

Caught in the DEAF TRAP

Most of South Africa's deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens are functionally illiterate and likely to remain unemployed

Aug 16, 2009 12:00 AM | By KAREN VAN ROOYEN

DEAF education in South Africa is failing miserably. Although there are about four million deaf or hard-of-hearing people in the country, the overwhelming majority never make it to matric - and only a handful reach university.

Startling figures provided by the Deaf Federation of South Africa show that:

- * Only 12 of the country's 47 schools catering for the hearing impaired offer matric;
- * Only 14% of teachers are fluent in sign language; and
- * Although about 6600 deaf children attend school, thousands more have no access to education.

The federation puts the functional illiteracy rate among South Africa's deaf and hard-of-hearing at 75%, and unemployment at 70%.

In a document titled Deaf Education in South Africa: A State of Emergency, the federation highlights its battle to have SA sign language officially recognised in our schools.

Although more than a million South Africans use sign language as a first language, it is not among a string of languages, including German, Portuguese, Arabic and Latin, that will be written in this year's grade 12 year-end exams.

But matric is the least of many deaf South Africans' worries.

Just getting an education is an uphill battle. Even those at deaf schools struggle because few of their teachers can communicate in sign language, said Tim Stones, a researcher at the National Institute for the Deaf's Deafnet Centre of Knowledge. As a result, said Stones, it was not surprising that "the average deaf school leaver in South Africa has the same written language comprehension as the average eight-year-old hearing child".

Even gaining a school-leaving qualification is no guarantee that a deaf or hearing-impaired pupil has a bright future.

South Africa has just one tertiary institution catering for the deaf or hearing-impaired - the institute's college in Worcester.

It offers training in hospitality, cosmetics and beauty, construction, upholstery, agriculture, early-child development and office practice.

The number of deaf or hearing-impaired students at mainstream universities is negligible. The University of Cape Town has no deaf students, but has six hard-of-hearing students registered - including one completing a PhD that focuses on the challenges of placing disabled people in the workplace.

Those who make it to UCT are generally prepared, but those coming from the deaf education system do not have the skills to cope, according to the university's disability service manager, Reinette Popplestone.

"Deaf learners coming out of the deaf education system just do not have the skills and they don't get the points to get them into UCT," she said.

The Nelson Mandela Metro-politan University in Port Elizabeth has two hearing-impaired students - one completing her master's degree in applied languages, the other a music student.

Six deaf students are registered at the University of the Free State, according to Hetsie Veitch, head of its unit for students with disabilities. She said the results of these students varied.

"Deaf students need a lot of extra assistance with English if sign language is their first language and their language of learning."

The University of South Africa has 113 deaf students registered in fields of human and social sciences, economic and management sciences, and law. Very few venture into the sciences, according to university spokesman Lehuma Ntuane.

The pass rate is about 60% and a BAdmin degree is the highest qualification obtained so far by a deaf student at Unisa.

Jace Nair, CEO of the KwaZulu-Natal Blind and Deaf Society, confirmed that the skills base among the deaf was very low and that students who managed to get into tertiary education often took longer to finish than their hearing counterparts.

He added: "If one is confined to low-paying menial jobs without hope of advancement, which is the case with the majority of deaf South Africans, then it may seem more preferable for them to survive on welfare grants than seek employment."

Zanele Mngadi, spokesman for the Department of Social Development, said there were 5314 deaf and hearing-impaired people on disability grants in the Eastern Cape, but that other provinces did not capture statistics according to specific disabilities.

Penny Vinjevold, deputy director-general for further education and training at the Department of Basic Education, had previously stated in papers that there was no consensus among organisations representing aurally impaired communities about the exact definition or components of sign language. This had resulted in the delay to formally recognise it.