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School factors against co-curricular participation of students with mobility problem

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine school factors that hinder the co-curricular participation of students with disabilities. The researcher has primarily used the survey method to investigate the co-curricular participation of students with disabilities in Weldeya primary schools. For this, 100 teachers were selected at random and two interviewees with disabilities were selected purposefully. Results indicated that mobility problems, teachers' misunderstanding about the benefit of co-curricular engagements for the personality development of children, and lack of interest among students with disabilities themselves to take part in non-academic works were all factors that inhibited the co-curricular participation of students with disabilities.

1. Introduction

According to Tirussew (2005), people with disabilities in Ethiopia have experienced discrimination, neglect, stigma and other forms of segregation ranging from the extreme of being exterminated to systematic avoidance from the household by the family and their community as a whole. According to the same author, in Ethiopia and most of the other African countries causes of disabilities were associated with curses, evil spirits, adultery, false swear and other superstition beliefs. As a result, most people with disabilities are victims of prejudice, especially in the rural areas of Ethiopia. In developing countries like Ethiopia, many children with disabilities suffer from neglect and abuse (Tirussew, 2005; Japan international cooperation agency, 2003). In the most extreme cases children with disabilities have frequently been shut inside their homes and deliberately kept away from other people because they are considered a sign of shame and of sin committed either by the parents or someone of blood relationship (Tirussew, 2005; Zelalem, 2007).

As a result, societal association of disability with curses often hindered people with disabilities from full participation of life (Save the Children Finland, 2010). A study conducted by Almaz (2011) regarding Ethiopian college students' attitude towards persons with disabilities reveals that even the students in higher education have culturally influenced negative attitudes about disability. Similarly, Tirussew (2005) found that community participation of people with disabilities was frequently restricted due to negative attitudes and beliefs. Almaz (2011) reported that most students largely believed disabilities were due to supernatural causes carrying a strong

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stigma which also affected family members, thus increasing the segregation of people with disabilities and their families. According to research findings, the most distressing belief of Ethiopians about disabilities is that they associate disability with God, as it is seen as a punishment by a supernatural power (Zelalem, 2018). This negative belief has led persons with disabilities to have miserable lives (African children policy forum, 2012). As a consequence, people with disabilities living in Ethiopia, even in the present day, suffer from poor societal awareness and limited support (Zelalem, 2007).

Based on the World Bank and World Health Organization Joint Report on Disability (2011), there are an estimated 15 million children, adults and elderly persons with disabilities in Ethiopia, representing 17.6 percent of the population. A vast majority of these people live in rural areas where access to basic services is limited. In Ethiopia, 95 per cent of all persons with disabilities are estimated to live in poverty, many of them dependent on family support and begging for their livelihoods (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2003; CARDOS, 2007). Begging is a prevalent method of survival particularly in urban Ethiopian centers, as is financial help from religious institutions and charities (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2003; Cardos, 2007).

As research report of Save the Children Finland (2010) highlighted, there is still a great deal of social stigma regarding disability in east Africa, specifically, and in the whole Africa at large. In rural areas of Ethiopia in particular, the belief persists that children with disabilities are gifts from the devil and a product of their parents' sins. This means that, in many families, these children are hidden away and are simply not sent to school (Ministry of Education, 2012; African Children Policy Forum, 2012; Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2003).

However, although many children with disabilities were not sent to school, over time, some groups of children with disabilities had exposure to education provided by religious bodies with the spread of religious teachings, processes of national social development, global experience, and the coming of the missionaries to the country (Teshome, 2006). As a result, Ethiopia has made significant progress in many areas of education in the last ten years. For example, primary enrolment has increased overall from 68 percent in 2005 to an estimated 90 percent today (Ministry of education, 2012). However, for children with disabilities, particularly those with conditions such as hearing, visual, or intellectual impairments, it is statistically a much less successful picture (Zelalem, 2018). School enrollment of children with disabilities is estimated to be only three to four percent (Ministry of Education, 2012). A number of reasons underpin this, one among which is a severe shortage of trained classroom teachers generally who do not have the skills to teach a child with disabilities in classes that often include 60 to 100 pupils (Tirussew, 2006; Zelalem, 2018). Consequently, when a child with a disability does begin to attend school, she/he often quickly drops out (African Children Policy Forum, 2012; Ministery of Education, 2012). Most of the special schools which provide services for children with disabilities suffer from overcrowding, scarcity of modified instructional materials and shortage of teachers trained in special education (Tirussew, 2005). These institutions and special classes in regular schools are facing a serious problem of financial constraints as is recognized and reported by the government (Ministry of Education, 2012). The most significant lack of provision appears to involve situations in which children with hidden disabilities are attending classes with non-disabled peers in regular schools yet do not receive any special educational support (Ministry of Education, 2012; African Children Policy Forum, 2012).

As indicated earlier, the enrollment rate of children with disabilities in both public and residential schools in Ethiopia is very low. Furthermore, over 95% of residential schools and special classes or units in Ethiopia are generally overcrowded around towns and ill-equipped in terms of human and material resources (Tirussew, 2005). Simply put, the education of children with disabilities in Ethiopia has failed to reach and serve over 96% of school-age children in the country (Ministry of education, 2012).

In order to take a child in a rural area to school, who cannot travel on their own, might involve parents a walk of an hour or more, which results in lost income from farming or selling products in

the market for the family. Students with disabilities in areas where there are a substantial number of the population in the regular schools, often find their special educational needs unrecognized and unattended to by the school or their classroom teachers. Therefore, these and other attitudinal and economic problems are major causes for unsuccessful school achievement, poor school participation and early school drop-out rates for children with disabilities (Tirussew, 2005; Ministry of Education, 2012).

However, the rights of children with disabilities to equal access to social and economic services and support is clearly stipulated in the Constitution (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1995, article 41 sub articles 5 and 50). In addition to this, the Education and Training Policy (1994) further states that attempts shall be made to enable children with disabilities to learn in accordance to their potential and needs (sub article, 2.2.3). It is apparent, based on these documents, that Ethiopia has a long way to go to address the needs of persons with disabilities in all aspects of life in the society. As Oliver (1996) highlighted, even though many societies have for many years recognized the need to dismantle physical and attitudinal barriers, solutions such as making the physical environment more accessible, providing information in a variety of formats and challenging attitudes about disability, are still taking time in many countries.

1.1. Co-curricular participation of students with disabilities

Sharma, Vaid and Jamwal (2004) reported that some of the social difficulties of students with disabilities were associated with segregated education, being offsite from regular schools, and the stigma associated with being identified with a disability. Although it is generally accepted that being in a segregated institutional educational setting could protect children with disabilities from being teased by their non-disabled peers, research findings indicated that in addition to stigma, factors such as the children's interpersonal skill deficits contribute to their low peer acceptance (Tirussew, 2005; Sharma, Vaid & Jamwal, 2004).

Co-curricular activities are believed to facilitate the intellectual, emotional, social, moral and aesthetic development of a school child (Gilman, 2001; Sharma, Vaid & Jamwal, 2004). Further, co-curricular activities also provide avenues of socialization, self-identification and assessment when the child comes in contact with organizers, fellow participants, teachers, and people outside the school during co-curricular activity (Gilman, 2001). As it is observed and though it is not a comprehensive list, co-curricular activity comprises sports, singing, music, debate, dance, drama, social services, and so on.

As children progress through elementary and middle school, they desire to be accepted by their peer group and to share activities with them. This is particularly critical for children with disabilities since their life experiences are diminished by stigma, discrimination and, often, little opportunity to interact with their nondisabled peers. Through participation in co-curricular activities, children with disabilities can have opportunities to develop a number of social skills that are essential for their socio-emotional adjustment (Mahoney, 2000; Mitchell, 2008). Many research findings suggest, the social and academic lives of children with disabilities are significantly enriched by their participation in extracurricular activities (Gilman, 2001). Extracurricular participation has been shown to have a beneficial effect on academic performance and diminishes the likelihood of students' dropping out of school (Mahoney, 2000). According to the same author, students with disabilities benefit from engagement in co-curricular activities such as field sports, mean-media, question and answer and other school clubs. Those who participate in such extracurricular activities with peers learn new skills and enjoy participation in social gatherings. Studies by Gilman (2001)and Mahoney (2000) indicate that more than three-quarters of youth with disabilities participate in extracurricular activities and programs through which they can explore interests, learn skills, develop friendships, and participate actively as members of their schools and communities. Further, students with disabilities who participated in extracurricular activities also develop more active friendships than those who had no involvement in school clubs. A good

reason for this might be, extracurricular participants are exposed to a wider range of social interactions and opportunities to make friends (Gilman, 2010; Mahoney, 2000).

While the functional limitations of some students may make extracurricular participation difficult, this imposes some limitations upon their ability to interact with friends, develop moral skills, and other cultural and community functions (Mahoney, 2000).

2. Method

The researcher has employed a survey method to examine factors that hindered the co-curricular participation of students with disabilities in Weldeya primary schools of Ethiopia. Weldeya is located to the northeast of Addis Ababa the capital city of Ethiopia at a distance of five hundred and twenty kilometers from the city. In the town, there are seven governmental and two non-governmental primary schools. The data was collected from 100 primary school teachers and 2 students with disabilities. In selecting the teacher respondents for the study, a simple random sampling technique was utilized. A list of all teachers from the co-curricular clubs in the nine selected primary schools was obtained. The list was numbered (1) and (2) and those who had (1) against their names were selected for the study. The two students with mobility problem were invited to take part in the study using judgmental sampling technique.

To collect data, the following methods were employed:

Questionnaire, which was developed by the researcher, was used to gather information about teachers' awareness regarding the benefits of co-curricular activities for students with disabilities. The questionnaire consisted thirty-eight items. From which, the first part was about teachers' demographic information; the second part comprised of yes/no items; the third part of the questionnaire consisted five level of Likert scale items; and the fourth part of the questionnaire added in two open ended questions to inquire teachers' recommendation of likely co-curricular club that can suit students with disabilities. The Cronbach's reliability co-efficient on the overall scale measured .75. An observation checklist was used to document mobility problems that students with mobility limitation face in the primary schools. A semi-structured interview was conducted to gather students' feelings regarding school factors that prohibited them from co-curricular engagements.

2.1. Techniques of Data Analysis

The transcripts were broken down into discrete parts, then examined closely and analyzed for similarities and differences. Categories were identified through emerging ideas from the data and from information gained through the literature. This grouping allowed for a more workable number of units (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher used verbatim description and percentages to present the data that was collected through the questionnaire, interview and observation checklist. Each category was named according to the data it represented, and then analyzed individually, with a view to determining the conditions that gave rise to the findings and the context in which they occurred (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The data was read multiple times, in order to analyze and find constructs, themes and emerging patterns. Hence, both qualitative and quantitative data has been categorized thematically to ensure the accuracy of the analysis (Bogdan, 1992).

3. Results

First of all, in order to answer the first research question, the data gathered from teachers is presented. Table 1 show teachers' responses to the items related to co-curricular participation of students with mobility problem.

Table 1.
Environmental accessibility and co-curricular participation of students with disabilities. (N = 9)

No.	Items	Yes	%	No	%
1	Are there dugs inside the school?	6	68.5	3	32.5
2	Are there electric or telephone bars erected inside schools which may hamper any movement of students with disabilities?	5	68.5	3	32.5
3	Are the entries of co-curricular rooms/offices accessible for wheelchair and crutch usage?	2	22	6	88
4	Are there sign language interpreters in the school?	0	0	9	100
5	Are there dug roads or open channels in each gate the way to classrooms and offices?	7	77	2	22
6	Are there visual signs which direct to rooms/offices?	1	11.05	8	88.5
7	Are the school's leisure places, toilet rooms and others accessible to those students who are with mobility problems?	3	32.5	6	68.5
8	Is the sports field of the school accessible to those students who have disabilities?	2	22	7	77
9	Are there organized school clubs?	9	100	0	00
10	Do students with disabilities participate in co curricular activities?	1	11.5	8	88.5

As indicated in Table 1, and as the information collected through observation checklist from all selected primary schools reveals, students with physical, visual and hearing disabilities are not active participants in co-curricular education. Out of the sampled schools, 6 (68.5%) schools were inaccessible for free movement of students with disabilities. Also in 6 (68.5%) of the schools, electric and telephone Wires were observed which may hamper any healthy movement of students with disabilities. Seven (77%) of the schools had classrooms, co-curricular rooms, and students' service offices inaccessible for students who use wheelchairs. In addition to this, six (68.5%) of the schools had inaccessible leisure places and toilet rooms for those students with mobility problems. In six (68.5%) of the schools, even the inside arrangement of the classroom hinders free movement of students with disabilities.

In most primary schools there were no direction indicators to help students with hearing problems. On a positive note, in all 9 (100%) of the schools, there were extracurricular activities, such as debate, music, drama, sport, dance, anti-HIV instruction, even disability awareness clubs. Though participation was generally not satisfactory, the encouraging fact was that in all observed primary schools, students with disabilities were participants in 'disability awareness clubs'.

Table 2.
Teachers' opinion towards extracurricular participation of students with disabilities (N = 100 teachers)

No.	Items	Yes	%	No	%
1	Are there students with any disability in your extracurricular group?	19	19	81	81
2	Have you ever managed extracurricular activities?	76	76	24	24
3	Are there students with disabilities in your school?	100	100	0	0
4	Do you think your school is comfortable for those students with mobility problems?	25	25	75	75
5	Do you support students with disabilities to participate in co-curricular activities?	10	10	90	90
6	Do students with disabilities participate in school clubs?	40	40	60	60
7	Have teachers of the school ever discussed school participation of students with disabilities?	0	0	100	100.

As it is shown in Table 2, among hundred 100 percent teachers, 81 of them have never registered students with disabilities in their co-curricular group. Though 79/ 79 percent of teacher respondents are leading co-curricular activities in their primary schools, they lack awareness of the value of non-academic activity for students with disabilities.

It is worth reiterating the prevalence of students with special needs, particularly those who have physical, hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities, in all sampled primary schools. Seventy five teachers confirmed their primary schools were inaccessible for those students who have mobility problem, whereas only 25 reported positively on the accessibility of their school. Most respondents reported no effort was made to encourage students with disabilities to participate in co-curricular or non-academic activities. Only 10 percent of the respondents were pushing the study group to take part in non-academic events.

On the other hand, 94 percent of teachers had not observed students with disabilities in co-curricular gatherings only 6 percent witnessed the co-curricular participation of students with disabilities.

The most painful fact was the data that revealed no teachers had never discussed non-academic participation of students with disabilities in their co-curricular.

3.1. Teachers' opinions towards the reasons of lack of participation of students with mobility problem

The views of teachers on the reasons of lack of participation of students with mobility problem are as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3.
Teachers' opinion towards the reasons of lack of participation of students with mobility problem

No	Items	Strongly agree		Agree		To some extent agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1	Engaging students with disabilities in co-curricular activities is time wastage.	57	57	28	28	7	7	8	8	0	0
2	It is possible to assign assistant to push wheelchair for students with physical Disabilities in non-academic works.	7	7	15	15	5	5	35	35	40	40
3	It is difficult to assign sighted guide for students with visual disabilities during Co-curricular activities.	47	47	35	35	10	10	2	2	16	16

As the above table shows, the great majority of respondents have perceived that Engaging students with disabilities in co-curricular activities was wasting their time. The other reason for lack of co-curricular participation of students with mobility problem was the inability to assign an assistant. In line with this, more than 82% of the respondents witnessed the difficulty to assign an assistant for both students with physical and visual limitation so as to engage them in co-curricular activities.

3.2. Teachers' opinion towards possible club for students with mobility problem

Finally, teachers were asked to recommend kind of school clubs that are suited to students with disabilities. The great majority of teachers proposed only "disability awareness club" for students with disabilities as an ultimate co-curricular activity. In support of this, respondents put forward remarks as follows:

- First, a disability awareness club deals with issues which are relevant to the target group. Moreover, it concerns this group more than anyone else.

- Second, the club does not require physical agility or dexterity. Simply sitting somewhere and sharing ideas in a gathering is a non-academic activity that suits some students with limited mobility.
- Thirdly, since the pupils experienced disability themselves, they may have better expertise. Therefore, being a member of the "disability club" may not necessitate them to exert more effort in preparation.

3.3. Data obtained from two students with disabilities through semi-structured interview

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two students with disabilities. The first student was 19 year old girl with physical disabilities in grade eight. The second student was a 17 year old male student with a visual impairment in grade seven.

Students were first asked their views about school participation.

The first interviewee: "I usually participate in the classroom."

The second interviewee: "I and my friends do our assignment. Whenever lectures aren't clear, I ask teachers for explanation." When they had spare time, they prefer to spend it in academic study with their classmates. For them, school participation refers only to academic activity. As first interviewee added, "Co-curricular activity is leisure where ostentatious people stroll."

The students were then asked whether they participated in co-curricular activities or not. Unfortunately, both students said they did not have any participation. They added that most students with disabilities preferred to spend their time on academic study. The second interviewee remarked, "Perhaps, one or two of my friends are members of 'The disability' awareness club. The rest of us have never engaged in non-academic activities."

The students with disabilities where also asked to explain why they were not active participants in non-academic activities. Their responses can be classified into three categories:

a. **Lack of interest**. Both interviewees consider as it was "time wasting" to take part in extracurricular activity. Doing their homework by itself takes them a great deal of time. Mostly, extracurricular activities are in the opposite shift; added to which, most students with disabilities live a distance from their schools; and they believe such activities are appropriate for nondisabled students. Further, the second interviewee remarked, "Being clever at co-curricular things doesn't help any person to get a job." According to these interviewees, working hard on academic subjects will enable them to be successful in life.

b. Mobility problem. Usually extracurricular events do not have fixed settings. The occasions took place wherever there is free space and time. Also sometimes, few are selected from school population. These things hindered students from participation in the non-academic activities effectively. As both interviewees reported they didn't want to face the environmental hardship searching for places where the events are taking place." Data obtained via observation confirms the case that most primary schools in Woldeya are full of hazards. Electric and telephone poles are erected here and there with no consideration of the presence of students with a range of mobility problems. In addition, co-curricular activities often take place at the back of the classrooms and in offices which are inaccessible for wheelchair users particularly. Since the drainage canals are open, the researcher has observed the difficulty in moving around school sites for students with visual impairment.

c. Teachers' misconceptions. In answer to the question, 'Do teachers encourage you to take part in extracurricular activities?' The second interviewee explained how at the beginning of the academic year, teachers announce what school clubs are available; their objectives; office location of each club; and number of students that they want to register. However, none of the teachers ever said a word about the membership of students with disabilities or the kind of support that they may receive. The first interviewee reported, "In our school there is 'disability' awareness club. Teachers request us to join the 'disability' awareness club. Because of this, two students with visual

impairments are participating in the aforementioned club in one primary school." The second interviewee remembered, "Once upon a time, at the flag ceremony, while the director was announcing about an extracurricular day and inviting students to come to the sports field, a representative of the teachers added that the announcement 'doesn't include students with disabilities'." As he remarked later, "They should not suffer moving here and there".

4. Discussion

The discussion continues with the following themes identified as major findings of the study: Accessibility of school sites, teacher misconceptions, and lack of interest among students with disabilities.

4.1. Accessibility of school sites

As the observation data already cited suggests, each of the eight primary schools in Weldeya has an inaccessible environment which is full of environmental obstacles. As the study identified, the difficulty of driving a wheelchair in such environments limited access for some pupils with mobility impairment. More than seventy-five teacher respondents in this study confirmed that their primary schools are not accessible for persons with physical and visual disabilities.

Again the data that was obtained via observation suggests the extent of challenge for students with disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities as their mobility has been observed being hampered. In favour of the above fact, Gilman (2001) and Manhoney (2000) reported that obstacles such as carelessly erected electricity poles as well as open ditches could hinder the participation of students with disabilities in co-curricular activities.

As the study shows, out of eight primary schools, only one had entirely accessible classrooms, offices and other service rooms to support full participation of students with disabilities. The remaining seven primary schools were inaccessible in many of those areas, and also hazardous for day-to-day mobility of the students with disabilities. Based on the data gathered through questionnaire, semi-structured interview and observation, it is possible to conclude one of the major findings is that inaccessibility of school sites hinder extracurricular participation of students with disabilities in Weldeya primary schools. Similarly, a research finding by Ishmael (2015) asserts that architectural Barriers reported as major challenges to ensure school participation of students with mobility impairment.

4.1. Teachers' Misconceptions

Teachers' misconceptions about the benefits of co-curricular activities for the academic wellbeing of students with disabilities has hindered students from experiencing any significant participation in this area. The following remark evidenced the extent of teachers' misconceptions about the relevance of co-curricular activities: "If co-curricular activities hadn't been part of our work efficiency, we wouldn't have been part of it." Further, in another teachers' opinion, " physical agility" is cited as a requirement for non-academic activities and "disabled children do not fit such a thing," This indicates the low level of awareness that some teachers have towards students with disabilities and the benefit of co-curricular participation for students' social, emotional and academic wellbeing. In line with this, research findings reveal the impact of teachers' misunderstanding about students with disabilities upon their non-academic participation (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

The data has also revealed that no teachers had ever discussed non-academic participation of students with disabilities. If teachers have no awareness about the profit of co-curricular engagement and do not inspire participation of students with disabilities, indisputably, the target group is in a position of experiencing injustice. In accordance with the finding above, research finding by Annie (2015) confirms that lack of awareness of disability among teachers acts as a barrier in engaging students with disabilities in co-curricular activities.

4.2. Lack of interest among students with disabilities

Though it has been reported that a non-academic curriculum helps to reinforce various facets of personality development, (emotional, physical, spiritual and moral development) it seems that students with disabilities in Weldeya primary schools are not very motivated to participate in nonacademic activities, losing such opportunities for development because of their lack of awareness of the innumerable benefits of co-curricular engagements. "Co-curricular activity is leisure where ostentatious people stroll." The above statements made by an interviewee with visual disability implies to what extent they are unaware of the social, cultural, moral and emotional value that anyone can achieve from active participation of co-curricular activity. For these interviewees, taking part in non-academic activity is "time wasting". This wrongly deep-rooted perception seems to inhibit the group from the immeasurable rewards of co-curricular activities.

Even though the two interviewees in this study showed no interest in taking part in co-curricular events, research findings suggested that successful participation in extra-curricular activities allows students with disabilities to enjoy positive social interaction with others and be more active members of their school community (Gilman, 2001). Along with this, taking part in extracurricular activity also increases the likelihood of positive feelings for the school and successful school completion (Brooks, 2013).

5. Conclusion

For many of teachers in the sample schools, extracurricular participation seems to be perceived as something that takes place during leisure time and may seem insignificant when it is compared with academic engagement. However, researchers such as Brooks (2013) found that co-curricular activities offer equal benefits with academic engagement for social, emotional and moral development of children with disabilities.

The study group in Weldeya primary schools seemed to limit access to co-curricular participation because of the three major factors:

- Lack of awareness about the benefit of non-academic activity, which stems from teachers' attitudes;
- Inaccessibility of school sites, as co-curricular venues are frequently inaccessible and it is challenging, particularly for students with physical and visual disabilities to take part, they refrained themselves from involving in co-curricular activities.
- Finally, lack of interest among students with disabilities to take part in the co-curricular activities obstructed the group from nonacademic activities.

To reverse the situation, the researcher recommends the schools to:

- Make teachers more aware about the benefits of co-curricular engagement for all the learners, but in particular for those with disabilities.
- Modify the school environment to enable students with disabilities to take part in co-curricular activities.
- Motivate learners with disabilities to take part in a wider range of extra-curricular activities.

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