

## **FOLKLORE BASED ANALYSIS FOR A CULTURE-SPECIFIC CONCEPT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Disabled People's Organisations, parents' organisations and professional groups and individuals have, over the past decade, been grappling with the concept of inclusive education and how it can best be implemented. The United Nations and its specialised agencies have provided the framework for its planning and implementation (UN 1994; UNESCO 1994) but also fuelled much criticism. For instance, Haskell (1998) refers to inclusive schooling as "contemporary cultural imperialism of western ideologues". Indeed, many studies of inclusive school practices have so far been carried out in the North. Unfortunately, political, social, economic and cultural conditions in the countries of the North are markedly different from those in the South. To what extent, then, is the concept of inclusive schooling/education relevant to the South? Should planning for inclusion follow models of the North? These are broad and complex questions, which we cannot ignore if we are to learn from cross-cultural perspectives. The purpose of the study reported here was to determine community attitudes towards persons with disability in Tanzania as a basis for exploring the existence of inclusive practices through an analysis of the community account of its own action, as contained in fireside stories and proverbs.

### **CHOICE OF FOLKLORE FOR STUDYING ATTITUDES AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION**

Impairment is a human characteristic; it knows no bounds in terms of time-space, geographical location, social or economic status and age-band. The currently available statistics on the prevalence of disability in different parts of the world are a product of guesswork because percep-

tion of disability is culture-bound, and culture-sensitive assessment instruments are yet to be developed. However, despite this cultural dimension, interpretation of attitudes and beliefs relating to disability and persons with disabilities in different parts of the world has been based on foreign value systems. For example, African attitudes and beliefs were being interpreted within a Western frame (Ingstad 1990; Kisanji 1995). Research on perceptions and attitudes are important particularly at a time when national governments are planning and/or implementing Education for All (EFA) and inclusive education for different groups of people previously excluded. Schools as social organisations (Fullan 1991) are most likely, despite international trends and rhetoric, to respond to the needs of these groups in ways that reflect community perceptions and attitudes. Since perceptions and attitudes also influence the content and process of informal and non-formal education, studying them could shed light on what processes and materials the school could adopt or adapt to ensure cultural relevance.

Previous studies in African countries have employed survey methods. However, in this study, I explored the manner in which language was used metaphorically in the folklore in relation to people with disabilities with a view to teasing out underlying perceptions and attitudes. Lakoff and Johnson (1980), in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, seem to provide the most systematic and detailed analysis of metaphors and the way they are used in everyday life. They argue that a community's system of concepts is metaphoric and, therefore, the people's language and behaviour is organised metaphorically. As the "essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (ibid.: 5), disability and persons with disabilities in the folklore (proverbs, folksongs, poems, stories and riddles) studied have been taken as metaphoric structures and concepts. My choice of metaphors as the component of culture through which I could study community attitudes and perceptions of disability in Tanzania was also based on the understanding that language is both a vehicle for acquiring the content of culture and an aspect of content in itself. The importance of language in a cultural context lies in the fact that it is the vehicle for transmitting culture between members and from one generation to another (Kuhn 1966). Language also fosters social cohesion and a people's identity (Diop 1991; Crystal 1987). It was, therefore, possible to analyse the metaphoric use of language in order to examine attitudes towards people with disabilities and to tease out any possible processes and structures relevant to inclusion.

## Methods

Folklore provides the raw material for explaining a community's behaviour towards one another or one section of a community towards another. Since it is metaphoric and embedded within the day-to-day life, folklore can also be considered to provide the community's account of its actions in a way that is intelligible and justifiable to its members. The aspect of community life under investigation was disability and, as such, through folklore, the community was accounting for its actions in disability-related social episodes. With this perspective in mind, my approach to data collection and analysis was what Cohen and Manion (1994) refer to as ethogenic. Taken as community accounts, proverbs, sayings, riddles, folksongs, poems and tales which carried notions related to disability were collected from Tanzania. The method used in collecting data included documentation and interviews. A manual literature search for the period 1935-1990 was carried out at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, to identify disability-related folklore in the form of proverbs, riddles, songs, poems and tales. Interviews were also conducted with tribal elders (N=44), primary school heads (N=10) and teachers (N=45) to gather the folklore. The data, collected between 1989 and 1991, were content analysed and thematically arranged by type of disability to determine the disability characteristics and by meaning and usage to provide a basis for understanding the folklore's surface and deep meanings. The thematically arranged proverbs, songs, poems, tales and riddles were circulated during 1994 to 11 Tanzanian students at the Universities of Bradford, Cardiff and Manchester in the U.K. to verify their meanings and usage as well as to elicit their contributions to the disability-related folklore. A few additions were made, especially with regard to songs and tales. The content and editorial comments received were incorporated into the initial analysis. Findings based on proverbs have been reported elsewhere (Kisanji 1995). Songs, poems, stories and riddles were not included. This paper is based on the thematic analysis of all aspects of the folklore, except poems, collected up to 1994.

## Results

This study presents a composite pattern of attitudes resulting from the content analysis of the folklore. The results of the study are reported according to the themes which emerged during the analysis. The first part provides a summary of the findings in the thematic analysis of proverbs reported in detail elsewhere (Kisanji 1995) and of riddles, songs and stories which have not been reported before. In the second part, I

present a story to take the reader through the process of analysis and to show the educative content of the folklore.

### Perception and Attitudes

When the data were initially confronted, they were categorised on the basis of the major traditional impairment areas. This analysis was informed mainly by the global historical trend in attitudes towards persons with disabilities identified in literature (Miles 1983; Ingstad 1990a; 1990b). In this trend and pattern analysis, the data were arranged according to themes which emerged from the folklore's surface and deep meanings. Initially, four main themes emerged, namely 1. disability characteristics, 2. disability in various aspects of community life, 3. attitudes which show persecution (cruelty), and 4. attitudes which show accommodation, equality and human rights. Four main findings could be discerned from the thematic analysis. First, literal translation of the folklore from the community languages to Kiswahili and/or English did not express or contain a generally inclusive category similar to the concept disability. The folklore referred to the specific impairments of blindness or partial blindness (or one-eyedness), deafness, physical impairments, intellectual impairment, behavioural difficulties and mental illness. The second finding was that the characteristics of the impairments which appeared in the folklore were similar to the scientific descriptions. However, the folklore does not concern itself with specific points of lesion in the body other than the body part affected and the limitation imposed by the impairment.

One of the key attitude areas revealed by the folklore was the common understanding that, whatever their causes, impairments were part of human nature; any person could be impaired at any time during life, whatever one's socio-economic status. However, despite the impairments, affected persons were usefully contributing members of their community or could be so if given adequate training and support. The fourth finding was related to the unidimensional reference to attitudes towards people with impairments. This approach to attitude analysis seeks to find out whether community reactions were either positive or negative, an orientation which has influenced the use of such measures as the semantic differential scales. All the 11 students to whom the folklore was referred for authentication, when asked which of the folklore items were positive or negative (specifically which ones indicated cruelty, unfairness or were dehumanising), pointed to only three proverbs as negative. The rest of the folklore was considered positive. The folklore collected later did not fit into the negative theme. In addition to these

four findings drawn from all aspects of the folklore examined, stories also revealed other attitude areas. In some stories a subliminal connotation was evident. The person with impairment was portrayed as a hero. This portrayal may be based on the community's uncertainty about the cause(s) of the impairment and, therefore, the belief that such a person had special powers which could not be understood by people without impairments. The stories collected also showed that persons with impairments were capable of developing high self-esteem and being useful to the community.

### EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Proverbs are statements of accumulated wisdom within a given community. They are used to ensure acceptable social behaviour. They therefore point to social skills that are cherished in that community, such as helping those who are weak and/or young or communicating with respect. However, proverbs are rather abstract. Stories, on the other hand, are easier to follow and interpret. The stories collected in this study contain aspects of local geography in terms of climate and economic activities and citizenship. For example, in one story (Kaguru Kamwe), the setting is a natural disaster, such as famine, which occurs from time to time in the central parts of mainland Tanzania. The narrator reminds the listeners (children) of a situation they have experienced in the past and points out especially to younger children what they are likely to find themselves in, unless there is change in the climatic pattern, as they grow older. The second related point in the story is that different parts of the country have different climatic conditions. It is, therefore, possible to survive the situation if supplies can be obtained from areas where the climate is more favourable. However, this is only possible when there is peace with neighbouring communities, good leadership, people work hard, and support and trust one another. Kaguru Kamwe's impairment is used figuratively and metaphorically to highlight family responsibility, special skills and exceptional courage, on the one hand, and the dangers of conflict between communities and limited support and trust on the other. Stories not only carry the content to be learned, but also indicate how this content is to be learned. The subject matter and attitudes towards impairments were learned by means of a series of brief, alternating activities, namely listening, singing, predicting, questioning and discussing. At strategic points during the progress of the

storytelling, the narrator asked questions to assess whether his/her audience was following the story. Use of songs in storytelling assists listeners to remember the story. Singing is also enjoyable. In addition, the frequent change of activity ensures that the narrator does not lose the audience. Storytelling also ensures that peer and cross-age support takes place. During discussion as well as when individual children respond to questions, different listeners help to clarify issues so that all listeners are with the narrator most of the time. However, responsibility for learning rests with individual children. They are encouraged to ask questions and this is clearly so when grandparents, and sometimes aunts or uncles, with whom children tend to be freer, are involved. The narrator asks listeners to tell their stories as they know them. This encourages them to learn as many stories as possible so that they are able to contribute. In the process, some children also invent their own stories.

## DISCUSSION

Most folklore presents itself in metaphors; that is, one concept is expressed in terms of another. As such, its interpretation needs to recognise the existence of at least two meanings. Reference to impairment often represents a *surface meaning* from which its characteristics, associated limitations and attitudes have been derived. However, the impairment or person with impairment referred to is merely a vehicle for offering advice, instruction or presenting a moral in relation to a specific aspect of everyday life. This second concept represents the *deep meaning* of the folklore. It is evident that the folklore as explored in this study provides data on attitudes and beliefs as well as on the educational content and process as practised in informal settings in Africa. These two areas are presented and briefly discussed below.

## PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDES IN THE FOLKLORE

Five major findings on perception and attitudes can be discerned from the folklore data. These were 1. absence of the general category referred to as disability; 2. accuracy of the description of people with specific impairments; 3. belief that impairments were a social reality in everyday life and one source of differentness and diversity in society; 4. unfavour-

able attitudes towards persons with impairments existed, but were found in only a very small number of proverbs (3 %); and 5. that the human person was valued even when the usefulness of the person with impairment was minimal. Miles (1983: v), in his study of attitudes towards persons with disability in Pakistan, contends that, despite the existence of a mixture of attitudes towards persons with disability in all cultures in time and space, the dominant type of attitudes have progressively changed from “negative, stigmatising and rejecting attitudes, through pity and compassion, towards willingness to accept disabled persons on equal terms”. Indeed, this mixture was evident in the folklore analysed in this study. However, in using folklore in the form of old proverbs and stories we are attempting to interpret the past in terms of the present social theorising. Given that knowledge is not static and that social organisation and structures as well as economic and other cultural conditions have changed over time, our interpretations may only represent outsider, rather than insider, views and may, therefore, at best be flawed. However, the parables associated with the proverbs which are being collected should be an important guide to our interpretations. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that the language used to describe specific impairments has been the subject of criticism among some people with impairments, especially within impairment-based organisations. For example, the Tanzania League of the Blind are opposed to the use of the word *kipofu* (singular) or *vipofu* (plural), the Kiswahili equivalent of the term *blind*. They claim that the word is a product of an historical elision from two words, *kipo* (it is there) and *kifu* (a dead thing). Their preferred term is *asiyeona* (a person who does not see) or *wasioona* (its plural form). In this respect, it is possible to surmise that historically attitudes towards blind people were not favourable.

### Use of Folklore in Schools for Attitude Change

The obvious progression of attitudes thus noted from negative in the past to more positive at present may be a pointer to the need to use some aspects of the folklore in our schools to teach responsibility as well to facilitate inclusion of people with impairments. It is sad to find children in some African nursery and primary schools singing songs and narrating stories from Europe. Considering that we are fast losing the oral tradition, it is absurd that we are not making adequate use of this rich heritage and putting this precious folklore in writing for future generations. Schools could also benefit from the use of local knowledge systems in the current move towards inclusive education. The community focus on impairments rather than the broader disability category and the pervasive

notion of impairment as a social leveller connote diversity in society and differences in individual learning needs which teachers should respond to in ways that stretch each learner beyond their current competency level.

### Teaching and Learning

In addition to the content of the folklore, which is informative in terms of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards impairment, there were specific knowledge areas which were taught and reflected through proverbs, songs, stories and riddles. In the *Kaguru Kamwe* story referred to above, social studies were part of the teaching agenda, although not labelled as such. In the proverbs, stories and songs, such subject areas as family life, education, ecology, uses of plants and animals, appropriate technology, counselling skills, communication skills and legal rights were included. The subject areas addressed were relevant to the local conditions. Indeed, observers consider this aspect as one of the strengths of indigenous forms of education in Africa (Ociiti 1994; Bray et al. 1986). Those concerned with the current state of school curricula have lamented that areas of particular relevance to learners' prior knowledge tend to be omitted or relegated to the background (Salia-Bao 1989). No wonder many children experience difficulties in school learning and find themselves pushed out of the school system. There is need, therefore, to consider the content of the curriculum when planning for inclusion of children with special needs due to impairments.

Perhaps more important to consider than the curriculum or knowledge areas, is the process by which this content was communicated, shared and/or advanced. This consideration has implications for classroom practice in Tanzania. The proverbs, stories and riddles told by the fireside did not involve one-to-one individualised teaching. From my personal experience, the process was enjoyably interactive and the older people encouraged the participation of all children, whatever the level of learning needs. Whereas active learning is reflected in storytelling, some classrooms continue to use the banking method (Freire 1972) introduced when schooling was first established (see e.g. Stambach 1993 for an ethnographic description of some classrooms in Tanzania). It seems to me, therefore, that there is a mismatch between the active learning in the inclusive practice of informal education and classroom experiences. Can all classroom teachers in Tanzania learn to include as facilitators do in informal education? Unfortunately, we have learned to ignore, or see as inferior, what is at our doorstep in favour of what comes from those we consider the powerful and successful.



### Limitation of Studies Based on Folklore

Undoubtedly, as stated earlier, the interpretation of folklore is attended by a number of difficulties. First, the folklore may be based on superstition (Possi 1996) and fear of the unknown. As such the messages passed on from one generation to another may be uninformed by current changes in society. However, much of the folklore also changes with time. For instance, the poems and songs of the 1950s are different from those of the 1990s. Second, the issue of translation of folklore from one language to another may distort the original meaning, especially of proverbs. Third, since metaphors are used, it is very possible to miss out much disability-related folklore, especially in the areas of care, education and employment. For instance, Serpell (1993), in discussing education in Zambia, has referred to a number of proverbs which are directly relevant to *disability*, but may be missed when interviews on disability-related folklore are asked for.

### CONCLUSION

The characteristics of major impairments are clearly represented in the collection of folklore from Tanzania. These include visual, hearing, physical, intellectual and behavioural impairments and difficulties. Closely linked to the characteristics are the limitations imposed by each impairment. There are very few instances in which negative attitudes were identified. Public attitudes reflect fairness and equal opportunities for all community members, including those with impairments. It seems plausible from the data in this study that community attitudes follow patterns in any other country in the world, namely a mixture of positive and negative images and practices (Miles 1983), save for differences in type, degree and what is considered *politically correct* on the international scene. However, folklore data indicate that features of inclusive education meant to meet the needs of all learners through appropriate school and teacher responses are in-built into informal and non-formal education. Although the demands of the school are different, the functional relevance of the curriculum and teaching/learning processes in the informal/non-formal sector is applicable to an inclusive school. Why has this sector been ignored or relegated to the background? The poor can learn from their past and the rich can learn from the poor!

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