

## School Challenges of Students with Visual Disabilities

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to identify challenges that students with visual disabilities faced in the primary schools of Weldeya town in Ethiopia. Principals, students with visual disabilities and teachers were invited to take part in the study. With this, a phenomenological design was used to investigate the experience of participants regarding school challenges of students with visual impairment. The researcher used a semi-structured interview, focused group discussion and observation checklist to gather data. Then, the data were analyzed thematically which were preset in relation with research questions. Through the discussion, environmental inaccessibility, inflexibility of financial guidelines in schools and lack of training among teachers were identified as major school challenges for education of students with visual impairment.*

### **Introduction**

The history of the education of the blind in Ethiopia has been profoundly anchored into the past Christianity. For this, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has played a matchless role to educate the blind for the purpose of church rituals (Zelalem, 2014). As Sergew and Tadesse (1970) noted, the church education derives its distinctive character from the unique Christian heritage of the country. With this, again, Ethiopia is the only African country to have preserved Christianity as its own religion for over thousands of years. The religious heritage, therefore, contributed for the country to have its own written language and literature which makes the country still unique in

Africa. For this, the widely scattered monastic tradition which are dated back to the fifth century enlightened particularly those children of the nobility who were visually impaired (Binns, 2013; Tekeste, 2006; Zelalem, 2014).

According to Sergew and Tadesse (1970), noted in their historical record, in the early Ethiopian church schools, children were taught how to read and write in Geez and Amharic. Nevertheless, to address the different need of the blind, the church adapted oral rehearsal as an alternative to reading and writing Geez which was the original language of the religious rituals. It is worth doing to highlight that the Church was fully aware of the necessity to train its own future leaders in such a way that they fulfilled their duties and responsibilities in the society (Binns, 2013; Tekeste, 2006). Such education played a wider role for the increment of the national literacy rate and provided more instruction for adults as well as young pupils including persons with visual disabilities (Zelalem, 2014; Tekeste, 2006; Binns, 2013).

As Tekeste (2006) reported, until the time of emperor Menelik II (1889–1913), education was determined mainly by the church. However, following the introduction of the Western civilization to the country, American Missionaries established the first school for the Blind in the history of special education in Ethiopia at the town of Dembi Dolo in 1925. The second and third special schools for persons with visual disabilities at Entoto and Kasanchis around Addis Ababa. In 1948 by Swedish Missionaries and the government in collaboration with Mennonite Missionaries respectively (Teshome, 2006). The schools started their operation by catering a very few children with visual disabilities by importing teaching materials from America and other Western countries in the form of aid (Teshome, 2006).

However, neither of this nor other similar beliefs described about the population with visual disabilities has no well established research findings (Johnsen 2001). Persons with visual impairments are a diverse group in the society. Hence, they are thin and fat, tall and short, fun loving and irritable. They have all the characteristics found in any group of the society in which they live (Degefa, 2001). The common characteristics that persons with visual impairment viewed differently by different researchers. For instance, Hyvarainen (1996), states, as blind persons exhibit characteristics such as eye pressing, head banging which is a sign of under

stimulation. Whereas, the report of Scholl (1986) reveals as blind person possess no characteristics specific to themselves as blind persons and show no typical reaction to being blind. He further states that like all people, they are the products of their own unique heredity and environment and are individuals. Thus, it is not possible to generalize about any common characteristics of persons with visual impairments.

The non-disabled persons' refusal to accept the individual difference that persons with disabilities have possessed; and the deep-rooted misunderstanding "disability is inability," denied children with special needs to equal opportunity of education (Tirussew, 2005; UNESCO, 1994). Exclusion of students with visually impaired from any school participation subsequently, has a devastating impact on the physical, social, academic and psychological wellbeing of the group (Degefa, 2001).

As Mastropieri & Scruggs (2010) well noted, most of the barriers associated with education of children with visual disabilities are negative attitudes. As with society in general, these attitudes and stereotypes often stem from lack of knowledge and understanding about the group. The attitudes and abilities of general education teachers can also be taken as major limitations in the process of education of children with visual disabilities (Sherrill, 1993).

As the Ministry of Education, (2012) reported, in Ethiopia, training teachers to understand and work with children with disabilities is often inadequate, fragmented and uncoordinated. If educators have negative attitudes toward students with special needs, then, children will unlikely receive a satisfactory, quality education (Tirussew, 2005). Negative attitudes held by teachers, school administrators, overprotection by parents and lack of motivation of students with visual impairments themselves are critical barriers that hinder their full school participation (Sherrill, 1993; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010).

### **Special Needs**

In line with this, and as research findings reveal, the negative attitudes of the society can be a major barrier for the successful inclusion of students with visual impairments in overall school activities (Sherrill, 1998). According to Sherrill, (1998) teachers' negative attitude is the first and

the most impeding factor that contributes to lack of involvement in school activities by students with visual impairments. If the environment in which learning occurs is not supportive to students with visual impairments, their learning will automatically be interrupted (Johnsen, 2001).

Research shows that the context in which the learning occurs; inflexible curriculum, environmental inaccessibility, negative attitude which stems from both teachers and parents and inappropriate assessment procedures are some of the factors that can impede effective school participation of students with visual impairments (Fraser & Maguvhe, 2008).

As Mastropieri & Scruggs, (2010) obviously noted, a student with a disability cannot learn in a regular classroom if he/she 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.

As researchers in the field of special needs education agree, accessibility of school environment can go beyond passageways, stairs and ramps to recreational areas (Sherrill, 1993). Based on the above facts, it is important to be aware about the presence of many factors that can interfere into the education of children with visual impairment to learn with their alongside typical peers. Hence, the inaccessibility of the learning environment is also one of the variables that can interfere in the learning of students who use white-canes. Nevertheless, students with disabilities can participate in unrestricted general school activities if the social and physical environment is accessible. With this, the teaching and learning process of students with visual impairments usually needs modifications for them to be successful (Sherrill, 1998). In order to meet their unique needs, subsequently, students must have specialized services, books and materials in appropriate media like Braille, as well as specialized equipment and technology to assure equal access to the core and specialized curricula, and to enable them to most effectively compete with their peers in school and ultimately in society. Placing a student with a visual impairment in a regular classroom by itself, doesn't ensure the inclusion of the student with visual impairment (Sherrill, 1993). If student with a visual impairment who does not have access to social and physical information because of his/her visual impairment, he/she is not included practically. Students with visual impairments will not be included unless their unique educational needs for access are addressed by specially trained personnel in appropriate environment. Again, unless

these students are provided with equal access to core and specialized curricula through appropriate and specialized books, materials and equipment, no way to make sure the inclusion of the student with visual disability. For quality learning of students with visual impairments, some features and conditions should be adhered to. These include special services from specialized teachers, teaching and learning resources, as well as assistive devices like Braille and magnifying glasses and the use of flexible teaching methods (Webster & Roe, 1998).

Therefore, Sherrill (1993) critically emphasized in his research report, the need for stakeholders of education including teachers to consider the restructuring of the education system and practices as well as modification of the environment in order to assist these students learn better.

### **Methodology**

Qualitative research method was chosen as overall strategy to undertake this study. Specifically, as phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon in the human sphere, this design normally enabled researchers to gather deep information and perceptions through inductive qualitative research methods. To know the experience of principals and teachers about the school challenges of students with visual impairment, semi-structured interviews, focused group discussion and observation checklist serve as instruments to dig out information and perceptions from the perspective of the research participants (Bogdan R. and Steven J., 1975; Creswell, 2003).

Weldeya is the town where the study took place, and which is located 527 kilometers northeast from the capital city of Ethiopia. In the town, there are eight governmental and one non-governmental primary schools. There are around 500 teachers and 32 students with visual impairment in these primary schools. The sample design is multilevel in which, participants from three different groups have been selected. The sampling scheme that the researcher used to recruit was also proportional quota sampling. Hence, three participants from each assemblage of; principals, teachers and students with visual disabilities were employed to undertake the study. Therefore, from each primary school, three/participants wererecruited for the study (Patton, 1990; Bogdan R. and Steven J., 1975).

### **Instruments**

The instruments which the researcher used to collect data were focused group discussion, semi-structured interview and observation checklist. The interviews in this research were conducted in average one hour with each interviewee until a point of data saturation was reached and no new information was gathered (Creswell, 2003). Facilitating the discussion, posing research questions and creating a conducive atmosphere to the discussion were the major roles of the researcher. This was happened deliberately to encourage the participants to speak freely. Subsequently, during the interviews and focused group discussion, field notes were taken by two assistants of the researcher to ensure triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1984).

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis involved gathering information, determining themes and allocating information into the already preset themes. Hence, the preset category technique has been applied to organise the data according to its set of information and eventually, qualitative report has been accomplished (Creswell, 2003; Bogdan R. and Steven J., 1975). To achieve all these things, the data analysis involved the verbatim transcription of the tape recording of each interviewee and focus group discussion. Thereafter the records were analyzed by means of the thematic analysis (Creswell, 2003). Hence; to determine differences, similarities and gaps of the results of this study were compare with already carried out other studies (Denzin and Lincoln, 1984).

### **Trustworthiness**

Though measurements of reliability and validity aren't very big issues in qualitative method, Trustworthiness then becomes the pursuit to produce trusted results (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In this research therefore; The principles of credibility /checking the truth-value, transferability/the strategy used to attain applicability, dependability/refers to the consistency of the findings and conformability/using the criterion of neutrality as freedom of bias were maintained to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The information obtained from principals, teachers, and students with visual disabilities has been analysed and interpreted with similar themes. However, the first theme discussed in line with the focus group discussants only. The rest of the themes have been triangulated. the analysis,

therefore, involved three themes in common in each group for the purpose of data triangulation. Hence, as it is already mentioned, Theme one involved only principals and teachers. This was done deliberately to know the awareness that principals and teachers have towards students with disabilities.

### **Findings**

Among principals and teachers, two of them were females and the other four were males. Their teaching experience ranged between fifteen and thirty years. Their age also fell between thirty-eight and fifty-three. All of them have received their first degree. Whereas, the three interviewees with visual disabilities were between age 18 and 20 years, two of them are from grade eight and the one was from grade seven.

### **Theme one Awareness**

Discussant 1: *“It is my first experience. I began to teach the group since I was transferred from rural school to urban.”*

Discussant 2: *“For the last ten years, I have served as a school director. Since that time, I am administrating students with visual impairment. Currently, the school has about five such students.”*

Discussant 3: *“As a director, I see some students with visual impairment. But I didn't teach them so far.”*

Discussant 4: *“Even though I do not have special training, I am teaching them for the last two years.”*

Discussant 5: *“This semester, I am not teaching in the classrooms where students with visual disabilities are enrolled. However, as I took different trainings organized by US aid, I feel ease when I teach them.”*

Discussant 6: *“Among five of my classrooms, there are two students with visual disabilities. As I didn't take course or other training regarding visual disabilities, it is challenging to teach them.”*

It is clear that all participants had exposure to students with visual disabilities. Discussant 5 was the only participant who felt easy to teach the group as she had trainings. the three principals

were much reserved to express either their comfort or discomfort in the process of teaching students with visual disabilities. However, teacher 1 and 3 forwarded their incompetency to teach the target group due to lack of training. Creating awareness regarding the nature and needs of students with visual disabilities could alleviate the feeling of incompetency that was created among teachers. In proportion to this, adequate training for teachers as well as principals could also improve the positive attitude that they had towards students with special needs. In favor of this, Norwich (2002) recognised the paramount importance of teachers' attitude that they possessed for the academic success of students with disabilities in inclusive classroom. In line with this, a survey, which was conducted in the other town of Ethiopia, reported teachers' reluctance to support children with disabilities in Bahir dar primary schools (Dagneu, 2013).

### **Theme Two School Support for Students with Visual Disabilities**

Discussant 1: *“They have stipend of 350 Birr from regional education bureau. So far, no different support for these students from others. Even to support them financially, guideline or budgetary instruction is required.”*

Discussant 2 agreed with discussant 1 regarding the amount of money that the students were receiving. He added, *“But since our school is financially weak, we aren't able to furnish the group with teaching material.”*

Discussant 3 repeated what the two discussants remarked concerning the pocket money that students with visual disabilities were receiving. He added the following points: *“I don't think it is possible to support them at school level. NGOs should fulfill the extra need of students with special needs. We don't have budget assigned for such purpose. so we can't afford them.”*

Discussant 4: *“I am simply a teacher. I am not expected to do something. if support is needed, it should be from school. Off course, during examination, I read them. I feel that trained teacher is required to assist them.”*

Discussant 5: *“I give them my teaching note. I also encourage them to participate in the classroom.”*

Discussant 6: *“I do not have training which enable me to support them. I feel pity of them but I can't do anything.”*



To triangulate the preceded data, the interview report from students with visual disabilities has been presented as follows. As interviewees unanimously reported, to be effective in their education, the school should provide them with Braille equipment; such as slate and stylus, Braille paper, abacus, white-cane and tutors. the interviewees also forwarded their complaint further about poor attention that they are receiving from the directors. Whenever they ask about additional bursary and supply of Braille equipment, the usual answer that they were receiving from school principals was "no budget". As they informed the researcher, most students with disabilities were from rural and poor families. Hence, they weren't able to be provided with the necessary learning materials. They also believed that the schools couldn't treat them equally with sighted students not alone to meet their special needs. They justified this by listing the provision of chalk, blackboard, ink-printed books and all other things were for the sake of sighted friends.

Evidently, there are research findings which colabourate the preceded accounts made by students with disabilities. For instance, Dagneu (2013) and Lewis (2009) have found out the prevalence of inadequate school support for students with disabilities. Not only the regular schools, even the special school of students with special needs have been observed as they were poorly staffed, under-resourced, and generally concentrated in urban areas (Lewis, 2009).

The need of students with visual disabilities can be addressed if they were provided with teaching equipment such as; Braille-paper, abacus, slate and stylus for those who are blind. As well as magnifiers, large prints and contact lens for those who have low vision (Sherrill, 1998). Inevitably, schools are supposed to facilitate students with disabilities with appropriate support not only to retain but also to minimize school dropout of the group (UNESCO, 2005). As informants reported and as it was observed, one of major educational challenges of students with visual impairment in the primary schools of the study area has been poor provision of adapted material. In favour of the above fact, Bishop (1996) suggested the need of adapting teaching materials to improve academic achievement of students with visual impairment.

To the reverse, students with visual disabilities in Weldeya primary schools were not receiving both financial and material support from their respective schools other than the bursary that regional bureau has already allotted. Regarding school support, the principals have confirmed as

the target group were receiving monthly bursary from the education bureau of the regional state of Amhara. The feedback of the principals unanimously showed to what extent financial statements were challenging them to take measures in order to support students with visual disabilities. It is also worth doing to highlight how lack of teachers' training has impacted the delivery of education for the target group. As it is recognized by UNESCO (2005), stipulating school policy regarding students with special needs and producing well-trained teachers has a paramount importance not only to make education accessible but also to ensure quality education for children with special needs.

Further, placing children with special needs in the regular classroom by itself is not a remedial measure to tackle exclusionary factors against students with disabilities. Rather, facilitating with modified learning material and teaching methodology is guarantee for the academic wellbeing of the group (UNESCO, 2005).

### **Theme Three Environmental Accessibility**

Discussant 1: *“The school is accessible to some extent.”*

Discussant 2: *“The entry of some classrooms requires short jumping.”*

Discussant 3: *“Our school isn't designed considering blind students. that is why there are ditches, poles and other kinds of obstacles here and there.”*

Discussant 4: *” Students with visual disabilities inter in to all classrooms, but not with confidence. they need support from their classmates sometimes.”*

Discussant 5: *“No environmental modification at all. Therefore, sometimes they bump to poles and need sight guide to inter some classrooms.”*

Discussant 6: *“the school is designed for sighted students. so, it is not accessible for students with visual disabilities. If I were in the position of school head, I would urge education bureau to construct special class for them.”*

In line with this, discussants with visual disabilities have reported the presence of environmental barriers in order to move from classroom to classrooms as well as from playgrounds to buildings safely. For them, carelessly erected poles and uncovered ditches are the main obstacles not to

study with their counterparts and participate in social events outside the classrooms. Hips of stone and other which are leftover during the previous constructions were barriers in two schools out of the three primary schools.

Even the data obtained via observation checklist revealed as most of school areas were covered with piles of stone, wood, and broken chairs. Carelessly erected poles and open ditches were the other threats for free movement of students with visual disabilities. Amongst other things, environmental barrier was the one which often got in the way of equal participation of students with visual disabilities. The data obtained through observation checklist and focused group discussion was a very good witness to be aware of the environmental difficulties that students with visual problems faced in the primary schools of Weldeya town. Observably, the social interaction of students with visual disabilities was so limited due to the environmental hazards in these primary schools.

The removal of the physical environment subsequently can enhance the overall school participation of students with visual disabilities. According to Bishop (1996), modification of the physical environment become paramount, if they have to participate in all the things other students without visual impairments participate in the school.

As research findings show, next to attitudinal barrier, the most obvious impeding factor for persons with disabilities is environmental inaccessibility (Johnsen 2001). As principals and teachers together reported and as it was observed, students with visual disabilities were precluded from co-curricular activities and some social events with in the primary schools due to aforementioned physical barriers. To reverse the situation, therefore, adaptations of teaching materials and modification of the physical environment become paramount; if they have to participate all the things other students without visual impairments participate in the school (Bishop, 1996).

#### **Theme Four Classroom Instruction**

Except discussant 5, the rest of discussants admitted their inconsiderateness of students with visual disabilities in the classroom. For instance, discussant 1: “I teach biology, therefore, I use

diagrams and charts to simplify lessons like blood circulation, respiratory organs and others. However, I don't know how to modify these diagrams into Braille." Discussant 4: "I don't think as it is my responsibility to adapt diagrams and maps. Rather, trained personnel should be assigned to accomplish such tasks."

To evident the above account, students with visual impairment together reported the following regarding classroom instruction: teachers used to write notes on the blackboards silently. These idled students with visual disabilities. As they have noticed, the process consumed much of the class time. The interviewees therefore, aren't getting something from such proceed. Hence, to ensure equal benefit of the class, the group recommended teachers to narrate or verbalize what they write on the board.

The other comment forwarded by the students with visual disabilities was regarding lesson modification; most often, teachers draw pictures, diagrams, and charts on the wall of the classroom. However, they do not mind our presence. If they did, they could either produce tactile teaching aid or give verbal explanation of the visualized lesson.

To cop-up with sighted students, indisputably, students with visual disabilities require extended time during assessment and submission of assignments as they remarked. For this lack of training has hampered teachers not to meet the instructional need of students with disabilities in Weldeya primary schools. Even, due to teachers' inability to read Braille, students are not expected to complete homework and take notes in class, unlike their sighted peers (Louis, 2009).

Therefore; the content, method, teaching material, and other related activities, which are provided for students with disabilities, should be accessible and flexible. Curriculum must take into consideration the different abilities and needs of all students. It must be capable of being adapted and modified to meet the need of all children. Flexible time frames for work completion, differentiation of tasks, and flexibility for teachers and time for additional support are some of strategies to meet specific need of children (UNESCO, 2005). In addition to this, flexible teaching-learning methodology is also necessary to realize inclusion. Access to the curriculum is so much more than simply including a student with disability in a regular classroom. Further, the

systematic way of classroom organization and the arrangement of teaching materials should be considerations that must be taken in to account during education of the disability group.

### **Conclusion**

As the research findings show, the students with visual disabilities have faced enormous obstacles to precede their education competently likewise other non-disabled schoolmates. The primary schools where this study was conducted have been identified as they weren't providing special support for students with visual problems. Hence, no matter how these children have a right to receive quality education, because of multifaceted factors, they weren't being catered in the expected manner. For this;

- lack of trainings among teachers
  - inaccessibility of school environment
  - inflexible financial statement
  - lack of awareness among school principals about the necessity of devising special provision are some of the findings that jeopardize the quality education of the group in the primary schools of primary schools of Ethiopia. Based on the above fact, the researcher intended to suggest remedial actions hereunder.
- ❖ The regional education bureau in collaboration with non-governmental organisations should come up with strategies that could help how to sensitize issues of disability to teachers, students, school administrators and stakeholders so that they can contribute to successful inclusion of students with visual limitation.
  - ❖ Teacher education institutes should provide practical oriented courses of inclusive education for preservice teachers in order to raise their awareness towards disability issues and equip them with basic skills of Braille as well as orientation and mobility.
  - ❖ Financial and other school guidelines should be designed flexibly to address the special needs of students with disabilities.

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