


# Chapter 9

## Navigating the Third Space: Bridging Educational Gaps Within Mainstream Society for Black Deaf Students

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter examines systemic barriers affecting Black Deaf students in educational settings and presents evidence-based strategies for building inclusive, equitable pathways to academic and career success. Grounded in intersectional frameworks, it integrates concepts such as psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), Appreciative Peer Mentorship, and the CREEEPP framework to challenge deficit-based models. Through personal narrative and community-engaged scholarship, the author underscores the importance of culturally responsive teaching, early language acquisition, and neuroinclusive design. Policy recommendations call for increased professional development, representation, and school-university-community partnerships. With actionable insights and data-informed practices, the chapter urges a reimagining of learning environments where Black Deaf students are affirmed, empowered, and equipped to thrive. It offers a roadmap for dismantling structural inequities through leadership, mentorship, and culturally sustaining practices.*

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-9914-9.ch009

## INTRODUCTION: OVERVIEW OF EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES FOR BLACK DEAF STUDENTS

The exclusionary nature of classroom environments—paired with the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy and limited access to college and career pathways or junior cooperative (co-op) education curricula—continues to contribute to the disproportionately low percentage of Black Deaf graduates (and neurodivergent students) with disabilities in U.S. higher education. This chapter explores the educational journey of a neurodivergent Black Deaf student raised in the American South. It examines students’ navigation across three interrelated social systems:

- 1) Pre-K through 12th-grade mainstream education within a predominantly monolingual classroom environment (Baker & Wright, 2017, culminating in graduating from a Division II university (reclassified as Division I in 2024);
- 2) “Third Space” (Bhabha, 1994), wherein the home environment fosters interpersonal connections with the deaf organizations; and,
- 3) *Appreciative peer mentorship*, which connects the student with peers, educators, community leaders, and trusted co-op employers across these spaces to demonstrate their capacity for critical thought and self-emancipation in an evolving 21<sup>st</sup>-century society (Kelly et al., 2023).

The National Deaf Center (NDC) has identified significant barriers that impede Black Deaf individuals' access to higher education, contributing to the alarming statistic that only 0.4% attained terminal, medical, or juris doctor degrees (Garberoglio et al., 2019). Advancing equity in academia requires intentionally including Deaf and disabled perspectives within academic leadership to foster inclusive, world-class institutions. Black Deaf individuals from rural communities often navigate a dual existence, engaging with both mainstream society and the Deaf community. This bicultural navigation offers critical insights into the disparities between mainstream and Deaf school environments. It is through the leadership of Black Deaf servant leaders—who challenged academic ableism (Dolmage, 2017)—that institutions can effectively address these disparities through comprehensive academic policy reform and authentic community engagement. Their contributions are essential in cultivating educational environments where Black Deaf students can thrive in mainstream public schools and deaf residential schools, grounded in a holistic understanding of family and community expectations for Deaf children.

One proposed strategy is the establishment of a “Third Space”—a conceptual framework that creates a supportive environment to address educational disparities (Bhabha, 1994). This space fosters aspirational and self-reflective journaling, which promotes exposure to inner-alignment leadership practices and empowers members

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