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### Recommended Citation

Schwartz, Michael A., Brent C. Elder, Monu Chhetri, and Zenna Preli. 2022. "Falling through the Cracks: Deaf New Americans and Their Unsupported Educational Needs" *Education Sciences* 12, no. 1: 35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12010035>

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Article

# Falling through the Cracks: Deaf New Americans and Their Unsupported Educational Needs

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**Abstract:** Members of the Deaf New American community reported they arrived in the United States with no formal education, unable to read or write in their native language, and had zero fluency in English. Efforts to educate them have floundered, and the study aims to find out why and how to fix the problem. Interviews of eight Deaf New Americans yielded rich data that demonstrates how education policy in the form of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and other laws fail to address their needs, because these laws do not include them in their coverage. The study's main findings are the deleterious effect of the home country's failure to educate their Deaf citizens, America's failure to provide accessible and effective instruction, and the combined effect of these institutional failures on the ability of Deaf New Americans to master English and find gainful employment. This article is an argument for a change in education policy that recognizes the unique nature of this community and provides for a role of Deaf educators in teaching Deaf New Americans.

**Keywords:** Deaf New Americans; access to communication; parental rights; special education policy; access to sign language; sign language interpreters



**Citation:** Schwartz, M.A.; Elder, B.C.; Chhetri, M.; Preli, Z. Falling through the Cracks: Deaf New Americans and Their Unsupported Educational Needs. *Educ. Sci.* **2022**, *12*, 35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12010035>

Academic Editors: Tiina Itkonen and Henri Pesonen

Received: 10 October 2021

Accepted: 29 December 2021

Published: 7 January 2022

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## 1. Introduction

The genesis of this project emerged from information received by Schwartz indicating that members of the Deaf New American community (In this project, the moniker, "Deaf New Americans," refers to refugees, many from Nepal, who have relocated to this specific region in the United States within the last 20 years and who identify as Deaf or hard of hearing. This group has labeled itself as "Deaf New Americans" to signify their newly acquired status as American citizens of foreign ancestry. Many are community members who work on a local farm and advocate for and support one another in a variety of capacities.) were experiencing difficulties with effective communication access at two major hospitals in the Northeast United States. Members of this community cited their lack of access to a formal education as a part of the problem. The overarching theme of the study concerns access to education for Deaf New Americans, mainly members of the Bhutanese/Nepali community, in the Northeastern United States, which has steadily grown in number. Anecdotal evidence based on conversations with eight Deaf New Americans indicates significant barriers remain, especially for individuals with relatively little education, few economic resources, and/or limited English language skills. Deaf New Americans report difficulties in accessing the educational system, because it is not equipped to teach them English reading and writing skills that would make them more likely to obtain gainful employment as well as provide support to their children in American schools. Interpreters skilled in their native sign language are few and far between.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [1] is an American law that guarantees students with a disability the right to a free and appropriate public education that is tailored to meet their individual needs in the least restrictive environment [2]. The

IDEA was originally enacted in 1975 as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. The law covers children aged 3 to 21. 20 U.S.C. §1400. The law also makes no distinction between Deaf refugees, whether naturalized or not, and Deaf American citizens. The age-out provision (i.e., older than 21) of the IDEA renders many Deaf New Americans ineligible for services under the law, and simply placing a sign language interpreter in an educational program as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act does not always work, because the Deaf New Americans' need for formal education calls for more than just an interpreter.

This region of the Northeastern United States is the fifth largest entry point (50 refugees for every 10,000 residents) in the United States for refugees fleeing civil strife, famine, poverty and the effects of climate change [3]. Many of these refugees have physical and/or psychological disabilities, and some are deaf with limited to no formal education. The "Education Center" (As part of the Hecate (pseudonym) City School District's outreach to the refugee community, the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP), also known as the Education Center, was established in 1978 by the school district to assist the increasing numbers of refugees arriving in the local community. The mission of the RAP was to help refugees, both Deaf and hearing, to open doors to their new world by providing them with the skills needed to become successful productive members of the community. Services included English for Speakers of Other Languages, career counseling, and employment training, including job placement support services.) was established to serve the educational needs of refugees, and a class for Deaf refugees was included to meet their needs, too. The data collected by the authors, however, discloses that the Education Center failed to educate the Deaf refugees.

There is a bright spot for Deaf refugees in the Northeastern United States: the "Seneca Farm." The farm is a site where people united by their experience of marginalization can learn from and with one another based on their fund of knowledge and expertise developed by their role in agriculture in their native countries. The farm is a central focus of the lives of Deaf New Americans. A few acres of farmed land afford the community an opportunity to grow their own vegetables with an eye to marketing surplus produce. The land affirms their commitment to sustainable practices that benefit their community. It is also culturally important for the Deaf New Americans because it binds the community members together in a communal activity.

## 2. Literature Review

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) [4] estimates that over 1% of the world's population is forcibly displaced due to conflict, violence, persecution, and human rights abuses. That equates to roughly 82.4 million people, or 1 in 95. These numbers are even higher when one considers that the International Organization for Migration [5] estimated that in 2017 there were an additional 258 million migrants, or 3.4% of the world's total population. Additionally, according to the World Health Organization's [6] "Disability and health" website, "Over 1 billion people are estimated to live with some form of disability. This corresponds to about 15% of the world's population, with up to 190 million (3.8%) people aged 15 years and older having significant difficulties in functioning, often requiring healthcare services" [6] (p. 1). While these statistics are staggering, the numbers are more than likely much higher as many refugees and migrants may acquire visible disabilities (e.g., acquired through violence) or invisible disabilities (e.g., anxiety disorders) at a higher rate than the population at large [7,8].

Following the conclusion of World War II, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [9] established education for refugees as a fundamental human right. Other international instruments that promote access to education for marginalized groups include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) [10], the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) [11], and most recently the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) [12] (It is important to note that the ICESCR [10], CRC [11], and the UNCRPD [12] are legally binding for ratifying

countries). While these international commitments to education are important, when it comes to the education of refugees with disabilities on the ground in locations like refugee camps, the application of these treaties fails to provide appropriate educational access for the world's most vulnerable populations [13,14].

Disabled children have historically been excluded from education, with the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) [15] (p. 1) stating, "Youth with disabilities are among the most marginalized and poorest of the world's youth population and are more likely to face severe social, economic, and civic disparities as compared with those without disabilities, even in developed countries". When considering hearing impairments, according to the WHO [16], roughly 5% of the world's population, or 430 million people, experience some form of hearing impairment. The WHO [16] goes on to state that children with hearing loss and deafness often do not receive schooling. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) declares, "The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on access to education has significantly impacted deaf learners. Around the world, deaf children and youth lack access to quality bilingual education in national sign languages, and parents of deaf children lack support for learning sign languages" [17] (p. 1).

Indeed, In the United States, American education laws do not address the needs of Deaf refugees who arrive with little or no formal education. For example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) [18] entitled children aged three to 21 who have a disability as defined in Section 308 of the IDEA to a free and appropriate public education (Under Section 300.8(a)(1) of the IDEA, a child with a disability "means a child evaluated in accordance with §§300.304 through 300.311 as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services."). However, the general rule is that people who reach the age of 21 are cut off from educational services as provided by the IDEA (See <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/b/300.102> (accessed on 2 December 2021)). This means that refugees and immigrants with disabilities over 21 years of age who resettle in the United States and who wish to learn to read and write English are not covered by this law.

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008, amended numerous times since its inception as the Higher Education Act of 1965 [19], is a federal law that governs the administration of federal higher education programs. Its purpose is to strengthen the educational resources of American colleges and universities and to provide financial assistance to students in postsecondary and higher education. By its very definition it excludes refugees with disabilities who arrive with limited or no formal education. The HEOA asks three main questions:

1. Inclusion: Are all students including those from rural, economic, and racial backgrounds, included in higher education?
2. Alignment: Does the educational program lead to job skills? Are students offered classes and an education that teaches the soft and hard skills that are most demanded in the job market?
3. Attainment: Are students graduating with a higher education certificate or degree, and at what rate do access and completion obstacles prevent good outcomes? How can we improve education pathways so that more students attain higher education outcomes? Are additional pathways needed in addition to high school, and existing academic degrees such as a Bachelor's? (See <https://highereducationact.org/> (accessed on 2 December 2021)).

There is no mention of Deaf refugees in this statute. They are not included in the law's schema, nor are they afforded programming that leads to job skills, let alone a higher education degree.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) [20] was signed by President Obama on 10 December 2015, and reauthorizes the 50-year-old Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the nation's national education law and longstanding commitment to equal opportunity for all students. The previous version of the law, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, was enacted in 2002 [21]. NCLB represented a significant step forward for our nation's children in many respects, particularly as it shone a light on where students were making progress and where they needed additional support, regardless of race, income, zip code, disability, home language, or background.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics [22], "17.9% of disabled people had a job, which was down from 19.3% in 2019. Similarly, the unemployment rates for persons with and without a disability both increased from 2019 to 2020, to 12.6% and 7.9%, respectively. Data on both groups for 2020 reflect the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and efforts to contain it" [22] (p. 1).

Digging deeper into statistics that focus specifically on deaf employment, the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes [23] (p. 4) reported that "In 2017, only 53.3% of deaf people were employed, compared to 75.8% of hearing people. This is an employment gap of 22.5%". The WHO [16] also affirms that adults with hearing loss also have a much higher unemployment rate. Among those who are employed, a higher percentage of people with hearing loss are in the lower grades of employment compared with the general workforce.

In addition to providing literature on deaf employment, it is also important to make it clear that deaf parents also face other communication barriers, particularly when attempting to support their children in school. This reality was mentioned by multiple participants in this project. While deaf adults are underemployed, for those who have children, deaf parents have reported that they have limited contact with their children's school [24]. Deaf parents raising hearing children have reported frustration with this lack of communication from their children's schools/teachers [25]. This lack of contact often requires that hearing children are the "messengers" between the school and the parents, which can cause incomplete and/or ineffective communication [25] (p. 230). To increase home-school communication, it is important to consider parent preferences regarding communication technology, engaging sign language interpreting services, and considering the holistic family unit when developing educational supports for hearing children of deaf parents [25].

### 3. Theoretical Frameworks

When designing this project, the authors utilize two intersecting theoretical frameworks: (a) Deaf Studies and (b) Disability Studies. The authors explain these frameworks and their application to this project in the following sections.

#### 3.1. Deaf Studies

Society has for centuries treated Deaf people as people in a state of pathology, as "biologically deficient beings in need of cures or charity in order to be successfully assimilated into society" [26] (p. 12). In this research project, the authors draw on Deaf Studies, a discipline that centers the lived experiences of the Deaf community, promotes Deaf culture, and intersects with other fields of study (e.g., law, education, sociology, political science, economics, geography, history, and even architecture). The idea of "Deafhood," central to Deaf Studies, is an empowering and liberating philosophy within the Deaf community responding to the history of oppressive oralist and colonizing practices forced upon the Deaf community by the larger society [27,28]. Deafhood unites members of the international Deaf community in affirming the importance of their lived experiences as Deaf people, the quality of their lives, and the value they add to non-Deaf societies [26].

Despite resistance to oralist oppression by Deaf Studies scholars and Deaf communities around the world, many countries continue to classify Deaf citizens as disabled, a classification contested by the Deaf community [29] (To be clear, we are not asserting

that resistance to oralist oppression is universal in the Deaf community). This oppression is manifested by the implementation of policies that favor cochlear implants, disability benefits, and mainstream education [30]. Additionally, this lack of access to language-rich education and access to sign language further marginalizes deaf children and puts them at even further risk for exploitation and abuse [16]. By positioning deafness as a medical condition rather than a cultural and social phenomenon, governments fail to enact language policies that would recognize native sign languages as an official language as required by Article 24 of the UNCRPD [12]. By adopting a human rights approach, the UNCRPD [12] requires that ratifying countries recognize a country's sign language and support bilingual education for Deaf people, which should include not only children but also adult refugees and immigrants.

Deaf Studies scholars hope that international legal instruments like the UNCRPD will encourage a shift in policy discourse and promote the value of sign language and Deaf communities at large [31]. Such a shift can also affirm an idea at the center of Deaf Studies, which is the characterization of the Deaf community as "Sign Language Peoples" (SLP). This term, used by the World Federation of the Deaf and the UNCRPD [32] expresses the idea that sign languages around the world reflect the diversity of human communication worthy of protection and respect.

### 3.2. Disability Studies

Complimenting Deaf Studies, the authors' research is similarly grounded in Disability Studies. As such, the authors view deafness as a natural aspect of human diversity [33,34], and locate deafness at the intersection between the physical condition of hearing loss and social practices and policies dealing with Deaf people. In other words, what is disabling is not people's hearing loss, but rather society's failure to accommodate Deaf people. This idea underscores the notion that many Deaf people do not consider deafness a disability, and believe they become disabled when they interact with inaccessible spaces in society (e.g., people who do not know sign language, a television without captions, an event lacking sign language interpreters) [35,36].

Guided by the principles of Disability Studies, the authors privileged the narratives and lived experience of people with disabilities [37], including those who are deaf or hard of hearing. A Disability Studies lens requires that the participants' stories be foundational to the research. Approaching research through a lens of Disability Studies promotes an emancipatory narrative that positions participants as experts of their lived experience and powerful agents in charge of their lives [38]. Additionally, community-based participatory research (CBPR), a fundamental research approach organic to Disability Studies, see page 8, below, promotes the redistribution of power from the center to the margins of society [39,40]. This interaction between the center of power and the margins, with scholarly research promoting resistance and counternarratives, is at the core of Disability Studies. These theoretical framings and approaches to research also help address the reality that disabled people are the largest minority on the planet, and that they are among the most marginalized and at-risk people in the world [6]. Additionally, for people who have experienced forced migration, like many of the participants in this project, they are more likely to experience trauma and abuse during the relocation process which can result in invisible disabilities [7,8].

### 3.3. Research Questions

This project was guided by the following research questions:

- What are the educational experiences of Deaf New Americans both in their native country and in the United States?
- What are the rights asserted here, and where are the gaps in access and delivery of services?
- What are possible remedies for the gaps?

### 3.4. Positionality

Schwartz has known Chhetri since her arrival in the United States in 2011 through his contacts with the Deaf community in the Northeastern United States. Elder engaged Chhetri in a series of interviews as part of his dissertation work at Syracuse University. Schwartz has worked with Preli for over 20 years. Elder has known Preli since 2011.

Schwartz's positionality centers on his lived experience with being profoundly deaf since birth. Born to a middle-class family with social and economic capital, he mastered the code of the English language from an early age, learning to read and write English with native fluency despite not being able to hear. As a Deaf person, Schwartz brings to the table lived experience with communication barriers that has conditioned his thinking about living with deafness in a society constructed for and by people with typical hearing. His lived experiences helped gain him access to the Deaf community in America, Europe, and Asia, and he engages with his domestic and international colleagues as an active way to push back against ableist notions of deafness and disability around the world. This work enabled Schwartz to acquire fluency in British Sign Language. Schwartz believes in the importance of allyship, which consists of cooperation and collaboration, to his disability rights work. As an educated white male, Schwartz is aware of his privileged position vis-a-vis the Deaf community.

Elder is aware of the privilege and power he enjoys as a nondisabled, white, educated gay male, while also attempting to leverage his position within academia to support his partners and colleagues who may not have those same privileges. Elder is conversant in ASL and sees his research with Deaf communities as one way to counter the negative social perception of disability and deafness. Like Schwartz, Elder believes in the importance of allyship, particularly between researchers and historically marginalized communities. He values such partnerships in collaboration so that both participants and researchers have informed partners outside of their respective communities [41].

Allyship means enacting "an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group" [42] (p. 1). This requires Schwartz and Elder to commit to "a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust, consistency, and accountability with marginalized individuals and/or groups of people." [42] (p. 1).

Chhetri works as a Deaf interpreter and advocate for a social services agency in the region, which serves the Deaf community, both native and foreign-born. She is fluent in NSL, ASL, and International Sign. As an interpreter fluent in these languages, Chhetri provides advocacy support for the Deaf New American community in health care, education, and justice in the region. Chhetri received some education in India and has a grasp of basic English. For this project, Chhetri, a native insider in the Deaf New American community, serves as the team's interlocutor and interpreter, making it possible for Schwartz and Elder to communicate effectively with members of this community.

Preli is a long-time ASL interpreter in the region and works closely with Chhetri in providing effective communication access to members of the Deaf New American community when they interact with health care personnel, law enforcement, social service agencies and other key sectors of society. Both Preli, who can hear, and Chhetri, who is Deaf, work in tandem to ensure that the Deaf New Americans, many who do not have fluency in both the English language and ASL, achieve a level of understanding of their situation and their options.

All four authors define ableism as "a set of beliefs or practices that devalue and discriminate against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be 'fixed' in one form or the other" [43] (p. 1). This understanding of ableism underwrites the authors' positions in the research.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Exploratory Case Study

The purpose of exploratory case studies is to lay the foundation for future inquiry into a phenomenon by identifying guiding research questions that can lead to new approaches to research [44–46]. Here, the authors used exploratory case study methodology to examine the educational experiences of Deaf New Americans. By applying this methodology, the authors do not intend to make causal statements about participants' education; rather, through this approach, they wish to illuminate the educational experiences both in their country of origin and in the United States. In this study, the authors do not purport to include the entire range of individuals with hearing loss or those deaf or hard of hearing people who do not rely on sign language.

### 4.2. Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)

Researchers utilizing a CBPR approach, engage community participants who understand they may not necessarily contribute, for a variety of reasons, to all phases of the project (i.e., analysis and publication) [47]. From the outset, CBPR-informed researchers and participants collaborate to formulate research ideas and questions, and to guide research directions [48,49]. The ultimate goal in CBPR projects is the creation of actions that provide immediate and clear benefits to the target community [50,51]. Indeed, CBPR is rooted in promoting equity, is action-oriented, and is focused on generating a sequence of socially just outcomes that are adaptable enough to fit the evolving needs of the focus community [52,53].

To the extent that the interview subjects in this project were not involved in the design and execution of the project, our study was not traditional CBPR. Yet, to connect and complement the theoretical framework, the authors' research methods were informed by CBPR to the extent that we sought to include our narrators along every step of the way in the work, restricted by funding and time constraints (Schwartz's university covered the expenditure for Nepali and ASL interpreters, and Elder's university provided funding for transcripts, travel and food. The funding was contingent on completing the research within a few months). While there are many approaches to participatory research, the authors purposefully chose CBPR to address the complex multilingual realities (i.e., multiple signed languages) within this project.

### 4.3. Participants

Selection of the eight Deaf New American interview subjects was guided by the expertise and knowledge of Chhetri, our Deaf Nepali interlocutor, who also served as interpreter for the interviews. We sought those members of the Deaf New American community who had tried to access educational programming and could testify to their experiences. When interacting with Chhetri at the farm, all participants had expressed frustration with their personal education in their country of origin as well as in the United States. Those with children also experienced barriers to participation in their own children's education in the United States. With support from Chhetri, all participants organized themselves as a group of activists with a common goal of breaking down collective barriers to communication they faced in their community. Their participation in this project is evidence of their collective commitment to communication justice and equitable community access.

The authors selected participants based on their lived experiences as Deaf New Americans living in the American Northeast. The authors interviewed eight Deaf people who were 18 years of age or older, and who had experiences in education both in their native country and in America. Seven participants identify as refugees, and one identifies as an immigrant. Seven of the eight participants identify as refugees, and all seven reported they spent many years in refugee camps before relocating to the United States. Some of the participants also knew one another in their respective refugee camps. All participants, with the exception of one, identify as Deaf (i.e., culturally Deaf), and noted their first language was some form of local/home sign language (Leaving aside the question of self-identity,

our study focuses on eight Deaf New Americans who clearly identify as both Deaf and deaf. A limitation imposed by the small number of participants means that our findings cannot be considered representative of the world's Deaf communities). The participant whose first language was not a form of sign language lost her hearing over time and has identified as Deaf for many years. Schwartz and Elder received IRB approval from their respective institutions. For additional details on participants, see Table 1.

**Table 1.** Participant Demographics.

Name	Country of Origin	Years in America	Number/Age of Children
1. Bhavaroopa	Bhutan	10	3 children; 19 years; 14 years; 12 years
2. Batsal	Bhutan	9	1 child; 16 years
3. Gamyra	Bhutan	10	1 child; 21 years
4. Lakshmi	Bhutan	9	2 children: 8 years; 3 and $\frac{1}{2}$ years
5. Bhavisana	Bhutan	10	None
6. Ballabh	Nepal	3	1 child: <1 year
7. Chhetri	Bhutan	11	2 children: 13 years; <1 year
8. Hayma	Thailand	17	Expecting first child

#### 4.4. Procedures

The authors conducted eight semi-structured that lasted between 45-min and one-hour. They were conducted at a local church in the neighborhood where most participants lived and could either walk to the interviews or take local transportation. The authors used the IRB-approved semi-structured interview questions as a guide for each interview. The authors' general methodology was to start with open-ended questions that led to narrower, more focused questions based on the initial responses. During the interviews, the authors encouraged the participants to communicate in their preferred language, Nepali Sign Language. The authors provided a Deaf interpreter (Chhetri) who was fluent in both ASL and Nepali Sign Language (NSL), and an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter (Preli). Chhetri's role was critical because all eight participants used NSL, and were not necessarily conversant or fluent in ASL. Schwartz would sign the question in ASL to Preli, the hearing ASL interpreter, who would sign Schwartz's question to Chhetri, the Deaf ASL/NSL interpreter. Chhetri would then translate the question from ASL to NSL so the participant could understand the question. This communication chain was reversed when the participant responded. American Sign Language and NSL was central to the project since spoken English was not the preferred language of the participants. During these exchanges, Elder recorded the interviews and took written notes, and would occasionally ask clarifying questions.

During the interviews, there were regular checks for understanding with the two interpreters to make sure communication was effective. Following the interviews, Schwartz and Elder debriefed with the Deaf interpreter (Chhetri) and the hearing ASL interpreter (Preli) to ensure clarity of interpreting and the integrity of the interview process in general. It is also important to note the impact of the deafness of Schwartz and Chhetri on the data collection aspect of the project. Since Schwartz and Chhetri could not hear Preli's voicing their signs during the interviews, Chhetri and Preli confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts afterward. The authors determined that the questions voiced by the ASL interpreter (Preli) and translated by the NSL interpreter (Chhetri) reflected what Schwartz and Chhetri signed and yielded an appropriate response from the participants. As an additional check for transcript accuracy, Elder, who is hearing, listened to the interviews, and both Schwartz and Elder went line-by-line confirming the transcripts prior to data analysis.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

To reiterate the point related to the CBPR section, due to fiscal and time constraints inherent in small-scale projects, the authors could not involve participants in all aspects of

the project, which included the data analysis portion of the project. Due to their research background and expertise conducting research, Schwartz and Elder conducted most of the analysis. Chhetri and Preli contributed to the analysis phase by conducting member checks with participants to verify the quotes used in the article [54,55]. The authors recognize this modified approach to CBPR as a limitation within the project.

Schwartz and Elder used traditional qualitative research methods (i.e., constant comparison method and constructivist grounded theory approach) to conduct data analysis [56]. This allowed simultaneous evaluation and collection of data and findings [57]. The authors used Bogdan and Biklen's [58] coding procedures to analyze the data in three phases: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. This process helped identify four salient themes that emerged from the interviews [59]. The authors co-analyzed data systematically to maintain inter-coder reliability [60], and organized and maintained the data with Dedoose software [61]. Through this approach to analysis, Schwartz and Elder were able to focus on data that informed their understanding of the barriers to education faced by the participants.

During the open coding process, the authors read transcribed interviews line-by-line and collectively came up with codes. Some examples of codes include: "Communication Access," "Family Support," and "School-Based Discrimination". To better comprehend emerging trends in data, the authors used features in Dedoose [61] such as the "Code Co-Occurrence" and "Packed Code Cloud" to identify the four most salient themes. During the axial coding phase, the most commonly-coded themes included: (a) "Educational Backgrounds," (b) "Education in America," (c) "Employment in America," and (d) "Supporting their Children's Education." Following the axial coding phase, during the selective coding process, the authors identified a variety of participant quotes that most powerfully illuminated each theme, which the authors present in the next section.

All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion in this research project before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Schwartz and Elder's respective universities (Syracuse University IRB # 20-200).

## 5. Findings

In this section, the authors present findings in the following four key themes: (a) "Educational Backgrounds," (b) "Education in America," (c) "Employment in America," and (d) "Supporting their Children's Education." In the following sections, the authors introduce each theme, provide participant quotes in support of the theme, and make connections to relevant literature.

### 5.1. Educational Backgrounds

Consistent with the literature on educational experiences of immigrants and refugees with disabilities [4,13,15,17], during the interviews, all of the participants discussed having no access to quality education in their country of origin. In the first excerpt, Chhetri describes her experience of attending a hearing class in her refugee camp in Nepal.

**Chhetri:** I didn't understand anything. I got punished a lot at school. It was awful.

**Schwartz:** What did the school punish you for?

**Chhetri:** They punished me because I didn't respond to their questions and the questions in the book. I failed my classes because I couldn't hear them. But they misunderstood. They thought that I wasn't paying attention. The problem wasn't me not paying attention, it was that I didn't have communication access. There were no interpreters in school.

In the excerpt above, Chhetri was punished because, as a result of a lack of interpreters, she was unable to respond to the teacher's questions. Below, Hayma shares a similar story of being in a hearing classroom in Thailand without adequate accommodations:

**Hayma:** Without language, it's very difficult to learn. If you can see someone speaking face-to-face it was easy, but if the teacher turned away from the board to write then I couldn't read their lips and so it was very difficult. You know I was very far behind my classmates and that was frustrating. It didn't work for me, it just did not work well. So that was another reason why I quit school to focus on working.

Here, Hayma describes the barriers to education that impacted her ability to learn. In the next excerpt, Bhavaroopa describes her experiences at an unofficial school in a Nepali refugee camp where she was only taught sign language before having to drop out to tend to her family responsibilities.

**Bhavaroopa:** I didn't go to an official school. I went to a disability center and they taught me sign language, NSL. I didn't really have an opportunity to go to school. Before I got married, I went to the center to be taught NSL but then after I was married there was no opportunity to go to school. I was responsible for cooking and taking care of the family and my in-laws.

Here, Bhavaroopa states that she could not access an academic education, and external factors like caring for her family impacted her ability to stay in school. Echoing Bhavaroopa's experiences in a segregated school where she was only taught sign language, Gamy's only options for education in her Nepali refugee camp were: (a) attending a hearing school where she would be punished, or (b) attending a school to learn only sign language.

**Gamy:** There were two separate schools, one place where we went to learn sign language and the other there was a hearing school. It was like a mainstream school and there was no sign language, there was no interpreting, there was no access. They would ask us to do homework and if we didn't do it, we would get punished.

Like Chhetri and Hayma, Gamy was between a rock and a hard place: (a) go to a hearing school and be punished because of her deafness, or (b) go to a school that taught only sign language, an impossible and unfair choice for these women. Deciding to avoid inaccessible schooling altogether due to oppression of deaf people, Lakshmi, below, describes her educational experience that did not include learning any subject except for sign language.

**Schwartz:** In your school did you learn math and science, history, any academic subjects?

**Lakshmi:** Actually I didn't go to any school because there were no interpreters. I didn't get any formal education, they only taught me sign language. That was it. It's very important to know that in the schools the hearing people really oppressed the deaf people. It was terrible. If you didn't hear, they really just rejected you and they really oppressed us a lot.

The theme of rejection and marginalization of Deaf women is a common thread throughout these stories, with the quotes from these five women underscoring the reality that Deaf refugees not only receive a subpar education, but when they get inside a classroom, they experience the trauma of punishment for something not within their control. Relevant to their subsequent experience in America, the Deaf refugees were denied access to subject matter learning except for sign language. This lack of access to an equitable education relative to nondisabled peers does not support the educational mandates set forth by international instruments like ICESCR [10], the CRC [11], and the UNCRPD [12]. Crucially, this lack of access to education meant that for these five refugee women, when they arrived in America, they were set up for failure when attempting to access education upon resettlement.

## 5.2. Education in America

Upon arrival in America, the participants found that their lack of access to quality education in their country of origin forced them to experience similarly ineffective adult education programs in their local communities. Chhetri describes one such experience below.

**Schwartz:** Did you learn anything from the Education Center?

**Chhetri:** Well, I learned every day but most of it was basic needs. I already knew about the days of the week, the months, the alphabet, you know number one to 10. Then, we would have dialogue where are you going on Saturday, where are you going on Sunday. Those are the kind of dialogues we practiced.

**Schwartz:** It was very basic, very simple?

**Chhetri:** Yeah, very simple. It was boring.

Here, Chhetri, who was educated in India and had a grasp of basic English, conveys that her educational experience at the Education Center was ineffective. In the next excerpt, Hayma describes her experiences at the same school as Chhetri and states, like she did in her educational background in Thailand, that this adult education program was similarly ineffective.

**Hayma:** In the United States I thought I couldn't learn. I thought I wasn't able to learn. So, for a year I struggled.

**Schwartz:** You didn't have any programs or anything?

**Hayma:** I went to the Education Center.

**Schwartz:** At the Education Center did you learn anything?

**Hayma:** I didn't learn anything. I mean those are good people, those are good programs, it's a good program but it wasn't accessible for deaf people period. It was good for hearing people; it was fine for hearing refugees. That program worked as an English as a Second Language program and the other programs they had, but it definitely did not suit a deaf individual in what they needed.

When Hayma said the Education Center "did not suit a deaf individual in what they needed," she was echoing the call from the WFD [17] (p. 4) for classroom instruction to be headed by Deaf educators fluent in ASL. Deaf refugees at the Education Center did not benefit from instruction despite the presence of a hearing teacher who could sign; they needed further accommodations—the provision of a Nepali sign language interpreter to mediate between the Deaf American teacher and the Deaf New American students. In addition to an ASL interpreter, the Deaf Nepali refugees needed a Nepali sign language interpreter. The NSL and ASL interpreters, working in tandem, would enable the Deaf Nepali refugees to learn English by using their native language as a bridge. That never happened at the Education Center. Since Hayma and other Deaf refugees in the program were older than 21, they could not request interpreters as provided for by the IDEA [1], nor were they qualified to access the benefits of the HEOA [62] because they arrived in America with limited formal education. Put simply, Hayma and the other refugees were falling through the cracks of the system. This same difficulty is described by Bhavaroopa:

**Bhavaroopa:** I'm not in school right now. I was in school a long time ago but not now. Yeah, I went to school for three years and they taught us the same thing over and over again. I finally gave up. They would teach us the ABC's all the time and I didn't understand it. Over and over again, same thing, nothing different. Every year they would teach the American alphabet and I was not content.

Experiencing the same frustration as Bhavaroopa when being forced to attend an ineffective education program, Chhetri, below, describes the anger she felt as she was infantilized by the Education Center.

**Schwartz:** So they put you in the first level?

**Chhetri:** Yeah, first level. That means that what's your name, what's your birthday, what's the day, you know the ABC's, 1-2-3's, all that. That's the class I got put into, and I was so frustrated. I was actually quite pissed off because you know, I didn't know about what services were available here, I didn't know it was available in America. I was clueless and I was afraid that I would lose my benefits. To be honest with you, because I did get some money for resettlement, and I had not yet started a job. So if I lost my benefits, I would starve. I knew that so I went to these classes that I didn't need. All the people there were not on my level. They were at a much lower level of English, like my mom's level of English. They weren't as capable in English, so I went for a whole year to these English classes.

Chhetri's testimony demonstrates the failure of policy in addressing the needs of Deaf refugees. American lawmakers drafting the IDEA, the HEOA, and the ESSA did not have in mind Deaf refugees who lack a formal education from their home countries due to discrimination and marginalization. This is a classic "falling through the cracks" problem where the refugees are too old for the IDEA and not qualified to go to college under the HEOA and the ESSA. "Wait one moment," an American lawyer might say, "Doesn't the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ensure the right of these refugees to access the classroom via a sign language interpreter?" The answer is that the ADA and Section 504, while different from the IDEA, do guarantee the right of Deaf refugees to access an educational program. However, as the WFD [17] recognized, special education policy needs to acknowledge and accept the importance of Deaf instructors in educating Deaf refugees with limited education. We go further in adding that such instruction requires a tandem team of NSL and ASL interpreters. Hayma echoes this:

So I think that for the Deaf New American they can be very successful. However, they need appropriate support, and they need the appropriate access, and they need the appropriate people who would be able to walk alongside them and help them.

By "appropriate," Hayma and the other refugees are talking about being taught by qualified Deaf instructors who can break down complex ideas, inspire their students, and support them as they embark on the difficult task of learning English, one of the most complex languages in the world [63].

### 5.3. Employment in America

Being systematically excluded from formal education both in their countries of origin and in America has had a significant impact on participants' ability to find gainful employment. In order to find a job, participants were told they needed to be fluent in sign language and understand written English. However, as described by Ballabh below, employment services like Acme VR would not pay for educational programs.

**Ballabh:** So when I got here in America, I heard that deaf people had opportunities through Acme VR to go to school or college. So I explained to [the VR counselor] that I was from Nepal, that I was Deaf and that I used NSL. I told the Acme VR counselor who I was. I told VR that I wanted to learn ASL, and that I wanted to take classes. So, I asked Acme VR to get services. Acme VR said, 'We can't accept you, because you have limited English. We only support people that are looking to find jobs.' I was very frustrated by that, so I gave up and I stopped trying to get services from Acme VR. Instead, Hayma and Aries Counseling Services really helped me. I went and I explained to them what I wanted to do, and that I wanted to take ASL classes.

**Schwartz:** So Acme VR refused to support you learning ASL?

**Ballabh:** Right, they wouldn't support me to learn ASL only if the goal was to get a job and they said, 'You can't learn sign language because your English is

limited. The only thing we can do to support you is to help you find a job if that's what you want.' So you know cleaning or something like that. Some kind of entry level job.

In response to Ballabh's answer, Chhetri asks him a follow-up question about his thoughts on only being qualified for entry-level positions.

**Chhetri:** The jobs they were offering you cleaning and things, how did you feel about that?

**Ballabh:** It's interesting because when I was 15, I started to learn NSL. I picked it up relatively quickly, and I became an advocate for deaf children in Nepal in rural areas. So, I was a strong advocate. Then, I came to America and Acme VR told me the only work they could give me were janitorial jobs. I thought, 'Oh my goodness, what about my vision and goals?' I wanted to learn and the support to do what I did when I was in Nepal. I wanted to become a leader and an advocate. I wanted to be able to support the Deaf New American community. That was my vision, and [Acme VR's rejection] was very sad. They kind of took away my goals, my vision.

Here, Ballabh powerfully articulates his dreams he has of being a leader in the Deaf New American community similar to his role in Nepal. In addition to not being supported by Acme VR, due to his age he could not access IDEA [1] support. Similarly, because of barriers to him accessing English language programs, Ballabh, like Hayma, was also falling through the cracks.

While Ballabh experienced significant barriers to employment, Bhavaroopu found similar barriers with a different employment service, Jobs"R"Us.

**Bhavaroopu:** Jobs"R"Us referred me to the Education Center and a local social services office. They said that in order to get food stamps, I had to continue to go to the Education Center. The social services office forced me to go to Jobs"R"Us. Jobs"R"Us was not accessible at all. They do not provide interpreting services, and they still don't. So I would go to these employment classes and just sit there and listen, but there was no interpretation provided for me whatsoever. I hated that. Then I met [Chhetri] on the street, literally on the street, and she's been helping me ever since get what I needed.

History was repeating itself for Bhavaroopu. Not only did she not have access to education, but she was also not given adequate access to job training. Not knowing about the availability of services is the same thing as being denied access to these services. As noted in the next excerpt by Batsal, this was not Chhetri's first time supporting Deaf New Americans in accessing services.

**Schwartz:** What kind of support services did you get?

**Batsal:** I didn't get any support in Texas whatsoever, but I desperately wanted to get a job. I wanted to have my own money. I wanted to buy a car. So, when I moved here, I shared those goals with [Chhetri]. She helped me fill out the information for Acme VR, and we went there. [Chhetri] helped me get a job coach, and eventually I got a job from that. But, it was the Deaf New Americans that really pulled other Deaf New Americans into getting positions because we know that Deaf New Americans tend to be very humble, they're very good workers, and people want to hire them because of that. [Chhetri] provided me with a lot of support.

What Batsal references here is how much the Deaf New Americans looked out for one another. They frequently helped one another navigate systems that were clearly not designed for them. Below, Hayma shares a similar story, but emphasizes the importance of connecting with Deaf role models within the community.

**Hayma:** When I was at an educational services program, that was the first time I had ever met a Deaf role model. I had never really seen a deaf person before. I've met some deaf people here and there, but not someone who is brilliant. I was just so inspired by her. I was so amazed. It was so inspiring to meet her because I had only seen negative aspects of deafness, and now here was a person that was a positive role model.

Here, Hayma speaks to the importance of representation by way of a role model. It is critical to see someone who shares the same experiences as you in a position of influence and power. Without these types of experiences, it is impossible to know what is achievable. How can one set goals if they never see someone like them who has attained high levels of success? Acquiring an education and leveraging the education to gainful employment are important tools for sustaining oneself and one's family. Now we turn our attention to the final theme, the idea that by acquiring an education and a good job is a critical way to support a refugee's children as they create a new life in America.

#### 5.4. Supporting Their Children's Education

Without appropriate access to education in their country of origin and in America, coupled with the barriers to gainful employment, these realities taken together make it more difficult for the Deaf New American refugees to support their children. Chhetri expands on her understanding of how the Deaf New Americans struggle to support their children in the education system.

**Chhetri:** The Deaf New American community really struggles with the public school system. Many teachers there have never had any exposure [to deaf people] and don't really care about the parents. They just ignore them. Teachers think, 'They're deaf, and I know they have challenges with English.' But Deaf New Americans don't speak up. I am much more willing to speak up because I have some English skills. I'm not fluent but I still have a basic understanding of English. There's still some challenges at my daughter's school, but much less. It's not the same challenges as the other Deaf New Americans face with their children's schools. Deaf New Americans, they just basically stay home and work, they don't really get involved in their kids' schools.

Here, Chhetri explains the connections between having basic English skills and being able to advocate for her child at school. Chhetri implies that Deaf New Americans are not able to connect with their children's schools because they were not able to access education neither in their country of origin nor in America. In the next excerpt, Lakshmi shares a personal example of the barriers she faces when attempting to support the education of her children.

**Lakshmi:** My two kids go to different schools. One goes to [name removed for confidentiality], and my son goes to school somewhere right here. I don't know the name of it.

**Schwartz:** In your children's schools do you meet with your children's teachers?

**Lakshmi:** I don't know, I haven't met with them. I don't know what's happening in school, I don't know if they're doing well. I don't know when there's breaks, and when they start and end. I never have any idea what's going on.

The Deaf New American refugees don't know where their children go to school. As Gamy explains, similar to Lakshmi, she never knew the name of the schools her son attended.

**Gamy:** Actually I don't know where [my son] went to school. Different places, but I don't really know... it was definitely in this area. But, I don't know what building or what the name of the school was. I don't know.

Gamya's son is now 21 and no longer school-aged. But, in all the years he was in school, and in all of the buildings he attended, she never knew the name of the school. In Bhavaroopa's quote below, she affirms that she has a similar disconnect from her children's education. Her children are in three different schools and she doesn't have access to communicate with anyone in the three schools.

**Bhavaroopa:** Yeah, I'm not aware of what's really going on with my children's education at their school. I don't know if their grades are good or if they're bad. I don't know how they behave. They never call me to go into parent-teacher conferences. One time, a while ago, we had a parent-teacher conference, but they did not provide an interpreter. So, I just sat there and my son went with me. The teachers were talking to my son, they didn't address me directly, so I was basically left out of the entire conversation. So then we went home and my son filled me in on a little bit of what happened, but not all of it. I never got complete access to the information. Maybe my son was holding back information from me that he didn't want me to know. I'll never know because I didn't have access.

Here, Bhavaroopa directly references what Singleton and Tittle [25] describe as hearing children being "messengers" between the school and the parents. In this final excerpt, Bhavaroopa explains how COVID-19 complicated communication with the school even further.

**Schwartz:** Because you don't understand the materials that are being sent to you from the school system, how do you think that impacts your children's education?

**Bhavaroopa:** I am very frustrated because when COVID hit, one of my kids stayed home and did school online. The other went to school. There was information that we needed to fill out to decide whether the children would stay in school or come home and do online school. I didn't even know that I had that opportunity. I had to go to work at nine in the morning, so the kids were home. I didn't know when they started school or when they finished school. There was no communication from the school about what they were doing. Then, the school told me that my son failed. He failed school because I had no information.

This final quote illuminates what can happen when parents are systematically denied access to education, employment, and communication. Not only are the person's individual options living a sustainable life, but the implications also impact their children's ability to access education. In this case, Bhavaroopa's son experienced school failure.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Local Implications

In a position paper on its website, the WFD calls on all governments to ensure deaf children and youth receive equitable access to information and education in national sign languages during and after the [COVID-19] pandemic, *including access to instruction by sign language-proficient teachers and the provision of visual learning materials*" (emphasis added) [17] (p. 1). None of the instructors for the Deaf refugees in the Education Center were "sign language-proficient." Evidently the material, if any, presented to the refugees did not aid in visual learning because as the refugees explained it to the authors, they learned nothing from the Education Center.

### 6.2. International Implications

Responsible for operating and maintaining refugee camps in Nepal and elsewhere, the United Nations must re-evaluate its support of educational programs that neglect the communication needs of Deaf refugees. The UN, along with its related agencies such as the WHO and the World Bank need to place resources, both capital and labor, that support the acquisition of language for Deaf refugees. Again, as the WFD points out, labor must consist of Deaf teachers trained in education policies and practices geared toward Deaf students. A useful way to think about the problem of educating Deaf refugees is to look at

the success enjoyed by Deaf children of Deaf parents [64]. From the day the Deaf child is born, they are exposed on a daily basis to language, not through the ears but through the hands. These children grow up mastering English because they have a language, ASL, that serves as a bridge to English as a second language.

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1. Next Steps: Local

Educational policies and practices in the United States vis-a-vis Deaf New American refugees must account for their lack of formal education due to the failure of their home country to properly educate these refugees in their native language. They arrive in America without an effective bridge to learn English as a second language. Not having fluency in ASL compounds their difficulty in mastering English, which is the gateway to a better life in America. However, as the data from the participants in the study shows, the effective way to learn a new language requires the employment of Deaf instructors who are trained in educational pedagogy and who possess native fluency enabling the teachers to reach, inform and inspire their foreign-born students. Hiring Deaf teachers to teach Deaf students is not a novel idea but must be the linchpin of a strategy to reform educational practices involving Deaf refugees. Taking this further for purposes of effective access to education, the Deaf teacher, who is American born, must work in tandem with a Nepali sign language interpreter, like Chhetri, who is skilled in both NSL and ASL. Together, the Deaf American teacher and the Deaf Nepali Sign Language interpreter can help the Deaf New Americans acquire literacy in written English as well as American Sign Language.

Another element of reform involves a dialogue between Deaf New American advocates like Chhetri, a foreign-born Deaf New American with fluency in both ASL and NSL and a working knowledge of English, and members of the school district where the Deaf New Americans live. As the famous saying goes, “One gets more with honey than vinegar,” and going on the assumption that education officials want to do the right thing, it is possible to envision greater involvement of the Deaf New American community in educational policies and practices that affect their members and their children.

Finally but not least, the Deaf New American community is planning a conference for July 2022 where education will be one of the important issues on the conference’s agenda. The hope is to engage with key stakeholders in education, teachers, administrators, lawyers and politicians, and articulate how and why Deaf teachers need to be part of the solution in educating Deaf New Americans. Only when the refugees acquire English reading and writing skills will they be able to acquire gainful employment as well as be in a position to support their children in American schools.

### 7.2. Next Steps: International

The data suggests that an international mandate to improve Deaf education in the refugees’ home countries is necessary for these refugees to acquire a meaningful education—not just in sign language but also courses with academic content such as math, science, history, and the native language of the refugee’s home country. The authors suggest that world bodies such as the United Nations and the World Bank should put on their agenda the need for reform of Deaf education around the world. Part of that reform must include the provision of Deaf educators trained in pedagogy and sign language.

The annual meeting of the Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (COSP) takes place in New York every June. The authors plan to invite representatives of the key stakeholders in Deaf education, the World Federation of the Deaf, Gallaudet University, Rochester Institute of Technology, UNICEF, and the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) Office. The idea is to share information and enlighten these stakeholders as to what is needed to successfully educate Deaf New Americans in their new language, English.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, M.A.S., B.C.E. and M.C.; Data curation, B.C.E., M.C. and Z.P.; Funding acquisition, M.A.S. and B.C.E.; Investigation, M.A.S., B.C.E. and Z.P.; Methodology, M.A.S., B.C.E., M.C. and Z.P.; Resources, M.C. and Z.P.; Software, B.C.E.; Validation, M.C.; Writing—original draft, M.A.S. and B.C.E.; Writing—review and editing, B.C.E. and M.C. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Rowan University College of Education Diversity in Action Grant.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Syracuse University (protocol code 20-200, approved 17 August 2020).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the subjects to publish this paper.

**Acknowledgments:** We would like to thank our Deaf New American colleagues in Syracuse who opened their lives and experiences to us. Without their willingness and strength to call out their lived discriminations, this work would not have been possible. We also owe a debt of gratitude to our wonderful sign language interpreters, Monu Chhetri and Zenna Preli, for not only providing us access to these important stories, but for being so committed to this work. We also thank Syracuse University and Rowan University for providing material resources we used to engage in this work.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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