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How deaf pupils battle to cope in Yobe conventional schools

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It's Tuesday morning, and pupils and teachers walk-in and out of Mamudo Primary School, obeying bell rings that command them to maximize their school hours.

Amidst chats and shriek of pupils in Primary 3B, Halima Muhammed, 9, was sitting on a bare floor, seemingly completely disconnected from the rest of the class.

At 9:00am, a bell rang, and the whole school echoed with a joyful rhythm "Shantu break!" (short break), but Halima was just busy struggling with her miniature pencil to depict with lines a beautiful flower from her mental image.

"Halima is one of the three deaf students we have in this school. She is very punctual, neat and keen to learn, but always falling grade behind her hearing classmates. In fact she doesn't understand anything in this school," her teacher complained.

A glimpse at the drawing book, our correspondent observed a beautiful flower-like henna design, which many house wives and young girls depend on for livelihood in northern Nigerian settings.

Few minutes later, a charming little girl joined Halima in the class. They look happily together and communicate in a way difficult for a stranger to grasp.

"She's also one of the deaf students we have, and they are biological sisters. We also have another hard-of-hearing girl in primary 5," the teacher added.

The School Headmaster, Malam Iliya Ibrahim, said the deaf pupils were admitted into the school to help them socialise with other kids, deal with idleness at home and relate with other kids in the school to rid stigmatization.

He said there is a special school in Potiskum town (Kwata special) where special education pupils enroll but too far for these helpless deaf pupils to attend.

On how the deaf children understand lesson in his school, he said, "We made sure they sit close to the wall, to listen and feel the sound and echoes whenever the teacher is talking. We also use color chalks to differentiate things and demonstrate images for them to understand. It's difficult teaching them but we



■ Halima drawing in her notebook

are doing our best."

For the few hours spent in the school, our correspondent observed that, after three solid years in the school, Zainab could not write her name or copy note from the black board, but for Halima, she can write beyond her name, but they all struggle to connect in understanding the lessons and the school environment.

One of the teachers, who doesn't want to be named, recalled how bags, books and writing materials donated by UNICEF had encouraged children retention in the school, especially the hard of hearing.

"I remember how Zainab (the younger deaf pupil) became restless when Halima collected the bag ahead of her. In fact the headmaster had to give her before the turn of her classmates to allow peace to reing.

"Not only the deaf students, the entire children in the school were happy with the donation. Even those who absconded for years returned and continued with their study," he said.

This reporter observed that the deaf pupils were learning the hard way, through demonstration and gesticulation from teachers that are not trained special education instructors.

A visit to the deaf children's family home revealed a

pathetic story of how three out of four normal children turned dumb at early stage of their lives.

Hauwa Mohammed, the mother of Halima and Zainab, said all her four children were born normal but turned deaf and dumb in their early ages.

"It's very sad when you born a normal child and suddenly turned dumb. Not once, not twice but thrice. Only God knows why this is happening to us.

"We tried Potiskum General Hospital, traditional and religious institutions to find treatment for them without success. They said they couldn't find anything at the hospital. The last time I took my last born there they diagnosed him and gave me some drugs. Initially, when you call his name he will turn and look at you, but now he is completely dumb. He just always shouts and nothing more," she said.

Hauwa, who spoke in tears, urged government and non-governmental organisations to come to their aid and rescue her children from what she described a "preventable deformity."

She said, if God had destined them to be dumb, government should provide them with sound education to have promising lives ahead.

On her children performance in the conventional school,

Hauwa, said her first daughter Amina always mimics their teachers and can write names but "Zainab doesn't understand anything".

Also on the henna designs that Halima draws, the mother of four said her daughter got that interest from the Hausa film she watches almost on daily basis.

"It surprises me on the first day I saw her doing it. She told me that it was from a particular film she learnt it and am happy she loved what she is doing," she added.

Alhaji Muhammed Jibo, the grandfather of the children said he witnessed the single shout that turned his granddaughter Amina deaf.

He said "I was sitting outside my house when she came to me running, she shouted my name Baba! and that was the last word she uttered to this day.

"I am her maternal grandfather. We don't have deaf in our lineage. I have 31 children and none of them is deaf. That is why we must consider this as destiny and we will continue to seek intervention from God," he said

An expert on special education, Mal Abubakar Ismael, said the crowded nature of their classes and lack of trained special education teachers would thwart their effort, no matter how punctual

they are in attending their classes," he clarified.

He said that the girls need to be admitted into Special School or government to employ special education instructor to teach them in the school.

He appealed to governments, NGOs, philanthropists and well-meaning individuals to assist in supporting the education of these young girls.

"It is a general belief that, if one educates a woman is tantamount to educating the whole society" he added.

Yobe Association of the Deaf has been criticizing the state government over the years of neglect, exclusion and disparity in the provision of social intervention.

However, the state government had declared state of emergency on the educational sector in effort to turn things round.

The chairman, People Living With Disability, (PLWD), Usman Bura Gabai, said they would go round all the schools in Yobe to collect the number deaf and blind studying in conventional schools so as to present their cases to the government.

"With the recent development of state of emergency declared on education, we will take advantage of it and present this to government for action," he said.