

# Mind the gap: Implementation Challenges to the Transition towards Inclusive Education in East African Country

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**Abstract-** Most of the African children with disabilities live in sub Saharan, Africa. Many of these countries including: Ethiopia, have ratified international conventions on the rights of children with disabilities and are making a transition towards inclusive education. However, the vast majority of Africans with disabilities are excluded from schools and opportunities to work. This study examines the challenges in making this transition in one East African country, Ethiopia. A multi-method qualitative research approach was adopted. Document analysis identified the Ethiopian governments' vision for inclusive education. This vision was compared with the reality revealed by observations and interviews. Observation of teacher-student and student-student interactions in classrooms and outdoors, and analysis of the physical environment, was made in a total of fifteen classrooms drawn from five primary schools found in southern Ethiopia. In-depth interviews were conducted with school principals, classroom teachers, students with and without disabilities, and members of the parent teacher association. It has learned from the study that though the government policies that are prerequisite for inclusive education exist in Ethiopia, there is a large gap between policy and practice. In particular, the implementation of the policies is hindered by a lack of special needs professionals, a shortage of relevant teaching resources and accessible basic amenities, and low level of collaboration among stakeholders.

**Index Terms-** Inclusive Education, Children with Disabilities, IEP, Challenges

## I. INTRODUCTION

**A** 1.1 Background of the Study  
According to UNICEF, more than 80% of children with disabilities live in developing countries and have little or no access to appropriate services (Deluca, M. Tramontano, C. and . Kett M, 2014). Despite the efforts and achievements of Education For All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), children with disabilities remain one of the main groups that continue to be excluded from education around the world; those who do attend school are more likely to be excluded in the classroom and to drop out (UNESCO, 2015).

According to UN statistics, there are currently over 600 million persons with disabilities throughout the world of whom 400 million live in developing countries and 80 million in Africa (ACSL,2017).Most of the African children with disabilities live in sub Saharan, Africa. Many of these countries (including:

Ethiopia, Kenya, Burundi, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda) have ratified international conventions on the rights of children with disabilities and are making a transition towards inclusive education. However, the vast majority of Africans with disabilities are excluded from schools and opportunities to work.

In a movement towards inclusive education the government of Ethiopia adopted the United Nations convention on the right of the child on December 9, 1991. The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), article 9(4) states that all international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are an integral part of the law of the land .Article 13 further elaborates that all legislative, executive, and judicial organs have the responsibility to respect and enforce what is embedded in the constitution.

The Ethiopian constitution establishes the right to equal access to publicly funded social services urges all Ethiopians to have access to public health and provides rehabilitation assistance to people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups.

The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (TGE, 1994) requires expansion of basic quality education for all including children with special needs. In order to achieve the goal of universal primary education by the year 2015 as stipulated in the policy, due attention has to be given to the enormous number (10 %) of children and students with special educational needs (MOE, 2006).

In 2006 the MOE has developed Federal Special Needs Education strategy which focuses on the promotion of inclusive education to meet the Millennium Development and EFA goals (MOE, 2006). According to this document the government's strategy for improving the provision of educational services for children with special educational need is based on the principle of inclusion. The special needs education (SNE) strategy aims to make the education system inclusive by educating teachers and establishing support system in regional education bureaus (REBS), *woreda* education bureaus (WEBS) and in schools(MOE,2006). The strategy recognizes the need to identify and remove barriers by considering learners' diversity through for example transcribing textbooks in to Braille, using sign language as a medium of instruction and other activities (UNESCO, 2007). Despite the effort Ethiopia has shown in the process of Education for All (EFA), it has been noted that there is still a gap in the provision of access to all learners particularly those with special education needs hence, and actualizing special needs education (MoE, 2012)

## 1.2 Problem Statement

The government of Ethiopia is striving to achieve the goal to provide quality education for all citizens. Moreover, as the country adheres to international convention concerning child right, and also the federal democratic republic of Ethiopia reorganizes the existence of diversity in peoples, cultures etc, and the country considers diversity as beauty (opportunity) to develop the country. Thus, the need to make a shift to inclusive education is logical.

Children and young people with disabilities including psychological problems of different origins, learning difficulties, behavioral disorders and family problems, who are confronted with abusive behaviors at home and schools, increase the number of dropouts and repeaters at schools and the population of homeless children and youth on the street. Such children and young people have needs that can be addressed within ordinary schools, but only if the schools are organized and teachers are appropriately educated and use appropriate instructional strategies along inclusive education (MoE, 2006). The movement towards educating children with disabilities along with those without disabilities will have twists and turns, and there is a long way to go to get everything in place in the way of moving forward, and thus it is always important to check whether the necessary preparations are in place or not (Tirussew,2005) .

In southern parts of Ethiopia (about 185Km south to Addis Ababa, capital city of Ethiopia) where the current study has conducted students having diversified needs share the same class and school and learn together including those which are recognized as having visual impairment, motor disability, and hearing impairment. Due to the international paradigm towards inclusive education pioneered by western countries, Ethiopia is also following similar scenario without having necessary preconditions. In many schools mere presence of students with disabilities in schools is perceived as inclusive education by school communities. Thus, to fill the understanding gap about inclusiveness of the school practice especially as to whether the overall teaching and learning process, the learning environment, the practice of community building is in line with inclusive education or not. Thus, it is important to understand whether the necessary requirements of inclusive practice are in place in order to realize inclusive education. Therefore, the researcher formulated the following research questions.

- How does the schools' environment (physical and social) respond to the needs of students?
- How does the instructional strategy used in the schools address the needs of students?
- To what extent does the school community collaborate with local community and among each other?

## 1.3 Objectives of the Study

### General Objective

To understand the implementation gaps hindering the transition towards inclusive education.

### Specific Objectives

- To explore as to whether the schools environment (physical and social) appropriately respond to the needs of students or not.
- To analyse the instructional strategies used in the schools in addressing the needs of students.

- To identify the extent to which the school community collaborate with local community and among each other?
- To forward feasible recommendation that helps to improve the journey towards inclusive education.

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

The study benefits those working in inclusive education to have a glance look at their own practice and improve their service. It helps them to see the extent to which they are practicing instructional strategy which is in line with the principle of inclusion in such a way that they would become better practitioners of inclusive education than they did. Moreover, the study offers an opportunity to understand one's weaknesses and strengths in the move towards building inclusive community helping diversified students, and orchestrating learning.

The school and local community would be benefited from the study by doing better in involvement, mutual respect, and collaborating with each other. As a result schools would perform better, more students become beneficial in their education and in all forms of participations. The schools and local community would be benefited from the reciprocal relationship expected to be established as a result of understanding the role and status of each other. Moreover, this study is important in the move towards building inclusive society and realization of fundamental human right. Understanding the gaps might inform the government and all stakeholders to work hard and take correcting measures.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

### 2.1. Methodological Approach

In this study qualitative research approach was followed. Qualitative research focuses on the process that is occurring as well as the product or outcome. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how things occur (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990; Merriam, 1988 cited in Cresswell, 2003). Qualitative research allows the investigator to interpret and bring to light an understanding of particular subjects and events (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research is much more relevant and appropriate to identify the fundamental roles of personnel beliefs, feelings and perceptions, and organizational dynamism, as well as the social process that plays a great role in shaping practices in special needs education (Peck and Furman; 1992 in Mertens & McLanughin,, 1995). Qualitative research method enables the researcher to explore problems in accordance with the insider's view point and it is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Thus, qualitative research approach and particularly case study was employed to explore and describe implementation challenges to the transition towards inclusive education from the view points of school administration, teachers, students, and local community.

### 2.2. Research Design

To get a detailed account or description of the issue, qualitative case study was employed. Qualitative case study

focuses on providing a detailed account or description of a single instance or bound system rather than making general explanations about phenomenon (Sherman & Webb, 2003). Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting. The qualitative researcher often goes to the life (home, office) of the participant to conduct the research. This enables the researcher to develop a level of detail about the individual or place and to be highly involved in actual experiences of the participants.

### 2.3 Selection of Participants

To obtain the richest possible information and thus understand the issue under study as clearly as possible, non probability- purposive sampling was used. Payne and Payne (2004), states that sampling in qualitative research is generally based on non-probability rather than probability and random approaches. In purposive sampling, whether a member of the population is chosen as a participant is decided not by chance rather it is decided by whether the individual could provide a rich information on the issue or not. According to Cresswell, (2007) the concept of purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research. This means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomena. Thus, the researcher purposefully included five school principals, fifteen teachers, ten members of parent teacher Association (PTA), ten students without disability, and ten students with disability.

### 2.4. Data Collection Instruments

In order to obtain the necessary data for the study three instruments namely interview, observation, and document analysis were used. According to Cresswell (2003), in qualitative research the actual methods of data collection are based on open-ended observation, interview, and documents.

### 2.5. Data Analysis mechanisms

Data were analyzed using qualitative method. Data obtained from interview, observation, and document analysis were transcribed, coded, triangulated and themes were made. Finally, Data Analysis was carried out using narration and the summary of the words of respondents.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study was aimed to understand implementation challenges to the transition towards inclusive education in selected schools of Ethiopia. More specifically it was intended to achieve the following specific objectives.

- To explore as to whether the schools environment (physical and social) appropriately respond to the needs of students or not.
- To analyse the instructional strategies used in the schools in addressing the needs of students.
- To identify the extent to which the school community collaborate with local community and among each other.

In order to achieve the above specific objectives data were collected using three instruments namely; interview, observation, and document review. The very extensive data were reduced, organized, and themed under *school physical environment, the school social environment, the teaching-learning process, collaboration and opportunities in the schools* and thus presented as follows.

### 3.1 The Schools' Physical Environment

*A student with a disability cannot learn in an inclusive classroom if he cannot enter the room, let alone the school building. Some schools are still inaccessible to students in wheelchairs or to those other mobility aides and need elevators, ramps, paved pathways and lifts to get in and around buildings. Accessibility can go beyond passageways, stairs, and ramps to recreational areas, paved pathways, and door handles. A student with cerebral palsy, for instance, may not have the ability to grasp and turn a traditional doorknob. Classrooms must be able to accommodate a student's assistive technology devices, as well as other furniture to meet individual needs (UNESCO,2008)*

Contrary to the above expectations the pathways leading to the gates of the schools were not clean and had a lot of obstacles. They were not smooth to allow free movement for students who were blind as well as for students with motor disability. Therefore, the students were observed to face difficulty in getting into the schools. There were no access ramps for wheelchair use. In the school compound itself the pathways to and from classrooms, toilets, library, offices were hurdled by a number of obstructions. There were trees, newly planted foliage & fenced, stones collected here and there, dig outs, etc. These and others seem to hinder blind students and students with motor disability not move freely in the school compound. Generally speaking the outdoor environment of the schools had a number of hazards. It was unsafe and inaccessible for some students.

The classroom physical environment also didn't allow easy movement of students in the class. The classrooms were overcrowded by desks which were attached together. There was also large number of students in a single class. Thus, it didn't allow free movement for children with motor disability and visual impairments. This is not characteristics of inclusive classroom which was described by Belk (2005) as, the need of classroom arrangement to allow for freedom of movements. One of students with disability using crutches responded,

*I can't easily and safely access my classroom as it has stages. The classroom materials are also not arranged well. Desks are not arranged properly for easy movement. It is also not suitable to sit on.*

A learner using wheelchair says

*There were also stages at every room in the school. How can I step on to get in to the classrooms? It hindered me to get in to the rooms unless someone carry/ lifts me up to the upper stages*

Almost all of the classrooms were not aesthetically pleasing and materials in the class were not arranged to meet the needs of all students. There was shortage of materials in the class to encourage the learning of all students. There was also scarcity of furniture in some classes of the schools. The class design and arrangement of furniture seem unfortunate to accommodate the

needs of students with motor and those with visual impairment. Some classes had no sufficient natural or artificial light thus making some students to miss important points which can otherwise be gained from observing the teacher and the blackboard. There were classes which were overcrowded and suffocated. There was no electric ventilation to foster easy movement of air in the class to serve the large number of students. Temperature in the afternoon shift, which was relatively hot, was aggravated by the nature of the classroom buildings and large number of students in the class. Students at their first arrival to the class in the afternoon were observed to be busy in dealing with sweats and taking off their most upper wears.

The overall topography of the school compounds also seem unfortunate for easily movement to access different rooms.

One of the student with visual impairment responded:

*I can't move freely in the classroom as well as in the school. There are a number of obstacles here and there. I used to collide with different objects in the schools. Therefore I decided to sit at specific place.*

Another learner using wheelchair says

*The toilets were not suitable for me. I couldn't use any of them. I couldn't get in to the toilet room with my wheelchair. It has stage and also had narrow door. Moreover, as I see from distance and as I informed by my classmates, it has no special design to support me at appropriate place to use it. Therefore, I usually manage/minimize my food and drink intake before school but still I encountered problems in school including wetting my dresses.*

The toilets were not suitable for students with motor disability. It seems that any of the toilets in the schools were not made to consider the needs of students with motor disability during its construction and almost no attempt was made to modify at least some of them to the current demand of students with motor disability. Lack of toilet access in the school made the students to abstinent from food for certain time so that they would not need toilet at school times. Such condition might have its own impact on students learning.

### 3.2. The Social Environment of the Schools

Students with disabilities and those without disabilities were observed while they were coming to the schools and in the school compounds. Most of them were observed to chat and walk together. It seems that they didn't discriminate each other. In the flag ceremony they attend it commonly together by forming lines without preferring one student to another based on any other differences. They didn't prefer one to another based up on disability or other differences. In moving to the class or out of the classes, they formed pairs or small groups based on their relationship other than disability condition. Exception to this condition was that deaf students seem to tend together in movement and discussion. But here also there was communication between deaf and hearing to some extent.

Student with physical disability says,

*In moving together in school compound students without disabilities usually don't discriminate me. They approach me just like other student. In play ground and any activity they even provide me the first chance. In the class also we sit together. In students team work I am grouped with students without disabilities. We work together. We also exchange learning*

*materials. They usually support me. Teachers also encourage me to be successful in my education through their advices.*

In play grounds during break times, students were observed actively playing with each other. Teachers were also observed communicating with some students regardless of their disability. Students seem to disclose their problems freely to their teachers for solution. The teachers approached/interacted almost all students in similar manner regardless of their differences. Students without disability were also observed showing concern and care for students with disabilities and vice versa. In the classroom, students with disabilities and students without disabilities were observed to learn and discuss issues together. They did class works together, showed concern for each other. When the teachers order them to form arbitrary groups, students with disabilities also could find friends easily to form the group they need. In borrowing materials among themselves no difference was observed among students with disabilities and students without disabilities. It seems that there were no discrimination in the classroom among the teachers and students due to disability. But some teachers were observed that they ask more "difficult" questions students without disabilities than they used to ask students with disabilities.

### 3.3 Teaching Learning Process

It is likely that there are students functioning at different levels. Some will be working at their age level, some will be working a year or more ahead, and some other will be working at an earlier age level (MoE,2012). Such conditions require teachers to prepare their lesson according to the needs and abilities of children. In order to address such diversified needs, teachers should use multi-level teaching or make lesson adaptation to respond to the diversified needs.

Moreover, according to UNESCO (2008), just as the environment must be accessible to students with disabilities, the curriculum must facilitate inclusive education, too. General educators must be willing to work with inclusion specialists to make modifications and accommodations in both teaching methods and classroom and homework assignments. Teachers should be flexible in how students learn and demonstrate knowledge and understanding. Written work, for example, should be limited if a student cannot write and can accomplish the same or similar learning objective through a different method.

Opposite to the above idea, the teaching learning process carried out in the schools was almost depended on lecture and traditional group discussion. In the schools all students were considered as working at the same ability level. Even though the teachers believed that there are three different ability levels in their students, no practical attempt was made to address the needs of such diversified ability levels. The teachers almost employed similar teaching methodology for all students. In addition, no curriculum modification was made to respond to the needs of all students. What the students learn (the content) was the same for all students in the class. The teachers used student text books with no modifications. The way the teachers present the lesson for the students was almost the same for all students in the same class despite differences among students. Thus, there were students who couldn't benefit from the content taught as well as the teaching methodology employed. This strategy

opposes with the advise that Kendall and DeMoulin (1993) cited in Belk (2005) offered *teachers of inclusive classroom are expected present lessons in a multi sensory manner, using relevant material and active learning methods, and they need to teach to the personal interests of the students.*

In line with the above idea Urdvari-Soluer & Thousand (1995) and Belk (2005) also agreed that *... teachers of inclusive classroom need to adapt or differentiate the curriculum by changing the content, methods and the use of flexible and non standardized assessments that are more responsive to human diversity.*

Furthermore, in the schools under study no time adjustment was made on learners' speed of learning and learning styles were not addressed appropriately. Classroom tasks were not present at different levels of complexity. The teachers gave almost equal amount of time to copy notes from blackboard, or to accomplish activity regardless of their difference.

UNESCO (2001), Quiun & Ryba (2004), and National Science Foundation (2006) opposes the teachers practice describing as

*the need to have instructional differentiation like: sensitivity to students' diversity, the use of active learning methods, using different learning styles (visual kinesthetic, auditory, etc), providing tasks and questions at different levels of complexity and varying numbers of steps in practice.*

Lesson plans were not in line with the needs of every student. The objectives were not specific and didn't communicate what was intended to achieve. Moreover, it puts the students to be only recipients of the instruction rather than active participants. There was no Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to address educational services tailored to the needs of learners with special educational needs. To the contrary, UNESCO (2009) underscored the need to have individual educational plan for the child with a special needs. MoE (2012) also described the importance of preparing and using IEP for learners and teachers. According to the document IEP assures the right of learners to education and helps the teacher to deliver effective programs for learners with special needs. It also helps to overcome barriers in education.

Document analysis showed that the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia endorsed inclusive education (IE), and the use of individualized education programs (IEP) for children with special needs, and provided printed guidelines about these to some school. Encouraging progress had been achieved in exposing teachers to initial training and in building ramps to increase the accessibility of classrooms. However, many barriers to the implementation of inclusive education remained as problems. Interviews with school principals and class teachers revealed that they were not in a position to understand, disseminate or implement the IE guidelines obtained from the Ministry of Education.

*Interviews with principals and teachers revealed that most had no access to support staff (such as permanent or itinerant special needs professionals), IEP and IEP teams did not exist, and the rigid curriculum was difficult to adapt for children with special needs.*

### 3.4 Collaboration

Teachers working together, with other professionals, or with parents to help student with special educational needs in the schools seem to be weak. There was totally absence of itinerant teachers and shortage of professionals in special needs education in the schools under study. Moreover, teachers teaching in the same school or class were not collaborating to the expected level to help student with special needs in their class.

*One of the barriers associated with inclusion education is a lack of communication among administrators, teachers, specialists, staff, parents, and students. Open communication and coordinated planning among staff are essential for inclusion to work. Time is needed for teachers and specialists to meet and create well-constructed plans to identify and implement modifications the, accommodations, and specific goals for individual students. Collaboration must also exist among teachers, staff, and parents to meet a student's needs and facilitate learning at home.*

Some teachers took initiation and form *special needs club* in two of the schools but the school administration seem to stay far from them. Furthermore, the collaboration between school and local community was found to be unsatisfactory. The school and local community come together rarely to discuss issues of special needs children. The Education and training board at the *kebele administration* level seem to ignore the issue of students with special needs. But there were contacts with *Woreda* education office on the issues. Still their relationship was not beyond asking statistical data about number and types of students with special educational needs. Though the current trend is providing access to education in the nearest school, to this paradox, the education office itself is sometimes not willing to hire or assign professional teachers in special needs education to schools accepting students with special needs. Instead, the office made the special needs children to attend only specified schools. As a result, some students with disabilities were forced to attend a school very far from home while others (for example, children with intellectual disability) stayed at home.

## IV. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Summary

This study was intended to understand implementation challenges to the transition towards inclusive education in selected schools of Ethiopia. In order to achieve this general objective, the following basic questions were raised.

- How does the schools' environment (physical and social) appropriately respond to the needs of students?
- How does the instructional strategy used in the schools address the needs of students?
- To what extent does the school community collaborate with local community and among each other?

In order to answer the above basic questions qualitative case study research approach was followed. Data were collected using three instruments namely interview, observation, and document analysis were used. The participants of the study were five school principals, fifteen teachers, ten members of parent teacher Association (PTA), ten students without disability, and ten students with disability. The participants were purposely

selected. Open ended interview questions were carefully developed by the researcher and held with school principals, teachers, students, and PTA members. Observation focused on both physical environment and social environment of the school. From the collected data it was found that the schools' physical environment was almost inaccessible for students who were physically challenged and for blind students. The outdoor environment and indoor environment were almost difficult to be accessed by physically challenged. Toilets and the play grounds were the most challenging for wheelchair users. Moreover, the schools' environment were full of obstacles and hard to navigate, inaccessibility of toilets, lots of stages, absence or shortage of special needs professionals, lack of itinerant teachers, rigidity of curriculum, absence of IEP and IEP team, unsatisfactory relationship between the school and local community. Teaching learning process and its plan seem to ignore students with disabilities.

#### 4.2 Conclusion

Almost all schools under the study were physically inaccessible for students who used wheelchairs. The schools were not accessible for anyone in wheelchair. It is possible to say that the schools were not open for those who use wheelchair. So it is not logical to expect a number of wheelchair users in an environment which is not accessible. Failure to provide accessible environment is denying the rights of the children to equal access of publicly funded social services (Article 41 of the constitution of FDRE). The whole school compound and classroom equipments, library, toilets, etc. were not equally accessed to all students. The number of students in the class was very high that teachers couldn't support all students. The classrooms were not ease for students learning. There were shortage of professionals, itinerant teachers, and resource room. The social environments of the school on the other hand seem good. The interaction among students with disability and students without disabilities as well as teachers and students was relatively interesting. The teaching-learning process was characterized by highly rigid curriculum despite government's effort in preparing guideline for curriculum differentiation and individual educational program. Teachers seem to lack knowledge and competence to do so. Teachers didn't prepare and help students according to their needs and abilities. The content, instructional methodology, assessment, and instructional-aids were not adapted to the needs of students. There were also lack of adequate communication among administrators (woreda, Kebele, & school), teachers, parents, and students.

#### 4.3 Recommendations

- ❖ The school and local administration should facilitate mechanism in which school grounds and facilities become safe, clean, and well-maintained.
- ❖ Hurdles and obstructions in the schools should be removed by the school community.
- ❖ Local and school administration should facilitate the implementation of policies and strategies formulated by the Ministry of Education (MoE) on inclusive education to ascertain the rights of individual learners.
- ❖ Practical measures should be taken by the school and local administrative body to facilitate accessibility of

toilet, library, classrooms, play grounds, seats, and path ways to the needs of students with disabilities.

- ❖ The *Woreda* education office should assign professionals (itinerant teachers, Braille & sign language teachers) to respond to the acute shortage of professionals and support staff. They should work together to prepare and utilize individualized education plan (IEP) for learners in need of it.
- ❖ Resource rooms should be made available at schools. Moreover, the under resourced once should be equipped with appropriate teaching learning materials (Braille text books, tactile graphs, and other stationary and mobility material for children with disabilities).
- ❖ Screening and assessment tools should be developed by professionals and made available at schools for use.
- ❖ Teachers should adapt or modify the content, methodology, instructional-aids, and assessment according to the students needs. The effort made by MoE in preparing documents is interesting but classroom teachers should get mechanism on how to adapt curriculum.
- ❖ Collaboration among and between the school and local community should be facilitated by the school, members of parent teacher association, and *Kebele* education and training board.
- ❖ More comprehensive researches should be carried out on the practice of inclusive education.

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