

# Achieving academic excellence for deaf learners: the influence of early exposure to rich language



# Introduction

This briefing paper summarises a research project conducted in collaboration with Deaf Child Worldwide, VSO Kenya and University College London. It investigates the ways in which special education teachers in Kenya support the early language development of deaf children.



## Kenyan context

The Government of Kenya has progressive policies in place in relation to the inclusion of deaf and disabled children in education and this was recently reaffirmed with the new Inclusive Education Policy (2018). It is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and recognises the right to education for all children in its Constitution (2010). However, challenges remain. To date, there is little academic research available that specifically documents the educational challenges facing teachers of deaf primary age children in low resource contexts such as Kenya.

### Key findings

Findings from this study reveal that:

- › deaf children show evidence of having delays of up to 10 years in competency in their first language
- › teachers in the critical early years of formal education (from pre-primary through to Grade 3) were found to be largely unaware of the impact of this delay on the children's global learning needs
- › overall, teachers were unprepared and unsupported to address the specific need to assist deaf children to develop fluent language
- › there is confusion on how to teach Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) versus other spoken/written languages.

## Research scope

The research aimed to identify how the attitudes, skills, self-efficacy and preparedness of pre-primary and early grade primary teachers in the special needs education sector influence their approach to address the language learning needs of deaf children. An innovative<sup>1</sup> language assessment tool (the Language Proficiency Profile – 2) was introduced as part of the study to provide baseline information on the early language competency of deaf children and to assess the extent to which teachers feel able to use this tool in their classroom practice.

The study was carried out in early 2018 in three schools for deaf children in the counties of Nandi and Kwale. A total of 12 teaching staff were included (representing pre-primary to Grade 3 levels), as well as three headteachers, eight young deaf people (18–25 years), eight carers of deaf children, two Education Assessment and Resource Centre staff and representatives from the Kenya Institute of Special Education. In total 48 deaf children from pre-primary to Grade 3 with an average age of 11 years, were assessed by their teachers using the Language Proficiency Profile – 2 tool. The research team included three deaf researchers (the lead researcher and two Kenyan research assistants) alongside four Kenyan and expat research assistants and a Kenyan Sign Language interpreter<sup>2</sup>.



It is essential to have a good command of a first language in order to be able to develop higher level skills of reading and writing and ultimately to play an active role in society.

<sup>1</sup> Bebko J., and E. McKinnon, 2003, Language Proficiency Profile (LPP) – 2. York University.

<sup>2</sup> Research team: Lorraine Wapling, UCL; Josephine Mwau, Harrison Kariuku, Mawazo Mazima, Felix Talam, Janet Gerishon, Boniface Muriithi and Marje Vandoorn of VSO Kenya.

## Our findings

Our research provides evidence of the poor language environment young deaf children are being exposed to in their early years of formal education, along with low levels of awareness amongst teachers about how deaf children learn. A number of interrelating factors emerged which together mean that deaf students are not being provided with optimal opportunities for learning their first language, nor are they being adequately supported to learn English.



## Acquiring a first language

Preliminary analysis from implementation of the Language Proficiency Profile - 2 tool demonstrates that significant language deficits are not being adequately addressed for deaf children in Kenya who are in formal education - even in schools specialising in educating deaf students. **Depending on the age at which they first enter school, they can show delays of up to ten years in the development of their first language. This presents teachers with very significant challenges and makes the need to focus on language support in the early years of education of foremost importance.** Given there is no support currently available to families who have deaf children, and that most deaf children are born to hearing parents, school usually represents the first opportunity children have to acquire a fluent language. Our research showed however that teachers do not currently have the skills, capacity, knowledge or classroom materials to be able to provide deaf children with this level of language support.

**Kenyan Sign Language** is a language like any other, with its own grammatical constructs (which are different from English). It is communicated through hand movements and facial expressions and not through speech.

**Sign Supported English** uses signs from local sign language in the same word order as English to visually support spoken English. Whilst the signs might be local, the language is English.

## Language environment in school

Whilst overall the policies around use of Kenyan Sign Language (KSL) in the early years of education are extremely positive and two out of the three headteachers claimed that KSL was the school's language of instruction, our research found that in practice fluent KSL was not being used by hearing teachers in their classrooms. Teachers struggled in practice to differentiate between English and KSL, mostly relying on Sign Supported English. Teachers admitted to not feeling confident to teach in KSL and were using their limited range of KSL-based signs to enable their students to see English. Moreover, none of them had considered the implications of the children's lack of a first language nor their potential role in teaching KSL as a first language. Overall our research found a lack of fluent language exchange happening between students, their teachers and each other in the classroom which was then reflected in the lower than expected scores on the Language Proficiency – 2 assessment. The only examples where fluent language exchange took place in the classroom were when deaf teaching assistants were leading activities.



### Examples of the difference in content when teachers signed and spoke simultaneously:

**Teacher says in English:** "Ok today we are going to be learning some new words."

**Teacher signs:** 'NEW WORDS'

**Teachers says in English:** "Add together 2 and 2 and we get 4. 2 plus 2 equals 4."

**Teacher signs:** '2 WITH 2 SAME AS 4.'

**Teacher says in English:** "Ok, now take out your English workbooks and copy down the words from the board."

**Teacher signs:** 'BOOK'

## Teaching strategies

Teachers also demonstrated poor levels of deaf awareness in the way in which they managed the classroom set up, communicated with their students and structured their lessons. They seemed largely unfamiliar with the implications of their students' needs as visual learners and did not seem especially well prepared for teaching students who rely on visual modes of communication. Many, for example, were observed only using their voice, talking while facing the board, talking while walking around the room (behind students/in front of windows), signing/fingerspelling whilst holding chalk/pens/objects in their hands, beginning an explanation using Sign Supported English then switching to just spoken English when they ran out of signs, and failing to maintain eye contact during one-to-one communications/turning away part way through an explanation. All of these behaviours represent a lack of deaf awareness and many are also poor examples for young deaf children learning the rules of language and communication.



### Poor practice:

Teacher is standing in front of light source, pupils unable to see facial expressions or hands clearly.



### Good practice:

Teacher is interacting with an individual child, making eye contact and using visual prompts.

## Recommendations

Recommendations that support improvements in the early years of education for young deaf children include:

1. Intentionally focus on assisting young deaf children to acquire their first language during their initial years in formal education before embarking on secondary skills such as literacy and numeracy.
2. Support early identification and intervention programmes that ensure deaf children are enrolled at the appropriate age and that families have access to support for basic communication with their deaf child.
3. Increase the use of fluent KSL users in classes of deaf learners, through the use of deaf teachers or deaf teaching assistants supporting teachers who are not proficient in KSL. This is especially important in early grades, to ensure deaf children have access to fluent deaf signers.
4. Incorporate mandatory units on language development and the teaching of KSL as a first language into all Early Childhood Development Education and lower grade primary teacher training courses (pre- and in-service) for those specialising in inclusive education and/or teaching deaf children.
5. Deploy those teachers who have the greatest KSL sign language fluency in the early years settings and where teachers are not fluent, ensure the availability of fluent teaching assistants.
6. Develop and disseminate guidelines on creating deaf-friendly learning environments and equip the quality assurance process with the expertise to monitor deaf inclusion in learning, ensure schools have teaching and learning materials for visual learners and that teachers are trained in their use.
7. Equip teachers with the right skills and knowledge to teach KSL as a first language and ensure it is examined visually.
8. Carry out research into the most appropriate curriculum approaches for teaching English to deaf children in Kenya.



## Who are we?

Deaf Child Worldwide is the leading international charity for deaf children. We support deaf children and young people disadvantaged by poverty and discrimination in developing countries. We work to overcome barriers that deaf children face in three key areas: language and communication, education and independence. Our projects deliver life changing support in East Africa, Latin America and South Asia.

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Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) is the world's leading independent international development organisation that works with volunteers to deliver high impact development projects. VSO's mission is to bring people together to fight poverty.

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Deaf Child Worldwide is the international arm of The National Deaf Children's Society.  
The National Deaf Children's Society is a registered charity in England and Wales  
no. 1016532 and in Scotland SC040779. JR1462

