

EDUCATING CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT: DO TEACHERS AND PARENTS SUBSCRIBE TO A COMMON PARADIGM?

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ABSTRACT

Educational Psychology has made strides in helping educators to understand the physical, cognitive and emotional development of children including children with disabilities¹. Although the education of mentally, emotionally and physically challenged students has taken centre stage, traditional beliefs have persisted in influencing the education of children with special needs. Thus this article dwells on the negative attitudes that parents have towards the education of their children with special needs, especially those with cerebral palsy. These negative attitudes have their origins in traditional African culture where the causes on many disabilities were not well understood; hence having a disabled family member was regarded as taboo. Empirical investigation has shown that negative traditional parental attitudes, perceptions and beliefs impact unfavourably in the education of children with disabilities. Interestingly parents have little faith in the work of educational psychologists, preferring to consult traditional healers. Would equipping traditional healers with psychological knowledge make the difference?

Keywords: Zimbabwe, Special Needs Education, Disabilities, Educational Psychology, Traditional beliefs

INTRODUCTION

There is no consensus on the meaning of 'Special Needs'. Actually several perspectives have been advanced ranging from one which understands special needs in terms of the characteristics of the "disabled" individual, to those which, while acknowledging differences between individual children does not view these differences alone as adequately accounting for the educational failure of children (Avramidis et al 2000). Special needs have also been linked to the concept of disability, which in itself has been explained through various paradigms such as post modernism, historical-materialism, interpretivism, and functionalism (Gabel and Peters 2004). The bottom line is that children with disabilities have special needs and in this article, special needs education shall be used to refer to the education of children with various disabilities.

¹ The term children with disabilities refers to exceptional children who have physical, mental, behavioral or sensory characteristics that differ from the majority of children such that they require special education and related services to develop their full potential. According to Burden (2000) these are children with impairments e.g. visual, hearing, or physical which restrict them from full and equal participation in society.

Traditional African Views² of disability

In traditional African society, the birth of a child with any form of disability brings a lot of emotional stress to family members as a result of the stigma attached to such a condition. Traditionally, disability was regarded to be the work of mythical Gods or the presence of the evil and witchcraft (Sello, Levitz and Kamper 1997). Some parents believed that disability is a punishment from the ancestors for having transgressed the spiritual or moral values of society. The assumption of traditional African philosophies is that the birth of a child with disability is a bad omen or an act of bewitchment (Zindi 1997). This is so because the disabled child is viewed as someone who will not bring fortune into the family as argued by Sanders (1985) in Kapp (1994). From a Zimbabwean cultural perspective, the child was and is still seen as an important asset for the family. Having a child fulfills societal expectations of procreation and helps to strengthen the clan and nation. For some parents, the child has always been seen as a source of income, as well as financial gain through the payment of lobola³ for their daughters. Thus a disabled child, especially the cerebral palsied may not marry or work for the family and in such situations, the parents often respond negatively to the situation. Very few parents have been able to handle the trauma that comes with the birth of a disabled child. However as pointed out by Levitz (1991) the adjustment and reactions that those parents of children with disabilities experience do not necessarily manifest at the same degree in all parents, but do manifest in most of them. In some families a child with a disability is regarded as a demon, possessed by a demon or bad omen to the entire clan. The situation is perceived as a punishment from God for the evil doings committed either by parents or by their ancestors, hence some parents actually think it is shameful to have a disabled child around (Chimedza and Peters 2000). In some instances the occurrence of the condition has often led to divorce, propelled by the belief that such children are unclean, inferior and unworthy for an education (Chimedza and Peters 2000). Yet some families do regard disability as a problem that can be solved although they may exhibit disbelief, shock, rejection, mourning, anger, embarrassment and frustration as argued by Sello (1995), though of course the parents' reactions may differ from culture to culture. In some African cultures parents' reactions depend on the size of the family, the sex of the child, religion and the degree of severity of the child's ability. These reactions provided some assistance in the understanding of parental attitudes⁴ to children's disabilities as is the case of children with cerebral palsy in a research that was done in Bulawayo Zimbabwe to be discussed later on.

Cultures share a lot of similarities worldwide. The perception of disability discussed earlier is also evident from the biblical times and other ancient civilizations, and with the universal influence of Christianity, this has resulted in a negative feedback mechanism into the African traditional beliefs. People in biblical times commonly viewed those with disabilities as sinful, demon-possessed, separate from the rest of humanity, and "unclean." Within this moral model, the place of disability has been displayed as manifestation of sin or of God's displeasure, a test or challenge for nondisabled people, an opportunity for nondisabled people to achieve salvation through serving disabled people, and an aberration in nature's harmony (Mackelprang 2010) and hence charity and ostracism have been used as typical mechanisms to assist and to control people "afflicted" with disabilities (Mackelprang 2010). Historically

² Traditional African views referred to in this article are those of the various indigenous societies found in Zimbabwe mainly the Shona and Ndebele.

³ Bride price

⁴ An attitude is defined as an acquired feeling, belief or disposition that is shown in the way a person response to another person, object or experience (Sello, Livitz and Kemper 1997).

then, people with disabilities have been stigmatized, stereotyped, and discriminated against (Garner & Joe, 1987; Livneh, 1994 in Treloar 2000).

Educational Psychology: Friend or Foe?

An attitude will always involve a relationship and will involve a certain disposition or action as argued by Van den Aardweg and Van den Aardweg (1994). Negative and discriminatory attitudes towards differences resulting from prejudice against learners on the basis of disability manifest themselves as barriers to learning and development. Traditionally in many instances the education of children with disabilities is affected by physical and psychological conditions in the home (Burden 2000). The traditional perspectives provide the background for the interpretation of findings of empirical survey into the attitudes of parents as exemplified by a study in Bulawayo Zimbabwe on the education of children with disabilities. Zimbabwe has a dual society; the educated middle class whose values and beliefs are western and the majority less educated but literate, who value traditional beliefs. Educationists and other professionals make up the bulk of the middle class and these are the people who subscribe to Psychological explanations to educational problems. Thus in most cases the school is likely to call on the services of the Schools Psychological Services (SPS), a department in the Ministry of Education and Culture, for the diagnosis and advice on various problems relating to special needs education. However, many parents tend to ignore the advice from SPS in favour of advice given by traditional healers and religious prophets. Unfortunately, such advice is nothing nearer to the material, biological and medical conditions affecting the child. Thus, those who have faith in Psychologists are the black middle class, and those of European and Asian origin, who constitute a small percentage of the whole population. The other fact is that those who make use of the SPS are the urban dwellers, maybe as a result of their proximity to the service. Probably it is high time that it becomes mandatory for traditional healers to undergo a basic course in psychology, since this group of people has a fundamental influence on a large section of the Zimbabwean society. One could dismiss this as highly unlikely, if not impossible. However, taking into account the fact that traditional healers are issued with licences in order to practise, it would be easier to tie such a condition to the issuance of a practising licence. In short, education is not benefiting much from the services of the SPS. Much benefit could only be derived if traditional healers are urged to refer cases that need psychological attention to relevant institutions.

Influence of antecedent Socio-economic conditions

Many parents of children with disabilities are restricted in their ability to help because of poverty. They are unable to send their children to expensive schools that can rehabilitate their disabled children (Chronicle 2005). Some of them are unable to meet the high travelling expenses to and from the school since such children would need special transport. Generally poverty prevents parents from participating in school activities aimed at mitigating disability impact and thus they view disability as increasing their burden to participate in school activities. This inevitably creates a negative attitude towards the education of children with disabilities.

Another dimension is the type of treatment parents receive from the teaching staff. Usually, the hidden message is that teachers may not value the participation of parents in school disability mitigating activities as argued by Sello (1995). This could be the result of the fact that both side are aware that they operate from different and irreconcilable perspectives on disability. Although on paper the structure of the school management in special schools allows for parental participation, in reality parental participation may be low. The following

report looks into the attitudes of parents whose children have cerebral palsy, towards the education of such children.

EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE ATTITUDES OF PARENTS IN BULAWAYO TOWARDS THE EDUCATION OF CHILDREN WITH CEREBRAL PALSY⁵

The study involving children with cerebral palsy was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, this disability is a severe type physical and congenital disorder that many parents fail to comprehend. Secondly, the choice was also influenced by the researchers' deep understanding of its biological causes as well as the psychological effects on the education of children who have such a condition. Lastly, the availability of special schools in Bulawayo that cater for children with this condition was also a stimulant for such a research. The main aim was to establish parental attitudes towards the education of these children. It was thought that attitudes are the most influential aspect motivating actions toward a particular disposition.

RESEARCH METHOD

A qualitative investigation was undertaken. A purposive sample of ten parents, five teachers and two social workers was chosen. The parents and teachers were selected from two special schools in Bulawayo. All the parents interviewed have children with cerebral palsy. The five teachers chosen were those studying for the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) Special Education degree with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). Involving teachers, parents and social workers would help get reliable information through cross – checking.

In trying to investigate the attitudes of parents in Bulawayo an interview guide based on the following questions was prepared to guide the empirical survey:

1. How do traditional beliefs influence response to disability and education of the disabled?
2. How do parents in Bulawayo respond to children with cerebral palsy?
3. How do attitudes of parents of Bulawayo influence the education of their children with cerebral palsy?

The advantage of using a structured interview was its ability to be able to provide important background information on participants/respondents whilst at the same time giving them an opportunity to express their views freely about educating children with cerebral palsy. The researchers also felt that interviews were an important instrument if they were to access information about feelings, intentions, beliefs, knowledge and opinions. All interviews were recorded on tape and later transcribed in to text scripts. Though the sample was small, it took a fairly long time to transcribe and analyse the data to identify emerging issues, views, concepts, and recurring patterns sought through the interview guide.

⁵ Cerebral palsy can be described as a physical disability resulting from damage to or a failure to develop of a part of the brain before the brain could attain its maturity. (Kapp 1994)

FINDINGS FROM THE INVESTIGATION

Parents' knowledge about cerebral palsy

Some of the parents interviewed indicated that they did not know the causes, effects and prevention of cerebral palsy. Those who had consulted traditional healers were made to believe that the disability was as a result of witch craft or evil spirits. Another issue that emerged was that the disability was associated with demons and bad omen. Thus these beliefs provided meaning for their experiences with disabled children and hence it affected how they responded to disability issues. A few parents believed that the disability has a natural cause and hence the children with cerebral palsy need a special place for good care (rehabilitation) as early as possible. These are the parents who consulted medical doctors for the rehabilitation of their children at an early stage.

Problems associated with caring for a child with disabilities:

An important emerging issue was that children with cerebral palsy require a lot of financial support for their rehabilitation. This was causing a lot of financial strain in the families of all the ten parents interviewed. This led to the evident manifestation of negative attitudes towards the child with cerebral palsy. Another issue that came up is that of discrimination. The parents did not see it as discrimination but the practice confirms it so. For example, preference for the payment of school fees is given for children without disabilities before those living with the disability. Although the explanation is to pay for those whose fees is cheaper first, this really amounts to discrimination. Eventually this created negative attitudes among the siblings who would see the child with cerebral palsy as second class, while at the same time viewing him or her as one who is using more financial resources at the expense of the welfare of the other children. However all the parents expressed that these disabled children were an integral part of their families.

It also emerged that in homes where house maids were employed, children with disabilities did not receive proper care, especially when their parents would have gone to work. The child is sometimes left alone, without food or proper care. Children with mobility problems were the most affected and more frustrated. Some parents have ended overprotecting the child and this has affected his/her development of independence. Such treatment disrupts the efforts by the special school.

Parents' involvement in their children's education

The research unearthed a trend that indicated that at times parents are not able to send their children continuously to school. One parent had failed to send her child to school at one point due to financial problems. Other parents indicated that they were not fully involved in what was happening at school or were not sure as to how they could get involved. However, it was also evident that some parents lacked interest in the education of their children with cerebral palsy, only interacting with the school only when invited for consultation. Some even failed to go for such consultations. One point worth noting is that most parents complained that the special schools are far away. This is not surprising since disabled children are few, it also follows that the schools are few.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers' suggestions on parental attitudes towards children with cerebral palsy

Through the research, teachers managed to make several suggestions to affected parents. Firstly, parents should be committed to their children's education. They should be compelled to visit the school regularly so as to create enabling conditions for the acceptance of their children in special schools. Teachers also encouraged parents to accompany their children during class/ school outings. This would enable a seamless effort in standardising the caring and handling of the children at both home and school. Such a scenario would be possible if the child attends the nearest special school.

Teachers and social workers also recommended that their visits to the homes of the children with cerebral palsy should be more frequent in order to marry the home and the school environment. Parents must not view such school routines with suspicion. Lastly parents should shun away cultural values that see disabled children as bad omen in their lives.

However, from this study, the following recommendations may also be made to solve problems of parental attitudes towards children with cerebral palsy.

- a. Efforts to change the negative attitudes towards the education of children with disabilities e.g. those with cerebral palsy, should be effected through strong parent –teacher associations at special schools.
- b. Both teachers and parents should show respect towards the rights of disabled children. We are all equal as human beings not withstanding our physical condition or disposition. Thus consultation days should be turned into a fruitful forum for the benefit of education children with disabilities for the special school. These discussions should encourage the parents to participate fully in the education of their children.
- c. It could be worthwhile to involve traditional healers in the education of children with disabilities by inviting them to special schools for discussions with teachers and parents concerning children with disabilities. That could give them an insight into the real causes and handling of these disabilities

CONCLUSION

It is clear from this research that parents of children with cerebral palsy have negative attitudes towards the education of their own children most probably as a result of traditional beliefs that create non-supportive parental behaviours. This could be a result of an educational system that is far removed from societal issues and problems. Zimbabwe's education has always been regarded as cascading irrelevant and foreign knowledge and skills, hence many traditionalist have failed to have faith in modern knowledge. Maybe it is high time that education practitioners try to tap the vast indigenous knowledge systems and integrate them into the education system to maintain relevancy and accountability, hence somewhere in the article, we suggest that traditional healers who have remained respected opinion leaders in society, should not only be exposed to the basic tenets of modern disability issues, but could also be invited to special schools so that they learn about education while others learn from them. In short, teachers and parents are not eating from the same plate. They both subscribe to different and contrasting paradigms as far as disability issues are concerned. Disability is artificially a modern phenomenon. Traditionally, the African culture had a way of dealing

with disability. Oral tradition says most disabled children, including twins were killed at birth and hence catering for such a group was not a problem since they rarely existed as a group. The existence of this group has now caught traditional society unawares. Therefore attitudinal change is paramount and needed. Despite the fact that the rights of the disabled people have changed a lot in Zimbabwe politically, culminating into the passing of Disabled Persons Act of 1992, (see Chimedza and Peters 1999, 2000), little has changed in some attitudes like the parents' attitude toward how they view education of disabled children or children with special needs.

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