Why Is Sign Language an Important Part of a Deaf Childâ??s Identity Development?

Description

The AutoEthnographer

Why Is Sign Language an Important Part of Identity Development for a Deaf Child?

This brief essay and video introduce an autoethnographic study of my life as a deaf child in Finland using sign language, titled *I Sign, Therefore I Am*. I suffered challenging psychiatric problems during puberty as a consequence of an unawareness of my language identity and a lack of social-emotional skills.

sign language
sign language
Photo of Pram by Jussi Rinta-Hoiska

I Sign, Therefore I Am

I was born in the 80s as a deaf child into a hearing family. All my relatives were also hearing. My family received very little information about sign language from the hearing center. My parents wondered what kind of language environment I should be brought up in. To some extent, my parents received some sign language education, but the environment in which I grew up was not known about sign language. My parents were very interested in sign language but attempts to learn more about it were thwarted by various obstacles.

I used very little sign language, on the contrary, mainly Finnish, where my language skills developed well. Finnish was emphasized at school. Although there were other deaf pupils, the teaching method was strongly Finnish. The language used was signed speech, which is not sign language as such, as its grammar is strongly based on spoken language. I had regular hearing tests at the hearing center, where the doctors encouraged me to use Finnish and did not recommend signing.

My childhood was quite comfortable. At school I did well and had friends, but at puberty I started to fall behind. I felt lonely and didnâ??t know what my identity was. I was ashamed of my deafness. And I got the impression from my environment that deafness was unacceptable. Instead, it would be good to be like the hearing people and use the Finnish language. I adopted this way of thinking, which had a big influence on me during adolescence, as I was all broken and full of wounds inside and I didnâ??t know who I was.

â??I have been deaf from birth. One who cannot hear speech, sweet birdsong, musical melodies or other subtleties of the world of sound. But what else does being deaf imply? How many people consider it or try to find out? Living with one foot in the hearing world and one in the deaf has led me to develop a dualistic identity.â?• [1]

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It wasnâ??t until years later, at around the age of twenty, that I started to use more Finnish Sign Language and get to know other deaf people. At the same time, I realized that deaf people could succeed in life. These deaf people were role models for me, like Liisa Kauppinen [2], who everyone knew. I searched my heart and realized that sign language would be my emotional language. As I began to sign more and more, I understood myself better. I discovered my identity and my role in society.

As my sign language skills got stronger, my Finnish language skills also improved. This gave me a strong, bilingual identity. At the end of a long process, I am today a very proud sign language user, and Finnish Sign Language is a strong foundation of my identity.

I am concerned about todayâ??s children, their language environment and the development of their identity. Today, the majority of deaf children have their cochlear implants cut and many of them do not sign because sign language education is not provided for their families. I have met many of these families, and parents have expressed concern about the lack of a sign language environment in which to grow up.

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In Finland, access to sign language education varies widely. Teaching often requires a medical certificate, which is not necessarily available. In addition, municipalities argue about the obligations of teaching arrangements. Serious consequences have arisen. I spoke to a mother who told me that her family had fought fiercely for sign language teaching. The family has also asked for help from various organizations. Still, they have not received sign language education from their hometown.

Todayâ??s society does not understand the importance of sign language, which is still seen as an auxiliary language. It may be introduced when a child with a cochlear implant does not benefit from spoken language. But this is completely the wrong direction. Sign language should be used alongside spoken language right from the start. This would allow the principle of bilingualism to become a reality.

Iâ??ll show you an example of a video (starting at 5.24 min) where Iâ??m a 7-year-old boy myself. You can see what can happens in a situation where a child has no sign language basis for his identity:

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â??What matters deafness of the ears when the mind hears? The one true deafness, the incurable deafness, is that of the mind.â?• *Victor Hugo, writing to Ferdinand Berthier (25/11/1845)*

Iâ??m sure you noticed in the video what it looks like when a child is alone and withdraws from the group. I was in my own world, I didnâ??t understand what was being discussed in the group, and those times have stayed with me hard. It was painful for me to be in a group where I didnâ??t understand anything. The same was true for the spoken language, so I was doubly lonely. It felt really bad. It was like being in a closed room with no way out.

The others didnâ??t understand me, and I didnâ??t understand them. It took me a long time to get over these difficult phases. And today I see the same phenomena in children. Many of them are alone, perhaps marginalized. Today, the principle of local schools has been strengthened, which means that children with very different sign language skills are scattered in their local schools. Who will take care of the development of their identity? Who will support their families? They should be listened to more and encouraged to use sign language and bilingual education.

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Man looking in window by Jussi Rinta-Hoiska

â??Children must grow up in such a way that they can accept themselves and have linguistic diversity: spoken languages, sign languages, and thus develop in a multilingual and multicultural environment.â?•

I remember very well from my childhood that children are very sensitive and can sense what is going on in their environment. If adults have a negative attitude towards sign language and do not recommend its use, the child will adopt a similar mindset. The child may then not want to sign. This is what happened to me. My mother would have signed with me, but I told her not to because I was ashamed of sign language. It is very important to give children models of how to appreciate and respond positively to sign language. If parents have to struggle to get sign language lessons, children may become frustrated and no longer want to sign. This can lead to serious problems later in adolescence, as it did for me.

I have written a book about my experiences: *I Sign, Therefore I Am*. I think that today it would be good to be more aware of the important role that sign language plays in the construction of a childâ??s identity. We should take into account childrenâ??s rights and proceed on their terms.

â??My journey has led me through great difficulties to form a cohesive identity as a deaf sign language person, and I am proud of that. In all honesty, on this journey of discovery I have also experienced quite extraordinary moments of joy, elation and euphoria. My attitude towards deafness and sign language has radically changed.â?• [3]

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How can we as adults take better account of them? We adults should also remember that we are role models. We should not forget this. Children must grow up in such a way that they can accept themselves and have linguistic diversity: spoken languages, sign languages, and thus develop in a multilingual and multicultural environment. If they cannot, depression and other mental disorders may result. In the same way that I had to deal with my situation during adolescence. Itâ??s not a matter of play.

I very much hope that we will reflect together on this important issue of identity. Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language are minority languages in Finland. If families are denied the opportunity to learn sign language, they may never have access to it again. Finnish and other spoken languages are constantly in abundance, while sign languages are very scarce. It would be good to hold on to what little sign language there is.

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Get to know more about Juhana and *I Sign, Therefore I Am* by visiting his website: https://juhanasalonen.com/

PURCHASE JUHANAâ??S BOOK

Miksi viittomakieli on tÃ¤rkeÃ¤ osa kuuron lapsen identiteetin kehitystÃ¤?

TÃ¤ssÃ¤ lyhyessÃ¤ esseessÃ¤ ja videossa esitellÃ¤Ã¤n autoetnografinen tutkimus elÃ¤mÃ¤stÃ¤ni viittomakieltÃ¤ kÃ¤yttÃ¤vÃ¤nÃ¤ kuurona lapsena Suomessa, otsikolla Viiton â??olen olemassa. KÃ¤rsin murrosiÃ¤ssÃ¤ haastavista psykiatrisista ongelmista, jotka johtuivat kielellisen identiteettini tiedostamattomuudesta ja sosiaalis-emotionaalisten taitojen puutteesta.

Viiton â?? olen olemassa

Synnyin 80-luvulla kuurona kuulevaan perheeseen. Kaikki sukulaiseni olivat myÃ¶s kuulevia. Perheeni sai hyvin vÃ¤hÃ¤n tietoa viittomakielestÃ¤ kuulokeskuksesta. Vanhempani pohtivat, millaisessa kieliympÃ¤ristÃ¶ssÃ¤ minut pitÃ¤isi kasvattaa. Jossain mÃ¤Ã¤rin vanhempani saivat viittomakielistÃ¤ opetusta, mutta ympÃ¤ristÃ¶, jossa kasvoin, ei tiennyt viittomakielestÃ¤. Vanhempani olivat hyvin kiinnostuneita viittomakielestÃ¤, mutta yritykset oppia siitÃ¤ lisÃ¤Ã¤ kariutuivat erilaisiin esteisiin. KÃ¤ytin viittomakieltÃ¤ hyvin vÃ¤hÃ¤n, pÃ¤invastoin lÃ¤hinnÃ¤ suomea, jossa kielitaitoni kehittyi hyvin. Koulussa suomea korostettiin. Vaikka siellÃ¤ oli muitakin kuuroja oppilaita, opetusmenetelmÃ¤ oli vahvasti suomenkielinen. KielenÃ¤ kÃ¤ytettiin viitottua puhetta, joka ei sinÃ¤nsÃ¤ ole viittomakieli, sillÃ¤ sen kielioppi perustuu vahvasti puhuttuun kieleen. KÃ¤vin sÃ¤Ã¤nnÃ¶llisesti kuulokokeissa kuulokeskuksessa, jossa lÃ¤Ã¤kÃ¤rit kannustivat minua kÃ¤yttÃ¤mÃ¤Ã¤n suomea eivÃ¤tkÃ¤ suositelleet viittomakieltÃ¤.

Lapsuuteni oli varsin mukava. Koulussa pÃ¤rjÃ¤sin hyvin ja minulla oli ystÃ¤viÃ¤, mutta murrosiÃ¤ssÃ¤ aloin jÃ¤Ã¤dÃ¤ jÃ¤lkeen. Tunsin itseni yksinÃ¤iseksi enkÃ¤ tiennyt, mikÃ¤ oli identiteettini. HÃ¤pesin kuurouttani. Ja sain ympÃ¤ristÃ¶stÃ¤ni sen kÃ¤sityksen, ettÃ¤ kuuroutta ei voitu hyvÃ¤ksyÃ¤. Sen sijaan olisi hyvÃ¤ olla kuin kuulevat ihmiset ja kÃ¤yttÃ¤Ã¤ suomen kieltÃ¤. Omaksuin tÃ¤mÃ¤n ajattelutavan, joka vaikutti minuun suuresti nuoruusvuosina, sillÃ¤ olin sisÃ¤ltÃ¤ aivan rikki ja tÃ¤ynnÃ¤ haavoja enkÃ¤ tiennyt, kuka olin.

â??Olen ollut syntymaÌ?staÌ?ni laÌ?htien kuuro. HaÌ?n, joka ei kuule puhetta, linnun somaa laulua, musiikin melodioita eikaÌ? muita aÌ?aÌ?nimaailman hienouksia. Moniko tulee ajatelleeksi tai ottaneeksi selvaÌ?aÌ?, mitaÌ? muuta kuurous pitaÌ?aÌ? sisaÌ?llaÌ?aÌ?n? ElaÌ?maÌ? samanaikaisesti sekaÌ? kuulevien ettaÌ? kuurojen maailmassa loi alussa pohjaa ikaÌ?aÌ?n kuin kahtia jakautuvalle persoonalleni.â?•

Vasta vuosia myÃ¶hemmin, noin parikymppisenÃ¤, aloin kÃ¤yttÃ¤Ã¤ enemmÃ¤n suomalaista viittomakieltÃ¤ ja tutustua muihin kuuroihin. Samalla tajusin, ettÃ¤ kuurot voivat menestyÃ¤

elÃ¤mÃ¤ssÃ¤. NÃ¤mÃ¤ kuurot olivat minulle roolimalleja, kuten Liisa Kauppinen [2], jonka kaikki tunsivat. Etsin sydÃ¤ntÃ¤ni ja tajusin, ettÃ¤ viittomakielestÃ¤ tulisi tunnekieleni. Kun aloin viittoa yhÃ¤ enemmÃ¤n ja enemmÃ¤n, ymmÃ¤rsin itseÃ¤ni paremmin. LÃ¶ysin identiteettini ja roolini yhteiskunnassa.

Kun viittomakielitaitoni vahvistui, myÃ¶s suomen kielen taitoni parani. TÃ¤mÃ¤ antoi minulle vahvan, kaksikielisen identiteetin. PitkÃ¤n prosessin pÃ¤Ã¤tteeksi olen nykyÃ¤Ã¤n hyvin ylpeÃ¤ viittomakielen kÃ¤yttÃ¤jÃ¤, ja suomalainen viittomakieli on identiteettini vahva perusta.

Olen huolissani nykypÃ¤ivÃ¤n lapsista, heidÃ¤n kieliympÃ¤ristÃ¶stÃ¤Ã¤n ja identiteettinsÃ¤ kehittymisestÃ¤. NykyÃ¤Ã¤n suurimmalle osalle kuuroista lapsista on leikattu sisÃ¤korvaistute, ja monet heistÃ¤ eivÃ¤t viittoa, koska viittomakielistÃ¤ opetusta ei jÃ¤rjestetÃ¤ heidÃ¤n perheilleen. Olen tavannut monia nÃ¤istÃ¤ perheistÃ¤, ja vanhemmat ovat ilmaisseet huolensa viittomakielisen kasvuympÃ¤ristÃ¶n puuttumisesta.

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Suomessa viittomakielisen opetuksen saatavuus vaihtelee suuresti. Opetus edellyttÃ¤Ã¤ usein lÃ¤Ã¤kÃ¤rintodistusta, jota ei vÃ¤lttÃ¤mÃ¤ttÃ¤ ole saatavilla. LisÃ¤ksi kunnat kiistelevÃ¤t opetusjÃ¤rjestelyjen velvoitteista. TÃ¤stÃ¤ on aiheutunut vakavia seurauksia. Juttelin erÃ¤Ã¤n Ã¤idin kanssa, joka kertoi, ettÃ¤ hÃ¤nen perheensÃ¤ oli taistellut kiivaasti viittomakielen opetuksen puolesta. Perhe on myÃ¶s pyytÃ¤nyt apua eri jÃ¤rjestÃ¶iltÃ¤. Silti he eivÃ¤t ole saaneet viittomakielen opetusta kotikaupungistaan.

Nyky-yhteiskunta ei ymmÃ¤rrÃ¤ viittomakielen merkitystÃ¤, sillÃ¤ sitÃ¤ pidetÃ¤Ã¤n edelleen apukielenÃ¤. Se voidaan ottaa kÃ¤yttÃ¶Ã¶n, kun sisÃ¤korvaistutteen saanut lapsi ei hyÃ¶dy puhutusta kielestÃ¤. TÃ¤mÃ¤ on kuitenkin tÃ¤ysin vÃ¤Ã¤rÃ¤ suunta. ViittomakieltÃ¤ pitÃ¤isi kÃ¤yttÃ¤Ã¤ puhutun kielen rinnalla alusta alkaen. NÃ¤in kaksikielisyyden periaate voisi toteutua.

NÃ¤ytÃ¤n esimerkkinÃ¤ videon (alkaa 5.24 min), jossa olen itse 7-vuotias poika. NÃ¤ette, mitÃ¤ voi tapahtua tilanteessa, jossa lapsella ei ole viittomakielistÃ¤ perustaa identiteetilleen:

â??What matters deafness of the ears when the mind hears? The one true deafness,
the incurable deafness, is that of the mind.â?• Victor Hugo, writing to Ferdinand Berthier (25/11/1845)

Huomasitte varmasti videolta, miltÃ¤ nÃ¤yttÃ¤Ã¤, kun lapsi on yksin ja vetÃ¤ytyy ryhmÃ¤stÃ¤. Olin omassa maailmassani, en ymmÃ¤rtÃ¤nyt, mistÃ¤ ryhmÃ¤ssÃ¤ puhuttiin, ja nuo hetket ovat jÃ¤Ã¤neet kovasti mieleeni. Minulle oli tuskallista olla ryhmÃ¤ssÃ¤, jossa en ymmÃ¤rtÃ¤nyt mitÃ¤Ã¤n. Sama pÃ¤ti puhuttuun kieleen, joten olin kaksin verroin yksinÃ¤inen. Se tuntui todella pahalta. Se oli kuin olisi ollut suljetussa huoneessa ilman ulospÃ¤Ã¤syÃ¤.

Muut eivÃ¤t ymmÃ¤rtÃ¤neet minua, enkÃ¤ minÃ¤ ymmÃ¤rtÃ¤nyt heitÃ¤. Kesti kauan pÃ¤Ã¤stÃ¤ ylinÃ¤istÃ¤ vaikeista vaiheista. Ja nykyÃ¤Ã¤n nÃ¤en samoja ilmiÃ¶itÃ¤ lapsissa. Monet heistÃ¤ ovat yksin, ehkÃ¤ syrjÃ¤ytyneitÃ¤. NykyÃ¤Ã¤n lÃ¤hikouluperiaatetta on vahvistettu, mikÃ¤ tarkoittaa, ettÃ¤ lapset, joilla on hyvin erilainen viittomakielitaito, ovat hajallaan lÃ¤hikouluissaan. Kuka huolehtii heidÃ¤n identiteettinsÃ¤ kehittymisestÃ¤? Kuka tukee heidÃ¤n perheitÃ¤Ã¤n? HeitÃ¤ pitÃ¤isi kuunnella enemmÃ¤n ja rohkaista viittomakielen ja kaksikielisen opetuksen kÃ¤yttÃ¶Ã¶n.

Muistan hyvin lapsuudestani, ettÃ¤ lapset ovat hyvin herkkiÃ¤ ja aistivat, mitÃ¤ heidÃ¤n ympÃ¤ristÃ¶ssÃ¤Ã¤n tapahtuu. Jos aikuiset suhtautuvat viittomakieleen kielteisesti eivÃ¤tkÃ¤ suosittele sen kÃ¤yttÃ¶Ã¤, lapsi omaksuu samanlaisen ajattelutavan. Silloin lapsi ei ehkÃ¤ halua viittoa. Minulle kÃ¤vi juuri nÃ¤in. Ã?itini olisi viittonut kanssani, mutta kielsin hÃ¤ntÃ¤, koska hÃ¤pesin viittomakieltÃ¤. On hyvin tÃ¤rkeÃ¤Ã¤ antaa lapsille malleja siitÃ¤, miten he voivat arvostaa viittomakieltÃ¤ ja reagoida siihen myÃ¶nteisesti. Jos vanhemmat joutuvat ponnistelemaan saadakseen viittomakielen opetusta,lapset saattavat turhautua eivÃ¤tkÃ¤ enÃ¤Ã¤ halua viittoa. TÃ¤mÃ¤ voi johtaa vakaviin ongelmiin myÃ¶hemmin nuoruusiÃ¤ssÃ¤, kuten minulle kÃ¤vi.

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â??Lasten on kasvettava niin, ettÃ¤ he voivat hyvÃ¤ksyÃ¤ itsensÃ¤ ja ettÃ¤ heillÃ¤ on kielellistÃ¤ monimuotoisuutta: puhuttuja kieliÃ¤, viittomakieliÃ¤, ja siten kehittyÃ¤ monikielisessÃ¤ ja monikulttuurisessa ympÃ¤ristÃ¶ssÃ¤.â•

Olen kirjoittanut kirjan kokemuksistani: Viiton â?? olen olemassa. MielestÃ¤ni nykyÃ¤Ã¤n olisi hyvÃ¤ olla tietoisempi siitÃ¤ tÃ¤rkeÃ¤stÃ¤ roolista, joka viittomakielellÃ¤ on lapsen identiteetin rakentumisessa. MeidÃ¤n pitÃ¤isi ottaa huomioon lasten oikeudet ja toimia heidÃ¤n ehdoillaan.

Miten me aikuiset voimme ottaa heidÃ¤t paremmin huomioon? MeidÃ¤n aikuisten olisi myÃ¶s muistettava, ettÃ¤ olemme roolimalleja. MeidÃ¤n ei pidÃ¤ unohtaa tÃ¤tÃ¤. Lasten on kasvettava siten, ettÃ¤ he voivat hyvÃ¤ksyÃ¤ itsensÃ¤ ja kielellisen monimuotoisuuden: puhutut kielet, viittomakielet, ja siten kehittyÃ¤ monikielisessÃ¤ ja monikulttuurisessa ympÃ¤ristÃ¶ssÃ¤. Jos he eivÃ¤t pysty siihen, seurauksena voi olla masennusta ja muita mielenterveyshÃ¤iriÃ¶itÃ¤. Samalla tavalla kuin minÃ¤ jouduin kÃ¤sittelemÃ¤Ã¤n omaa tilannettani teini-iÃ¤ssÃ¤. TÃ¤mÃ¤ ei ole leikin asia.

Toivon kovasti, ettÃ¤ pohdimme yhdessÃ¤ tÃ¤tÃ¤ tÃ¤rkeÃ¤Ã¤ identiteettikysymystÃ¤. Suomalainen viittomakieli ja suomenruotsalainen viittomakieli ovat Suomessa vÃ¤hemmistÃ¶kieliÃ¤. Jos perheiltÃ¤ evÃ¤tÃ¤Ã¤n mahdollisuus opetella viittomakieltÃ¤, he eivÃ¤t ehkÃ¤ enÃ¤Ã¤ koskaan pÃ¤Ã¤se kÃ¤yttÃ¤mÃ¤Ã¤n sitÃ¤. Suomea ja muita puhuttuja kieliÃ¤ on jatkuvasti runsaasti, kun taas

viittomakieliÃ¤ on hyvin vÃ¤hÃ¤n. Olisi hyvÃ¤ pitÃ¤Ã¤ kiinni siitÃ¤ vÃ¤hÃ¤isestÃ¤ viittomakielestÃ¤, mitÃ¤ on tarjolla.

â??Matkani on johtanut minut suurten vaikeuksien kautta muodostamaan yhtenÃ¤isen identiteetin kuurona viittomakielisenÃ¤, ja olen siitÃ¤ ylpeÃ¤. Rehellisesti sanottuna olen tÃ¤llÃ¤ lÃ¶ytÃ¶retkellÃ¤ kokenut myÃ¶s aivan poikkeuksellisia ilon, riemun ja euforian hetkiÃ¤. Suhtautumiseni kuurouteen ja viittomakieleen on muuttunut radikaalisti.â?• [3]

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Notes

[1] Salonen, J. (2021). *I sign, therefore I am*. *[Viiton â?? olen olemassa.]* Books on Demand.

[2] The United Nations Prize in the Field of Human Rights, awarded in December 2013 to Liisa Kauppinen who was a former Executive Director of Finnish Association of the Deaf and President of the World Federation of the Deaf. *YK:n ihmisoikeuspalkinto, joka myÃ¶nnettiin joulukuussa 2013 Liisa Kauppiselle, joka oli Suomen Kuurojen Liiton entinen toiminnanjohtaja ja Kuurojen Maailmanliiton presidentti.*

[3] Salonen, J. (2021). *I sign, therefore I am*. *[Viiton â?? olen olemassa.]* Books on Demand.

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