**Review of the Current Status of Ensuring Inclusive Education in Ethiopia**

***Abstract:*** As a crucial strategy for guaranteeing equitable access and high-quality education for all students, inclusive education has attracted attention in both rich and poor nations. Ethiopia began implementing inclusive education comparatively sooner than other developing nations and established the "Special Needs Education Program Strategy" in 2006, which was updated in 2012 to become the "Special Needs/Inclusive Education Strategy." The Ethiopian government has continued to prioritize inclusive education for youngsters with disabilities, but there are still difficulties in reaching this aim. This review paper offers a thorough analysis of the present state, obstacles, and prospects for inclusive education insurance in Ethiopia. Using numerous sources, such as electronic databases and academic repositories, the review article analyses a diverse selection of peer-reviewed papers, publications, and literature up to September 2024. Reports from the Ethiopian Ministry of Education and the grey literature were also taken into account. According to the results, the obstacles to implementing inclusive education varied from the lack of a required national inclusive policy to the low income of the families of children with disabilities. Among the obstacles identified were attitudinal barriers, knowledge barriers, policy barriers, economic barriers, infrastructural barriers, insufficient stakeholder cooperation in education, misconceptions regarding inclusive education, a scarcity of skilled instructors, inadequate financial distribution, subpar school infrastructure, and the absence of a mandatory inclusive policy.

*Key words: Inclusive education, developmental disabilities, Ethiopia*

1. **Introduction**

The government of Ethiopia, which has over 1. 2 million children with disabilities, has made great strides in making sure that no child is left behind, including children with disabilities, in its educational policies, strategies, and plans. This is to make sure that data collecting and financial planning both consider disability. Save the Children (2014) best defines inclusive education as high-quality, rights-based education that promotes equal access and participation and effectively meets the unique learning requirements and talents of every child. Inclusive education takes a child-centred approach and holds the education system, rather than the children as an individual, accountable for making changes. Children with disabilities continue to encounter numerous obstacles in obtaining a fair and high-quality education, even though Ethiopia's national and international treaties guarantee the right to education for everyone. Despite the fact that UNESCO (2019) estimates that more than 18% of the Ethiopian population has a disability, it is nonetheless challenging to provide every kid's educational requirements (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2006).

In particular, evidence-based planning for children with disabilities has been integrated into education sector planning, from pre-school to secondary, to ensure that every child learns. The current Education Sector Development Plan (2020-25) includes the provision of services for children with disabilities. The plan includes programs and strategies to strengthen the training of pre-school teachers to promote inclusion and to make all pre-school teaching and learning materials and environments inclusive, gender and disability inclusive transformation. In addition, the Ministry of Education has updated a number of existing policies and training strategies to place greater emphasis on the development of inclusive education systems, including pre-school, such as the Education and Training Policy 2023 and the Inclusive Education Strategy. Therefore, the researcher believes that it is appropriate to conduct a review of various studies that have been conducted in different regions of Ethiopia. Regarding the implementation of inclusive education, its practices and its possibilities. This review is expected to contribute to providing information to the Ministry of Education, researchers, policy makers, various NGOs and any other body dealing with issues of education and disability inclusion.

1. **Objectives**

* To review the current status of inclusive education in Ethiopia.
* To review main challenges of inclusive education in Ethiopia.

1. **Methodology**

The reviewer discussed the results of empirical studies on the challenges of inclusive education that were carried out at various periods in various regions of Ethiopia. Because publications are produced at a high and quick rate, a regular synthesis of knowledge is necessary. There may be a need for a literature review due to the quantity of information, conflicting opinions, or lack of agreement on a subject, as seen in Bolderston, (2008); and Green, Johnson & Adams, (2006). According to Philip (2009), the researcher chose studies, compared and summarized them, and then paraphrased, narrated, and presented the results of the reviewed studies thematically.

The reviewer included findings from both published and unpublished research works in the current study. By inputting search terms and phrases pertaining to Challenges, Practice and Opportunities to inclusive Education, Attitudes of teachers towards students with disabilities in Ethiopia, Disability in Ethiopia, and Challenges of students with disabilities in Ethiopia, the researcher attempted to include the published research papers from peer reviewed, full length, and open access research articles from the internet.

Several locations in Ethiopia served as the setting for the reviewed research, which took place between 2010 and 2024. Five of the papers examined were from Northern Ethiopia, five were from Southern Ethiopia, five were from Western Ethiopia, five were from Eastern Ethiopia, and five were from Addis Ababa, which is in the centre of the country and where the national studies were conducted. From the internet, two master's theses that received an academic grade of excellent from Hawassa University in Ethiopia and two PhD dissertations were retrieved. The latter were completed in part to satisfy the requirements for a doctoral degree at the University of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University. As a result, the current study examined 29 research articles in all.

1. **Result and Discussion**

Inclusive education, as a process of enhancing the educational system's capacity, should reach out to all learners (Mkonongwa, 2014; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2011). Recognizing that all children can learn, a quality inclusive education may be provided to each student by: making the instruction more student-centred, adapting and modifying the curriculum and assessment, preparing well-trained and committed teachers, providing a variety of services and allocating resources, and taking systemic action for all programs within the strong commitment of decision-making bodies (UNESCO, 2009; European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013; Kearney, 2011; Richards & Armstrong, 2010).

The three main elements of inclusion are access, participation, and support (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2013; DEC/NAEYC, 2009). By eliminating physical barriers and providing various methods to foster learning and development, Access is offering a diverse array of activities and environments for all preschool kids. Inclusion entails using a range of teaching strategies to foster participation in play and learning activities and a sense of belonging for all students. Lastly, Support is developing a system-level support infrastructure to guarantee high-quality inclusion. This includes professional development, the integration of specialized services with general early care and education, and opportunities for families and professionals to interact and cooperate.

As stated in its policies, plans, and programs, the government has continuously made promoting inclusive education for children with disabilities a priority, with additional impetus from international players and treaties like the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the execution of their implementation has been described as subpar, and improvement in this area has been sluggish. A significant flaw in the design process is the frequent absence of the opinions and viewpoints of local-level stakeholders, who have crucial knowledge about what is happening in schools and communities.

One of the most marginalized groups of children are those with disabilities, who have considerable difficulty obtaining an education and gaining from it. The difficulties change depending on the kind and degree of their impairment, the resources and assistance available in their environment, and the interaction with other types of inequalities, such as poverty and gender. Children with disabilities’ access to education are restricted by a variety of obstacles, including inadequate physical facilities and unfavourable attitudes from family, school, and community members. This emphasizes the necessity of giving priority to helping these children, taking into account their unique needs and circumstances.

The findings suggest that for inclusive education to be effectively implemented in Ethiopia there must be a paradigm shift in educational planning and community awareness. Stakeholder collaboration is essential—bringing together educators, parents, policy makers, and communities to create an inclusive culture. Long-term investment in teacher education, curriculum adaptation, and inclusive school infrastructure is crucial. The article underscores that inclusive education is not merely about physical access but about meaningful participation and learning for all. Therefore, addressing attitudinal barriers and fostering inclusive pedagogy must be prioritized to transform the vision of inclusive education into reality (Tirussew Teferra, 2021).

1. **Current Status of Inclusive Education in Ethiopia**

From 2020 to 2023, more than 63,000 children with disabilities benefited from the preschool program under the National Education Sector Development Plan. Through two-year back-to-school campaigns, regular community mobilization and engagement of the Parents’ Association, parents of children with disabilities were encouraged to send their children to kindergarten.

According to the 2022/23 annual report, since the introduction of the screening tool, 41,808 children (18,580 girls) have been identified and enrolled in kindergartens. Data collected through this tool has been fed into the national education data collection system and helps inform evidence-based planning. The Government of Ethiopia, the World Bank, UNICEF and other implementing partners have established 700 inclusive education centres equipped with teaching and learning materials and teaching professionals to support 3,500 satellite schools (pre-primary and primary). Resources from these centres assist nearby schools and teachers with training, equipment, and assistive devices, as well as screening, identification, and referral of children with disabilities at the school level.

In 2023, UNICEF led by the Ministry of Education, reactivated a national taskforce on Disability Inclusion and created a three-year action plan to promote inclusive education in Ethiopia.

**6) The Obstacles to Inclusive Education in Ethiopia**

**I) Attitudinal Barriers**

The social assessment survey (Jennings, et al. ,2011) included questions regarding a focus group discussion with educators special need education typically brought up a range of topics. the many obstacles that schools encounter while attempting to provide an inclusive education training for youngsters with impairments:

* Restricted technological assistance from the Special Needs Units in Local Education Bureaus;
* Insufficient systematic coordination between the state and non- state actors;
* Special needs education is given a low priority by the institution.
* Reallocation of special need education infrastructure for other uses and authorities (e. g. , assigning special needs rooms to a kindergarten);
* The absence of a well-defined strategy or policy on whether youngsters with intellectual disabilities should attend school is a serious problem.
* Special education courses should graduate students with disabilities and/or inclusion in regular schooling.

Despite the World Health Organization's (2011) claim that attitudes toward people with disabilities have shifted globally, one of the barriers identified to inclusive education in Ethiopia is negative and hostile attitudes. Research indicates that the negative attitudes fostered by mainstream teachers, school leaders, parents, nondisabled students, and society hinder the complete integration of students with disabilities into the educational system (Tirussew, 2005; Mitiku, Alemu, and Mengsitu, 2014). Numerous studies demonstrate that students with disabilities are avoided by mainstream teachers, nondisabled classmates, and school administrators. The study by Melese (2019), which demonstrated that mainstream teachers still treat them differently and believe that pupils with impairments are unable to do various activities, supports this. Melese also emphasized that in the Ethiopian educational system, teachers, school officials, and students without disabilities hold biased and psychologically ignorant opinions toward students with disabilities. This conclusion is supported by the research findings of Jaffer and Aminu (2020), which show that a positive attitude toward inclusion on the part of the school principal is a necessary condition for successful inclusion, but that it is negative in Oromia West, Ethiopia. In addition to the aforementioned premises, the study conducted by Yoshiko (2019) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, revealed conflicting perspectives among teachers and parents/guardians of children with disabilities on inclusive education. According to the same source, parents/guardians and teachers do not always believe that children with disabilities learn best in traditional schools. Another study conducted by Ludago (2020) in the area of ​​Kambata Tambaro, southern Ethiopia, showed that due to negative attitudes, some teachers believe that the inclusion of students with disabilities is a burden . Alemayehu (2019) also clarified that because of negative attitudes, teachers have negative attitudes, behaviors, perceptions and assumptions that discriminate students with disabilities. Furthermore, researchers Dessalegn, Adugna and Kasech (2016) noted that the ancient Attitudes resist welcoming students with disabilities and learning disabilities, as well as those from minority cultures . One of the challenges of inclusive education in the city of Nekemte was highlighted as the attitude of people without disabilities in the social integration of students with disabilities. Teketel (2018) in his study in the city of Harar, Ethiopia indicated that one of the challenges of inclusive education in the study area was the attitude barrier faced by students with disabilities. The emotional and physical harassment that is a serious obstacle and leads to isolation and exclusion. In support of the above findings, a study conducted by Mintesnot (2020) in Benchi Maji area, southwest Ethiopia, found that students with disabilities are often bullied because of their appearance and become the object of ridicule/jokes . This, in turn, pushes them to drop out of school.

**Ⅱ) Knowledge Barrier**

According to the evaluated research, one of the primary obstacles to inclusive education in Ethiopia is a lack of skills and knowledge. Belay, Fantahun, & Missaye, 2015; Jaffer & Aminu, 2020 have backed this argument, as schools in Ethiopia lacking qualified and certified special educators prevent youngsters with impairments from enrolling in regular schools. According to inclusive education, though, school administrators and instructors must take introductory courses (UNICEF, 2014). It has also been decided that schools must figure out how to teach all pupils. However, researchers have claimed that one of the primary obstacles to implementing inclusive education in Ethiopia is the lack of understanding necessary to create suitable pedagogy for all students (Mitiku, Alemu, & Mengsitu, 2014; Tirussew, 2005; and Zelalem, 2018). This necessitates that teachers and school leaders be well-trained and skilled (Tirussew, 2006). The teacher training program in Ethiopia is still mostly theoretical and not practical, even though chosen instructors have the chance to learn about inclusive education, according to Yoshiko (2019). Ludego (2020) demonstrated this by showing that despite the fact that children with disabilities have begun enrolling in schools in her research site, the lack of skills within the school community to support them is still one of the most pressing issues.

The primary skills gap that Ludego (2020) identified was the inability to properly screen and identify students who required an individualized education program. In addition, he stated that pupils with impairments had the most repeaters and that the learning environment in his research area was not conducive to them. Additionally, Tirussew, (2005) and Yoshiko, (2019) revealed that traditional curriculum is the most acknowledged within the teachers and teachers feel more confident in traditional school culture in

Ethiopia. Owing to these factors, researchers indicated that inclusive practice more relies on knowledge, skills, understanding, resources, and attitudes (Tirussew, 2006; Mintesnot, 2020; and Melese, 2019). This was again supported by Dessalegn, Adugna & Kasech (2016) as one of the challenge to inclusive education in their research area was linked to teachers' lack skills and knowledge to teach students from diversified groups.

**Ⅲ) Policies as Barriers**

Nearly every pertinent international treaty and law concerning the rights of people with disabilities has been ratified and put into effect by Ethiopia. The topic of people with disabilities is covered in a number of federal legislation (MM, 2012). Research shows that, despite the efforts of Ethiopian government policies and strategies, there is still a significant need to work with persons with disabilities to ensure their full inclusion in all areas of society, notably education (MM, 2012; Teketel, 2018 UNESCO, 2015). Belay, Fantahun, and Missaye's (2015) study supports the aforementioned concept by demonstrating that children with special needs are far less likely to be fully included, even in the near future. The same source claims that the political strategy is a top-down one that uses appeals, slogans, and national and international outreach, but it's not a thorough, culturally sensitive, cost-effective, or community-based approach. Melese's 2019 research, which is titled Ethiopian Inclusive Education Strategy on a Responsive Learning Environment for an Inclusive Higher Education System, shows that there is no well-thought-out national strategy for Ethiopian schools to adopt inclusive education. This study also discovered that the draft policy, the inclusive education strategy document, is the only strong inclusive education policy because it only includes its own comprehensive, attainable signals that may be implemented to support students with disabilities. Furthermore, Yoshiko (2019) highlights that children with disabilities are frequently denied the choice of attending a regular college or a special school. Furthermore, Ludago (2020) found that the absence of responsible personnel in the district, zone, and regional education offices prevents inclusive education. In the Benchi Maji area of southwestern Ethiopia, Mintesnot's (2020) research once again came to the conclusion that the absence of clear standards defining the idea of inclusive education and its implementation in the area posed a major impediment to the implementation of inclusive education. Zelalem (2018b) asserts that the lack of a required inclusive policy hinders the implementation of inclusive education.

**Ⅳ) Economic Barrier**

All around the world, individuals with disabilities encounter poverty and marginalization (UNESCO, 2016). UNICEF has reported that the participation of people with disabilities in economic, social, and cultural activities in their communities in Ethiopia is thus restricted (UNICEF, 2011). UNICEF has also highlighted that the availability of educational resources to address the needs of each society has a fundamental impact on effective learning. The quantity of learning centres and other facilities in nations like Ethiopia is insufficient to satisfy the population's educational demands. The gaps in provision are frequently related to other inequalities in society, such as urban/rural disparities, as well as inequalities resulting from discrimination based on gender, race, and disability (Tirussew, 2006). Supporting the aforementioned claims, Wondwossen, Abraham, and George's (2020) study found that one of the barriers to inclusive education in Ethiopia is access to educational resources. The research also mentioned technology as an equalizer that levels the playing field for all students and the lack of access to ICT, which makes visually impaired students reliant, lowers their chances of finding modern eresources, and lowers their academic performance. The main obstacle to ICT access is poverty, according to this study.

Once again, Ludego's research in the Kambata Tambaro region of southern Ethiopia discovered that the main obstacles to inclusion in the study area were inadequate infrastructure and learning facilities, poor sanitation, a lack of ramps in buildings and classrooms, and unmaintained classrooms and equipment (Ludego, 2020). In the research done in South West Ethiopia, Mintesnot (2020) found that one of the main obstacles to implementing inclusive education in all schools is the availability of school resources. All target schools, according to data gathered from the same source, lacked the resources necessary to satisfy the needs of inclusive education practice, and the ways in which they created resources also varied, depending on their limitations. According to Tirusew (2005), children with special needs in schools have a very low capacity and are unable to attend secondary schools. The primary issues are that they quit school early due to a lack of resources, facilities, and skilled personnel. The reviewed sources, therefore, indicate that a lack of resources is one of the main barriers to the effective implementation of inclusive education in Ethiopia (Alemayehu, 2019; Dessalegn, Adugna, & Kasech, 2016; Ludago, 2020; Tirusew, 2005; Wondwossen; Abraham and George, 2020; and Mintesnot, 2020).

**Ⅴ) Infrastructural Barriers**

Students with disabilities encounter several obstacles in education because of, among other things, physical inaccessibility, disability-related obstacles, an inaccessible classroom and library facility the whole educational process, including examination (64%), acquiring information and Assignments (53. 3%) (Dawit, 2014).The unavailability of buildings and classrooms, no elevators, and different ways to park cars Common physical limitations serve as barriers (Tirussew et al., 2013). As a result, a large number of Ethiopian educational environments are not favourable and sufficiently welcoming to support pupils with impairments (MoE, 2012). The majority of the schools with special and inclusive learning environments have Children with inclusive classrooms do not find them convenient or comfortable intellectual impairment (Hiwot, 2011). Some physical barriers are insurmountable environments like classrooms, school campuses, buildings, etc. routes, and so on (Tirussew & Alemayehu, 2007). The actual configuration of the involvement of children with schools is restricted by restrictions physical impairments (Jennings, et al. , 2011; Asrat, 2013; Belay et al. ,2004). The classroom environment's physical layout is not positive conditions like the seating layout, noise level, and space and a sense of order in the classroom environment) to create an inclusive atmosphere work on educational practice (Dessalegn's ,2007).

**7) Summary and Suggestions**

The research uncovered a variety of obstacles to the implementation of inclusive education, including the low income of families with disabled children and the absence of a national mandatory inclusion policy. Among the other barriers identified are attitudinal, informational, policy, economic, and infrastructural barriers; misunderstandings about inclusive education; a shortage of qualified instructors; inadequate funding; and poor school infrastructure. Additionally, there is a lack of collaboration among education stakeholders. Lastly, I suggest that all parties work together to include children with disabilities. The prioritized actions include enhancing teacher training, awareness-raising programs, modifying the workforce and infrastructure to support children with developmental disabilities, and advancing the government's emphasis on effective inclusion. As a result, inclusive education is a process that necessitates the participation of all people in its advancement and effectiveness. Therefore, schools, families, communities, the Ministry of Education, and non-governmental organizations operating in the education sector must accept children with disabilities as a natural part of the system rather than expecting them to conform to the offerings of the system.

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