

Championing Accessible Education For Deaf Learners: Monicah Muthoni



Monicah guiding deaf learners through a memory game

Executive Summary

Monicah Muthoni is a deaf educator and advocate for transforming inclusive education in Kenya. Despite facing systemic barriers such as lack of sign language interpreters, she has risen to become a skilled teacher and leader in the Digital StoryTime project. Her journey highlights both the challenges in the education system and the power of resilience in driving change.

Introduction

Monicah Muthoni's journey is an inspiring one. Her passion in ensuring access to special needs education portrays a powerful case study in her resilience, professional, personal growth, and advocacy. It highlights the systemic challenges faced by most Deaf individuals in the educational settings and demonstrates how one individual's determination can lead to significant personal and professional achievements while also illuminating a path for broader systemic change. Her story is a clear path that shows impact brought about by determination, perseverance and hard work in an inaccessible education system.

1. Barriers to Education

From a tender age, Monicah already knew what she wanted to become when she grew up, her passion was to teach deaf learners. Her enthusiasm for educating deaf learners was clear, but the path was fraught with systemic accessibility barriers that made her education journey quite challenging.

- **Initial Education:** Monica took up the initiative to enroll in school and her pursuit of an Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) course was a major hurdle that she faced. With no interpreters available, she was forced to rely on her peers to copy notes which was challenging in itself given the fact that if the peer made a mistake, that meant she also made the same mistake, which led to her missing out on crucial classroom engagements, group discussions and direct instruction from the lecturers. Despite the challenges, she developed alternative learning strategies to bridge gaps caused by inaccessibility.
- **Professional Development:** Despite the challenges she faced while pursuing her course, that did not deter her from exploring further courses. Years later, she still experienced a similar challenge while furthering her training with an online Learner Support Assistant course. Lack of sign language interpreters and the lecturers not using accessible modes of teaching during the online course made it even worse since she had to rely on captions which can also be misleading. The inaccessibility made it difficult for her to follow simultaneous captions and slides, hindering her ability to fully absorb the material and knowledge. This made her work extra hard to cover the topics and gain the intended skills.

The challenges she experienced clearly show a critical gap in the Kenyan education system and at the learning institutions, the lack of adequate and accessible support for deaf learners, which forces them to work twice as hard to achieve the same outcomes as their hearing peers who have accessibility privilege. It is this reason that led to Monica taking up the advocacy role, championing and advocating for all learning institutions. Education systems need to provide accessible opportunities and ensure that no one is left behind.



Monicah takes deaf learners through a lesson using Digital StoryTimecontent.

2. Turning Barriers into Action

Rather than being discouraged, Monicah displayed huge determination and her strategic action to respond to the challenges she has faced so far in her life is not one of defeat, but of proactive resilience, hard work and continuous advocacy. To overcome these barriers to success, she took a personal decision to work extra hard and fight for the rights of deaf learners which resulted in the following;

- **Self-Study and Peer Support:** Monicah didn't think giving up was an option, she developed an innovative, intensive self-study strategy and leveraged on peer support networks to fill in the gaps left by the inaccessible curriculum that she couldn't reach. Self-reliance became the only cornerstone of Monicah's success and has fuelled her drive to champion advocacy for accessible education for all.
- **Volunteering and Gaining Experience:** Monicah's hands-on experience saw her secure an opportunity to volunteer in a community engagement project by joining the International Citizen Service project implemented by Voluntary Service Overseas (ICS|VSO) in 2018. The project entailed working with the community to advocate for accessible inclusive education hence she was placed as a volunteer at Urafiki unit for Deaf in Nandi county and later, in 2023, she joined the Deaf Child Worldwide (DCW|VSO) project where she was placed at Ngala School for the Deaf as a Learner Support Assistant. She gained practical classroom experience and, more importantly, identified another critical need: supporting children with multiple disabilities.
- **Targeted Training:** This realisation was a pivotal moment for her, Monicah didn't just see a problem; she acted on it. In 2024, she strategically enrolled in the Learner Support Assistant course at the Kenya Institute of Special Education to advance her knowledge and specifically be in a position to address this gap, demonstrating a clear commitment to providing comprehensive care for her learners.

3. Impact and Leadership

Monicah's determination has yielded significant results, personally, professionally and within the community she serves. Her vision for the future is promising and she is working diligently towards realising it.

In January 2022, Monica got an opportunity to work with eKitabu in the adaptation and production of accessible children's edutainment content in Kenyan Sign Language. This experience strengthened her skills in content development, enhanced her understanding of accessible learning materials and deepened her commitment to creating inclusive educational resources for deaf learners. It also exposed her to innovative approaches to using digital media to support language development and literacy.



Monicah in eKitabu's Digital StoryTime Production

In July 2023, she further expanded her impact by joining the Digital StoryTime (DST) project implemented by eKitabu whose aim is to promote language acquisition among deaf children in early grades to support their literacy development. The intervention includes placing deaf teachers fluent in sign language in schools, provision of accessible digital content, training teachers and conducting language assessments. Through her role in the DST project, Monicah has gained extensive experience in working with children with multiple disabilities, mastered skills in using differentiated teaching methods to meet diverse learner needs, effectively integrating DST videos into daily lessons and adapting instructional approaches to ensure clarity. Additionally, she has strengthened her ability to use interactive strategies such as role play to enhance learner engagement and comprehension.

*“ I may teach in silence, but my lessons speak loudly, shaping minds, touching hearts and proving that ability shines brighter than sound.” - **Monicah Muthoni***

Demonstrated Expertise: Monicah's role in the DST project at Tumutumu School for the Deaf in Nyeri is a testament to her acquired skills. She successfully gained "valuable experience in handling deaf children and those with multiple disabilities," an area she identified as a weakness. She now feels comfortable managing her class and has become a key resource for other teachers who seek her support in making concepts more accessible and understandable. She has grown and is a strong pillar in the DST project, acting as an advocate and champion who encourages and trains fellow teachers on the importance and effective use of digital content provided by eKitabu. The school administration has recognised her contribution, noting her impact. Deaf learners increasingly look up to her as a role model.

- **From Student to Advocate:** Monicah's journey reflects a powerful transformation from a student overcoming personal and academic accessibility obstacles into a strong advocate for systemic change. Her core vision is clear and urgent: She strives to see sign language interpreters deployed in all higher learning institutions to facilitate

accessible learning for all and to encourage more deaf teachers to enroll in ECDE to continue improving education for deaf children and act as role models.

- **A Foundation for the Future:** Monicah understands that the foundation for a deaf child's future is built in early education. By advocating for deaf teachers fluent in sign language at this crucial stage and access to interpreters in training institutions, she is working hard to ensure that future generations of deaf learners do not have to face the same inaccessibility issues she did. Her proudest achievement is not just a personal one, but a contribution to a larger movement for equity and accessibility in education.

Monicah is continually growing herself professionally and engaging in various developmental programmes. For example, she completed a four-week programme under the Regional Leadership Center East Africa which works towards empowering educational change makers across east Africa to drive innovation and create solutions for social change in their communities. Through her involvement in the DST project and the Scaling Inclusive Early Learning with Deaf Children Project, Monicah has confirmed that Deaf ECDE learners in PP1 and PP2 often face language and literacy delays due to limited, if any, early exposure to sign language hence expanded these projects to bridge the gap with the initiative; **Sign Literacy Bridge**, which was among the design challenge winners. This initiative aims to transform early childhood education for deaf learners by empowering ECDE teachers and parents through targeted teacher capacity building, the creation of multi-sensory learning materials and strategic stakeholders engagement with tools and training needed to nurture communication and unlock the full potential of the deaf learners. The programme took place at Kenyatta University in partnership with Trevor Noah Foundation which focuses on building knowledge in the curriculum framework, educational policies, design thinking and inclusive education to equip participants with skills needed to create meaningful impact.



Monicah introduces Sign Literacy Bridge project to teachers

Monicah Muthoni is embarking on a new beginning, marked by her recent appointment as a high-level Language Advisor at Deaf Opportunities OutReach (DOOR). This prestigious role is a

direct acknowledgment of her transformative contributions, especially her vital involvement in and expansion of the eKitabu Digital StoryTime (DST) project. Monicah's unwavering commitment to creating accessible opportunities ensures she brings a valuable and critical perspective to DOOR's language strategies, which will solidify the foundation for a more equitable future in Deaf education. She sees this new role as an opportunity to challenge herself professionally and continue implementing the Sign Literacy Bridge project.

Monicah describes this transition as an exciting new chapter: "Moving from teacher to Language Advisor at Deaf Outreach Development is exciting! It means turning my classroom experience into wider impact by promoting language access, inclusion, and a stronger future for the Deaf community. What I learned from the DST/KIX project will support me in my new role to create simple, clear, and engaging bible focused content for deaf learners in Kenya using effective storytelling and visual communication." She believes that new beginnings are always possible if you do not give up.



*"New beginnings are always possible if you do not give up" - **Monicah Muthoni***

Conclusion

Monicah's case is a compelling illustration of how individual resilience can lead to significant professional and personal growth. More importantly, it serves as a call to action for educational institutions to address the persistent lack of accessibility for deaf learners and ensure no one is left behind. Her story proves that investing in and empowering deaf educators from the earliest stages of their training is not just a matter of inclusion—it is essential for building a stronger, more equitable foundation for the future of Deaf education.