

Attitudes and Beliefs towards Blind and Visually Impaired Persons in Melanesian Societies

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Introduction

The Papua New Guinea government wants to give every child the opportunity to go to school. Moreover, the Papua New Guinea Government Policy on Special Education (1993) gives all children the right to an education. At the moment, most children who are blind or visually impaired do not go to school. In fact only a very small percentage of children with special needs attend mainstream schools.

Parents play an important role in the implementation of this Policy by giving their children an opportunity to attend schools along with other children of the community. If parents want to educate their children then their children will have a chance of succeeding in school.

Children with visual impairment can do well in school if the support needed is provided by the parents, teachers and the government. A concerned parent can recognize the talent, disability and difficulties. A caring parent takes time to help the child both at home and school with their work. Parents can serve as effective teachers as stated by Heward (2000). This is further supported by research studies on parents supporting their children at school and homes (e.g. Barbetta & Heron, 1991; Leach & Siddall, 1992; Thurston & Dasta, 1990).

One of the first Centres for the visually impaired in PNG is the Mt. Sion Centre for the Blind. The Centre is located in the Highlands of PNG and was established by Christian Brothers in 1983. The children were brought in from all over the country. This has its own advantages and disadvantage of taking children away from their parents and the community. The primary objective of the Centre is to prepare students for possible integration into the mainstream schools. The Centre changed its traditional role in 1994 to enroll children with other disabilities. This was to be inline with PNG Government Policy on Special Education. The Centre now has two hostel type accommodations and caters for over fifty students with special needs.

In some traditional Papua New Guinean societies babies who were born with a crooked arm or leg or who were born blind were killed. Other societies cared for these babies (NDOE, SE Teacher' Resource Book, 1998).

Understanding the relationship between traditional Melanesian and modern beliefs about why some children in our community have some form of disability or learning difficulties assists teachers in their work with students, parents and their school communities. Parents need to have positive attitudes towards their children with special needs if they are to be effective in working with these children.

What Melanesian belief affects children with special educational needs.

There are three main influences on community belief about disability in contemporary Melanesian societies.

1. Traditional Beliefs

It is generally believed and accepted by many people in Melanesian societies that when a child is born with a disability, it has something to do with consequence of a curse, spell or other magic (sanguma, puripuri). The belief varies from region to region.

Some of these are:

- Parents not respecting or making offerings to ancestors.
- The mother eating wrong food during pregnancy.
- Breaking local taboo and upsetting the spirit of the land.
- Father having an affair with another woman.
- Spirit not happy because of certain actions by parents.
- Relatives from mother's side upset with the family.

2. Christian Beliefs

A significant percentage of Melanesian inhabitants are Christians, however, their beliefs in spirit and sorcery and the consequences of breaking taboo still exist today.

The Bible also makes a few reference to causes of disabilities as those in Deuteronomy 28 “*if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God ... curse shall be the fruit of the body*” as an indication that disability can be a punishment for a parent’s misbehaviour. Other passages, however, seem to contradict this notion, example Ezekiel 18 states “*the son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wicked will be charged against him*” (Frost, 2002, p.8)

3. Contemporary

In modern history, medical findings have provided us with some causes of disability while educational researchers are also finding new ways of teaching children with different forms of disabilities. On the other hand, modern thinking is increasingly arguing that disability is a social construct, not a medical construct. However, some causes still remain unknown but generally new findings will eventually replace the traditional views of the causes of disabilities. In Melanesian societies where large majority of people are illiterate, it will take a long time to understand and accept medical research findings regarding the causes of different disabilities.

Consequences of different beliefs

It is generally the customs and practice in Melanesian culture that when a child is born with a disability the relatives and communities in the village discuss and find faults committed by the parents to explain such disabilities. Sometimes these lead to the community blaming the parents for a child born with a disability. This can bring embarrassment to the family and at times parents are separated, or subsequently live with guilt and shame. Consequencely, most parents in Melanesian societies hide their children from public, deny them access to social life and education.

It is parents and communities belief that disabilities are associated with certain spirit and sorcery. If it is explained by medical and educational research that a child’s action or behaviour is caused by other factors then parents are confused and many Melanesians are trying to come to terms with the clash of traditional, religious and scientific information and knowledge.

Some case studies of different beliefs towards disabilities.

Case 1

Benjamin was born with a deteriorating form of physical disability in village of Morobe Province of the mainland of PNG. During his early years, he was able to move around without any assistance but after some years, he lost his ability to walk. After much talk among community members it was found that Benjamin's father had committed adultery with another woman of the same village. Benjamin's mother was hurt and contemplated divorcing her husband. Community members believed that if Benjamin's father confessed his sins, Benjamin would be able to walk again and reconciliation of the family might also be achieved. Benjamin's father did confess and asked forgiveness from his wife. Benjamin's condition did not improve after his mother accepted his father's confession, and his disability continued to deteriorate. Benjamin's parents developed a strong relationship and it was said in the village that it was their love for their child in his remaining years that brought them closer together (Frost, 2002, p.9)

Case 2

PR's legs are swollen from the thighs down to his feet. He cannot walk or stand. He first suffered this problem after the death of his father. He says: "*Papa bilong mi i gat dispela sik na em i dai wantaim. Bihain mi kisim sik bilong papa,*" (My father had this sickness and died from it. I have now got my father's sickness)

Here is an example of a man who believes that his condition was inherited from his father, but that it continues because he broke a taboo. Efforts to seek traditional ways of healing have not been successful because the elders say that they have forgotten the rituals for healing in this case (Gibbs, 2003, p38)

Case 3

T of Rubugum 3 is a 15 year girl who is unable to hear or to speak. It is believed that she developed this condition after her mother unintentionally washed her in water from a pool inhabited by a masalai spirit (Gibbs, 2003, p.41)

Case 4

LM of Nanda village has very poor eye sight. He says that his father unintentionally burned the eyes of a frog at a time when his mother was expecting. A month later or so LM was born and soon it became obvious that he had eye problems. His parents associated this condition with the burning of the frog's eyes. The spirit living in the place where LM's father had ill treated the frog had now retaliated and spoiled the eyes of their child (Gibbs, 2003, p.41)

Conclusion

It is apparent that to change the Melanesian cultural beliefs and attitudes of parents towards disabilities including vision impairment will not be an easy task. However, the following recommendation could be considered:

- We must find effective and efficient ways to bridge the communication gap between medical and traditional understanding of disabilities and culturally held supernatural beliefs of the causes of disabilities.
- There is a greater need for awareness in local areas on the importance of accepting children with disabilities and how to include them in all activities in the communities and their right to an education.
- Parents, teachers and government must be encouraged and supported with resources to take an active role in the education of disabled children.
- Parents with positive and caring attitudes are usually the most successful and often the most influential parents. It is parents with this kind of attitudes that will help the disabled children to do well academically at school and be useful and active members of the society.

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