

# Voices | Julius Nganji on disability discrimination in schools

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Julius Nganji is an expert in information technology at the University of Hall in the UK, and an award winner for his work in promoting ICTs in schools in Cameroon. Along with a Nigerian partner, he's up to another challenge. They are carrying out a study on disability awareness in schools in Cameroon and Nigeria. "Because our society has not been equipped with this awareness, the tendency has been to exclude disabled people," he says. "Consequently, disabled people have 'special' schools and 'difficult' cases would not normally study in the mainstream schools. They are also being left out of jobs and places in mainstream institutions." In this interview he explains the motive and the expected outcome. You'll also find out to participate.

## What is the purpose of this survey?

Disability is an issue we experience everyday. There are a number of disabled people in our society. Increasingly, disabled students, with high aspirations progress through secondary and high schools into universities. Unfortunately, many people in our society are not aware of disabilities and how to handle issues arising from them, due to various myths. As a result they are unable to meet the needs of disabled people.

Because our society has not been equipped with this awareness, the tendency has been to exclude disabled people. Consequently, disabled people have "special" schools and "difficult" cases would not normally study in the mainstream schools. They are also being left out of jobs and places in mainstream institutions.

In 2008, The Post Newspaper reported that a ministerial decree prevented people with disabilities from applying for the 2008 entrance examination into the 1st Cycle of Ecole Normale Supérieure of the University of Maroua. This shows that the journey to full awareness on in our country is a long one.

This survey will therefore help raise awareness amongst secondary school staff and students on the existence of various disabilities and will enable the government and school management anticipate the recruitment of disabled staff and students by making provision for their needs.

## How is it being carried out?

This survey is being carried out online through a survey instrument, Survey Monkey. Three surveys are being done simultaneously. One for secondary school staff which includes principals and vice principals, bursars, discipline masters/mistresses, teachers and P.T.A. staff. The second survey is for secondary school students only. The third survey is for both secondary school staff and students, which aims to capture the range of visual, auditory, mobility impairments and learning difficulties in secondary schools and how these affect the use of computers in education.

## What are the facts on disability in schools in the two countries?

Preliminary studies and observations have shown that the needs of disabled students are not being met to a satisfactory level in most schools due to ignorance on these issues and lack of capacity.

Additionally, staff and students



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may not be aware of certain disabilities. For instance, at school some students are labelled as "slow learners" which might have been what is known as dyslexia, a form of disability which is defined by the International Dyslexia Association as "a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin, characterised by difficulties with accurate and /or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities". This is just an example of the non obvious disabilities.

On the other hand, in schools, there are students with visual impairments, mobility difficulties (lower and upper limbs), hearing difficulties and a lot more of such disabilities that need to be taken care of for students with such difficulties to be able to study equivalently with their peers. Without any action taken to alleviate their situations, these students are further disadvantaged due to their disability and hence may not perform well. We also find that most schools in these countries lack a disability officer, who should be a member of staff responsible for the welfare of staff and students with disabilities.

## Why the special focus on disability in schools?

We live in a competitive world and everyone has the potential to do great things if we can provide the platform to do this. Our schools every year train young men and women who become leaders in various sectors of our society and even abroad. Very few of these are people with disabilities as their needs are not being met. With the appropriate equipments, disabled people can work like the non-disabled and even perform better. They can be software developers, bankers, lecturers and ministers, just to name a few. We see this in the West where

legislation promotes the right of disabled people to be included in their society.

To change the mindset in our society, we need therefore, to begin with our schools, raising awareness, providing the needed adjustments and building our future generation to be people who have the confidence to excel with or without disability. Through schools, we can get to a level where everyone will be seen as equal, where employers will not eliminate a candidate because of disability, but will allow them through the interview process and recruit based on the skills they need. This will help reduce the disability divide in our society.

## Why have you chosen Cameroon and Nigeria for the study?

I am a Cameroonian and my collaborator Shawulu Nggada is from Nigeria and we are both interested in the same subject and want to begin with our countries before extending the survey elsewhere as the need arises. Also, Cameroon being a smaller country with some French and English traditions could be representative of Francophone Africa. Nigeria is the most populous nation in Africa and like Cameroon also has many scholars who have studied abroad and have been exposed to the management of disability issues in academic institutions in the West. Being neighbouring countries, there might be some relationships in the results which could be due to cultural similarities.

## How long would the survey last? What would the results be used for?

This survey will run from 24 August to 24 November 2010 to give school staff and students enough time to participate. The results will

be used to help inform decisions on dealing with disabilities in secondary school education in both countries. Recommendations from the survey will help the government and school management decide what assistive or adaptive technologies might be needed for schools with disabled students using computers. The results may also be published in scientific journals in which case will be anonymous as schools will not be identified.

## Why is it important for teachers to participate?

Teachers and school administration are interested in learning new ways to help their students improve their performance. This might help them gain more awareness on how to teach students with disabilities and to improve their results. Teachers will be able to educate other students on disability issues and help reduce any stigma associated with it. They are ideal for raising the confidence of disabled students and encouraging them to become what they aspire to be in future.

## How can one participate?

You will need an internet connection as the survey is being done online. The three surveys could be accessed as follows:

- Secondary school staff can take the survey online through <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/disability-staff>
- Secondary school students can take the survey online through <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/disability-students>
- All secondary school staff and students can participate in a 3rd survey which will assess the range of visual, auditory and mobility difficulties through <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/disability-diagnosis>

## Is there any other thing about the survey you want to say?

This survey will be very helpful to Cameroon and might help make secondary education a better experience for both staff and students. We really value your opinion and want to hear from you today. We therefore call on everyone to be involved. This survey is not only for disabled students and staff. Secondary students and staff in all regions and urban/rural areas should participate today through the links mentioned above. Non secondary school students and staff could pass on the information to those eligible to participate. Together, let us improve the quality of education we provide in order to build a better society for today and tomorrow.