The Experiences of Cypriot Hearing Adults With Deaf Parents in Family, School, and Society

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This paper investigates the personal experiences of hearing adults with signing Deaf parents in their families, school, and society. In order to obtain relevant information, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Cypriot hearing adults with Deaf parents between the ages of 21 and 30 years with different occupation, sex, and educational background. It was found that most of the participants developed a bicultural identity, undertook the interpreter and protector role in their family, and interacted well with their parents, despite the lack of in-depth communication that they noted. The positive role of the extended family was acknowledged. The prejudices of Cypriot hearing people against the Deaf people were identified, as well as the lack of state support toward the Deaf community. This study has implications for Deaf parents, and professionals working, planning, and implementing social, psychological, and educational support services to Deaf-parented families.

The overwhelming majority of Deaf/deaf² adults (90%–95%) have hearing children (Schein, 1989), which “places inevitable pressure on child-rearing and family life” (Allsop & Kyle, 1997, p. 2). Such families bridge the divide between the deaf and hearing worlds, thus facing unique communication and parenting challenges (Clark, 2003). Additionally, the majority of Deaf/deaf adults (90%–95%) have hearing parents showing the one-generational nature of the Deaf community (Allsop & Kyle, 1997).

It is worth noting that there are different types of deaf-parented families with hearing children. Explicitly, both parents may be signing Deaf, or one parent may be hearing and one signing Deaf or oral deaf. Both deaf parents may not know the sign language; they may be oral and they may not consider themselves as part of Deaf culture (Children of Deaf Adults [CODA] International, 2005). However, given that the most prevalent type is that of Deaf signing parents, it is likely that most of the hearing children will grow up at homes with signing Deaf parents (Preston, 1994).

As a result, most of the applicable research has focused on hearing children’s communication with their signing Deaf parents, as well as on the cultural awareness within the nuclear family (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). It is suggested in the current literature that hearing children growing up with signing Deaf parents are bilingual and bicultural because they share their Deaf parents’ language and culture (CODA International, 2005; Preston, 1994). Explicitly, on the one hand, they get familiar with their parents’ Deaf

A decade ago, when the senior author was working as a peripatetic teacher for deaf children, during a visit at a general school, she started signing with a signing deaf child; a hearing child of Deaf parents, as transpired later, approached the researcher with hesitation and asked her whether she felt ashamed for signing in front of all hearing children and staff, being such an important teacher herself. The researcher replied that she felt very proud of signing fluently and that she could see the jealousy and the admiration in the eyes of hearing teachers and pupils for her signing. The child left thoughtfully. To that child and to all Cypriot hearing children of Deaf parents, with the hope that they will never feel that way, we devote this paper. Special thanks are extended to all participants who have voluntarily participated in our study, trusted us, and shared very personal experiences with us! Without them the data that form the basis of the study would not have been forthcoming. No conflicts of interest were reported. Correspondence should be sent to Kika Hadjikakou, PO Box 20653, Nicosia 1661, Cyprus (e-mail: kikaha@cytanet.com.cy).

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culture and learn the sign language from birth in a natural way similar to a hearing child learning a spoken language, and on the other hand as hearing people they learn the spoken language and are integrated into the hearing community (Preston, 1996).

Hearing children of Deaf adults, being bicultural and bilingual, are often the link between the Deaf and the hearing world (Preston, 1994). Sometimes they serve as interpreters and spokespersons for the family (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). They also explain the hearing culture to their parents (Filer & Filer, 2000). If the role of parent is clear and the interpretation is kept to appropriate contexts, the added responsibility can add to the children’s maturity and independence (Preston, 1994; Lane et al., 1996), as well as to the development of a close relationship with their parents (Filer & Filer, 2000). On the other hand, if the above prerequisites are not met, this may cause the child’s exposure to inappropriate interpreting situations (e.g., hospitals, police station) and to his/her becoming a “parentified” child (Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Using the hearing child as an interpreter for his/her parents may also violate the Deaf parent’s right to privacy and cause biased communication (Luey, Glass, & Elliott, 1995; Preston, 1994).

It is possible that Deaf parents may use sign language with each other, but a mixed mode of communication (signing, speech, or both) with their children (Clark, 2003; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). For instance, some Deaf parents may chose not to sign with their children and speak to them instead, for various reasons; for example, because the child is hearing, because of the prejudices against the sign language (Hoffmeister, 1985), or even because they want to prevent them from becoming their interpreters (Jones, Strom, & Daniels, 1989). This may result in hearing children not learning the sign language, an inappropriate spoken language model, and restricted communication between parents and children (Clark, 2003; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

In a small number of studies it has also been reported that a few young hearing children of Deaf parents may experience spoken language delay, given that they are not adequately exposed to oral language. Researchers suggest that a culturally practical plan (e.g., time spent with hearing relatives, preschool) would enhance a child’s exposure to spoken language (Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

It has been noted that Deaf parents may not have equal access to information on effective parenting skills (Singleton & Tittle, 2000) or lack exposure to good parent models (Hoffmeister, 1985), due to lack of incidental learning (Allsop & Kyle, 1997; Hoffmeister, 1985) and frustrating relationships with their hearing parents (Hadjikakou & Nikolaraizi, 2008). Nevertheless, research evidence shows that Deaf parents are generally competent, loving, and caring (Clark, 2003; Mallory, Schein, & Zingle, 1992; Preston, 1994; Schein, 1989) and determined to raise their children in the best way they know (due to the limitations pointed out above; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Current studies also suggest that there is no difference in family interactions between families with Deaf parents and hearing children and families with hearing parents and hearing children (Mattock & Crist, 1989; Jones & Dumas, 1996).

It is worth stressing that the formation of the CODA organization (Filer & Filer, 2000) and the fact that 60% of the hearing children of Deaf adults work in some manner with the Deaf/deaf adults/children (e.g., interpreter, teacher of deaf children; Preston, 1994) indicate that many hearing children of Deaf adults feel a lifelong connection with the Deaf community.

Preston (1994) emphasizes that “as adults, hearing children of deaf parents have largely been passed over by researchers” (p. 21). Although a considerable number of studies mainly focus on Deaf parents’ interactions and communication with their hearing children, having involved school-age hearing children of Deaf parents (Buchino, 1993; Gosselin, 1994; Mattock & Crist, 1989; Rienzi, 1990), few studies have focused on the experiences of adult hearing with Deaf parents. As pointed out by Preston (1994) and Buchino (1993), the studies by Arlow (1976), Dent (1982), Taska and Rhoads (1981), Wagenheim (1985), and others form exceptions to this case, although they generalize on the basis of a single case study.

A lot of research has focused on Deaf people, and some of the studies describe Deaf parents’ experiences with their hearing children (Allsop & Kyle, 1997;
Hoffmeister, 1985; Jones et al., 1989). Despite the importance of this topic, there is a tremendous need for adult hearing children of Deaf parents to speak out for themselves. Most of the childhood memories and experiences with Deaf parents can be found in books (Barash & Dicker, 1991; Crowe, 1993; Glickfeld, 1989; Greenberg, 1970; Harris, 1983; Sidransky, 1990; Walker, 1986). In these books (with the exception of Greenberg, whose parents were not Deaf), however, personal stories of being the hearing child of Deaf parents are presented. As pointed out by Buchino (1993) in those books “each author was careful to discuss the impact of interpreting the intense feelings related to deafness and the parents, the times when the children felt as if they were the parents (...) and the positive and negative aspects of having a communication mode that is different from that of their peers” (p. 41).

A number of researchers have identified the limited research findings on this topic. Singleton and Tittle (2000) in a review paper on Deaf parents and their hearing children clearly state that overall there is “little empirical research involving hearing children of deaf Deaf parents” (p. 224), despite the fact that “future research on hearing children with Deaf parents is much needed and would be an important contribution to the growing discipline of Deaf studies” (p. 234). Buchino (1993), similarly, points out that there is a “paucity of information regarding social and emotional issues for families with deaf parents and hearing children” (p. 40). Preston (1994) emphasizes that “researchers have rarely allowed these men and women to tell their own story. There has been no study that gives primacy to a broad cross-section of hearing children of deaf parents” (p. 5).

Thus, little relevant empirical research is available, apart from the work carried out by Preston (1994). He conducted a 4-year study and interviewed more than 150 hearing adults who were raised by Deaf parents throughout the United States. Interesting findings were recorded, especially concerning identity development and cultural alignment, family experiences, and issues of protection and advocacy. Despite the great importance of this study, there is not enough research evidence on adult hearing people with Deaf parents in other countries, where different conditions may exist. International perspectives on the experiences of hearing adults with Deaf parents should be a valuable contribution to the literature.

In view of the limited findings on the experiences of adult hearing people with Deaf parents, the lack of any such research in Cyprus and having in mind the value of international perspectives on hearing adults with Deaf parents as well as the critical role of research on this topic “to promote effective parenting, enhanced family communication, and identity development” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000, p. 229), this paper explores exclusively and for the first time in Cyprus the personal descriptions of the experiences of adult hearing people with Deaf parents in the family, the school, and the wider society.

Methods

The Participants

An a priori determination of the sample structure was chosen for the purposes of this study (Oppenheim, 1997; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Thus, a sample of adult hearing people with Deaf parents satisfying a certain set of criteria (different age, occupation, sex, and educational background) was selected by the researchers. These criteria have been developed by the researchers “independently of the concrete material analyzed, and before its collection and analysis was defined for this study” (Flick, 1998, p. 63). As pointed out by Preston (1994, p. 32), because “there is no demographic information on the entire population of adult hearing children of Deaf parents,” efforts were made by the researchers to compile a balanced sample of participants, enrolling adult hearing participants of any age, occupation, sex, or educational background.

In order to trace and select the sample, we contacted the Associations of the Deaf people in Cyprus, there being no CODA association in Cyprus, and the only school for deaf children does not keep any relevant records. It is worth noting that members of the Associations are signing Deaf persons and those who have adult children graduated from the only school for deaf children in Cyprus. Thus, those Deaf people were asked by the researchers to inform their adult hearing children about this study and about the criteria set and to assure them about the confidentiality of the study. Initially, 13 potential participants with both signing
Deaf parents expressed an interest in participating voluntarily in this study. However, one participant declined to participate when he/she was contacted by us because he/she stated that he/she did not feel ready to talk about his/her experiences. Among the rest of the 12 potential participants, the jobs or current studies of six of them were related to the Deaf community. In an effort to balance a clustering of potential participants with involvement with the Deaf community (despite the fact that 60% of the hearing children of Deaf adults work in some manner with the Deaf/deaf adults/children, as pointed out by Preston, 1994), four participants whose jobs or current studies are related with the Deaf/deaf adults/children were finally selected by the researchers, focusing on their representativeness regarding age, sex, and educational background. In total, 10 hearing adults enrolled in the study. Their ages ranged from 21 to 30 years (\( M = 24.60, SD = 3.37 \)). They were of different gender (four men and six women) and had different jobs. As mentioned above, four of the participants’ jobs or current studies were related to the Deaf community (e.g., teachers of deaf children/special teachers, interpreters; see Table 1). Four of the participants were high school graduates, three participants were university students, and three participants were university graduates. Thus, this study enrolled a small number of participants (\( n = 10 \)) who had special characteristics (e.g., they had a rather high level of formal schooling, both their parents were signing Deaf). No further information will be given about the participants, for reasons of confidentiality.

Research Design and Data Analysis

Qualitative methods were deemed appropriate for taking an in-depth approach of data collection (Cohen & Manion, 1994) to allow the voices of hearing adults of Deaf parents to be heard. Thus, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted for gathering data for this research. The general issues to be investigated were formulated as an interview guide. This interview guide was developed based on the current literature on hearing children with Deaf parents (Mallory et al., 1992; Preston, 1994). Four sets of questions relating to the research questions of the study were explored with informants, and the interview guide matched the four sets of questions (in Appendix 1 only the first out of four parts of the interview guide, which refers only to the first set of questions [family experiences], is presented). The first set focused on the participants’ family experiences (e.g., communication, extended family, protection, leaving home). The second set covered school experiences including parents’ communication with school, teachers, hearing parents, friends, and so on. The third set of questions focused on Deaf-World (for instance, on identity, Cypriot Sign Language [CSL], Deaf community, etc.). The fourth set of questions investigated issues relating to society (for instance, hearing people’s attitudes, state role, etc.).

For the interviews, places were chosen where respondents would feel comfortable to express their thoughts; a nonthreatening environment ensures and strengthens confidentiality (Oppenheim, 1997). A note-taker was also available at every interview. Each one hour and a half interview was audio taped for keeping the information obtained (with the exception of one interview, which the participant refused to audi-tape). Ethical issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality, and access to the research findings were discussed with the participants who gave an informed consent prior to data collection.

A qualitative data analysis was carried out. Three steps were followed in the analysis of the interviews: (a) text transcription, the first step in the analysis of the interviews was to arrange for the transcription of the detailed notes and audio tapes of the interviews; and (b) code procedures, when a printed document of all interviews had been produced, the researchers studied the transcript and identified those sections of it that were relevant to the research questions of the study. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p. 105) “this coding procedure requires several passes.

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<th>Table 1 The occupations of the participants</th>
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<td>Number (N)</td>
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through the transcript as categories of the topics evolved and the analyst gained greater insight into the content” of the interviews. The topics of the interviews served as a general guide for developing code categories. A set of four primary code categories was created: family experiences, educational experiences, Deaf-World, and society. Additional codes, referring to parts of each major category were also used. For family experiences, the subcodes used were the following: communication, protection, extended family, leaving home, interpreting, and interactions. For educational experiences the following codes were applied: parents' communication with school, homework, teachers, friendships, hearing parents, and academic level. For Deaf-World, the subcodes used were the following: identity, Deaf community, CSL, working with the Deaf/deaf adults/children, and the Deaf versus the hearing world. For the code “society,” the subcodes used were as follows: hearing people’s attitude, state role and responsibility, (c) search procedures; once the code categories were assigned and noted in the margins of interviews, the data were copied, cut, and pasted and sorted into separate code folders. A printout was produced, which was used as supporting material within an interpretative analysis.

In order to ensure the reliability of the study, more than one individual reviewed the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, the identification of meaningful units, the creation of meaningful concepts, their allocation into the code categories, and the development of the final code categories were conducted by two researchers independently, who regularly discussed and resolved disagreements (Hadjikakou & Nikolaraizi, 2008). Interrater reliability averaged 87% and was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements.

Results

Family Experiences

Communication Participants were asked to describe the mode of communication used between the participants and their Deaf parents. Most of them stressed that the first language that they learned was the CSL.

I grew up in an environment that you cannot do otherwise, but sign. Me and my brother first learned to talk with the hands. I was watching my parents signing and I thought that it was normal. (P1)

I consider myself as bilingual, first I learned to sign and then to speak. How did you learn to speak Greek? That’s how I’ve learned how to sign. It was not difficult for me. Any sign language is like any oral language. (P2)

Most of the participants were using a combination of signs and speech to communicate with their parents:

I sign with my parents but at the same time I use my lips. More often, I communicate with my mother using my lips, less often I use the sign language. If we are to discuss about some issues for the first time, to use phrases for the first time, we will use the signs. But for everyday communication “How are you?” “Yes I am fine,” we will use the mouth. With my father we mostly sign. (P2)

Since I was young I have been signing with my parents. My native language is the CSL. First, I learned the CSL but now I use a combination of signs and speech to communicate with my parents. Because I got used to their way of speaking I may not use the signs, only the lips with no voice, to communicate with my parents. They read my lips, and they understand what I am saying. I don’t have a problem with the signs, but I prefer communication with the lips. That’s how I got used to do at home, even though in some cases hearing children mostly sign with their Deaf parents. (P5)

Only one participant mentioned that he/she did not use any signs with his/her parents and he/she was using the lip movements with no voice:

I just speak slowly, I read the lips. We do not use the CSL that you watch on television. (...) If you meet my parents and other “deaf-mute,” and if you speak slowly to them, they read the lips. In my family we just speak to our parents more slowly. (P6)

Almost all participants stressed that their communication with their parents is rather superficial and it does not go deeper, such as talking about politics, or laughing about a joke, and so on.
I cannot joke with my parents. Any joke has to be short and easy. Otherwise, you cannot explain a difficult joke to them. (P6)

Everyday, I have the feeling that I cannot communicate things to my parents. I may want to talk with them about politics, and I can’t. I love reading books, and sometimes I want to give a book to my mother to read so as to talk about it later, but I know she can’t understand (…). Ever since, I was young, I remember that I was trying to explain the news to my father. I would explain it one, two, three times. Then, I gave up. How many times, explaining the same thing? However, I managed to cope with the difficulties of communication. It was not that I could communicate freely with my parents. I may have wanted to tell them a joke, and I couldn’t. OK, we laugh but not at the level I would like to, I don’t use the “smart jokes” … that I would give a hint for them to understand. I have to analyze everything so as to laugh. At least we laugh. If they can laugh I don’t care about anything else. (P2)

Some participants attributed these difficulties to their parents’ poor vocabulary.

I communicate with my parents, but sometimes I face some difficulties, because they have poor vocabulary, and I try to find other ways to explain things to them. (P5)

I was communicating with my parents, but in their language. I was watching the news, and I heard the phrase ‘Nicosia is dead’. I had to think of an easy word in CSL to explain to my parents. (P7)

The majority of the participants revealed that they were late speakers. Some of them even mentioned some problems with speech in their adult life.

I had some problems with articulation. Maybe it’s wrong that I’m mentioning it now…. For instance, my parents pronounce the word “pyjamas” like “pytsamas.” I remember myself pronouncing it wrongly when I was quite old, assuming that this was right. (…) I also faced difficulties with the words of the Cyprus dialect. Even now I have a lot of unknown words, because the Deaf people, do not use such words. I think that I know sign language better than oral Greek. I believe that my oral speech has improved relatively late. We did not have oral stimuli at home. (P3)

Till now, I have a problem with oral speech. I prefer to express myself in writing rather than in speech. (P5)

Some of the participants identified some problems even in their Greek writing.

I face some problems with oral Greek. I remember myself also facing problems with writing essays. I think this has to do with Deaf not speaking properly. Most of the Deaf people speak Greek like foreign people. (…) I also face difficulties with difficult words that we do not come across very often. For instance, the word hitherto; no Deaf will use such a word. (P4)

Protection  Almost all participants had to protect their parents from hearing people’s comments, looks, and other difficult conditions.

I remember once, I was somewhere with my parents. I listened to some hearing people’s comments “Oh, how unfortunate are these people, they are ‘deaf-mute.’” I got angry and I told them “They are not ill, they are just like us, they just can’t listen.” However, I got used to such behaviour. Or if I notice that someone stares at us, I try to explain to him that there is no reason to feel like this for the Deaf people. They are normal! I think that these people behave like this, not because they are bad, but because they are not Deaf-aware. (P3)

A lot of times I protected my parents. You know, I admire my parents and I cannot put up with hearing people’s comments. Once, we were all at a restaurant and the waiter talked to my father in English because he thought that he was a foreigner. I told him “Talk to him in Greek. He’s not a foreigner. Just Deaf.” (P7)

Sometimes, they had to warn their parents of dangers, strange noises, and so on.

Sometimes, when I was really really young, I was listening to strange noises, I was wakening my
father and I was telling him to go and check, and I returned to my bed. (P2)

The eldest participants mentioned that they had to protect the younger members of their families.

I had the role of protector in my family. Especially, looking after my sister that she was ten years younger than me. I had to change her, feed her, help her with the homework. Until today, my parents come to me for all their problems. Sometimes, I wanted to protect them from hearing people’s comments. But my parents would tell me to calm down, and to ignore the hearing people. (P5)

Extended family Most of the participants referred to the important role of some members of their extended family, in order to succeed later in life:

My aunt made a lot of sacrifices for us. She put aside her own children to help us. She made all these sacrifices, so many concessions, quarrels, running for me and my brother, and I was wondering if a mother would do all these things for her children. Someone had to do all these things and it was my aunt who made all this effort. I believe that a lot of achievements in my life are due to my aunt’s efforts. Of course, I am grateful to my parents, but my aunt was my main supporter. (P2)

Some members of the extended family offered me advice about my behaviour. For instance, I was screaming, doing whatever I wanted because my parents were Deaf! (P7)

In some cases, the participants mentioned communication problems between their parents and the hearing members of the extended family.

In my mother’s family there are Deaf members and everything is fine. In my father’s family there are only hearing members and they get fed up communicating with my father. I asked my aunt, “Why don’t you visit us? I know that you love your brother. You all say that he has a good family, and has raised up fine his children.” I believe that they have a communication problem. My father’s mother doesn’t communicate with him. So many years and they never communicated with each other! Even now they communicate through us, and only if my father manages to lipread his mother. (P3)

In some other cases, the participants stressed that their grandparents loved their parents more than the rest of their children.

I remember that my grandparents loved my father more than the rest of their children. (P1)

Leaving home Given the role of the participants as protectors, some of the participants commented that leaving home had an impact on their parents because they depended on them a lot for communicating, interpreting, and so on. It is also obvious from some participants’ comments that sometimes the participants shared similar feelings of worry, anxiety, and so on, when leaving home.

I help my parents and my parents depend on me a lot. When I did my military service my father kept telling me to run off when they needed me and that he would cover me up. (P1)

When I went abroad for my studies, I was a bit worried about my parents. If something happened who would they call? OK I communicated with them through SMS, but I was a bit worried, because they would not reply immediately. I was calling my aunt and I was telling her to go and check with my parents and let me know. (…) Similarly, my mother was sending SMSes that she was crying for one month after I had gone. I assume because she did not have anyone to depend on. (P2)

Some of the participants acknowledged the role of technology for minimizing the Deaf parents’ dependency on hearing children and for making it easier for both sides.

When both my sister and myself left home, it was not a problem for my parents. Of course they were worried about us as hearing parents do, e.g. they were wondering about “how we are,” “how we are getting on, etc.” Maybe technology contributed, so as they could feel so cool. Especially, SMS was a great discovery for the Deaf people, five years
ago. They can communicate with each other and with their children. Imagine me being away from home and not having a way to communicate with my parents. The use of mobile phones helps the Deaf people to become more secure. I send them a message and they don’t feel worried about me. (P8)

**Interpreting** It can be inferred from the participants’ comments that an important role of the Cypriot hearing children of Deaf adults is interpreting for their parents. Almost all of them stressed that they were fed up with interpreting when children, but at the same time they mentioned that they could not do otherwise because there was no other option.

We had to be the interpreters for our parents. When we were young there were no CSL interpreters. (P3)

When I “make the interpreter” for my father, sometimes I want to help, and sometimes I get fed up. The role of the interpreter is to help the Deaf people. If there wasn’t an interpreter, my father couldn’t move around easily. I think that he needs help, and that if I were in his place I would do the same. (P1)

The majority of the participants noted that this was very stressful and tiring for them, especially in difficult situations, for example, protecting their parents, during arguments, or when everybody was staring at them.

I think that it was bad and not right that I was interpreting for my parents when I was a child, because I had to pick up the phone and tell things that were not appropriate for a child of my age. For instance, if my father wanted to argue with someone, I had to argue in interpreting whatever my father said. I could not handle this at that age. I believe it’s wrong for hearing children to interpret for their parents. At least, it’s OK to interpret for unimportant things, but definitely wrong for serious things that may have an impact on the child’s psychological condition. (P3)

I was feeling very uncomfortable in adolescence to interpret for my parents. Especially, when they were outside the home. I was using “smaller signs,” so as to escape notice. At home there was no problem signing with my parents. (P8)

The participants revealed that the older children of a family had more duties as interpreters than the younger ones. Some of the first-born children also emphasized that they went without their games because they had to do interpreting for their parents or their schedule had to change suddenly in order to interpreter for their parents.

I was the first-born child in my family. I’ve been interpreting for my parents since I was 5-6 years old. They were asking us to “do the interpreting” when we should not do so. I was leaving my friends and the game to interpret for my parents. I missed the game. I even “do the interpreting” at court. Having a Deaf father, ruins my schedule. I have to help him with interpreting whenever he asks for it. I am the eldest and he doesn’t ask his younger children to do the interpreting for him. (P1)

However, some of the participants acknowledged that because of their parents’ deafness, they took over a lot of responsibilities and the role of the interpreter, which contributed to their becoming more responsible and mature in adult life.

Now, looking back I believe that interpreting for my parents had a positive impact on my way of thinking and analyzing things. (…) Being an interpreter for my parents made me more responsible. I can say that my parents’ deafness helped me to take more initiatives, to face my problems on my own, and to be more mature. This is very positive for me. (P8)

**Interactions** The majority of the participants did not mention any problems in their interactions with their parents. Only some of the participants mentioned that having Deaf parents had an impact on their growing up and on their relationships with their parents.

Deaf parents think differently than hearing parents. Sometimes, the Deaf people react differently. During adolescence, I used to argue with my...
father. If my parents were not Deaf, things would have been different for me. (P1)

Sometimes, I felt bad about my parents’ deafness, when I was watching hearing parents talking and doing things with their children that I couldn’t do. (P5)

One participant mentioned that despite the fact that Deaf parents love their hearing children, in some cases they do not know how to handle or raise them.

Sometimes, I feel guilty for having had all these opportunities, and also for having good parents, in comparison with other children. I know a lot of hearing children of Deaf adults, whose parents worked day and night so as to raise them but they did not know how to handle their children and to offer them all they could, and the children went astray, either because they felt inferior or because they reacted to their parents’ deafness. Very tragic things.... (P2)

School Experiences

Parents’ communication with school The majority of the participants stressed that their parents never or rarely visited their school, to talk with the teachers, and so on, mainly because of communication reasons. Family members (e.g., aunts, grandmothers) undertook this duty instead; in rare cases in the presence of the parents.

Basically, my parents did not communicate with the school. The only solution was for me to do the interpreting for them. But I avoided asking them to come to school. (P4)

My aunt used to come to school, because my mother was afraid that she could not communicate with the teachers; sometimes the teachers had some concerns. I was sure that she could communicate on her own, and whenever she came they could communicate just fine! (P5)

Only the minority of the participants mentioned that their parents visited the school, and the hearing child acted as an interpreter for the parent.

My parents communicated with the school through us. If they wanted to talk with the teachers we had to be present in order to interpret. (P1)

Some participants took advantage of the situation and in some cases they did not inform their parents about school meetings, their progress, and so on.

One day when I was at high school, the head-teacher called home to ask my parents why I left school. I picked up the phone. I told him that my parents were not at home and that I would let them know. Of course, I did not!! (P2)

My parents never saw my term’s marks. I never gave them the term’s report. Only, when I was in the first class of the junior school when I had As and Bs. (...) When the secretary was asking me to give her a phone number for contact, I was giving her my mobile phone! (P7)

Homework Almost all participants stressed that family members helped them with their homework because their parents could not do so.

My grandfather helped me with the homework. If he was not there, we would have a problem. (P1)

My mother helped me when I was in primary school. We were doing reading with our aunt who was living close by. When I was in junior school my aunt helped me, and I was helping my brother. (P3)

In a few cases, Deaf parents helped the participants when in primary school as the homework was easier.

My father used to help me with my homework when I was in primary school. My father graduated from the school for deaf children. But my sister helped me with my homework in secondary school. (P8)

One participant mentioned that as a child he was studying in a reading room, as his/her parents could not help him/her.

When I was in primary school, I wouldn’t go home for my homework, since my parents could not help me, but I went to a reading-room instead. I was studying there under supervision till five o’clock in the afternoon. (P6)

In a few cases the participants did their homework alone without any help.
Nobody helped me with the homework. Whatever I achieved, it was because of my own efforts. (P2)

I was studying alone, while my grandmother was cooking. If I wanted something I used to ask her. (P5)

**Teachers**  Most of the participants mentioned that their teachers were understanding toward them because of their parents’ deafness.

I remember that my aunt came once to primary school and told my teacher that my parents were Deaf. Then, that teacher told me “I want you to know that I will always be near by if you need me.” (P2)

In some cases, the teachers seemed to admire our participants for their efforts or were curious to find out how they managed.

Sometimes the teachers would ask us how we manage to communicate with our parents. (P3)

I did not have special treatment because my parents were Deaf. I achieved everything because of my efforts. One day, a teacher told me that I was a hero. (P9)

In some other cases, the participants would use their parents’ deafness in order to avoid punishment or to have “special” treatment.

In some cases I was telling the teachers that my parents are Deaf, so as to make them feel pity for me and to get away with a punishment. (P10)

I believe that I had better treatment because of my parents’ deafness. Sometimes, I was taking advantage of it. Of course, I was a good student but I think that the teachers helped me more than the rest of the students. (P5)

**Friendships**  Almost all participants stressed that their friends were aware of their parents’ deafness, but this fact did not have any effect on their friendships. They invited their hearing friends, and they were invited to their homes.

My friends did not have a problem with my father. (P1)

I used to go to my friends’ parties, and I invited them to my house. (P5)

A participant referred to the disclosure of his/her parents’ deafness in front of his/her classmates.

Ok, I remember one time that my father came to ask my teachers about my progress, and there was a long queue with parents and their children. I and my father were there and everybody was watching us, signing. That was uncomfortable, but on the other hand its was liberating; the disclosure of the “particularity” in front of your classmates; in a way this was relieving. (P8)

A number of participants mentioned that their friends liked their parents, the way they were communicating, and some of them told them that they would like the participants’ parents to be their own parents, and so on.

When I was in high school and my friends visited me at home, they found my parents really “cool.” They kept asking me “When can we come again to see your parents and talk with them?” My parents have an “open character.” (P2)

My friends were visiting us at home very often. I was also going out and my parents allowed me to do so. My friends’ parents did not allow them to go out. They kept telling me “We wish we had your parents, they are so good! They are ahead of our parents.” (P7)

Only one participant mentioned that his/her classmates were rather cautious, but this lasted till they met his/her parents.

In the beginning, before my classmates met my parents, their behaviour was rather strange. But things changed when they visited us at home. They came, once, twice, three times. In the end they would even go earlier to my home, before I arrived, and they would drink beer with my father, and chat about football. (P6)

**Hearing parents**  Almost all participants did not mention any problems with the hearing parents of their hearing peers.

My friends’ parents accepted me. Only once, the father of a friend of mine asked if the P9’s mother...
can drive OK. And my friend replied that she drives fine, and if something happens, P9 will tell her mother. My mother cannot hear and she is doubly careful when she drives. (P9)

In some cases the hearing parents would even try to socialize and to try to communicate with the Deaf parents.

My friends’ parents were very friendly with my parents. They would even go out together and try to communicate with them. (P5)

Academic level  Most of the participants did not mention any relationship between their academic level and their parents’ deafness.

It was not my parents’ fault that I was not good at school. My aunt told me “do your homework” but I didn’t listen. I didn’t want to.... (P6)

Only one participant mentioned that his/her low academic level was due to his/her parents’ deafness.

It was my complaint. I believe that I was not good at school because of my parents’ deafness. My parents believed that it was our fault. I cannot say for sure that if my parents were hearing we would be the best students in the classroom. (P1)

Deaf-World

Identity  Most of the participants mentioned that they felt that they had a bicultural identity, belonging both to the Deaf and the hearing world.

I believe that I am bicultural. When at home I belong to the Deaf-World, when outside, to the hearing group. But sometimes, I want to express myself in the sign language, I think in the sign language, or even sign in front of the mirror. (...) Sometimes, I cannot decide where I belong. I hope that both communities want to have me as a member [laughing]. (P2)

I believe that I belong to both worlds, the Deaf and the hearing. Now, in which I belong more, I cannot tell. When people ask me, I say that I belong to the Deaf-World, and then when I think a bit more, I say, wait a minute, you can communicate with both of them. My native language is CSL, and I can also communicate with the hearing. It depends on the people I am with. (P3)

Only one participant did not share the above view and stated that she/he belonged only to the hearing world.

I don’t believe that CODA are bicultural. I belong only to the hearing world, because I am hearing. If I were Deaf, I would belong to the Deaf-World. (P1)

Cypriot Sign Language  All participants stressed that knowing the CSL was advantageous for them. More than half of the participants’ jobs are not related to the Deaf/deaf adults/children. However, they mentioned some advantages as listed below.

The CSL helped me a lot. I can lip-read from a distance and I am more observant. I have better spatial skills than the rest of the hearing people. (P5)

I believe that it’s advantageous for me to know the CSL; in some cases I meet Deaf people in the street and I sign with them; they ask me how I learned how to sign, and I tell them that my parents are Deaf. Knowing CSL helped me a lot. (P7)

Some participants stressed that knowing the CSL was an extra qualification for them because their job is related with the Deaf community (e.g., as interpreters, special teachers).

Knowing the CSL is an extra advantage for me, given that my job is related to the Deaf community. (P2)

Deaf community  The participants (whose job is not related to the Deaf/deaf adults/children) had more contacts with the Deaf community (e.g., at the Deaf club, with Deaf people, at events) when they were younger than in adult life.

When I was younger I used to go to the Deaf club. Our friends were hearing children of Deaf parents,
whom we met there. We played different games, e.g. billiards, bingo, football. It was very nice. Of course when I got older (when I went to high school) I stopped attending the Deaf club with my parents. (P10)

Some participants mentioned that their contact with the Deaf people was like communicating with your parents’ friends.

I like signing with the Deaf people. Especially, with my parents’ friends because they grew up in dormitory houses they are like brothers and sisters. So I love them as well. I will ask how they are, how their children are. Of course, I will not talk with them for ten hours. I imagine you wouldn’t spend ten hours talking with your parents’ friends. (P2)

The participants, whose job is related with the Deaf community, mentioned that they have Deaf friends and socialize with the Deaf people.

I have a lot of Deaf friends (because of my job). A lot of my friends are CODA as well. (P4)

Deaf versus hearing world The participants identified some differences between the Deaf and the hearing world; for example, that they laugh and talk about different things. Some of the participants also identified a different level of discussion between the Deaf and the hearing people.

Deaf people laugh at different things than the hearing. Their conversations have different content than those of the hearing. They will not talk about politics, but about things of everyday life. Deaf people entertain in a different way than the hearing. (P5)

If you want to explain something to a Deaf person it takes longer than to explain the same thing to a hearing person. For instance, if a Deaf person watches the news, you need ten minutes to explain something. The Deaf people will ask continuous questions. “But why?,” “Who thought about it?,” “What will happen after?” Probably, because they don’t have the same experiences as the hearing people. (P10)

Working with the Deaf/deaf adults/children The participants who were working with the Deaf/deaf adults/children mentioned different reasons for choosing a career working with the Deaf/deaf adults/children. The main reasons were the need to help the Deaf adults/children, the vocational perspective, and so on.

It was my choice to work with the Deaf/deaf adults/children. I cannot think about the reason that I chose to do so. Initially, it was my need to help the Deaf people, and to help them to solve some of their problems. Then, I loved my job, as an interpreter. I cannot imagine myself doing anything else. I know how to respect the Deaf community and culture. (P3)

I saw it from a self-interested point of view. I saw that there was a great need for teachers of deaf children, and I thought since I can sign and enjoy working more with the deaf children than with the hearing, why not? (P2)

Society

Hearing people’s attitudes Regarding the hearing people’s attitude toward the Deaf people, some of the participants stressed that there are a lot of prejudices.

In Cyprus things are not good. There are a lot of prejudices against the Deaf people. For instance, they take advantage of them by paying them very little money. They asked my father to go and work in a job for €950. I did not let him go and work for such little money. My father wanted to go, because he is a hardworking man but I did not let him. (P7)

In some cases there were prejudices against the participants from their perspective parents-in-law.

I had once a relationship with someone, and his mother told him. “Don’t marry her, you may have children with a ‘problem’.” (P5)

State role and responsibility Most of the participants stressed that the state does not offer anything for the hearing children of Deaf adults.

The state does nothing for CODA. Of course, Cyprus is much behind compared to other countries. (P1)
The majority of the participants mentioned that the state should help Deaf parents so as to be in a position to help their children, and not the children themselves.

I don’t think that the government should help the CODA. (…) I believe that the government should help more the Deaf adults than their hearing children. Of course, the Deaf people don’t think that there is something wrong with them. For instance, the government should help them to get a job, since a lot of Deaf people are unemployed. They face financial problems. (P5)

The participants made some recommendations about responsibilities of the state. Most of the participants suggested that the state should organize afternoon classes so as to help the Deaf parents’ children with their homework.

I was lucky because my aunt helped me with my homework. Some hearing children with Deaf parents may not get this help. So, I would suggest that there should be an afternoon school for the hearing children of Deaf adults. (P8)

Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to explore for the first time in Cyprus the personal descriptions of memories and experiences of adult hearing people with Deaf parents in family, school, and society. It must be noted that the data reported in this study are based on a small number of participants (n = 10), who had special characteristics (e.g., they had a rather high level of formal schooling, both their parents were signing Deaf). Almost all participants stressed that they had developed a bicultural identity, belonging both to the Deaf and the hearing world. The participants identified CSL as their first language and Greek as a second language (Filer & Filer, 2000; Hicks, 2005; Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

Despite the fact that a number of researchers questioned (Hicks, 2005; Preston, 1994; Schiff-Myers, 1988) the notion about the spoken language delay of children of Deaf adults, as suggested by other studies, most of the participants in this study experienced spoken language problems (e.g., with vocabulary, articulation; even in adult life), and some of them stressed that they preferred to sign than to talk. Some of the participants also identified themselves as late speakers.

Regarding family interactions, the participants stressed that they had developed good relationships with their parents and that they interacted with them well (Buchino, 1993; Jones & Dumas, 1996; Rienzi, 1990). In some cases, despite the unquestionable love of Deaf parents toward their hearing children (Mallory et al., 1992; Schein, 1989), participants identified problems in the relationships between hearing children and Deaf parents especially in adolescence (Allsop & Kyle, 1997; Buchino, 1993; Hicks, 2005); mainly, as stated by the participants, because of different ways of thinking and other experiences (differences between the hearing and Deaf culture), Deaf parents’ lack of knowledge as to how to raise their children (probably because of lack of good parental role models when young) or due to some children’s nonacceptance of their parents’ deafness, causing them feelings of embarrassment, shame, and stigma, which routinely appear in hearing children of Deaf adults, as similarly noted by Preston (1994).

Concerning the participants’ communication with their parents, most of them used mainly a combination of signs and speech to communicate with them, as similarly suggested by previous studies (Lane et al., 1996; Preston, 1994; Rienzi, 1990; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). However, most of the participants in this study emphasized that their communication with their parents was superficial and had not gone deeper to issues, other than those associated with everyday life. This may be explained by the fact that our participants’ parents were graduates of the only residential school for deaf children in Cyprus. In previous studies, the low academic level offered at the only school for deaf children in the island in the past was pointed out (Hadjikakou & Nikolaraizi, 2008); it is possible that our participants’ Deaf parents were not provided during their schooling with all the necessary vocabulary, experiences, knowledge, and access to hearing culture to be in a position to understand the news as explained by their children or to laugh with “smart hearing” jokes as desired and repeatedly mentioned by our participants. It is also probable that the Deaf
parents’ difficulties in understanding the participants’ explanations are associated with the differences observed between the Deaf and the hearing culture (e.g., different jokes, different topics for discussion), as indicated by some participants and supported by other papers (Buchino, 1993; Filer & Filer, 2000; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

Interpreting for their Deaf parents is one of the most sensitive and complex issues for hearing children of Deaf adults (Allsop & Kyle, 1997; Buchino, 1993; Jones & Dumas, 1996; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Our participants acted as cultural mediators, becoming the communication links between their parents and the hearing world, sharing with their parents experiences heard or read about (Clark, 2003; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). They also served as language interpreters quite often during childhood. It is worth mentioning that in the last decade there have been no CSL interpreters in Cyprus, as similarly happened elsewhere (Hicks, 2005), and Deaf parents had to rely exclusively on their hearing children for everyday interpreting. However, interpreting for their parents during childhood was described by the participants as very tiring and sometimes traumatic because it was associated with inappropriate experiences for their age, imposition on their social life, and with feelings of embarrassment. Our findings go along with those reported in previous studies (Buchino, 1993; Clark, 2003; Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). At the same time, some of the participants cited some very positive results of interpreting in childhood, such as being more mature and responsible in adult life and having a greater variety of life experiences. Clark (2003), Filer and Filer (2000), and Preston (1994, 1996) concur with these findings.

Our participants assumed the role of protector (Clark, 2003). Protection comes in many forms (Filer & Filer, 2000). Role reversal (Buchino, 1993) or parentified role (Singleton & Tittle, 2000) was the most notable issue in the comments regarding the feeling of responsibility of hearing children of Deaf adults (Preston, 1994). In Cyprus, which is a very small country, there are still a lot of prejudices against, and ignorance about, Deaf people as identified by our participants, and similarly revealed by previous Cypriot studies (Hadjikakou, 2005). It is significant that Deaf people in Cyprus are often called “deaf-mute,” and even two of the participants (whose job is not related to the Deaf community) used this term to name their parents and generally the Deaf adults. Most of the participants repeatedly stressed that in various circumstances they had to advocate, that is, to explain about deafness and their Deaf parents, as well as to protect them from hearing people’s comments, looks, and difficult situations (e.g., to avoid interpreting for their parents the insensitive remarks or comments made by a hearing person; Buchino, 1993; Clark, 2003; Filer & Filer, 2000; Mallory et al., 1992). Another form of protection, relates to children of Deaf adults screening against danger and emergencies at home (Clark, 2003; Filer & Filer, 2000; Preston, 1994).

It is worth noting that some participants described mutual feelings of concern about their parents when they had to leave home because their parents relied on them for communication with the hearing world (Barash & Dicker, 1991). However, technology (e.g., mobile phones) was considered by some of the participants to be an important opportunity for Deaf parents to become independent and for themselves as a means to achieve greater separation from their parents, as suggested by other studies (Filer & Filer, 2000; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

Elder participants had more responsibilities than their younger siblings. Specifically, elder children were the primary interpreters for their parents, they had to protect their youngest siblings and help them with their homework, and in some cases their parents would even turn to them for various problems, even after they had left the family home. There is considerable documentation that supports this finding (Buchino, 1993; Gosselin, 1994; Jones & Dumas, 1996; Preston, 1994).

The negative aspects of outsiders have been reported in previous studies. Harvey (1989) suggests that Deaf people’s hearing parents may intervene with the raising of their grandchildren. This was not the case in our study. The role of the extended family has been identified in our study as very important for supporting the participants, and no negative impact of intervention was reported by them. This is compatible with the Cypriot situation; it is very common in Cyprus for grandparents to support, financially and emotionally, their adult children (with or without deafness).
Regarding their school experiences, the majority of the participants identified positive experiences. Specifically, they developed friendships with their classmates, and both hearing peers and hearing parents did not consider their parents’ deafness as an obstacle to the development of a friendship, as reported in previous papers (Clark, 2003; Filer & Filer, 2000; Hicks, 2005).

Concerning the participants’ relationships with teachers, the latter were understanding of them, admired them for efforts, and in some cases they were curious to find out how they managed at home. However, some participants admitted that they took advantage of their parents’ deafness and tried to gain special treatment at school by trying to arouse the pity of their teachers or by bypassing their parents (e.g., by not showing the marks, giving their own mobile phone numbers to school, discouraging their parents from contacting school). All these behaviors indicate some participants’ authoritarian attitudes over their parents, which were not apparent in other comments; this was facilitated by their teachers’ ignorance and their non-deaf awareness (CODA International, 2005; Rienzi, 1990).

As mentioned above, mostly hearing members of the extended family communicated with the school on behalf of the parents, and only on rare occasions Deaf parents attended school meetings, with their children or relatives as interpreters. The nonpresence of Deaf parents at school might have hindered their communication with the school regarding homework progress, grades, or disciplinary issues, as similarly suggested by Mallory et al. (1992) and Singleton and Tittle (2000), engendering the teachers’ feelings of pity deriving from some participants’ actions as analyzed above, by replacing the “disabled” Deaf parents with hearing relatives. On the other hand, some Deaf parents’ presence at school with the children as interpreters was mostly inappropriate, placing overwhelming parents’ dependency and responsibility on them (Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

The participants emphasized lack of state support toward the Deaf people and stressed that if the Deaf people got enough support from the government they would be in a position to help their children because, as they noted, the hearing children of Deaf adults do not need any special support, probably apart from organizing afternoon classes to help some Deaf parents’ children with their homework.

The above study has some limitations. In this retrospective study, participants were asked to recount stories of their childhood regarding their communication experiences. Despite the fact that this retelling may involve certain risks (e.g., restructuring memory), a number of researchers have employed similar methods (Preston, 1994, 1996; Hadjikakou & Nikolaraizi, 2007, 2008). Cyprus is a very small country of 750,000 inhabitants with a very small Deaf community; as a result the sample was rather small. Studies on children of Deaf adults conducted in big countries have also enlisted small numbers of participants (e.g., Buchino, 1993; Mallory et al., 1992; Rienzi, 1990). Finally, despite the fact that the paper focuses on the most prevalent type of deaf-parented families, that of Deaf signing parents with hearing children (Preston, 1994), the results and recommendations ought to be taken with caution when generalizing to other types of families (e.g., families with oral deaf parents, families with one Deaf/deaf and one hearing parent). Further systematic research in other countries will improve our understanding of the issues concerning deaf-parented families.

Despite the fact that the above constraint limits the generalizability of these results, a few implications are, nevertheless, worthy of consideration for Deaf parents, and professionals working, planning, and implementing social, psychological, and educational support services for Deaf-parented families (Mallory et al., 1992; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Deaf parents need to call upon professional “sign language interpreters” to interpret for them, especially in any situation that would be viewed as inappropriate for a child (e.g., during a visit to the doctor, school visits, talking to the bank manager, a lawyer; Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Then, in order to reduce the reliance upon the hearing children, one could take full advantage of the “technology” that can facilitate Deaf parents’ interactions with the hearing world (e.g., video phones, short message service, telecommunication devices for the Deaf people, faxes, computers; Buchino, 1993; Filer & Filer, 2000; Power & Power,
“Parent education training courses” especially designed for Deaf parents should be in place, taking into consideration their cultural needs, so as to provide them with all the missing information regarding the raising of their children (Mallory et al., 1992) and about hearing culture. Regarding “speech development,” if a hearing child of Deaf parents is showing signs of significant spoken language delay, a culturally practical plan (e.g., time spent with hearing relatives, preschool attendance) would enhance a child’s exposure to spoken language (CODA International, 2005). If necessary, speech therapy sessions for hearing children may be provided taking into consideration the cultural context of the Deaf-parented family. Finally, “mental health” professionals (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors), “social workers,” and “school personnel” working with Deaf-parented families should gain Deaf cultural awareness and knowledge about practical communication issues. In general, the development of “deaf awareness programs” (e.g., enrichment of sign language programs offered by Deaf people, news in sign language, TV programs on Deaf culture) could minimize the prejudices against Deaf people.

Appendix 1

First part of the interview guide

1. Family experiences
   - Tell us a few things about your family (e.g., how many brothers and sisters do you have, what do your parents do for a living).
   - How did you communicate with your family during the past years and how do you feel about this communication?
   - Have you faced any difficulties while communicating with your parents?
   - How would you describe your communication with your parents?
   - Was it easy for you to learn the CSL?
   - Have you faced any difficulties with spoken Greek?
   - In which language do you think that you are more fluent, in CSL or in Greek?
   - Could you describe your relationship with your family?
   - Has your parents’ deafness had an impact on your interactions with them?
   - How would you describe your family’s relationships with members of the extended family (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles)?
   - Did you get any support by any members of the extended family? When?
   - Have you ever interpreted for your parents? Under which circumstances? How do you feel about it?
   - Have you ever undertaken the protector role in your family? In which circumstances?
   - How did you feel when leaving home? How was your parents’ reaction?

Notes

1. In this paper, the lower case “d” is used to refer to those deaf people who do not sign, are oral, and do not belong to the Deaf community, whereas the upper “D” is used to refer to Deaf adults, who belong to the Deaf community, are signing Deaf, and are considered culturally Deaf. The term “deaf” also refers in general to the condition of not hearing (e.g., deaf-parented families).

2. Since the nineties, deaf children in Cyprus have attended exclusively the only school for deaf children. As a result the participants’ Deaf parents graduated from the school for deaf children. The children of the Deaf/deaf people who graduated from general schools in Cyprus are too young (minors) to participate in such a study.

References


