

Enhancing resilience among deaf youth in South Africa

Alexandra Tomkins explains the impact made by the Deaf Camera South Africa project

How do deaf children, linguistically and educationally marginalised from society, learn about safety? How can we draw on deaf children's existing strengths to develop safeguarding learning resources with, and for, deaf young people? Deaf Camera South Africa is a multidisciplinary international research project led by the University of Witwatersrand (South Africa) and the University of Manchester (UK), supported by the UK's Arts Humanities Research Council, the Medical Research Council and the Global Challenges Research Fund. Bringing visual anthropology, social research and deaf studies together, the project uses community-based film methods to explore issues of vulnerability and resilience among deaf youth in South Africa. Deaf Cam's key aim is to positively shift social attitudes towards deaf people, while also building life-skills among the deaf youth involved (including film and photography techniques, social skills, and critical thinking):

Deaf Cam South Africa is a project that seeks to empower deaf young people with camera skills so that they can record their everyday lives, their families, their communities, and share them with the world.

(Nenio Mbazima, Filmmaker, University of Witwatersrand)

Worldwide, deaf young people face discrimination and exclusion from society, which vastly decreases their life chances and makes them particularly vulnerable. While a global issue, this is particularly prevalent in low and middle income countries (including South Africa). Most significantly, deaf children often lack adequate opportunities to acquire language, build meaningful relationships, receive specialised health care and receive equal education. Yet, at the same time, these challenges also mean that deaf young people are already extremely resilient. In recognition of this, the project aimed to enhance deaf young people's existing resilience by starting from a key strength of deaf people – the visual:

Resilience is about bouncing back in the face of adversity. Deaf young people face very particular challenges in achieving their potential and becoming full citizens. As visual people, they also have unique resources on which to draw. Through the use of community-based film methods, this project tunes in to those latent strengths as visual learners with the capacity to develop new resiliences given the right opportunities. The work is pioneering.

(Professors Alys Young and Andrew Irving, University of Manchester)

Through a series of workshops using film and photography, we worked with deaf young people in

Johannesburg and Durban to develop media resources to enhance resilience and promote awareness about vulnerability and safeguarding. In total, the project worked with six deaf schools between 2017–2018, two in Gauteng and four in KwaZulu-Natal over two-month and one-month periods. A total of 72 children and young people participated, ranging in age from 8 to 22 years old.

In 2018, I joined Phase 2 of the project which looked specifically at 'Keeping Safe'. A key element of this related to emotional literacy: since 95% of deaf children grow up in hearing households, many deaf young people experience difficulties understanding and interpreting emotions. Since most hearing parents do not know sign language, the language barrier means many deaf children cannot clearly articulate how they are feeling, or what has happened, to their parents and other hearing people. Correspondingly, hearing people often cannot understand or communicate effectively with their deaf children. This can be confusing and upsetting for deaf children, as well as making them extremely vulnerable to abuse. In response to this issue, one workshop asked the children to photograph a series of emotions, thereby materially representing the children's understanding of 'scared', 'happy' and 'frustrated', for example. Through a peer review process, the children then presented and interpreted the meaning of their own and each other's photos, and gave feedback to each other on lighting, composition and framing. Building from this exercise, the children were then invited to film a short narrative sequence which portrayed an emotion developing and changing over time. Through this process, the children further developed Theory of Mind and social skills as they developed their understandings of emotions, while also building technical skills in visual media. You can see some of the young people's visual media at:

www.deafcamsa.net These photos and films were later exhibited at the Children's Museum of the Arts (New York) and Kwazulu Natal Society of the Arts (Durban), which the children attended and filmed.¹

Following this project, EyeBuzz was launched at the University of Witwatersrand. Generated through partnership with South African schools and developed through Deaf Camera South Africa: EyeBuzz aims to "provide a forum for understanding issues of immediate and wider relevance, and a platform for discussing, understanding and engaging with your wider community" (Eyebuzz Website 2020). Continuing to engage deaf young people in the filmmaking process, the Eyebuzz team has been working hard throughout 2020

to develop Covid-19 information videos for the South African deaf community.² Since public information about Covid-19 in sign language is scarce, these videos are particularly important for the health and wellbeing of deaf people throughout South Africa. To find out more about this, you can check out the EyeBuzz website <https://www.wits.ac.za/centre-for-deaf-studies/eyebuzz/> or Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/EyeBuzzSA/>

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References

- 1 Deaf Lifeworlds Exhibition: <https://youtu.be/ghKYxpuWpBE> and <https://youtu.be/uflGcRPuxi0>
- 2 Coronavirus information for kids in SASL, by EyeBuzz: <https://youtu.be/jaV39waZj9E>



Alexandra Tomkins is a PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology with Visual Media at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, University of Manchester. She participated in Deaf Camera South Africa as a research assistant and workshop facilitator in 2018. Her current research combines visual media and play to investigate how deaf children in Uganda come to know and understand the world (2019–2023).

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- BATOD has an expectation for the overseas special member to submit an annual magazine article or information for a blog post. BATOD encourages the overseas special member to be the author/co-author of the article submitted.
- The BATOD overseas special member must have internet access in order to access the online resources which may be of interest.
- Online members can access the five magazine editions/year in the electronic version. The BATOD magazine frequently features articles about deaf education from across the world. Thus, our special overseas members can share with and learn from UK and other worldwide professional peers in deaf and deaf related education.

BATOD

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