



PRACTICE, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES IN REALIZING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SOME SELECTED PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF HOSSANA CITY ADMINISTRATION, ETHIOPIA

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Received: June 04, 2024

Accepted: October 08, 2024

Published: December 31, 2024

Suggested Citation:

Gebbru, K., & Abate, T. (2024). Practice, challenges, and opportunities in realizing inclusive education in some selected primary schools of Hossana city administration, Ethiopia. *International Online Journal of Primary Education (IOJPE)*, 13(4), 222-237. <https://doi.org/10.55020/iojpe.1493333>



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Abstract

Inclusive education is a topic of much debate, but it is widely recognized as a crucial system that aims to provide equal opportunities for all students, including those with special needs, to thrive in regular school environments. This study focused on exploring the practices, challenges, and opportunities related to realizing inclusive education in selected primary schools within Hossana city administration, Haddiya zone, under Central Ethiopia regional state. To achieve this, a descriptive case study methodology was used. The study revealed that the teaching of students with special educational needs currently employs segregation, integration, and inclusion approaches. However, administrative challenges, knowledge gaps, and skill gaps were identified as the main obstacles to achieving inclusive education in the city administration. Respondents also suggested that while there are challenges to implementing inclusive education, there are also many opportunities to do so. To address these challenges, we recommend collaboration among stakeholders and training for school administrators and teachers to increase awareness, knowledge, and skills.

Keywords: Inclusive education, challenges, opportunities, practices, realizing inclusive education.

INTRODUCTION

There is no widely agreed-upon definition of inclusive education, despite the fact that it has been the subject of much discussion in the literature (Namanyane & Shaoan, 2021). Scholars have varying views on the concept's relevance to students with special educational needs. Most believe that inclusion involves placing these students in regular classrooms for the entirety of the school day to maximize their social interaction and benefit (Stainback & Stainback, 1996; Robiyansah, 2020; Idol, 2006). They emphasize that these individuals can flourish in regular classrooms if they are given the right kind of assistance and have their requirements satisfied. However, others argue that inclusive education is not a viable option for students with diverse abilities and disabilities in regular classes due to inadequate planning, educational provision, and support for their needs (Kluth et al., 2002; McCarty, 2006; Irmsher, 1995). Many think that the greatest way to help people with exceptional needs who need more than regular education can offer is through special education programs. Researchers worry that putting social engagement ahead of these students' needs and compromising education could result from full inclusion (Irmsher, 1995). Though inclusive education is a topic that is often debated, there is a consensus that it is a system designed to serve all students equally, including those with special needs, in regular classrooms. UNESCO (1994) defines inclusive education as a system that integrates all students, regardless of their mental capacity, disability, psychological, physical, or social circumstances, or related differences, in a regular classroom. According to Miles and Singal (2010), inclusive education is a democratic commitment that aims to guarantee equal opportunities and rights for children with



disabilities. It is the right of children with special educational needs to be included in general education settings, as stated clearly in the UNESCO agreements. Clark et al. (2020) describes inclusive education as a system that accepts and encourages all children to study, regardless of their identity, abilities, or needs. This means ensuring that the curriculum, instruction, school facilities, play areas, transportation, and toilets are appropriate for all students at all levels. Under UNICEF's inclusive education framework, all students attend the same schools, which requires overhauling the entire educational system, as well as laws and policies, funding procedures, management, design, delivery, and oversight of instruction, and how schools are organized.

According to various sources, it is estimated that over 5.1% of children worldwide experience moderate to severe disabilities, encompassing physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health challenges (Ainscow & César, 2006; Clark et al., 2020; Sarton & Smith, 2018; WHO, 2011). Sadly, reports showed that 90% of these children live in developing nations where access to education is limited (Ainscow & César, 2006). Despite international laws guaranteeing everyone's right to education, children with disabilities often face obstacles in accessing, participating, and receiving high-quality education. UNESCO estimates show that between 10 and 16 percent of the population has a disability, yet the number of children with disabilities reported in schools is significantly lower (Ainscow & César, 2006; Sarton & Smith, 2018). For instance, in Uganda, only 1.79 percent of total school enrollment is identified as having disabilities, while in Rwanda and Ethiopia, it is 1.1 percent and .7 percent, respectively according to (Sarton & Smith, 2018). This suggests that many children with impairments are not enrolled in school or are not being identified within current school populations.

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa, only 25% of students who experienced various disabilities, on average, manage to complete all levels of primary school, leading to a high primary school dropout rate (Musenyente & Knigge, 2022). Additionally, there is a significant disparity between the prevalence rate of disabilities (10-16%) and the enrollment rate in schools, which is much lower, at less than 0.7% in Ethiopia (Sarton, E. & Smith, M., 2018). According to a different report, the percentage of disabled children in developing countries who attend school is estimated to be between 1% and 5% (Mwangi & Orodho, 2014). This indicates that the school enrollment rate in Ethiopia is lower than the average for developing nations. Meanwhile Minas et al. (2015) reported a significant increase in the prevalence of children with disabilities in low and middle-income nations like Ethiopia, with the number rising from 0.4% to 12.7%. Due to a lack of resources and awareness, these children may not receive the proper education they need (Hayes, 2017). Ethiopia has initiated steps to integrate children with special educational needs into conventional schools nearby, with the slogan "No one has left behind." However, there are challenges, including a lack of funding, an unorganized educational system, and insufficient knowledge among stakeholders and the general public about inclusive education (Hayes, 2017). Team and Mergia (2020) noted that the South Nation Nationality and Peoples Region (SNNPR) attempted to implement inclusive education but encountered difficulties. The region has since disintegrated, leaving a gap in the implementation of inclusive education. This suggests that further studies and exploration of existing practices and challenges are necessary to appropriately implement inclusive education in Ethiopia (Hayes, 2017; Minas et al., 2015; Team & Mergia, 2020).

In addition, during their prolonged stays in the Haddiya Zone, the researchers of this study, who have extensive experience teaching both disabled and non-disabled students from elementary school through higher education, observed ethnically-based schools where only a certain group of people is segregated. This is an indication that suggests there is a significant obstacle to the implementation of inclusive education. This implies that education in our region is still segregated according to ethnicity, despite the widespread acceptance today that distinctions in color, gender, sexual orientation, or religion should not be permitted to keep people apart from others. This is also confirmed by Yoshida's (2008) study, which revealed that Wayto in the Amhara Region and Fuga in the Haddiya zone of the SNNPR are victims of exclusion. According to research studied by Shaeffer (2019), discrimination based on ethnicity raises the dropout rate, has an impact on psycho-social adjustment, and has an indirect effect on how well students learn.



According to studies, addressing the issue of inclusive education and providing lessons for a global setting requires context-based research (Magnússon, Göransson, & Lindqvist, 2019; Mosalagae & Lukusa, 2016). It is necessary to explore the current setting and features of inclusive education, considering the opportunities, difficulties, and practices both domestically and internationally. However, studies conducted concerning inclusion and children with special educational needs in the context of Central Ethiopia, a recently formed regional state, are limited. Aemiro (2020) also demonstrated that while Ethiopia has legislative and legal frameworks supporting universal access to high-quality education, there is still a significant gap in actualization nationally. This gap has resulted in challenges in implementing inclusive education, including severe ethnic-based discrimination. Given that the inclusion process is dynamic and ever-changing, depending on cultural norms and environmental requirements, there is a need to explore context-based studies in the central regional state of Ethiopia, where isolated groups are not yet addressed. Conducting different studies and forwarding research-based expertise recommendations can help minimize and gradually overcome these problems.

This study aimed to examine the current practices, challenges, and opportunities in enhancing the education system's capacity to cater to the diverse needs of all learners. The Ministry of Education's demand for all stakeholders to be taken into account in this process was a key motivator for the authors of this study, who sought to contribute scholarly work by investigating the situation in the Central region's Hadiya zone. Hence, the objective of this study was to explore the current practices of inclusive education in schools, examine the challenges encountered by these schools in achieving inclusive education, and identify the opportunities available to support the realization of inclusive education. To achieve these objectives the present study was guided by the following leading questions:

1. How the schools currently practicing inclusive education?
2. What challenges the schools are facing in realizing inclusive education?
3. What opportunities the schools have that support the realization of inclusive education?

Theoretical framework

The persistent increase in exclusionary educational practices among children with special educational needs has been a significant concern despite ongoing efforts to address the issue (Sarton & Smith, 2018; Timmons, 2010). Children with learning difficulties often lack access to essential resources, physical facilities, and equipment required to support their specific needs, resulting in disproportionate challenges within the education system (Aluko, Omidire, & Mampane, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of supportive leadership, teacher training, and resources, as well as inflexible curricula, presents additional obstacles to inclusive education (Mbua, 2023; Mokaleng & Möwes, 2020; Mumbi, 2011).

Barriers to inclusive education, including those related to socio-economic, socio-cultural, geographical, and school-based factors, hinder learners with disabilities from fully leveraging their innate abilities. It is essential for educational systems to be designed to remove such barriers, as disability should not be equated with inability. Education is a powerful equalizer that should accelerate the social advancement of children with special needs (Aluko, Omidire, & Mampane, 2022; Eunice, Orodho, & EUNICE, 2014). Access to education at all levels, regardless of disability, is crucial for promoting equal opportunities based on individual capabilities.

Despite efforts by national and international organizations to promote inclusive education, many learners are still being educated in segregated special schools in various parts of the world (Yorke et al., 2022). One of the challenges in achieving inclusive education is the lack of a common consensus and clear debates on the scope of inclusive education at a global level (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2024; Sarton & Smith, 2018).

Inclusive education is a system that strives to promote and uphold the learning of all students, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs. This involves ensuring that the curriculum, teaching methods, facilities, playgrounds, transportation, and restrooms are appropriate for all students, at all levels. Under an inclusive education system, all students receive their education in the same classrooms, and there should be no exclusion. Clark et al. (2020) describes that every child including those with disabilities,



has the right to inclusive education, by the. In an inclusive education system, students are accepted at every stage of education, from preschool to lifelong learning, regardless of their abilities. In educational settings, inclusion means adapting the physical structure, teaching methods, curriculum, and institutional culture to ensure that all students feel welcome and protected from discrimination. According to the Nizar (2011), including disabled students in regular classes without making the necessary adjustments cannot be considered inclusive. An inclusive curriculum eliminates the need for labeling children as special or disabled to receive specialized education and support. In other words, no child is treated differently based on their abilities or disabilities (Stentiford, & Koutsouris, 2022). Under an inclusive curriculum, exceptional and non-special children receive the same level of support and education.

In Ethiopia, three types of school organizations focus on educating individuals with disabilities: regular schools, special units, and special schools (Tonegawa, 2019). Special schools are dedicated to a specific disability, like deaf or blind schools. They can be boarding or day schools and teachers receive additional training in sign language and Braille. However, there aren't many special schools in the country. After completing grades 1-8, students with disabilities move on to regular schools or special units for grades 9-12. Special units are designated classrooms or blocks for students with disabilities, and students can interact with those without disabilities during break time. While they are more common than special schools, special units are not present in every regular school in the nation.

Although there are efforts to promote inclusive education in Ethiopia through various organizations, there is still much progress needed compared to other parts of the world (Tonegawa, 2019; Yorke et al., 2022). While educational institutions are making attempts to accommodate students with disabilities, they are falling short of meeting the essential requirements to achieve true inclusivity. According to Yorke et al. (2022) the role of schools, education goes beyond simply making schools accessible to those who can already attend. It involves identifying and addressing the obstacles and challenges that prevent students from accessing high-quality education and result in exclusion. Inclusive teaching embraces diversity to address different educational needs and learning styles of students. This approach promotes proactive, student-centered instruction over-reactive, teacher-centered methods (Tirri, & Laine, 2017). It involves a broad range of effective instructional practices.

To ensure inclusivity at the school level, a joint, responsible authority is necessary. This study argues that individuals should not be segregated or confined to certain locations due to physical, mental, psychological, or sensory impairments. All human beings should coexist peacefully, demonstrating mutual respect, enjoying equal access to resources, working towards improving humanity, engaging in all aspects of life, and continuously striving to enhance their abilities. Oliver and Barnes (2013) posit that regardless of age, gender, disability, social status, or ethnicity, everyone should be able to coexist as equal members of society, confident that their needs will be met and their opinions will be heard. Therefore, it is imperative to establish an inclusive society that transcends all barriers, including political, economic, and social obstacles. Barton and Armstrong (2001) contend that a stable, democratic, and economically inclusive global society is essential. Thus, the foundation of this study is based on the work of Barton and Armstrong (2001), which advocates for the realization of an inclusive society and calls for a new era where everyone's needs are met with minimal bias or prejudice. This can be accomplished by examining current practices, identifying obstacles, and seizing opportunities to uphold the principles of human rights. This study aims to achieve that goal.

METHOD

Research Design

To gain a thorough understanding of the current state of inclusive education, it is essential to investigate the existing practice, underlying challenges, and potential opportunities in schools. To achieve this, a descriptive case study design was employed to examine the subject in-depth within its real-world context. According to Sarfo (2021), a case study is a qualitative research method that involves a detailed examination of the actual experiences of a real-life subject, which may be a person, an organization,



a program, or a community. The use of the descriptive approach was chosen to gather data and answer questions concerning the current condition of the subjects being studied. This research technique determines and reports the way things are at present. According to Yin (2014), descriptive research involves collecting data to address questions about the current state of the subjects under study. Descriptive studies are typically structured to outline the distribution of one or more cases of a study, without consideration for any causal or other hypotheses (Aggarwal & Ranganathan, 2019). Hence, the descriptive case study design utilized in this research allowed the researchers to gather insights from a diverse group of participants (including school principals, teachers, and experts) regarding the practices, challenges, and opportunities associated with achieving inclusive education.

Sampling

The study included teachers, school administrators, and experts in special needs education from Hadiya Zone in Central Ethiopia Regional State, as well as coordinators of special needs education resource centers at selected primary schools. Hadiya Zone was selected for the study due to its proximity to the researchers' Educational College and government administration seat, making data collection convenient for participants. The researchers used a non-probability/purposive sampling technique to select four primary schools with special classes and inclusive practices and to identify school personnel, teachers, and special needs/inclusive education experts with relevant information on the area. The data was collected in the year of 2023 and study included a total of fourteen participants, consisting of one school personnel, and two teachers from each school, and two special needs/inclusive education experts from both the City Administration and Zone. With the exception of one female expert and one female teacher, all participants were male. Additionally, all participants held first degrees.

Data collection tools

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews were utilized to gather data from school principals, teachers, City Administration, and Zone education units/offices of special needs/inclusive education experts (Education experts). These interview methods allowed respondents to freely express their knowledge, emotions, and desires without any limitations. Additionally, researchers could ask follow-up questions based on the respondents' answers and probe further based on the interviewee's situation and emotions. The researchers developed the interview protocol, which was validated by two education experts and revised based on their feedback. The first expert was chosen for their 20 years of experience in teaching educational research courses at a teacher education college, while the second expert was selected for their experience in publishing articles in educational journals. As a result of their input, the number of questions was reduced, and additional probing questions were added to investigate the issue from various perspectives. The same experts validated the qualitative findings, and themes were revised and renamed based on their feedback.

Data collection procedure

An interview schedule was utilized to gather input from key informants such as school principals, teachers, and experts. The interview questions were carefully crafted to delve into the practices, challenges, and opportunities encountered by participants in their schools and work environments while striving to implement inclusive education. Specifically, teachers were asked about their grasp of inclusive education, methods for accommodating children with disabilities, approaches to assessment, and strategies for adapting materials to meet the needs of children with disabilities. They were also queried about the challenges they faced and the opportunities available to them. Questions for school principals focused on their plans for children with disabilities, how they support these children and their teachers, and the nature of their relationship with the zonal educational bureau and the surrounding community. Meanwhile, questions for the experts aimed to evaluate their support for schools, interactions with school principals and educational managers, involvement with children with disabilities, frequency of school visits, and knowledge about children with disabilities. The interviews were carried out in distraction-free primary school rooms, with the consent of the participants obtained before audio recording the interviews. Each participant's interview lasted between 40 minutes to one hour.



Data analysis procedure

The data collected through interviews were analyzed qualitatively. Ideas were compared and contrasted from all sources and critical analysis was made using qualitative data analysis techniques to establish core themes. In this study, the researchers employed thematic analysis to analyze the generated data. Thematic analysis in qualitative research mostly involves editing, coding, tabulation, summarizing, and interpreting the findings Hancock et al., (2009). Hence, the data analysis involved five key steps: preparing field notes and verbatim transcriptions, carefully reviewing the transcriptions and audio recordings, identifying key concepts and coding the data, generating themes, and finally, presenting and interpreting the data. The detail procedure employed by the researchers is delineated as follows:

The data firstly were transcribed verbatim. To make sense of the data, it was first read and listened to multiple times from different sources. Secondly, to find noteworthy concepts, the text was read again and the audios were listened to again while taking notes. To generate meaning and categorize into groups the words, phrases, expressions, and examples participants provided were recorded, sorted, and re-sorted. This aids in the comprehension and conceptualization of the data by the researchers. This made it possible to determine the most often-used terms, phrases, concepts, and perspectives. This assisted in the identification of several practices, difficulties, and opportunities in realizing inclusive education. The third stage involved reading the text and the identified codes in terms of words, phrases, and sentences once again to make sure the lists of terms were reflective of the entire text, to eliminate any concepts that weren't significant, and to add any points that the second step might have overlooked. With this, the study's key themes were determined. The themes were narrowed down in the fourth step to produce integrative, representational, and significant themes. To confirm the accuracy of the content, valid quotations were included in the final steps (step 5). The themes were gradually sorted and presented in integrated useful findings based on the repetition of occurrences.

RESULTS

Practices

This study aimed to explore the current practices, challenges, and opportunities in implementing inclusive education in selected schools within the Hossana City Administration (HCA). After gathering data from various sources using different tools, the following results were obtained. Education for students with diverse abilities is delivered using various approaches worldwide, including in Ethiopia. Segregation, integration, and inclusion are the three approaches used to educate students with diverse needs. Segregation focuses on providing education to children with similar disabilities within a separate environment. Although this approach has been heavily criticized for its impact on the social skill development of students, it still persists in teaching students with special needs.

This study revealed the existence of a segregated approach for teaching children with special needs in the Hossana city administration. Regarding this, an interviewee, a vice director of a school participating in the study, remarked:

In our school from Grades 5-8, there are many students who are traditionally facing social exclusion because of their ethnicity. Children from this group are not allowed to learn from Grades 1-4 in our school and they are forced to learn their primary education (1-4) in a Non-Governmental Organization funded special place "Haro Tasa" which is established to serve children from the minority group only by considering social exclusionary challenges in regular schools. We are sending them to "Haro Tasa" if they are beginners (1-4). After completion of Grade four, they are allowed to start Grade 5 in our school.

This shows that, in HCA there is a separate system of education provided for serving children/students with special educational needs. The presence of a segregated system of education in the town in one way or another indicates the presence of children/students who have diversified needs but are not allowed to learn in regular schools where they choose and are pushed away to find places that serve them. Integration is also an approach used for teaching students with special educational needs in two different ways. One is putting students with special educational needs in regular classrooms without considering the diverse abilities of learners. The other is physical integration which opens special



class/classes for students who have similar disabilities in a regular school compound and serves them with specially trained teachers. About this, the coordinator of a special needs education resource center, pointed out, "In our school, we have special classes for Deaf learners in grades 1-4, led by Deaf teachers." Similarly, another interviewee, a vice director at another school involved in the study, stated, "We have a separate class for autistic children, known as the O class, where they receive instruction from special needs education professionals." These responses from the two individuals above demonstrate that schools in the Hossana city administration are incorporating an integrated education system to teach students with varying abilities.

These days, inclusion is the most widely recommended method for teaching students with special educational needs worldwide. This is because it addresses the needs of all students in regular classes and goes beyond issues related to disabilities; hence it is a widely accepted approach. This study also found the presence of inclusion practice in two schools under the Hossana city administration. Regarding this, an interviewee, Special needs education resource center coordinator in one school under the study stated this as:

We are sending Deaf students to regular classes when they complete their Grades 1-4 classes in the special classes. Starting from Grades 5-8 our Deaf students are learning in regular classes of the school with hearing students.

In addition to this, an interviewee, a school vice director in another school in his part stated as:

Autistic children who are learning in our special class start learning in Grade 1 with regular students in regular classrooms when they show progress and get approval from their teachers.

The response forwarded by the above two interviewees clearly shows that their schools are serving students with special needs in regular classes after some years of stay in special classes. This implies that the schools under this study are aware of inclusion and they are practicing to realize an inclusive education system in their school.

According to the results mentioned, one can deduce that there is a practice of Segregation, Integration, and Inclusion approaches for teaching students with special educational needs in Hossana city administration. It is possible to conclude that, in Hossana city administration, inclusion at the beginning level is ignored and children with special needs are denied the opportunity to learn alongside their peers in regular schools closest to their homes. This conclusion is supported by the existence of both segregation and integration approaches that focus on separated education systems that are focused on disabilities.

Challenges

Under this construct with the help of interviews with administrators, teachers, and experts several challenges were identified. Based on the participant's responses three main themes (*administrative challenges, knowledge gap, and skill gap*) and three sub-themes under administrative challenges, and four sub-themes under knowledge and skill emerged.

Administrative Challenges

For constructive and productive implementation of inclusive education, one of the most significant components is reflective, conscious, skilled, transformative administration. This study explored that there were various challenges related to administrative issues. The most commonly viewed challenges were irresponsibility, unplanned work, and lack of creating links with different stakeholders.

Irresponsibility of Administrators

Responsibility of concerned bodies is one of the key aspects of implementing inclusive education in the Ethiopian context in which several limitations are seen. Some respondents do not believe they are responsible for taking action, solving problems related to students' resource scarcity, facilitating different trainings, and following up the ongoing process. They only focus on coordinating normal teacher-student affairs. They try to externalize problems to City and



Zonal administrators, and other governmental bodies. In this regard, one of the interviewees, a school vice director responded as:

There is no responsibility or concern to facilitate the education of students with special needs. No one is working seriously on this issue. There is a lack of governmental bodies' follow-up. They are not providing the necessary materials, support, and financial aspects.

An interviewee, a school vice director in another school under the study also echoed in another way this as:

City administration education office experts do not provide training for teachers on how to teach and help students with special needs. They come with checklists and observe the school twice a year but it is not beyond the sack of reporting.

This implies that the school vice directors are not responsible for leading, facilitating, and being engaged actively in issues related to the implementation of inclusive education. They do not believe that they are responsible for helping, facilitating, and solving all the problems that emerged about inclusive education. They only believe that their main task is leading, guiding, facilitating, and coordinating issues related to regular teaching and learning aspects.

Unplanned works

Planning is a guideline that shows a clear picture of the task aimed to be accomplished. It is a backbone for the education sector in general and for the realization of inclusive education specifically. To realize Inclusive education the system needs to be planned at all stakeholders' levels. Zone and City Administration education offices, schools, and teachers need to provide their plan on how they implement and monitor the system of inclusion. But this mandatory task seems forgotten by the concerned bodies in the City Administration.

Regarding this one of the interviewee, Zone Education Office Special needs/Inclusive education expert said:

We plan about the teaching and learning process in Haddiya Zone in general. We do not have specific plan regarding inclusive education cases.

An interviewee, City Administration education offices Special needs/Inclusive education expert in his part said:

We offer a comprehensive annual education plan that includes all school-aged children and students in our City Administration. Our plan does not specifically focus on inclusive education or students with special needs. We believe that all students, including those with special needs, are included in our plan as it is designed for all school-aged individuals.

Interviewee C, a school director also revealed that: “As a school we have one annual plan that holds the educational activities of our all students. As any other students children with special needs are included in this plan”. One of the Interviewee, a teacher in an inclusive classroom who has deaf students disclosed that:

I develop yearly and daily lesson plans to teach my students. My lesson focuses on my activities and my students' tasks at specified times. It is about all my students not individually focused.

The response of the interviewees above implies that holistic planning takes place at all levels of stakeholders and specific educational plans are forgotten. This in other words means that SWSNs are taken as having no special educational needs that do not require individualized plans. The result revealed that students with special needs in Hossana city administration are learning with the education system planned for regular students and they lost the advantage they may get from specific planning that helps the realization of Inclusive Education.



Lack of creating collaborative work

Inclusion is never realized without a strong bond between concerned bodies. Interwoven actions among stakeholders can make the realization of inclusive education simple. On the contrary fragmented tasks and/or isolated tasks of concerned parties can strongly harm the inclusion practice. This study revealed the presence of limitations in stakeholders in creating links between them. Concerning this interviewee, a school vice director stated this as:

The City administration education office does not support us financially or even in material related to the issues of students with special needs. It only focuses on the regular education program and leaves the issue of Special needs for the school and Non-Governmental Organizations.

An interviewee, a teacher in the inclusive classroom on his interview also stated as:

Because of communication problem and frustration to order my deaf students I do not ask them to bring their parents whatever it is necessary. In addition to this I never saw a deaf student parent who came to school to deal with teachers about the education of his/her child.

The connection between schools and the City Administration, as well as the collaboration between teachers and parents of deaf students, is significantly lacking in the Hossana city administration. As a result, it can be inferred that the inadequate coordination among relevant parties in the city administration has hurt inclusive education. This has, in turn, deprived students with special needs of the opportunity to benefit from an inclusive environment that could have been strengthened by better communication and collaboration among the involved parties.

Lack of awareness

Recognizing the needs of students with special requirements plays a crucial role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Teachers need to be mindful of the specific needs of their students to provide the necessary support. Conversely, a lack of awareness regarding the needs of students with special requirements hinders teachers' efforts to effectively address the diverse needs of their students. In an interview, a teacher from one of the schools involved in the study expressed the following viewpoint:

I do not have any information about the term special needs and the presence of such students in my class and the school also does not inform me about them.

During the interview related to the issue of awareness one of the interviewee, a teacher also responded as:

I know some students are from ethnically labeled groups but I have no idea whether these students are under special needs or not.

This implies that there are teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms without having awareness of the presence of varied students who have diverse needs even in a single classroom. The result also shows the presence of teachers who are teaching without any awareness about the issue of special child or special student.

Inability to adapt materials

Teaching materials need to be adapted to make education more suitable and compatible for students with special needs. Teaching without any modification of content, activities and even time gives students with special needs challenges in their education. It hinders them from grasping the necessary knowledge expected for the level they are within. In line with this, one of the participant teacher stated as:

I mainly focus on covering the text book because that is expected from me. In addition to this, frankly speaking, I do not know how to adapt teaching materials based on the needs of deaf students.



In addition, a teacher who has autistic students in her classroom said: “I am teaching similar content for all of my students from the textbook”. This revealed that the focus of teachers in inclusive classrooms is portion coverage rather than translating and contextualizing knowledge by considering the diverse needs of the students. From the responses of the interviewees above it is also possible to say that, teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms do not know adaptation of materials in line with the needs of learners with diverse abilities in their classrooms.

Difficulty in employing various styles of learning

The education of students with special needs requires knowledge to deliver content based on the needs of learners. The transformation of content needs the understanding of different strategies for teaching students with special educational needs. For instance, teaching strategies for teaching students with visual impairment are different from the strategies for teaching students with hearing problems, intellectual limitations, autism, and the like. Losing such strategies limits the performance of teachers in delivering content. Concerning one of the teachers said:

I know there are students with hearing problems in my class. But I have no idea about the presence of different strategies that help to teach them other than the usual methods.

Furthermore, a teacher in another school under the study also said:

I am a regular teacher and I do not know how to teach and support autistic students using various learning strategies even though there are some such children in my class.

The result obtained from the above interviewees shows that the teachers assigned in inclusive classrooms teach students with special needs similarly to other students and they do not have knowledge on teaching students with diverse abilities using the strategies that help the learners. This implies that the knowledge gap of teachers in delivering curriculum in inclusive classrooms using varied strategies affects the translation of contents so that in one way or another it affects the performance of students with diversified needs assigned in inclusive classrooms.

Skill gap

Absence of Sign language skill

Skills are important tools for teaching students with special needs. More specifically Sign language and Braille writing and reading skills are two major skills for teaching deaf and blind students respectively. When a teacher fails to use Sign language he/she is unable to communicate with deaf learners. In addition, if a teacher has difficulty in Braille skills that means she/he faces challenges for teaching Blind learners. In line with this, interviewee A, a teacher in the inclusive class that incorporated deaf students states:

“Even though there are deaf students in my class our communication is limited with writing because I do not get any Sign language skill training”. Interviewee B, a vice director in a similar school also expressed this *“Unfortunately we do not have any subject area teacher who has Sign language skills from those we assigned in the inclusive classroom”*.

The absence of teachers who have Sign language skills in inclusive classrooms vividly revealed that both teachers and deaf learners are challenged in transforming and receiving knowledge because of the communication barrier.

Absence of interpreter

A sign language interpreter is used as a bridge to make communication possible between deaf and hearing persons. When it comes to the education of the deaf, Sign language interpreters play a vital role in translating contents, messages, and information forwarded orally by a teacher or peers who do not use Sign language. To make the classroom truly inclusive, the class either needs to have teachers who have Sign language skills or a Sign language interpreter. Putting deaf learners in a classroom that uses the oral method only and losses interpreters in it makes the communication difficult and affects the education in general. With this regard a vice director in the school who has an inclusive classroom that holds deaf students disclosed that:



Though we have a lot of deaf teachers and a few hearing teachers who have Sign language skills, because of financial problems we do not provide even basic sign language training let alone the advanced and translator level one. In addition to this, the absence of payment for interpretation purposes made teachers unmotivated to engage in such activities even if they have the skill.

The response implies that inclusive classrooms that include deaf learners do not have any Sign language interpreter to facilitate the teaching and learning process and make communication easy. This on the other hand indicates how deaf students are facing challenges to have enough knowledge and skills intended for them.

Opportunities

The present study explored the existence of many prospects for implementing inclusive education in the region; however, their improper utilization stems from stakeholders' deficiency in knowledge and expertise. "What opportunities does the school have to support the realization of IE?" was the question posed by the researchers in this regard. One of the participants provided the following response:

Although implementing inclusive education in our school entails a lot of problems, there are also opportunities that we haven't fully utilized. Among them are presence of SNE professionals, deaf teachers, and teachers with various professional trainings.

According to the response, there is potential for Inclusive education in schools, but they aren't being adequately implemented yet. This could be due to a lack of appropriate knowledge or expertise or to issues with management. A different respondent from a different school also mentioned that many possibilities existed for IE practice in school. As one of the respondent stated that:

Regarding the possibilities for IE realization in our school, I cannot lie. The government is giving attention to IE; teachers receive numerous trainings; awareness-raising workshops are conducted; nongovernmental organizations assist; the city administration and zonal education office assigned a focal person; and so on.

Additionally, the other respondent acknowledges the opportunities that are present in the third school the researchers visited to get data. The response disclosed the opportunities available at the school as:

There is the presence of trained individuals, non-governmental organizations attention, and the SNE resource center; there are visits of assigned individuals from governmental organizations, training opportunities, and so forth.

The results from the respondents showed that though implementing IE in their schools presents certain challenges, there are also many opportunities, including the presence of Non-Governmental Organization support, Special needs education resource centers, trained teachers, deaf teachers, assigned bodies from educational administrations, and Special needs education professionals. The response also suggests that the schools may not be making the most of the opportunities available to them, which could be related to the difficulties discussed in the earlier part of the paper.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION, and RECOMMENDATIONS

This study attempted to explore the current practices, overarching challenges, and possible opportunities to realize inclusive education. In the previous section, data were analyzed using the qualitative approach. The study identified three types practices in which the schools are exercising, various challenges that are hindering facilitation of inclusive education, and possible opportunities that could allow responsible bodies to implement inclusive education at school level. In this section, the main result of the study is discussed vis-à-vis literature.

Literature reveals that there are different models of education for children with disabilities presented in international practice with different educational systems and economic conditions and are conventionally leveled as models of segregation, integration, mainstreaming, and inclusion



(Grigorieva, 2022). Globally, in the last three decades there has been a fundamental shift in the education of children with special educational needs away from segregated provision towards a more inclusive approach (Das, Sharma & Singh, 2012). This study revealed that some children are forced to learn their primary education (1-4) separately by considering social exclusionary challenges in regular schools. There are also children in special classes from Grade 1-4 that serve only Deaf learners with Deaf teachers in a regular school. This school send deaf students to regular classes (Grade 5-8) when they complete their Grade 1-4 classes in the special classes of the same school. There is also another school that has Autistic children who are learning in a separated special class by special needs education professionals. Similarly this school also sends children to grade one in the same school that shown some progress in the special class. Upon completion of lower primary education, students in special education are transitioned into inclusive classes as they progress to upper primary levels. The successful integration of students with disabilities into regular classrooms expected to be based on several factors, including the physical accessibility of the learning environment, the availability of support services and resources, the training and awareness of teachers and staff, individualized education plans for each student, and the overall inclusivity and acceptance within the school community. However, in reality, these conditions were often not met. Furthermore, the readiness of each student to join the mainstream classroom, including their social and emotional preparedness, as well as their academic abilities, is crucial for a smooth transition and successful integration. This suggests that in the City administration there are three models of education for teaching students with special educational needs. In this regard studies also revealed that the Ethiopian schools follow a mixed approach in which children with disabilities are integrated into mainstream classrooms (Yorke et al., 2022). However, they argue that the shift was not supported with the necessary materials and awareness of the responsible bodies.

According to Mpofu and Chimhenga (2013), school administrators should feel a sense of responsibility toward the academic and socio-emotional development of each student in their school. However, the current study suggests that these administrators did not view themselves as responsible for the education of students with special needs. Instead, they relied on others to manage the inclusion program. Mpofu and Chimhenga (2013) also emphasize the importance of collaborative planning for the education of students with special needs. Unfortunately, the concerned administrators and teachers in the current study did not prioritize planning for inclusion or addressing the needs of diverse learners. First of all, it is required for managers to understand and consider education which allows each child to learn together, be recognized, and be given equal educational opportunities. It is also required for managers to identify children with disabilities who need specially designed treatments. The management of inclusive education can be measured and improved on an ongoing and accountable basis. Studies have shown that management of inclusive education is important which involves the collaboration process to support the practices of inclusive education (Robiyansah, 2020).

Furthermore, the majority of teachers in Ethiopia's educational system are usually prepared to teach the entire class without adequate support for pupils with individualized teaching or a variety of learning requirements.. As a result, these educators need to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively cater to a wide range of learning requirements and employ diverse teaching methods. UNICEF reports also underscore the necessity of individualized educational plans in meeting the unique needs of students with disabilities in an inclusive environment (Clark et al., 2020). In addition, strong collaboration among stakeholders ensures and enhances the realization of inclusion (Clark et al., 2020). Contrary to this, the current study has found the presence of a poor bond between Zone and City administration education offices with schools and b/n teachers and families as well.

This study uncovered a concerning reality that there are teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms and are unaware of the diverse needs of their students with special needs. This lack of awareness has a direct impact on the education of these students. Mpofu and Chimhenga (2013) noted that teaching in inclusive classrooms requires a deep understanding of inclusive education and individual differences. Similarly, some revealed that children with diverse abilities may not receive the education they need due to a lack of awareness (Hayes, 2017). Despite UNICEF's reports emphasis on the importance of adapting curriculum, teaching methods, and physical structures to cater to diverse



needs, the current study found that some teachers were unable to adapt their teaching materials to suit the needs of their learners (Clark et al., 2020). They simply used the texts as they were, focused on completing chapters, and employed the same teaching methods for all learners. It is vital for teachers to have the professional knowledge that is required to provide adequate education to students with diverse needs (Vrasmas & Vrasmas, 2012). However, this study found that some teachers were assigned to inclusive classrooms without the necessary knowledge to teach students with different educational needs.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study highlight the fact that deaf students are frequently instructed through oral methods by teachers who lack the skill of proficiency in sign language. Additionally, it has been revealed that even in inclusive settings, there is a shortage of sign-language interpreters. Tedla and Negassa (2019) have also recognized the language barrier as a critical obstacle that deaf learners encounter in attaining inclusive education.

Recommendations

To sum up, the study's findings revealed that the Hossana City Administration's efforts toward inclusive education are hindered by poor administration and a knowledge and skill gap. To achieve proper education and support for students with diverse abilities, the study recommends that:

- The education offices in Haddiya Zone and Hossana City Administration should establish strong connections with schools that are working towards inclusive education.
- School management effectiveness should be continuously measured and improved in a accountable and transparent manner by Educational offices.
- School leaders need to prioritize creating feasible plans and fostering relationships between teachers and parents of students with diverse needs.
- School leaders and teachers should receive training and awareness sessions from qualified professionals or organizations.
- The Hossana College of Education, being the only college in the regional state, should provide professional, financial, material, and other necessary support to facilitate inclusive education in the Haddiya zone and its surrounding areas.
- It is recommended that the Hossana City Administration, in collaboration with the educational sectors of Hadiya Zone and regional educational bureaus, provide training for teachers and school principals in the following areas: sign language, speech production, curriculum adaptation, teaching methods, classroom management, assessment, and intervention for deaf children.

Limitation of the study

The data collecting tool employed for this study was limited to interviews, which may have restricted the ability to capture a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Incorporating additional tools such as direct observation and questionnaires could have provided a more holistic view of the situation. Furthermore, the study was constrained by its focus on a limited number of schools practicing inclusive education, which may have limited the diversity of perspectives and experiences captured in the data. Additionally, the lack of inclusion of children's perspectives in the data collection process is a notable limitation that could have enriched the study findings. These limitations present valuable insights for future research endeavors aimed at comprehensively understanding the practices, challenges, and opportunities associated with implementing inclusive education and devising effective solutions.

Ethics and Conflict of Interest

All ethical rules were observed at each stage of the research. The author declares that he acted in accordance with ethical rules in all processes of the research. The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest with other persons, institutions or organizations.

**Supporting Institution**

Hossana College of Education

Author Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the research.

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