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## The Right to Pursue Happiness - Life and Education of Hearing Impaired People in Brazil

### Summary about the documentary "Silence Crossing"

**Carla Rocha Pereira**

Anthropologist  
carlaperei@gmail.com

DOI:10.3395/reciis.v4i5.429en

#### Synopsis

The theme is the relationship of hearing impaired people with the "listeners" world. The documentary uses the testimonial of several people afflicted by this condition and their families, to show the daily challenges they have to face, such as during school time, playing soccer or even taking part in a dance class. The journalist follows up outstanding characters, such as a man who interprets the National Anthem using signs language.

After recording a series of documentaries whose main subject is about several types of crossings (the darkness, life, time, pain and air)<sup>1</sup>, the documentarist Dorrit Harazim leads the audience of the *Silence Crossing* documentary to an overview about the debate of two big sides of learning and the life of hearing impaired people in Brazil: the world of "speaking people" versus the world of "signaling people".

The "speaking people" learned how to do lip reading and speak phonetically. The ones who communicate through signals are part of an universe of hearing impaired people who use LIBRAS (Brazilian Signal Language - Linguagem Brasileira de Sinais) to express themselves. The choices of belonging to a tendency or another happens during infancy, by the parents' preferences of how to educate their hearing impaired children, but when they grow up to be adults, they can determine the manner how they feel comfortable

#### Cast and crew credits

Direction and screenplay: Dorrit Harazim

Duration: 58 minutes

Producer: VideoFilmes

Production year: 2004

to communicate, according to testimonies exhibited on the documentary.

There is a profusion of life stories: around 40 people were interviewed, creating a wide discussion about the topic and showing several points of view, from hearing impaired people and their families who, inclusive, compose a fundamental part of the documentary. The family, mainly the mother figure, has a decisive role on the decision-making about the future education of the child. Will he be taken to a school that teaches LIBRAS? Will she try to "oralize" the child so that he/she could be integrated to a school? If possible, will she place some type of auditory device so that the child has the possibility of listening and speaking? The choices happen beyond possibilities and surpass family or cultural preferences, but also because of financial issues.

Inside this range of characters on the video, we can divide them into four groups: 1 - The ones who did a cochlear implant<sup>2</sup> (type of device which stays coupled on the external superior side of the ear); 2 - Listener child and hearing impaired parents; 3 - "Oralized" group; and 4 - "Signaling" group ("manualists").

On the first group we see the anguish of a "listener" couple, that is, without listening problems, with the birth of their first son, who is hearing impaired. We can see the delay on the diagnostic, the guilty feeling for the child being born hearing impaired, the seek for information and specialized doctors and the decision making for the cochlear implant, successfully performed. With the birth of the second daughter, the decision for the implant was taken again, even with the mother's desire to know more about the LIBRAS learning method.

The second case about the cochlear implant is of sixteen-year-old teenager called R., who became hearing impaired when she was 6 years old, when she had the mumps. The mother's testimonial about the reaction of the hearing impaired daughter after the disease, when she already knew how to speak, has caused a rebellion on the child, mainly when she realized people were talking and she couldn't listen to them. Since the implant was placed at that same year, at 16 years old has a normal life as any other teenager of her age, listening, speaking, and having a great social interaction.

But in the second group we see a single case of a woman, child of hearing impaired parents, uncles and grandparents. T. first learned LIBRAS, the language the parents have taught her to be able to communicate with their daughter, and she considers this as her first language. Only when she was enrolled at school, she learned how to speak, being known as "the dumbs' daughter". Since she was a child, she has been the connection of her parents to the world by solving problems, such as her participation on negotiating the purchase of the family's apartment when she was 10. When we asked the father if he would like a hearing impaired or "listener" grandchild, his answer was that he would like a hearing impaired grandchild so he could pass his leadership on the community, and she answers that if she had a hearing impaired child, she wouldn't know on which school to enroll him.

In the "oralized" group, we have the initial and final scenes of the video, showing children being taught how to listen and repeat some sounds and words, indicating the beginning of the phonetically speaking learning method. Three stories are central: P. (hearing impaired due to a medical mistake), A. (hearing impaired due to a meningitis sequela) and E. (born

hearing impaired). P. and E.'s mothers are similar about the concern of their children to be able to interact in the "listeners" world. They both keep their choices, of having oralized their children, who support their mother's speech not to raise any conflicts, since P. has started to date a hearing impaired girl whose mother shows the concern about having hearing impaired grandchildren, making it clear she does not want this to happen.

E. thinks having a hearing impaired child would be difficult, but his mother intervenes saying the same work done with him would be performed again, and there's still time for him to learn LIBRAS, but the son replies that it's already too late and that he doesn't know if he would be happier if he had learned it. E.'s mother, a psychologist from Centro de Pesquisas Audiológicas da Universidade de São Paulo - Campus Bauru (Center for Audiological Researches at University of São Paulo - Bauru Campus), states clearly, "as a mother", that children that can receive the cochlear implant or that can be "oralized" should not learn LIBRAS "because they'll be happier", but as a professional, she is learning how to be able to communicate better with hearing impaired people at University.

An important question is raised by this documentary: for a hearing impaired person, how happy a life would be? Expressing the communication through speaking with "listeners", or being happy would be socially interacting with similar people, "manualists" hearing impaired people, not "oralized"? Happiness is a discovery whose answer will depend on the hearing impaired person's own desires and expectations. However, each family raises its ideal of happiness for their hearing impaired children, mainly among "listener" parents. They expect their children to be able to socialize to be part of a world where the hearing and speaking capacity is a synonym of a full and happy life.

With a more moderate speech, A.'s mother talks about the abilities of her son on social interaction as a child, such as in sports, but that she has noticed changes in his behavior when he was 14. Invitations for birthday parties at nightclubs were not attractive, since he would be in a dark environment, where he wouldn't be able to lip read and wouldn't be able to dance. A. started to attend the hearing impaired community, has learned LIBRAS and started to date a hearing impaired girl. For him, "speaking" is a sacrifice, having conscience about what he's going to say and with his mouth joint (among other concerns), and the LIBRAS learning was liberating, and that he feels "loosen". Through that, he has felt connected to a group of equals, finding a way to communicate easily and without suffering. His mother saw the happiness of her son and her anguish for his future has faded. An important topic

was approached by his mother: the re-acceptation of her son after the deafness diagnostic as a disease consequence. For A.'s mother, it's important that her son is happy, being in the world of "oralized or in the world of "signaling people".

On the crossing of these two worlds are the brothers V. (INES student - National Institute for the Hearing Impaired - Instituto Nacional na Educação de Surdos) and Á. Both were forced to be "oralized" by their mother, with phonoaudiologists and teachers smacking their hands if they tried to make some type of signal. When adults, they learned LIBRAS and now express themselves using that language, as well as speaking<sup>3</sup>. What matters, according to Á, is the feeling they understand and express. For V., "the hearing impaired ear is the silence where noise cannot enter".

The symbol of the "signaling people" world is INES, an institution located in Rio de Janeiro, created in 1857. It has as principle the bilingual study, Portuguese and LIBRAS, also offering several workshops, such as the ones highlighted on the documentary when the students attend a class where they learn how to feel, through a sound box, the rhythm of a song. At classrooms, teachers and students communicate through LIBRAS and write in Portuguese, but some teachers need another person to translate everything that is being taught. We see among the students a huge interaction where visual communication is a part of it.

For the ones who communicate using LIBRAS, we have some characters: S. (T's deaf father), S. (who didn't agree to participate on the documentary when the team arrived at her home with her mother), N. (an actor who gave up using his hearing device) and M. (who studied at INES, knows LIBRAS, but has difficulty in communicating with his father), all hearing impaired from birth.

The outstanding character in the group who communicates using LIBRAS on the documentary is N., graduated in Arts and Theater on the National School for the Deaf, in New York. We could say that, in his testimonial, we have the most involved speech, defending hearing impaired people who use LIBRAS for having their language, their identity and culture, distinguishing themselves from the other group, saying "oralized" hearing impaired people do not have their own identity. When asked about how he feels to be a hearing impaired person in Brazil, he made a comparison between Brazil and United States, saying that when he arrived in New York he saw American hearing impaired people "singing" the country's national anthem through signs and was overwhelmed, reminding that, in Brazil, when other people sang the anthem, he used to be quiet with his right hand on his chest. In the end of his interview, N. "sings" the Brazilian National Anthem through

signs, but using what he learned on theater to express the feeling of each word.

The deaf culture, for some authors, would be connected by the visual form of communication (signs language) and by the interaction among the ones who are part of this group, such as in Federations and Associations for Hearing Impaired People. We see, on the documentary, this interaction in Clube Alvorada, Headquarters of the Sports Federation for Hearing Impaired People of Rio de Janeiro, and also at INES, where the students use LIBRAS as a form of communication. We can notice that, in these two institutions, the hearing impaired people socialization is intense, forming a social network where they can interact and build friendships with equals. Deafness wouldn't be an abnormality or deficiency, but based on the linguistic difference, that is, on the way how they communicate among themselves. According to Diniz (2003), for the ones who defend the deaf culture what exists is a barrier between hearing impaired people and "listeners", delimited by audition, not justifying the "confinement of hearing impaired people to the social stigma of pathological or abnormal, being able to be medicated or healed".

On the documentary *Silence Crossing*, we can say that the hearing impaired community adopts the LIBRAS language as a form of communication and those "oralized", who in the video are middle class people, are not in the world of "listeners" nor feel they belong to this community. For Gesueli (2006), hearing impaired people who cannot identify themselves with their group, don't dominate the signs language and don't feel totally inserted inside the "listeners" universe, have a "fragmented identity", since their communication with the world "has always been marked with artificial exercises and practices (language transformed into codes)".

Beyond the controversy between these two worlds, the documentary makes us to reflect about the education of hearing impaired people in Brazil, and how the worlds of "oralized" and "signaling people" are distant, but, at the same time, can be approximated when there is a search for those who want to interact with the hearing impaired community, by learning LIBRAS and relating with their equals.

## Notes

1. The documentary *Silence Crossing* is part of a series of six documentaries by Dorrit Harazim: *Darkness Crossing*, which depicts three characters who spent their lives without knowing how to read and write; *Life Crossing*, depicting the life story of Dr. Zilda Ams, founder of Pastoral da Criança (Children's Pastoral); *Time Crossing*, about a convict who spent 27 of his 52 years of age as a prisoner at Carandiru; *Pain Crossing*, that follows the fight of two swimmers seeking the Olympic Index, and *Air Crossing*, showing the arduous training of the gymnasts for the Brazilian Olympic Team.

2. According to the documentary, the cochlear implant has the following process: "1 - an external microphone captures the sound; 2 - the sound is codified in electric signs; 3 - the signs are transmitted by antenna to electrodes implanted on the ear and 4 - the brain registers the information as "audition sensation".

3. On the testimonial of these two characters, the subtitling resource was used on the documentary.

## References

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