

Against all odds

Malonje Phiri shares the story of Fanny Singini-Mvula, a Malawian Deaf Teacher of the Deaf

Malawi is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). As such, Malawi has to implement the UNCRPD, including Article 24, which stipulates that qualified competent sign language teachers should be employed in deaf education systems of participating states. Currently, Malawi has nine deaf teachers, including those teaching in schools for the deaf.

Fanny Singini-Mvula is one of Malawi's first deaf teachers. She was trained as a regular teacher at Loudon Teachers Training College before attending Montfort Special Needs Education College where she specialized in deaf education.

Since 1968, when the first school for the deaf was established in Malawi, deaf children have been taught by hearing teachers, and until the early 1990s, when the wind of sign language awareness shook the country, oralism was the only method used. Oralism employed in Malawi's deaf education system involved auditory training, using lip reading, speech, and mimicking mouth shapes.

Fanny's journey to become a certified teacher began at a school for the deaf. She was born hearing and she started primary school with hearing children in her home area. She became deaf at the age of eight while in Standard two.

Malawi has only seven schools for the deaf, with each one of them enrolling only 10–12 children annually. Unlike many Malawian deaf children who attend mainstream schools, Fanny was privileged to attend a school for the deaf where she received adequate support. In 2000, at the age of ten, she was enrolled at Embangweni School for the Deaf in northern Malawi.

Embangweni School for the Deaf was established in 1994 with ten deaf children. Since the mid 2000s a number of deaf learners have completed primary education and have been enrolled in vocational schools and various secondary schools. In 2021, the school enrolled 168 pupils: 93 boys and 75 girls.

Embangweni was established following concerns by Northern Region parents concerning their deaf children's educational future. At that time, Malawi had only two schools for the deaf: Southern Region's Maryview, established in 1968, and Central Region's Mua, established in 1984. Thus, prior to the establishment of Embangweni School for the Deaf, deaf children travelled to Mua and Maryview to

obtain education. Rampant poverty characterizing deaf children's families prevented most parents from sending children to these two distant schools.

The situation improved in the early 1990s. Michael Bernard Hara, a retired head teacher of Maryview School for the Deaf, based at his home village near Embangweni Trading Centre, urged the Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central African Presbyterian (CCAP) to set up a school for the deaf in Embangweni mission area. When the school was set up, Mr. Hara came out of retirement and joined its small teaching staff team.

During its initial years, the school offered pre-school level education to all its pupils regardless of their advanced age.

In the past, especially during the Maryview-Mua era, deaf children used to start schooling at the early age of four years. This early intervention strategy enabled deaf children to learn language skills and other important skills at an early stage. This helped minimize potential developmental delays. However, nowadays, the situation has changed due to resource constraints. A deaf Teacher of the Deaf, Lucy Siwinda, who teaches at Mua School for the Deaf, reported that *"due to resource constraints and inadequacy of the caregivers, it is difficult to handle young children. Therefore, they opt for grown-ups, particularly, six and eight-year-olds"*.

Education for the deaf in Malawi does not have a central office to coordinate and oversee the quality of teaching in schools for the deaf. However, from 1968 to the 1990s deaf education was managed by Dutch missionaries who were Malawi's official trainers of Teachers for the Deaf. In the 1990s, they handed over the leadership to Malawian deaf educationists whom they had trained. However, following the introduction of inclusive education and subsequent establishment of the Directorate of Special





Needs Education (DSNE) at the Ministry of Education, the control of deaf education was transferred to the DSNE. Ironically, the DSNE lacks personnel conversant with deaf education issues.

The lack of a vibrant national central office for deaf education in Malawi has led to limited interaction between schools for the deaf. This has, in turn, created a sense of isolation or silo design for deaf education programmes in the country. For example, deaf education service is not uniform across schools for the deaf. For instance, while preschool is a four-year programme at Maryview and Mua, it has been reduced to three years at Embangweni. *"The period of learning at preschool has been reduced from four years because of inadequate teaching staff"*, said Moverit Manda, head teacher of Embangweni School for the Deaf.

Upon joining Embangweni School for the Deaf, Fanny was assessed and it was established that she was profoundly deaf but she had a good level of intelligence and she could also speak with a reasonable voice. So, she was to start Standard five together with other adult deaf children. Despite the fact that she was profoundly deaf, she was, like any deaf child, given a hearing aid.

By the time Fanny arrived at Embangweni School for the Deaf, some children were already learning at Embangweni Primary School, a nearby mainstream school. During that time, mainstreaming deaf children was not something related to inclusive education, which some quarters fought for later. On the contrary, the reason was that schools for the deaf wanted these children to sit the Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education (PSLCE). The PSLCE is used by the Ministry of Education to select learners to all public secondary schools in Malawi. The problem was that then, Embangweni School for the Deaf was not a PSLCE examination centre.

In 2008, when Fanny was in Standard eight, Embangweni School for the Deaf was certified as a Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) examination centre, thereby

giving deaf children the chance to their examinations right at their school. Fanny, together with two other girls, was among Embangweni's first eight deaf PSLCE candidates. More importantly, she was the only candidate to be selected for secondary school. She was selected for Embangweni Community Day Secondary School (CDSS).

In December 1999 the Ministry of Education Science and Technology, with the help of the Danish Secondary School Support Programme (DSSP), embarked on a revolutionary policy that overnight, converted scores of secondary education institutions termed Distance Education Centres (DECs) into CDSSs. The policy intended to minimize what was considered to be open apartheid in the way government was providing secondary

education to children. Although the initiative improved secondary level education in Malawi, it created a new problem. On the one hand, a small proportion of intellectually fortunate children were privileged to be taught in relatively well-staffed conventional secondary schools with relatively comfortable provision of learning facilities such as boarding, libraries and laboratories. On the other hand, the majority of the same Malawian children were left to 'scavenge' for education in community-managed CDSSs, using improvised libraries and laboratory facilities or nothing at all.

These CDSSs are not suitable schools for deaf learners. Deaf learners need both adequate support from qualified



teachers and resources to enhance their education. Embangweni CDSS was unable to offer this support. After one school term therefore, Fanny was transferred to Robert Laws, a well-resourced boarding national secondary school close to Embangweni School for the Deaf. Although this transfer gave her close proximity to her Teachers of the Deaf, they, being primary school teachers, provided her with very limited assistance.

During her four years of secondary education, like other students, Fanny struggled with physical science due to the lack of teachers and other resources. *"There were no good teachers and science textbooks in the schools were using long sentences, so it was difficult [for me] to understand such sentences in the book".*

In 2010 Robert Laws was turned into a boys' secondary school. Consequently, together with all the hearing girls, Fanny was transferred to Chilumba Secondary School. At Chilumba, she discontinued physical science in order to concentrate on other subjects such as mathematics, English, Chichewa, Bible knowledge, social studies, life skills and biology. Eventually, she successfully completed four years of secondary education by obtaining a Malawi School Certificate of Education (MSCE).

Having completed secondary education, Fanny secured a place at Loudon Teachers Training College. This was no mean achievement for her because to enroll in a teaching program in Malawi, one needs to score a minimum of four credits in the MSCE, including in English and at least one of the science subjects.

Fanny completed her teacher training in 2013, and in 2014 she was posted to teach at Bandawe School for the Deaf. Her interest in further education, however, continued. In



2016, she was enrolled in a Special Needs Education programme at Montfort Special Needs Education College, where she later graduated with a diploma in special needs focusing on deaf education. Currently, Fanny is not only one of Malawi's only nine deaf Teachers of the Deaf, she is also the only deaf teacher with training specializing in special needs education.

Fanny is currently teaching children with learning difficulties at Ekwendeni Primary School where her husband, also a graduate of Montfort Special Needs Education College, teaches blind children. Like for most deaf teachers, Fanny's class does not have deaf pupils. Thus, although she is good at sign language, she uses the total communication approach to teach children with learning difficulties.

Fanny says there are many deaf children in homes around the school and she hopes that, one day, she will engage her District Education Manager to conduct a wide range of hearing screening on children suspected to have hearing problems. "Since Malawi launched the National Strategy on Inclusive Education, there is a lot of talk about how we can create a genuine, meaningful, inclusive education for deaf children. It's one of the great injustices still to be tackled in Malawi", she says. However, currently hearing screening is conducted by individual schools for the deaf to determine the school placement for the child at respective schools.

With Fanny, being one of nine Teachers of the Deaf in Malawi, the number of deaf teachers is likely to increase. This is good for the educational needs of deaf children. ■



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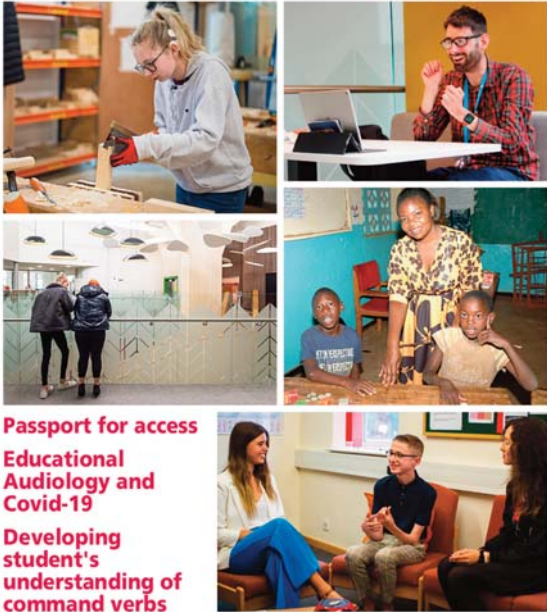
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