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Teacher Preparation to Implement Inclusive Education in Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study explored the experiences of education personnel about mentoring and preparing teachers for inclusive education in Ethiopia. An interpretive qualitative method is employed to find out the meanings of the mentoring experiences for the teacher trainees as well as the interpretations of these experiences for the researcher. Judgmental sampling is adopted, in which education officials, experts and school supervisors involved as informants. Focus group discussion and semi-structured interview were used to get the data for the study. The data were analyzed thematically as per the questions of the study. Findings revealed shortage of teachers in SNE, absence of guideline of inclusive education, and lapses in teachers skills as main hindrances to inclusion of children with disabilities into regular schools. It is concluded that while preparing SNE teachers for inclusive education is a responsibility on the part of each regional education bureaus, education personnel faced several challenges to adequately meet this demand.

Keywords: disability, inclusive education, misunderstanding, teacher preparation

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Introduction

Historically, people with disabilities were segregated from the mainstream society because of their uniqueness (Peters, 2007). This practice exists in Africa in general and Ethiopia in particular to these days. The practice of segregation includes hiding and abandoning children with disabilities (Tirussew, 2005). In Ethiopia, there is a general tendency to think of people with disabilities as weak, hopeless, dependent, and unable to learn and as subjects of charity (Tirussew, 2005). Owing to traditional beliefs and other things, most Ethiopians associate disability with sin that parents have committed and perceive it as a curse from God (Zelalem, 2007).

Wrong causal attributions and misunderstandings about the capabilities of children with disabilities resulted in stereotypes and general negative attitudes towards them. Their societal reactions are clearly manifested in marginalised interpersonal relationships and their little or no participation at family, neighbourhood and community levels (Zelalem, 2007; Tirussew, 2006).

Inclusive Education engages and supports all learners in such a way that a full range of learning needs can be met (UNESCO, 2009; Tirussew, 2006). However, among regular classroom and subject teachers, there is a perception that adopting methods that are more inclusive of students with special needs in their classes is viewed as an imposing and misguided policy. Some among the complaints about the policy include; students with special education needs waste teachers' instructional time that would have been used for helping students who are more likely to achieve, teaching students with special needs require specialized teaching skills, and teachers are not trained for teaching students with special education needs (UNESCO, 2009; Zelalem, 2018).

While enhancing inclusive practices to benefit all students, teachers fear that they may not have the specialised knowledge to do so (Mafa, 2012). As Mafa (2012) noted, professionally competent teachers strive to increase access and reduce or address barriers of special needs students. This involves adapting instructional materials to allow students to participate, accommodating students' responses, and providing multiple opportunities for students to learn in a variety of ways (Gokdere, 2012; Dias and Cadim, 2016; Ali, 2014).

Zelalem (2018) noted that a significant relationship exists between what teachers believe about ability, disability, knowledge, learning method, and beliefs about roles and responsibilities in instructing learners. These beliefs in turn influence how they teach and how effective they would be in reaching their students with and without special education needs. As Florian & Linklater (2010) remarked that teachers who lack the necessary knowledge and skills to teach students with special needs in inclusive classrooms associate their reluctance to with poor quality of in-service training. Students with disabilities are expected to have equal access to educational opportunities as their 'able' peers. This in turn implies that regular teachers must provide appropriate instruction to these students. However, owing to lack of training on effective adaptive teaching strategies and limited skills and competencies, teachers fail with respect to including students with disabilities in their regular classrooms (Mukhopadhyay, 2015; Agbenyega, and Deku, 2011; Kuyini and Desai, 2008). In a study of 20 regular schools, researchers in Ghana found that, of the 220 teachers, 46% had limited knowledge about inclusive education, and 58% had no training in special and inclusive education (Kuyini & Desai, 2008).

The roles and responsibilities of regular teachers in implementing inclusive education highly correlates with the quality of training they received. According to Zelalem (2007) documented, teachers are not only required to meet the needs of regular education students but also that of their peers. Hence, creating inclusive classrooms is related to the quality of their training. The skills and knowledge of teaching approaches and strategies determine their ability to meet the needs of all children in regular classrooms. These skills enable teachers to plan instructions in more flexible ways, taking in to consideration differences within learners through adapting learning goals,

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contents and the learning environment to accommodate students with special needs (Ainscow and Goldrick 2010; Tikly, 2015; Gokdere, 2012).

Schools exclude children with special needs when they fail to provide teachers with appropriate continuous professional development to enable them to accommodate all learners in the teaching and learning process. The result is exclusion, a denial of opportunities to acquire the knowledge, capacity and self-confidence essential for the overall development of children (UNESCO 2005; Tikly, 2015). Thus, barriers to learning and development children with disabilities originate from the learner, the system of education, quality of teacher training and the broader socio-political context. These barriers lead to exclusion of learners with disabilities from inclusive education (Mashiya, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, 2015).

In Ethiopia, several factors hinder school enrolment of CwDs. Lack of sign language skills among teachers, resource and infrastructure constraints, inflexibility of curriculum, and teachers' lack of information and training on how to adapt teaching methods for children with special needs are some among many (Zelalem, 2018). Consequently, instead of adapting the school to accommodate the needs of the students with SEN, teachers compel them to adapt to the school environment (World Vision, 2007).

Even schools that have access to education are not equipped with modified teaching material, are not assisted by trained teachers, and are not provided a modified and accommodating learning environment. These indicate that the implementation of inclusive education is faced with several challenges. The aforementioned situations prompted the researcher to investigate the problem so as to discover ways useful to overcome the challenge. Subsequently, the researcher posed the following research questions

- How does the Ministry of Education prepare teachers to implement inclusive education in Ethiopia?
- Are teachers skilled enough to educate children with disabilities?
- Does the country design guideline to implement inclusive education?
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Methods

Qualitative research is interpretive and aims to discover the meaning events have for the individuals who experience them and the interpretations of those meanings by the researcher (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Furthermore, it aims to reflect on the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the people who participated in the study. Accordingly, education officials, experts and school supervisors recruited provided in-depth information about the effectiveness of teacher development for inclusive education. Qualitative methods typically involve generating highly detailed rich descriptions of human behaviours and opinions. This methodological perspective helped the participants to construct their own reality about the challenges of inclusive education, and their understanding of the practise and experience of implementing inclusive education.

In this study, judgemental sampling is employed, and 12 participants drawn from three regional states and one city administration of Ethiopia are involved.

Instruments of Data Collection

To obtain data about the teacher preparation programmes and implementation of inclusive education, focus group discussions were conducted with officers of Amhara Regional Education Bureau. These officials were interviewed because they are thought to have role in teacher preparation, support, implementation of inclusive education. Hence, the FGDs consisted of school

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supervisors, education experts and curriculum designers. Researcher served as a moderator by taking the responsibility to:

- Facilitate the discussion;
- Prompt members to speak; and
- Request overly talkative members to let others talk.

The role of the assistant was to record the session using tape-recorder, taking notes, creating an environment that was conducive for group discussion, making sure everyone had a seat, and providing verification of data.

The second type of instrument was semi-structured interview. Having developed the interview questions, data were collected from the SNE experts, school supervisors and education heads in each Regional Education Bureau. The sample also included higher officials including directorate of SNE in the MoE.

Data analysis

Data analysis includes working with data, organising it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesising it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Within the qualitative approach, my primary choice was phenomenological analysis. Phenomenological analysis is iterative, complex, and requires creativity in its nature (Van Manen, 1990).

As Creswell (2007) and Van Manen (1990) note, in phenomenological interpretive analysis, there are different stages of analysis. Phenomenological approach consists of four stage of analysis.

During the initial stage, I read the whole transcripts more than once and recorded some observations and reflections about the interview experience. During the second stage, I returned to the transcripts to transform the initial notes into emerging themes, formulating concise phrases that contain enough particularity to remain grounded in the text and enough abstraction to offer conceptual understanding. In third stage of analysis, I examined the emerging themes and clustered them together according to conceptual similarities. I looked for patterns in the emerging and pre-set themes with the intention to produce a structure that will be helpful in highlighting converging ideas.

Finally, a group of themes was identified.

Data presentation and interpretation

The study sought to explore challenges to implement inclusive education from teacher preparation perspective; To this end, the lived experiences of 12 personnel in the education system were analyzed.

Inadequate teacher preparation

As quality training could enhance inclusion, poor training results in incompetency among teachers. Failure to provide teachers with quality continuous professional development compromises learners and deprives them of receiving quality education, especially for learners with disabilities. The participants acknowledged the problem as follows:

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Discussant A: *“Teachers aren’t capable of modifying lessons.”*

Discussant C: *“Regular teachers can’t communicate in sign language.”*

Discussant D: *“Education bureaus use special class approach due to shortage of teachers of special needs education.”*

Discussant E: *“Some graduates of special needs education have no mastery of Braille and sign language.”*

As a result of the shortcomings listed above, children with disabilities do not receive quality education. This in turn indicates the extent to which our teacher institutions lack capacity to prepare teachers to address diversity issues in their teaching. As such, teachers are not well trained in so that they can teach all students, regardless of ability and disability. All teachers are not proficient in the use of Braille and sign language even those who have been trained in Special Needs Education.

Discussant B added: *“The training colleges focus on the theoretical aspect of special needs education rather than the practical.”*

Discussant C substantiated *“Trainers in training institutes aren’t preparing teachers in a way that they can support children with special needs.”*

As these discussants highlighted, quality training is one of basic ingredients for quality inclusive education. However, teachers seem to have basic problems in educating children according to their specific needs, which suggests that their training does not prepare them for dealing with diverse learning needs. As such, children with disabilities do not receive quality education. Poor teacher training and shortage of trained teachers reciprocally have contributed for the delivery of poor quality education for children with disabilities. Although there are few teachers who have graduated in Special Needs Education (SNE), their training did not prepare them to be inclusive in their teaching.

Shortage of teachers in special needs education

There is a shortage of teachers who are trained in SNE, who are able to facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in everyday teaching and learning processes. The country needs enough properly qualified teachers to provide professional support to general education teachers and to students with disabilities themselves. However, contrary to this, the country has not been able to train SNE teachers who can adequately meet this demand. Confirming this, participants in the Focus Group Discussions said the following:

Discussant A: *“No! I don’t think. There are no trained teachers in SNE adequately.”*

Discussant B: *“Sometimes, since parents who have problematic children couldn’t get professional support for their children at schools, they prefer to sit their children with disabilities at home.”*

Discussant C: *“I have observed as some parents want to send their children with disabilities to private or commercial schools. But since the school leaders couldn’t reject the child officially, they enrolled him/her to spend the school time in the compound by playing. Because the commercial schools don’t have trained teachers in special needs or professionals in the field.”*

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Discussant D: *"Even parents are forced to take their children with disabilities to primary schools where there are special classes are available rather than to the adjacent schools."*

Discussant E: *"It is not possible to say that there are special needs education teachers."*

Discussant F: *"If no shortage of special needs education teachers, the education sector is eager to integrate children with disabilities in to regular schools."*

As the participants highlighted, one among a variety of factors that hindered the implementation of inclusive education was the inadequacy of teacher training in SNE. To ensure the realisation of inclusion of children with disabilities, either the general education teachers should have training or SNE teachers should assist them in the classroom. Research has shown the multifaceted impact of shortage of professionals in special needs/inclusive education on the process of inclusion. For instance, one of the discussants witnessed the extent to which parents were discontent to send their children with disabilities to regular schools. Even those who have the will, have to travel kilometres to get to schools where there are special classes.

As most Ethiopians are agrarian, there is job allotment among householders. As a result, when one looks after the cattle, the other harvests, still the other collects firewood, even the other may fetch water. With all these responsibilities, hunting for schools that have special classes, taking and returning the child with disabilities to these schools daily can be an unassigned task that no one is accountable for. Therefore, the only choice would be to keep the child with a disability at home.

In the towns where there are abundant commercial schools, parents enrol children with disabilities. However, since hiring SNE teachers is costly and not to enrol children with disabilities has legal impeachment, they enrol them but do not provide any special support. The insufficient number of teachers of SNE hampers integration of children with disabilities into regular schools to a certain extent.

Skills gap

It was also clear from the respondents' responses that there are not enough teachers who have the requisite skill of Braille and sign language to implement inclusive education.

Participant A: *"An attempt was made in three primary schools by training 85 teachers in the areas of sign language and Braille. Subsequently, the trained teachers had begun the 'Tansies'/inception. However, they stopped it because there is no conducive working environment to work. First and foremost, the teacher education training was not effective."*

Participant B: *"No, We don't have". In our region, we have about 1,400 cluster schools and 6,222 primary schools. However, we can't reach them with trained teachers."*

It was clear that the current cohort of teachers could not be used to train others in the use of these specialised skills. The number was not also as sufficient implement inclusive education. For instance, Participant A said: *"Universities and colleges are preaching rather than training."*

This indicates that the teacher training in colleges and universities tends to be more theoretical. As such, these teachers, although qualified, were unable to teach skills like Braille, sign language and daily living skills.

The primary stakeholders of inclusive education are teachers. Consequently, they have full responsibility for the implementation of inclusive education and therefore it is crucial that they receive quality training. Nonetheless, as all the interviewees together reported, universities and teacher education colleges were not able to produce quality teachers to meet the special needs of children with disabilities. Though teachers were able to give theoretical explanation about Braille and sign language, they could not equip with the practical skills of Braille and sign language. Furthermore, the interviewees confirmed that there were no adequate skilled teachers to implement inclusive education in Ethiopia.

Lack of guidelines to implement inclusive education

It is important that all stakeholders, from school-based teachers to office-based officials receive guidelines to help them implement inclusive education. In the absence of guidelines, it is difficult for teachers to know what they are supposed to do and how, it is also difficult for the senior officials to provide guidance and support. The interviewees confirmed the absence of guideline of inclusive education as follows:

Participant A: *“No, we don’t have.”*

Participant B: *“There is strategic plan. But not guideline.”*

Participant C: *“The MoE is discussing about. But not yet.”*

Participant D: *“I think strategic plan is enough.”*

Without guidelines that specify how to implement inclusive education or any innovation for that matter, the process would be subjected to personal interpretation. For instance, participant D reported that strategic plan is adequate to implement inclusive education.

The above indicates the extent to which both experts and school supervisors were not clear about guideline and strategic plan for the implementation of inclusive education. The strategic plan may help the education system to check and balance the goal that they were supposed to achieve with the plan that they had already scheduled. Hence, the presence of guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education would help stakeholders follow clear directions about the implementation process.

There were different opinions about why the country did not issue guideline of inclusive education. Particularly, two of the participants reasoned out the absence of guideline of inclusive education as follows:

Participant B: *“We have about 76 ethnic groups. Therefore, preparing such a number of guidelines is costly.”*

Participant C: *“Do you know?”* [and he laughed], *“Ah ah ah ah!”* [He continued], *“Document is nothing with any commitment.”*

Truly, Ethiopia is one of multi-ethnic nations in Africa that is exercising a multilingual curriculum. However, issuing guidelines on the implementation of inclusive education would not be costly if there was political commitment to see inclusion succeed. Thus, one needs to consider the benefits that it could bring in terms of quality, equity, and social justice first in the education system and later in society.

Of course, the country has designed strategic plan of special needs/inclusive education in 2006 and 2012. However, the strategic plan was a general concept that could serve as clarification of the concept of SNE. Even as one of the interviewees explained, the document was only for the purpose of state relief. The manual that was developed in some regions was equivalent to that of the strategic plan, which was issued by the MoE.

Discussion

The findings indicate that there are several barriers that hinder the inclusion of CwDs in Ethiopian primary schools.

In the current section again, the themes have been discussed sequentially in the same way they were presented in previous section. Therefore, the discussion has folded a range of matters that conspicuously hindered the effective implementation of inclusive education from teacher preparation perspective.

Poor quality of teachers' training

As the findings reveal, one of the greatest barriers to realise inclusion of children with special needs is that most teachers do not have the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes to carry out this work. In addition, inadequate preparation of teachers and a lack of on-going professional development opportunities have been observed as impeding factor for inclusion (Naicker, 2006; Mashiya, 2014; Gokdere, 2012).

According to the accounts of the research participants, quality training would enhance inclusion while poor training of the opposite develops a feeling of incompetency among teachers. In this regard, researchers like Wook (2013) and Naicker (2006) found that the poor quality training of teachers held back CwDs from full inclusion. Conversely, Adebisi (2010) suggested that the effective implementation of inclusive education entirely depends on the high quality of teachers' training both at pre and in-service levels to equip them for and update their knowledge and skill in meeting the needs and rights of children with special needs.

The training colleges in Ethiopia focus on the theoretical rather than the practical aspect of SNE. Trainers in training institutes are not preparing teachers in ways children with special needs could be supported well. To substantiate this, Naicker (2006) underscores that the paramount importance of in-depth teacher training in relating theory with practice effectively. Even, most regular education teachers have seldom or never taken courses regarding special education during their teacher training. This in turn has hindered the effective implementation of inclusion of children with special needs.

Shortage of teachers in special needs education

Research findings show how important trained teachers are in supporting general education teachers and students with disabilities (Mafa, 2012; Agbenyega, and Deku, 2011; Ali, 2014). It is also believed that teachers who are trained in special needs could facilitate the implementation of inclusion of CwDs. To do this, there should be adequate number of teachers so as to provide professional support for students with disabilities. However, the country is not yet able to train SNE teachers to adequately meet the demand. In this regard, Mukhopadhyay (2009) highlighted that lack of training in special needs education impeded the full inclusion of CwDs in Botswana to a significant extent.

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As the findings revealed, there was inadequate number of teachers in the field of special needs education. Moreover, this field of education has not been well and widely introduced to the country, and the number of colleges and universities that offer SNE training could only be finger counted. Consequently, the country has faced shortage of teachers to implement inclusive education. Subsequently, parents of children with special needs were obliged to travel considerable distance to get special units where there were SNE teachers seeking support for their CwDs. Hence, one of the findings identified from this study is that shortage of teachers in special needs is a main hindrance to implement inclusive education. Mukhopadhyay (2009) reported a similar observation where lack of trained special educators became a pervasive barrier to include learners with disabilities into regular school classrooms.

Parents found it painful for them to take their CwDs to very remote primary schools instead of adjacent schools in search of special classes. The research participants ubiquitously underscored that, among a variety of problems that hinder the implementation of inclusive education, inadequacy of teachers trained in special needs education was the leading factor.

Skills gap among special needs education teachers

The other obstacle identified as a great barrier to implementing inclusive education is teachers trained inadequately in special needs and inclusive education. Currently, the country faced teachers trained inadequately in Braille and sign language to accommodate students with visual and hearing difficulties in the regular schools. The existing practice is using special class approach from Grade 1 to Grade 4 in Amhara Regional State. However, the prevalent practice of Tigray and South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regional states is different. In the aforementioned regional states, the education personnel used to assign one graduate of SNE for five schools (school cluster). As the data indicates, the experience happened not only because of shortage of teachers in SNE but also because of lack of skilled teachers in sign language and Braille. Wook's (2013) study confirms that not only are teachers not being in a position to read and write Braille when handling students with visual impairments but also, they are able to use sign language when interacting with children with hearing impairments.

Eighty-five (85) teachers in three primary schools attempted to undergo training in sign language and Braille. The trained teachers had begun the practical skill training. However, they left the primary schools since there was no conducive work environment. Similarly, researchers reported that though there is less attention from governments, special need educators for students even if with visual impairment play role of Braille transcribers and translators for deaf students (Wook, 2013; Naicker, 2006).

Most teachers insert some percentage figure here who were SNE graduates were unable to read and write in Braille and communicate in sign language. as a result, the personnel in the education system complained about teacher education colleges and universities. For education personnel, instructors in the higher institutions used to "preach Braille and sign language" instead of teaching the skills. Thus, the graduates lack the practical skills of Braille and sign language. According to the informants' reports, the existing skill gap among teachers was perceived as a factor impeding implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopian 1,400 cluster schools and 6,222 primary schools.

Lack of guideline to implement inclusive education

Ethiopia has neither a policy of inclusive education nor the guidelines to execute such education. Some of the personnel in the system took the adequacy of strategic plan. Though the strategic plan tried to address the “how” question in the process of implementation of inclusive education, it did not put a clear guideline to answer the “what” question in a more practical way.

Certainly, teachers and schools at grassroots level, and education heads at the top together require guidelines that could guide them what to do in order to implement inclusive education effectively. The absence of guidelines created misunderstanding among experts and education heads about what inclusive education entails. At the same time, the absence has also led the personnel to confuse the two education settings (integration and inclusive education). Following this, the education system could not identify a better educational setting that suits the need of CwDs. The absence of inclusive education policy and guidelines inadvertently subjected the concept of inclusive education to personal interpretation. This study discovered the absence of guideline with misconception of the role of strategic plan and guideline as well as lack of commitment on the part of the education personnel.

This study has also accentuated the absence of guidelines of inclusive education as a determinant factor to ensure inclusion of children with SNE into the regular schools. In this connection, international documents identified the absence of inclusive policy, guideline and related documents could hinder the implementation of inclusive education as well as other social and environmental barriers (Unesco, 2005). More than anything else, the absence of inclusive guidelines indicates the deficient political commitment of leaders to act upon inclusive education. In his comparative study of Ethiopia and Rwanda, Lewis (2009) showed that in the case of the former, not only the absence of inclusive guidelines but the imprecision of the concept of inclusive education that experts and school supervisors held barred the realisation of the approach.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the research, the following conclusions have been drawn. Indisputably, the implementation of inclusive education demands professionally trained and well skilled teachers. However, education personnel in Ethiopia aren't in a position to prepare teachers adequately to ensure inclusion of children with disabilities. As the data witnessed, the absence of guideline in inclusive education, along with shortage of SNE teachers and the prevailing skill gap among teachers is hampering the implementation of inclusive education.

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