

## **Demystifying and Dispelling Stereotypes and Myths Related to Visual Impairment**

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**Abstract:** Considering that with the absence of visual input, as Salleh & Zainal (2010) explain, one is already deprived of about 85% of learning accomplishments, which naturally come through sight, the condition of visual impairment (VI) is, therefore, a very serious limitation one can ever endure. Since people from different cultural backgrounds have different understanding of disability, most sighted people also believe that the condition of VI evokes unprecedented awkwardness. Also due to their attitudes, which are predominantly negative towards this sensory condition, persons with sight loss are generally removed from the realm of mainstream spaces. Seeing one with a VI, as The American Association of University Women (AAUW) (2014) observes, people just develop unfounded judgement. Such judgements have been widely held and traditionally used to mythically and stereotypically characterise persons with different forms of disabilities, inclusive of those with VI as supernatural beings. Even in this modern day age, there are so many untold misconceptions about persons with VI, a scenario that has *removed them from the realm of the ordinary* mainstream spaces. By their nature, *most* myths and stereotypes are far from being positive, but usually convey negative impressions of individuals. Experiential contact with persons with VI has shown that the general impressions conveyed about these persons is downright misinterpretation facts, and hence falsehood. Such misconceptions aside, the reality of the matter is that whether one's condition is congenital or adventitious, learners with VI are just as capable as their sighted peers, when it comes to skill acquisition, as long as necessary provisions are in place. What the sighted mainstream community always forgets is that formation of any concept by learners with VI is not by natural means, as it is with sighted learners who learn through visual feedback, leading them to imitating and assimilating. If in school, it has to be appreciated that learners with VI need an Expanded Core-Curriculum (ECC) for them to form and/or develop concepts within a given environment. To date, little or no knowledge about VI, by the mainstream community, has allowed myths and negative stereotypes to continue flourishing. If they remain unchallenged, as Bolt (2006) observes, overtly negative stereotypes will always diminish the talent and achievements inherent in the majority of these persons with VI.

**Keywords:** Adventitious Blindness, Congenital Blindness, Demystify, Discrimination, Dispel, Goggles, Mainstream, Misconception, Myths, Navigation, Orientation and Mobility, Peripatologists, Stereotype, Stigmatisation, Supernatural, Visual Impairment, White Cane

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

*“All stereotypes of people who are visually impaired achieve one end. They remove the person who is visually impaired from the realm of the ordinary, everyday world of plain people, and place the person in a limbo of abnormality...where the person is without responsibility, without rights, and without society”* (Jernigan, 1997).

With sight loss, it is not the obstacles in one's paths and spaces, which is the problem. The biggest danger to the person with visual impairment is other people, who attach a lot of mythical and/or stereotypical explanations about the sight loss. The cause of such explanations, as Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) observe, is that people's feelings about others or things are often based largely on physical appearances that are visually perceived. Since the sighted people would always derive great pleasure from the expressiveness of their eyes, personal experience with the blind has shown that people generally dread the condition of being visually impaired. One of the most uncouth notions about the condition of sight loss is the explanation that it is a result of a wrong doing, especially on the parents, therefore, it's a punishment from the gods. For this reason, the condition is not only perceived as shameful, but also considered as frightening, as it is believed to evoke

unprecedented awkwardness in an individual. Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) explain that the sighted's apprehensiveness is attributable to their lack of experience in interacting with individuals with visual impairment. For lack of understanding of this condition of blindness, there is a tendency to having facts twisted, with the blind persons explained in all imagined mythical and stereotypical ways. Such warped facts and omissions of reality, therefore, warrant close re-examination and restatement, especially by those knowledgeable about issues of blindness, but first, there is need to unravel what myths and stereotypes entail.

### **Myths and Stereotypes – What they are:Myths**

While explanations and attitudes towards myth vary greatly, Magoulick (2003) understands myth as having its roots in the Greek term *mythos*, underpinning a set of distinct characters of particular cultures, and symbolic tales of colourful stories. Being beliefs or assumptions about something, myths have been handed down through written history or oral tradition, often from the distant past or primordial times (Magoulick, 2003). As a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people, myths have been understood as typically revolving around the supernatural, thereby often connected with some rituals, like the mythical belief that with visual impairment, one is under some form of supernatural divine judgement (Salisbury, 2008). Although myths continue to be told even today, their narratives remain that of primeval times of a sacred nature. While some regard and celebrate myths as a source of spiritual growth, others, as Hansen, William & Hansen (2002) put it, see and regard them as anciently disputed stories full of falsehoods, hence dead! While myths are understood as a set of distinct character of particular culture, stereotypes are used to define impressions of an idea upon someone or groups of people.

### **What they are:Stereotypes**

Like myths, Nittle (2017) authoritatively explains the meaning of stereotype as also coming from the Greek terms *stereos*(στερεός) meaning firm or solid, and *typos* (τύπος) signifying an 'impression'. Stereotype was first coined in 1798 by Firmin Didot, to signify a solid impression of an idea or theory, as imposed upon groups of people because of their race, nationality, sexual orientation, and/or other characteristics such as disabilities (Nittle, 2017).The above authorities further observe that stereotypes tend to be oversimplifications of the characteristics of groups of people. To augment, McLeod (1994) also describe stereotypes as being fixed social categorisations and over-generalised beliefs about a particular group or class of people. Stereotyping, therefore, assume that the characteristics that a person has are representative of all the members of that particular group or class of people. Such an assumption verily leads to prejudicial attitudes towards those with blindness. A stereotypical example that may be advanced may be that if someone meets a few learners with VI, and finds them to be quiet and/or reserved, they may spread the word and draw a conclusion that all persons with VI are quiet and reserved.

From <http://www.dsb.wa.gov/resourcesdispelling-myths.shtml>, it may be learnt that myths and some negative stereotypes made about persons with VI do great injustice by pervading a thought that those with blindness are always inferior to sighted people, hence they are always dependent and in need of help from the sighted community. While persons with visual impairment may occasionally require help, it has to be appreciated that their sensory condition does not necessarily warrant strict supervision in their day-to-day activities. Even with their vision loss, these people also want to be asked if they need any form of assistance, otherwise offering one when not requested tantamount to usurping their independence.

While there can be both positive and negative stereotypes, Nittle (2017)makes an observation that by their nature, most stereotypes are far from being positive, but widely circulated generalisations which convey negative impressions of individuals, groups or categories of people.Unfortunately, suchnegative generalisations do not always allow for diversity, and may result in stigmatisation and discrimination of some individuals or groups of people. While stereotypes may have an advantage that they enable us to respond rapidly to situations, studies still have it that even the so-called positive stereotypes can be harmful due to over expectations. Be it they are positive or negative, stereotypes should be dispelled and avoided, at all cost, since they are known as limiting and leave little to no room for diversity and individuality.

### **Examples of myths and stereotypes**

Being symbolic tales of the distant past, attitudes towards myth vary greatly. While they are often highly valued, and taken as narratives of a sacred nature, some see nothing but falsehood in myths. The same can be said about limitations which also come with stereotypes' unwarranted generalisations. Bynot allowing for diversity, stereotypes result in stigmatisation and discrimination of learners with VI. From Jernigan (1997), it may be understood that negative stereotypes and myths attached to people with VI focus on removing persons with blindness from the realm of the ordinary, casting them in a territory where such persons are without responsibility, without rights, and without society. This remains so notwithstanding the fact that with blindness, these people have interests similar to everyone else, provided they receive appropriate orientation programmes in

a cooperative effort. It is from such collaborative efforts that Keller (2015) is quoted as saying that ‘*Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.*’

There are many different examples of myths and stereotypes about learners with visual impairment. One assumption is that a baby with congenital blindness will never develop concepts and/or techniques in all day life skills. Not only is this a twisted truth, as explained by Kenneth Jernigan, the President for National Federation of the Blind. In one of his addresses, Jernigan said that such distortion of information was also a profound disservice to the blind; for it suggests that whatever one with blindness may accomplish, is not due to his own ability but to some magic inherent in blindness itself. This assumption, as the president further laments, removes the one with VI, at a stroke of the pen from the realm of the normal, the ordinary, everyday world of plain people, and places him in a limbo of abnormality. The greatest problem with myths and stereotypes, for example, is that they suggest that certain individuals or groups of people are inherently prone to certain behaviours (McLeod, 2015). If in school, it is there on good record that with visual impairment, these learners are stereotypically regarded as *idiots* or individuals who cannot understand any instruction. These learners are subjected to all sorts of negative stereotypical labels and/or tags, which depict them as dependent and non-achievers. This remains so, regardless of the truth that these learners’ learning can be amazingly rapid, if accorded the opportunities through the ECC, to carry out survival tasks through tactual, auditory, gustatory and olfactory compensatory senses, for example. With the understanding that about 85% of all the knowledge human beings possess is acquired visually, this may be the reason why there are some bizarre stereotypical beliefs that a person with visual impairment has extra senses. Mythically perceived, there is also a belief that a person’s other senses become more acute after the onset of blindness, resulting in one having ‘super’ hearing, for example, or possessing a sixth sense (<https://dsb.wa.gov/resources/dispellingmyths.shtml>). What is known as factual, however, is that blindness does not entail magic-compensatory powers. Instead, bereft of vision, one tends to pay greater attention to the other senses, as a compensatory measure, not that hearing, for example, will organically improve (<https://dsb.wa.gov/resources/dispelling-myths.shtml>).

The beneficial blindness mantra is also a well-known mythical belief premised on the assumption that persons with impaired vision possess extra or extraordinary powers, senses or skills, which are ascribed to or attributable to being sightless (Bolt, 2006). It is also mythical, as <https://www.theiris.org/resources/faqs/misconceptions-and-myths-about-blindness> explains that without sight, one is always endowed with other extra senses. Far from it and such a notion has to be dispelled! There is nothing like extra senses! To one with blindness, loss of eyesight just means a loss of visual feedback and orientation. These learners, therefore, need to specifically rely on other senses such as hearing, smell and touch, which have to be highly sharpened and developed to help them perceive and do familiar and similar tasks differently (Bolt, 2006). What has to be emphasised is that persons with VI are not inherently endowed with sharper senses, but need to be engaged in work out programmes to have these senses sharpened, in order to compensate for their loss of vision.

At any rate, as Bolt (2006) explains, no medical study has proved that persons with visual impairment have more sensitive senses than those who are sighted. There are also no studies in which the sensory acuities of people with impaired vision and those with unimpaired vision have been compared, with results showing any superiority of the other senses or possession of special abilities or skills in persons with visual impairment (Lowenfeld, 1993). Blindness does not, therefore, entail miraculous new compensatory powers or the awakening of strange new perceptions or abilities. If anything, these learners just strengthen their remaining senses by indulging themselves to a lot of persistent concentrating and overlearning, giving their best attention to every small or finer details ‘within’ and ‘without’ their reach. Such devoted concentration to detail leads in them remembering many things, even without taking any notes. Paying greater attention to the other compensatory senses, therefore, makes these learners become extra-sensitive and amazingly perform, resulting in the sighted mythically developing a notion that loss of sight results in other senses organically improving. Those with blindness are different from the sighted learners whose inherent gift of sight distracts them from concentrating on other sensory cues.

Like has been noted, when developing the ability for independent travel, a person with impaired vision will learn to concentrate on faintly audible, haptic/tactual or olfactory clues, within a given environment. This increases their directional acumen to compensate for their lack of functional vision. It is this ability to make good judgements and navigation decisions, even without sight, which lead the sighted community to mythically believe that there is some extra sense or other supernatural powers which enable these learners with blindness to avoid obstacles (Hansen, 2002). This extra sense mantra of beneficial blindness aside, let it be established that the ability for independent travel, using other sensory cues, is all to do with concentration. For this reason, it is, therefore, an insult to persons with blindness, to hear someone say, “... your eyes go, and the efficiency of your nose and ears and all the rest instantly increase by hundreds of per cent ...” (Hansen, 2002).

Negative stereotypes of those with visual impairment are perpetuated by very little knowledge, on the part of the sighted who fail to appreciate that with VI, these persons need to be oriented to solve their life challenges by performing tasks differently; hence they are understood as differently abled. To perform their

reading and writing tasks, for example, learners with VI need to pay extreme attention to their haptic/skin sense as they make use of adapted gadgets like Braille writers. This flies in the face of the stereotypical belief that with blindness, one naturally possesses extra-sensitive haptic/skin sense, in order to read and write Braille. Far from it, loss of eyesight means learning to do tasks differently through other well sharpened senses. The thought that those with VI are inferior to the sighted is, therefore, summarily stereotypical in every sense of the word. The fact of the matter, as the Department of Services for the Blind (2017) observes, is that with proper training and the necessary opportunities provided, through the expanded core-curriculum activities, learners who are visually impaired have the capacity to also live independently, just like those with typical vision.

There is also another very popular belief is that people with total blindness *see* nothing, but total darkness, warranting 100% assistance and dependence on the sighted. However, this has to also be dismissed as stereotypical since statistically, as the Department of Services for the Blind (2017) explains; only about 10% to 18% of people who are visually impaired are classified as being totally blind. This, therefore, suggests that the majority of them can differentiate between light and dark. In other words, the majority of these people have some residual vision/sight, as evidenced through either light perception (LP), finger movement (FM) or hand movement (HM) perception. To maximise the use of residual sight, these learners need adapted types of low optic devices with either convex or concave lenses, contingent upon individual preferences. With some basic or elementary orientation, learners with visual impairment have also demonstrated high capabilities in managing their own lives. These persons do not always need help, unfortunately, due to lack of knowledge and sensitivity by the sighted, the type of help given to learners with blindness, usurps and/or undermines their independence, for such assistance is, not always called for. It is important to always remember that like every other person, if a learner with visual impairment needs help, they will ask for it.

Yes, it is true that the wrong understanding of something leads to incorrect concept, judgements, views or opinions formed about that thing. Due to inaccurate information and traditional thinking about blindness, many people hold on to stereotypical views which are not only wrong, but embarrassingly discriminatory, like saying that with blindness, one always needs the sighted to rely on in everything. This belief by the mainstream community has always put the real abilities and capabilities of persons with VI at stake. On social interaction, instead of directly addressing one with VI, as a customary code of interpersonal behavior in communication, the sighted people have a tendency of directing their questions to the sighted pal, say accompanying one with blindness. Referring to one with blindness, but directed to the sighted buddy, typical questions/statements include: *What is his/her name?*, *What does he/she want to eat?*, *What juice does he prefer taking?*, *Please, you tell him/her to come back tomorrow*, etc.. This is done to make the sighted friend to communicate on behalf of their friend with blindness. What has to be emphasised as a broadly accurate guide or principle in interpersonal communication is that persons with VI have to be spoken to directly, and not through a mediator. In the same way, ordinary conversation words, like *'look'*, *'here'*, etc. have to be used, as if talking to a sighted person!

A lot has also been said about blindness and music. People believe that there is an association between blindness and music. There has been common stereotypical statements going the rounds like: *"All people with visual impairment are musically gifted..."*, *"The blind are more musical than the sighted..."*, etc. This is a misconception that may have been influenced by many popular singers who are visually impaired, such as Paul Matavire, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Ronnie Milsap, and many of those street performers and/or buskers with blindness.

Commenting on the stereotypical statement about musical giftedness, the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan (1999) cautions that no research has shown that persons with visual impairment, be it they are totally blind or they have remnant of sight, are more musical than sighted persons. If anything, sighted individuals are equally passionately musical individuals, just like those with VI.

Same stereotypical beliefs have also done the rounds about images of goggles or sunglasses, which have created an impression that these optic gadgets, especially with dark shades, are a symbol of blindness. This view could have been formed by impressions from some dramas, where characters with blindness usually wear glasses of dark shades. The truth of the matter surrounding the use of the said optic devices is that those with blindness do not have a definite image that defines them. It is only that like every other people, those with VI also have individual characters and preferences, with dark glasses being just one of those personal preferences.

Taking from the Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan Chapter (1999), it has to, however, be appreciated that some persons with VI choose to wear dark shades because of their somewhat defected outlooks due to damages in the cornea, which gives them a strange ocular appearance. The same can be said about those who choose to wear sunglasses or dark shades because of structural defects of the eyeball. However, it will be stereotypical to say that all persons with blindness have these strange or weird ocular appearances. Retinopathy, for example, is one example of an eye defect that can result in total blindness, yet not affecting the physical structure or appearance of the eye. It is, therefore, impossible for the public to know about the existence of this retinal vascular disease or damage, unless they are told (Hallahan and Kauffman, 1997). Even with none of

such notable ocular defects, persons having this retinopathy condition, can still prefer putting on goggles or sunglasses with dark shades. Therefore, it is not only being irresponsible, but stereotypical to think that all persons with VI have weird eyeball or corneal appearances, warranting camouflaging with dark shades. Donning dark glasses, therefore, becomes a personal preference, a choice that may also be opted for by the sighted, not in disguise of the presence of anything. For this reason, such optical devices may not be taken as a stereotypical symbol of blindness, like perceptions surrounding the white cane.

### **The white cane**

As they travel around, navigating familiar and unfamiliar spaces, persons with VI, like every other traveller, also need to reach their objectives safely and independently. Such can be made possible through strict orientation and mobility (O&M) programmes, with or without the use of the white cane. When the white cane has to be used, it has to be taken as one of the most important mobility devices used by learners with blindness for mobility efficiency and competence. Through efficient use of the white cane, learners with VI can adjust their mobility skills to navigate given environments, thereby performing same tasks as their sighted peers, but going about it in different ways.

It is self-evident that the white cane is associated with persons with visual impairment. It has also been proved to be a very useful mobility tool for millions of such people the world over, ever since blinded veterans began returning from the battlefields of World War II, as explained by Danielsen (2007). Even though, it is, however stereotypical to say that all people who are visually impaired need the use of a white cane for their mobility. To, therefore, take a white cane as a badge of inferiority as Danielsen (2007) puts it, cannot go unchallenged. To also code-name a white cane a symbol of blindness is also not only stereotypical, but grossly incongruous with the truth, since less than 2% of Americans who are visually impaired use a cane for their mobility (<https://dsb.wa.gov/resources/dispelling-myths.shtml>). So the assertion that all persons with VI necessarily use canes for their mobility is not in harmony, and hence inconsistent with the truth. If anything, what these persons need are well planned O&M programmes to enhance their mobility. As long as there is specialised training, especially in making these learners learn to pay greater attention to the use of their other compensatory senses, there will be de-mystification of a lot of mythical notions to do with travelling for persons with blindness.

Like earlier raised, somewhere in this paper, the natural gift of sight which the sighted learners have is their greatest betrayal, when it comes to their desire and effort to concentrate on auditory or olfactory cues. Bereft of that sight gift inherent in the sighted learners, those with VI can still pick even the most hidden details within the environment through well sharpened auditory and/or olfactory cues. Apart from sharpening these learners' compensatory senses, the blind also have to be oriented to the proper use of the white cane. With the necessary training programmes, as Bolt (2006) puts it, blindness will be considered as a mere physical nuisance, and not a barrier to leading a full life independently.

Although the cane remains a useful mobility tool for persons with VI, it has to be understood that if well oriented, even those with total blindness will not even need this mobility gadget. Experience with persons with VI has shown that with proper O&M training programmes, these persons can independently navigate a given environment just like the sighted. While the white cane is a tool that helps learners with visual impairment to explore their environment, as they test the evenness or unevenness of paths, it remains untrue and hence stereotypical to say that all persons with visual impairment have to always use the white cane, in order to walk around navigating paths and terrains of given spaces. Also, by the cane being a celebrated mobility device for the blind world over, does not make it a symbol of blindness, neither does it make the device a badge of inferiority and incompetence for the blind (Danielsen, 2007).

### **Understanding persons with visual impairment**

By mere listening to stories from the primordial times, it could be learnt that persons with VI have always suffered unprecedented marginalisation. This peripheral treatment of the blind has always revolved around superstitious explanations, which have often been connected to some unfounded rituals. For perpetuation of human kind, earliest primitive societies would just abandon or would not allow children with VI to live beyond early babyhood or infancy stage. For lack of proper knowledge about this condition of visual impairment, some sections of the modern day society still hold on to some of those mythical beliefs and explanations. It's on good record that Ronnie Lee Milsap, an American born blind music singer and pianist, for example, was persistently avoided or shunned by his mother who mythically believed that his visual impairment condition was punishment from God or gods (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111917238>). Probably it is, therefore, important to define what visual impairment entails.

Visual impairment is a term used to describe any kind of vision loss. In their heterogeneity, some of these people are totally blind, with others having partial sight as characterised by their remnant vision. Chandler and Worsfold (2013) understand visual impairment as a condition characterised by reduction or inability to see,

in categories of partial sightedness ( $B_2$ ) and total blindness ( $B_1$ ). Both of these conditions can be found as either congenital or adventitious. With VI, these learners find themselves in a completely different world, resulting in developing certain amount of fear to reaching out. Even in this condition, it is, however, important to understand that persons with visual impairment have the same needs and drive for leading an independent life. For that reason, these persons are not mythically imperfect beings, but social actors competent enough to live and function within any given mainstream social space.

### **Perception of the environment**

Brown, Packer and Passmore (2011) are sceptical about the environmental factors perceived as critical for learners with visual impairment. These authorities say that the sighted community seems not to appreciate the importance of types of environment in which one with VI should find themselves, be it social, physical or infrastructural. Well-meaning as inclusion may sound, experience with mainstreamed learners with VI shows that they still face the reality of being stereotyped, leading them to being isolated and/or excluded, when it comes to receiving appropriate inclusive education. The reality shows that there is incongruence between what is expected of learners with VI and the situation on the ground, especially in mainstream schools.

It has to be known that with visual impairment, these children always consider the environment beyond their fingertips as danger-laden, and therefore hazardous. For this reason, the mobility of these people is generally characterised by foot padding, with the thorax slightly bent backwards and hands thrust slightly forward, as a defense mechanism, for fear of the unknown. Such an atypical posture and gait have also been associated with other mannerisms or blindisms such as humming, finger snapping, or soft clapping as one moves along. To a learner with visual impairment, the environment around them remains an un-motivational space. This remains so because with congenital total blindness, for example, individuals are not aware of objects around them, no matter how close and safe their spaces may be. This is made worse if the object in the environment remains stationary and emits no odour or sound.

Like everyone else, children with VI are equally anxious to move around and explore, however, the fact that they are unable to see, does in many instances; restrict their natural drive to reach out. With congenital blindness, for example, these children have generally been found to be victims of overprotection by their peers, parents and/or care-givers. What the sighted always forget is that without support and motivation, it is common for children with VI to remain idle by leading a sedentary life style. Fear of injury, especially instilled into these children by an over protective sighted community has resulted in these learners' reduced interest in exploring by walking, running, climbing, jumping or such gross motor activities, which define their natural development.

For lack of proper motivation and encouragement, it is very common for such learners to show a wide range of stereotypical behaviours, or mannerisms, which among them also include: head rocking, head twisting, limb jerking, eye poking, headshaking or similar of such blindisms. If in school, such behaviours have been known to reduce learners with blindness' personal effectiveness and opportunities for positive development, making it very difficult for these learners to be accepted by their sighted classmates and the mainstream public at large (Brown, Packer, & Passmore, 2011). While it is imperative and hence encouraging to let these learners step out on their own, children with blindness also need to be taken out and be guided physically from one place to another, especially during their early O&M training programmes. Yes, these learners need a lot of encouragement to physically explore their surroundings. It is, therefore, the duty of instructors, like peripatologists, to encourage and instill confidence in these learners, in order to navigate given environments safely, efficiently, gracefully and independently, also with that gait or manner of walking that is aesthetically pleasing to watch.

Experience with learners with VI has also shown that on its own, blindness negatively affect the development of O&M skills, numerical skills, recreational skills, directional skills, spatial awareness, and these learners' general learning and development. The atypical social skills and behaviour some of them also exhibit, at times, impede these learners' interaction with others (Salleh and Zainal, 2010). In more ways than one, this condition of blindness limits these learners' access to visual instructions, especially as they strive to pursue an inclusive education system. Dale and Sonksen (2002) observe that placement of such learners along with their sighted friends, somehow affects them. This observation has also been made by MacCuspie (2001) and Sacks and Silberman (2000), who state that the condition of visual impairment tends to affect learners' interaction level with their sighted peers, in any given environment. Since behaviours ordinarily guide us in life experiences, the inability of learners with visual impairment to positively observe and adhere to what is socially expected of them, significantly impacts negatively on all aspects of their development and acquisition of life skills (Sacks & Silberman, 2000). This is so because the objects and situations a child sees around them during their development form a large part of the learning process, since these stimulate the development of the child's cognitive mind. Because of lack of vision, learners with visual impairment, therefore, find it very difficult to observe and imitate behaviours considered acceptable. The inability of children with VI to imitate expected and

acceptable social standards evidently affects their own behaviour, making them square pegs in the round hole of any mainstream setting.

It is very important to understand that due to their lack of vision, learners with VI remain relatively backward in terms of general knowledge and growth in almost all developmental aspects, as compared to sighted learners (Salleh & Zainal, 2010). This does not, however, suggest that they remain like that forever, although stereotypes will already be attached. What has to be emphasised is that learners with VI are differently abled, and this can be seen if instructors are patient with them, offering them the much needed expanded core-curriculum in order for these learners to cope in mainstream spaces.

The greatest challenge I have observed is that, due to lack of proper knowledge and understanding about learners with visual impairment, a lot of oversimplified generalisations, in the form of stereotypes, have been apportioned to these learners by the mainstream community (McLeod, 1994). Unfortunately, such generalisations have never acknowledged diversity among learners with VI, thereby leading to stigmatisation of these learners. It is unfortunate that such simplistic perspectives, on these children, continue to hold even today, despite the fact that it has been proven that stereotypes and myths are full of falsehoods, as has been discussed at length earlier in this chapter. As social actors, these learners also have the capacity for development and to fit in social spaces, as long as the mainstream community is accommodative enough to celebrate human diversity.

What I learnt from my experience with the blind is that many a times, stereotypes are caused by the public's misunderstanding of the real abilities of these persons. Failure or wrong understanding of something leads to a wrong judgment or an incorrect view or opinion, thus we have an incorrect concepts formed, which are misconceptions (Hong Kong Rehabilitation Programme Plan Chapter (1999)). Such misconceptions are very serious since they affect daily lives and education opportunities and needs for the visually impaired. Probably the introduction of ordinances like The Disability Discrimination Ordinance of 1996 (Hong Kong) and The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2008 (Check date) will reduce or totally eradicate stereotypes and myths, for the public to accept of persons with visual impairment, and other forms of disabilities.

### **Special needs education and learners with visual impairment**

There has been an evolution in the history of how persons with visual impairment have been treated. It is worth noting that the general welfare of these persons has of late changed for the better, courtesy of certain individuals, organisations, national and international efforts and conventions. Many changes have been noted in various fields including that of education, which is of late considered more of a human right than charity. As a result of human rights and democracy, the modern view on disabilities is that children with visual impairment have to be inspired by special needs education, where these learners have to be taught survival skills through an expanded core-curriculum individually planned education (IEP) initiative, an innovation that allows such learners to become independent and productive citizens, especially after their traditional school lives.

Shining light on special needs education, Howard and Orlansky (1992) state that it is an individually planned, systematically implemented, and carefully evaluated instruction that helps children with disabilities to achieve the greatest possible personal self-sufficiency and success in their present and future environment. Like has been hinted earlier, future environments here may denote the period after these children's traditional school lives. Hallahan and Kauffman (1997) also assert that special needs education is specially designed instruction that meets the unusual needs of an exceptional child, where special materials, teaching techniques, or equipment and facilities may be required. From the above, special needs education may, therefore, be understood as an umbrella term that encompasses and/or includes any extra help given to a learner with VI over and above that which is offered in an ordinary or conventional learning process. Adding on to the above, special needs education may also be understood as a modified process of learning which, in this case, is designed to meet special learning needs for learners with visual impairment, and is characterised as learner-centred, flexible, adjustable to individual needs and potential (Uganda National Institute of Special Education).

While special needs education activities are rooted in the UNESCO (1990) initiative, the education for persons with visual impairment, like other forms of disabilities, has been marked by the spirit and principles of the Public Law 94-142 (EFAHCA, 1975) and the World Declaration on Education for All (Haddad et al., 1990), making educational concerns for these learners a cause of concern the world over. Therefore, in line with the understanding that special needs education is a specially designed and legislatively governed instruction to meet the unusual needs of exceptional children (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1997), laws and policies have also been enacted mandating learners with visual impairment to receive appropriate education and instruction as a fundamental human right. Through human rights initiatives and commitments, most governments, the Kingdom of Eswatini included, have taken an upstream celebration of human diversity that realizes that all learners are equal, yet differently abled. It is, therefore, stereotypical to suggest that sight loss is a condition that makes someone less of a person, and also mythical to view one bereft of vision as under some form of divine judgment (<https://peersofbeinan.wordpress.com/2014/07/04/ten-myths-about-blindness-and-sight-loss/>).

### **Inclusion of learners with visual impairment**

Sharma et al. (2010) state that there are varied opinions regarding the best placement strategies for learners with VI. The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (United Nations, 1948), as read together with the Warnock Commission Report on Special Educational Needs (Warnock, 1978), categorically recommends that there be no segregation, but total acceptance of all exceptional learners, inclusive of those with visual impairment. It is for this reason that many countries, with the Kingdom of Eswatini included, have also taken an upstream to seriously provide education to all children without restriction or discrimination. In the face of continued search for the best placement options for learners with VI, it is also refreshing to note that countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Canada have already taken a position by instituting legislation that emphasises that learners with VI, like any other forms of exceptionalities, should be educated in mainstream settings (Sharma et al., 2010), benefitting from inclusive education instructions. However, FamilyConnect (2012) makes an important realisation that each child is unique, so what may work well for one child may fall flat for another. This, therefore, suggests that mainstreaming may not necessarily be a conclusive option for learners with visual impairment. Whatever the placement decision to be taken, the Australian Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act (1992), however, cautions that a disability should neither impede admission nor should it result in conditional enrolment of learners, which may be viewed as exclusionary.

Through a number of international conventions and enacted legislative documents, the education system for children with VI has, of late, changed drastically, with a paradigm shift from exclusionary to inclusionary initiative. Notwithstanding the foregoing, protagonists in the field of education and the general welfare of learners with visual impairment such as Hallahan and Kauffman (1997), Barker and Weller (2003), Zembylas (2005), Chubbuck and Zembylas (2008), Myers and Bastian (2010) concur that on its own, a condition of visual impairment has deep-seated social and emotional effects on an individual, thereby interfering with their inclusion in mainstream placements. Experiential contact with mainstreamed learners with VI has shown that the attitudes of fellow students and teachers towards learners with visual impairment can have a significant impact on their educational experiences. Since our beliefs generally affect our attitudes, lack of tolerance of diversity and general exclusion of person with VI, as (Myers and Bastian, 2010), can generate a lot of difficult situations for these learners. For example, some people have a stereotypical belief that persons with blindness have a personality characterised by inability and low intelligence, displays of impatience, distasteful or inappropriate language, aggression, or other of such aberrant behaviours. At the end of the day, such stereotypical notions make learners with blindness not only get marginalised, but become excluded by the sighted mainstream community. Because of the negative attitudes found in the mainstream spaces, those with blindness, are prone bullying, making them to withdraw or even drop out, which is wastage in education.

Apart from some academic challenges, studies and teaching experience have also shown that mainstreaming placement of learners with VI also presents social challenges to these learners. Unwarranted pressure may be mounted on the learner by teachers, especially if the teacher already has some stereotypically high expectations towards the mainstreamed learner. If, for example, a child belongs to a certain racial group or class that is known for being highly intelligent, the learner may be affected by teacher's unrealistic high expectations. Instead of the teacher considering issues of individual merits and human diversity, they will just buy into the stereotypical conclusion that this child is supposed to excel in class because the racial group or class they come from is known to be smart. This may remain so yet the particular child will literally be struggling. Blinded by the stereotype of generalisation, the teachers will fail to separate the particular child from the other family mates. If the child is performing badly in school, for example, the teacher will just assume that the child's poor performance is out of laziness. Instead of finding out of the child's personal challenges and needs, the teacher will just negatively label the child as lazy, based on a stereotypical belief that since the child's family is celebrated of its intellect, it therefore implies that the child should also equally excel, by being exceptionally good at, or proficient in school activities or subjects. This is an example of a scenario where learners with VI, for example, may suffer a dilemma of whether to tell others of their school experiences, quit or remain quiet suffering in silence.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

While this paper interrogated the concept of myths as beliefs or assumptions handed down through symbolic tales, it also made an attempt to give a thought about stereotypes as signifying a solid impression on an idea imposed upon an individual or groups of people because of their race or nationality, among other considerations (Nittle, 2017). As has been illuminated in the paper, a lot of mythical and stereotypical tags have come by through the sighted community's deliberate effort to twist the truth about blindness. By stereotyping, as Saul McLeod (2015) further elaborate, it is inferred that the characteristics that a person has are assumed to be a



representation of all the members of a group, which lead to prejudicial attitudes. It has to be appreciated that we have both positive and negative stereotypes about learners with visual impairment. While we have these two, Nittle(2017)makes an unfortunate observation that by their nature, most stereotypes are far from being positive, but roundly paradoxical, not even accurately reflecting reality. 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. From the paper, it was learnt that lack of knowledge about learners with VI has allowed these myths and overtly negative stereotypes to frequently remain unchallenged, thereby diminishing the talent and achievements inherent in these learners with impaired vision. To, therefore, think that those with visual impairment are inferior to the sighted, and cannot work and live independently, is not only stereotypical, but also mythical in that it twists the truth about these persons' capabilities. To make life easy for persons with visual impairment, those knowledgeable about their condition should, therefore, make an effort to straighten up twisted facts and spread the truth about what it means to be living with a condition of blindness. With stereotypes and myths demystified and dispelled, it is then and only when the sighted community will appreciate that visual impairment is nothing, but a mere sensory nuisance, and not a barrier to leading an independent life.

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