

# EFFECTS OF A DEAF ROLE MODELS DOCUMENTARY FILM ON ATTITUDES OF PARENTS TOWARDS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES OF THEIR CHILDREN: A CASE OF KENYA

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### **Abstract**

Educating deaf and hard of hearing children is largely hampered by attitudes of parents who believe that investing in the children has almost zero returns. In 2013, the Kenya Society for Deaf Children reported that out of 200,000 deaf children, 8,000 were in school. A study by Kiaritha (2011) found that deaf students attending universities in Kenya make up 7.4% compared to 15.4% visually impaired and 77.2% physically handicapped. These findings indicate that parents of deaf and hard of hearing and the society generally have low expectations of deaf children regarding their educational potentials and career choices. This results in deaf students being enrolled in vocational schools after they complete primary education.

### **Purpose**

Two studies sought to determine whether the use of a deaf role models film has influence on parents' initial reactions and their regarding educational opportunities and career aspirations and choices for their children.

### **Methods**

A documentary film of Kenya Deaf Models produced by a consortium of NGOs working with deaf persons in Kenya and the Netherlands was shown to both parents and deaf youths in primary, secondary, and technical training institutions. Focus group discussions, interviews and a questionnaire were used to determine the impact of film on attitudes of parents and their children regarding educational opportunities and career choices.

### **Results**

Results of the studies and the documentary film itself will be presented at the conference.

## Introduction

According to the World Health Organization (2012), there are 360,000,000 persons with disabling hearing loss in the world, 9% or 36,800,000 of them living in sub-Saharan Africa. This number includes 6,800,000 children between 0-14 years old (WHO, 2012) while those between 15-65 years make up 30,000,000 persons. The African Union (2013) states that youth between 15 and 24 years constitute 35% of the African population. An extraction of this percentage means there are 10,300,000 youths with hearing loss in Africa. Together with the children below 14, the population of children and youth needing education in the sub-Saharan Africa therefore stands at 17,300,000.

Barriers to the provision of education to persons with disabilities in Africa have been associated with disability (Ndurumo, 1993) where stigma and belief in witchcraft among some communities is very strong. For instance, the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2007) conducted a qualitative study of attitudes of communities in Kenya. The study revealed that regions of Nyanza, Western, Eastern, Coast and Rift Valley perceive disability as a curse and disgrace to the family. Some communities do not even mention names of children with disabilities or talk about them, and where they do, are referred in derogatory terms as if they were objects such as "that one sitting on the wheelchair." Other findings by the survey showed that (1) persons with disabilities are perceived a burden who cannot do anything on their own; (2) families with persons with disabilities are accused of witchcraft and possessing genes that transmit disability; (3) mothers with children with disabilities are perceived to have conceived them by outsiders or strangers and disability is perceived as a punishment; (4) Some children with disabilities are taken to children's homes or special schools as a way of keeping them out of sight or decreasing the stigma and burden purported to be imposed on the family. Since disability is associated with poverty, for children with disabilities whose families live in slums perceive disability as an additional burden to the family and community.

To aggravate the matter, some communities view disability as a family problem rather than as a community problem. Therefore, few communities recognize and identify with persons with disabilities and their families are left to shoulder economic burdens such as provision of special education and assistive devices (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The inability of the family to accept their children with disability makes the situation worse because communities treat persons with disabilities according to how families perceive their children. Thus there is a trickle-down effect where attitudes towards persons with disabilities are shaped at the micro level, thus affecting perception of persons with disabilities. Indeed, the traditional term for persons with disabilities was *wasiojiweza* which translates to "those incapable of doing anything." This has significant effect on education of deaf children and perception of their abilities. For instance, the Kenya Society for Deaf Children (2013) reported that out of 200,000 deaf children needing education only 8,000 were in school, while the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2007) found that only 2% of persons with disabilities have university education. In relation to deaf students, Kiaritha (2011) reported that deaf students attending universities in Kenya make up 7.4% compared to 15.4% for the visually impaired and 77.2% for the physically handicapped. These findings indicate that parents of deaf and hard of hearing and the society generally have low expectations of deaf children regarding their educational potentials and career choices. This in turn makes parents less involved in education of their children (Njue, 2014).

In spite of the negative attitudes of the community, the Government of Kenya has since Kenya became independent in 1963 recognized education as a basic human right (Ministry of Education, 2008) and the Kenya's Vision 2030 which is an economic development barometer recognizes education as "one of the cornerstones of social pillar" necessary to transform Kenya into a "globally competitive and prosperous country with a high quality of life by 2030" (Vision 2030, 2011).

In relation to special education, the government's commitment has been manifested through its inclusion in all national educational reform papers, beginning with the Ominde Commission in 1964. The Persons with Disabilities Act 2003 mandates provision of education to persons with disabilities, while Article 54 of the Constitution of Kenya states that persons with disabilities access to education. Article 7(3) advocates promotion, development, research and use of Kenyan Sign Language, while Article 120 confers KSL as one of the three official languages of the Parliament. The Kenya's Basic Education Act 2013 details the promotion of special needs education under Part VI. Globally, Kenya ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities on May 19, 2008 (DeafAid, 2013).

### **Statement of the Problem**

In spite the government's commitment to education of learners with special educational needs, enrolment of minorities and persons with disability in schools is below the national average (UWEZO Kenya, 2011). Furthermore, parents of children with disabilities have not fully embraced the importance of education of their deaf children. It is because of this that the first East African Conference on Deaf Education organized by Kentalis in 2012 in Kampala proposed the development of a documentary about Deaf Role Models to create awareness among parents and stakeholders in education.

### **Purpose of the Studies**

The quantitative and qualitative studies were to evaluate whether the documentary is an effective tool for awareness raising and, in the long run, attitudinal change of parents. It did not focus on the methodological question of using film as a means, but on the issue of portraying successful role models to parents. The research question was: Do Deaf role models as portrayed in the documentary have a significant effect in changing attitudes of parents towards educational opportunities and career choices. One limitation of the study is related to timing. The responses are given immediately after watching the film. However, as the project was implemented in 2014, there is no long-term attitudinal change data available yet. In that sense, the study needs to be considered as a first step, and the results need to be considered preliminary.

### **Significance of the studies**

It is anticipated that, firstly, the findings of the quantitative study will contribute to the limited anthropological research on attitudes of parents towards education in a developing country, specifically related to disability. Secondly, the findings of both studies can inform professionals working in education and/or social service provision on the efficacy of using deaf role models in changing parents' attitudes towards their children. Those deaf role models can be also deaf teachers in schools. In that sense, if taken up seriously, the implications could directly impact on the learning environment of the children in the local schools as well as the attitude of the local community towards deaf citizens among them. Third, the findings can have the potential to empower organisations on how to use deaf role model films as tools to lobby for the recognition of the right to education of deaf persons in developing countries. Finally, lessons learned from the Kenyan setting can stimulate future Deaf role model documentaries to be developed in other countries.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of the quantitative study were to:

1. Determine the parents' knowledge about deafness in general and their attitudes towards their children's educational opportunities and career options prior to viewing the deaf role models film.
2. Determine whether the deaf role models film exerted any significant attitudinal changes in parents after viewing the film.
3. Determine who of the deaf role model(s) parents significantly identified with, and their potential impact on parents attitude.

The objectives of the qualitative study were to analyse initial attitude change along the following factors: (1) Encouragement, (2) Awareness, (3) Recognition and Emotions and (4) Questions.

## **Methods**

For the quantitative study a questionnaire was set up - in close cooperation with members of the Kenyan deaf community. Apart from basic information on the parents, other questions were (1) What did parents already know? (2) How did the documentary relate to parent's own beliefs and ideas? (3) What feelings were they confronted with? (4) How do they relate the information of the documentary to their own deaf children? (5) What aspect or which Deaf role model has made the biggest impression and why? ,Professionals working in various NGOs with parents of the deaf children, organized gatherings where the film was shown to parents who were at random invited. At the end of the event, after viewing the film, the questionnaires were filled. There was no filter used for questionnaire distribution, be it socio-economic background, educational background, or regional rural-urban diversification.

For the qualitative research, the documentary was shown to parents and deaf youths in primary, secondary, and technical training institutions. The film comprised of nine deaf role models who told their stories of challenges and successes when growing up. For the qualitative study, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion were used to gain in-depth insight and more profound personal information on specific topics with informants separately. This involved asking parents about their experiences with a deaf child from the time of pregnancy until present time. The interviews were conducted in English, Kiswahili, or Kikuyu with the assistance of an interpreter and did not use questionnaires.

## **Results**

**At the time of writing the paper, the results of the quantitative analysis are not yet known. They will be shared in the presentation of the paper during the conferene in July 2015.**

The results from the qualitative study described the impact of the documentary on parents and can be grouped into the following key terms: (1) Encouragement, (2) Awareness, (3) Recognition and Emotions and (4) Questions.

1. Encouragement. The first response of the majority of parents was words of encouragement because the film showed that their Deaf children are the same, just like the others. Parents felt more confident towards the future. Some parents felt strengthened too because in their hearts parent's had always believed in their Deaf child's capabilities despite what other told them.
2. Awareness. Although during the interviews parents stated that Deaf can do anything, during the focus groups it became clear that they had doubts too. Watching the

documentary made them aware that Deaf can drive cars, marry, have a good job and go to university. One mother's awareness became obvious when she stated that she was *"happy to see my son can reach the highest educational level. I did not think about that before. I can see the Deaf professor and think my son can become anything."*

3. Recognition and Emotions. In the documentary parents recognised their struggles and emotions as they went through the film. They exhibited feelings of discouragement, disappointment, shame. One parent stated that: *"We experience the same. Went through emotions and shock. How to answer questions of others? How will children play? Communicate?"* One father expressed emotions of joy but also disappointment about the lost time when he narrated how he was misinformed by health care institution: *"I was told the child must be 7 years before I can bring it to school. That time I was cheated, I kept mine home for 7 years. I should have taken him within 2 years."*
4. Questions. The documentary also raised many questions like: *"We don't know sign language...we don't know where to go..."* Other questions were on how to get the best support for child, where to find good schools or churches for the deaf, how to pay school fees, and whether it would be possible to get a second opinion on the hearing loss.

### **Discussion**

From the responses, we note that the documentary has a positive impact on parents. Initially parents perceived deafness as a disability or a disease due to lack of information on deafness, the meaning of sign language and where to learn it, and the available educational options. This indicates that when parents are fully informed about the capabilities and possibilities for their Deaf children and appropriate career paths, they tend to value of education for their Deaf children. It remains to be seen whether the information from the questionnaire survey subscribe to these outcomes of the interviews with parents.

### **Implication of Findings**

Parents of deaf children need tangible information about deafness, sign language, education and career opportunities. The Deaf Role Models documentary is seen as an effective tool for raising awareness of parents as it provides them with information and encourages them when they see Deaf persons who have surmounted challenges in their educational career and became successful active self sustaining members of society. It proves the point that high level academic achievement is possible for a deaf child, and therefore increases the confidence of parents, and through them the self-confidence of the deaf child. Accurate information also gives parent's hope and they will be able to be more inquisitive, critical, and become independent thinkers thus making informed decisions for the benefit of their children. These findings are contrary to the perception in certain African countries which links deafness to witchcraft, inability of the father to pay dowry for his wife, or on poor relationship with a deceased relative (Ndurumo, 1993). Visibility of and exchange with successful deaf persons in society, be it via a documentary film, invitation of deaf professionals in talk shows or employment of deaf persons in schools and social service offices can change attitudes and thereby be one important building block in the improvement of the education of the deaf child.

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