultural Involvement with both Hearing and Deaf cultures is that participation in Deaf studies courses encourages greater involvement in culture in general. An alternative

interpretation is that Deaf studies courses attract students with greater cultural involvement. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive.

The finding that Deaf studies students increased knowledge of Deaf and Hearing cultures from the beginning to the end of a quarter suggests that the Deaf studies courses increased these students cultural knowledge. These findings are consistent with previous research on the impact of cultural studies courses for diverse cultures. Just as helping white students understand their identity promoted these students understanding of racism, helping deaf students understand their identity may facilitate deaf students understanding of Hearing culture (Tatum, 1992).

The results that indicated that students had higher Deaf acculturation subscale scores than Hearing acculturation ones is consistent with the findings of Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011). Maxwell-McCaw and Zea (2011) suggested that a reason that their sample assigned higher ratings for Deaf acculturation than for Hearing acculturation was because most of their sample was associated in one way or another with the Deaf community and was largely skilled in sign language. In the present study the sample attended a northeastern university with a large population of deaf students and the university provided many opportunities to participate in the Deaf community. Furthermore the participating students tended to be proficient in sign language. Hence, students in this study had an association with the Deaf community.

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