



Original Article

The challenges of inclusive education in Ethiopia: The reality on the ground

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Abstract

Ensuring access to quality education for all acknowledges the intrinsic value of diversity and respect for human dignity. The purpose of this research was to identify the challenges of inclusive education. The differences come to be seen in a positive light as the stimulus for fostering learning among all children. The principles of inclusion and equity in education are, then, not only about ensuring access to education, but also about having quality learning spaces and pedagogies that enable students to thrive, to understand their realities, and to work for a more just society. However, researches indicate that there are several challenges to implement Inclusive Education. The main purpose this article review was to investigate the major challenges that hinder the implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopia. Methodological wise, it employed a narrative review since the reviewer summarized the findings of empirical research which were conducted in different parts of Ethiopia at different time regarding challenges of Inclusive education. The findings from the reviewed studies revealed that attitudinal barriers, skill/knowledge barrier, inflexibility of curriculum, policies barriers, economic barrier, and physical/infrastructural barriers are the major hindrances to implement inclusive education in Ethiopia. Hence, it is recommended that ministry of education, non-government organizations working on education, families, schools and communities need to change and accept children with disabilities to be part of the system and refrain from expecting the children to adjust and conform to what the system provides.

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1 Introduction

Currently, promoting access to quality education for all is an international agenda through the underpinning principle is that all children have the right to be educated regardless of their special needs; disabilities and abilities with appropriate support provided. In order to realize this schema, every child should be able to go to school to be educated and to be granted the same opportunities as other children. However, it is known that about nine out of ten children with disabilities are not schooled in Ethiopia (UNESCO, 2016). It is important to react to this situation in order to create equal possibilities for everyone through equity in education. This was supported by United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child as education is human right for everyone children (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). Hence, inclusive education is the most acknowledged by Save the Children (2014) as inclusive education is a rights-based quality education which emphasizes equity in access and participation, and responds positively to the individual learning needs and competencies of all children. Inclusive education is a child-centered approach and places the responsibility of adaptation on the education system rather than the individual child.

Despite the fact that the right to education for all is enshrined in Ethiopia national and international treaties, there are still many challenges for children with disabilities with regard to accessing to quality and equitable education. Even though, [UNESCO \(2019\)](#) identifies the disability prevalence rate in Ethiopia populations is to be more than 18 per cent, approach to address the educational needs of all children ([Ainscow et al., 2006](#)).

According to [UNESCO \(1994\)](#), inclusion means that students with special needs attend natural school program and are enrolled in age-appropriate classes for all of their schooling day. It is a widely accepted phenomenon for two reasons. Firstly, education is a right that is part and parcel of modern society. Inclusion can foster democratic values in the pursuit of social justice. Secondly, it is a feasible option, and an integral part of the principles of equality of opportunity in education ([Mitchell, 2010](#); [Thomas, 2013](#); [UNESCO, 2009](#) & [UNESCO, 2016](#)). Recent studies show that inclusive education provides the best opportunities to support the development for people with disabilities ([Thomas, 2013](#); [Mitchell, 2008](#); & [Yoshiko, 2019](#)). This was supported yet the reported number of children with disabilities in schools is much lower. [UNESCO \(2019\)](#) further pointed this as either a large number of children with disabilities are not attending in school in Ethiopia, or if they are, they are unidentified within current school populations.

In addition, the reality on the ground shows that despite the conceived efforts of the government and the initiatives of national and international non-governmental organizations to make education system to be Inclusive in Ethiopia, there is still a great need to work with children with disabilities towards their full inclusion in education ([Belay et al., 2015](#)). In other words, educational equity is a main pillar or creating equal chances for individuals to reach a certain quality of life. It is clear that differences, or inequalities, exist naturally among human beings. However, these inequalities have to be addressed and given special attention when working towards educational equity and equality of opportunities in all aspects.

The researcher believes that it is sensible to conduct a review on different studies which had been conducted in different regions of Ethiopia regarding Inclusive Education implementation, its practices and opportunities. It is expected that this review will help to provide input for ministry of Education, researchers, policy makers, different NGO's, and any other concerned bodies in education and disability inclusion issues.

As a result, the main purpose of this review article was to expose the main factors that impede the successful implementation of Inclusive Education in Ethiopia. Therefore, the current review was guided by the following the research question.

1.1 Research question

What are the main challenges of inclusive education in Ethiopia?

2 Research Methods

2.1 Research design

This study employed a narrative review approach. The reviewer summarized the findings of empirical researches which were conducted in different parts of Ethiopia at different time regarding challenges of Inclusive Education. Since, there are vast and rapid rate of publications, a periodic synthesis of knowledge is required. As [Bolderston \(2008\)](#); and [Green et al. \(2006\)](#), the need for a review of literature may arise from the abundance of

information, divergent views, or a lack of consensus about a topic. As stated by Philip (2009), in current review the researcher selected studies, compared and summarized, and the findings of the reviewed studies were paraphrased, narrated and presented thematically.

In the current work, the reviewer included studies from both published and unpublished research works. The researcher tried to include the published research articles from peer reviewed, full length and open access research articles from the internet by entering the search terms and phrases which are related to Challenges, Practice and Opportunities to inclusive Education, Attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities in Ethiopia, Disability in Ethiopia, and Challenges of students with disabilities in Ethiopia.

The reviewed studies were conducted in between 2005-2020 in different parts of Ethiopia. The regional distribution of the reviewed studies indicated that three articles were included from Northern Ethiopia, three from Southern Ethiopia, three from western part of Ethiopia; three from Eastern part and three from Addis Ababa which is central to Ethiopia and the Conducted at a national basis in Ethiopia. Again, two master's theses with an academic rating of excellent from Dilla University, Ethiopia and two PhD dissertations were accessed from internet; which was conducted in partial fulfillment for the requirement for doctoral degree at University of South Africa (UNISA). Hence, a total of 22 research works were reviewed in current study.

3 Findings

In this section, the findings from different reviewed studies regarding challenges of Inclusive Education in Ethiopia were discussed thematically.

3.1 Attitudinal barriers

Even though the World Health Organization (2011) indicated as the World's attitudes towards people with disabilities have been shifting positively; one of the witnessed barriers to inclusive education in Ethiopia is unfavorable and negative attitude. The research finding shows that the negative attitudes imposed from regular teachers, school administrators, parents, students without disabilities and society are hindering the full participation of students with disabilities in education system (Tirussew, 2005; Mitiku et al., 2014).

Different researches show that regular teachers, non-disabled peers and school administrators are reluctant to interact with students with disabilities. In support of this, the study conducted by Melese (2019) indicated that regular teachers always look at them with different attitude and feel students with disability are not capable to do different activities. Melese (2019) further pointed that students with disabilities are facing high stigma and psychological ignorance from teachers, school administrators and students without disabilities in education system in Ethiopia. This was maintained by the research finding from Jaffer and Aminu (2020) as though principal's positive attitude toward inclusion is a critical prerequisite for successful inclusion, they are possessing negative attitude in western Oromia, Ethiopia.

In addition to above premises, the study conducted by Yoshiko (2019) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia revealed that teachers and parents/guardians of children with disabilities have contradicting views on inclusive education. The same source pointed that teachers and parents/guardians do not perceive learning in regular school is not necessarily the best path for children with disabilities.

Another study conducted by [Ludago \(2020\)](#) in Kambata Tambaro Zone Southern Ethiopia indicated that because of negative attitudes, some teachers believe that inclusion of students with disabilities as a burden. [Alemayehu \(2019\)](#) further specified that because of negative attitudes, teachers possess negative attitudinal, behaviours, perceptions, and assumptions that discriminate against students with disabilities. In addition, researchers [Dessalegn et al. \(2016\)](#) pointed out old attitudes resist the accommodation of students with disabilities and learning issues, as well as those from minority cultures. One of the challenges of inclusive education in Nekemte town is pointed as the attitudes of the non-disabled in the social integration of students with disabilities. [Teketel \(2018\)](#) on his study in Harar Town, Ethiopia indicated that one of the challenges to inclusive education in the study area was the attitudinal barrier that students with disability face emotional and physical bullying which is a serious barrier and leads to isolation and exclusion. In support to the above findings, the study conducted by [Mintesnot \(2020\)](#) in Benchi Maji Zone, South West Ethiopia witnessed that many times students with disabilities are made fun of because of their looks and become a matter of mockery/joke. Hence, this makes them to dropout from their education.

3.2 Skill/knowledge barrier

The reviewed studies showed that the skill/knowledge gap is among the main challenges for inclusive education in Ethiopia. This idea was supported by [Belay et al. \(2015\)](#); [Jaffer and Aminu \(2020\)](#) as schools without trained and certified special educators as hindrance for children with disabilities not to attend regular schools in Ethiopia.

However, inclusive education asserts that school leaders and teachers should have knowledge and skill about special needs of all children and school administrators and teachers should have knowledge that goes beyond simple introductory courses ([UNICEF, 2014](#)). It is also agreed that schools should have to find ways for educating all children. However, researchers boldly stated that one of the main challenges to implement inclusive education in Ethiopia is lack of knowledge to develop a pedagogy which is responsive for all children ([Mitiku et al., 2014](#); [Tirussew, 2005](#); and [Zelalem, 2018](#)). Hence, this requires well-trained and skilled teachers and school managers ([Tirussew, 2006](#)). As pointed on [Yoshiko \(2019\)](#), although the selected teachers have opportunities to receive training on inclusive education, the training system for teachers in Ethiopia also mainly focuses on theories and is not practical. In support to this [Ludago \(2020\)](#) indicated that even though children with disabilities are started to attend the schools in his research site, still skill gap of the school community to support them is one of the sounding challenge. The major skill problem mentioned in [Ludago \(2020\)](#) was lack of skills to screen and identify students need for individualized education program. He further mentioned that students with disabilities as the highest repeaters and because of unfriendly learning environment in his study area.

Additionally, [Tirussew \(2005\)](#) and [Yoshiko \(2019\)](#) revealed that traditional curriculum is the most acknowledged within the teachers and teachers feel more confident in traditional school culture in Ethiopia. Owing to these factors, researchers indicated that inclusive practice more relies on knowledge, skills, understanding, resources, and attitudes ([Tirussew, 2006](#); [Mintesnot, 2020](#); and [Melese, 2019](#)). This was again supported by [Dessalegn et al. \(2016\)](#) as one of the challenge to inclusive education in their research area was linked to teachers' lack skills and knowledge to teach students from diversified groups.

3.3 Inflexibility of curriculum

Ensuring that all learners have access to quality education also acknowledges the intrinsic value of diversity and respect for human dignity (UNESCO, 2015). In this way, differences come to be seen in a positive light as the stimulus for fostering learning among all children. UNESCO (2009) pointed the principles of inclusion and equity are not only about ensuring access to education, but also about having quality learning spaces and pedagogies that enable students to thrive, to understand their realities, and to work for a more just society. Hence, the same source stressed the curriculum as the central means for enacting the principles of inclusion and equity within an education system. In support to this, UNICEF (2011) suggested that inclusive curricula should be based on the view that learning occurs when students are actively involved, taking the lead in making sense of their experiences. Hence, this was suggested by Dessalegn et al. (2016) as curriculum developers should consider students with special needs during its design and development. Dessalegn et al. (2016) suggested that curriculum can have potential to address multidimensional needs of students.

According to Belay et al. (2015), one of the big challenges to inclusiveness in education in Ethiopia is the rigidity of the curriculum and lack of teachers' ability to adapt and modify for the individual needs of learners. This was again supported by Ludago (2020) as one of the challenges to inclusive education on his study area was curricular rigidity and skill gap within regular teachers to adapt the curriculum. Teketel (2018) further pointed that curriculum is not flexible for all learners and there is no practice for individualized education program (IEP).

Even though, it has been suggests by UNESCO (2009) as inclusion involves the responsive learning environment including fair assessment techniques, researches indicated that there is rigid curriculum, especially with regard to the design and management of timetables (Wondwossen et al., 2020). In addition, Ludago (2020); Melese (2019); and Dessalegn et al. (2016) found out that the timetables most often do not take care of students with disabilities in their study sites.

3.4 Policies as barriers

Ethiopia has ratified and adopted almost all of the relevant initiatives and international legal texts on the rights of persons with disabilities. On a national level, the issue of persons with disabilities has been included in many legal documents (Ministry of Education, 2012).

Despite the efforts of the government policies and strategies in Ethiopia, research suggest that there is still a great need to work with persons with disabilities towards their full inclusion in all aspects of society in general and inclusion in education specifically (Ministry of Education, 2012; Teketel, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

In support to the above premise, the investigation made by Belay et al. (2015) revealed that proper realization of inclusion for children with special needs is less likely even in the time to come in Ethiopia. The same source witnessed that the policy approach is focused on the top-down approach passed from international and national call, slogan, and approach which is not culturally sensitive, cost-effective, and community resource-based inclusive model.

The study conducted by Melese (2019) on title Ethiopian inclusive education strategy as to responsive learning environment for inclusive higher education system shows that there is no well-designed model recommended for Ethiopian universities at national level

to practice inclusive education. This study further indicated that there is no strong inclusive education policy except the draft policy that is the inclusive education strategy document that only has its own holistically seen feasible signals which can be in place for serving students with disabilities. Yoshiko (2019) also underlines that children with disabilities do not often have a choice in terms of school selection of either regular school or special school. Furthermore, Ludago (2020) pointed there were no responsible personnel in district, zone and region education offices as a challenge for inclusive education. This was again in line with the finding from Mintesnot (2020) the study conducted at Benchi Maji Zone, South West Ethiopia as no clear guidelines which clarify the concept of inclusive education and its implementation in the zone was mentioned as a main challenge for inclusive education implementation. Zelalem (2018) witnessed that lack of mandatory inclusive policy are barriers for inclusive education implementation.

3.5 Economic barrier

People with disabilities in the world are facing poverty and marginalisation in the whole world, UNESCO (2016). UNICEF (2011) indicated that people with disability's participation so restricted in economic, social and cultural activities in community which they live in Ethiopia (UNICEF, 2011). UNICEF (2011) further noted as effective learning is fundamentally influenced by the availability of educational resources to meet the needs of any society. In countries like Ethiopia, there are inadequate numbers of centers of learning and other facilities to meet the educational needs of the population. In most cases, inadequacies in provision are linked to other inequalities in the society such as Urban/rural disparities, as well as inequalities arising from discrimination on grounds such as gender, race and disability .

In support to above premises, the study conducted by Wondwossen et al. (2020) indicated that one of the barriers of inclusive education in Ethiopia is access to educational resources. The study further mentioned technology as an equaliser that levels the playing field for all learners and lack of access to ICT makes learners with visual impairment dependent, decreases their chance of getting up-to-date e-resources, and reduces their performance in their studies. This study boldly witnessed that poverty is the principal barrier for access to ICT.

Again, the study conducted by Ludago (2020) in Kambata Tambaro Zone, Southern Ethiopia revealed that inadequacy of infrastructures and education accommodations, low hygiene, none availability of ramps on the buildings and learning rooms, not treated classrooms and equipment as the major barrier for inclusion in the study area (Ludago, 2020). This was supported by Mintesnot (2020) on the study conducted on south west Ethiopia as school resources are from the major challenges in all schools to implement inclusive education. According to the information obtained from the same source, all targeted schools were under resourced to fulfil the requirements of inclusive education practice and within the limited resources, target schools also varied in the way they generate resources. This is finding is compatible with tirusew2005disability<empty citation> the intake capacity of children with special needs in schools are very few and they cannot reaching high schools rather they leave school early because scarcity of materials, facilities as well as trained professionals were the major challenges. Hence, the reviewed sources indicated that shortage of resources are among the main theme that hinders the successful implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopia (Alemayehu, 2019; Dessalegn et al., 2016; Ludago, 2020; Tirussew, 2005; Wondwossen et al., 2020).

3.6 Physical/infrastructural barriers

Accessibility is a precondition for the full realization of the rights and inclusion of persons with disabilities in society and development. This can be provision of flexible facilities and environments, either virtual or physical, to accommodate each user's needs and preferences. For persons with disabilities this may be any place, space, item or service that is easily approached, reached, entered, exited from, interacted with, understood or otherwise used.

In education setting, it is obvious that students with a disability should have accessible classrooms. It is obvious that one of the principles of inclusive education is about presence. If child cannot enter the room, there is no presence. The research conducted by [Belay et al. \(2015\)](#) indicated that many schools in Ethiopia are inaccessible to students with disabilities. This contradicts a statement on the accessibility should go beyond passageways, stairs, and ramps to recreational areas, paved pathways, and door handles. For instance, [Jaffer and Aminu \(2020\)](#) indicated that classrooms are not conducive to accommodate assistive technology to meet individual needs of students with disabilities ([Jaffer and Aminu, 2020](#)). This contradicts the UNESCO's premise as inclusive education worries for eliminating all obstacles to learning, and with the participation of all learners vulnerable to exclusion and marginalization practices ([UNESCO, 2009](#)).

In contrast, the study conducted by [Ludago \(2020\)](#) revealed that inaccessible environment is the biggest challenges to implement inclusive education. This was supported by [Zelalem \(2018\)](#) as most schools in rural areas of Ethiopia are unhealthy and unsafe for learners with disabilities. [Zelalem \(2018\)](#) further indicated that these problems are very pervasive in schools without local support.

Many literatures indicated that an accessible environment is essential for children with disabilities to enjoy their education right ([Jaffer and Aminu, 2020](#); [Ludago, 2020](#); [Mintesnot, 2020](#); [Mitiku et al., 2014](#), & [Zelalem, 2018](#)). However, lack of accessibility school environment is among the major barriers to implement inclusive education in Ethiopian.

4 Conclusions

The findings from the review revealed that attitudinal barriers, skill/knowledge barrier, inflexibility of curriculum, policies barriers, economic barrier, and physical/infrastructural barriers as the major hindrances to implement inclusive education in Ethiopia. And hence, inclusive education is a process that requires everyone to contribute to its full effectiveness and processing. Hence; ministry of education, non-government organizations working on education, families, schools and communities need to change and accept children with disabilities to be part of the system and refrain from expecting the children to adjust and conform to what the System provides.

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Data Availability

Data can be made available on the behavior of the request

Declaration of interests' statement

The author declare no competing interests.

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