

# Myth Driven Discrimination of Learners with Visual Impairments. An Analysis of Implications on 21st Century Education System

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study sought to investigate myths about visual impairment and their implications on the education of learners. Thirty-four (34) participants were selected through purposive (heterogeneous) sampling from one of the government schools in Mufulira district that has learners with visual impairment. An interview guide and a focus group discussion guide were employed as data collection tools and data were analysed using thematic approach. The study revealed that myths such as improper conduct, generational curses of the ancestors, demonic possession and punishment from God or gods led to prejudice, exclusion, labelling, mockery, discrimination, absenteeism, and bullying negatively influenced the education of learners with visual impairment. The study recommends that sensitisation on the learners with visual impairment among school peers and surrounding communities, promotion of inclusive learning to reduce on the myths about visual impairment.

**Key words:** Myths, Visual impairment, education and Learners.

## INTRODUCTION

The survival of persons with visual impairments is even today threatened by myths, attitudes, prejudices and beliefs, common among non-disabled people (World Health Organisation, 2010). Although the social inclusion of persons with visual impairments has improved over the last few years, there is still, unfortunately, a number of social barriers related to myths about visual impairments still exist (Mandyata, 2002).

The myths associated with visual impairment have a profound effect on the education of learners with visual impairments. Some myths identified by Roy & Mackay (2002) were that learners with visual impairments educated in general classrooms may not get the support they needed. Secondly, learners with visual impairments do better when they are educated in separate classrooms and learners with visual impairments are too disruptive when included in a general classroom.

Flourishing even in our modern times is that most of stereotypes and myths still convey negative impressions on an individual or a group of people. In a study by (Inguanzo, 2017) on demystifying and dispelling stereotypes and myths related to visual impairment, it was learnt that lack of knowledge about learners with Visual Impairment has allowed myths and overtly negative stereotypes to frequently remain unchallenged, thereby diminishing the talent and achievements inherent in these learners with impaired vision

Some learners with visual impairment face extreme poverty, exclusion, discrimination in society as well as being denied basic services offered to their peers without disabilities (Kalabula, 2000). This has been partly due to myths surrounding visual impairment in schools and society at large. Myths about visual impairment are barriers in the area of accessing education, support from family members, as well as discrimination

within and outside the institution of education due to fear, lack of understanding and prejudice (Setume, (2016).

Studies show that children born with visual impairment in some families are usually faced with challenges at different stages from family members such as denial, anger, depression and acceptance (Muzata et al 2019; Simalalo, & Hambulo, (2019). Parents may react with psychological stress, a feeling of loss and low self-esteem. Parents may direct their anger towards others, they may feel guilt that the child was a punishment for a past sin. While other families may end up going through divorce. The negative attitude towards children with disabilities especially learners with visual impairments led to stigmatisation which eventually affected their performance at school (Monk, 2008).

Learners with visual impairment may fail to achieve academically because of the myths that surround them in the community and the schools where they are found. Although myths continue to be told even today, their narratives remain that of pre-medieval times of a sacred nature as others regard and celebrate myths as a source of spiritual growth, Hansen (2002) regard them as anciently disputed stories full of falsehoods hence dead.

Roy & Mackay (2002) in South Africa revealed that many sighted learners in schools had negative attitudes towards learners with visual impairment. Further, learners with visual impairment indicated that they were often teased, laughed at, joked about and were made fun of while some learners treated them well. This influenced learner with visual impairment to avoid attending classes on a daily basis.

Simon (2010) carried out a study on the provision of learning support to learners with visual impairment in Botswana which revealed that teachers and learners' attitudes contributed to the academic performance of learners with visual impairment. Teachers were the major agents whose role can either have negative or positive impact on a child. A teacher with a negative attitude would have negative views about teaching and interest on lessons, marking and guiding learners on the hands-on experience. On the other hand, learners who are not visually impaired may also contribute to the poor performance of learners with visual impairment through rejection during the group work activities when support is not received.

The research sought to ascertain myths about visual impairment and their perceived implications.

### **Theoretical Lens for the Study**

We considered the Social Identity Theory formulated by social psychologist Henri Taifel and John Turner (1979) guided this study. The theory is a Social Psychology theory that contends that humans possess the sense of social identity to be able to relate to a group they belong to. However, social identity is more positive when the group accepts someone than when he or she is rejected. People belong to their families, neighbourhood, church, and other social groupings. The theory says, the social world is divided into two; 'them' and 'us', ways of categorising people into social groups. In such a division, the in-group which is made up of the 'us' may discriminate against the out-group which is made up of 'them'. The central hypothesis of social identity theory is that group members of an in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus enhancing their self-image (McLeod, 2008). Although stereotyping may be both positive and negative, most stereotyping is negative (McLeod, 2015). In this study, negative myths are likely to isolate individuals with disabilities from their own families and communities. Myths are or less stereotypical. Negative myths can exclude people from their own communities and from accessing social services. By use of negative language, persons with disabilities feel they are not part of the community in which they live because the social classes created there in are discriminatory. They feel they are worthless and are not considered as part of the productive society for they are seen as: 'that one is disabled; he or she cannot do anything'. Such myths have more negative implications on the individuals with disabilities

because they influence the way they look at themselves thereby affecting their self-concept and esteem.

### **Statement of the problem**

Learners with visual impairment face extreme poverty, exclusion, discrimination in society and education most of which is driven by myths about visual impairments. (Kalabula, 2000). Myths about visual impairment, which create barriers in access to education, support from family members, are mainly due to fear, lack of understanding and prejudice (Kearney, 2009). This study sought to ascertain the implications of myth driven discrimination and its impact on education of learners with visual impairments.

### **Objectives of the Study**

To establish the myths about visual impairment in the study school.

To describe the implications of myths on the learners with visual impairment in school.

## **METHODS**

### **Design and Sample**

This study situates itself within a qualitative research methodology which employed a descriptive case study on thirty four (34) purposively selected participants. The distribution was one head teacher-female (HT), one Deputy Head Teacher-male (DHT), two specialist teachers (TS-01 male, TS-02 female), ten learners with visual impairment five boys and five girls coded from learner with visual impairment one to number ten as (LVI-01 – LVI-10), ten learners without visual impairment; five boys and five girls coded as (LWVI-01 to LWVI-10), five parents of learners with visual impairment three females and two males coded as (PRT-01 to PRT-05), five ordinary community neighbours to learners with visual impairment three males and two females coded as (CM-01 – CM-05). The major purpose for using the descriptive research was to describe the state of affairs as it existed within the school under study.

### **Study instrument and data collection**

The two sources of data were Interviews and focus group discussions. Interviews were used on the Head teacher, Deputy Head teacher, Specialist teachers who taught learners with visual impairment, parents of learners with visual impairment and community members who were neighbours of learners with visual impairment within Mufulira district. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to obtain primary data from learners with visual impairment (FGD1) and learners without visual impairment (FGDs2). A voice recorder was used to record the interviews and focus group discussions in the school and the community members within the neighbourhood.

### **Data analysis**

Data were analysed in which transcription of verbatim were clustered into themes by creating meaningful descriptions. Data were reviewed in relation to coded data and the entire dataset. This was done to ascertain if the themes were relevant in relation to the myths about visual impairment: implications on the education of learners with visual impairment. The study created themes in relation to the aim of the study.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Introductory letter and clearance were obtained from the University of Zambia ethics committee. Informed consent was sought from all participants. The study adhered to the principle of confidentiality, anonymity,

## FINDINGS

### Mythical understanding of visual impairments

Understanding of visual impairments is driven by belief systems that have been perpetuated over time. The findings in the study seem not to be very different from the scholars that have written about visual impairments.

### Improper conduct

The themes related to the causes of visual impairment centred mainly on myths caused by improper conduct by the visually impairment learner. Improper conduct such as peeping through to watch elders bathing (CM-2), a community member mentioned that:

*These learners who became visually impaired after they were born it was because of peeping to see the nakedness of elders as they bath. How could one become blind when he was born with sight? This is the outcome of indiscipline.*

During (FGD) (FGD2, LWVI-4), a learner without visual impairment stated that:

*They saw the nakedness of elderly people while they were bathing.*

However, a few other participants provided real causes of visual impairment and they noted that expectant mother's health and nutritional level were related to baby's well-being. Participant (TS-02), a teacher added that:

*There are those of us who never visit the hospital throughout the entire period of pregnancy, this may result in a child born with visual impairment. Therefore, to me diet is very important to someone who is pregnant.*

Similarly, FGD1, LVI-1, a learner with visual impairment stated that:

*translated as we were born with the visual impairment. All I know is visual impairment just comes and any one can become impaired or born impaired, visual impairment has nothing to do with the diet.*

### Curses

The study found out that visual impairment was seen as generational curses of the ancestors; where a family was cursed for something one of their parents or grandparents had done in the past. In one case, the parent believed that she was cursed because she previously had quarrels with the elderly people before she conceived. (PRT02), a parent expressed that:

*When I was pregnant, I had a fight with my grandfather for refusing to stay with him in the village. Two of my relatives have children who are visually impaired and one of my aunties is as well visually impaired.*

In the (FGD1, LVI-8), a learner with visual impairment mentioned that:

*Our friends without visual impairment told us that, their parents told them that visual impairment was as a curse of ancestor. Your parents were cursed because they violated their ancestors. Most of the time we are in class our friends without visual impairment remind us of our impairment.*

### Demonic possession

Learners with visual impairment were seen to be demon possessed and these demons make them do things without being aided and make them see at night.

(HT), a head teacher stated that:

*If a woman was possessed with demonic spirits during pregnancy, the child maybe born with visual impairment, the child will always be considered to be a product of demons in the study school especial when the child with visual impairment performs well.*

While a CM-04, a community member added saying:

*These learners with visual impairment have demons or evil spirit which make them see at night.*

The above myth of learners with visual impairment had demons was affirmed by TS-02, a teacher and TS-01, a teacher stating that:

*Learners with visual impairment have demons/evil spirit which make them see at night. Their peers who are non-visual impaired fear to associate with them because they feel they come from demonic world.*

### **Punishment from God**

Visual impairment was also viewed as a punishment from God or gods sins, such as teasing someone with visual impairment or disobeying God by not giving enough to the church or sharing with the vulnerable in society, (CM-3), a community member stated that:

*A family that has a child with a visual impairment was being punished by God for sins they may have committed. These sins ranged from teasing someone with a visual impairment, to disobeying God, not giving enough to the church or not sharing with the vulnerable in society.*

A different view by participant (TS-01), a teacher agued saying:

*I don't believe the myth that says visual impairment is a punishment from God, all I know is that visual impairment is a gift from God. The same myth has made learners without visual impairment not to associate themselves with learners with visual impairment because they feel these learners are a product of punishment from God and feel they cannot interact with them*

TS-02, a teacher added saying:

*Visual impairment may be a punishment from God as parents may have laughed at someone who was visually impaired as they were pregnant*

Interesting enough it was revealed that myths differ from one culture to another. (TS-01), a teacher stated that:

*There are different tribes in Zambia each one with its own beliefs, for instance, if a mother is visually impaired even the children will be visually impaired and their generation will be people with visual impairment.*

### **Perceived implications on inclusion of learners with visual impairments**

Learners with visual impairment were affected by prejudice, labelling and absenteeism

#### **Prejudice**

From the one-on-one and focus group interviews, it was evident that prejudice arose from myths that



affected learning. FGD1, LVI-4, a learner with visual impairment lamented that:

*People judge us before seeing what we are able to do they feel we cannot be educated. Education is for persons who have sight*

TS01, a teacher was in support of LVI-4, a learner with visual impairment from FGD1 when stating that:

*People judge them wrongly without concentrating on what these learners can do. Our community is full of negatives than positives, the myths about visual impairment has brought more harm than good when it comes to the learners with visual impairment receiving education.*

### **Negative labels**

Labelling and name calling of the learners with visual impairment made them feel different from everyone around them and if not addressed may lead them not to participant in day to day activities.

In FGD1, LVI-3, a learner with visual impairment had this to say:

*They call us names like “mulifipuba you are fools”, “indoshi– witches”, “impofu- blind people, “PK Chishala.” Referring to the late musician PK Chishala who was visually impaired, all you will do in life is to become musician. You want to answer a question posed by the teacher, someone will just shout! “ PK Chishala”, and how do you learn in such an environment, this is so discouraging with such negative people.*

The above statement was confirmed by FGD2, LWVI-5, a learner without visual impairment who stated that:

*Our friends with visual impairment are called by various names because of them being visually impaired. These labels make them dislike school. One of my friends was telling me that, “ nalalekafyeisukuluamashinaayabiyachilamo ” translated as, I will just stop school because of the negative names given to me are too much.*

FGD1, LVI-4, a learner with visual lamented that they were called names because of the impairment they had:

*They say we have demons that curses our friends no wonder some of them cannot perform well we as visual impaired learners are responsible for that; and that we operate in the spiritual world and some of our friends fear to interact with us at school, saying we are demon possessed and don't deserve to be school.*

### **Absenteeism**

The findings showed that absenteeism of the learners with visual impairment was the order of the day. These learners hated going to school on a daily basis because of what other people say about them and also feared to be laughed at because of their impairment. In FGD1, LVI-1, a learner with visual impairment stated that:

*We don't like coming to school because of what other people say about us, we would love to be home than being here because life has not been easy for us, we are safer to be home than school. We fear being ridiculed.*

*This is sad when you expect other people to encourage you and all you hear is something that is not constructive.*

DHT, a deputy head teacher revealed that:

*There is too much absenteeism on learners with visual impairment, they are not given support by some teachers and other learners not forgetting their parents who seemingly not to support the education of their children instead they hide their children from public eye as they fear to be laughed at that they have a child with visual impairment.*

FGD1- LVI-8, a learner with visual impairment stated that:

*They treat us good while some of them tease us, make funny of us while others make jokes of us because we cannot see. This makes us uncomfortable to learn with them because we feel we are not part of them, we are demoralized and if this is not addressed it can result in a large number of dropouts. For me I feel it is a share waste of time coming to school where some people don't value our existence.*

TS-02, a teacher added to say:

*Sleeping with a person with visual impairment can cure HIV and AIDS, or bring good luck to people with businesses this myth affects learners with visual impairment attending classes as their body parts are being haunted.*

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

Myths about visual impairment are ongoing and have affected learners with visual impairment. Although (Dart, 2006) found that, myths are similar and held worldwide including Zambia these myths to date have no scientific backing. Meanwhile, the study participants reported that visual impairment comes because of parental promiscuity. A woman having so many relationships with other men while pregnant led to a woman giving birth to a child with visual impairment. This corresponds (Dart, 2006) who contended that, disability was believed to be a result of promiscuity of the mother. This was also similar to what (Zimba & Haihambo, 2004) stated that, having sex with a man other than the father of the child led to a woman giving birth to a child with disabilities. This finding was supported by (Haihambo & Lightfoot, 2010) who stated that sexual relations with a woman with visual impairment brings good luck especially business investments. This is not true but anciently disputed stories full of falsehoods.

The finding of this study showing that visual impairment is caused by diet such as eating too much fish do not reflect the scientific view of the cause of visual impairment. Meanwhile (Serra *et al.*, 2010) found that, there is no nutritional status recorded previously published about dietary as the cause of visual impairment. The truth of the matter is that visual impairment is caused by diseases such as cataracts, glaucoma, trachoma and other diseases.

Participants also held a view that visual impairment was a result of witchcraft, which appears to be one of the most persistent finding in a number of studies such as (Mostert, 2016) who stated that disability was attributed to witchcraft and magic in either the family or jealous neighbours. Meanwhile (Baker, 2010) revealed that a child with visual impairment was bewitched before he or she was born. The study showed that, some body parts of learners with visual impairment were used for charms like those who wanted to become rich. This finding was similar to that of (Haihambo, 2010) who revealed that body parts of people with visual impairment made potent charms that made people rich and successful, in which persons with visual impairments were killed. Their body parts were being haunted hence learners with visual impairment shunned classes, as they feared for their lives. If anything, the policy documents should indicate that, all discriminatory practices and activities that lead to exclusion of learners with visual impairment from school should be punishable by law.

Another view to explain cause of visual impairment was that the condition was a result of a curse of

ancestors. This was also seen as generational curses of the ancestors such that, a family could have been cursed for something one of their parents or grandparents had done in the past. This assertion was in line with the African Child Forum (2011) which stated that disability was considered a curse from god or ancestors for, violation of societal norms, offenses against the gods of the land, breaking the law family, and adultery. While (Groce & McGeown, 2013) agreed with the above assertion that, myths about disability of the learners with impairment relate to ancestral curse. While in other studies like that of (Mpofu, & Lee, 2008) it was indicated that, impairment was an ancestor's curse in the family and caused by the community not only by gods but also as generational whereby a family was cursed for something one of their parents or grandparents had done in the past or for not doing what was culturally expected of them. The above listed myths have negative connotation on the learners with visual impairment, making them feel they are different from everyone around them.

Visual impairment was also associated to demon or spirits. This finding was similar to the one by (Gannotti & Handwerker, 2001) who stated that, a woman was possessed with demonic spirits during pregnancy, might bear a child with visual impairment. This myth led to teachers who were not trained in teaching learners with visual impairment not to want to associate themselves with such learners. While some learners feared to learn with visual impaired learners as they believed that these learners had demons or spirits. The myth that visual impairment is because of demons or spirits from has been documented in the bible in the book of Luke chapter 8 vs 39 where Jesus casted out the demons. However, these are simply religious beliefs, which have unfortunately continued to be spread by religious groups. The linkage between belief and science is still a battle in many communities such as the one under study.

Visual impairment was understood to be a punishment from the gods for sins committed by parents. The finding was in line with (Groce & McGeown, 2013) who mentioned that, myths about disability of the learners with disabilities related to punishment from god, as an act of God's will. This was also similar with (Haihambo, 2004) who stated that, disability was a punishment from God that had a child with visually impaired for the sins committed. While Chandler and Worsfold (2013) indicated that, people with visual impairment were seen as a punishment from the gods. A study by (Jernigan, 1997) indicate that, visual impairment was a medical condition, which could involve cell mutation.

### **Implications on access and participation in education**

Myths brought about labelling of learners with visual impairments with offensive tags. The learners were called names like "*ifipuba* – fools", "*indoshi* –witches", "*impofu* – blind -PK Chishala the late musician who was blind". Learners with visual impairment were subjected to name-calling, especially when they visited communities where there were no people with the impairment According to Gillman, Heyman and Swain (2000), a label can lead to social disadvantage and exclusion from society and school. Truthfully speaking labelling defeats, the purpose of education of learners with visual impairment inclusive education in particular. Lauchlan & Boyle, (2007) revealed that labels have a tendency to stay on stay with an individual throughout their entire life and the possibility of negative connotations regarding personal preferences such as social relationship as well as the effects on self-esteem. Labels perpetuate barriers to inclusion in communities, societies and schools. Derogatory names used to refer to a person with disability especially a person with visual impairment that symbolise uselessness and inhumanity always affect a learner with an impairment academically such that learners are not free to participate fully to the expectation (Diken 2006, Muzata, 2019). Learners were not addressed by or even known by their names, but rather were referred to by their disability. The labelling of negative names on learners with visual impairment make them feel different from everyone around them, hence failing to participate in day-to-day activities. The realisation that one is different from the others need not bring a sad experience in the life of a child with a visual impairment. However, this can be achieved when communities learn to celebrate diversity in people.

The study showed that peers without visual impairment and elderly people in the community subjected



learners with visual impairment to mockery. The mockery often led to the children with visual impairment being kept out of the public eye by some parents. This finding was similar to that of Diken (2006) indicated that, learners with visual impairment were mocked, the mockery led to rejection and abuse which could be physical or emotional abuse. Meanwhile Silberman (2008) in his research indicated that, mockery had a negative impact on the education of learners with visual impairment as many sighted learners in a school often teased, joked about and made fun of them while some learners would treat them well. This contributed to learners doubting their self-worth hence miss classes on daily basis, a situation linked to low academic performance serious restriction to the potential abilities of learners with visual impairment in schools. As Muzata et al, (2019) noted, the many factors affect academic performance of students with visual impairment.

It was evidently noted that myths about visual impairment affected learners and led to serious absenteeism being experienced by the school. Learners preferred staying at home. Schools felt unsafe because some their friends mocked them while some teachers did not offer much support to encourage learners to be in school. This finding was in tandem with that of (Morgan, 2011) who mentioned that, lack of parental involvement in the education of their children with visual impairment was contributing to factor to low performance. Parents are primary educators and advocates for their children with visual impairments. , their influence in their children's attitude towards school attendance play an important role in alleviating learners' absenteeism. When parents act strongly against absenteeism the behaviour is much more likely to decrease. The study also showed that, most of the learners who were frequently absent came from very poor family backgrounds where parents were illiterate and did not recognise the value of attending school regularly. In this study, absenteeism had negatively affected the learning of learners with visual impairment.

## LIMITATIONS

The challenges were on the local language barrier, some participants were not able to describe myths and their implications on their education. The other one was on resistance by some participants to provide information. To alleviate these limitations, the researcher clearly explained the purpose of the study and assured participants of privacy and confidentiality. On the language, the head teacher provided the researcher with a teacher who was conversant with the local language to interpret the responses from the participants

## CONCLUSION

The topic under discussion implied that myths have serious implications on the education of learners with visual impairment. The study concluded that, myths were common in the study school and the surrounding community. Society is still misinformed on matters relating to visual impairment thereby influencing the creation of inclusive systems especially in education.

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