

# Importance of Social Support for Hard-of-Hearing Students in pursuing their “Educational Careers”

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**ABSTRACT** *The aim was to describe different processes in what is termed the “educational career” of hard-of-hearing students. The data comprises narratives from 30 hard-of-hearing former students representing four groups: students from a special school who continued to university education or to employment; students from ordinary schools who continued to university education or to employment. The results indicate that support within the educational experience is of great importance and the social support provided by parents is of crucial importance for a student’s educational trajectory or career. This support, in combination with an adjusted school environment, seems to greatly diminish the importance of the hearing impairment. The conclusion is that hard-of-hearing students should not necessarily choose a special school just because of the impairment itself. When the needs of these students are met, there seem to be more accentuated mechanisms in ordinary educational settings than in special schools that promote post-secondary education.*

The principle of inclusive education is set out in the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 1994). The declaration’s guiding principle is stated in this path-breaking document as “recognition of the need to work towards ‘school for all’ – institutions which include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs.” (a.a. iii). However, after intense debate, the delegates chose to provide for one exception to this rule: the educational system for deaf people should not be covered or bound by this guiding principle of educational inclusiveness. Among the reasons cited were that deaf people have their own language and the deaf community its own culture. Since its adoption, the Salamanca Declaration has been interpreted and implemented in various ways in different countries (for a comparison between Greece, The Netherlands, Sweden and the USA, see DeCaro & Foster 2002). The system of separation has also, at least to some extent, involved hard-of-hearing students who do not fit the description offered by the Salamanca Declaration, in that, while they may have some hearing

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impairment, most of them do not use sign language as their first language and are not members of a supportive community with a specific "hard-of-hearing culture" (Laszlo 1994). One primary reason given by Swedish educators for having separate schools for hard-of-hearing students is that these students need special, adaptive physical environments, such as those equipped with fm-loops and other features of an acoustically adjusted classroom. A second reason given is that the pedagogy has to be adjusted to fit the needs of this group, with special attention given to teaching skills, such as how to take turns and how to study in small groups.

In Sweden it is estimated that approximately 1 student in 1000 in each age cohort of the general student population has a hearing impairment serious enough that it affects their education (and this is not including those students diagnosed as deaf). Approximately 20% of Sweden's hard-of-hearing youth attend the National School for Hard-of-Hearing (upper secondary school). This school is physically integrated with the National School for the Deaf and an ordinary upper secondary school, i.e. there are three schools in the same building. However, according to the findings of an evaluation commissioned by the Department of Education, this system of partial separation has both desirable and not so desirable outcomes. It was concluded that the hard-of-hearing students were satisfied with their environment in terms of their physical integration with the other children, but not with the social interactions and opportunities they were afforded. They said they wanted more settings in which to interact socially with their hearing peers. On this point the evaluation clearly showed that the organization of the school, at least as then constituted, did not adequately support opportunities for social interaction of the kind to fulfil the wishes of the hard-of-hearing students (National Agency for Schools 1996).

Research has indicated that there are some factors that influence the educational career of hard-of-hearing students. A few studies (see, for example, Järvelin, Mäki-Toriko, Sorri & Rantakallio 1997, Powers, Gregory & Thoutenhoofd 1998) have shown that the academic achievement among those with a less severe hearing impairment was better than among those with a more severe impairment, although some studies have not been able to demonstrate this (e.g. Huttunen 2000). The role of the type of schooling and educational career seems not to have been the subject of any investigation. Transition from secondary to tertiary education has been shown to be lower among hard-of-hearing students than among their normal-hearing peers (see Antonson 1998, Huttunen & Sorri 2001, Dye & Kyle 2000). The literature indicates that the ratio of hard-of-hearing students who continue their education to hearing students who continue is approximately 1:3 in Sweden, Finland and the UK.

Regarding the social situation for hard-of-hearing students in ordinary educational settings, for the hard-of-hearing students in the compulsory school in Sweden the older students were at risk of social isolation. Furthermore, the students reported that no experience of a genuine group belonging and identification developed, since the number of hard-of-hearing students was too small (Tvingstedt 1993). For hard-of-hearing university

students, Danermark, Sjölund and Borg (1996) found that, compared with hearing students, they tend to be of higher socio-economic status, have more minor medical complaints, feel more lonely or mildly depressed and experience greater anxiety.

Our knowledge of the effects of hearing impairment and how different school contexts (such as separation as opposed to inclusion) might affect these students is very limited, and before we take measures to increase the rate of hard-of-hearing students' transition to post-secondary education we have to understand the decision-making process. The aim of this study was therefore to describe and analyse different processes in what might be called the educational careers of hard-of-hearing students. The main questions are: (i) how to understand the importance of the environment in terms of different educational settings (special schools and ordinary schools); (ii) what role does the hearing impairment play in the educational career; and (iii) what is the impact of other environmental factors besides the educational setting.

### Theoretical Approach

What is an "educational career" and what are the mechanisms that influence that career? By educational career we mean the *decision-making process* related to educational issues and the *outcome* of these decisions. There are many decisions that the parents and/or the students have to make related to education. Among the more obvious ones are whether to choose a special class for the hard-of-hearing student, how much information about the hearing impairment should be given to the proximity environment (to teachers, peers, etc.) and how much technical support should be requested for the hard-of-hearing student and his or her environment. The outcome is here interpreted in terms of the choice of school environment, student achievement in terms of results (represented by grades), the choice of program in the upper secondary school and further studies at the university level – or transition to the labour market. A more subjective dimension of the outcome is the satisfaction with the schooling experienced by the student.

In order to reveal mechanisms in the educational career we turn to Tinto's model of educational career (see Appendix), which has been widely applied when studying the educational career of hearing-impaired students. Tinto (1987) highlights six important types of factor influencing the educational career: pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments at time 1, institutional experiences, integration, goals and commitments at time 2, and the final stage of the career, departure or continuation. The model has been modified to fit the hearing-impaired population, e.g. including "communication skills" (see Barnhart 1991, Stinson & Walter 1992, 1995). The most elaborated and empirically most completed studies using the model in the context of hearing-impaired students and the decision-making process are those of Stinson, Scherer, and Walter (1987) and Stinson and Walter (1992, 1995). These studies suggested that important factors for choosing higher education are that you know what you want (goal and commitment), have some experience in the mainstream (pre-entry attribute), are academically and social satisfied

and integrated (institutional factors), and are doing well, while other studies emphasize the importance of communication skills. Students who experienced communication problems were more apt to experience difficulties and develop a negative affect (Dagel & Dowaliby 1989, Dowaliby, Garrison & Dagel 1993). Factors such as “unsure of goals”, “unmotivated” and “need a break” are also reported in the literature (see, for example, Scherer & Walter 1988). Tinto’s model has also been discussed extensively by Antonson (1998) in his study of hard-of-hearing students in post-secondary education. In his study he points out that using Tinto’s model does not give enough attention to the role of identity formation. Other researchers using the model studying the school situation for deaf students have also discussed this. However, when it comes to the hard-of-hearing students, the role of identity formation is different from the formation of a deaf identity due to their ambivalent position in between the deaf culture and the hearing culture.

We will focus on the following three pre-entry attributes: “family background” (e.g. academic tradition); “skills and abilities” (hearing level and functional hearing); and “prior schooling” (type of school environment prior to the different educational level we discuss and student’s subjective experiences). For “goals and commitments”, we will focus on both the goals the parents are articulating (according to the student) and what the student himself or herself expresses. The “institutional experiences” will be related to the different school environments the student has experienced and will also be analysed in terms of integration. Since it is a process that occurs over 12–14 years (depending on the choice of special school or ordinary school, where the former is the longer tenure) the “goals and commitments” are subject to change. Regarding Tinto’s last factor, “departure or continuation”, we use here the decision whether to enter the labour market or university after secondary education.<sup>1</sup> We will return to the question of goals related to the decision of whether to continue at a university or leave and enter the labour market.

## Material and Methods

The data comprises 30 former hard-of-hearing students’ stories of their educational career. The distribution of students regarding type of school settings and transition to university or labour market is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Number of students and type of school setting and transition choice

	Transit to university	Transit to labour market
Special upper secondary school for hard-of-hearing students	8 (SU <sup>a</sup> )	8 (SL <sup>b</sup> )
Ordinary upper secondary school	9 (U <sup>c</sup> )	5 (L <sup>d</sup> )

<sup>a</sup>Special University group.

<sup>b</sup>Special Labour market group.

<sup>c</sup>University group.

<sup>d</sup>Labour market group.

Students who chose to go to a special class in upper secondary school and thereafter continued with higher education or started working are designated in the following section as “Special University group” (SU), and “Special Labour market group” (SL), respectively. The students acting under compulsory level and upper secondary school requirements who went to ordinary schools, and after their examination, chose to either attend higher education or start working are designated as “University group” (U) and “Labour market group” (L), respectively.

Selection criteria were shown by “type of school”, that is, whether it is a special or ordinary school, and whether it also offers students a continuing career, such as further academic studies or employment. The hard-of-hearing students were selected so as to maximize the possible variety of experiences, in terms of factors influencing their educational career. Thus the choice was strategically made. We aimed for an even distribution among the four categories shown in Table 1, though this aim was not fully achieved. The students were recruited in three ways; 11 students were hard-of-hearing students studying at a Swedish university at the beginning of the investigation (all agreed to participate). Among these students some had experience of special school, some not. In order to increase the number of students and the variety of experience, 37 hard-of-hearing students were invited to participate, of whom 30 responded affirmatively. Of those, 16 had attended special upper secondary school. These 16 students were contacted by the researchers. Those who had attended ordinary classes (14 students) were contacted by hard-of-hearing counsellors from different parts of Sweden.

All the students had attended a program in which they had to obtain a pass in three designated core subjects (Swedish, mathematics and English), which prepared them for further academic studies (i.e. vocational as well as more theoretically orientated programs). Thirty-three percent of the students were women and the average age was 28 years. The investigation was conducted approximately 5 years after graduation from upper secondary school.

A semi-structured audio-taped interview, varying in length from 1.5 to 2.5 hours, was conducted with each participating student; all the interview tapes were then transcribed *verbatim* to form a text for the three authors to analyse individually. Tinto’s model was used as the point of departure. Each author individually and independently perused the text to discern explicitly expressed patterns of meaning. These meanings occurred, or recurred, on the one hand, in views expressed through the narrative of a single informant, and, on the other hand, in the views expressed in the narratives of several – or even all – of the informants. The intention was to construct summary or holistic patterns and descriptions, and at the same time to understand the correlation between meaningful statements in individual interviews and those found in the whole text. In other words, the authors looked for the characteristic points in the participants’ interviews, which, when taken together and seen in their relationships, expressed the meaning of all the interviews. The three authors then discussed their individual findings and took decisions about the meanings expressed and how to proceed based on an evolved consensus. In the process of performing the work and arriving at agreement, it became

obvious that Tinto's model had some important limitations when trying to understand and explain all the aspects of meanings that had been revealed in the individual interviews and in the interviews seen as a meaningful whole.

Approximately half of the students in the investigation graduated from the National School for Hard-of-Hearing (RGH). This is a special school with the whole of Sweden as its catchment area. The housing of the attending students can vary. They can either live in a dormitory or with a local host family. Furthermore, some of the students choose to have their own place, especially when they are older. The students have the right to a longer period of study than is normally accorded Swedish students (often 1 extra year, but it could extend to several extra years). The students are taught in small classes, of approximately 6–12, compared with 28–30 students in ordinary classes. The classes are designated as “locally integrated” in three different regular upper secondary schools. The environment is adjusted to the target group. For example, there are wall-to-wall carpets, hearing loops and microphones in all classrooms, and some teachers at each school have experience in teaching and dealing with hard-of-hearing persons. Technicians and audiologists are also available.

The other half of the students in the investigation graduated from “ordinary” upper secondary schools. They lived at home with their families throughout their entire schooling. Often they were the only hard-of-hearing person in their class. They were expected to keep the same pace of study as their hearing classmates. In some cases their classrooms were adapted to their needs, for example having a classroom with hearing loops and microphones. Support was provided by audiologists, technicians and other professional persons knowledgeable about, and used to working with, hard-of-hearing students in upper secondary school.

## **Findings**

### *Pre-Entry Attributes*

*Academic tradition in family and parents' profession.* None of the students in the SU and SL groups came from a family where a parent had taken and passed an academic examination. In both groups the parents usually had blue-collar professions. In the L group some parents had experience of higher education. In the L group families, the mother and/or the father had a white-collar profession, working as a sales clerk, computer-worker, insurance clerk, labour union representative, accountant or even owner of a business. In the U group on the other hand, all but one student came from families with achievements constituting what we have called an academic tradition. That meant that all the children of these academic parents chose to study at ordinary upper secondary schools.

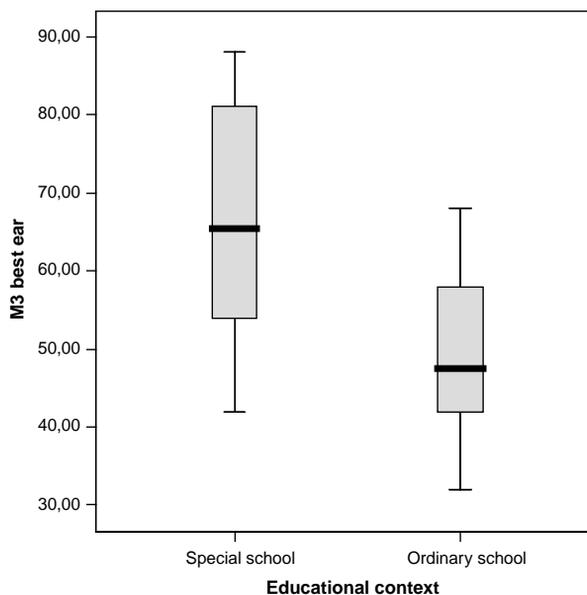
*Skills and abilities.* When Tinto's model is used in the context of hard-of-hearing people, “related skills and abilities” is most often the person's ability to hear (see Figure 1, the higher the value, the more hearing loss). The pure-

tone average in the best ear (classified according to The Swedish Council on Technology Assessment in Health Care) is better for the students in the ordinary schools than for the special school students. The role of this difference in hearing level will be discussed at the end of the article.

*Prior schooling.* At the compulsory school level, some in both the SU and SL groups had studied at special schools and some in mainstream classes. The students who attended mainstream classes found it difficult to manage their studies in the hearing school environment. Several also found it difficult to identify themselves with their hearing classmates: they saw themselves as hearing-impaired and therefore different from their hearing classmates. To these hard-of-hearing students the choice to continue their studies at a special upper secondary school seemed obvious.

The students from the U and L groups had all attended ordinary or mainstream nine-year school – but not without problems. However, the problems were not so much because of the physical hearing loss as such, but were more often connected to the students' concerns and social interactions, their strong desire not to be seen as different or to avoid having a feeling of being treated differently. This struggle is exemplified in their comments: “It was hard in the senior level of nine-year school.” “It was hard to have to tell people about the hearing loss.” “It was hard to have a speech therapist.” “It was hard to have to carry around the black briefcase.” “I missed a lot.” “I should have carried a big microphone everywhere – but I refused.”

Many of the students voiced a clear impression, or gave a clear indication, that they did not feel that they had something in common – or could identify



**Figure 1.** Hearing level and type of educational setting. M3 = pure-tone thresholds at 0.5, 1, 2 kHz in the better ear.

themselves – with other hard-of-hearing students, and so developed coping strategies to blend into the social background, again as demonstrated in their own words. As one student expressed it: “Unfortunately, I got together in different groups with other hard-of-hearing students. I thought to myself: Oh God, they aren’t a bit like me!” Another student said: “In a way it was about having the will to tag along, but on the other hand, not to be seen.”

Almost all of the U and L students had the self-consciously outspoken wish not to be pointed out as different. Here are sample student comments:

It’s not fun to be pointed out as different and therefore get special benefits, I don’t think so. Then you know you’re not like all other students; you will always have that label on you.

The students therefore tend to miss important information, rather than using the technical aids available and thereby drawing other students’ attention to their impairment:

My teacher was so mad at me when I quit using my hearing-aid!

### *Goals and Commitment (T1)*

*Students’ choice of school.* In eighth grade, when students are usually approximately 15 years of age, they choose which upper secondary school and which program they want to attend. The SU and SL students in the present study had different reasons why they chose the special upper secondary school. One said he wanted to attend a school where he was able to “relax”. Another student said, when thinking of the regular compulsory school: “Well, there I was, sitting together with 27 hearing classmates, and I have such bad spoken Swedish . . . I didn’t want to be in that situation again!” A third student said: “Older hard-of-hearing mates preferred the special upper secondary school and the hard-of-hearing counsellor arranged that I could be there for a week. I liked it so much. It was such a calm and nice situation in small classes.”

The U and L students, who chose ordinary upper secondary school, also showed certain variations concerning their reasons for that decision. One student said that no-one ever told her about the special upper secondary school. That was the reason why she did not go – in effect she never had the choice. Another student did not attend the special upper secondary school because he did not want to move away from home. The apprehensions voiced by the other students concerned the right to be free, in this case to study what they really wanted to study. One student expressed it thus: “Should I have to choose school depending on my hearing? I thought that I should choose depending on my interest.”

The SL students seemed to select a program that they thought would be alright, or at least manageable, for the moment or short-term, even knowing it might be at the expense of future benefits that might have accrued over the longer term if they instead chose a longer upper secondary program. Thus these students signed up for a short vocational program, for example the

2-year electronic-telephony program. Some of these students were also advised by school counsellors and audiology personnel to do this. The students in the three other groups chose, with a few exceptions, 3- or 4-year programs. They also varied their selection of subjects for study, for instance choosing humanities, social science, technical or arts programs. The most variation was found in the choices of the U and L students. Most of these students first chose programs according to what they wanted to read, or were most interested in, such as music and languages. Choices for these students did not seem to depend on, or in effect correlate with, the extent of the hearing impairment.

*Support from parents, and their expectations concerning the education of their child after compulsory schooling.* Most of the parents of the SU and SL students could not (because of the travel distance) be physically close to their children on a daily basis, though they maintained contact through telephoning and weekend visits. However, parental distance was adequately compensated for, as clearly shown in the stories of the students, by their good and warm-hearted treatment by professional adults within the special upper secondary school. These adults evidently put much effort into supporting students individually.

On the other hand, good educational experiential conditions for learning and feeling comfortable were enhanced by the parents of the U and L students. These parents always had the opportunity during all the time their sons and daughters spent in compulsory and upper secondary school levels to be close to, and to take care of, them. This possibility of closeness and direct care added to the parents' trust in the ability of the child and also in the ability of the school to face and solve problems related to the hearing impairment. The students said many things to illustrate this general point:

Yes, of course they (the parents) have been engaged in the parents' association at school ... Of course they have helped me so that everything could turn out fine for me ... Of course they always have been helpful and supported me ... They have given me and my brother a lift to different camps and daddy was active in the swimming association. Nothing is impossible, you can manage to do everything, they have told me.

I know my parents had a lot of a 'Don't give in!' way, so to speak ... They have been good parents.

Of course they have supported me a lot and said, like, 'You can handle it!' ... They have been a lot like that and encouraged me and so on.

When I was about to enter the university they asked me: 'What about hearing loops and everything, have you checked it?' Of course they still are very anxious about me and my hearing and so on ... but ... nothing can be allowed to cut down my ambition, so to speak.

It was very important for their success and well-being, and must not be underestimated, that the U and L students had access to a certain continuity regarding everyday life, which included their families. According to the U and L students, it was much easier to cope with different kinds of problems due to

the hearing impairment when there was a natural support structure provided by their parents and other relatives. When everything turned out in the very best way for the hard-of-hearing student the reason was, predominantly, a highly functioning unit of personal care and professional service in the living and educational settings. This unit consisted of very good family support, as well as support from friends outside and inside school, together with the professional support provided in the regular school.

Both the SU and SL students said in their interviews that their parents, most of the time, had had low expectations concerning the education of their children. These students had not been encouraged, groomed or pushed by their parents regarding how and in what ways they should act concerning making their decision about upper secondary study programs. The main impression when analysing their interview comments is the absence of advice from these parents. Many of the students in the special upper secondary school remembered that, from an age of 15 years or so, they had almost no pressure from their parents. In effect the parents told their children they could do exactly what they wanted. It seems the parents were grateful if their hard-of-hearing child succeeded in getting and passing an examination in special upper secondary school; beyond that, the child's choice of program did not seem to matter.

For parents of the students who had attended ordinary upper secondary school, the initial impression was that they, too, had low expectations concerning their children: "Go study what you yourself wish, they said to me." However, when analysing the stories of the students, there was a little more to it. Often there was a "but" after the comment "go study what you yourself wish". The conditions parents advocated generally, or put on behalf of their children, might be expressed in different ways, but were there all the same, and always connected to higher expectations for the child, for example, to encourage a higher ambition level on the part of the child, or to put forward various recommendations related to future study programs, which could lead beyond the upper secondary level and even provide the child with possibilities to go further in a way the parents approved of. One student expressed the parental concerns he heard like this:

"Mom and dad said concerning further studies, 'It is completely up to you, *but* of course, you still have more capacity, if you want to continue, you know that, don't you!'"

### *Institutional Experiences*

All students in the SU and SL groups had good contact with their teachers and the rest of the employees at the upper secondary school for hard-of-hearing, and all students were, to some degree at least, involved in activities outside the classroom. All of the students basically expressed the same thing about the way they had been treated in school, making comments such as: "It was wonderful! The teachers, they were such conscientious people! They were super, really super!" Yet many students at the same time

had a feeling of being isolated from the hearing students in the school (see below).

Students from the U and L groups gave different examples for when they thought the formal actions of officials of the ordinary school did not rise to meet their expectations. The students were troubled when certain questions about the school organization were not taken seriously and when teachers did not seem to understand how to meet the particular needs of a hard-of-hearing student properly. In cases like these, school life suddenly became more complicated for the hard-of-hearing students.

One student said:

It was the same in upper secondary school as it was in compulsory school. There were some classrooms with a hearing loop and many classrooms without a hearing loop. And I had some teachers – old fogies. One of them said he always had had his history lessons in that particular corridor, in that particular classroom and he wanted it to be like that forever! He was not planning to move to a classroom with a hearing loop.

Another student said:

And when we started the second year in upper secondary school, I had already said, so as to be in time for summer holidays: ‘Just remember, put my lessons in rooms with a hearing loop’. But when I came back after the holidays, they had forgotten it anyhow . . . Several weeks, yes, a month later, the lessons were changed on the timetable. On the eve of the third year, I wrote a note to the guidance officer and another one to the director of studies: ‘Remember me when working with the timetable!’ But when I came back for the third year they had still forgotten!

One more example from a third student shows the variation of problems these students had to face in ordinary upper secondary school:

One teacher had been mentally ill for a while and she had got such twitching in her face. I very often read lips, and when I could, I tried to read her lips, but she had her tics. And when I followed her so I could do the same (read her lips), she thought I was making fun of her. So she gave me a very low mark in her subject. It did not matter how much I tried to explain. I felt it was very unfair. I really loved the subject itself!

But the students who had attended the ordinary upper secondary school also had good things to say, for instance how they had been able to arrange the support in a way they liked. One student said:

I knew I was making a choice. I said to the hard-of-hearing counsellor: ‘I don’t want you to come informing my classmates before I allow you to do that! I thought that if my new classmates had the choice of getting to know me as a *person* before they got to know me as hearing-impaired, everything would turn out much easier’.

Not until 3 weeks later did this student allow the hard-of-hearing counsellor to inform the class. Then the teachers could start using hearing loops and microphones. In this case the professionals in school adapted, complying with the wishes of this student.

Overall, mostly good memories were expressed by the students from compulsory and upper second school, in comments such as the following: “I thought it was fun in school.” “I belonged to the same group,

from pre-school to the 9th grade in compulsory school, and some of us continued together in upper secondary school. My classmates very often supported me.”

It is striking that stories from students who had attended the ordinary upper secondary school were often about how teachers and other staff, together with classmates, contributed to good conditions for all the students in class. Here is an example:

When someone in class was about to say something, she or he had to step forward and use the microphone. It was natural. Today, as a result of that, I find it natural to stand in front of a group of people and talk.

This was one of many examples pointing out the good intentions of teachers in their attempts to plan for an education for all the different kinds of students in their classrooms. Such examples cited by the students demonstrate a high awareness of student needs on the part of faculty/staff and also their own struggle against other school officials or school rules to provide a good experience for all, including achieving good, integrated solidarity.

Although all of the SU and SL students attended a special upper secondary school for hard-of-hearing students, their classes were situated in a school where the majority of students had normal hearing. There was also a group of deaf students in the school. However, almost no hard-of-hearing students interacted with any of the students from either of the other two groups. The hard-of-hearing students comprised a distinct subgroup, with no significant interaction with the deaf or the normal hearing. This isolation is partly a result of the way the special upper secondary school is organized, e.g. student councils are separated in most gatherings, for example the celebration of Lucia, breaking-up, lectures and call-over. On such occasions, the hard-of-hearing students were lumped together with deaf students. Some of the hard-of-hearing students benefit from this interaction with deaf students because of the sign language interpretation, but some feel that they do not have anything in common with their deaf peers. The way the school was organized did not provide the students with the choice of whether to attend gatherings like this with their hearing peers or deaf peers.

However, those students who chose the ordinary school soon shared various interests with normal-hearing students, such as sport and music. In that way they got to know a wider/widening circle of schoolmates. They became acquainted with others who were neither hearing-impaired nor classmates, but friends outside school. In such circles, students with talent for football, or some musical instrument, or similar interests and abilities, can become recognized, or even popular. At the same time, such students are accepted as one of the larger group, like everybody else. Here is a comment, illustrating this general point of gaining greater perspective and acceptance:

Me and two mates of mine, we started up, while in upper secondary school, a trading company in music. We built loudspeakers, we played in discos and things like that. I had a lot of older music, before CDs came along.

These students in fact had the opportunity to share the thoughts of non-hearing-impaired mates, not only about how to act as an ordinary upper secondary school student, but also about the future, about further education and what to do when finished with school.

*Goals and Intentions (T2) – Labour Market or Further Studies*

At the time of this investigation, the position of the SL students when entering the labour market was very weak. All of them had low-paid jobs, or they had experience of such a job. Four of them were working in large companies as a mounting-, stock- or unskilled labourer; one was a shift repairer in the paper industry and had experienced periods of unemployment; one was a trainee and was, as he said, indirectly unemployed; one was pregnant and did not work; and one was unemployed. The last had worked previously as a cleaner on a passenger ship. It is also striking to note that none of the group reported that they had made any use of, or benefited from, the narrow vocational program they studied at the upper secondary school.

Regarding the SU students, they were all still at the university at the time of the research. However, two of the students had faced some problems during their studies. One transferred to another university due to problems with the administration at the first university, and one of the other students faced some difficulties during the third and last year due to problems with the last examination. This possibly shows that the SU students, when they entered an institution of higher education, and for the first time, had to face the problems of being hearing-impaired in a hearing world, and had not been prepared, at least not compared with those with hearing impairment who had attended ordinary school all along. Following this train of thought, it seems necessary that the SU students receive good, professional support from the very first day in higher education.

It is worth noting that all of the L students continued their studies, but not on an academic level. They instead wanted to complete their upper-secondary certificates. For that purpose, one of the students chose a 1-year computer program, another attended the electrical engineering program, a third chose 1 year of the community adult education program to improve marks in Swedish and English, the fourth qualified for a profession in massage therapy and the fifth added a third year to an earlier technical education. The two last-mentioned students did not find professions related to their education. Instead, the first of the two became a consultant in an association for young hard-of-hearing people. The other temporarily had a job as a student assistant. His position in the labour market seemed to be somewhat weak. The other students in the same group had jobs that did accord or correspond with their upper-secondary educations. That group included an engineer, a telephone operator and a computer technician, respectively.

All the U students were already, or were well on their way to becoming, well educated. Five of them had a job. One was, through formal education, a highly qualified engineer who was employed as a chief manager for a car manufacturing company. Another had qualified to be a cantor and had a job

using those skills, while a third, with both a bachelors degree in political science and a masters degree in English, who had also concentrated studies on the EU, had worked as an EU information officer in the Swedish Parliament. The fourth, who had gained considerable knowledge in several academic subjects, was an administrator in a steel company. The fifth student had most recently become an assistant lecturer at a university, and was just about to defend a thesis in molecular immunology. The last three students in the U-group were still studying at university. One of them wants to be an archivist, another is preparing to be a teacher for students with hearing impairment/vision and physical disabilities, and the third studies political science. She already has an environment controller certification and an additional 2 years of study in geo-science. This last-mentioned student has not yet decided what kind of a career or job she wants.

Only one of the U students was, although well-educated, without a job at the time of the research. He has a bachelor's degree in English, his main subject of concentration, but also has a bachelor's degree in law. He says: "A job in a public department would suit me fine!"

## **Discussion**

The main aim of this study was to analyze and discuss the educational careers of hard-of-hearing students, taking their different educational settings and hearing impairments into account. In the light of the Salamanca Declaration, hard-of-hearing students comprise a group that can be characterized as "students in between", i.e. they do not fully belong either to the hearing world or to the deaf community. Neither is there anything resembling a "hard-of-hearing culture" and identity. This ambiguous, and therefore ambivalent, situation is also reflected in the educational arrangements for hard-of-hearing youths. There are special upper secondary schools for them and about one-fifth of hard-of-hearing young people from throughout Sweden choose to enrol in such schools, while the rest choose different forms of inclusive, mainstream education in non-special schools.

However, we must bear in mind that we have interviewed 30 students about their experiences related to their education. These students were selected strategically in order to cover different educational settings and different outcomes of the educational process, such as further university study or entering the labour market, respectively. At this early stage, we can point only to processes and factors that seem to play important roles in these individual educational careers. Still, we have seen that there are, in some cases, what seem to be clear empirical patterns, which need further study and elaboration. Overall, however, we are not yet in a position to draw any conclusions about how general our findings are regarding the entire group of hard-of-hearing youth in Sweden.

Our analysis indicates that there is a complex interplay between many factors in terms of explaining how students progress in their education and how they feel about their school experiences. The four groups of students (SU, SL, U and L) are highly heterogeneous, thus the variation is large, but

there are invariances as well. Among the more important conditions and factors seem to be class background, social support, level of hearing loss and educational context.

It is not surprising that *class background* plays an important role. There are several studies finding that children born to parents with an academic education, or tradition, tend to choose an academic education themselves. However, in the case of hard-of-hearing young people there is an important difference. There is a significantly lower number of hard-of-hearing young people who continue with higher education than would have been expected; among our subjects we found that *all* of the hard-of-hearing students whose parents come from an academic background choose university post-secondary education. This indicates that the “social inheritance” is more accentuated among this group of youth than in the general population. One explanation is related to our second observation, the importance of social support, inside and outside the educational setting, for hard-of-hearing students whose educational careers are under way.

All young people benefit from *social support* in their school career. The question here is whether hard-of-hearing students are more in need of support than their non-hearing-impaired peers. The answer is not known, since non-hearing-impaired students were not included in our study. However, our analysis, at least preliminarily, indicates that hard-of-hearing students are a vulnerable group and, as such, need a stronger support system than do their non-hearing-impaired peers. It also seems fair to say at this point in our research that the social support given to students of parents with and without an academic background differs. It is important to emphasize that we do not place values on the different types of support, but we do find that, among those with university/college-educated parents, the support given to their children was embedded in a set of expectations – for better or worse – that encouraged them to pursue further education.

What role did the level of *hearing impairment* seem to play in this context? It is well known that the level of hearing, measured by audiometric tests, is not a good predictor of real-life functional listening ability, due to many other factors, such as the person’s benefit from the use of hearing aids (which differs depending on the type of hearing impairment) and such as the level of a student’s cognitive skills. Therefore, the traditional way of measuring hearing status that we use here has its shortcomings. Still, we can nevertheless note two things. The first is that the students attending the special school have a more profound hearing loss than the integrated students. This indicates that there is a selection bias in recruitment to the special school. Our analysis of the interviews suggests that many of the students choosing the special school had a bad experience in the compulsory regular school environment. Neither their social nor their audiological needs were met. It seems the level of hearing impairment plays a larger role in the decision-making process when the environment fails the student and their families.

However, the in-group variation among the special school students is large and this is the second point to be made here. For instance, the two students from the special school with the most hearing loss among all the students

continued their education at the university level. Two of the three students with less hearing loss chose the labour market instead of university studies. For the SU group, it seems the special school played an important role in compensating for the hearing impairment and negative experiences of prior schooling. This suggests once again that, with an adjusted environment, the impairment does not play an important role in influencing the educational career.

Turning to the fourth group of factors that the analysis brings to the fore – the *educational context* – we have already begun to touch upon it when discussing the impairment within the educational context and its importance in these students' choices. In all the interviews the students emphasized important factors related to the educational environment. They had both positive and negative experiences of compulsory school. As indicated above, for some students the lack of sufficient technical and educational support was a barrier in their educational career. For others, support was sufficient, although some of them had to fight for the resources. As a result, some chose special school as a solution to these problems, while others did not want to identify themselves as hard-of-hearing students in need of a special education. They did not want to be “special”. Although the special school seemed to play an important, and positive, role for some of the students, they all had in common the dissatisfaction of being “special”. To attend a special school for hard-of-hearing students was to be separated as a group and as individuals from the others, including not only those with no impairment, but often those who were also “special”. The location of the school within an ordinary school did not affect this sense of separation from others. From a social and an administrative point of view, there often was a feeling of distinct separation, which caused suffering.

For the students in ordinary school at the upper secondary level, the educational context was very mixed. For some it worked very smoothly, for others not. There were some students with an adjusted and well-fitting educational environment whose educational career was not that successful, and there were students who had to struggle very hard throughout their schooling, but who were very successful. That means that hard-of-hearing students are like other students. But there is one observation worth stressing: even if there is a great similarity between hard-of-hearing students and their normal hearing peers, the former group is more vulnerable and more in need of support (technical, educational and social).

It is important to emphasize, however, that the educationally and socially ambiguous and ambivalent position of this group of students is reflected in our interviews with them. Our interviews also revealed a marginalization among the group. Emerton (1992), who has investigated marginality and biculturalism and its effects on the development of social identity of deaf people, uses the word *marginalization* to mean a situation where a deaf person is involved in two or three culturally distinct groups. Antonson (1998) uses marginality in the same sense as Emerton to describe the post-secondary school situation for students with hearing impairments. Antonson found that these students remained marginalized as a condition growing out of, or

stemming from, different concepts of expected and actual interactions with the larger “hearing” university. These concepts, which also affected successful students, were about:

- different kinds of problems in the interplay between oneself as a student with hearing impairment and the university environment (for instance that the environment should pay the necessary attention when it often does not);
- fundamental values (for instance that everyone is of equal value and has the right to be unlike others without having to suffer feelings associated from being decreased in value); and
- valid legitimate demands (that is, the right to special support and the belief that the environment should show thoughtful consideration when it often does not).

All these and related aspects of marginality were clearly present in the former hard-of-hearing students’ stories about their educational career.

Because of the lack of clear pathways to follow and the difficulty of planning for the future, these students have important, and difficult, and perhaps less obvious, choices to make during their educational careers, perhaps even more important choices in some ways than the ones other students must make. Since there have not been any comparative in-depth studies of this process (how hard-of-hearing students attending special schools perform compared with those in integrated educational settings), the findings we present in this article are new and should be of some interest to those concerned with providing the best opportunities to hard-of-hearing students and, we hope, to the students themselves.

Are our findings in accordance with previous research on this topic? The role of the hearing impairment seems to be conditioned by environmental factors. Therefore it is hazardous to point to the level of hearing as causally related to school achievement. Furthermore, the social experiences of being a hard-of-hearing student among normal-hearing students are very contextually determined. Also, in this case, the level of support seems to play an important role. In relation to the studies that explicitly used Tinto’s model as the theoretical framework, we can identify some differences as well. Tinto’s model has been used in several studies regarding students’ decision-making processes. However, the model was originally constructed for revealing the most important factors related to a student’s departure decision. In this study and some earlier studies reported in this article, the model is used to highlight the educational career in general, including the decision whether to continue to post-secondary education. Viewing this as a decision-making process one has to bear in mind that the decision is influenced by both internal and external factors. The model does not pay enough attention to external factors. Important among such factors are, for example, other, more attractive, options (for instance the prospect of getting a job, earning money, starting a family), and uncertainty of intentions. Furthermore, it is important to modify the academic and social integration part of Tinto’s model. More focus must

be on marginalization and the complex identity formation process for hard-of-hearing students.

To conclude, support within the educational experience is of great importance and the social support provided by parents is of crucial importance for students' educational trajectory or career. This support, in combination with an adjusted school environment, seems to greatly diminish, if not rule out, the importance of the hearing impairment. In terms of inclusion-type educational settings or special schools, there is a complex interplay of factors; but choosing a special school cannot be justified by the hearing impairment alone. Furthermore, given that the needs of the hard-of-hearing student were met, there seem to be mechanisms in the inclusion-type educational settings that promote post-secondary education. These mechanisms are more accentuated in this setting than in the special school.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> There are several options other than enrolling in a university for post-secondary education, for example folk high school and vocational training. Here we consider only further education at university level.

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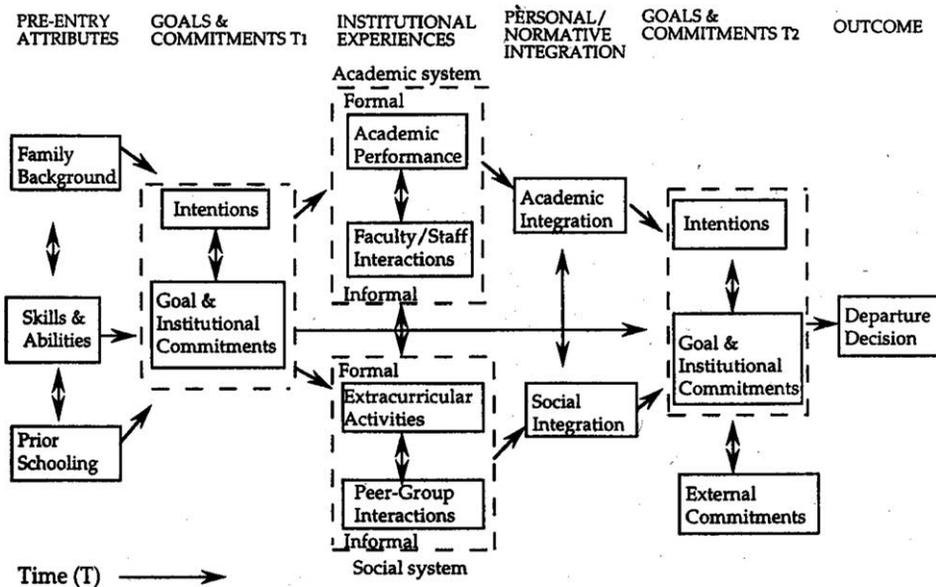
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**Appendix**



Source: Tinto (1987) p. 114.