

Across Rwanda, children with disabilities often struggle to access quality education; Deaf Children in particular, are often overlooked like other disabilities.

Founded in 2012, it is against this background that Nyabihu School for the Deaf was set up to give deaf children in Rwanda access to education and skills they might otherwise miss.

Rwanda Dispatch spoke with Eric Ngabo, acting program manager at Nyabihu School for the Deaf, about how teachers are trained, how sign language helps students learn, and what life is like for deaf children at school and beyond.

Dispatch: How does the school approach inclusive education, and could you explain how sign language is integrated into teaching?

Ngabo: Well, first of all, we recruit teachers who are graduates from teacher training colleges—those who are qualified to teach children with special needs. Once they are recruited, we send them to a sign language school for further training. Most of our staff, including the head teacher and deputy head teacher, are experts in sign language.

The head teacher, in particular, has 25 years of experience teaching children with speech disabilities and has contributed extensively to the design and improvement of the school's learning programs.

Our founder had started the Rwandan sign language dictionary. As of yet, it's not out because of budget cuts. We have only a very limited number of copies because the project that was working on it was funded by USAID, and, you know, what happened to USAID in the end.

So from the moment they are recruited, we take them through training in sign language so that they can deliver their courses effectively in sign language.

Dispatch: How about equipment or tools, does the school provide the materials?

Ngabo : Yes, we do provide them. Rwandan sign language adapts to American Sign Language (ASL) because it is very similar. Not everything is identical, but generally, someone coming from the US who is fluent in ASL will feel comfortable communicating in Rwandan sign language. It's different from British Sign Language (BSL). ASL materials and content are widespread on social media, especially YouTube.

Some of the tools we use are found on the internet. We also have our own resources. As I mentioned, our head teacher, the late founder, was very influential and determined to put together the Rwandan sign language dictionary. Additionally, we have content adapted into the local language, Kinyarwanda. We use all these resources to train our teachers, which is very important for the learning of our children in sign language.

Dispatch: How does the school recruit or identify children with speech or communication disabilities is there a process?

Ngabo : Currently, our school has a maximum of 70 children. Classrooms are designed according to the standards of the National Examination and School Inspection Authority. We cannot have more than 10 children per classroom due to space limitations. We are working to add more rooms. Our dormitories, For example, our bathrooms, kitchen and lavatories can serve up to 140 children, but since the classes are small, we have 7 classes; we can't take more than 10 per class.

We mainly serve children from Nyabihu District, Gakenke and Burera Districts. We also have some few from Ngororero, and two children from Nyamasheke District. We work with local authorities, districts, and sectors, not only for education but also for other types of disabilities.

We refer children with other needs to specialized schools. They send us children, but we first assess to determine if they truly have a hearing disability. People in Rwanda don't have enough information about these disabilities. A parent will bring their child thinking they may be autistic, or may they have Down syndrome, or a mental disability.

We conduct physical assessments and also assess hearing using an audiometer. We perform audiograms and audiometric tests to determine if they are deaf, the level of hearing loss, whether profound, severe, or mild—and whether they can benefit from hearing aids.

Once identified we identify them, once done, we enroll them in our pre-primary class. These children often miss early childhood education in local community kindergartens, so we help them catch up. By age six, they join pre-primary for one year before moving to Primary One. If they do not perform well, they may repeat pre-primary or Primary One. This is the stage where we teach them sign language,

which is their language of instruction.

You can't take a child into P1 and teach addition, subtraction, or vowels without first establishing this line of communication, sign language.

Dispatch: Can you paint the school environment for our readers?

Ngabo : Every kind of communication in the school is adapted to sign language. For example, we have painted the entire alphabet in sign language. Anyone entering the school, not just deaf children, can start learning sign language just by observing their surroundings, without even entering a classroom.

Dispatch: How do you involve the parents?

Ngabo : In the past, parents would bring their child, leave them at school, and never return until it was time for the children to go home. This relieved some stress for parents, but it left the child isolated. Other schools have maybe one or two visiting days per month, we encourage parents to visit as often as they like. These visits matter because the children eventually return home after spending a long time away and there is no appropriate way to communicate with parents.

So, we introduced sessions to train parents in basic sign language. Initially, we trained one person per household, but it wasn't enough because the child was away. Now we train two people per household, so knowledge is shared and practiced, even in the child's absence. We also provide resources, books, pamphlets, and more, to help parents stay involved.

Dispatch: And national exams? How do the children perform?

Ngabo : Deaf children sit for national exams like everyone else, but their disabilities aren't considered in marking. They learn a language through another language, so their vocabulary and sentence structure are different. Non-signers may see their answers as incorrect.

For example, a signing child might respond to "What is your problem?" with "My problem is zero." A speaking child would say, "I have no problem." If marked as a regular answer, "My problem is zero" would be considered wrong, but it accurately reflects their sign language response.

Yes, only one out of ten signing children passed last year, though six should have

passed if marked fairly. Deaf children should be marked by trained sign language interpreters, just as blind students' exams are marked in Braille. NESA, REB, and others need to establish guidelines for this.

If a child fails primary exams, they can't proceed to secondary school. If they struggle in O-levels or A-levels, they can't get a diploma or attend university. This explains why so few deaf children graduate from university. For instance, in my primary, only one out of ten deaf students eventually graduated from university. As schools, we would more than happy to play our part; there should be a marking framework.

Sign language isn't recognized as an official national language. Adding it would be complex and costly. All government institutions would need personnel who can communicate in sign language, but the budget isn't available.

These children also face challenges in sports; they can't play with non-disabled children because they can't hear whistles or instructions. They also can't join other adaptive sports like wheelchair basketball or sitting volleyball because their disabilities don't match the required categories. We need innovative ways to include them in sports and games.



A group photo of school children at Nyabihu School For Deaf. Courtesy Photo