

Working with families in Malawi

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Background Information

The term “Inclusive” is commonly used with reference to educational provision that welcomes all children including those with visual impairment. Malawi is among African countries that provide education to children with visual impairment. It has three programmes put in place namely, Resource Centers, Residential schools and Itinerant Teaching Programme. In Itinerant teaching programme working with families is a prerequisite since children operate from their homes on a daily basis. In itinerant teaching programme the following services are provided to families in Malawi

- Guidance and counseling
- Demonstrations on how to assist children with visual impairment
- Daily living skills including orientation and mobility
- Discussing issues concerning visual impairment
- Disseminating information about visual impairment

Introduction

The power of a family is judged by its contribution towards any achievement since it is the first social institution for any person. The issue of working with families seems to be dormant but research shows that it plays a greater role.

This paper explains the experience of working with families in Malawi by stating current challenges and attitudes, which have negative impact on education. It will also highlight

some policies and strategies in which is included the "Telling Mode" as a tool of helping to achieve equality in education. A case study is included to exemplify what actually takes place in real life situation.

The Challenges

When working with families in Malawi a lot of challenges are being faced towards achieving equality in education. Some of these challenges are briefly explained below:

1. Professional Philosophy, Attitudes and Practices

Literature has revealed that interventions in the past were dominated by professional-centered approach. This implied that professionals made the diagnosis prescribe treatment and was responsible for its implementation. This type of treatment process left little room for participation of families. In Malawi not much has changed even in the current situation where children with visual impairment are taken to be for the government. Families take very little part if any in the education of their children. Most of the decisions are left to the teacher for example families can hardly be seen buying materials for their visually impaired children but wait for the government to provide.

2. Social Economic Status

Many families are not economically empowered. They are unable to provide a conducive environment to children with visual impairment by not providing essential resources and support. Their social activities tend to be in conflict with the provision of equality in education. For example families look for other ways to earn a living when they have no money. Most of these ways do take much of their time and fail to provide adequate assistance to their children.

3. Emotional Attitudes

These include low self-esteem, guilt, fear, shock, denial, and insecurity, which often lead to tension that hinder contact with other families and a distortion of the information that is given. Sometimes this guilt and insecurity comes about due to poor remarks from neighbours and friends. For example in some parts of the country they believe that families having children with disabilities and in this case those with visual impairment practice witchcraft. This result into families hiding their children with visual impairment.

4. Employment Opportunities

Some families believe that it is a waste of time and resources to educate a child with visual impairment because some end up in the streets begging. Some think that people who are blind do not have a wider career choice. For example most of such people in Malawi are mainly employed by Ministry of Education, Malawi Council for the Handicapped and Ministry of People with Disabilities.

5. Overprotection

It is generally believed by many families that to let a child who is blind do any work independently is an insult. This is being sympathetic than being empathetic. The result is that teachers have problems when conducting physical education, orientation and mobility activities.

6. Lack of Information

Limited access to technology and books impedes professionals from acquiring knowledge and skills on how to advise families. These could be lack of computers and accessories, limited internet access and poor media coverage.

7. Ignorance

Many families are not aware of the existence of special needs education catering for children with disabilities. Some families are not aware of the rights of children basing on United Nations Declarations. They are not conversant with the government policies on education. This results in late identification and children start school late than recommended.

8. Cultural Activities

Reports from Non-governmental Organisations and Civil Society indicates that some places in Malawi still practice initiation ceremonies, which are usually conducted in cold season in the months of June and July when schools are on. Those behind this activity are members of the families who are at the same time partners in education.

9. Chronicle Illnesses and Hunger

When families persistently become sick the result is that they do not attend to household activities. The result is lack of food for the family thereby making their children absent from school.

10. Family Breakup and Orphanage children

When families break, it means that the upbringing of a child with impairment becomes difficult for a single parent. In most cases these single parents are mothers who face a lot problem. In addition, some children with impairments in this case those with visual impairment are orphans and taken care of by grandparents or just guardian. These face a lot of problems and need support from specialist teachers through family support

Case Study

Rabson Chinkhandwe is a 9-year-old boy with visual impairment whose family runs a small business or earns a living through vending along Mbayani road. Before he was identified, he was being kept indoors and had no chance to go to school. When asked, the mother said that she had no money to send the boy to a special school for the visually impaired. The number of children in the

family was another factor besides Rabson being a stepson. The mother said locking up the boy in the house was to prevent him from being involved in accidents when she is not around.

Later Rabson started school and was very happy to have sighted friends and was given materials such as hand frame, cuberithm boards and others to be using them for school work. But he was facing opposition at home after school. The mother could not give him the materials to use them for fear of loosing them because of his visual impairment. Though Rabson was catching up in class but his performance went down because he could not do home work due to lack of materials.

Activity

1. Would you sympathise with Rabson?
2. Suggest reasons why the family was behaving that way.
3. What advice and information can you provide to the family?

Strategies to Achieve Equality in Education

Equality in education can be achieved in many ways but here are the key factors that facilitate this in many countries. It is important to look at factors that can help in achieving equality in education through the following strategies.

1. Telling Mode

Research on verbal communications shows that people remember only 25% of a message told to them. Everyone may remember a different 25% but telling mode can help to balance up what people can remember when working with families with low education standards by following simple guides such as:

- Inform people directly, clearly and consistently
- Tell the truth about the current reality
- Be clear about what is negotiable and what is not
- Point out the details but not too many

2. Policies

Malawi government is committed to special needs education, which includes the education of children with visual impairment by joining other countries in ratifying the World declaration on education for all at the Jomtein conference. This declaration clearly states that *“Every person, child, youth, adult shall be able to benefit from education opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs.”* In addition the General assembly of the United Nation convention on the rights of the child on 20th November 1989 highlighted that *“parents have the primary responsibility for upbringing.....”* as stated in my introductory statement.

To this effect the government's move was to ensure achievement of equitable good quality and relevant basic education by putting in place policies as stipulated in her official policy documents: the Policy Investment Framework (PIF) MOE (2001) and the Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (M PRSP) as follows:

- Providing an enabling environment for learners with special educational needs and for under privileged within the conventional school system.
- Being pro-active in its investigation of strategies needing to be introduced to make education – All-inclusive.
- Affording a priority status to special needs education with the aim of getting a higher number of pupils with special educational needs to complete primary education cycle.
- Continuing to devise strategies through Malawi Institute of Education (MIE) and Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB) to ensure that learners with special needs are not disadvantaged in their effort to complete their courses.

3. Holistic Approach

All members need to work together as a team such as teachers, families and other stakeholders. It is important for the community to take part in supporting families who have children with visual impairment in order to eliminate discrimination.

4. Advocacy

This is organized in collaboration with all stakeholders in education through campaigns, networking, workshops, seminars, and through electronic and print media. This will help in overcoming some challenges as outlined above.

5. Change of Approach

The change in professional practices brings about concepts representing new attitudes and modes of cooperation where the following characteristics are important:

- Mutual respect
- Mutual openness, also with respect to feelings and attitudes
- Exchange of experiences and knowledge
- 'Negotiation' to discover solutions that everyone agrees to

6. Involvement of families in the school

Rye (2001) identified a way to work with parents through family groups, which has been seen as under-utilized in most schools in many countries including Malawi. But in Norway this method seem to have achieved good results for families with children with disabilities. Such groups are usually initiated by the school and arranged by the teacher. They are supposed to be structured around themes that families agree to address. The themes in such groups can vary according to the interests and needs of the group. For example, themes can be connected to the instruction and social situation in the classroom, or issues of child rearing, the child's situation outside of school, etc. When

the themes are connected to the school, the teaching and other relevant people at school could be invited for discussions that summarize the viewpoints that emerge. In the itinerant teaching programme this could be an area requiring improvement in Malawi because not much is done. If families could be organized in groups, hopefully at the end of the day much can be achieved on the education of children with visual impairment.

The importance of involving families on School issues

The involvement of families on school issues can achieve a number of things including the following:

- Making families aware of the positive effect they already have on their children, with a view that how and what they do together at home has an impact on and relates to the work the children are doing at school, and that school and home are not two different worlds for children.
- Making families aware that what they can do, alone and together with their children, is important for the child's learning and development both at home and at school.
- Inviting families to participate in discussions about the child's schoolwork, about the instruction the child is receiving, about homework, and about how families can help make the teaching more interesting and relevant to the child's everyday life.
- Helping families' see that how they interact with their children at home affect's their children's well-being, happiness, involvement, and social and academic development.
- Developing the teacher's and school's insight into the child's daily life both inside and outside school, and thereby create a better foundation for contact and increase the relevance of school activities.

Conclusions

Working with families can be a challenging task but can at the same time help facilitate education for all children including those with disabilities and in this regard those with visual impairment. Therefore it is of paramount importance that majority world countries should establish the programme of working with families. But Malawi should improve the already existing itinerant teaching programme because it is through family's involvement that quality education can be realized.

References

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