

The Case of Ranjit A Deaf Caribbean Migrant Child Migrating to United States of America in Hopes of A Better Education and The Establishment of A Support Community

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Abstract

Review Article

In the Caribbean, it is common practice for a mother, father, or both parents to migrate to a more developed country, leaving their children behind in the care of relatives or friends. A lesser-known aspect of this practice is the decision taken by several Caribbean families to migrate with their Deaf children and enroll them in residential schools for the Deaf in their adopted countries, which typically include the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom. This paper examines the case of Ranjit by examining the interplay between language (spoken and signed), language deprivation, culture, the “disrupted attachment” caused by forced separation from one’s family and the concerns and controversies faced by the Deaf communities today.

Keywords: Sign Language, Deaf Culture, Minority Deaf, Migration, Language Deprivation, Education.

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INTRODUCTION

One in five school-age children in the United States of America (US) is an immigrant or child of immigrants [1]. These children face several significant challenges and limited opportunities both at school and within their communities. The challenges are often related to issues such as insufficient English language proficiency, culture shock, and the status of being from immigrant communities or lower socio-economic backgrounds [2]. Hearing loss, whether temporary or permanent, has a profound impact on children’s psychological well-being. Research strongly suggests that a significant percentage of Deaf children will experience behavioural, emotional, and/or learning difficulties during childhood or adolescence [3]. Identity and self-esteem are common sources of struggle for many children and teenagers with hearing loss.

The attainment of language competency and the ability to communicate effectively with non-deaf family members are often particularly challenging. Approximately 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents [4]. It is likely that these parents will never have encountered a Deaf person prior to the birth of their child and are often at a loss as to how to negotiate life as the parents of a Deaf child. Various

modes of communication are open to Deaf children; however, hearing parents with no prior knowledge of appropriate education for Deaf children typically desire that their child will learn to speak and develop fluency of speech. It is very rare that hearing parents will choose sign language as a first option for their Deaf child. Several organizations and agencies worldwide provide resources aimed at assisting parents to communicate with their Deaf children.

Language deprivation in Deaf and hard of hearing children is when a child is not exposed to language (either spoken or sign language) during their critical development periods, i.e. from birth to age five years old. Language development can be severely delayed due to lack of language stimulation and socialization. Ongoing research currently led to a term coined, Language Deprivation Syndrome (LDS) in Deaf and Hard of Hearing children. LDS is not limited to any geographic area, nationality, ethnicity or migrant status.

LDS is currently being researched in the state of Massachusetts, United States of America, by a team of psychiatrist, psychologist, and mental health professionals who are either Deaf or active members of the Deaf community. The lead team member is a Deaf psychiatrist named Dr. Sanjay Gulati. Dr. Gulati is believed to be the sole individual recognizing and

acknowledged LDS in Deaf and Hard of Hearing children.

Dr. Gulati and his research team discovered many Deaf and hard of hearing children arriving to preschool or kindergarten with significant language delays that impacted the rest of their education [5]. They discovered accommodations and specialized methods of instruction are required to meet the unique communication needs of Deaf and hard of hearing children, such as, sign language, cued speech, Auditory Verbal/ Listening and Spoken language therapy, or a combination of all approaches.

The effects of poverty on education have been widely researched and are known to have a lifelong impact, particularly when educational requirements are not successfully met [5]. Poverty and education are inextricably linked, as persons living in poverty may be obliged to forgo school attendance in order to work and support their families. This decision leaves them without the literacy and numeracy skills required for further education and many career types. Some organizations, such as ChildFund International, have implemented literacy and solar power campaigns in developing countries, where few households have books and electricity. Under these initiatives, solar power lamps are provided to allow children to read at night [7]. The importance of education cannot be overstated: it is the catalyst needed to pull families and communities out of poverty. Knowledge enables children to envision a better future and build the confidence required to pursue a full education. Education also significantly contributes to experiences in adulthood, particularly in its application to day-to-day life, in aspects such as nutrition, healthcare access, and gender equity. The relationship between education and poverty is complex; however, it is clear that education helps to ensure that societies have healthier workforces. Education plays a key role in the fight for children's rights, teaching children what they can and should expect from adults, while also reinforcing for adults the importance of respecting children's rights [6].

Deaf and hard of hearing children who are suffering from language deprivation and who inhabit lower socio-economic status (SES) brackets already lack the many resources needed to raise a child, let alone those required to raise a Deaf child. When the child's hearing loss is first discovered or diagnosed, whether by a family acquaintance or doctor, the chosen course of action is generally to send them to a residential school for the Deaf. Migration is one of the many avenues that people pursue in search of a better life, and migration from the Caribbean has continued steadily for a century and is much more common than was previously believed [8].

The Case of Ranjit¹

The case of Ranjit* highlights all the critical aspects of this paper. A brief history of Ranjit is summarized below to demonstrate the impact of Caribbean Deaf children migrating to another country and the challenges faced.

Ranjit was a twelve-year-old boy who had been left in his grandmother's care when his parents migrated to the United States of America from the Caribbean. Ranjit's father migrated first, followed by his mother a few years later. Ranjit's parents had been prominent citizens in their village in the Caribbean and felt ashamed at having a Deaf child. They hoped that by migrating to the US, they could rid themselves of the perceived stigma of being parent to a Deaf child. They also hoped for Ranjit to have access to a better educational system for their Deaf son. Ranjit had great difficulty communicating with his grandmother and depended on his teacher at the local school, which was not capable of educating Deaf children.

One day, Ranjit received word from his mother that he would be joining her and his father in the US. When he had arrived and his mother enrolled him in school, the school encouraged Ranjit's mother to send him to a residential school for the Deaf. The residential school for the Deaf was approximately six hours away from his parents' home. Ranjit would reside at the school from Monday to Thursday. On Fridays, he would attend a half-day of lessons before taking the school district's bus to his parents' home. On Sunday evenings, he would return to the residential school on the school bus.

Upon arrival at the residential school, Ranjit had to learn American Sign Language (ASL), formal English, and the rules associated with living in a residential boys' dormitory. Ranjit's parents were encouraged to learn ASL at their local library so that they could communicate effectively with Ranjit on weekends. Ranjit exhibited significant behavioural and emotional problems at school: anger, fear, depression, confusion, lack of empathy towards others, cruelty towards animals, and suicide ideation. Ranjit attended counselling both at school and with his parents in their community for approximately four years. At Ranjit's school, his school counsellor was a Deaf woman originally from the Caribbean. The relationship between Ranjit, his parents and his school counsellor flourished and it led to Ranjit decreasing his negative behaviours and gaining greater self awareness of himself and his cultural heritage. The community counsellor was a woman of Caribbean heritage whose parents are Deaf. One of the major aspects of community counselling with Ranjit's parents were to educate them regarding the impact of migration and forced separation on their son's wellbeing.

Caribbean Migration

The United Nations Secretariat has identified the Caribbean as the region with the highest number of international migrants worldwide. The Caribbean diaspora is primarily distributed across North America and Europe [9]. In recent decades, research and discussions on the migration of Caribbean families and/or children have flourished in the fields of Anthropology, Ethnic and Migration Studies, and Family Studies.

The phenomenon of economic and voluntary mass migration has a long history in the Caribbean, dating back to the 1800's. Two major migration "waves" emanated from the region's smaller islands. The first major "wave" occurred post-World War II, while the second occurred during the 1960s and 1970s in response to amendments to North American and European immigration laws [10]. Reasons for increased migration included unemployment and lack of career opportunities, scarcity of resources, and overall economic status. Men and women migrated in equal proportions, though men were faster than women to migrate. During the first "wave", men migrated leaving behind their wives and children [11]. After a few years, these men would typically request that their wives and children join them. During the second "wave", however, women tended to migrate faster than men. This may be attributable to socio-political circumstances, including women's objectives regarding workplace equality [12].

In the case of Ranjit's parents, both parents were not in a financial position to migrate together. Ranjit's father migrated first and later the mother migrated. The parents were seeking ways to be financially secure before migrating Ranjit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing literature concerning immigrant children rarely distinguishes between children who have migrated with their parents and those who are separated from their parents during the migration process. Furthermore, no research has focused specifically on Deaf children from Caribbean families who experience international migration and forced separation. Parent-child relationships, particularly during early childhood, can affect a wide range of behaviours later in life. Among the theoretical frameworks that offer useful perspectives on the particular issue under discussion here is attachment theory, which argues that disruptions to the affectionate bonds with parental figures (particularly the mother) can have profound negative implications for a child's psychological development later in life, as the loss of parental bonds precipitates grief, anger, and bewilderment. Young children interpret separation as a complete loss of their parents' love and protection and, during migration in particular, this can lead to emotional distress and have an impact on their later relationships and behaviours [13].

In the case of Ranjit, he was separated from his father at first, later separated from his mother. The school near his family's home in the Caribbean frequently reported to Ranjit's grandmother on his behaviours at school. Ranjit would hit, slap, yell, scream at other children when they do not play with him. Other times he will be seen on the playground in a fetal position, crying uncontrollably. He also became overly affectionate with the female teachers, who were not comfortable with his constant hugging.

The Separation of Deaf Children from their Parents

Survivors of trauma know that their experience can be a catalytic event. The term "*disrupted attachment*", coined by Becker, denotes the interruption of a securely established and meaningful family life, and a long and complicated road to resilience [14]. Deaf children who migrate to other countries with their parents face a uniquely stressful challenge. The Deaf child from the Caribbean must adapt to living in a new country, separation from his or her parents, the need to negotiate a new environment, and the need to learn or advance their proficiency in a variety of skills, including formal sign language, written English, social skills, such as making new friends and learning about a new culture [15]. The further stressor of leaving their parents to attend residential schools for the Deaf can be traumatic for these children. The word Deaf, when used as a cultural label, particularly within the Deaf community, is often written with a capital D. When lower-case d is used, it generally refers to a person or group of persons with the audiological condition.

Ranjit shared a poem with his dorm staff at his residential school. The poem reflected on his struggle to adjust to living in a new country and having to learn to adjust to the different types of food. He recalled asking the cafeteria at the residential school for the deaf for oxtail soup, a Caribbean dish. To his bewilderment, the cafeteria staff has never heard of this dish and offered him an American dish called, Sloppy Joe's. Ranjit further stated he went to his bedroom that night and cried. It was another reality that he is in a new society and have to learn to adjust to a new culture.

Disability and Shame

The words "disability" and "deafness" evoke a taboo subject that can cause discomfort when it arises. Caribbean parents who have migrated to North America or Europe may discover that they lack the resources required for full integration into their adopted country, where they must raise their Deaf child, and are often encouraged to send their child away to a residential school. The principle behind this practice was the belief that residential schools would be better equipped to meet their child's needs while simultaneously relieving the parents of the burden of having to raise a "disabled" child. Researchers who have studied the stigma placed on Deaf children by the non-disabled community have observed "feeling of guilt and shame related to the

experience of having this disability and reflect the internalization of a social problem as a personal ill” [16].

Ranjit parents were encouraged by the local church pastor to send Ranjit to a residential school for the deaf. The parents felt the residential school for the deaf would allow Ranjit to develop the language skills needed to communicate with them and to become more independent. They also admitted the burden of having to communicate with Ranjit during the week was great and the residential school for the deaf appeared to be the perfect solution at the time. Ranjit’s father phrased this as the “win/win” situation. The parents would not be identified as the couple with a “disabled” child and Ranjit would be able to learn a new language and make friends with children like himself.

Among the problems faced by Deaf children from Caribbean families who have migrated to developed countries is the internal conflict between cultural pride and the personal shame of being Deaf. Ranjit struggled daily with being Deaf and from the Caribbean. At times he would destroy his island’s flag sticker stuck onto his pencil holder when he did not receive any mail on Thursday nights from his parents. When Ranjit is asked to release his frustration, he would state, “they don’t want Caribbean people to know I am Deaf, they didn’t send me my weekly care package, they are ashamed of me”. Undoubtedly, children like Ranjit require external support to navigate the acculturation process as immigrants, as well as the experiences of being Deaf and having been separated from their parents. Deaf children like Ranjit, should be provided with the appropriate conditions and coping strategies required to thrive in the non-Deaf world [16]. Deaf children should be afforded equal treatment in schools and public places to support them in leading successful lives. Research has found that “the personal is political, as *shame* and fear are personal burdens that are challenged by being made public” [17]: that is, Deaf children need social protection and support to cope with the challenges posed by their hearing impairment.

Deaf and Hearing Family Members: Language, Gender and Family Structure

The study of sign language by hearing family members is an integral part of the process by which the Deaf and hearing communities can be merged. In the case of Ranjit, the residential school for the deaf school personnel were instrumental in organizing, supporting and leading the merging of the Deaf and hearing family members and communities. Hearing family members, such as Ranjit’s parents, encountered difficulties in the process of learning signed language as a second language and therefore they were trained by professional teachers and educators of the Deaf on acquiring a second language, i.e. sign language. The development of any educational curriculum requires research and consultation with other professionals.

There is considerable evidence that the study of sign language, defined as a visual-gestural language, can help parents to improve their Deaf children’s attentional abilities, deal with visual discrimination, and enhance spatial memory [3].

With regard to their native culture, Deaf children from Caribbean families should be educated in the culture and traditions of their Caribbean heritage. Ranjit’s school counsellor, for example, educated him on the history of the Caribbean and the traditional gender roles that contribute to the overall perception of the meaning of life and social status from the Caribbean perspective. Furthermore, his school counsellor educated him on the gender roles in the general American society and in the Deaf community. In the Deaf community, while gender roles are not exactly equal, women do have more opportunities to become the primary income earners in their families.

Deaf women are often empowered to become teachers, counsellors, social workers, professors, psychologist, and administrators at schools or community centres for the Deaf. Deaf men are often encouraged to seek “hands-on” professions, such as, car mechanic, welder, carpenter, etc. In most developed countries, individuals working within the school system or a community centre focusing on social development and education is much higher than individuals working at a factory, car maintenance shop, etc [18].

Research suggests that Deaf children and their hearing parents should share a common language, such as sign language with some spoken communication, sign language without spoken communication, or cued speech (i.e. communication with cues regarding how to recognize mouth movements) in order to facilitate effective communication [19]. Effective communication within the family will ultimately establish bonds that will support the development of positive interpersonal relationships.

Family structure contributes to the proper development of Deaf children with hearing parents. As Language Deprived Syndrome suggest, young Deaf children without language access exhibit several behavioural, emotional and psychological problems that may be resolved through the collaborative efforts of family members and school and community leaders aimed at supporting the success of the Deaf child. Caribbean families, such as Ranjit’s parents, require a solid understanding of how their family culture may be integrated and how the important roles of family values may be communicated effectively to their Deaf children [3].

The Deaf Community, the Controversies within It and the interplay of Deaf Immigrants

The Deaf community continues to face several challenges. According to Dr Paddy Ladd, the author of

Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood, “The deaf community comprises those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who share a common language, common experiences and values, and a common way of interacting with each other, and with hearing people” [15]. Deaf culture may be defined as the set of social beliefs, behaviours, art, traditions, history, valued and shared experiences among individuals who are deaf and who use sign language as their primary mode of communication. Members of the Deaf community view deafness as a difference in human experience rather than a disability or a disease. The word “deafhood” is used by Dr Paddy Ladd in celebration of the experience of being Deaf [15].

A major problem among the Deaf community at large is the considerable presence in educational institutions of hearing individuals who do not value Deaf culture. Deaf culture converges on Deaf institutions, clubs, leagues, social organizations, religious groups, theatres, communal homes for the Deaf, and an array of conferences and festivals celebrating or offering education about Deaf issues. Like other communities, the Deaf community is not immune to “outsider within” controversies. “Outsider within” is a term used to describe members of the same community who do not represent the ideal “image” of that community; Deaf people of colour, for example, are particularly susceptible to being regarded as outsiders. The ideal “image” of a Deaf person is an individual who are prominent members of the Deaf community: white educated males from generations of family members who are Deaf. They are often individuals whose families escaped Hitler’s regime, fled to the US in search of a better life, and were able to adapt to societies that were accommodating towards European White immigrants. The neglect of Deaf people of colour is the subject of much debate and affects all Deaf individuals of colour. Deaf children from the Caribbean who are of African or Indian descent are often referred to as “Deaf people of colour” [15].

In the case of Ranjit, he is a person of colour. While he may not have expressed feeling discriminated against Deaf White individuals, there is a need for him to be educated on the needs of deaf people of colour.

The needs of Deaf people of colour and other perceived “outsiders within” should be addressed to provide opportunities for improved socialization and acceptance within the Deaf community. According to experts, “there is a controversy within the community on the true definition of Deaf culture”, with some arguing that the original meaning of Deaf culture has been lost [15]. Others counter this by asserting that the Deaf community is “the Deaf world” with its own intrinsic values and patterns. It has also been observed, however, that “one can be in the Deaf world but not have or always manifest Deaf culture”.

Due to the ongoing exploration of the assertions of Deaf culture within the Deaf community, it is possible to assess the ways in which the community members’ experiences vary. The Deaf culture reflects the growing needs of the Deaf community, in addition to highlighting the community members’ strengths in “breaking down” the barriers that they encounter while living in a world of sound.

Building a Community of Support for Deaf Children of the Caribbean

It is imperative that an effective support system be established among the local Deaf community for the recognition and nurturing of Deaf children of Caribbean descent. Organizations including National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA), the Metro South Asian Deaf Association (MSADA), the National Asian Deaf Congress (NADC), and the Royal Deaf Association (RDA) provide numerous services and resources in conjunction with larger organizations that work towards supporting individuals of Caribbean descent. Initiatives such as the Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) programme are implemented for children within the Caribbean diaspora in collaboration with, for example, NADC. In a recent study, researchers investigated the link between parenting stress and the social support provided to hearing mothers of Deaf children and found that “most mothers of Deaf children do not feel a high level of general parenting stress or dissatisfaction with their lives and support networks” [20]. These researchers found that mothers of Deaf children need community support to reduce the stress caused by the issues that are unique to raising a Deaf child. They also observed that “because parenting stress was highly stable, special efforts should be made to intervene when mothers of deaf children are expressing high levels of stress” [20].

Community support is necessary to help parents of Deaf children overcome the challenges they face on a regular basis, including access to education and healthcare services. Deaf children must develop their socialization skills in order to build positive self-esteem and confidence in themselves. According to recent studies, “the effects on children in the home country differ according to country and gender of the migrating parent, with outcomes being better in some countries than others” [9]. This indicates that community support is more effective in some countries than in others. Community programmes designed to assist Caribbean families with Deaf children from lower SES brackets to overcome social isolation must be secured for these children to have the same opportunities available to hearing children. Parents of Deaf children must increase their awareness of the significant role fulfilled by family relationships in the lives of their Deaf children. Community members should improve the quality of parental support for parents of Deaf children through their enhanced involvement in various services.

The American Society for Deaf Children (ASDC) in the US, Deaf Child Worldwide in the UK, and the Australian Deaf Society (ADS) are some major leading organizations in their respective countries that collaborate with a wide range of local organisations and community groups in alleviating the challenges faced by families with Deaf children. The major common goal of these organizations is to provide valuable information and relevant resources for parents of Deaf children, teachers, administrators, and other specialists working with Deaf children. Special attention is directed towards the provision of educational services for Deaf children in the areas of communication, language, and literacy.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Deaf children from Caribbean families who have migrated to developed countries, such as the US, Canada, and the UK, require community support to ensure their adaptation to a new environment, on the understanding that their new home may come with unfortunate realities, including discrimination and oppression. Effective community support can also contribute to society's understanding of Deaf culture, and devise ways to combat the negative effects of "disrupted attachment" caused by forced familial separation, including cases wherein Deaf children are sent to residential schools located some distance from their family homes. The major concerns and controversies that persist within the Deaf community should be addressed and resolved through the joint actions of relevant local organizations and community groups. Overall, community support is necessary for Deaf children to thrive, and this support should encompass a range of aspects of the Deaf experience. Deaf culture should be a vehicle for the self-expression and self-discovery of its members. Access to education ensures that Deaf people can use their own culture and language effectively. The impact of parental migration on Caribbean Deaf children is significant; therefore, local organizations and community groups should seize every possible opportunity to facilitate the process of adaptation to the new environment and integration into society.

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ⁱ This name is fictional and does not reflect any individual within the Deaf community or any communities in the Caribbean.