

The Role of Educational Experiences in the Development of Deaf Identity

Magda Nikolarazi

University of Thessaly, Greece

Kika Hadjidakou

Ministry of Education and Culture, Cyprus

In this study, the analytical educational experiences of 25 deaf adults are explored in relation to their identity. The qualitative analysis indicated that the most critical educational experiences for the participants' identity concerned their interactions with hearing or deaf peers and their language of communication with their peers at school. The participants with a hearing identity attended general schools, where they interacted with hearing peers in Greek, whereas the participants with a Deaf identity attended schools for the deaf, where they interacted with deaf peers in Greek Sign Language. The participants with a bicultural identity attended general schools, where they interacted with hearing peers in Greek, but they also had the chance to meet Deaf role models outside school, which played a critical role in the development of their identity.

According to Baumeister (1997), identity is the representation of the self. The self is a social construction because we develop a sense of who and what we are by observing and interpreting the responses of others (Crocker & Quinn, 2000). Therefore, the development of one's identity is a socially constructed process, which emerges through present and past experiences and interactions between oneself and the surrounding social environment (Baumeister, 1997; Grotevant, 1992;

Harter, 1997; Kent & Smith, in press; Stinson & Whitmire, 2000).

In particular, if deaf children are raised within a family and educated in a school environment where they interact with Deaf adults and deaf peers and communicate in sign language, they are likely to get immersed in the Deaf culture.¹ If deaf children are raised within a family and educated in a school environment where they interact with hearing adults and peers via oral means of communication, they are likely to get conditioned by a hearing culture. Sometimes, deaf persons may develop a bicultural identity and feel comfortable and competent within both the Deaf and the hearing worlds. Other times, though, deaf persons may develop a marginal identity, namely, when they do not feel particularly strong about a particular culture or feel uncomfortable and not well accepted within the deaf or the hearing world (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004; Bat-Chava, 2000; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Glickman, 1996; Israelite, Ower, & Goldstein, 2002; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Maxwell-McCaw, Leigh, & Marcus, 2000; Padden, 1998).

In this article, the focus is placed on school as a powerful social context to one's identity (Davidson, 1996; Grotevant, 1992) and particularly critical for deaf identity (Leigh, 1999). The majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Moores, 2001) and therefore do not have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with sign language and Deaf culture within their family, unless they attend a school for the deaf, where they learn sign language as well as the norms of

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the Deaf culture by interacting with their peers (Parasnis, 1998). In such educational environments, children are more likely to get immersed in the Deaf culture, identify themselves with Deaf culture, and develop a strong sense of deaf identity and social consciousness (Bat-Chava, 2000; Breivick, 2005; Foster, 1998; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Holcomb, 1998; Lampropoulou, 1999b; Maxwell-McCaw et al., 2000; Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

During the last two decades, a considerable number of deaf children have been attending general schools (Hyde & Power, 2004; Lampropoulou & Padelidiadu, 1997; Moores, 2001), where there is a stronger likelihood for students to identify with the social and cultural norms of the hearing community (Bat-Chava, 2000; Israelite et al., 2002; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). A number of studies have been carried out investigating the impact of general school attendance on deaf people's identity.

In particular, Leigh (1999) used open-ended questionnaires to analyze the mainstream educational experiences of 34 deaf and hard of hearing adults. The participants in the study consisted of persons affiliated with an organization that supported auditory approach. Some of the participants had positive opinions due to the supportive environment to their self-acceptance and their ability to cope, whereas others had negative opinions due to the fact they were treated as different and the environment was not supportive. Regardless of the positive or negative nature of their experiences, they believed that relationships with hearing peers was a strong value, although some of them struggled to form such relationships at school. None of these respondents chose Deaf culture labels, and many participants felt caught between the Deaf and the hearing worlds.

Israelite et al. (2002) used a qualitative approach to explore the identity construction of seven adolescents who were enrolled in special classes for hard of hearing students for many years. Their educational experiences were rather negative, involving rejection, loneliness, and discrimination. All participants identified themselves as hard of hearing persons and underscored their need to connect with other hard of hearing persons as well as explore the Deaf world. The study underlined the importance of connecting

hard of hearing students in inclusive settings with other hard of hearing students, regardless of whether they decided to participate in the Deaf or hearing world.

Kent (2003) examined identity issues among 52 mainstreamed hard of hearing and 470 hearing students based on the use of the health behavior in school-aged children questionnaire. The educational experiences of a large number of hard of hearing students were negative and not supportive, and they reported loneliness and bullying. Most of the participants did not identify themselves as having a hearing problem, a hearing disability, or any features that differentiated them from their hearing peers. However, the ones who identified themselves were more likely to feel lonely.

There has been scant research that has used qualitative research methods to explore the role of school on deaf development with the sole exception of one study (Israelite et al., 2002) that analyzed the educational experiences of seven deaf adolescents in mainstream schools in relation to their identity. Our study is based on qualitative methods and links deaf identity to analytical personal descriptions of the educational experiences of deaf adults. Furthermore, whereas most of the research regarding deaf identity focused on the development of identity of deaf people who attended general schools, our study investigates educational experiences of deaf adults from a variety of educational settings, such as schools for the deaf and general schools (with or without units). A focus on deaf persons' analytical reflections on their educational experiences from different school settings (Leigh, 1999) can enhance our understanding and deepen our knowledge about deaf identity, revealing unknown issues that cannot be identified solely with the use of qualitative methods.

Also, international perspectives on the development of deaf identity represent valuable contributions to the literature (Breivick, 2005), as has been recently indicated in a study that recorded the emerging identities in 10 Norwegian Deaf people based on a narrative perspective (Breivick, 2005) as well as in a study that explored the identity patterns of deaf adolescents in residential secondary schools for the deaf in Turkey with the "Deaf identity scale" (Sari, 2005).

Remarkably, there has never been a research on deaf identity in Greece or indeed on the role of education in the construction of deaf identity. Hence, it can be argued that a research specifically conducted in the Greek context constitutes an important contribution to the field. Considering the value of international perspective on deaf identity, the lack of any such research in Greece, the value of qualitative research, as well as the critical role of education upon deaf identity, this study aims to link deaf adults' analytical personal descriptions of their educational academic and social experiences in Greece to their identity.

The Context in Greece

The educational provision for deaf children in Greece includes special schools and resource rooms or units within general schools. The special schools for the deaf belong to the Ministry of Education.² The resource rooms started to operate around 1985 (O' Hanlon, 1993) when integration projects were implemented (Lampropoulou & Padelidou, 1995). The first units exclusively for deaf children were established mostly in Thessaloniki (northern part of Greece) due to the fact that at that period "The Association of Parents and Guardians of hard of hearing children," who wanted their children to be educated orally in general schools, was founded in Thessaloniki (Nikolarazi, 2000). Until 1984, the only language used in schools for the deaf was spoken language. In 1984, there was a shift toward the use of sign-supported systems in schools for the deaf (Foster et al., 2003; Lampropoulou, 1999b), and currently, Greek Sign Language (GSL) is legally recognized, and bilingual curricula for deaf children have been developed (Ministry of Education and Religion Affairs—Pedagogical Institute, 2005).

Method

The Participants

Twenty-five ($n = 25$) deaf participants, 12 men and 13 women, participated in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 47 years ($M = 31.84$, $SD = 6.53$). The participants' audiograms were not at the researchers' disposal because it was considered inap-

propriate to ask the participants to bring their audiograms to the interview. However, all the participants who participated in this study were entitled to the Greek State Disability Benefit, which requires that they have a bilateral mean degree of hearing loss equal to or greater than 70 dB. Furthermore, 14 out of the 25 participants were hearing aided, and 11 were not. Regarding the educational settings they attended during their school years, 11 participants attended general schools. Eight of the 11 participants attended general schools without the provision of any support services, whereas three of them attended for a few hours daily the units or the supportive classes for the deaf in general schools. These participants were supported within the units or the supportive classes but not in the general classroom. Four of the 25 participants attended schools for the deaf and 10 participants both settings (Table 1). Regarding the mode of communication in the above educational settings, 16 participants were educated orally, 2 participants were educated through total communication, and 7 participants were educated orally during the first years of their education and through total communication in the later years of their education (Table 2). Regarding the family background of the participants, 2 participants had deaf parents and 23 participants had hearing parents.

Instrument

A semistructured in-depth interview, which was developed for a larger study on deaf identity (Nikolarazi & Hadjikakou, 2005), was used to elicit the participants' views. The development of the interview was based on the review of the literature regarding deaf identity (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1996; Glickman & Carey, 1993; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). In this way, the researchers identified the issues that were important to be discussed in the interview to

Table 1 The participants according to their gender and educational setting

	General school	School for the deaf	Both settings	Total
Female	6	1	4	11 (44%)
Male	5	3	6	14 (56%)
Total	11 (44%)	4 (16%)	10 (40%)	25 (100%)

Table 2 The participants according to their educational setting and the mode of communication within it

	Oral communication	Total communication	Oral and total communication	Total
General school	11		—	11 (44%)
School for the deaf	—	2	2	4 (16%)
Both settings	5	—	5	10 (40%)
Total	16 (64%)	2 (8%)	7 (28%)	25 (100%)

encourage the participants to talk about their experiences and their views that would reveal significant information about their identity. The interview guide consisted of three sets of questions (see Appendix A). The first set of questions focused on the participants' retrospective family experiences; the second set of questions referred to their retrospective educational experiences; and the third set of questions explored the current views of the participants regarding their cultural identification, involvement, and preferences. In this paper, the data that are reported were drawn from the second and third part of the interview.

Procedure

The participants were traced through various associations and organizations for deaf and hard of hearing persons that favored either sign language or oral communication as well as through professionals who worked with deaf persons. All participants voluntarily participated in this project. They were all interviewed between June 2004 and October 2004. The interviews were carried out in Greek or in GSL according to the participants' choice. Although both researchers used GSL, a certified, experienced interpreter, who facilitated the interviews as needed with communication, was also present for all interviews that took place in GSL. With the participants' permission, almost all interviews were videotaped, and only a few interviews were audiotaped. All participants gave their consent for participating in the study after they were informed about the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Each interview lasted approximately for 1 h.

Analysis

A qualitative data analysis was carried out. All interviews were transcribed by two researchers and two

interpreters. Then, the participants were asked to read the transcripts and check its accuracy. Most of the transcriptions were confirmed, and minor modifications were made. The researchers read the transcripts several times to achieve a general comprehension of the data, grasp the basic themes in the data, and form general categories (Dey, 1993). The development of the categories was also guided by the interview topics (Dey, 1993; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003). Initially, three broad categories were formed: (a) family experiences, (b) educational experiences, and (c) identity. Then, the transcripts were read several times so that more detailed and refined categories or subcategories were produced. In this paper, the focus is placed on two broad categories and subcategories (see Appendix B): (1) educational experiences and (2) identity, which is presented in terms of the subcategories (a) views about being deaf, (b) language, and (c) social and personal relationships. The trustworthiness of our study was ensured through peer debriefing techniques, according to which more than one individual reviewed the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically in our study, the identification of meaningful units, the creation of meaningful concepts, their allocation into the categories, and the development of the final thematic categories were conducted by two researchers independently, who regularly met to discuss and resolve any disagreements. Interrater reliability averaged 88% and was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements.

Results

Three identities were discerned among the participants in this study: the participants with a hearing identity ($n = 7$), with a Deaf identity ($n = 12$), and

Table 3 The participants according to their identity and educational setting

	General school	School for the deaf	Both settings	Total
Hearing	7	—	—	7
Bicultural	4	—	2	6
Deaf	—	4	8	12
Total	11 (44%)	4 (16%)	10 (40%)	25 (100%)

with a bicultural identity ($n = 6$) (Table 3). No participants with a marginal identity were identified. The criteria used to assign research participants to identity groups were (a) their cultural identification (deaf or hard of hearing, feel closer to the Deaf or the hearing community), (b) their language choices (Greek or GSL), and (c) their personal and social choices (deaf or hearing friends/partners). The criteria applied to form identity groups were chosen on the basis of previous studies on deaf identity, which indicated that these characteristics were salient in deaf identity (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1996; Kannapell, 1994; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). In the following sections, the participants' educational experiences are analyzed and linked to their identity.

Hearing Identity

Educational experiences. Seven participants ($n = 7$) with a hearing identity were identified in this study. They all attended general schools. Three out of the seven general schools had attached units for the deaf. A commonly shared educational experience among most participants concerned their more pleasant and positive experiences in primary schools compared to the ones in secondary education. In particular, as the following participants explain, oral communication did not allow them full communication and posed several problems in their academic access. However, it seems that in primary schools the participants managed somehow to cope, whereas in secondary education they faced major difficulties.

In primary and in secondary school I used to sit in the front seat to lipread the teacher . . . My parents asked the teacher to keep visual contact with me, but it was difficult. Especially, at high school, I was bored. (GH5)

I coped well in primary school, because my teacher was good and most of the time she kept visual contact with me, in order to lipread her. However, at high school it was difficult. The teachers often forgot to look at me. When I was lost I had to ask my parents' or my brother's help . . . I studied on my own. Sometimes I asked my parents or my brother to help me. (GH17)

Three participants who attended general schools with attached units for the deaf in primary schools or supportive classes in secondary schools also experienced similar difficulties. They felt that they were helped in a better way in the units compared to the supportive classes. The access to communication in general classrooms was extremely difficult because the participants had to cope alone among the rest of their hearing classmates and with no support services. The participants stressed that a lot of personal effort was required as well as additional help, which was provided by their parents, their relatives, or private teachers at home, so that they could respond to the school's academic requirements.

In primary education I attended a general school. I spent part of the day in the general classroom and I also attended the unit for two hours a day, which helped me. In the general classroom, the teacher talked quickly. Sometimes she tried to speak slowly so that we could lipread her. Anyway, in primary school I could cope. In high school, though, I could not understand a thing. At least, we received some help in the supportive classes and I could understand more. Apart from that though, I used to study alone at home. (GH8)

In secondary education, things were very difficult. There were no units and we would spend the whole day in the general classroom. I did not understand anything at school and I used to study alone at home. Although we attended for 2–3 hours the supportive classes, this was not very facilitative because these classes included hard of hearing children from all grades, and the teachers could not respond to the diverse needs of the children in the classroom. It is ironic that in secondary education I was always among the best students in my classroom. Can you imagine? I could hardly

understand anything and still managed to have a higher performance compared to my hearing classmates and to be considered one of the best students in my class. (GH4)

The participants' social experiences were also more positive in primary compared to the ones in secondary education because in the latter they recalled feelings of low acceptance among their hearing peers.

I interacted with my classmates at school, but I did not have any friends outside school. Also, when they played basketball or football they did not want me in their team and they used to tell me that my hearing aid would break. I remember that in secondary education, they invited me only once to a party. I did not feel well. (GH5)

At school kids looked at me in a funny way. They were teasing me. Any way, in primary school it was not so bad, but in the secondary school I could not handle the whole situation. (GH9)

Furthermore, the participants who attended general schools with attached units or supportive classes recalled agreeable social experiences in primary schools but rather negative ones in secondary schools. As the following participants explain, their hearing fellow students did not treat them well. Therefore, it was very common for them to interact with their hard of hearing peers because they had this choice in their settings.

In the primary school it was ok but in the secondary school things were very difficult. Hearing children looked at us in a very funny way and they behaved inappropriately. They probably behaved in this way because of lack of awareness and knowledge, as well as due to the fact that they were adolescents. At high school I interacted only with my hard of hearing peers. The hearing students pushed us away. I tried to enter their world but they did not allow me to. (GH8)

In primary school kids loved me and I didn't face any problem at all. Kids were very sensitive. At high school, however, things were extremely difficult. The children ignored and avoided us. We were adolescents. They had no clue about what it meant to be hard of hearing. I interacted mostly

with the other hard of hearing children at school. (GH10)

Views about being deaf. The participants with a hearing identity call themselves as hard of hearing, and they all wear their hearing aids, which they consider as important. They differentiate themselves from deaf people audiologically and culturally. Furthermore, as one participant mentioned, a differentiating factor concerns the educational experiences of hard of hearing people in general schools and of deaf people in schools for the deaf.

Deaf people are different from hard of hearing participants. They are reserved and do not want to interact with hearing people. Furthermore, hard of hearing persons communicate orally and attend general education settings while deaf persons use GSL and attend schools for the deaf. (GH4)

A deaf person cannot hear and uses GSL. A hard of hearing person can hear, however little and tries to communicate orally. I am hard of hearing. I wear my hearing aid, which helps me hear. Without the hearing aid I would be deaf. I am not hearing since I cannot hear as the hearing persons do. I feel more comfortable among hearing persons. (GH9)

A hard of hearing person can hear a little, while a deaf person cannot hear anything. I am hard of hearing because my hearing aid helps me hear. Hard of hearing persons use spoken language while deaf people use GSL. In this way they keep a distance from hearing persons compared to the hard of hearing persons who interact with hearing persons. (GH17)

Language choices. All participants with a hearing identity communicate in Greek. They acknowledge GSL as a language but prefer to communicate in Greek.

I was raised among hearing people, I attended a general school during all my life and therefore I did not have the chance to learn GSL. When I grew older, I wanted to learn GSL but I did not have the time. GSL is definitely difficult. However, I am not trying to learn it anymore because I will

not use it and therefore I will easily forget it . . . I interact with hearing people orally and I don't face any particular problem . . . What really helps me is to watch somebody's lips when he talks. It helps also if I hear something. (GH9)

I always communicate in Greek. Also, I attended many courses in GSL and I can now communicate both in Greek and in GSL. However, it bothers me that I tried hard to learn GSL, while deaf persons do not make any effort to speak. There are many people who do not know GSL and it is important for deaf persons to speak. I believe that all deaf and hard of hearing persons must use both GSL and Greek in order to communicate with everybody. (GH10)

Personal and social relationships. The participants with a hearing identity have hearing friends. As they spent most of their school years in general schools among hearing persons, they never had the chance to interact with deaf peers. Therefore, they feel more comfortable among hearing persons with whom they communicated orally.

I don't interact with deaf persons. I graduated from a general school while deaf children attended the special school. So I cannot understand deaf people because I was grown up in a different environment. Most of my friends are hearing and my partner is also hearing. I feel very comfortable among them. Also, I have some hard of hearing persons, with whom we communicate in Greek. (GH4)

Furthermore, as the following participant describes, she is very satisfied with her hearing partner, and she wants to have the right to choose her partner, rather than feel restricted among the small circle of the Deaf community.

My partner is hearing. He understands me and admires me for my character, my strong will. He is not ashamed to tell his friends that I don't hear, which I really appreciate. When we are far from each other we communicate with SMS . . . I usually have a hearing partner. In this way I feel that I can choose and that I have a personal life. In contrast,

the Deaf community is very small. They always make friends and affairs with each other. Everybody knows each other's personal life and nothing remains secret. I feel suffocated in this way. (GH8)

Deaf Identity

Educational experiences. Twelve participants ($n = 12$) were identified in the study. They attended either schools for the deaf or both schools for the deaf and general schools, having spent most of their school years in schools for the deaf. One of the positive features in the school for the deaf concerned the participants' access to the curriculum. Specifically, the teacher considered the educational needs of deaf children and made the necessary adjustments according to the children's needs. The following participant, for example, describes the adjustments regarding the language lessons.

The reading texts in the book were very difficult. We could not understand them. I remember that the teacher drew the main meaning from a difficult text and she used to explain it to us. When we could not understand her we used to ask each other. (GH7)

Despite the fact that the schools for the deaf did take into account many educational needs of deaf children, the children themselves faced many difficulties regarding communication. The following extract reveals the nature of these difficulties when communication at school relied only on spoken language.

The teachers were quite strict and they did not allow us to use GSL. I could not understand anything. When I returned home, I used to study either alone or with my aunt's help. (GH23)

One participant with a Deaf identity did not make any complains about communication problems, and she seemed very satisfied with the education in the school for the deaf and the high academic demands, although oral communication was the mode of communication.

I attended a school for the deaf. It was quite good for me. I didn't have any problems. Many

kids complained that they could not understand and they wanted GSL. I didn't care. Outside the classroom we signed. I liked the school because it was very well organized, the teachers were very good and they had high demands. I was able to adjust and I learnt many things. (GH14)

The participants who were educated in schools through total communication, which was introduced in Greece in 1984, seemed more pleased. However, they were rather critical about the level of the teachers' knowledge in GSL in secondary schools, which, as the following comments indicate, did not enable full communication.

In my classroom in primary school the teacher could sign well but in secondary education teachers could not sign. Therefore, they could not help us to learn. (GH25)

In high school we could not understand teachers, because they did not know GSL. Also, the staff at school was not permanent and each year new teachers were employed, who could not sign. Actually, we were the ones who taught GSL to teachers. (GH6)

In other schools, though, the participants felt more satisfied with the teachers' GSL knowledge.

When we moved to another city, I started to attend another primary school. In this school, everybody signed and I felt so happy. Teachers also signed and I learnt many new things quickly and easily. (GH2)

One participant complained that the academic demands in schools for the deaf were very low and the level of many students was very low too. As a result, the high performers were not encouraged to make a progress.

I wanted something more, but many students could not understand and the teachers always had to help and support them. This was very boring for me. (GH25)

Although the academic experiences of the participants with a Deaf identity appeared to be sometimes quite challenging, their social experiences were de-

scribed as very pleasant. This was mostly attributed to two elements: the fact that they communicated in GSL and that they interacted with their deaf peers. Before or after the introduction of total communication, GSL constituted for the participants their language of communication outside the classroom.

The school for the deaf was very important for me. I had so many friends and I participated in many activities. (GH25)

When I first went to the school for the deaf, I immediately used GSL. Nobody taught it to me. I simply acquired it by interacting with children. Teachers did not allow us to use GSL and encouraged us to speak. We ignored them and we signed outside the classroom during the breaks, always aware that we could be spotted by the teachers. (GH7)

Views about being deaf. All participants with a Deaf identity feel strong and confident about being Deaf and about their language and social preferences in contrast to hard of hearing persons, who, as one of the following comments reveals, cannot communicate effectively in Greek and struggle to fit within the hearing or the Deaf world. Furthermore, the participants with a Deaf identity differentiate themselves from hard of hearing persons audiologically. Ten of the 12 participants with a Deaf identity do not wear their hearing aids while two of them that wear them do not consider them as particularly helpful.

A deaf person uses GSL, while a hard of hearing person uses Greek. I cannot communicate in Greek since I cannot hear. I don't even wear my hearing aids. Hard of hearing persons interact with hearing persons, while we prefer to be with Deaf persons. I am happy with my life and I don't want to be hearing. I am deaf and I was raised as deaf. I went to a school for the deaf and I am very happy about this. Perhaps, if I hadn't gone to this school, I would have felt differently. I was quite lucky. (GH2)

I cannot communicate orally. Even with my hearing aid, I only hear sounds. Many deaf persons cannot communicate orally and they need sign language, otherwise they have psychological problems, because they belong neither to the world

of hearing nor to the deaf world and at the end they are alone. Deaf people do not reject hard of hearing people but if hard of hearing people want to become accepted within the Deaf community they need to learn sign language. (GH25)

Language. The participants with a Deaf identity feel that GSL is their language, and as such, it allows them effective communication. They were all interviewed in GSL. Most of them, as the following extracts indicate, communicate orally when it is necessary, but they stress that it is tiring and does not enable fluent communication.

I think that a deaf person must be able to communicate in GSL and in Greek. Both languages are important. When I am with deaf persons I use GSL, when I am with hearing persons, I try to speak. Hearing people cannot understand me easily because my speech is not very intelligible. Also, some people do not talk very clearly and I cannot lipread them. (GH14)

I can hardly communicate with hearing persons in Greek. Also, when I go to the doctor there is no way that I can communicate with him. I always need an interpreter. (GH20)

I am very good at lipreading, but I get tired. I cannot lipread somebody for about 15 minutes. I communicate with all my friends in GSL. (GH25)

Personal and social relationships. Most participants with a Deaf identity have deaf friends, and they would also like to have a deaf partner stressing that in such a relationship they feel or would feel equal and comfortable. Their choice, as it is evidenced below, is mostly based on communication issues. Even one participant who did not choose to have either a deaf or a hearing partner stressed the importance of effective communication.

My best friends are deaf. I cannot communicate with hearing persons. Also, I cannot easily communicate with hard of hearing persons because they do not know good GSL. (...) I have never been interested in having an affair with a hearing

person, since I cannot communicate or feel comfortable. (GH20)

Most of my friends are deaf . . . I wouldn't mind if my partner is Deaf or hearing as long as we love, communicate and understand each other. If my partner is hearing, though, she should be able to communicate in GSL. (GH19)

Bicultural Identity

Educational experiences. Six ($n = 6$) participants had a bicultural identity. They attended either general schools or both general schools and schools for the deaf, having spent many or most of their school years in general schools. The experiences of the participants who attended only general schools has many similarities with the experiences of the participants with a hearing identity, meaning that they faced challenges in their academic and social accesses, especially in secondary education.

In the primary school it was fine. I could manage, and my mother also helped me at home. In secondary education things were extremely difficult and I could not understand anything. Fortunately, my parents employed private teachers, who helped me at home and in this way I could cope at school. (GH3)

Although academic access was very difficult, the following participants were pleased with the high academic expectations in general schools that contributed to their progress.

I attended a general school. I think that the level of education in general schools is much better compared to the schools for the deaf. In the general school the deaf student is expected to read the same books and respond to the same requirements as the rest of the hearing students, while in schools for the deaf the expectations are low. (GH3)

I attended a primary school for the deaf, but in secondary education I attended a general school. The teachers in the primary school for the deaf advised my parents to send me to a general secondary school because I was a very good student. (GH11)

Regarding the social participation in general educational settings, the participants made efforts to feel accepted among their hearing classmates. As the following comment indicates, the teacher had a positive role in encouraging the social acceptance within the classroom.

I had a good teacher in primary school, who helped me feel equal with my hearing peers and helped me make friends at school. However, this also required a huge effort on my side. Many children did not want me because they could not always understand the way I talked and thought I was stupid. I tried a lot in order to become accepted and I had to prove all the time that I was equal with them. I spent so many hours in speech therapy, I always felt stressed and tired. In secondary education children avoided me, they did not invite me to their parties, they did not really accept me. (GH18)

The following participant felt accepted because her speech was intelligible and also because she was a good student.

At the beginning of my secondary education I faced many difficulties. However, I was a good student and hearing students accepted me. Also, my speech was intelligible, which helped me a lot. I don't know what I would do if my classmates could not understand me. (GH11)

One of the most significant events in the life of the participants who attended both general schools and schools for the deaf concerned the period that they met deaf persons and started to learn GSL. Both the participants, who met Deaf adults as adolescents or later as adults, felt that this was a unique and fulfilling experience.

When I was in the Lyceum (11th grade) a deaf student started to attend the same general school with me. She knew many deaf persons and I went with her to Deaf associations. Until that time, I did not know any Deaf persons, but I felt fine. However, when I met deaf persons and learnt GSL, I felt so fulfilled and I realized that I missed so many things in my life. (GH11)

When I was in general school everybody was nice to me, but I felt alone. I only had 2 friends and I avoided the others. When I went to the school for the deaf, I was shy. However, I immediately felt that I belonged there even though at the beginning I did not know GSL. I didn't feel alone any more and I felt I could do everything that other children did, such as making friends, participating in common activities and staff. These were the best years of my life, full of life, jokes, friends and activities. I did not know GSL but I gradually learnt it. At the beginning it was difficult. However, I managed to learn GSL and I really liked it. (GH21)

Views about being deaf. The participants with a bicultural identity belong both to the world of the hearing and to the world of the Deaf. Five of the six participants with a bicultural identity wore their hearing aids, which they did not consider as helpful. Two participants below comment on the audiological as well as the cultural dimension of being deaf and indicate their struggle to balance the two different worlds. As one participant states, the social context defines whether he feels as "deaf" or as "Deaf."

I feel that I belong both to the world of hearing as well as to the Deaf world. (. . .) When I am among the deaf or hard of hearing people I do not feel that I have a problem. However, among the hearing persons I feel deaf, since there are many things that I cannot do without extra help. For instance, I cannot make a phone call on my own. I do not hear and therefore I do not wear my hearing aid. It doesn't help me. Also, if I want to attend a seminar or a conference I need an interpreter. (. . .) More and more I feel that it is very tiring to be deaf, because you need to struggle all the time. While some things are easy for hearing people, deaf people have to make huge efforts. I try but until when? Will I have to struggle for all my life? I would like to stop struggling. This is how I feel. (. . .) Hard of hearing people do not have a strong personality. What really fascinated me within the Deaf world was their strong identity, their self-confidence, their self-esteem. (GH18)

I am deaf and I accept myself. I think it is better to be deaf than to be blind or disabled. I sometimes

think that there are worse things than being deaf. Since I am healthy, I can work and do all the things that you do. I feel fine. Sometimes I feel a bit sad because I cannot talk on the phone or listen to music, especially Greek music. Hard of hearing persons, on the other hand can talk on the phone and speak with hearing persons. (GH21)

Language. The participants with a bicultural identity communicate in Greek and in GSL. Half of them were interviewed in Greek and half in GSL. They seem to respect and use both languages. However, they all felt that GSL allows full communication, whereas communication in Greek sometimes poses difficulties.

I communicate in both languages. However, GSL connects us with the world. We can follow the daily news, attend seminars and participate in conversations. In the past, I didn't know GSL and it was impossible for me to attend a seminar for more than an hour. It would be extremely tiring to try to understand Greek. (GH16)

It is a pity I didn't have the chance to learn GSL earlier. If I had known GSL, I would have been able to meet more Deaf people and communicate easier. Sign language is so fascinating, full of emotion and expressions (. . .). It is a bit difficult to communicate orally with more than two hearing persons because if they speak to each other I cannot understand them. On the other hand, I can easily communicate with Deaf people in GSL. (GH21)

Personal and social relationships. All participants with a bicultural identity have both deaf and hearing friends. Most of them had very close hearing friends that they have known for years. They also had deaf friends that they met later in their life when they entered the Deaf community.

My best friends—the ones I have known for years—are hearing. I also have deaf friends. However, I am very close to my two hearing friends, because I have known them for years. I believe that a friendly relationship that lasts for years is very strong and very important. (GH18)

It is interesting to note that although the participants with a bicultural identity had both hearing and deaf friends, they chose a deaf partner.

I would prefer to have a deaf partner, because we would be equal, we would communicate fluently and also feel secure. In the past, I had some affairs with hearing persons, but I felt alone and insecure. (GH21)

The following participant commented that he would like a “deaf and hearing” partner, meaning probably a partner who would have similar experiences to the ones that he had, who has grown up among hearing persons and who communicated in Greek until he met deaf persons and learned GSL.

I want my partner to be deaf and hearing, someone like me who will make me feel comfortable. What really matters, though, is for the two of us to match together, to be able to communicate, to enjoy ourselves, to have fun. (GH18)

Discussion

The findings in this study are in line with previous studies (Bat-Chava, 2000; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Holcomb, 1998; Israelite et al., 2002; Kent, 2003; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001) about the importance of educational experiences in the development of deaf identity. In our study, three identities were prevalent among the participants: a hearing, a Deaf, and a bicultural identity. No participants with a marginal identity were identified. It is possible that only the participants who felt strong or secure about their identity and were competent in GSL or Greek were willing to participate in this study, whereas the ones who might have felt unsure about their identity or uncomfortable communicating in Greek or GSL were reluctant to participate in this study and share personal information with us. It is important to note that even in other quantitative studies that included a large number of participants, no or very few participants had a marginal identity. Sari (2005) identified three identity patterns including a culturally hearing identity, a culturally Deaf Identity, and a bicultural identity. In Maxwell-McCaw's (2001) study, only 27 of the

3,070 deaf adults had a marginal cultural identity, whereas in Bat-Chava's (2000) study, 22 of the 267 deaf adults had "negative" (p. 423) identities. Furthermore, in the latter study, semistructured interviews were used for a more analytical exploration of the participants' identity. However, no participants with a negative identity (p. 424) volunteered to be interviewed. Such findings, in addition to the findings in our study, possibly imply that deaf persons with a marginal identity cannot be traced easily or that they are unwilling to participate in this type of studies.

As mentioned above, education played an important role in the participants' identification process. The most critical educational experiences concerned their social relationships with their hearing or deaf classmates and most importantly the language (Greek or GSL) in which they communicated with their classmates.

The participants with a Deaf identity were educated only or mostly in schools for the deaf, where they experienced a happy social life. Nevertheless, academically, they faced many obstacles, mostly associated with communication difficulties, as has also been indicated by Breivick (2005). Even when in 1984 total communication was introduced, academic participation and communication in the classroom continued to be a challenge for some participants, mostly in secondary education. This may probably be linked to the fact that total communication was introduced in the NID, which included only primary but no secondary schools. The educational staff that belonged to the NID attended seminars about the education of the deaf as well as GSL classes (Lampropoulou, 1999a). The staff in secondary schools that did not belong to NID, however, had no such training. Further, there were very limited opportunities for the teachers to learn GSL during this period because the majority of courses in GSL were established in Greece around 1990 (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004/2005).

Despite the communication problems with their teachers, the social experiences of the participants were fulfilling and critical for their identity. Before or after 1984, all participants who attended schools for the deaf communicated with their deaf peers in GSL at breaks, regardless of whether the policy of the school permitted the use of GSL or not. In parallel

with other studies (Breivick, 2005; Charlson, Strong, & Gold, 1992; Foster, 1998; Hadjidakou, 2005; Skelton & Valentine, 2003), schools for the deaf were places that allowed students to communicate fully and fluently in GSL with their classmates. Considering that the use of sign language is very powerful in defining the social identity of the Deaf community (Breivick, 2005; Foster, 1998; Nash, 1987; Skelton & Valentine, 2003), in addition to the contact and interaction with deaf peers (Israelite et al., 2002), it can be argued that language and social experiences of the participants in our study played a critical role in the construction of a Deaf identity. As indicated by previous researchers (Hadjidakou, Petridou, & Stylianou, 2005; Lampropoulou, 1999b; Leigh, 1999; Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002; Stinson, Whitmire, & Kluwin, 1996) a supportive school environment, in conjunction to one's ability to cope and communicate contributes to the development of positive perceptions about school experiences.

The participants with a hearing identity attended general schools where they communicated in Greek with their teachers and classmates. Especially, a few participants who attended schools with units were also in contact with deaf peers, with whom they communicated in Greek. Most of the participants had more positive experiences in primary than in secondary school. Although no formal support services were provided for most of the participants, they felt that in primary schools they could cope academically and socially. This may be associated with the perceived helpful role of the participants' general teachers and hearing classmates in primary schools. Also, a few participants who attended schools with attached units for the deaf received support in the units where additionally they interacted with their deaf peers for a few hours each day, which is considered as supportive and can enhance the students' self-acceptance (Israelite et al., 2002).

In secondary education, the participants' experiences were rather negative. In particular, most participants faced major communication barriers in the general classroom, as has also been indicated in previous studies (Cawthorn, 2001; Stinson, Liu, Saur, & Long, 1996), which may be associated with the higher academic demands in secondary education as well as the increase

of the number of teachers and therefore the students' need to cope with different teaching and lipreading styles. Also, the role of the supportive classes, for the few participants who had this experience, was somewhat questioned. It is worth reminding that the participants attended the supportive classes after the end of the regular program and for approximately 3 h, while they had no support in the general classroom. Nevertheless, many of the participants managed to respond to the academic requirements. Their performance, though, was probably a result of their own personal effort in combination to the additional learning support provided to them by the teachers in the supportive classes, by private teachers at home, or by their parents, as also indicated by Lampropoulou (1999a). Furthermore, the social experiences of the participants in secondary education were rather poor. During this critical period for identity construction, the participants felt rejected in numerous ways, as has already been identified by other researchers (Breivik, 2005; Foster, 1998; Gregory, Bishop, & Sheldon, 1995; Israelite et al., 2002; Kent, 2003; Stinson & Antia, 1999; Stinson & Liu, 1999).

Such experiences can be quite risky for the development of one's identity (Bat-Chava, 2000) and could trap deaf persons between different worlds compelling them to determine where they stand and belong (Israelite et al., 2002) and to acquire a strong group identity (Bat-Chava, 2000). As they strive to shape their own identity, however, they feel that one of the characteristics that forms their identity and partly separates them from Deaf individuals is the use of oral language (Israelite et al., 2002; Kent & Smith, *in press*; Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004/2005). This can be attributed to the fact that they have usually grown up within a hearing-centered environment, as the participants in our study, and have learned to consider oral language their primary mode of communication (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). The participants with a hearing identity and in particular the ones who attended general schools with attached units or supportive classes have been raised in a hearing-centered environment, as a result of the integration movement and also the influence of the Association of Parents and Guardians of hard of hearing children, who wanted their children to be educated orally within general schools and were against sign lan-

guage. As a result, their children who were raised within such a value system may have also developed similar attitudes. Therefore, when they encountered the opportunity to get closer to the Deaf community, they probably rejected it as a potential role model.

In contrast, when the participants with a bicultural identity, who were also educated within a hearing-centered environment, met Deaf people and learnt GSL, they felt that this was a crucial experience bringing major changes in their life, in terms of communication, relationships, and access to knowledge. Perhaps, these participants were raised within families with more positive attitudes toward GSL and Deaf culture that also supported the participants to learn GSL and develop a link to the Deaf community. According to Leigh (1999) and Breivick (2005), even if deaf persons have positive feelings about affiliation in the hearing community, they also have a need to develop a link to the Deaf community, as was also identified among the participants with a bicultural identity. Although these participants maintained their old relationships with their hearing peers, which they sometimes struggled to make at school, as also found in Leigh's (1999) study, they also acquired Deaf friends, and most importantly, some of them felt that they wanted a Deaf partner.

It is important to note that the study has some limitations. In parallel to other research papers (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Israelite et al., 2002) as well as a recent book on deaf identity (Breivick, 2005), which used qualitative research approaches to explore deaf identity, the findings in this study are based on the in-depth accounts of the particular participants regarding their identification process. Such a study has never taken place in Greece, a country of approximately 13 million inhabitants, and an effort was made for a wide range of deaf participants to be included in the study, in terms of age, educational background, place of living, and language through which they communicated. Nevertheless, there is no intention to generalize the findings over the wider population of deaf adults. Also, the researchers are aware that the findings concern these participants who were traced mostly through the organizations of Deaf and hard of hearing persons and volunteered to participate in this study. There is certainly a need for greater research in the

views of a larger deaf population in Greece through mixed research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, so that more information about deaf identity can be gathered. We hope that this article sets an adequate context for further researching in the field.

Additionally, this study explored the participants' retrospective educational experiences. Although past experiences are quite important for the development of one's identity, such a study entails some risks because the participants have to recall their experiences, which might have also been affected by the passage of time (Leigh, 1999). In the future, it might be useful to explore deaf identity through the use of longitudinal studies, which could enrich our understanding about the whole identification process that a deaf person goes through.

Furthermore, the focus of this study was placed on the education, acknowledging at the same time the importance of various social contexts and experiences for the construction of one's identity (Baumeister, 1997; Grotevant, 1992; Harter, 1997). It was evident here that, apart from the role of education, a decisive experience for the participants with a bicultural identity came at the moment they encountered potential Deaf role models and discovered GSL. Future studies may enhance our understanding of the role that such experiences may have on deaf identity.

Concluding, the findings in this study underline the critical role of education on deaf identity. Given that a growing number of deaf children attend general schools (Hyde & Power, 2004; Lampropoulou & Padelidi, 1997; Moores, 2001), there seems to be an obvious need for the provision of a more supportive environment, which, as also indicated by Leigh (1999), could enhance children's social and academic experiences within the school. Most significantly, however, there is a need for the exposure of deaf children in general schools to Deaf culture and Deaf role models through the establishment of bilingual programs, the employment of Deaf adults at schools, and the school's participation in the Deaf community's activities, which could encourage deaf persons to develop self-confidence with regard to both hearing and Deaf culture and construct a balanced identity.

Appendix A

Interview Guide

Family experiences.

1. Tell us a few things about your family.
2. Could you describe your relationship with your family?
3. How did you communicate with your family during the past years and how do you feel about this communication?
4. Can you describe your parents' friends? Would you want to have a relationship with them?
5. In which way do you believe that your family influenced your choices about friendship and your relationships?
6. What sort of information did your parents give you about your hearing loss?

Educational experiences.

1. Tell us a few things about the schools you attended.
2. Give us some information about the communication you had with teachers and classmates at school.
3. Could you describe your social life at school?
4. What is your opinion about the level of education in your school?
5. How would you describe your participation in the school's activities?
6. Were there any challenges that you faced at school and if any how did you deal with them?

Cultural identification, involvement, and preferences.

1. Tell us about your social relationships. Do you interact mostly with deaf or hearing persons? What sort of relationships do you have with them?
2. What do you know about Deaf culture and persons who are members of the Deaf community?
3. What are your views about the role of the associations for the Deaf or hard of hearing persons? Do you often visit such associations and why?
4. In which way do you communicate in your daily life and how do you feel about this?
5. What do you know about GSL? Does it play any role in your life?

6. What is your opinion about cochlear implants?
7. How do you feel about your identity?
8. How would you describe your self? (Deaf, deaf, or hard of hearing person) and why? Are there any differences between deaf, Deaf, or hard of hearing persons?
9. Could you tell us a few things about your partner/husband? Would you like to have a deaf or a hearing partner and if so, why?

Appendix B The thematic categories

Broad categories	Subcategories
Educational experiences	General schools
	Schools for the deaf
	Comparisons of educational settings
	Academic access
	Social access
Identity	Mode of communication
	Views about being deaf
	Social and Personal relationships
	Language

Notes

1. In this paper, the term “Deaf” (capitalized) concerns a group of deaf people who share a common language and culture, whereas the term “deaf” refers in general to the condition of not hearing (Padden & Humphries, 1988). The term deaf is also used in the participants’ comments to describe the whole population of the deaf.

2. In the past, the special schools for the deaf belonged either to the Ministry of Education or to the National Institute for the Deaf (NID), which belonged to the Ministry of Health and Welfare but was supervised by the Ministry of Education. The NID was founded in Athens in 1937, and in the period from 1956 to 1970, the Institute established residential schools in five more cities (Lampropoulou, 1999a). Nowadays, all schools for the deaf, including primary and secondary schools, belong to the Ministry of Education.

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