A Community-based Sign Language Programme in Uganda

Education never takes place in a social vacuum.

Until recently few Deaf children in northern Uganda attended school, and those who did usually sat ignored and uncomprehending. Children who became deaf during their school years were likely to be expelled.

This exclusion and isolation mirrored the situation of Deaf adults, who were ignored by most hearing people and rarely met other Deaf people. Few of them knew much Sign Language. Most of them spent their lives with little human contact or understanding of what was going on round them. Since few of them could speak, they were collectively called "Kasiru" - "Stupid".

Today Deaf children in this area are not only going to local schools: they are also getting the support they need there to learn. This new educational inclusion has come about largely because over the past three years deaf adults have been enabled to build a Deaf community, and develop Ugandan Sign language.

Deaf people in Uganda have been struggling for many years to obtain education for Deaf children. In the late 1950s the Deaf mother of two Deaf children began a campaign to get her children into school. She was supported by Church of Uganda missionaries, and a school for Deaf children was set up in the early 1960s, at Namirembe. This school later transferred to Ntinda in Kampala, and helped to start a second school, at Ngora in eastern Uganda.

The struggle for education for Deaf children has been a very tough one, however. To this day the government has provided no help with building schools for Deaf children. Deaf people's hopes, however, have not withered, and they are still lobbying the government to support their initiatives.

It was in this context of educational deprivation for Deaf children that ADD launched its pioneer programme with deaf adults in northern Uganda. Gloria Pullen, a British Deaf woman from Bristol University's Centre for Deaf Studies, started work in Lira three years ago.

Her first action when she arrived was to invite Deaf people to help her decorate the new office, and the office now provides a focal point where deaf people socialise, learn, and obtain information. Most pop in at least once a week, and this interaction has helped them to master Ugandan Sign language.

"When we first meet Deaf adults," says Mark Schofield, one of Gloria's Sign Language interpreters, "we find that we have to sit and 'listen' to them for days, as they communicate an entire lifetime's experience, and ask a lifetime's questions, for the first time."

Deaf people working with Gloria, and her Ugandan successor Christine Lule, are now keen to fight against the negative attitudes of hearing people. Currently they are doing this by:

* participating in different events and activities to show the capabilities of Deaf people;
* teaching Sign Language to families of Deaf children and the public, to incease communication and interaction;
* forming groups to fight against discrimination;
* raising awareness of deafness among parents of Deaf children and the general public country-wide;
* encouraging parents of Deaf children to form associations in their localities to learn Sign Language and share experiences.

One of their main preoccupations has been to make sure that the next generation of Deaf children should not experience the loneliness and frustration experienced by so many Deaf people today. Excited at their new opportunity to communicate with each other in Sign Language, the adults work hard to pass their skills on to local Deaf children. This has enabled the children to have a firm basis in Sign Language and most now attend local schools with a unit for Deaf children.

Instead of sitting silently and unnoticed in their classrooms, they now have Sign Language interpreters provided by the Education Assessment and Resource Services (EARS) programme.

The Deaf Development Programme is also starting more formal training in Sign language for Deaf children, run from its central office in Lira and in three sub-counties: Aloi, Omoro and Ogur. Sensitisation workshops on deafness for parents and families of Deaf children and Deaf awareness events with the wider public are creating an understanding that Deaf children need and can benefit from education as much as any other children.

Nationally, the struggle of Deaf people is beginning to show results. Uganda is one of the few countries in the world to recognise Sign as an official language in its constitution. The Ministry of Education and Uganda National Examinations Board have accepted Deaf people to sit for examinations at national level. Above all, parents and the government are recognising that Deaf children need education.

The parents of Deaf children are now calling upon the government to establish the support and facilities necessary for Deaf children to receive education of equal value to that provided for hearing children. In Lira and Mbale districts parents are mobilising funds to build schools for Deaf children.

Today there is an increasing awareness of deafness and Deaf people and more Sign interpreters are being trained. With adequate resources, it should become possible to enable Deaf children to be included more satisfactorily in mainstream education. The hope is that by 2010 all Deaf children will be able to obtain the education they need.

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Information supplied by Christine Lule and Fred Bwire

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