

The inclusion of deaf learners: observations from EENET's action research study in Zambia

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It is argued by most organisations of deaf people that deaf children have the right to access education in their first language – the sign language of their home community. Increasingly sign language is being recognised as the first language of deaf people, and has been formally recognised in the constitutions of Sweden, South Africa and Uganda. The World Federation of the Deaf argues that inclusion in school and society on an equal basis is only possible when deaf children have access to sign language. Article 21 of the [Salamanca Framework for Action](#) states that “owing to the particular communication needs of deaf and deaf/blind persons, their education may be more suitably provided in special schools or special classes and units in mainstream schools”.

In Southern countries, however, the majority of deaf children do not have access to education in schools for deaf children, or in the medium of sign language. Since the majority of deaf children have the option of being educated in their local schools, or not being educated at all, perhaps efforts should be made to ensure that deaf children at least have access to deaf adults in order to become proficient in sign language.

EENET's position on this complex and often controversial issue is that such specialist provision is not affordable, nor is it necessarily desirable. However specialist knowledge (in particular, deaf adults' knowledge of sign language) can be used in mainstream contexts to enable deaf children to access the curriculum in their local school, and to stay in their families and communities.

Many development agencies, and even disability-focused organisations, choose not to get involved in supporting deaf children precisely because of the difficulties and controversies. For this reason, EENET has developed a section on its web site over many years entitled '[Deafness](#)'. This provides a focus for debate and dialogue on some of these highly controversial issues.

It is unusual to hear what mainstream teachers have to say about deafness and inclusion because many deaf children have no access to education, and those who do, tend to be taught separately, either by teachers who have had some specialist training, or sometimes by teachers with none. The following observation notes, recorded as part of [EENET's action research project](#), show that the mainstream teachers in Zambia had plenty to say about the issue.

It should be pointed out that this discussion does not address the educational needs of children who have less severe hearing impairments and who are able to speak. This group of children can usually benefit from hearing aids and can learn to lip read as long as efforts are made to communicate clearly. Although hearing aids can help some children who have hearing impairments, their lack of availability, high cost, and need for ongoing maintenance are major barriers to their consistent use, especially in rural schools.

In addition to the complexity and controversy surrounding deafness, the appropriateness of educating children in 'special' units (organised separately according to their category of impairment) is also hotly debated. In most high-income countries the term 'unit' is no longer used, as it implies segregation. The

term 'resource base' or 'resourced school' tends to be used. This emphasises the existence of the resources that are available to meet the individual needs of a specific group of learners, rather than the physical space which they occupy within the school.

Observation notes*

"In the deaf unit there are two classes. The first has 4 grades together: beginner level – 1 boy sitting alone; Grade 1 – 2 children together; Grades 2 & 3 had bigger groups. It wasn't clear if the children had been asked to sit in segregated year groups for our visit so we could see the age splits, or whether they always sit like this, in which case the poor boy at beginner level was very isolated even within the unit.

The deaf pupils go into regular classes twice a week, but only for practical lessons like crafts. Most of the deaf pupils are boarders who live a long way away. We were told that other pupils in the school do know sign language.

We then briefly went to the Grade 7 class of deaf students who are taking exams this year - there were only about 5 in class. **This group was described as specialists in sign language who can help others, including teachers.**

There are also **deaf adults in the community who use sign language**. The teacher also spoke about a **married couple in the community who are deaf and met at school**.

The acting head and the unit teacher said that during theory-type classes **the children can't be included because sign language is slow**. We all felt that the teacher's signing was slow, which probably didn't help. They are worried about how other children would react to having slow signers - and I'm sure she added **'making strange noises in their class'**.

The unit is a start towards inclusion. The ultimate aim is to include them in all activities. The unit has existed since 1991, and they have only been trying to do inclusion for two years. **They aim to fully include the deaf children in another two years.**

The teachers had a long and confusing debate about sign language! They requested books about British Sign Language. I think we ended with an understanding that they didn't want BSL taught necessarily, but **wanted to use research about BSL to help them in the development of Zambian sign language**.

One teacher wanted special needs training brought near to the school. She explained that it wasn't the theory of special needs from a college they wanted, but practical in-school help with dealing with certain impairments and situations."

During the analysis stage of the action research project, we returned to the discussion which is recorded above as it highlights the particular challenges of including deaf children in mainstream education. These notes were then shared with a member of a UK-based networking group concerned with the education of deaf children in countries of the South. Together we asked the following questions of our data:

"What does this teach us about the state of units in Africa?" and

"What needs to be done to support the development of better education for deaf children in the context of mainstream schools?"

"The children can't be included because sign language is slow"

This implies that the children can't be included because the hearing teachers' sign language (SL) skills are not very good. This is not unusual. It is very difficult for hearing teachers to sign and it is almost impossible for them to 'think' in SL. The majority of teachers (of deaf children) use a spoken language, such as English or Isibemba, with signs. In other words they use signs in the word order of spoken language, and they tend to speak and sign simultaneously. This is not sign language. SL is a separate language with its own grammar and word order. Few 'hearing' people achieve fluency in SL, and even fewer are able to think in SL. This is not only a Zambian problem, it's a universal problem.

However it wouldn't be feasible for one specialist teacher to be able to provide SL support to each of the included deaf children in their separate grades. Neither would it be affordable to provide a specialist teacher for each class, where a deaf child was included. The only feasible and affordable solution may be to train people from the community as educational interpreters for the deaf children, since their primary need is for the spoken language to be interpreted.

The questions that need to be addressed are:

"Is it better for deaf children to be taught in the unit, given the difficulties of signing and speaking simultaneously in a mainstream class, and the difficulty in providing interpreters in different classes?"

"Are deaf children being denied quality education because of the slowness and inadequacy of the SL used by those who are not accomplished SL users, including those described as 'specialist' teachers?"

"This group [Grade 7 pupils] was described as specialists in SL, who can help others, including teachers."

Ideally, deaf children should have access to adult SL role models, and they should not be learning from other deaf learners. If their language skills are to progress, they need to be taught by experienced SL users, whose SL is more developed and advanced than theirs.

In practice, however, most units are situated far away from large urban centres, where SL expertise is more likely to be developed. Schools need to be flexible and innovative in the way they meet the language needs of deaf learners. They need to draw on available expertise which may not always exist within the school.

The deaf children make "strange noises in class"

It is not unusual for deaf children and adults to make noises, which sound strange to others. They need to be taught social skills. They need to have their attention brought to the fact that 'hearing' people find these noises strange and may react negatively. They should be helped to learn not to make these noises, if possible.

"Most of the deaf pupils are boarders, who live a long way away"

The distance that many children have to travel in order to attend a specialist educational facility is a major problem. It is especially difficult when it is not possible to explain to a young deaf child that they will not see their family for many weeks at a time. This can cause great emotional trauma in the child. Since the deaf children are not living in their home communities, and therefore are not socially included in the community in which they attend school, it is much harder for them to be socially included in either community.

“There are also deaf adults in the community who use sign language. The teacher also spoke about a married couple in the community who are deaf and met at school.”

It is important to find out more about the deaf adults in the community if they are to become involved in educational settings. For instance:

- Are they educated?
- Do they use the same sign language as the children?
- Did the married couple meet at a school for the deaf – if so, which one?
- Were they born deaf, or did they become deaf?

Most deaf adults who are well-educated and may become teachers of SL, were not born deaf – they became deaf later in life. They therefore still tend to think in spoken language, rather than sign language. It is unlikely in rural areas that there will be many born-deaf adults, who have good SL skills, and who are able to be involved in the education of deaf children. This is much more likely to happen in an urban setting.

The teachers “wanted to use research about BSL to help them in the development of Zambian sign language.”

SL should be developed by deaf adults. But in practice SL is developed by hearing teachers and deafened children, especially in the context of a unit. Where, rarely, there is a deaf child born to deaf parents, or with other educated deaf siblings, the sign language develops better. It is important for all those involved in the education of deaf children in a particular country to find out who is involved in developing the national sign language.

In conclusion, this action research study provided a rare opportunity to gather information on the education of deaf children in a ‘special’ unit attached to one of the mainstream schools in the study. The debate which took place among the mainstream teachers in the presence of the unit teacher needs to be seen in the overall context of an initiative in the north of Zambia to promote inclusive education. The teachers spent a lot of time reflecting on, and documenting, the barriers to participation and learning faced by the children they were teaching. Although this was a very small study, the issues that it has raised about teachers’ understanding of inclusion, and the particular experience in Zambia of promoting improved relationships between deaf and hearing pupils, make an important contribution to the overall debate about the inclusion of deaf learners.