



# Deaf Mentors:

## Perspectives of Mentors, Families & Program Administrators

Holly F. Pedersen, Ed.D., Kale Smith, M.S. Candidate, Nicole Swartwout, MEd.



### Background & Purpose

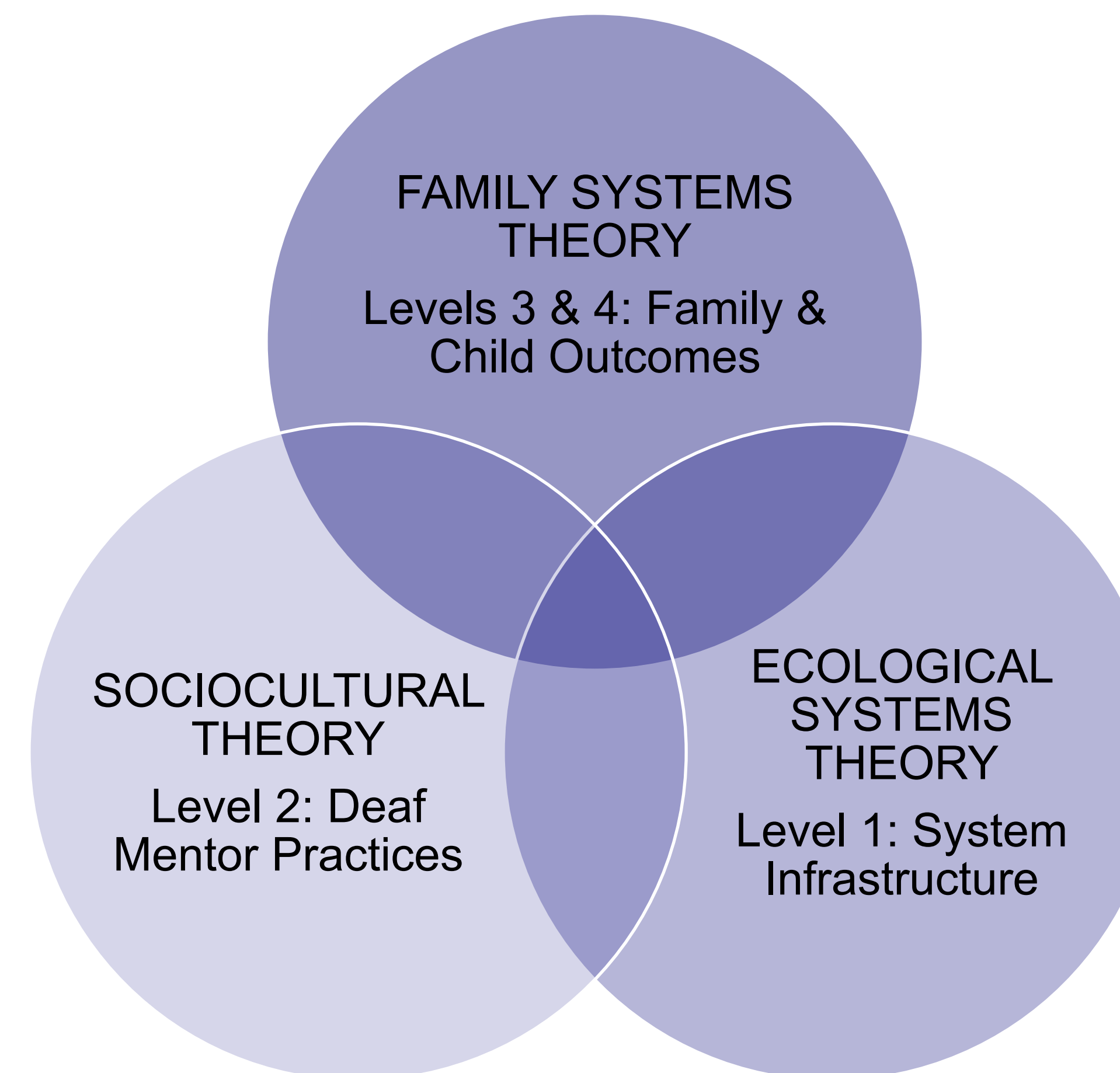
- Calls for involvement of Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) adults in early intervention programs have been present for over 40 years (Hill, 1982).
- DHH adults serve as essential partners in early education by contributing lived experience, cultural knowledge, and visual language expertise that hearing professionals cannot replicate (Bourne-Firl, 2016; JCIH, 2022).
- Collaboration with DHH adults in early intervention strengthens culturally responsive practice and aligns services with both linguistic and identity-based developmental needs (Gale, 2021; JCIH, 2022).
- Structured Deaf Mentor Programs provide families with in-home ASL modeling, exposure to Deaf culture, and individualized support that complements traditional medical and audiological services (Gale, 2021; Hamilton & Clark, 2020; JCIH, 2022).
- Families participating in Deaf Mentor Programs report increased parental confidence, improved communication competence, and enhanced understanding of Deaf identity (Hamilton & Clark, 2020; Watkins et al., 1998).
- A recent scoping review indicates that Deaf role models support socio-linguistic growth, cultural identity development, and positive self-concept for Deaf children in hearing families, while also identifying the need for additional longitudinal research (Joy et al., 2024).
- National EHDI guidance recommends meaningful access to DHH adults who can provide mentorship, culturally sensitive guidance, and language modeling to promote long-term developmental outcomes; however, meaningful integration of DHH adults is still emerging across many states (JCIH, 2022).
- North Dakota recently implemented a Deaf mentor program within its early intervention program for families of DHH children.
- The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore characteristics of this fledgling program through perceptions of families, Deaf mentors and administrators as a foundation for program evaluation.



### Participants & Method

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with:
  - 3 families receiving Deaf mentorship as part of their early intervention services.
  - 2 SKI\*HI Trained Deaf mentors working for the program
  - 2 early intervention program administrators
- Interviews took place in person and via Zoom with ASL interpretation as appropriate.
- Creswell's Six Steps (2018) for qualitative analysis.
- Deductive coding procedure based on JCIH 2013 Goals 3, 3a and 11.
- Triangulation among 3 participant groups

### Theoretical Framework



### Discussion

- ❑ These findings have implications for families of newly identified DHH children, Deaf mentors and early intervention providers, TODHH, school administrators, state EHDI leadership, and ECSE policymakers.
- ❑ Understanding how Deaf mentor programs operate and their impact across family, practitioner, and system levels is critical as states seek to strengthen early intervention services in a time of constrained resources.
- ❑ Findings reinforce early and accessible and Deaf adult mentorship as protective factors against language deprivation and as catalysts for parent empowerment, hope-building, and culturally responsive support.
- ❑ Findings strengthen advocacy for structured, evidence-informed Deaf mentor practices and highlight the importance of collaboration across early intervention systems.
- ❑ At the program level, results support sustainable funding, structured service models, and systematic outcome data collection. At the systems level, they underscore the need for intentional integration of Deaf mentors within EI infrastructure and alignment with EHDI priorities.
- ❑ Future research should expand the sample, track measurable language and family outcomes longitudinally, and disseminate findings to EHDI leadership to support broader policy and systems integration.

### Primary Findings

#### Themes Shared Across all Participant Groups

- ✓ Early access to Deaf mentor
- ✓ ASL language modeling
- ✓ Lived experience as expertise
- ✓ Cultural mediation
- ✓ Hope-building
- ✓ Parent empowerment
- ✓ Family-centered neutrality
- ✓ Child language development
- ✓ Structural barriers

#### Themes with Complementary Evidence

- ✓ Workforce sustainability (mentors + administrators)
- ✓ System-level infrastructure (primarily administrators)



"There's a whole other world out there that we just didn't know about... it's all going to be OK."

