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A Foundation for Educational Success in the Deaf Community:

Understanding the Four Key Paths to Successful Bilingualism for Deaf/HOH Students, their Families, Teachers, Staff, Deaf Community, and Hearing Allies

By Sheila Jacobs, MFT

My Deaf sister asked me if I, a hearing woman, wanted to double date with her Deaf husband and my hearing husband. How nice! A Deaf couple and a Hearing couple you may think? Yet I have found this is to be too simplistic of a description.

The four of us actually represent the four key paths to successful bilingualism in the Deaf Community. Both my deaf sister and I, a hearing Coda (Child of Deaf Adults), grew up with deaf parents. Both our husbands, my deaf brother in law and my hearing husband, grew up in hearing families. These factors impact our views of family, communication, decision making and problem solving approaches, sense of humor, and so on. I would say in fact that both my sister and I are both in “cross cultural marriages”.

My deaf sister, for example, when she spent her first “Hearing Christmas” with her future hearing in laws and her deaf husband to be was in culture shock when she called us on Christmas Day on the TTY back in the 1980s because everyone was talking and she felt so lost and left out, only being able to communicate fully with her husband to be. My deaf brother in law described his “culture shock” of spending his first “Deaf Christmas” with our deaf family because everyone can sign and he can follow all the conversations at any time—what a difference compared to how he grew up with two older hearing sisters and his hearing family and was missing out on so much of their spoken conversations.

My hearing husband comes from a hearing family and had to learn Deaf Culture 101 and the sign language basics when first meeting my deaf family. I also had to learn as I had growing up that when visiting hearing families, they operate differently than deaf families. For one thing, I am not supposed to hug everyone like we do when we are

introduced to new families in my deaf home growing up. Leave taking from a deaf home is usually 2-3 times longer than leaving from my husband's hearing family which has caused us some difficulty when we had two sons and trying to get out the door without either one of us getting too frustrated with how we leave that "felt right" based on our "cultural worldviews" from our Deaf and Hearing family frameworks.

We are blessed and challenged with mitigating the differing worldviews we each have based on our different upbringing. When we are able to recognize, acknowledge, understand and respect our individual differences, it makes for far more harmonious interactions when we enter each other's world.

Our Deaf Community consists of individuals coming from these four different backgrounds. Each has their own journey to bilingualism. Our Deaf Community, our Deaf Education System, our families with Deaf individuals need a structure to understand the foundation of varying roots to bilingualism over one's lifetime. Mutual understanding and respect lead to the ability to develop more effective approaches in education, job success, family success, and positive bilingual self esteem.

It is too simplistic to merely divide the Deaf Community into just two main groups: Deaf and Hearing. Using an analogy of a deck of cards, it would be like seeing only two colors-- black and red. You might miss the value of the four suits and the diversity within each suit (numbers A-10 and face cards--JQK).

There are actually four key "Bilingual Identity Groups" in the Deaf Community. Each one has its own bilingual roots and path to bilingualism that is different from the other three. There are two Deaf identity groups and two Hearing identity groups based on which language is used in the home, which language is used in the school, and the ages of acquisition of both English and ASL.

The 4 key bilingual identity groups in the Deaf Community (which are often informally discussed when introducing someone) "Is this person deaf or hearing?" "Did this person grow up with deaf or hearing parents?" "Did this person go to a residential school or mainstream program"? There is an implicit understanding in the Community that these factors significantly impact the person we are meeting, the person that we live or work with, depending upon our own bilingual experiences at home and at school.

The purpose of describing these 4 key identity groups is to develop more understanding, empathy, and mutual respect for each of our 4 paths to bilingualism in the Deaf Community. When we understand at a deeper level our own unique experiences, as well as the other 3 groups unique experiences that we live and work with, we are able to interact as a "bilingual team"/Community/family more successfully.

4 Key Identity Groups: Foundation to Educational Success

1. Deaf people raised with Deaf parents
2. Deaf people raised with Hearing parents
3. Hearing people raised with Deaf parents
4. Hearing people raised with Hearing parents

When teachers and related professionals/staff in the field of Deaf Education understand this “Foundation to Educational Success” they can work more effectively as a team. Teamwork is essential to provide an appropriate educational and emotional environment to optimize learning, especially since 90% of our deaf students come from hearing families.

Misunderstandings between these 4 groups has led to Deaf Education being fractured into various “camps” or “worldviews”, which are based on the views of just one or two of these Identity Groups. It would be more appropriate for Deaf Education, which includes teachers, staff, related professionals, parents, siblings, families and students, to take an egalitarian view to all 4 groups and collaborate together to create a more comprehensive approach to successful bilingualism.

Viewing the Deaf Community as “Hearing” or “Deaf”...or using our ‘deck of cards’ analogy, seeing the deck as just black or red, has led to many misunderstandings and discord. Rather, we need to see the distinct “shape” and characteristics inherent in each of these 4 bilingual groups, as well as the diversity within each group, as symbolized by the 4 suits, numbers and face cards. We can then learn about and appreciate more the challenges facing each of these groups, as well as learn from success stories. Developing this understanding and respect for each other leads to more successful working relationships and the ability to develop better initiatives for more successful bilingualism for everyone.

Similarities and Differences Among the 4 Groups

Ninety percent of Deaf people are born to hearing parents while ten percent are born to deaf parents. Deaf people attend similar types of schools and educational programs. However many deaf people born to hearing parents learn sign language much later in their lives as compared to those born to deaf parents.

Hearing people share their lives as hearing people even though some were born to deaf parents and learned sign language as their first language. The other hearing group born to hearing parents usually learns sign language as an adult.



The school life of both deaf groups is similar; however their home life is different. The home life of deaf people from deaf parents and hearing people from deaf parents is similar, whereas their school life is different.

These are very important factors when working with various families in the Deaf Community. The HOME life and the SCHOOL life of each individual in the Deaf Community affect our roots and therefore our various paths to bilingualism.

We learn at home and at school about the two worlds we live in. The formative impact on each individual depends on where he/she fits into this grid and has a profound impact on the individual's experience of learning in the school environment.

“Deck of Cards” Framework



Using our ‘deck of cards’ analogy, we could say that the 4 Bilingual Identity Groups are like the 4 suits in the deck of cards:

2 red suits—hearts and diamonds—representing the 2 Deaf identity groups.

2 black suits—clubs and spades—representing the 2 Hearing identity groups.

Numbers and Face cards ---represent the diversity within each of the 4 identity groups.

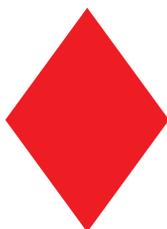
An example using this “deck of cards” model comes from a retreat I facilitated in the 1990s using this approach. In order to represent each of the 4 groups fairly, we invited 15 professionals working in the Deaf Community from each of these 4 identity groups with a total of 60 participants. I invited three other trained mental health professionals who were “members” of the 3 other groups that I am not a member of. The 4 of us facilitated our own “home groups”, the groups that we were “members” of. Once each group understood more about their own home group, their suit and the diversity within it, we had some intergroup discussions to learn more about the ways 4 groups overlap with each other.

As our Warm Up exercise, each facilitator was asked to facilitate small group discussions to agree on which symbol of the 4 suits—hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades, best FIT their Identity Group? (Someone with a statistics and math background commented that for each of the 4 groups to have chosen 1 of the 4 options that was different from the other 3, in full agreement, was a statistical anomaly in itself!) We expected 3 out of the 4 groups to choose “Hearts” as their symbol to represent their bilingual identity group's journey to bilingualism, but that is not what happened.

Here is the suit that each group chose and the reasons why their group felt this suit was the BEST symbol to capture their bilingual experiences over a lifetime.



The **Deaf of Deaf Identity Group** chose Hearts because they felt that the Heart signified both the physical and emotional link in these families connecting the Deaf Community together over time. This is due to their genetics of deafness over several generations which the heart represents the actual physical heart that pumps blood throughout our bodies and passes the genetics of deafness to our next generation. They reported that their generations of deaf relatives often become the “heart” of the Deaf Community where many gather and feel at home. Many described their pride about many deaf relatives who have served the Deaf Community at various points in our history as Deaf Leaders of various kinds.



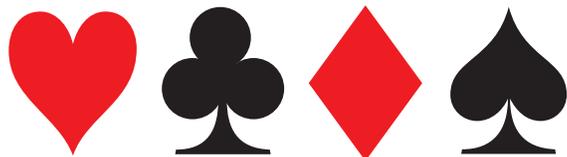
The **Deaf of Hearing Identity Group** chose Diamonds because they reported feeling like “a Diamond in the rough” as they grew up as the only deaf person in a large hearing family. They described that a diamond is hidden underground and needs to be dug out of the brown earth. Then the deaf of hearing person feels they work hard over their lifetime to PROVE to their hearing families and their hearing world that each side of the diamond represents that “Deaf CAN!” They described how hard they work to prove yet another beautiful side of the diamond is possible, “Deaf CAN this too!”. They noted that sometimes they even have to PROVE that they are Deaf ENOUGH! These examples demonstrated all the beautiful shiny sides that their lives are spent showing that Deaf people CAN graduate from high school, CAN graduate from college, CAN drive, CAN marry, CAN have successful jobs, and so they felt that Diamonds represented their bilingual journey over their lifetime.



The **Hearing of Deaf Identity Group** chose Clubs. Many of this group had attended CODA Conferences and as a result felt that the three “leaves” of the Club represented the 3 parts of their personality: the Deaf Part of their identity, the Hearing Part of their identity, and that the Coda Part was at the top as the “glue” bringing their 2 worlds together to make them feel more whole.



The **Hearing of Hearing Identity Group** chose Spades. They reported that they felt that a spade is like an “upside down heart”. They reported feeling that their hearts are turned upside down by others in the Deaf Community who look down at them. They described the tip of the spade representing how it looks when they feel they are “stabbed in the heart”.



These 4 different life experiences lead to differing personal and professional views and are important to keep in mind as we interact with others in our field. There are many applications of this understanding of the 4 key bilingual identity groups in the Deaf Community. Double Pride uses a Bilingual Bicultural Mental Health/Family Systems model to help strengthen the bilingualism of each member in our community. This model helps individuals understand their own bilingual journey as well as those they live and work with.

As a Marriage Family Therapist working in the Deaf Community for the last 25 years, my understanding of the 4 key bilingual identity groups has become the ‘cornerstone’ of my Bilingual Bicultural Family Systems model, and what I call “the Foundation for Educational Success”. This model has helped me become much more effective in assessments and developing intervention strategies with individuals (children, teens, adults), couples, families, and groups. As an Organizational Consultant, this “Foundation for Educational Success” has been the cornerstone of the staff training I have implemented at various schools for the Deaf nationwide. This information enhances mutual respect for these 4 distinct bilingual paths over a lifetime as well as leads to more effective bilingual teamwork at the school between staff from different bilingual backgrounds working with students and families with different bilingual backgrounds as well.

This “Foundation for Success” helps me understand the “norms” for each of these four key groups, how they may overlap, how they can work as a team, and how they can collide causing misunderstandings at home, at school, at work, and in our community interactions.

By understanding the “4 Directions” of these key paths to bilingualism in our community we can better clarify the 4 directions like we have in the USA: northern states, southern states, eastern states, and western states. Each region is an important part of the whole country with its own “personality”, characteristics, terrain, weather patterns, urban/rural, diversity to be taken into consideration while running each region and how we run the whole country. This is how I see the 4 paths to bilingualism in our Deaf Community world wide.

This will help us all understand each other better, understand the issues that apply to our “region”/path to bilingualism and how we can support all 4 directions to become a stronger, healthier, happier, and more productive community working and living in more harmony.

This will also help leaders lead in various related fields, especially Deaf Education and how we raise the next generation of deaf students and their hearing families. This will clarify a lot of the misunderstandings I believe that



exist between the 4 directions---we need to understand better how the northerners live as compared to the southerners, the easterners, and the westerners. Then we can also clarify and orient our own bilingualism process in relationship to others from our own region as well as those from others from the 3 other regions. This is how we can achieve more UNITY of purpose and clarify our COMMON MESSAGE to share within our community and with others in the hearing mainstream world.

Double Pride hopes to see more “Double Pride Teamwork” amongst all 4 of these Identity Groups at home, school, and at work. Double Pride’s goal is to empower each of these 4 Identity Groups to feel an integral part of our Deaf Community. Each of us is a valued member of our community. The problem is that if you look at a deck of cards and do not understand the value of each of the 52 cards, but instead only see the diversity in the deck as red and black only with usually the “face cards” valued higher than the “number cards”, then you have inequities and misunderstandings multiplying throughout our community which leads to the LACK of UNITY, LACK of teamwork, and the LACK of informed leadership which impacts the whole “deck of cards”--the whole community.

Instead, when you understand the equal value of each of the 4 suits, and the place that each number and face card has in the “natural hierarchy” in our world where not everyone can be a leader (face card), but that there is a natural pecking order that emerges in a natural way based on a mutual understanding about the wonderful gifts that EACH of the 52 cards can bring to the table. I look forward to more UNITY and TEAMWORK as we can apply this model to the ways we work together and live together in our community

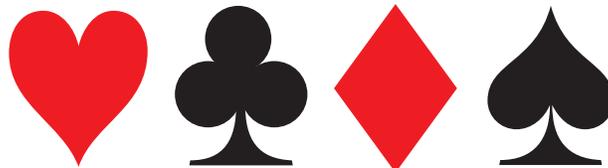
However, I am very concerned about the lack of understanding about the need for mutual respect and mutual support for these 4 key paths to bilingualism. Each of these 4 distinct identity groups have their own journey with our Deaf and Hearing worlds in terms of how and when they learned each language, and why becoming fluent in each language can be challenging for each group for different reasons.

Creating a structure of support based on this foundation for understanding our community’s roots to bilingualism over a lifetime for each member in our community can help create more mutual respect, understanding, and therefore more EFFECTIVE approaches in solving the many educational, interpreting, career choice, and child rearing challenges that we need to create healthier individuals, couples, and families. With this understanding we can “row this boat together” and the leaders from the 4 groups (the face cards) can make more informed decisions that greatly impact us all.

These 4 different experience lead to differing personal and professional views and are important to keep in mind as we interact with others in our field. It seems that often educational initiatives have been initiated from only one or two of the four groups. We have found that initiatives that educate each of the four groups on how the other

experience life are well received. We have also found that there are unique perspectives for each of the four identity groups. And that each group has inherent strengths that can contribute to the success of initiatives.

When different identity groups are represented in the same family, it can create a gap of communication and understanding but when we can acknowledge the different bilingual life experiences and build on them, the “multi-identity” family grouping becomes a rich environment of resources that can enlighten each individual and also support and enhance what is happening in the classroom.



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