

Isenberg, A., & Tuzen, S. (2011). *A Life Without Words*. [Motion Picture]. United States, DER Documentary.

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A Life Without Words, directed by Adam Isenberg and Senem Tuzen, is a documentary film about three deaf siblings aged 14-28 from rural Nicaragua, and their exposure to local sign language for the first time in their lives. The film contends with the issues of disability, gender, and poverty when addressing perceptions of disability, family relationships, and access to communication and education. The work presents the lives of deaf siblings and their hearing family before their meeting with a sign language teacher. The communication within the family is basic, consisting of gestures and invented signals. The deaf children do physical work as a way of contributing to the family to pass their day. In the latter half of the film, a deaf teacher teaches the family sign language, and contends with their varied reactions.

At first glance, it may seem that before the introduction of sign language instruction the film subjects entirely lacked language. However, as is evident but not explicitly addressed in the film, there is a local and unique sign language that the siblings use to communicate among themselves and with their family members. Researchers have found that there are “homesign” (a gestural communication system developed and used among the members of one family, see Goldin-Meadow, 2003) and village sign languages (see Aronoff et al., 2008; Padden et al., 2010; Sandler et al., 2005), which have emerged within communities that include deaf persons who have not attended school or acquired formal sign or spoken language instruction.

The film explores the ways in which religious and cultural values as well as economic production capacity contribute to the social construction of disability. Mike Oliver (1990) claimed that the type of society in which the disabled person lives has a profound effect on how

her disability is experienced and structured. Oliver's analysis of the social construction of disability is based on two concepts: the mode of production and the central core values that are present within any given society. The first concept refers to a person's capacity for productivity and economic output; and the second term refers to the values basic to a society, based on a religion, science, or medicine. In a society where a deaf person has economic value to the family and the community, she would not be perceived as a disabled person, unless there are also social or religious values that affect a person's social location.

Nora Ellen Groce (1985) described the 19th century-era town of Martha's Vineyard—here there was a high percentage of deaf people and all the hearing residents also knew the local sign language—as a utopia, an open and equitable community where deaf members were incorporated into the social, economic, and even religious fabric, and were not perceived as disabled. Such communities have also been observed nowadays in various places such as Israel (Kisch, 2007), Thailand (Nonaka, 2004), and Ghana (Kusters, 2012). These studies found common characteristics: most communities living in these areas were engaged in agricultural work or physical labour. Hearing and deaf people equally engaged in these labours, but the communities did not quite achieve utopia, in that there were differences in education between the deaf and the hearing that allowed hearing residents to engage in work outside the village. Another marked difference between deaf and hearing members in these communities was in relation to social status as spouse or partner, especially among deaf women (Zeshan, 2012).

The subjects of *A Life Without Words* are located within the broader context of the village. The various activities in the community such as work, leisure, and religious activities are seen in the film. It was interesting to see how the deaf characters are described by their hearing family members. The deaf siblings are engaged in physical labour and sharing the burdens of the

family. There may be value in further exploring the wider context of the village, such as its demographic characteristics, the distance of the village from the city, what the attitudes on deafness may be, and the social dimension of the deaf community.

Most interesting about the film were the meetings between the teacher and three students. At one meeting the teacher pointed out to them that they are “the same thing,” meaning they have one thing in common—their deafness. But this message was encountered with scepticism. Deaf communities around the world emphasize their unique cultural characteristics, such as hearing loss and the use of sign language, so that other features are irrelevant in belonging. On the other hand, in her anthropological research among deaf persons in Adamorobe Ghana, Annelies Kusters (2012) recounted that her skin colour received more attention than her deafness. Thus, the film raised an important point: a certain disability may not always be sufficient to create identification by others with the same disability.

In sum, this is a colourful film, interesting to watch, and comprehensive in its coverage of an unusual, often overlooked subject. *A Life Without Words* introduces its audience to rural village life in what is understood to be an impoverished country, describing the complex relationships between the characters in the film, and the ways sign language and deaf persons are perceived in this community. The film is recommended for those who are interested in the connection between disability, deafness, gender, and poverty.

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