

Construction of a social reality:

the integration of deaf and non-deaf students in a public elementary school program

Slobodzian, Jean Theodora*

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One driving force in education during the past few decades has been to mainstream deaf students into inclusive environments. The majority of extant research examining such amalgamated programs focuses on the deaf students. The purpose of this study was to produce a comparative ethnographic description of a fifth grade public school program where deaf and non-deaf students were educated both together and apart during the school day. The guiding questions were designed to perceive indications of self and group cultural identity formation. The fieldwork component of this study was one school year. Observations of naturally occurring interactions during the school day provided insight into the lived experiences of both groups of participants. The symbolic interactionist framework utilized in this study revealed a picture of a learning environment which normalized the non-deaf culture and thus disabled the deaf students. The experience the twenty fifth grade non-deaf students had in the morning, when they were

educated by them-selves, was no different than the experience they had in the afternoons, when the two deaf girls and the sign language interpreter joined their class. Sign language was not taught to nor expected from these non-deaf students. Spoken and written English skills were prized. Community members, both deaf and non-deaf, used the medical/pathological model as the single lens to view deafness. Overt statements of a fair and equal educational experience for all children; actually obscured the lived reality that served to oppress the deaf children. The more the deaf students for non-deaf, the more they were rewarded. However, the model for viewing deafness began to be reconfigured during the second half of the year and cultural doors that hitherto had been locked began to be opened. With the introduction of American Sign Language and interactions with Deaf adult role models arranged, the program was slowly shifting to a more inclusive model.