Identification of Challenges for Social Inclusion of Illiterate Deaf Adults

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This qualitative case study investigates the profound challenges hindering the social inclusion of illiterate deaf adults within Gujranwala city.

Methodology: A sample of eight illiterate deaf adults and sixteen family members was meticulously selected through snowball sampling. Data collection utilized a tailored semi-structured interview schedule, validated by experts, and conducted in sign language.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed a multitude of challenges, including communication barriers, unfamiliarity with standardized sign language, low self-confidence, limited awareness of civil and legal rights, attitudinal barriers, shyness, and hesitance. These challenges collectively undermine the social inclusion of illiterate deaf adults.

Implications: The study underscores the pressing need for adult education initiatives tailored to their unique needs to facilitate their independent integration into society.

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Introduction

Deafness is a unique facet of human diversity, contributing to a rich tapestry of cultures and communities worldwide. However, the challenges faced by deaf individuals, particularly those who are illiterate, are often underestimated and overlooked. Illiteracy among the deaf population presents a multifaceted issue that extends beyond the inability to read and write. It significantly impacts their social inclusion within both the deaf and hearing communities. The importance of addressing this problem statement lies in the fundamental principles of equality and inclusivity. Every individual, regardless of their hearing ability or literacy, deserves the opportunity to lead a fulfilling life, participate actively in society, and have access to their rights. Yet, illiterate deaf adults often find themselves on the margins, struggling to communicate, access education, and assert their civil and legal rights.
This study delves into the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults and the dynamics that influence their social inclusion. By examining their experiences within the deaf and hearing communities, we aim to highlight disparities, identify common issues, and ultimately contribute to the development of strategies that promote a more inclusive world for all deaf individuals, regardless of their literacy levels. This research underscores the urgent need for tailored interventions and policies that empower illiterate deaf adults to become active and engaged members of society, ensuring that no one is left behind.

**Literature Review**

Social inclusion is a complex and subjective concept often juxtaposed with social exclusion, wherein certain groups face marginalization or stigmatization based on characteristics such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, or disability (Le Boutillier & Croucher, 2010). For children with disabilities, achieving social inclusion necessitates overcoming substantial social, economic, and political obstacles to actively participate in society (Hill et al., 2004). This includes making friends, engaging in community activities, accessing quality inclusive education, and participating in leisure and play, ultimately contributing to their overall well-being and valued membership within the community (Mâsse et al., 2012; Murray & Greenberg, 2006).

However, research involving adults with disabilities underscores that defining social inclusion is nuanced and influenced by the interplay of personal and environmental factors (Martin & Cobigo, 2011). Rather than offering a rigid definition, adults with disabilities emphasize the freedom to choose and participate on their own terms, eschewing societal norms (Hammel et al., 2008). As such, allowing individuals with disabilities the opportunity to shape their definitions of social inclusion is imperative.

Social exclusion for children with disabilities is a multifaceted and persistent issue, typically stemming from a convergence of various factors over time (Koller et al., 2018). Deaf children, in particular, encounter numerous potential barriers within mainstream settings. Communication difficulties, including initiating and maintaining interactions with hearing peers, pose obstacles to forming friendships (Xie et al., 2014). Unsupportive educational environments can lead to feelings of loneliness, rejection, discrimination, or unwanted attention due to their hearing status (Israelite et al., 2002). Deaf students might grapple with isolation and self-consciousness when interacting with hearing peers, often seeking a sense of "normalcy" (Punch & Hyde, 2005). Research suggests that deaf youth may experience social marginalization or superficial acceptance, being perceived as unpopular among their peers (Ridsdale & Thompson, 2002). Additionally, curiosity about their deafness from other students can contribute to feelings of social embarrassment (Edmondson & Howe, 2019).

In contemporary society, written language plays a pivotal role in communication, granting access to culture and employment. However, many deaf individuals face difficulties in acquiring literacy skills, resulting in functional illiteracy. This impediment places them at a higher risk of unemployment and marginalization, with illiteracy rates exceeding 75% in most countries (Fernández-Viader et al., 2015). UNESCO emphasizes literacy as a fundamental component of the right to education, enabling empowerment, livelihood improvement, and active participation in society (Jones, 2018). Low literacy levels hinder individuals' engagement in social and political discourse, inhibiting their ability to influence community policies. Additionally, literacy extends beyond reading and writing; it encompasses information processing skills necessary in an increasingly digital and information-rich world (Akther, 2020; Adedokun, 2018).

Despite global progress, millions of individuals, both youth and adults, remain functionally illiterate, impeding their full engagement in society (Khuluvhe, 2021). Literacy encompasses the capacity to comprehend, interpret, communicate, and compute using written materials within various contexts. Functional illiteracy pertains to individuals unable to engage in activities requiring literacy skills, hindering their personal and communal development (Montoya, 2018).
Illiteracy profoundly impacts the social inclusion of deaf adults, erecting formidable barriers to their full participation in society. Illiteracy compounds the already significant challenges faced by deaf adults, undermining their social inclusion and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage.

**Objectives of the Study**
The objectives of the study were to:
- Identify the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults for social inclusion within deaf community.
- Identify the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults for social inclusion within hearing community.
- Compare the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults within deaf and hearing community.
- To compare the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults for social inclusion reported by deaf adults and their family members.

**Questions of the Study**
The following were the questions of the study:
- Which kind of challenges illiterate deaf adults have to face for social inclusion within deaf community?
- Which kind of challenges illiterate deaf adults have to face for social inclusion within hearing community?
- What is the difference between challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults for social inclusion within deaf and hearing communities?
- What is the difference between challenges reported by illiterate deaf adults and their family members for social inclusion within deaf and hearing communities?
- How does illiteracy affect the social life of deaf adults?

**Methodology**

**Research Design**
This study employs a qualitative case study design, well-suited for in-depth exploration of the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults in their pursuit of social inclusion. This approach allows for a thorough examination of the phenomena within their natural context.

**Study Population and Sampling**
The research focuses on illiterate deaf adults and their family members residing in Gujranwala city. The sample consists of eight illiterate deaf adults, each accompanied by two family members. Participants are selected using a systematic snowball sampling technique to ensure diversity in perspectives.

**Data Collection**
Data is collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by a specially designed interview schedule. This schedule, comprising twenty questions, is validated by experts and tailored to the research objectives. Interviews are conducted in sign language, accommodating the preferred mode of communication for the participants. Both in-person and video call interviews are employed to reach a wider geographic area. Informed consent is diligently obtained, and interactions are video-recorded for subsequent analysis.

**Data Analysis**
Thematic analysis is employed to uncover patterns and themes within the qualitative data. The process includes data familiarization, code generation, and the organization of codes into overarching themes. This iterative approach ensures the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings.

**Ethical Considerations**
The study adheres to strict ethical standards, including the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

**Demographic Information**

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
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Table 1: Demographic sheet of Illiterate Deaf Adults
Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of illiterate deaf adults participating in the study. The table provides a breakdown of various variables, including gender, age, profession, marital status, and level of hearing loss, along with their respective frequencies and percentages.

**Gender:** The majority of participants in this study were male, accounting for 75% of the sample, while females made up the remaining 25%.

**Age:** The age distribution of the participants varied, with the highest percentage (37.5%) falling into the 26-30 age group. Another 25% were aged 31-35, and the remaining 37.5% were above the age of 35.

**Profession:** Regarding their professions, the participants had diverse backgrounds. A small percentage (12.5%) were engaged in private jobs, 37.5% worked as laborers, 25% were involved in domestic handicrafts, and an additional 25% were unemployed.

**Marital Status:** Half of the participants (50%) were single, while 12.5% were married. A significant portion, 37.5%, had experienced divorce.

**Level of Hearing Loss:** The majority of the participants (75%) identified as deaf, while 25% reported being hard of hearing.

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<th>Variable</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Deaf</td>
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Table 2 outlines the demographic characteristics of family members of illiterate deaf adults who participated in the study. The table includes information on gender and the relationship of these family members with the illiterate deaf adults (IDA), along with corresponding frequencies and percentages.

**Gender:** The majority of family members in this study were male, representing 68.75% of the sample. Females made up the remaining 31.25%.

**Relationship with Illiterate Deaf Adult:** Family members had various relationships with the illiterate deaf adults. The highest percentage (43.75%) consisted of siblings, indicating that siblings were the most common relationship type with IDAs. Parents accounted for 37.5% of the sample, while in-laws constituted 18.75%.

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<td>In-laws</td>
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Findings and Discussion

Thematic Analysis

Following thematic categories provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults and their perceptions, as well as the role of family members in reinforcing these experiences.

**Theme 1: Causes of Illiteracy among Deaf Adults**
The primary reason cited for illiteracy among deaf adults is the prevailing belief that educating them is futile, leading to the suggestion of vocational training as an alternative path to economic improvement. Additionally, some financially stable families abstain from sending their deaf children to school due to excessive affection, further perpetuating illiteracy (Okosun, 2018; Miles & Hossain, 1999; Akram & Yang, 2021).

**Theme 2: Limited Awareness of Rights**
Illiterate deaf adults hindered by their illiteracy, lack awareness of their civil and legal rights. They rely heavily on family for protection, even associating the police with fear. Additionally, limited knowledge of inheritance rights often results in unequal property distribution. They often adhere to family religious practices due to inaccessible religious education in sign language, making society exempt them from religious obligations. Family members share concerns about their illiterate deaf relatives' struggles to access fundamental rights, highlighting a theme of vulnerability and dependency (Thengal, 2013).

**Theme 3: Perceptions of Life**
Illiterate deaf adults reveal a pervasive sense of exclusion and disenfranchisement, viewing themselves as unable to lead typical lives and lacking access to a quality lifestyle. This perspective is reinforced by their lack of education and skills, as reported by their family members (Waheed, 2017).

**Theme 4: Role in Society**
Illiterate deaf adults often experience exclusion from social activities due to their perceived incompetence, leading them to consider themselves unproductive members of society. This marginalization is driven by both their poor literacy and hearing impairment, as corroborated by their family members (Hussain, 2003; Kefallinou et al., 2020).

**Theme 5: Disregard for Opinions**
Illiterate deaf adults’ express frustration over the disregard for their opinions, attributing this dismissal to their illiteracy. Likewise, family members share the belief that illiterate deaf individuals' opinions are often overlooked due to presumed lack of understanding (Javed et al., 2016).

**Theme 6: Marital Challenges**
Maintaining a stable marital status proves challenging for illiterate deaf adults who lack awareness of the responsibilities of married life. Incompatibility with educated or hearing partners further complicates their relationships. Family members support this perspective, citing their relative's limited comprehension of marital responsibilities (Carlsson et al., 2004).

**Theme 7: Treatment by the Hearing Community**
Illiterate deaf adults report experiencing exclusion and condescension from the hearing community, which perceives them as incapable due to their illiteracy and deafness. Their educated hearing siblings, in particular, are noted for not accepting them due to perceived lack of manners (Brice & Strauss, 2016).

**Theme 8: Discomfort within the Literate Deaf Community**
Illiterate deaf adults struggle to integrate into the deaf community due to their lack of confidence and unfamiliarity with standard sign language. This discomfort is validated by their family members, who attribute it to communication barriers (Lewis, 1968; Asakereh & Yousofi, 2018).
Theme 9: Limited Income Sources
Most illiterate deaf adults have limited income prospects, often resorting to jobs such as tailoring, factory work, labor, and street vending. Their family members corroborate this, highlighting the constrained job opportunities available to them (Iftikhar & Yasmeen, 2009).

Theme 10: Communication Barriers and Shyness
Both illiterate deaf adults and their family members acknowledge the presence of communication barriers and shyness, which hinder effective interaction with others (Iqbal et al., 2023).

Theme 11: Marginalization in Decision-Making
Illiterate deaf adults and their family members note their exclusion from decision-making processes, primarily attributed to perceived illiteracy. This exclusion extends to family discussions and social gatherings, with limited attention given to their perspectives but they should be (Szmukler, 2019; Munoz-Baell & Ruiz, 2000).

Theme 12: Dependency on Others
Illiterate deaf adults express dependency on others due to their lack of awareness and confidence, limiting their independent mobility. Family members share these concerns, often prohibiting them from traveling alone (Kanwal et al., 2022).

Theme 13: Substandard Sign Language Proficiency
Their sign language proficiency is often localized and substandard, hindering communication even with literate deaf individuals (Ali et al., 2023).

Theme 14: Need for a Moderator
Illiterate deaf adults frequently require a hearing moderator in various situations due to communication gaps, such as when interacting with health professionals, shopping, or attending gatherings (Kanwal et al., 2022).

Theme 15: Limited Social Media Usage
While some illiterate deaf adults engage in social media for leisure and limited communication, they often lack a comprehensive understanding of its utility (Sweet et al., 2020).

Theme 16: Passive Participation in Social Gatherings
Illiterate deaf adults are often welcomed at social events, but they are frequently relegated to passive roles rather than active participation, reflecting a broader societal tendency to overlook their presence (Nortey, 2009).

Conclusion
This study explored the challenges faced by illiterate deaf adults in their pursuit of social inclusion within the deaf and hearing communities. Our objectives encompassed identifying these challenges, making nuanced comparisons, and understanding both the perspectives of illiterate deaf adults and their family members.

The research exposed a spectrum of obstacles, including limited awareness of rights, dependence on family, and a lack of comprehension regarding legal rights. Illiterate deaf adults often find themselves on the fringes of the deaf community due to discomfort with standard sign language and a dearth of self-assurance. In the hearing community, they encounter exclusion and condescension, reinforcing their sense of inadequacy. These challenges are uniformly recognized by illiterate deaf adults and their family members, underscoring shared apprehensions about autonomy, participation in decision making, and economic opportunities.
This study advocates for interventions that prioritize literacy enhancement, sign language proficiency, and rights awareness among illiterate deaf adults. Additionally, fostering an inclusive society that recognizes their potential is pivotal for their equitable integration into both the deaf and hearing communities.

**Recommendations**

Following are the recommendations based on the findings of the study:

Governmental and non-governmental organizations should collaborate to offer early intervention services for deaf children. These services should begin at an early stage of life to ensure timely development milestones, including language and communication skills.

Specialized adult education programs should be implemented to empower illiterate deaf adults with the knowledge and skills necessary for independent living. These programs should be designed to accommodate their unique needs and learning styles.

Encourage inclusive education policies and practices that promote the integration of illiterate deaf adults into mainstream educational settings. Ensure that educators receive training on accommodating the unique needs of deaf learners.

Strengthen family and community support networks for illiterate deaf adults. Offer counseling and guidance to family members to better understand the challenges faced by their deaf relatives, fostering more inclusive familial and social relationships.

**References**


