

HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS WORKING WITH DEAF STUDENTS: PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES, CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES¹

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ABSTRACT

Although in Chile deaf students in secondary education are usually mainstreamed, regular high schools are not prepared to educate them (Herrera, 2010). This study aimed to describe beliefs and practices of regular high school teachers working with deaf students in a Chilean high school.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 teachers from a high school with a mainstreaming program for deaf students. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. Results can be grouped in eight descriptive categories: (1) Teachers' beliefs about deaf students; (2) High school teachers' view of teachers of deaf students; (3) Adaptations made to the teaching process; (4) Adaptations made in the assessment process; (5) Teachers' view of curricular adjustments; (6) Factors that facilitate or complicate teaching in classes with deaf students; (7) Evaluation of the experience of teaching deaf students; (8) Suggestions to improve deaf students' learning process. The difficulties reported by high school teachers and their need to rely on the deaf education teacher in the classroom are troublesome, because very often students do not have the support of a deaf education teacher. These results are consistent with previous research showing that teachers working in mainstreamed settings tend to hold beliefs that are closer to the medical view of disability and to attribute difficulties to students' characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

Inclusion of deaf students in regular schools has been a highly controversial issue (Freire, 2009). Some authors argue that in inclusive environments deaf students have better learning opportunities. However, others claim that in segregated schools these students have the opportunity to be educated in sign language, without communication barriers between them and their regular education teachers and hearing peers, and therefore making full participation in the classroom a real option for them (Adoyo, 2007; Angelides & Aravi, 2006/2007). Even in higher education settings communication barriers severely hamper deaf students' learning and academic participation experiences (Powell, Hyde & Punch, 2014).

Often, regular education teachers do not have enough knowledge about deaf individuals, deaf culture and the linguistic characteristics of deaf students. Their lack of knowledge may lead to low expectations regarding their academic achievement, and, as a consequence, they will not challenge them enough. This type of expectations might impact negatively on deaf students' achievement (Antia, Stinson, & Gaustad, 2002). This is consistent with findings of research on teachers working in classrooms that include

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children with disabilities of different kind, which show that they tend to hold beliefs consistent with a medical view of disability and to attribute difficulties to students' characteristics (Lissi & Salinas 2012).

Several authors have highlighted the importance of close collaboration between teachers of deaf students and regular education teachers (Adoyo, 2007; Antia, 1999; Antia & Stinson, 1999; Freire, 1999; Jiménez-Sánchez & Antia, 1999). It has been reported that this collaboration contributes to broaden perspectives and examine stereotypes that teachers may hold, but it requires perceived equality of status between teachers, which is difficult to achieve when teachers of the deaf are either seen as providing support services or as holding an expert knowledge that is not available to other teachers (Antia & Stinson, 1999). The way regular teachers see teachers of deaf students is very important. Many times they see them as a resource to them or a tutor for deaf students. This narrow views get in the way of effective collaboration (Antia et al., 2002).

High school teachers working with deaf students need to make certain modifications in order to avoid placing deaf students in a disadvantaged position. Vermeulen, Debessen, and Knoors (2012) found that high school teachers tend to make some adjustments when having deaf students in their classrooms, such as adapting their communication to the needs of the students and providing individual follow-up. In a study aiming to analyze the situation of deaf college students in mainstream classes, Foster, Long, and Snell (1999) found that faculty made few if any modifications for deaf students and most of them considered that support service faculty were responsible of these student's success or failure.

In Chile, most schools for the deaf provide only elementary education, therefore, the great majority of deaf students have to attend a regular high school with or without a special mainstreaming program, and in most cases these institutions are not well prepared to educate them (Herrera, 2010). Considering the important role of teachers in this process, this study aimed to describe the beliefs and practices of regular high school teachers working with deaf students.

METHOD

Participants.

Seven high school teachers (one male and six female) participated in the study. All of them teach at a large high school in Santiago de Chile, with a project targeted to mainstreaming deaf students. Every year, the school has an average of 50 deaf students enrolled in grades 7th through 12th.

Procedure.

An interview protocol was designed to explore teachers' beliefs related to deaf students' literacy competences and academic achievement, and the strategies they used when working in classrooms that include deaf students. Based on this protocol, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers. All teachers signed a consent form and were interviewed at the school by one of the researchers. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed by at least two members of the research team. Qualitative content analysis was used.

RESULTS

Open coding of all the interviews allowed us to identify, initially, a total of more than fifty codes. These codes were organized in eight different categories: (a) Teachers' beliefs about deaf students, (b) High school teacher's view of teachers of deaf students, (c) Adaptations made to the teaching process, (d) Adaptations made in the assessment process, (e) Teachers' view of curricular adjustments, (f) Factors that facilitate or complicate the process of teaching in classes with deaf students, (g) Evaluation of the

experience of teaching deaf students, (h) Suggestions to improve deaf students learning process.

a) Teacher beliefs about deaf students. This category includes the types of difficulties high school teachers (HST) observe in deaf students' reading and writing, their explanations of deaf students' achievement, and their beliefs about these students' abilities. When discussing students' difficulties with written language use, teachers point to problems at the word, sentence, and text level. For all teachers, students' limited vocabulary explains an important part of their difficulties:

*"For what I understand, there are many abstract words that they don't know" (A.1.2, P6).
"Essentially, the lack of vocabulary, I think. We need to explain many words and when you, in a text, a ten-lines paragraph, there are six words that you do not understand, you are lost" (A.1.4, P74)*

Most teachers also refer to the way deaf students write, indicating that they write differently, or that they make many mistakes:

"Their writing seems backward, it seems that they write backwards" (A.1.2, P50).

The explanations teachers give for deaf students' achievement include both individual and context related reasons. However, attributions to students' characteristics are predominant. This type of explanations refer to factors such as: low motivation, concrete thinking, lack of responsibility, use of sign language and lack of oral communication:

"I get the feeling that they think through how they speak, all broken, then that makes texts much more difficult and more complex for them" (A.1.1, P166).

"There are contents that the kids do not ... will not grasp because they are more abstract than concrete, and hearing impaired children have a ... a mechanism that is much more concrete " (A.1.4, P56)

b) High school teacher's view of teachers of deaf students. Although the work of educators of deaf students (EDS) is highly valued by HST, the work they do is described as parallel, or complementary, more than as a joint collaborative venture. They interact for very specific purposes and not in a regular basis. HST consider that EDS are a great support to deaf students' learning process, and appreciate their presence in the classroom to facilitate student's access to class content. When EDS are in the classroom they usually interpret in sign language and mediate between HST and deaf students. EDS are seen as the experts and HST say they trust them in all matters concerning deaf students' learning needs. A frequently reported activity, besides supporting learning in the classroom, is making adjustments to tests. HST report handing the tests to EDS who modify them, making the tests more accessible for deaf students.

c) Adaptations made to the teaching process. HST report making some changes and adjustments in their teaching practices when they have deaf students in the class. This adaptations include: adapting communication, getting support from hearing classmates, getting support from the EDS, use more written information and visual tools, reducing the amount of readings for deaf students, checking comprehension during the class. This adjustments are more relevant when the EDS are not present in the classroom, when EDS are there the HST feel they can rely on them to make sure the students receive the information and are involved in the class.

d) Adaptations made in the assessment process. Adjustments made in the evaluation instruments, such as tests, are made by the EDS. HST report that adaptations in the assessment process include: reducing the content that is evaluated, paraphrasing the

questions to simplify the language, grading students' work more leniently or changing the criteria used to assess their work (e.g., not penalizing errors in written work if the main ideas expected are present). One teacher indicates that changes in the way she grades deaf students work is related to the fact that she does not feel prepared to teach them: *"I acknowledge that I ask for the minimum, if I can understand some of it, if they express themselves, that is good already. Because I don't know how to work with them"* (A.1.2, P4).

e) Teachers' view of curricular adjustments. HST see a need for adjustments, but at the same time some of them have doubts about the role these adjustments play in deaf students' learning process. On the one hand, there are some concerns related to the importance of challenging students, and on the other, there is concern about the needs of the rest of the students in the class:

"Adapted tests have other level, a different difficulty level" (A.1.3, P150)

"Since not many read lips, then I write in the blackboard and that takes time too...Time that I, maybe, could dictate to move faster, because writing is very slow..." (A.1.3, P116)

f) Factors that facilitate or complicate the process of teaching in classes with deaf students. When talking about the process of teaching deaf students HST tend to focus on factors that make this task a difficult one. These include: (a) organizational barriers, such as lack of time to search for better strategies to work with the students and not having permanent support from the EDS in all classes; (b) characteristics of the students, such as been slower than the rest to complete class activities, the fact that they require written information, and that the way they communicate might distract other students; and (c) personal difficulties, such as lack of sign language competence and lack of knowledge about curricular adaptations. Organizational factors, such as the presence of a project that includes a team of EDS to support their work, are also mentioned as facilitators of the teaching process.

g) Evaluation of the experience of teaching deaf students. Some of the teachers' comments point to the experience of having deaf students in their classrooms as a positive one. They mention that they have learned things from this experience, especially about deaf students' language development. However, the experience has also been a difficult one, mainly because they do not have the tools to be able to communicate freely with deaf students, or the time to be able to become better prepared to work with them in the classroom.

h) Suggestions to improve deaf students learning process. HST provide suggestions that they think could help improve the learning situation of deaf students. These suggestions can be organized in three groups: measures oriented to improve deaf students' language, reading comprehension, and communication; changes on teaching resources and practices; and in-service training for HST. The first group includes language courses for deaf students, workshops to teach them reading comprehension strategies, and training them to improve their lip reading skills. The second group includes increasing the number of EDS to be able to support deaf students in all their school activities, having more visual teaching resources, and increasing the academic demands on deaf students and the amount of exposure to written texts. The third group of suggestions includes offering sign language courses for HST and training in accommodations and adaptations to use when teaching deaf students.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the beliefs and practices of HST working with deaf students. It was carried out in a context that is unique in the Chilean educational system,

because it is a large regular high school that has nearly 50 deaf students enrolled. It is not usual to find so many deaf students in the same school. Due to the large number of deaf students, the school has a special program to support their learning process and has hired a group of EDS to work in the program.

Results show that although HST have in general positive attitudes towards having these students in their classrooms, they do not feel sufficiently prepared to work with deaf students. Their lack of knowledge of deaf students' characteristics and how to work with them, may lead to decisions that might not be the most beneficial for the students' learning process. This also relates to the fact that EDS are seen as the experts when it comes to teaching deaf students. Although this has the advantage of giving EDS the freedom to suggest adjustments and make accommodations, at the same time it takes away responsibility for deaf students' learning from the HST and makes collaboration less likely to occur (Antia & Stinson, 1999).

HST see deaf students as facing many difficulties in the learning process, mainly because of limited language development in oral and written Spanish. This also precludes fluent communication between teachers and students, leaving deaf students in a disadvantaged position when EDS are not present in the classroom. HST's view of deaf students is consistent with a medical perspective of disability, more than a view of them as members of a linguistic minority who own a language that is not deficient or less valuable than Spanish.

Besides focusing on deaf students' problems, HST acknowledge their own limitations to teach them successfully, basically their lack of knowledge of sign language and of how to make curricular adaptations. The problem is that they do not have enough time to participate in in-service training activities, and that schools in Chile do not provide enough time for them to work collaboratively with EDS to overcome some of the difficulties they face (Lissi & Salinas, 2012).

The central issue regarding the situation faced by deaf students in regular schools is participation. Full participation, in equity with their hearing peers, seems to be difficult to achieve, especially in those institutions that do not have enough professionals trained to work with deaf students. More research in this area needs to be carried out in Chile, in order to develop policies that assure better conditions for deaf students in mainstream educational institutions. Evidence like this could also be used as an argument to support the creation of high schools for deaf students, in which they have more opportunities to achieve full participation.

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