

# Ways of knowing among Ugandan deaf children

Alexandra Tomkins, PhD Candidate, shares an insight into her film project work in Uganda

Starting from the premise that deaf people have excellent visual perception, my current research uses film, photography, and other visual arts to investigate how deaf children in Uganda acquire knowledge. The film shared with you here, 'Deafness is not ignorance'\*, is one of three films produced for Framing Deafness (2018), a community film project in which the children scripted, filmed, and performed their own shared experiences of learning sign language (including barriers to learning sign language), through a series of film, photography, storytelling and drama workshops. The project took place at Wakiso Secondary School for the Deaf, one of Uganda's two specialist secondary schools for the deaf. Most school-attending deaf children in Uganda attend mainstream schools, learn alongside hearing children, and are taught by non-signing teachers. However, at Wakiso, sign language is encouraged and, while many of the hearing teachers learn sign language on the job, my being a non-signer raised eyebrows – I was certainly the odd one out.



The films were entirely child-led, with the children deciding the scenes, costumes, script and titles of each film. There was a role for everyone, with some children choosing to act, others to design the scenes, and others to film and direct. The film-making process raised interesting questions about knowledge acquisition among deaf Ugandan children, by providing a material perspective into how they perceive, interpret and understand the world around them. For example, it led to the development of a deaf-centred

film grammar that revealed key insights into the children's lifeworlds: when the hand becomes the locus of meaning and language, new ways of thinking, framing and representing the world are elicited through visual media. This led to an unanticipated challenge for me during editing: while conventional film editing often overlays image over voice, this is not possible in the same way with sign language, and I was adamant that I did not want to include a voice dub or music.





the family context. In Uganda, this contributes to the local perception of deaf children as *kasiru* ('stupid') which means that deaf children's education is often seen as futile and so is rarely prioritised.

In 1995 Ugandan Sign Language was recognised as a national language, equal in law to Uganda's 42 other languages. However, despite this recognition, there is a huge disparity between certain pedagogical approaches and deaf children's embodied, and profoundly visual, orientation to the world. While this is not isolated to Uganda, its position as a low-income country leads to an overall lack of resources and funding for sign language training for Teachers of the Deaf, meaning that deaf children are primarily taught in English and Luganda by hearing teachers who are not fluent in sign language. This is

exacerbated by the fact that deaf schools are generally located in urban areas, and the majority of the population (around 75%) lives rurally. As a result, many deaf children in Uganda go their whole lives without learning sign language or meeting other deaf children, and for those deaf children who do attend school, the emphasis is mostly on verbal communication. These factors contribute to delayed language acquisition among many deaf children, detrimentally affecting their cognitive development, meaning that many are unable to reach their full potential in terms of learning and understanding.

Through the story of one deaf girl, the film 'Deafness is not ignorance' explores the positive impact sign language acquisition has on the social relations and educational opportunities of deaf Ugandan youth. The film focuses on the changing relationships within a deaf-hearing family, and sign language's potential to create and sustain

While there are no firm statistics to measure the deaf population in Uganda or even Sub-Saharan Africa, the World Health Organisation estimates that 80% of deaf people are in low and middle-income countries in the global south, partly due to low access to medical treatment for diseases that can cause deafness. This includes a significant number of deaf children who are politically, economically, geographically and educationally marginalised. Uganda has a median age of 15.8 and a fertility rate of 4.78 compared to the world average of 2.4 (World Population Review 2020), meaning that a vast proportion of the population is composed of dependents whose families cannot afford schooling. Furthermore, a lack of specialist deaf schools throughout sub-Saharan Africa results in the social and linguistic isolation of many deaf children, compounded by the fact that around 95% have hearing parents and so do not develop language in





empathy, understanding, identity, sociality and communal experience among deaf young people and within their communities. Specifically, the film addresses social inequality and upends typical power dynamics (adult-child/hearing-deaf) as the children represent their lived experiences through creative mediums (visual media and play) that align with their visual and embodied way of being and communicating (sign language). Throughout the film, the children also demonstrate an awareness of the dominant discourse, while simultaneously resisting it, by caricaturing hearing people.

My role was to teach the children how to film, provide guidance in terms of composition and narrative, conduct sound recording, and edit the films in a way that represented the children's perspectives. I was keen to create an environment where the children felt safe and comfortable to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences, so it was decided that anything shared inside the workshops remained confidential. On the ground, the project was run by myself, two Ugandan project facilitators, and a professional sign language interpreter: Nalwolga Hanifah, Wabwire Denis and Ssenyomo Yusuf. Except for myself, the whole team was fluent in Ugandan Sign Language (USL). However, while Denis, Yusuf and Hanifah were excellent interpreters and facilitators, and the children were fantastic sign language teachers, I definitely missed direct interaction and conversation with the children that knowing USL would have enabled. In some ways, being the outsider among a group of fluent signers gave me a perspective on what it's like to have to constantly go through an interpreter on a daily basis, which is the reality for most of these children outside the school environment. However, as a result of this experience, I have been learning BSL this year and will be participating in an intensive USL course in 2021 before undertaking my next project.

'Framing Deafness' prompted questions for further research that I hope to explore during my PhD (2020-2024), building on my previous research (2015, 2018) which explored how sign language acquisition impacted the lives of deaf Ugandan youth. Taking a child-centred and deaf-centred approach, I will investigate what visual mediums (film, photography, art, drawing, drama) can reveal about how deaf Ugandan children come to know and understand the world around them. What can an attention to deaf ways of knowing bring to pedagogy? How can we draw on deaf ways of knowing to develop an inclusive educational approach, in which all deaf children can reach their full capacity and potential?

In 2021–2022 I'll be undertaking this research in Uganda with different schools and organisations for the deaf. If you are working in this area and would like to talk to me more about it, I would love to hear from you.

\* *This film title was chosen by the young people participating in this project.*



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### Project links mentioned in article

Framing Deafness Project:

<http://projects.alc.manchester.ac.uk/cross-language-dynamics/925-2/>

'Deafness is not Ignorance' Film:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqZlfX7\\_Mbk&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqZlfX7_Mbk&feature=emb_title)

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