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## Deaf Students Face Bullying and a Lack of Sign Language in Ugandan Schools

By Hannah Chi

Washington DC, and Gulu: A recent survey of 15 primary schools in the northern Ugandan district of Gulu suggests that students with a hearing impairment are being forced out of school by bullying from their classmates and a lack of teachers who know sign language.



**The isolation of deafness**

The survey was conducted by the [Gulu Disabled Persons Union \(GDPU\)](#), a leading advocate for disability rights, with help from [Amy Gillespie](#), who is serving as an AP Peace Fellow at the GDPU this summer. Ms Gillespie produced a [blog](#) and [podcast](#) on her findings.

The survey team found that some schools have over 10 pupils with a hearing impediment, but that none employs teachers with sign language. Patrick Ojok, GDPU's program director who led the survey, said this explains why only about 10% of affected students graduate from primary schools in Uganda. A dismal 2% graduate at the secondary level.

"When they come to school they are disturbed by their fellow learners," agreed Thomas

Kinyera, Vice Principal of the Awach Primary School. "Many of them are discouraged. They just need to drop out of school."

The survey appears to raise questions about the policy of inclusivity followed by the Ugandan authorities. Under the Universal Primary Education Policy, adopted in 1997, children with disabilities are integrated into the larger student population.

But GDPU argues that simply integrating students without providing for their special needs merely adds to the pressure of disability. "The hearing-impaired are in inclusive schools, but they are not benefiting from their education," said Patrick Ojok, head of programs as GDPU, who led the school survey. "If they are completely deaf... [they] are wasting their time."



**Patrick Ojok from the GDPU trains teachers about students with special needs**

The problem comes from students and teachers alike. Mr Ojok said that a student with a disability is likely to be "stigmatized" by classmates, and that this can lead to severe bullying. As for teachers, it is expensive and time-consuming to learn sign language, and many schools feel that they lack the funds to invest in a small number of students with disability. As a result, it is left to individual teachers to take the initiative.

Diksen enrolled for free training in sign language at USAID but dropped out because of the pressure of work. He studied hard during his spare time, earned his certificate and is now much in demand in Gulu District.

Diksen, from the GDPU, was inspired to learn sign language by a deaf friend.

"I have the passion," he says. "Not everyone has the mindset towards (the) deaf... You have to be passionate for someone."

None of this is an argument for abandoning an inclusive approach, but GDPU feels that inclusivity must be backed by a school-wide strategy and constant awareness of the special needs of affected students. This can range from acts of common-sense - such as placing students with a hearing impairment in the front row of class - to larger interventions.



**Man with a passion: Dicksen from the GDPU learned sign language in his spare time**

The installation of accessible toilets may offer an example. Helped by The Advocacy Project, GDPU supports a program to install accessible toilets for students with disability in primary schools. [GDPU installed the first toilet last year at the Tochi School](#) and provided extensive training for teachers and students at Tochi to foster a climate of inclusivity and tolerance.

When Ms Gillespie visited Tochi again recently, she was told that bullying against

students with disability has fallen since the installation of the toilet, and that enrollment among such students has risen - suggesting that a similar approach might work with other disabilities, like deafness.

***Hannah Chi studies at the University of Maryland and interns at AP***

- Amy is raising funds to install accessible toilets in Gulu. To donate [click here](#).
- For Amy's photos, [click here](#).
- For more about the Gulu Disabled Persons Union, [click here](#)
- Help us to recruit Peace Fellows like Amy by clicking [here](#).

***Thanks to Humanity United for supporting our 2016 program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network for re-posting our bulletins.***

