

# To d or not to D? Rethinking deaf identity

**Michelle Atkinson**, a Qualified Teacher of Deaf Children and Young People (QToD) at the Royal School for the Deaf, Derby, discusses the concept of 'big D/little d' and its implications on deaf identity

Let's take a step back and trace the roots of this curious split: little d and big D. Where did it come from, and who first drew that line in the sand?

It wasn't born in deaf<sup>1</sup> clubs nor planted through the pride of deaf culture. It was crafted in the pages of academia. A researcher, seeking clarity, needing a way to distinguish between groups in their writing: *deaf* with a small *d* to describe the audiological definition, *Deaf* with a capital *D* to describe a cultural-linguistic community. It was a tool, nothing more, a neat way to present concepts clearly in academic texts<sup>2</sup>.

But what was meant as shorthand slipped into the wider world. The researcher later published a clarification, explaining that the big *D*/little *d* divide was never intended as a cultural marker, never meant to be a badge of belonging or exclusion. It was a framework for writing, not for identity.

Yet here we are, still wrestling with those letters and the invisible lines they draw. Do we really need a split definition of being deaf? Does it guide us, or does it chip away at belonging?

Elitism within the deaf community, deciding who counts as 'truly Deaf' or worthy of inclusion, can be isolating and harmful. It creates invisible walls where there should be bridges, leaving some feeling judged, excluded, or like they don't belong. This kind of gatekeeping fractures the community rather than strengthening it. Just as we don't need to measure how adventurous someone is to call them an explorer, or how creative someone is to call them an artist, the deaf community shouldn't need to define how Deaf or deaf someone must be to belong. Identity isn't a scale or a checklist; it's lived experience, fluid and complex.

Being deaf doesn't come with a single set of rules. Each deaf person has a unique skill set and navigates the world in their own ways based on the moment. Life isn't a rigid 'either/or' choice; it's a spectrum of possibilities. Deaf identity is never set in stone; it moves, it breathes, it shifts with the day. What matters is what works in the moment, what allows us to connect, create, and move through the world fully. Our choices are not tests of little d or big D authenticity or membership; they are expressions of our freedom to navigate life on our own terms, in ways that honour both our needs and our identities.

To force this fluidity into a rigid D or d flattens the richness of being deaf. This divide mirrors another social construct: the idea of 'two worlds', the deaf world and the hearing world, a notion that doesn't reflect a lived reality. Society often uses this division, much like the 'd/Deaf' distinction, as a way to categorise and make sense of us. In truth, there aren't separate 'worlds'; we all share the same one, navigating life through different languages, identities, and experiences with

ease and challenges alike.

Identity shouldn't be a cage. Yet for the deaf community, the Big D versus little d divide can feel like one, a minority within a minority, an invisible line separating who's 'in' from who's not, even among people sharing the same space. The Deaf community carries the Big D with pride, and rightly so, with its rich culture, heritage, and language. But there's space for every deaf person to belong and explore it, no matter how deaf they are on their audiogram or their language repertoire. Freedom, after all, is living your identity without apology or restriction.

Perhaps it's time to stop chasing definitions and instead start embracing deaf identity as a network of experiences, and connections. Belonging isn't a test, and identity isn't an elite club. It is simply the freedom to be who we are, wherever we land, on any given day. Our identities stretch across tables, across conversations, across laughter shared with friends who see you for all of you. Belonging doesn't require a little d or big D badge; it lives in the spaces we create together. Like a living web, our identities are interconnected, flexible, and alive.

Sure, I am deaf, and I carry that with pride. But perhaps the real question isn't which D we are, but who we are in all the spaces we inhabit. We move between cultures and communities. We are whole, complex, human. We are more than letters on a page, more than definitions imposed by others. Beyond the alphabet lies the freedom to fully be ourselves, for ourselves.

As QToDs, perhaps it's time we pause and reflect how we frame deaf identity in our work. The way we communicate about it and teach it shapes how young deaf people come to see themselves. Are we offering them a full landscape of possibilities, or quietly drawing borders they don't need? Our role is not to choose paths for them, but to open doors to deaf identity, intersectionality in the wider world, and the rich culture of the deaf community. If we bestow ways that separate big D from little d, we risk creating uncertainty where there should be belonging. The divide between 'two worlds' may only exist because of how we present it. True inclusion means giving every deaf child the freedom to explore all parts of who they are, to belong everywhere, and to thrive without limits.

## Notes

- 1 In this article, 'deaf' is used as an inclusive term throughout to encompass people who identify as deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing. This usage recognises the diversity of linguistic, cultural, and audiological identities within the wider deaf community.
- 2 Woodward J and Horejes T (2016). *Deaf/deaf: origins and usage*, The Sage Deaf Studies Encyclopedia (3), 285-287. Accessed 30/10/2025 at <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483346489.n93>



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