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Understanding Deaf and Hard of Hearing College Student Experiences of School Social Work Services in the K-12 Education System

Abstract

This article focuses on Deaf and Hard of Hearing college students' experiences with school social work services. This study surveyed 136 Deaf and hard of hearing college students about their experiences with school social work services, their concerns about social workers' competencies, and service delivery. The results of the study imply that school-based social work services should be culturally relevant and school social workers culturally competent. Furthermore, the results indicated that respondents ranked services they felt most comfortable asking about and which aspects of service delivery they felt were most important.

Introduction

Understanding deaf and hard of hearing students' needs can provide school social workers and administrators with meaningful insights about services within school systems (Esera, 2008). Social work services involving a variety of school-wide mainstreaming education programs and deaf schools in the United States have been expanding in the past few years. High-quality school social work services in the K-12 education system can have long-term positive outcomes for Deaf and hard of hearing students' academic success, and can contribute to their personal growth. However, a lack of school social work services for Deaf and hard of hearing students can negatively impact their language development, attention span, learning skills, and communication skills (Sinnott, Looney, & Martin, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to explore Deaf and hard of hearing students' experiences with school social work services, including counseling and psychological services, in a variety of school settings. The study also explored which real-life problems and environmental issues, such as challenges within school settings, stress over family conflicts, and a lack of communication access, contributed to the desirability of school social work services.

Literature Review

The number of school social workers has expanded, providing enhanced common school social work services for K-12 students and their family members; services include individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, parental support, consultation services for teachers, and social skills training (Testa, 2013). School social workers, with specialized intervention skills and knowledge of the K-12 education system, can make essential contributions to K-12 school system to redress negative issues (Testa, 2013).

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education stated that the roles and responsibilities of school social workers working with Deaf and hard of hearing are: 1) providing counseling, 2) conducting home and family social history assessments, 3) possessing skills and understanding of family systems, 4) understanding multilingual and multicultural dynamics, 5) providing clinical consultations, 6) working with clients in obtaining services, resources, and support, 7) serving as liaisons between parents and professionals and developing community

resources, 8) communicating with Deaf and hard of hearing students in their primary language(s) and preferred communication mode(s) (Easterbrooks & Baker-Hawkins, 1995). The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2018) further suggested that school social workers should possess the unique specific knowledge and skills required for working with Deaf and hard of hearing students and their families, such as 1) understanding the psychological and sociological aspects of deafness and family dynamics, 2) understanding postsecondary program and recourses, 3) being knowledgeable about community and education services for Deaf and hard of hearing students, 4) understanding counseling frames and application to Deaf and hard of hearing, 5) providing psychosocial, developmental, self-determination and coping skills training, 6) communicating proficiently with Deaf and hard of hearing students, and 7) demonstrating practice skills for individual and group counseling for students.

There are more than 250 Deaf and hard of hearing individuals who have earned master's degrees in social work in the United States (Sheridan, White, & Mouny, 2010). There are numerous bilingual social workers who work with Deaf and hard of hearing people in different settings, including deaf education systems (Sheridan, White, & Mouny, 2010). Esp's (2001) study examining the role of 73 school social workers in schools for the deaf and school social work services in the nation found that school social workers in deaf schools were more likely to focus on health and financial concerns of Deaf and hard of hearing students and their families due to family poverty and a lack of health literacy. He also found that school social workers at schools for deaf students lagged behind school social workers working with hearing students (Esp, 2001) in professional development. Also, only 27 % ($n=20$) of school social workers were either a certified social worker or licensed social worker, and only 29% ($n=21$) of social workers at schools for the deaf held master's degrees in social worker, meaning they could not provide clinical-level therapeutic intervention (Esp, 2001).

A 2013 Gallaudet Research Institute survey reported that more than 23,500 Deaf and hard of hearing children were in K-12 school settings in the United States. Of this total, 40% had additional disabilities, almost 40% were economically disadvantaged homes, and 18% were new English language learners.

A 2013 study indicated that Deaf and hard of hearing children were at high risk for sexual abuse (Schenkel, Rothman-Marshall, Schlenofer, Towne, Burnash, & Priddy, 2014). Also, another study found that Deaf and hard of hearing students reported school bullying experiences two to three times more than the national average of hearing students. This is a significant difference, and the bullying took place among both genders and all age peer groups (Weiner, Day, & Galvan, 2013). Furthermore, Deaf and hard of hearing students are more likely to experience bullying in person as opposed to hearing students who are more likely to experience cyberbullying (Bauman & Pero, 2011). Therefore, Deaf and hard of hearing students are at greater risk of experiencing academic, emotional and social problems, as well as having more difficulty interacting with their peers and their academic environments (Marschark, Bull, Sapere, Nordmann, Skene, Lukomski, & Lumsden, 2012).

Fortunately, systemic and administrative changes can be made within schools to educate teachers and students about the signs of bullying. Additionally, interventions and education by school social workers can be engaged in bullies themselves through behavior modification, counseling,

referral to outside programs, and a zero-tolerance policy from the school system. (Dixon, 2006). Cawood (2013) reported that school social workers who focused on prevention and intervention saw a decreased level of school violence. However, most school social workers reported that they lacked time and resources to intervene to successfully address school problems (Lee, 2012).

School social work interventions address a variety of issues, such as sexual health, self-esteem, aggression, school attendance, and depression (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). However, Deaf and hard of hearing students are being mainstreamed in their communities and schools, and school social workers reported a lack of knowledge and unpreparedness to work with Deaf and hard of hearing students (Sinnott, Looney, & Martin, 2012). Therefore, more research is needed to examine the effectiveness of social work practice in deaf schools (Allen-Meares, Montgomery, & Kim, 2013). In fact, only 6% of all Deaf and hard of hearing students received any type of school social work services (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2013).

Method

Participants

The survey sample was a non-randomized group of 136 self-reported culturally Deaf and hard of hearing college students. The mean age of the sample was 27.44 ($SD = 8.02$). Fifty-seven percent ($n = 69$) were male and 49.3% were female. Seventy-two participants (52.9%) reported that their primary language was American Sign Language and also another preferred language: 72 participants (52.9%) identified Signed English, 48 (%) reported spoken English, 7 participants (5.1%) reported a foreign spoken language, 5 participants (3.7%) reported a foreign sign language, and 4 (2.9%) reported utilizing “other” primary language. Ninety-one participants were Deaf (66.9%), 44 participants hard of hearing (32.4%), and one participant was Deaf-Blind (0.7%). The sample’s racial and ethnic background was White ($n = 64$, 47.1%), followed by Black/African American ($n = 32$, 23.5%), and biracial ($n = 12$, 8.8%). See Table 1 for detailed demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Racial/Ethnic Demographics of the Participants

Race/Ethnicity	<i>n</i>	%
White	64	47.1
Black/African American	32	23.5
Biracial	12	8.8
Asian	11	8.1
Latino/Hispanic	10	7.4
Other	5	3.6
American Indian	2	1.5

Measures

This survey was based on explorative research and was a self-administered questionnaire that contained 26 items in four subscales: 1) demographics, 2) accessibility issues, 3) discrimination and bullying, and 4) student experiences with school social work services. The questionnaire

required approximately 15 minutes to complete. Most of the questions were answered using the Likert scaling method with a five-point scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

Procedures

Upon receiving Gallaudet University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the research team solicited participation from Deaf and hard of hearing college students. The student research assistants explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality guidelines, and procedures. After consent to participate, the researcher gave participants the questionnaire link. Participants also could request clarification in sign language for any question. Additionally, a Deaf interpreter translated a survey from English to American Sign Language prior to the survey research, and provided an ASL training to the researchers for the survey sessions.

Results

School Life Experience and Environmental Issues

Twenty-six participants (19.1%) of 136 participants reported they described no motivation during high school due to low self-esteem ($n = 7$, or 5.1%), lack of support ($n = 8$, or 5.9%), and low expectation from teacher ($n = 9$, or 6.6%). Nearly one-third of the respondents indicated that they stayed motivated helped by receiving tutoring ($n = 43$, or 31.6%) and having a study buddy ($n = 41$, or 30.1%). Thirty-two participants (23.5%) reported they had family involvement, 31 participants (22.8%) reported a mentor, and 24 participants (17.5%) reported a having school service.

Regarding experiences of the school transferring from one school to another, for example from a mainstream school to a deaf school due to communication difficulties, 17 respondents (12.5%) indicated that they experienced school transferring during elementary school; 15 respondents (11%) indicated that they experienced school transferring during middle school; and 18 respondents (18%) that they did transfer school during high school. A few participants wrote on the survey some narratives about their experiences with school climates and transferring school as follows:

- “With hearing peers it’s like using very little sign. I cannot talk about what happened in the school and home.”
- “It is Deaf community what I wanted to be in.”
- “My peers and teachers do not understand my sign and deaf culture in the mainstreaming school”
- “All things. With hearing peers I was bullied, hopeless, and loneliness during my middle school days”
-

Family Characteristics

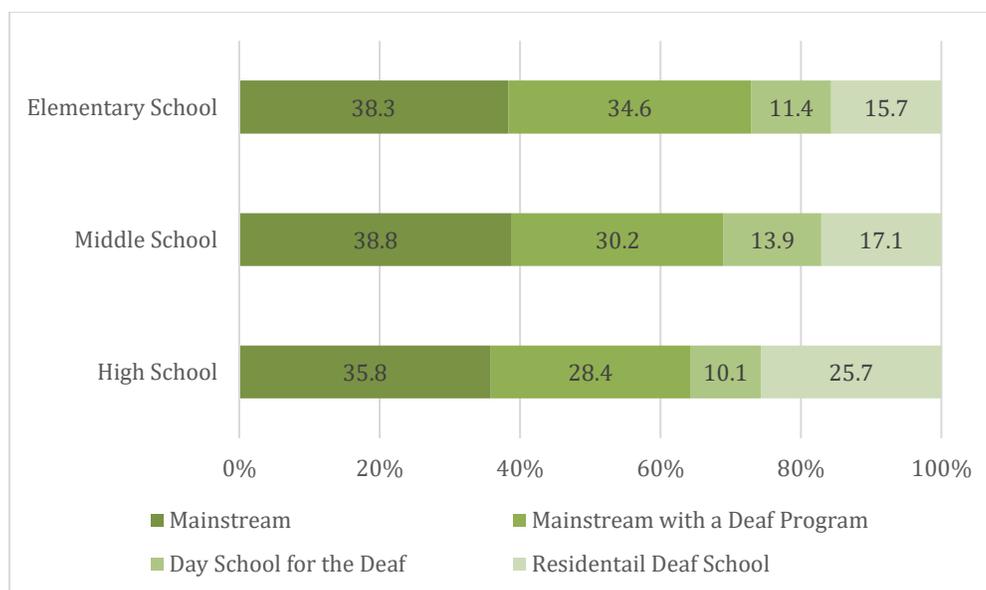
Ninety-eight participants were from hearing families (72.1%) and 38 from Deaf families (27.9%). In regards to communication their families: 58.8% ($n = 80$) reported using written

English or spoken English; 38 participants (27.9%) used ASL; and 18 participants (13.3%) reported using Signed English. One-quarter of the participants' family household income was low-income ($n = 24$, 17.7%), while 70% ($n = 70$) was in the middle-income range; and 31% were from high-income families. There was a positive but weak correlation between the level of household income and family communication time ($r_s = 0.337$, $n = 136$, $p < .001$). A power analysis revealed that in order for an effect of this size to be detected (80% chance) as significant at the 1% level, a sample of 125 participants would be required.

Attending School Programs

Nearly one-third of participants attended public schools with no support services. On the other hand, one-quarter of the participants graduated from a state-level high school for deaf students.

Figure 1. Percentages of types of K-12 school programs participants attended.



A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the correlation between the score accessibility in a school program and the level of participant difficulty in accessing school services. There was a positive, but weak, correlation between two variables ($r_s = 0.338$, $n = 133$, $p = .000$). Power analysis revealed that in order for an effect of this size to be detected (80% chance) as significant at the 1% level, a sample of 125 participants would be required.

Student Experiences of School Social Work Services

Only 32 participants (23.5%) directly received social work services at their schools. Of that group, 17 participants (53.1%) received school social work services once a week, 10 participants (31.3%) received services once a semester, and 5 participants (15.6%) received services once a month. Of these individuals, 65.8% ($n = 27$) reported that school social workers were Deaf ($n = 24$) or hard of hearing ($n = 3$), 34.2% ($n = 14$) reported that the school social workers were hearing. Out of all 14 hearing social workers at these schools, only 7 knew ASL. There was no

independent-sample t-test significant relationship in the scores of accessing school social work services between males ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.44$) and females ($M = 2.1, SD = 1.1$) conditions; $t(47) = -0.41, p = .684$.

As shown in Figure 2, more than half of the sample, 52.2% ($n = 71$) were concerned about peer issues including bullying and peer pressure. However, only 21 Deaf and hard of hearing students (29.6%) asked for help from school social workers or other school professionals. About half of the participants, 49.2% ($n = 67$), reported experiencing family problems; however, only 34.3% ($n = 23$) of this population had sought the services of a school social worker or other school professionals. Similarly, 41.1% ($n = 56$) stated that they had academic concerns, but only 21.4% ($n = 12$).

Figure 2: Students' past concerns and seeking services of school social workers (Frequency)

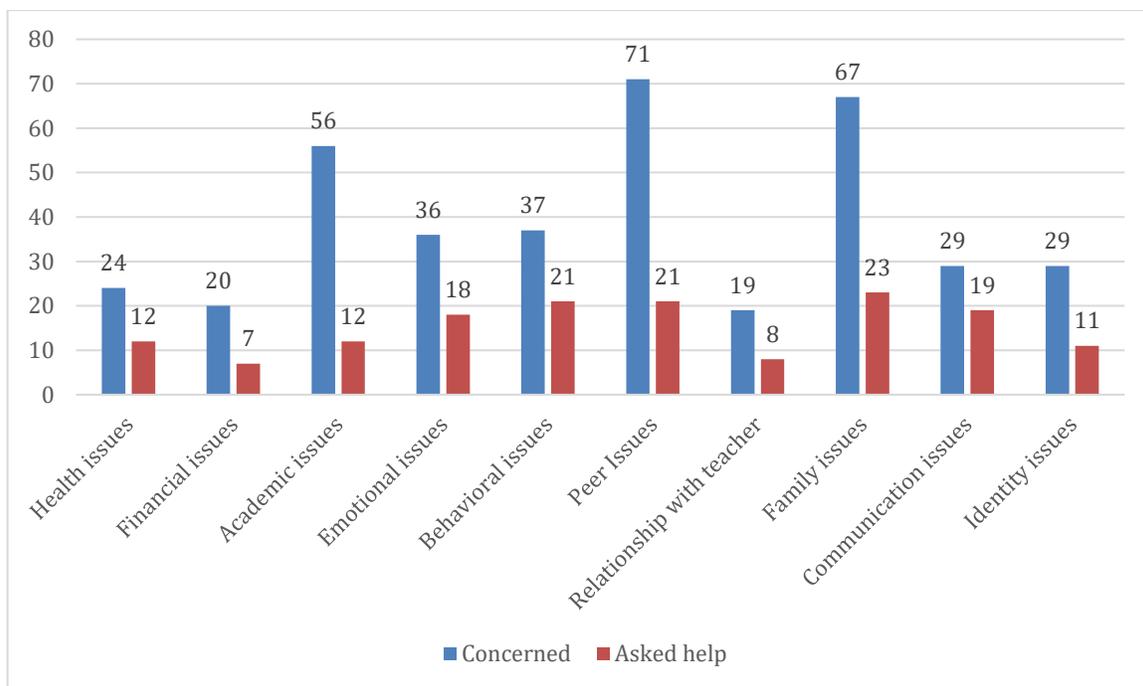


Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents, more than 50% of the sample, reported that they did not fully understand the role of social workers in the K-12 school setting.

Table 2. The knowledge of the role of school social workers ($n = 136$)

Do you know the role of a school social worker?	<i>n</i>	%
Strongly disagree	31	22.8
Disagree	43	31.6
Somewhat [AGREE/ DISAGREE?]	26	19.1
Agree	25	18.4
Strongly agree	11	8.1

Respondents ranked each item by choosing between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree). Sixty participants (43.4%) reported that the school social workers working with Deaf and hard of hearing students should improve their communication skills ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 1.6$), followed by ASL fluency ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.77$), accessibility to school social work services ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.78$), knowledge of Deaf culture ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.74$), and cultural attitude ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 1.67$).

Discussion

This study explored Deaf and hard of hearing students' perspectives of their experiences working with school social workers and the challenges they faced in accessing school social work services. This study's research questions focused on Deaf and hard of hearing college students' experiences with school social work services and the perceived level of quality of school social work services available to Deaf and hard of hearing students in the K-12 education system.

School social workers working with Deaf and hard of hearing students have a primary responsibility to provide social work services in the field of deaf education (Esp, 2001). Nonetheless, the results of this study showed that Deaf and hard of hearing students struggled to deal with their academic and life needs without seeking help provided by school social workers.

One challenge identified was communication barriers, which can prevent Deaf and hard of hearing students from seeking help with academic and life needs. In addition, Crowe (2017) stated that a "lack of providers who can sign, can impede individuals from seeking help," which may lead the students to change schools. The findings of this study showed that 52.2% of the respondents experienced problems such as bullying and peer pressure, but only 29.6% of them asked school social work services to intervene. The results also indicated that the participants experienced a wide range of academic issues, peer victimization, and family problems. This is significant because educators and school social workers should be aware of such issues and their potential for creating a negative impact on academics and personal well-being.

Approximately 50% of the respondents reported that they did not know the specific roles of school social workers. Moreover, only 32 participants had directly experienced intervention by a school social worker to address their issues. Of those 32 respondents, 65.8 % directly received intervention services provided by a school social worker who was Deaf or hard of hearing. Respondents also stated that they would prefer Deaf or hard of hearing school social workers so they could receive linguistically and culturally accessible services. Linguistic and cultural school social work services are certainly useful, but more importantly, service delivery availability and accessibility should be improved immediately to cover a wide range of school social work services. One participant stated, "I did not know I can seek school social worker's intervention because school did not explain what the role of the school social worker is."

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

The design of this study presented several strengths as well as limitations. The sample size was adequate for gaining an understanding of perceptions of school social work services for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Only 136 volunteered to participate in the survey, which may have

affected the internal and external validity of the survey result measurements. A non-random stratified sampling strategy ensured that the sample represented diversity in terms of race, sexual orientation, deaf identity, communication mode, and family style. The study was reliable and may be repeated in order to support the findings. However, the demographics of the sample focused on young Deaf and hard of hearing students, and so may not accurately represent older Deaf and hard of hearing adults. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized to all Deaf and hard of hearing college students in the United States.

Implications for Clinical Practice and Future Research

This was an exploratory investigation focusing on a small non-randomized sampling at the university level, so the study cannot be generalized to a large deaf population sample. However, this type of research methodology does not give insight into the specific reasons why some particular issues were important or not important. In the future, a broader sample that is appropriately randomized should be used. Additionally, more participants should be queried over a longer period. More qualitative research should be done on this study area to increase the understanding of how Deaf and hard of hearing students experience school social work services. From this study, further research could focus on specific age groups to understand their level of knowledge related to the school social worker's role. This would possibly add knowledge about the link between student achievement and school-based social work services.

Results of this study were consistent with other studies in that school social workers need training to ensure their specific knowledge and skills working with Deaf and hard of hearing students in the K-12 education systems (Esera, 2008; Esp, 2001; Sinnott, Looney, & Martin, 2012). Although this survey did not address the reason why participants did or did not seek help, some studies pointed to factors that could affect accessibility such as communication options, cultural insensitivity, and stigmas (Crowe, 2015; 2017) The implications of this specific study finding suggested that school social worker need to be more linguistically and culturally accessible, and awareness needs to increase among students regarding the school social worker's role and responsibilities. Also, school social workers should explore outreach programs and intervention strategies to connect Deaf and hard of hearing students who are at greater risk.

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