

# Educating children who are deaf in Uganda

**Bernadatte Namirembe** shares an insight into deaf education in Uganda

Aminah was 18 years old when I met her. She had completed primary school but her parents could not afford to take her to school any more. She was the fourth child in her family. She acquired deafness at 1.5 years caused by meningitis. Her parents initially managed to afford her education in a boarding school. But when her father lost his job, he could not afford to send her to a boarding school because of the high tuition fees. The mother lamented, "I wish Aminah could attend the schools in the neighbourhood just like her siblings because they are affordable. But teachers in these schools cannot teach her because they are not trained to teach students who are deaf."

I met Frank when he was 5 years old, the last born of a deaf couple. Although the parents knew that he had reached the school going age, they had no plans of taking him to school. All his siblings went to school except Frank and his elder brother Kasirye because they were disabled. Frank was congenitally deaf while his brother Kasirye (then 16 years old) was physically impaired due to polio. Taking Frank to school was a challenge because no school in the neighbourhood could enrol him because he is deaf. The parents could not afford to take him to a boarding school to study with other children who are deaf.

Many children who are deaf are like Aminah and Frank,



*Amina (in foreground)*

their parents cannot afford to take them to school because the schools in the neighbourhood, which are affordable, cannot accept them. Therefore, despite the introduction of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE) by the government of Uganda in 1997 and 2007 respectively, many parents of deaf children cannot afford to take them to school or sustain them in school. This is largely attributed to the fact that most schools cannot enrol children who are deaf. Hence, despite the paradigm shift from segregation to inclusion, most children who are deaf in Uganda are still educated in special schools. However, the financial implication of taking children who are deaf to boarding school has made many parents give up on educating them. The result of this is limited access to or to drop out of school for many deaf children in Uganda.

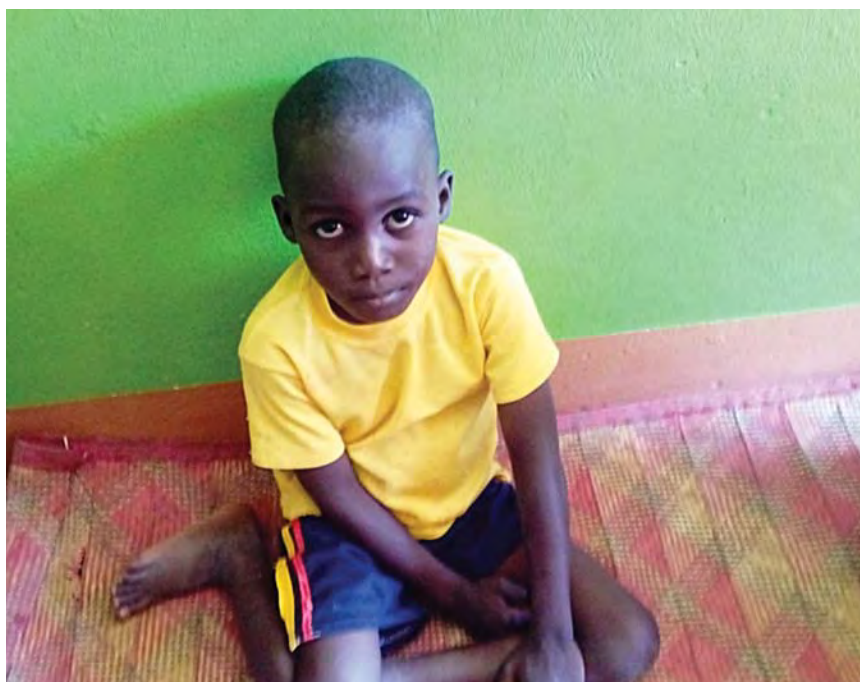
The attitude of many parents towards educating children who are deaf has not changed. Many still believe that the deaf cannot succeed in education like their hearing peers. This negative attitude is a result of a socially constructed belief that since the deaf cannot talk in a conventional way, they are therefore 'kasiru' (meaning 'stupid') as they are commonly referred to in many parts of Uganda. Schools have not helped to demystify this widely held belief because most deaf children taken to school end up failing and/or dropping out or, if they complete the education cycle, they end up with very poor scores to proceed to the next level. Therefore, many parents and teachers have concluded that the deaf cannot manage the academic orientation but maybe a vocational one. This may explain why it was established in the 2014 population census that only 30% of children with hearing loss who enrol in school complete primary education as children remain in the grade level, regardless of age, until they have achieved that grade. Therefore, only 3% of these enrol for secondary education, only 0.6% complete grade level senior four and 0.1% complete grade level senior six.

The failure of deaf children to succeed in school can be largely attributed to the limited number of trained teachers in the field of deafness. There are very few trained teachers of the deaf in primary schools in Uganda. The training of secondary school teachers has just been launched by one university. Most students who are deaf in primary and secondary schools are taught by regular teachers with little or no knowledge about deafness. Some universities and colleges have focused on training sign language interpreters as a way of mitigating the communication challenge students who are deaf are facing in schools. But the academic challenges of the students who are deaf in Uganda seem to go far beyond communication. When children who are deaf in Uganda are scrutinized closely, what is revealed is not homogeneity but diversity of needs impinging upon different social and environmental factors surrounding their upbringing.

The Ugandan system does not provide for early newborn screening and intervention services for congenital and pre-lingual deaf children, a situation which causes many deaf children from poor families (which is the biggest percentage of the populace) to grow to the age of 6–16 years without any form of communication. This kind of situation therefore requires an ecological approach to teaching focusing on individual learners' characteristics. Such learners do not only need sign language support but also many other support services which are lacking in Uganda.

It is pertinent to assert that most teachers that teach the children who are deaf in Uganda do not understand their needs and how they learn. These teachers do not know the language, socio-emotional, cognitive needs of the learners who are deaf and how to align their teaching methods and models to their needs. This does not only frustrate students but also many teachers who have ended up developing an attitude that deaf children cannot learn. The other problem may be a result of the way teachers are trained. Many trained teachers in Special Needs Education have confessed to the fact that they have limited skills in teaching learners who are deaf. This means that even the few trained teachers for deaf learners do not have the necessary skills needed to meet their educational needs. There is a need to find out whether this can be blamed on the training universities and colleges or on the teachers' attitudes. This problem is compounded by the Ministry of Public Service that posts and transfers teachers to schools. As some teachers gain some skills of teaching the deaf learners, they are transferred and new ones without any knowledge of deafness are posted and the process begins again.

It is also important to ponder on one of the measures that has been taken to improve the education of deaf children in Uganda, that of using Sign Language interpreters. Many Sign Language interpreters have been trained and posted to schools for the deaf both at primary and secondary school levels. However, despite this support, the deaf learners' performance has not improved. Many challenges have been identified by teachers when using Sign Language interpreters. One is the fact that teachers do not connect with their learners. The teacher and student relationship has a key influence on students' achievement. Additionally, the Sign Language interpreters do not know some subject specialist signs. One teacher teaching in one of the secondary schools for the deaf challenged me when he asked how a Sign Language interpreter who has no knowledge about a subject can interpret it. He argued that whereas the Sign Language interpreters are useful in other sectors like hospitals, courts of law and others, they may not be as useful in schools. Teachers need to directly communicate with their learners for better educational results.



Frank

Today, it's an era of inclusive education. The Ugandan Government has signed and ratified the UN Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008. Inclusive Education (IE) interpreted from a rights based perspective means equal rights to access, to quality education and learning. This does not only include the right of all children to attend a regular school, but also to access a 'child-centred pedagogy capable of meeting (their) needs'. This implies that teachers, and other professionals not only need to embrace diversity in the classes of the 21st century but also to be trained to meet the needs of each pupil. The implementation of inclusive education does require teachers that are trained to meet diverse learners' needs. The introduction of inclusive education in all schools may be advantageous as many children who are deaf will access education from their community which will enable many parents who cannot afford boarding fees to take their deaf children to school. ■



Bernadatte Namirembe  
is a lecturer at the  
Uganda Martyrs University.

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# Conference

**Journey of a Deaf Advisory ToD**  
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The cover features three photographs: a woman in a white jacket working with children at a table; a woman in a black dress pointing at a screen displaying a list of phrases; and a man in a dark jacket speaking to an audience in a room decorated with a palm tree and city skyline.

Let's Count!

- A: Good Evening
- B: Good Evening
- A: Name (one)
- B: Name (one)
- A: Name (one)
- B: Name (one)
- A: Well, (one), Bye
- B: Bye