

Book review

The forgotten needs of hard-of-hearing learners



The handbook challenges policymakers to rethink resource allocation. Rather than concentrating resources solely in special schools or units, it recommends investment in mainstream settings, where most hard-of-hearing learners are enrolled. Teacher training, classroom acoustics and access to technology are highlighted as priority areas.

BY OYET OKWERA

For many years, conversations about hearing impairment in Uganda's education system have revolved around deafness and sign language. While this focus has advanced recognition and support for hearing-impaired learners, it has also created an unintended blind spot: children who are hard-of-hearing, speak verbally and attempt to navigate mainstream classrooms with little or no specialised support.

A newly published handbook by education specialist Dr Abdul Busuulwa argues that this misunderstanding has left hard-of-hearing learners among the most neglected groups in Uganda's inclusive education framework.

Developed for the Uganda Federation of Hard-of-Hearing and released in June 2025, the handbook calls for a fundamental shift in how hearing impairment is understood, planned for and supported in schools.

National data suggests the scale of the issue is far from marginal. The 2024 National Population and Housing Census indicates that 273,167 Ugandans are hard-of-hearing, compared to 41,431 who are deaf. While the census does not specify how many are children, education advocates say the figures point to a significant number of learners whose needs are not being systematically addressed. "The assumption that hearing impairment automatically means sign language has excluded a large group of learners," Dr Busuulwa explains in the

handbook. "Hard-of-hearing learners communicate primarily through spoken language, but that does not mean they hear normally or learn effortlessly." Hard-of-hearing learners occupy a wide spectrum. According to the International Federation of Hard-of-Hearing People, the category includes people with mild to profound hearing loss who primarily use speech.

This includes learners with late-onset hearing loss, cochlear implant users, those with auditory processing disorders, tinnitus or conditions such as Meniere's disease. Some may become totally deaf after acquiring speech.

Despite this diversity, schools often treat hearing impairment as a single category, applying approaches designed for hearing-impaired learners or assuming that verbal communication means no accommodation is needed. Published by the Uganda Federation of Hard-of-Hearing for free distribution to learning institutions, the Handbook warns that both assumptions are flawed.

Hard-of-hearing learners typically rely on a combination of spoken language, lip-reading, hearing aids or cochlear implants and visual reinforcement. In noisy classrooms, with poor acoustics and fast-paced instruction, even learners with mild hearing loss can miss critical information. Over time, these gaps affect vocabulary development, literacy, academic performance and social confidence.

Research cited in the handbook shows that when hearing challenges are not addressed, learners may struggle with

pronunciation, omit speech sounds, misunderstand instructions or withdraw from group activities.

Teachers may interpret these difficulties as lack of interest, indiscipline or low ability, rather than access barriers.

"This is where hard-of-hearing learners are most disadvantaged," Dr Busuulwa observes. "Their disability is invisible, so their struggles are often misinterpreted instead of supported."

Uganda's legal framework does recognise hard-of-hearing as a distinct category. Schedule 3 of the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2020, explicitly lists hard-of-hearing as a sub-category of hearing impairment. However, the handbook argues that this legal recognition has not translated into practical guidance for schools, teacher-training institutions or education planners.

UFHOH research referenced in the handbook identifies persistent gaps, including lack of awareness about the needs of hard-of-hearing learners, shortages of Special Needs Education teachers, absence of captioning services, limited access to assistive devices and poor classroom acoustics.

These challenges are compounded by negative attitudes and weak data collection systems. Inclusive education, the handbook emphasises, is not simply about physical placement in a mainstream classroom. It requires deliberate planning to ensure learners access instruction, participate socially and demonstrate their abilities. Yet many inclusive education strategies continue to prioritise physical access while neglecting communication ac-

cess. International commitments reinforce this distinction. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities affirms the right to inclusive education that enables learners to develop their potential. The says without reasonable accommodation for communication, hard-of-hearing learners remain excluded even when enrolled.

One of the handbook's central contributions is clarifying the educational identity of hard-of-hearing learners. Unlike profoundly deaf learners who rely primarily on sign language, hard-of-hearing learners benefit most from speech-based interventions supported by visual aids and assistive technology. Captioning, speech-to-text tools, FM systems and clear visual instruction are not optional extras but essential access tools.

Dr Busuulwa cautions against forcing hard-of-hearing learners into rigid categories. Some may identify with hearing-impaired family members or use sign language, while others identify more closely with the hearing community. Educators, the handbook argues, must respect these identities and support bilingualism and flexible communication choices.

The failure to recognise these distinctions has practical consequences. Without targeted strategies, learners may fall behind academically, disengage socially or drop out altogether. The handbook notes that early identification and intervention are critical, particularly during the early years of schooling when language development is most sensitive.

To address this, the handbook provides educators with tools for identifying hard-of-hearing learners, including classroom observations, listening assessments, parental input and environmental checklists. It encourages schools to screen hearing at entry and remain alert to signs such as inattention, language delays or social withdrawal.

Once identified, the handbook recommends tailored support plans rather than blanket approaches. These include preferential seating, visual teaching methods, written instructions, peer support and use of assistive technology. Importantly, it emphasises that many of these adjustments are low-cost and benefit all learners, not only those who are hard of hearing.

The handbook also challenges policymakers to rethink resource allocation. Rather than concentrating resources solely in special schools or units, it argues for investment in mainstream settings where most hard-of-hearing learners are enrolled. Teacher training, classroom acoustics and access to technology are highlighted as priority areas.

For UFHOH, the handbook represents an attempt to shift national discourse. By centring the experiences of hard-of-hearing learners, it seeks to expand understanding of inclusion beyond sign language and visible disability. "Hard-of-hearing learners are often expected to adapt to the system," Dr Busuulwa writes. "This handbook calls on the system to adapt to them."

As Uganda continues to pursue inclusive education, the challenge is not only legal compliance but conceptual clarity. Recognising that hearing impairment is not monolithic is a necessary step toward ensuring that no learner is left behind simply because they do not fit prevailing assumptions.

KEY

By centring experiences of hard-of-hearing learners, the book seeks to expand understanding of inclusion beyond sign language and visible disability.