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Essays by Deaf Youth: Implications for Counselors and Teachers

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Abstract

For several years, Gallaudet University's School of Education and Human Services and Pre-College National Mission Programs (now Clerc Center) have co-sponsored an annual national essay contest for deaf and hard of hearing students in schools across the United States. In 1998, an unusually high number of essays – 235 -- were received for review. During the process of serving as members of the judges' panel for this national contest, the co-authors noted potentially important trends and patterns across the corpus of essays.

The topic of the essays was "My Biggest Challenge." This open topic, designed to enable the young writers to have considerable freedom in selecting a topic that was meaningful to them, resulted in a number of essays built around several social, emotional, and communication concerns of being a deaf adolescent in a hearing world. As a corollary to the apparent meaningfulness of the topic to these youth, it was also noted that the general quality of the writing demonstrated clarity, intensity, and honesty.

As a result, the authors determined to conduct a systematic content analysis of these essays, with parent permission, in order to determine those themes that would be of most importance to professionals who work with deaf and hard of hearing adolescents in schools and other settings. This article, then, explores these patterns against a backdrop of prior literature and thinking in the field of educational and social/emotional development of deaf adolescents to derive a set of recommendations for the training of teachers, counselors, and other human service professionals as well as parents for the ultimate benefit of those students and others like them in the future.

We now continue with a review of relevant literature in the field of deafness to provide a platform for the analysis of the essays.

Related Literature

The literature on the social and emotional well-being of deaf adolescents addresses a variety of dimensions, including resilience, stress, social disadvantage, developmental issues, personality adjustment, and parental expectations. At the same time, much of the prior research is a reflection of the attitudinal context in which it occurred, especially in regard to attitudes of hearing persons toward deaf persons. The tone of some of the literature tends toward a pathological view of deafness; this tone results from the comparisons being made between deaf and hearing young people.

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Unquestionably, however, deaf young people do encounter difficulties and challenges.

A comparative study of deaf and hearing children, including early adolescents (Freeman, Malkin, & Hastings, 1975), found that the deaf children were "socially disadvantaged" due to the indirect as well as the direct consequences of deafness. A greater frequency of home moves than for hearing children due to parental search for an appropriate school program, less breadth of activities permitted by parents, reduced amount of play, and lower parental expectations for deaf children were reported; however, the authors of that study acknowledge the difficulty in sorting out the primary and secondary consequences of deafness due to delays in medical diagnosis and the influence of educational controversies related to the appropriate language of instruction.

It is widely recognized that the majority of deaf children have hearing families. Until the recent development of parent education programs, most deaf children of hearing parents were known to enter school with a "relatively impoverished social repertoire and breadth of social experience" by comparison to hearing children's social and personality background, according to Marschark (1993, p. 71). Further, as noted by Freeman (1979), deaf children tend to encounter more "life changes" that require serious adaptations, and are in general permitted to do less by their parents than are hearing children (Freeman, et al., 1975). On the other hand, deaf children with deaf parents make more positive self-evaluations, due to differences in the parental expectations for academic and communication achievement; the deaf child's ability to fulfill the parental goals of a deaf parent is said to be a prime influence on that child's self-image (Meadow, 1969).

Self-image is thus still another factor in social interaction for deaf adolescents. The limited social experiences for some deaf adolescents with the hearing community can pose a problem in this arena. Emerton, Hurwitz, and Bishop (1979) indicated that when deaf adolescents are told directly or are being indirectly shown that they may be implicitly inferior, this process leads to feeling inferior; this situation then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, the social support system within the deaf community and its concomitantly nurturing self-concept have been found to buffer the effects of various kinds of stressful experiences (Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1994). Pudlas (1996) found gender differences in the self-concept of deaf youth; girls tend to have higher self-concept, and a study of deaf college students by Garrison (1978) found that assertiveness and self-identity in groups were related to individuals' self-concept. In fact, an entire literature in the area of resilience bears upon this situation, e.g.,

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Charlson, Bird, and Strong (1999) in a set of case studies of deaf high schoolers who were considered to be successful found one common characteristic – a high level of resilience. The successful students were from varied sociocultural, linguistic, and educational backgrounds. The young writers of the essays in the present study in many instances indicated a strong sense of personal resilience in spite of the life challenges about which they wrote.

The work of Erikson has contributed significantly to the understanding of this arena through his articulate focus on ego identity for coping with the social environment. Bozik (1985) conducted a study of deaf adolescents and their psychosocial development; the deaf adolescents who demonstrated better ego identity were found to have had a more adequate psychosocial adjustment in their lives. Kennedy (1973) in a further analysis of deaf adolescence discussed identity versus role confusion in the age group 13 to 18. She pointed out that students in day programs within deaf education are perhaps under greater stress than students in residential school placements because the day program students live with their families (usually hearing) but at the same time have minimal communication with their parents and siblings. In this context, Chough (1970) pointed out that deaf adolescents frequently have unfavorable conceptions of themselves that in many cases can be traced to the attitudes of their hearing parents.

Nonetheless, difficulties with ego identity are not inevitable; the study by Bozik (1985) of deaf adolescents in a mainstreamed school found several positive indicators. A large suburban county school system provided a strong support system for the deaf children in the regular schools, which incorporated the following elements: families received ongoing support, staff were given opportunities for professional growth and in-service training, and hearing students were assigned to become partners with the deaf students. The results of the study of deaf students in this particular environment indicated that there need not be an inevitable relationship between level of ego development and degree of hearing loss for those who have had the advantage of such a support system. On the other hand, Cohen (1978) found that deaf adolescents in mainstreamed schools without such support systems were frequently lonely and lacked involvement in the "social milieu" of the school. He continued that deaf adolescents have the same societal forces to deal with as do hearing adolescents (emancipation, independence, social role, etc.,) but deaf students also have the additional layer of the family "trauma" related to deafness in a hearing family, which in turn adds to the normal pressures that accompany adolescence.

A recent study by Rehkemper (1996) analyzed deaf children with hearing parents; all subjects were prelingually deaf persons' of college age

with either hereditary or non-hereditary deafness, and with hearing parents. The non-hereditarily deaf subjects made more errors than the hereditarily deaf on cognitive tests of sustained attention, indicating difficulty with response inhibition; these subjects also tended to have more interpersonal problems and poorer psychosocial functioning than their hereditarily deaf peers with hearing parents. [It was not possible in the present study to obtain detailed demographic information so as to differentiate between the writers who were hereditarily versus non-hereditarily deaf with hearing parents].

Thus, a variety of studies by researchers and reports from educators and other social service professionals appear to support in various ways the phenomenon that at least a significant segment of deaf adolescents in the United States either have had or do experience difficulties in social and emotional adjustment in a hearing world; it is thus reasonable to expect that an open-choice topic for their writing would reflect in many cases these challenges.

Method

Participants

Each student who was invited to participate in the national essay contest attended one of the programs serving children who are deaf, as identified in the Gallaudet University Research Institute's Annual Survey (1997). Two hundred thirty-five children submitted essays on the topic, "My Biggest Challenge." The families of 108 (46%) of the 235 submissions permitted analysis of their children's essay for this study. In regard to gender, 65% were female and 35% were male. A majority (65%) of the participants attended special schools for deaf children; 6% were enrolled in day programs for deaf children; and 29% attended local school programs in a mainstream environment; the degree to which children were mainstreamed daily in any of these latter programs is unknown. The ages of the students ranged in age from 11 to 19 years.

Data Collection

After the collection of the 235 essays for reading and judging by the panel of reviewers, awards were determined for the 10 outstanding essays in the group, and scholarships were awarded to the top essay writers. Then parent permission letters were sent to the parents of all of the writers to seek approval for analyzing the student essays for content themes, with the understanding that although certain excerpts could be quoted in the study, the identity of the writers would be protected. Of this group, parent approval permissions were received from 108 parents.

At that point, illustrative example quotations were identified from one or more essays within each of the identified categories, and are provided below in the section on themes identified.

Data Analysis

The theoretical approach to this study is grounded in phenomenological research. In an iterative process, participants had been requested to write essays that expressed individual subjective experiences. Deaf students themselves interpreted and explained their "biggest challenge." The data were analyzed through reading, discussion among the co-authors, and re-reading. All of the 108 essays were read separately by each author to obtain a general impression of the challenges described by the students. Preliminary specific categories were then identified from recurring topics. The essays were then re-read, and the topics of papers were organized within the categories identified. Overlapping categories were then eliminated, and categories were refined. In order to limit the impact of the researchers' personal values, beliefs, or possible biases, one of the authors engaged in extended separate discussions with two disinterested doctoral students who were shown the essays to obtain their perceived categories and to validate the categories already identified. The essays were analyzed based only on the dominant overt themes. A final categorization of all essays was then carried out by the co-authors, and discussion began about the implications of the categories and the frequency of essays within each category.

Recommendations were then developed, based on the analysis, in relation to appropriate implications for professionals working with deaf adolescents.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the following:

1. The original group of 235 essays was non-random in that it was based on either active interest in responding to an essay contest, interest in attending college and thus competing for the scholarship money represented by the contest, or membership in classrooms where the teacher actually assigned the task of writing to the topic.

2. The fact that some essay writers acted on their own whereas others carried out the work as part of a writing assignment by the teacher means that some of the writers in the latter group may not have had strong concerns if they had been able to make a free choice to write or not to write, whereas the students who volunteered on their own time were probably expressing concerns that were highly active.

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3. This study was carried out on only a subset of the 235 essays (the 108 whose parents gave permission); the deaf writers whose parents gave permission may also represent a special subset of the entire group in that those were parents who had some interest of an active nature in their children's adolescent development and education.

4. With content analysis of the kind used in this procedure, individual judgments must be made by the analysts. Though having three reviewers and two objective, uninvolved readers assisted in ensuring some objectivity in the analysis, nonetheless an element of subjective judgment must of necessity be a part of such a procedure.

5. Some essays reflected more than one of the concerns to be described below under the categories, whereas others reflected only a single concern theme; this difference affected the frequency counts in that only the dominant theme was counted. Thus, the actual frequency of certain topics in some less dominant form may actually be higher than reported.

Results

Categories Identified

After completion of the reading and analysis steps, essay themes were grouped into five categories: (1) Relationships, (2) Communication, (3) Education, (4) Self-concept, and (5) Other. We discuss below each of these theme groups in turn.

Relationships Theme

Relationships with hearing and other deaf individuals were stated as a challenge by a significant subgroup (28%) of the participants. Topics discussed were related to, for example, difficulties in making friends with hearing and deaf peers, problems with parents, and sibling disputes. One student in a mainstreamed class wondered, *"if I would EVER get friends."* Another youngster who had transferred from a mainstream setting to a school for the deaf proclaimed, *"I made more friends than I had ever thought possible."*

One writer expressed the clash between her and her parents with the words, *"my mom and dad keeps telling me to slow down because I am used to signing really fast; my parents keep punishing me because I use very high voices. My parents are always nice to my older [hearing] sister."*

Many of the students explicitly said or implied that their challenges were related to their deafness. However, some were not; while discussing the value of true friendships, one student wrote, *"I would rather be associated with an enemy than a false friend."*

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Half of the 18 girls whose essays focused on relationships attended local mainstream schools in special classes, but all of the nine boys in this category attended schools for the deaf. Girls more often than boys wrote about challenges that were not deaf-specific, such as dealing with divorced parents and dating difficulties.

Communication Theme

Communication issues were expressed as difficult by 21% of the youngsters. One student expressed the sentiments of many in the sample, *"I wish my dream come true that all Americans to learn sign language."*

Others expressed the loneliness of not being able to participate in the communication process with hearing peers. A young woman told of being with her hearing friends and *"suddenly they roar in laughter while I stand helplessly not understanding what the joke was."*

Many students expressed feelings of sadness and frustration about not being able to communicate with their families. One student divulged his feelings about his hearing parents, *"I wish they were deaf, so they can understand me more. They make me frustrated."* Others make general comments such as *"I continue to be challenged with communication problems every day."*

However, though one youngster considered it a challenge to communicate with members of her extended family, she was hopeful and stated, *"Although it may take a little bit of extra effort and/or time to communicate, I know we can enrich each other's lives."*

The frequency of occurrence of the communication issue was quite similar among boys and girls (24% of the males, 20% of the females). In addition, the communication issue occurred evenly across types of school placement – 22% of the students emphasizing this theme were from schools for the deaf, whereas 20% were from local schools. However, a gender difference in emphasis emerged noticeably: male students considered communication with family/friends and the general hearing public as almost equally problematic, whereas female students expressly stated that their communication challenges were more frequently with family members or close friends than with the hearing community as a whole.

Education Theme

Thirty-one (29%) of the students discussed dilemmas specific to school life. School placement was expressed as an obstacle for 5% of the students. One student said that her school for the deaf was not academically challenging and requested a hearing public school placement for her

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American literature class, *"I found out I was behind I requested a better class."*

Other students discussed the difficulties encountered in an integrated school setting, such as, *"I bet I know the real pain that other hearing impaired children feel; sitting in the front of the classroom, telling the teacher and student to repeat what they say, being called names, and giving you a disgusted look."*

A poignant comment came from a student in a mainstreamed class after being transferred to a school for the deaf, *"Now I have no boundaries."* Two students expressed concern with the closing of their residential school for the deaf: *"People don't think about our future. They think about saving money by putting us in public schools."*

Communication and relationship issues could also be inferred from these essays, although not explicitly stated. In this group, 8% discussed difficulty with specific subject matter, and 4% referred to challenges in their participation in extra-curricular activities in a hearing school. Again, relationship and communication problems were implied; hence, the overlap with extra-curricular activities. Low expectations by hearing people for these deaf student writers were reported as a concern by only 3% of the participants. However, though some youngsters were disturbed by low expectations, others felt challenged by high expectations. One student's response to hearing people's implication that he could not achieve was, *"[People say to me] 'You can't.' You know what I say to that phrase? I say I can, and I will."*

One youngster was spurred on by her family's high expectations that she could succeed as a competitive ice skater. Expectations of self also challenged some writers to succeed, as one student asserted, *"You can overcome anything if you have the confidence in yourself that you can succeed."*

Education was clearly more of a concern for boys than girls in this group (34% vs. 26%). Sub-areas emerging in the education category were school setting, specific subject matter, teacher's expectations, and general school topics such as obtaining a good education or good grades; 46% of the boys discussed general educational issues, whereas 39% of the girls were concerned with succeeding in specific subject areas. Four of the eight students in mainstream school settings in this category cited interaction with hearing peers in school extracurricular activities as problematic. However, students who attended schools for the deaf where access to extracurricular activities is usually unimpeded never raised this social issue. On the other hand, students in local school settings did not state concerns with specific academic subjects.

Self-Concept Theme

A small group (7%) of the essayists explicitly referred to concerns related to self-concept. These issues ranged from questioning their identity as a deaf person to now accepting it. One student clearly struggled with his deafness: *"My biggest challenge is accepting myself I did not feel proud of my deafness. Instead, I secretly prayed that I'd turn hearing overnight."*

A hard of hearing youngster expressed confusion about his identity: *"I wasn't hearing but I didn't feel fully deaf. I cannot figure out my identity still."* More severely deafened adolescents expressed feelings that ranged from sadness, *"That image of being like every other kid ceased when I reached first grade and my classmates made fun of the sound of my voice. Being different had become my greatest enemy"*, to acceptance, *"I can't pinpoint the exact moment in time when I accepted my identity as a deaf person, or when my anger faded."*

To summarize, these youngsters as a whole group discussed self-concept as a challenge less frequently than the authors originally expected; only seven girls and one boy wrote about this area. However, this theme underlaid many of the essays that were primarily about other themes, suggesting that adolescents are not yet always able to articulate clearly this theme as a challenge in their lives.

Other Themes

A small percentage (8%) referred to one or more of a variety of general (non-deafness related) social issues, including teenage sex and pregnancy, drugs, and issues of current importance to some of today's mainstream youth such as the piercing of body parts. For, example, one student expressed with pride that, *"drugs don't control my life anymore."*

Another student expressed frustration by having *"to endure going to the movies and not understanding what all the talk was about."*

Two students had received cochlear implants and now discuss the challenges of this new technology: *"I was deaf; cochlear implant made me hear, but it is hard to do mouth talk; I will learn to mouth talk. I want to try to learn."*

A third subgroup wrote about health problems unrelated to deafness that cause them concern. Twice as many girls as boys, and twice as many students in local schools as in schools for the deaf, discussed non-deafness-related social issues such as religious persecution and the dangers of communicating on an Internet chat room. This distribution would reflect the greater involvement in mainstream society that tends to characterize students in mainstreamed school environments.

Discussion

From the results above, the coping strategies used or considered by the respondents facing challenges as expressed in their writing across all theme groups were:

Accepting oneself
Requesting parental assistance
Personal reflection
Being persistent in the face of challenges
The importance of positive thinking
Seeking counseling for personal problems
Self-advocacy in dealing with challenges
Changing school placement
Using written communication

The student essays which revealed the relationships theme affirmed the findings of Freeman, et al. (1975) and others in relation to social disadvantage for deaf youth; that social disadvantage may become even more obvious than in the past with the significant trend at present to mainstreaming deaf students. The references to social adjustment by these writers appear to apply to both educational and non-educational settings in this sample of deaf writers.

The communication theme is fully understandable in the context of the prevalence of some form of sign language as the preferred language of instruction in the majority of deaf education programs in this country; the frequency of this theme is explainable in view of the high percentage of mainstreamed deaf students in environments where, although they may have a sign language interpreter for classroom instruction, in settings outside the classroom they still have communication barriers because most of their hearing peers do not know sign language.

The fact that about the same percentage of students in schools for the deaf as in mainstream schools also wrote about communication as a challenge may be the result of greater interaction today than in the past by these deaf students in the local community outside of classroom time.

The education theme is understandable because schooling occupies the greater part of these writers' daily waking hours, and cuts across the communication and relationship themes.

The self-concept theme correlates well with the cited research. We see in some essays the concern about possible inferiority cited by Emerton et al. (1979); however, in this sample of essays, we also see several examples of determination to overcome those feelings and assert that they are equal to hearing peers. These individuals seem to fit Bozik's (1985) finding that

those with stronger ego and identity make stronger psychosocial adjustment. These individuals clearly show evidence of resilience referred to by earlier cited researchers, such as Charlson et al. (1999).

On the other hand, Hagerty et al.'s (1994) reference to self-concept being bolstered by the social support system of the deaf community seems not to have emerged; again, the prevalence of mainstreaming of deaf students makes affiliation with such a deaf community less likely to occur without special effort in today's world. Kennedy's (1973) cited reference to greater stress on day-program deaf students than these in residential settings would support that interpretation; Cohen's (1978) study of mainstreamed students' missing support system also supports that interpretation.

Let us now examine the implications of these categories of findings in relation to the field in general and for the preparation of professionals.

Implications for Professionals

The challenges which deaf students encounter are multifaceted. Most of the essays discussed only one challenge; however, other challenges can be discerned. Therefore, categorizing the students' essays was a complex task. For example, students may have stated that their challenge was school placement; however, while reading the essays it was obvious to the authors that the students also had difficulty, for example, in making or sustaining relationships, communicating, and understanding and developing a solid self-concept. Likewise, poor communication impacted on their social relationships; in turn, weak relationships appear to affect their self-esteem. It was a challenge to disaggregate the data and specifically delineate "a challenge" without further investigation. It is apparent, however, that those students who were able to cope with their challenge were those who had support from the adults and peers around them. Several implications emerged from this analysis which are worthy of attention for several different constituencies as outlined below:

A. School Counselors

School counselors serving deaf and hard of hearing children may be greatly encouraged by the analysis of this essay contest. The essay analysis provides remarkable evidence of the thoughtfulness and resourcefulness of these 108 visual learners from school programs across the country.

In her masterful study of "resilient adults," Higgins (1994) talked about our need to "identify and foster adaptive strengths in anyone trying to forge a future in hate's ashes" (p. 3). How can school counselors now make use of the essay data in (a) counseling the deaf and hard of hearing students; (b) counseling with parents; and (c) expanding prevention-oriented group

counseling to foster adaptive strengths and resilience? With considerable overlap, the student essays indicate the centrality of relationships and the communication skills that support those relationships, at home and in school. School counselors serving deaf and hard of hearing students should:

1. Organize Parent Discussion Groups. Hearing parents, siblings, and extended family members can benefit from a discussion of these student-essay data and their anecdotal remarks. Discussion topics in such groups might include: What are your reactions to the "My Biggest Challenge" response themes? Can these hearing family members identify with the relationship, communication, school, and self-concept challenges in their own development? Why is effective communication with the deaf child absolutely essential for effective mentoring and problem solving modeling by parents? How is effective communication in loving family relationships a springboard for the development of the deaf child's positive self-concept, relationship skills, and problem solving skills? Are parents aware that family relationship, communication, and school failure problems are the most powerful predictors of child abuse as well as adult drug and alcohol problems? (McCrone, 1993).

2. Establish Prevention-Oriented Developmental Group Counseling with Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students. The school counseling profession has come to understand that it has a central role in facilitating the healthy psychosocial development of all students, particularly deaf and hard of hearing students who may not have effective communication at home. The transition from the therapeutic to the developmental/prevention school counseling model is also the practical consequence of the national school counselor/student ratio of 1:250 (Stone & Bradley, 1994). Issues to be considered here could include: How can school counselors use the developmental group to teach deaf and hard of hearing children the "ABC's" of problem-solving and psychosocial resilience? How does it help the deaf child to see resilient deaf adult role models? How can deaf and hard of hearing children learn to ask questions or ask for help? How can we help these deaf and hard of hearing children learn to do group and individual problem solving? How can we use role-playing, play therapy, art activities, and essay contests in developmental groups to teach and then measure resilience skills? How might we track significant improvements in the resilience skills of deaf and hard of hearing children and better academic performance?

3.　　Conduct Resilience Assessments and the IEP/LRE. School counselors and parents should now advocate strongly for special education placements for deaf and hard of hearing students that have the greatest probability of promoting academic and resiliency goals.

B. Educators of Deaf Students Should:

1.　　In either special or mainstreamed programs, be provided with information related to the stresses and concerns faced by deaf adolescents, using examples from the above theme categories.

2.　　Have access to information on appropriate risk signals in deaf adolescents, so that appropriate activities or follow-up assistance and support can be referred without loss of valuable time.

3.　　Build on opportunities for helping deaf adolescents to deal with concerns through the mechanism of written expression, such as with the essay program on which this study is based. Teachers, working together with counselors, can assist when the deaf students have externalized these concerns in such ways, and can also help the students to use these concerns as a part of the creative process.

C. School Administrators Should:

1.　　Be particularly aware of the challenges expressed by these writers, so that appropriate school placement decisions can be at least partially based on considerations of social and emotional risk. Specifically, placement decisions for certain adolescents may be clearly best in special programs, rather than in the isolation of mainstreamed programs. In the process of determining placement in the Individualized Education Program process, such factors, in addition to the academic area, are clearly important to consider.

2.　　Provide the opportunity and funding to establish Parent Education Programs. Parent Education Programs provide excellent support networks for parents. In these environments, parents can obtain information about their child's educational, social and emotional abilities and needs. Parents can also be provided with opportunities to master communication skills that will enable them to interact with their children.

3. Encourage student interactive opportunities in both directions. Deaf and hard of hearing youngsters in schools and programs for deaf children should be involved with their hearing peers. Likewise, deaf and hard of hearing adolescents in local school settings need opportunities to interact with significant numbers of other deaf and hard of hearing students who are placed in special schools and programs for deaf children.

4. Provide in-service training opportunities for their general education faculty and human services staff regarding the unique needs of the deaf and hard of hearing students placed in their schools.

5. Provide for family services and sign language programs for parents in order to foster children's resilience and psychosocial competence.

6. Organize peer support groups for deaf adolescents within school programs.

Conclusion

The above data comprise an affirmation of a number of the ideas and findings from the literature cited earlier. This non-random sampling of the concerns of deaf adolescents in one particular year serves at the very least as indication of critical factors in the development of deaf adolescent life. It is, of course, important to test these findings with further investigation. For the moment, however, the most important benefit from this study would be the immediate institution of careful planning and anticipation of potential concerns, such that deaf adolescents (who will soon be deaf adults) are able to deal appropriately with their special needs and then become the productive citizens of which they are fully capable.

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