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# Considerations for Best Practice When Conducting Qualitative Research With Deaf and Hard of Hearing Participants

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*A review of existing research with deaf or hard of hearing students reveals a focus on academic and social outcomes utilizing predominantly quantitative methods of research. Quantitative research typically generates numerical data and the measurement of discrete variables, whereas qualitative research allows researchers to delve deeper into what cannot easily be put into numbers: lived experiences, meaning, and context. To gain a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of students who are deaf, more qualitative research is needed. Qualitative research on deaf students' perspectives has the potential to contribute to the development of beneficial practices that will support students. This article describes considerations and best practices when conducting qualitative research with deaf participants, followed by an example of how such practices were applied in a research study on deaf students' lived experiences of inclusion.*

*Un examen des recherches existantes sur les élèves sourds ou malentendants révèle que l'accent est mis sur les résultats scolaires et sociaux en utilisant principalement des méthodes de recherche quantitatives. La recherche quantitative génère généralement des données numériques et la mesure de variables discrètes, alors que la recherche qualitative permet aux chercheurs d'approfondir ce qui n'est pas facilement quantifiable : les expériences vécues, la signification et le contexte. Pour parvenir à une compréhension nuancée des expériences et des perspectives des élèves sourds, il est nécessaire de mener davantage de recherches qualitatives. La recherche qualitative sur les perspectives des élèves sourds a le potentiel de contribuer au développement de pratiques bénéfiques qui soutiendront les élèves. Cet article décrit les considérations et les meilleures pratiques pour mener une recherche qualitative avec des participants sourds, suivi d'un exemple de la façon dont ces pratiques ont été appliquées dans une étude de recherche sur les expériences vécues par les élèves sourds en matière d'inclusion.*

In recent years, qualitative research with people who are deaf or hard of hearing has been gaining momentum. Although the existing literature is still overwhelmingly quantitative in nature, qualitative research is helping to expand current knowledge and understanding of deaf populations. A major strength of qualitative research is its ability to illuminate human experiences and perspectives in ways that attend to context and capture nuanced aspects of people's lives (Leavy, 2020). These strengths are especially relevant to research on the lived experiences of deaf students. To date, however, research on the perspectives and experiences of students who are deaf has rarely appeared in educational literature (Rohatyn-Martin & Hayward, 2019), and Cawthon and Garberoglio (2021) have argued that deaf-centered lenses of research are noticeably absent. Previously, studies on academic and social aspects of deaf students' lives have primarily been studied from the perspectives of educators (Antia et al., 2002; Luckner & Muir, 2001; Schwab et al., 2019), parents (Bat-Chava & Deignan, 2001; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004; Most & Ingber, 2016), and hearing peers (Cambra, 2002; Hung & Paul, 2006). Findings from these studies provide valuable information on what educators and hearing peers experience in inclusive classrooms with students who are deaf, and on what parents perceive as happening within these classroom settings; and many of these studies have helped inform educational policies and practices for deaf students (Rohatyn-Martin & Hayward, 2019). At the same time, the existing research does not adequately capture the perceptions and experiences of the students themselves (Cawthon & Garberoglio, 2021; Lightfoot et al., 1999; Singleton et al, 2017), and narrative methods can significantly contribute to illuminating one's experiences in ways that attend to context, depth, and nuances in people's lives (Ellis, 2006). Van Der Klift and Kunc (2019) have added, "if the stories that are given the most credibility are the stories that professionals [and others] tell, we are effectively … saying we know better than they [students] know themselves" (p. 74). Thus, successful inclusive education (i.e., policies and practices) can only happen when students' perspectives are included (Cawthon & Garberoglio, 2021; Jarvis et al., 2003; Singleton et al, 2017).

Furthermore, for researchers who wish to conduct qualitative educational research with deaf participants, there appears to be a growing literature on the topic of methodological issues related to qualitative research with this population. Individuals who are deaf are a unique population as approximately 95% of children who are deaf are born to hearing parents, who typically communicate orally that is, in spoken English or other spoken languages (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004). In addition, academic and social outcomes for students who are deaf remain highly variable, in part because there still remains little systematic research on critical contextual factors (e.g., educational policy, teacher training, language and communication needs, and specialized student supports) that aid in determining the effectiveness of educational supports for this population (Cawthon & Garberoglio, 2021; Rohatyn-Martin, 2017). Thus, much research is needed, including research on students' perspectives of their education, as well as research on the various methods within qualitative research focusing on deaf students (Beal-Alvarez, 2017; Graham & Horejes, 2017; Kusters et al., 2017; Singleton et al., 2017).

The purpose of this article is to highlight several methodological issues that we believe should be considered when conducting qualitative, particularly narrative, educational research with deaf participants. Based on our research experience, we focus on five areas: (a) diversity of disability cultures and identities; (b) ethical issues; (c) research positionality; (d) participant interviews; and (e) knowledge mobilization. We then provide an illustration of how these methodological issues may appear in practice, through our discussion of a recent qualitative research study (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017; Rohatyn-Martin & Hayward, 2019) that used narrative methods to explore the experiences of deaf students in inclusive education classrooms.

Within literature on disabilities, several researchers have pointed to the benefits of utilizing narrative research with participants from diverse populations. For example, Block and Weatherford (2013) stated that narrative and storytelling are ideal ways of capturing and understanding the subjective realities of people with disabilities. Additionally, Ellis (2006) suggested that narrative methods may provide a fluid avenue for participants with intellectual or communication difficulties to express their experiences and knowledge. Narrative approaches promote insight, empathy, and recognition of what is important to participants, based on participants' own descriptions and understandings of their experiences (Ellis, 2006).

## Diversity of Deaf Cultures and Identities

Research with deaf individuals requires the recognition, understanding, and consideration of how diversity may impact the research methods used in a study. Just as there is no single "type" of deaf person, there is no single prescribed way of involving deaf participants in research. Given the diversity and heterogeneity of deaf populations, it is important to consider how identity, linguistic, and cultural differences may come into play during the research process; and researchers should plan for and accommodate the different ways in which participants may communicate and self-identify (Holcomb et al., 2019). For example, this population, like other populations is made up of those who have various intersectionalities, such as those who self-identify as deaf, BIPOC, and 2SLGBTQ+, and who are of various cultural backgrounds (e.g. Asian, Indian, Indigenous). There may also be significant variability in language acquisition, language of communication, diagnosis and amplification age, hearing levels, and amplification type (if any). Therefore, a range of communication options should be made available to participants, such as a sign language interpreter, a Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) provider, or paper and pen or pencil.

Another aspect of cultural awareness and sensitivity is knowing how individual participants self-identify, and using the terminology that participants use to identify themselves (Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, hearing loss, hearing differences, disabled, etc.). When conducting qualitative research with people who are deaf, participants may identify their hearing status as a personal attribute, such as a linguistic difference, a disability, or as a medical diagnosis (Kusters et al., 2017; McKee et al., 2013). Paul and Moores (2012) stated that a deaf community, culture, and identity exist; however there may be varying definitions with the terms. This was evident in a study by Holcomb and colleagues (2019), who found that participants provided different responses when asked about their deaf identity. For example, some participants identified as deaf, some as hard of hearing, and some as cochlear implant users. Consultations from within the deaf community described the need to understand deaf identity as a fluid notion (National Deaf Centre, 2021) and to be aware of this when reporting how a participant self-identifies at the time (Blankmeyer Burke, 2019). This may not only increase rapport in the relationship between researcher and participant, but it may also enhance the researcher's understanding of participants' perspectives.

## Ethical Issues

Although numerous ethical considerations permeate all aspects of qualitative research with participants who are DHH, in this section, we focus on three ethical issues that we regard as particularly salient. These include considerations related to (a) respect for participants, (b) consent, and (c) anonymity and confidentiality.

### *Respect for Participants*

As in any study, the need for treating participants with respect is paramount throughout the research process. In the context of working with participants from diverse backgrounds, McDonald (2012) stated that respect includes (a) being honest and inclusive in all aspects of the research process, and (b) portraying individuals in a positive light when sharing research findings. For example, Baker-Shenk and Kyle (1990) stated that some members of the Deaf community may not be as invested in research that excludes them from the research decision-making process. Singleton et al. (2014) have identified trust and ethical issues in studies with deaf research participants, including translation issues and distrust toward non-signing researchers. Valuing, respecting, and including groups in the development of interview/focus group questions, in data analysis, and in knowledge mobilization (e.g., as seen in community-based research) creates opportunities for these communities to understand the potential benefits of participating in research. Kusters et al. (2017) emphasized that "research should be endorsed by deaf/sign language communities before, during and after the research" (p. 34). McDonald (2012) also suggested that participants feel respected when a researcher spends time getting to know them rather than just sourcing them for research information. This view is echoed in the literature on ethical research practices with deaf participants (e.g., Baker-Shenk & Kyle, 1990; Harris et al., 2009; McKee et al., 2013; Singleton et al., 2014; Young & Hunt, 2011). A prominent theme in the literature is that respect is founded upon understanding deaf communities, including the communities' values, culture, and language. In addition, Singleton et al., (2017) pointed to the need for inclusive research programs, as well as the effort required to "involve a broad-based team of consultants including deaf educators, deaf adults, deaf education scholars or sign language linguists." (p. 89).

Further, the risk of cultural appropriation needs to be considered. Cultural appropriation can occur, for example, when researchers reap the benefits of learning from those who are deaf without giving due recognition to the contributors from the community. Also, it has been found that the perspectives of those who are deaf are often absent throughout the planning, data collection, data analysis, and knowledge mobilization stages of the research process (Harris et al., 2009; Singleton et al, 2017). Therefore, we suggest that when conducting research with deaf participants, the research team includes deaf researchers.

### *Consent*

Other researchers have focused on consent issues when working with diverse participants. For example, Iacono (2006) suggested that when working with vulnerable and diverse populations, it is important to ensure that consent has been given voluntarily and that participants understand to what they are consenting. Iacono also recommended including participants with intellectual disabilities in the creation of a consent process because moving beyond informed consent gains community support and interest in research participation. More specifically, Johnson and colleagues (2011) suggested gaining consent with the deaf community firstly through a conversation to describe the study, and secondly through meeting face-to-face to discuss an explanatory statement about the study. These processes could be beneficial for the deaf community as there could be explanations in spoken or written English, or American Sign Language (ASL) videos explaining the study, depending on the participants' preferred language.

### *Anonymity and Confidentiality*

Nind (2008) stated that some participants may be proud of their stories and wish to be named within a research study. However, there may be unforeseen negative consequences to including one's name or other identifying information. Additionally, ensuring anonymity can be problematic when video recordings are shown at scholarly conferences or other venues. A right to anonymity is important in any research study but becomes critical in small or tight-knit populations where, despite the use of pseudonyms and pixelization of facial images, even a relatively small identifier could make a participant known to the whole community. The deaf population is a relatively small population when comparing to the general population (Beal-Alvarez, 2017), so confidentiality and anonymity must be key considerations with deaf participants. If a participant feels like they can be recognized from an identifier, they may be unwilling to fully share their experiences for fear of backlash or retaliation. Thus, it is crucial to understand these issues and discuss them openly with participants so they may carefully consider the benefits and limitations prior to giving informed consent.

## Participant Interviews

Participant interviews with those who are deaf will have many similarities to those who are hearing; however, the use of interpreters and issues related to space, location, and the recording process need careful consideration.

When utilizing a sign language interpreter, there are recommendations as to where the interpreter should be seated based on the preference of the deaf signer/participant (De Weerdt, 2016). It is also important to note that discussions with participants about where the interpreter could be seated should occur before starting the interview to ensure optimal exchange of communication and understandings.

Kitchin and Tate (2000) stated that interviews should be sufficiently recorded to ensure appropriate analysis and trustworthiness of a study. For participants who are deaf, this includes capturing all sign language, body language, or physical prompts (Kitchin & Tate, 2000). Rohatyn-Martin (2017) described how they met with a deaf educational consultant from a local school board, to understand implications for the rooms in which the interviews were taking place. According to the deaf educational consultant, camera angles must guarantee participants' hands are visible if outstretched sideways or above their head. Expressions on a participant's face also need to be captured to interpret the meaning/expression behind any signs or movement.

## Researcher Positionality

When conducting all research, it is essential that researchers state their positionality, or their background with the topic at hand. For instance, a researcher might identify themselves as a deaf person whose views of being deaf have been influenced by having a cochlear implant since childhood. A researcher's positionality reflects the stance that has been adopted within a study, including a researcher's beliefs about the nature of social reality, beliefs about the nature of knowledge, and assumptions about human nature (Holmes, 2020). One's positionality, including connections between their personal and social experiences, could then influence how research is conducted, along with its outcomes (Graham & Horejes, 2017; Kusters et al., 2017). As researchers are learning and evolving over the course of their careers, these positionalities tend to change over time. Thus, the personal experiences through which positionality is shaped may influence what researchers bring to research encounters, their choice of processes, and their interpretation of outcomes (Graham & Horejes, 2017; Holmes, 2020). According to Graham and Horejes (2017), "when researchers are clear with their own positionality and are transparent about the research process, it can create collaboration between the researcher and the participants" (p.64).

### Knowledge Mobilization

Another consideration includes creating knowledge mobilization practices that are personally, culturally, and linguistically accessible to participants and their community (Kwan et al., 2003). For deaf participants this typically means knowledge mobilization in both signed and written languages. If people who are deaf are not able to access research results in their preferred language, it creates unnecessary barriers for this community to be meaningfully engaged in research. If a research team has the means to disseminate their research in both a signed language and a written language, this would reach a larger population, including access for the participants.

Furthermore, researchers should consider how deaf participants may be represented—or misrepresented—through the inclusion of quotations attributed to participants when disseminating study findings (Young & Temple, 2014). There are some individuals who are deaf and for whom English is not their first language (Ayantoye & Luckner, 2016). In fact, the Gallaudet Research Institute (2011) reported that over 20% of K–12 students who are deaf are categorized as English Language Learners. Thus, there is a risk that participants might be unfairly judged as less cognitively capable compared to their peers due to the presence of language or grammatical errors in their interview responses. There is also a risk of sign language translations being incorrect (Kusters et al., 2017). Furthermore, when performing data cleaning (e.g., correcting grammatical errors and omissions), researchers should consider how disparities in data representation might portray differences in levels of English language or signed language proficiency between participants that may not otherwise exist. What becomes vital then is to complete member-checking interviews after interpretations are made to ensure participants feel the meaning generated is in line with what they were intending.

## Case Example

In this section, we describe how some of the above issues manifested themselves in a recent qualitative research study exploring the perceptions and day-to-day experiences of inclusion for Canadian students who are deaf (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017).

### Description of the Study

Study participants were six junior and senior high school students (ages 12 to 18) who had moderate-to-profound bilateral sensorineural hearing levels and who attended inclusive classrooms at five different schools within a large urban city in Western Canada. Two students communicated in ASL, three students communicated in spoken English, and one student communicated through Total Communication (TC), utilizing spoken English supported by Signed Exact English (SEE). Four of the six participants had one or two cochlear implants, and two participants wore digital hearing aids. Amplification ages varied from birth to six years old. Students participated in individual semi-structured research interviews in which they were asked to share their experiences and stories of inclusion in educational settings. The data were analyzed through the use of narrative research methods, to highlight participants' stories and experiences (Ellis, 2006).

## Diversity and Identity

Rohatyn-Martin (2017) found important linguistic and cultural differences in how study participants identified themselves and others. Participants had varied family backgrounds and educational experiences that affected their development of self. Some participants spoke about their perceptions of themselves and their identities as Deaf (identifying with the Deaf culture) or deaf (having varying hearing levels, and not identifying with Deaf culture). As researchers, we took care to know how participants self-identified, and to use the terminology that they used to identify themselves (Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, hearing loss, hearing differences, etc.). This was a way of showing respect to participants and helped inform our understanding of the perspectives or lenses that participants brought to the research process. Furthermore, because participants varied greatly in grade level, first language, amplification technology, and other characteristics that could influence data collection and analysis, we planned for the potential need for a diversity of supports. Rohatyn-Martin (2017) demonstrated three examples of this: (a) print copies of interview questions; (b) pre-interview activities; and (c) providing ASL interpreters. The research team provided copies of the interview questions to participants at the start of the interview so they could refer back to the questions, to remember what was asked, or to jot down notes before or while discussing the topic.

Pre-interview activities (PIAs) were also given to participants specifically to help build relationships and have participants feel comfortable in an interview setting. Use of PIAs is consistent with qualitative research grounded in constructivist and interpretivist philosophical perspectives, as it enables the participants to reveal their understandings about their encounters in a way that they prefer, and to identify the central ideas of their experiences as they relate to the research topic (Ellis et al., 2011). Ellis (2006) noted that PIAs can help create the conditions for participants "to recall significant experiences, analyze them, and reflect on their meaning" (p. 112). One to two weeks prior to the face-to-face interviews, participants were provided a series of pre-interview activity options to complete (adapted from Ellis, 2006). Each participant was asked to create artifacts designed to support their ability to reflect upon their understanding of the topic (Ellis, 2006). The PIAs also provided different avenues for participants to engage with the topic of interview as they were provided a choice of activities to choose from with varying degrees of difficulty and creativity.

Although the researcher is fluent in ASL, an interpreter was present to clarify any possible misunderstandings and to ensure that the researcher was able to make appropriate notes throughout the interview (National Technical Institute of the Deaf, 2023). For the students utilizing an ASL interpreter, an educational interpreter with no connection to the students or school was selected to ensure that participants would feel comfortable expressing their experiences without fear of disclosure or repercussions.

## Ethical Considerations

Among the most salient ethical considerations in Rohatyn-Martin (2017) were anonymity and confidentiality. Participants' anonymity was protected through the use of pseudonyms in place of participants' real names and by removing all personally identifying information from the transcript. This was completed to ensure that participants could not be identified within small communities or by Teachers of the Deaf, interpreters, or the participants' family members. We also ensured that the interpreters who were utilized for interviews, as well as transcription of the

ASL interviews followed confidentiality protocol so as to not disclose the identity of the participants.

### *Utilizing an Interpreter*

Rohatyn-Martin (2017) utilized ASL educational interpreters with no connection to the study participant or school. As a precaution, Rohatyn-Martin wanted to ensure that participants would feel comfortable expressing their experiences without fear or embarrassment of disclosure or later repercussions. However, some participants were not always comfortable interacting with the independent educational interpreter as they had not met them previously. Additionally, due to the lack of familiarity and dialect differences, clarifications of certain signs were needed several times throughout the interview process, both from the participant and the interpreter. As the first author and interviewer is a fluid ASL communicator all issues were mitigated, but for future research, we recommend that the participants meet the interpreter being used before the actual interviews to ensure familiarity, clarity of signs, and comfort (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017). Recommendations from within the deaf community suggest going one step further, ensuring that at least one member of the research team is deaf themselves to facilitate participant feelings of comfort and understanding of the research process and language(s) utilized (Singleton et al., 2017). However, we recognize that this is not always feasible, as was the case in Rohatyn-Martin (2017). We suggest that where the researcher does not identify as deaf, it may be beneficial for them to share with participants how the researcher is associated with the deaf community.

## Participant Interviews

In conducting interviews with participants, particular attention was given to physical space considerations, audio/video recordings, and the use of interpreters (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017). Prior to the interviews, considerations for the interview protocol and video/audio recordings were discussed with the deaf educational consultant and incorporated into the research interview process.

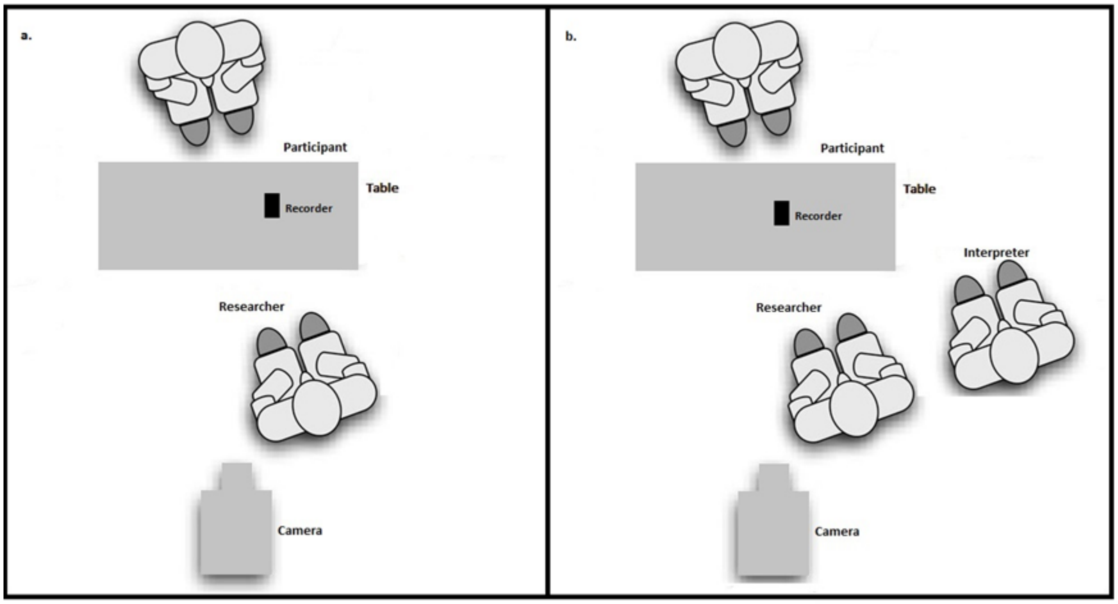
During the interviews it was essential that several steps be followed to ensure ease of understanding between the researcher and the study participants. First, a location with good lighting was essential. Participants were purposely seated away from direct light to ensure they were able to see the researcher or interpreter to facilitate conversation via ASL or spoken English (National Technical Institute of the Deaf, 2023) to ensure light from a window or overhead lighting was not casting a shadow on the interviewer's face to facilitate speech/lip reading. When utilized, the interpreter was seated next to the researcher based on the deaf educational consultant's recommendations and also at the participant's request, to facilitate comfortable interaction for the participant with both the interpreter and the researcher throughout the interview. The seating arrangement shown in Figure 1 was developed in consultation with the deaf educational consultant and used with all study participants (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017, p. 56).

## Researcher Positionality

The researcher positionality in Rohatyn-Martin (2017) derived from the principal investigator's experiences as a teacher and researcher, and as the sister of a Deaf sibling who was educated in both specialized and inclusive settings. Rohatyn-Martin made it known within the study

Figure 1

*Interview Setup*



*Note.* Schematic drawing of a bird's eye view of the interview set up (a) without interpreter and (b) with the interpreter (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017, p.56).

publication that her orientation toward a Deaf Cultural perspective influenced many of her hypotheses for her research.

## Knowledge Mobilization

Within Rohatyn-Martin (2017), all interviews were audio- and video-recorded to allow for the creation of written transcripts. Audio-recordings were made for all participants to ensure that all verbal information was collected, and to facilitate accurate transcription of the interviews. Video-recordings were made for all participants to document any nonverbal communication and gestures, and for students who signed, to verify the students' signed responses with the educational interpreter's interpretations. In some scenarios, it would be advisable to have two video cameras in the room: one on the participant and another on the interpreter.

An issue that arose with respect to knowledge mobilization of findings in Rohatyn-Martin (2017) was competency judgements based on English and ASL skills when comparing participant quotes. During data clean-up, significant English-language disparities were found between the interview transcripts of students who communicated through ASL compared to the transcripts of students who communicated through spoken language. In particular, the educational interpreter produced transcripts with fewer English grammatical errors than appeared in the transcripts of interviews that did not include interpreters and that were transcribed verbatim. De Meudler et al. (2019) pointed out that the translation process (i.e., utilizing different languages and modalities, such as sign language, speech, and writing, in order to convey meaning) may contribute to ASL interpreters' translating discrepancies since part of translating involves coming up with grammatically correct English sentences that are equivalent in ASL discourse.

The disparities between the transcripts led to discussions within the research team regarding whether exact quotes with grammatical errors should be retained, or whether a translated version (Canagarajah, 2013; Young & Temple, 2014) should be used instead. Rohatyn-Martin (2017) consulted a researcher who specializes in ASL interpretation who suggested that although one could edit participant quotes through the use of square brackets for clarity, it would be best to leave the original transcripts in the participants' actual words wherever possible so as to not change the intended message of the participant. An example of this would be the following: "I have really good grades … I think because my teachers [are] so nice, and especially to me because [of my] special abilities, like these (points to cochlear implants)" (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017, p.81). Therefore, for the researcher, the emphasis of exact production and forms of English (Canagarajah, 2013) should be de-emphasized; instead, the intention of the participant's message should be prioritized.

Once analysis of the data was completed, a final meeting was scheduled with each participant where transcripts and themes were shared through the process of member checking to determine if the researcher's interpretations were congruent with their own perspectives (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017). Graham and Horejes (2017) stated that when participants are involved in "editing their own narratives" (p.68), this supports the integrity of the research and helps to ensure the accuracy of findings.

Throughout the various stages of the study (Rohatyn-Martin, 2017), deaf practitioners and consultants were consulted, as Rohatyn-Martin's supervisory team did not include a member who was deaf. At a conference for deaf researchers and educators, community members with whom Rohatyn-Martin's research findings were shared commented that especially for hearing researchers, it is important to have deaf researchers included on research teams. Some of the potential benefits include having a deaf researcher who may understand how to better connect with participants to enhance comfort level when discussing personal experiences (Singleton et al., 2017). This may also help mitigate potential language barrier issues However, Harris and colleagues (2009) discussed partnerships in research in terms of power relations, respect, and privilege within deaf and hearing research teams. From the perspective of Harris et al., the research itself should ideally be a dialogue among all those involved at every step and process (i.e., research meetings, research design, data collection process, knowledge mobilization).

## Conclusion

Qualitative research has much to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the experiences and perspectives of students who are deaf. In this article, we have provided an overview of unique issues, processes, and guidelines that researchers may find helpful to consider when conducting research with this population. Our guidelines are informed by the literature, by a recent research study with deaf youth who described their experiences of inclusion in junior and senior high school, and through consultations within the deaf community. It is imperative to employ a broad understanding of the diversity of individuals who are deaf, and to specifically consider students' linguistic and cultural differences. Another important aspect is awareness of implications for the physical space in which the research occurs, including audio and video recordings. Although this article focuses on research specifically with deaf participants, many of these considerations would be appropriate for various disability populations. Taking proactive steps to understand cultural and linguistic barriers with research methods will ensure that varying populations of participants will have their needs met, both practically and ethically.

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## Note

1. In this article, we will use the term "deaf" as an inclusive term to refer to individuals of varying hearing levels, diverse backgrounds, experiences, and identities (e.g., race, culture, gender).

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