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Citation

BRITTANNY, Franck, & JOSHI, Devin K..(2017). Including students with disabilities in education for all: Lessons from Ethiopia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 21(4)*, 347-360.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/2070

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Including students with disabilities in Education for All: lessons from Ethiopia

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Published in International Journal of Inclusive Education, 2017, 21 (4), 347-360. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2016.1197320

Abstract

This article addresses the inclusion of students with disabilities into the Education for All and Sustainable Development Goals agenda through a case study of Ethiopia, a country aiming to promote inclusive education amidst rapidly rising school enrolments. The article begins with a review of debates concerning inclusive education in the Global South and the strategy taken by Ethiopia. It then examines how inclusive education is currently being implemented drawing on recent fieldwork at rural and urban schools in Tigray province. Through interviews, participant observation, and focus groups, we found that teachers and school administrators are generally in favour of mainstreaming children with disabilities into 'normal' schools. However, insufficient training of teachers and itinerant teachers along with shortages of teaching materials and resources present major challenges to addressing special education needs.

Keywords

Africa, disabilities, Education for All, Ethiopia, Inclusive education, Special Needs Education, Sustainable Development Goals, universal basic education

This article addresses the challenge of including students with disabilities into the Education for All (EFA) agenda. Currently, children with disabilities comprise a large share of those out of school globally (Handicap International 2013), but Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities mandates that disabled people should have full rights to education in inclusive settings (Chataika et al. 2012). Inclusive education is at the 'core' of the EFA agenda (Opertti, Brady, and Duncombe 2009) and providing quality education to children with disabilities is essential to meeting the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Joshi, Hughes, and Sisk 2015). Moreover, dis ability and lack of education are major causes and consequences of poverty (Singal 2011).

As most schools educating people with disabilities are located in urban areas and in industrialised countries, we focus here on rural areas of the developing world where the greatest challenges lie for EFA. Our study examines the case of Ethiopia, Africa's second most populated nation, which has promoted the goal of inclusive education while rapidly increasing school enrolments to meet universal basic education (UBE). The article begins with a brief review of debates over inclusive education and the strategy taken by Ethiopia. It then examines its implementation drawing on fieldwork conducted in 2014 at schools in the Tigray province. It concludes with several possible lessons for the Global South concerning the transformation of public attitudes, teacher training, school resources, and school–society relations.

1. Inclusive education

In the past, most efforts to provide a quality education to children with disabilities have taken the form of 'special' education in segregated institution-based services. Recognising this is costly, hinders

children's re-entry into their home communities, and violates their educational rights, *integration* approaches later emerged whereby students with special educational needs (SEN) sometimes visited or simply enrolled full-time in mainstream schools (Ainscow and César 2006). As students with disabilities were still often isolated in mainstream schools (Farrell 2000, 153), *inclusion* emerged as a third approach as encapsulated in the 1994 Salamanca Statement asserting the right of students with SEN to access regular schools and a curriculum adapted to their needs while calling for decentralisation, community participation, and changes in teacher education to achieve these goals. Unlike *integration* which is based on learners adapting to the schooling system, *inclusive education* involves radical changes to the education system including adjustments in class sizes, specialist support and training, and challenging norms against which students are judged and labelled (Giangreco 2010).

Although pitched at a universal level, inclusive education policies are usually based on Western political and cultural contexts (Miles and Singal 2010). Yet, even in affluent Western social democracies like Finland and Sweden, there have been a number of challenges to fully implementing inclusive education (Aurén and Joshi 2016; Göransson, Nilholm, and Karlsson 2011; Joshi and Navlakha 2010). Likewise, various efforts to advance inclusive education in Africa have met resistance due to inappropriate assumptions or perceived shortages of resources (Eleweke and Rodda 2002). For example, in Botswana, Chhabra, Srivastava, and Srivastava (2010) found that lack of adequate training and professional support resulted in teachers forming negative attitudes towards students with disabilities. In Kenya, Lynch et al. (2011) found that mainstream classroom teachers were not trained to impart certain skills like teaching Braille effectively. Similarly, in Ghana, Kuyini and Desai (2008) found teachers using few adaptive techniques in inclusive classrooms, presumably due to lack of training, large class sizes, limited learning resources, and only sporadic visits from an itinerant teacher.

Unlike countries where compulsory education has long been in place, many schools in the Global South simultaneously face increased student enrolment and teacher shortages due to UBE initiatives. Even trained itinerant teachers may be posted as general education teachers with no time to carry out itinerant duties. In response, several solutions offered by Charema (2007) include establishing community-based support systems, mobile units, and village/rural resource centres to help overcome shortages in relevant facilities, training programmes, information, materials, and support services. Other recommendations include developing closer links between schools and communities, collecting and utilising contextually relevant evidence, and improving local administrative arrangements at the district level (Ainscow, Farrell, and Tweddle 2000; Ainscow and Miles 2008).

II. Ethiopia's strategy

We now turn to the case of Ethiopia, a country that has significantly expanded schooling over the past two decades. In 1995, when nearly four-fifths of primary school-age children were out of school, Ethiopia launched its Educational and Training Policy (ETP) to quickly and efficiently expand schooling through a series of Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) (FDRE 1994; MoE 2002). To increase school enrolment, ESDP I (1997/8–2001/2) eliminated school fees up to Grade 10, instituted local languages as the primary school medium of instruction, increased pupil–teacher ratios to 50:1, and shortened the school day to allow for double shifting.

ESDP II (2002/3–2004/5) and ESDP III (2005/6–2009/10) continued to emphasise school access with the latter focusing on alternative schooling options, adult education programmes, and community–school partnerships. It also aimed to address cultural and social barriers impacting pastoralist communities' and girls' enrolment. Primary school access did increase significantly, but dropouts remained high. In response, ESDP IV (2010/11–2014/15) focused on improving school quality, creating friendly school environments, improving teaching and learning, and expanding early childhood education.

While access has increased in general, it continues to be a challenge for school-aged children with SEN. In 2006, less than 1% of such children were enrolled as schools and teachers often refused to

admit them (MoE 2006, 7–8). Ethiopia then developed its first five-year Special Needs Education (SNE) strategy envisaging a system whereby special schools serving a small number of students would support inclusive schools. Cluster centre schools would also have resource centres and itinerant SNE teachers who would be responsible for working with several cluster schools. Rather than insisting on 'full inclusion' in mainstream schools, the strategy allowed for different levels of inclusion acknowledging the heterogeneous needs of students with various impairments. It also aimed to school children close to their homes in an environment suited to their needs and reassert their right to learn in mainstream classrooms (Tirussew 2006, 66). While most students with SEN would enrol in mainstream schools, special classes attached to ordinary schools would offer Braille and sign language skills to students with visual and hearing impairments, and life-skills training for students with intellectual impairments (MoE 2006).

After the first SNE strategy's five-year term (2006–2011), the MoE (2012) found that it had accomplished three goals. First, various universities and teacher education colleges had developed SNE programmes and SNE was introduced as a course in all teacher education programmes. Second, awareness-building campaigns were conducted in many areas and nine resource centres were opened with 10 itinerant teachers. Third, students with disabilities in primary schools increased from 33,300 to 55,492. However, during the 2010/11 academic school year, the gross school enrolment rate for children with disabilities was still only 3.2% compared to a national rate of 96.4% (MoE 2012, 12). Thus, the strategy was critiqued for having poor identification methods, unclear budgeting guidelines, inattention to females with disabilities, underdevelopment of friendly school environments and for inadequately addressing negative attitudes among parents, teachers, and educational leaders.

In response, Ethiopia's 2012 SNE strategy emphasised both pre-service and in-service training of general and SNE teachers and the deployment of SNE experts as itinerant teachers to all school clusters. It called for establishing resource centres equipped with materials such as televisions, video cameras, hearing aids and canes, and for hiring professionals such as psychologists and Braille and sign language trainers (MoE 2012, 28). Though the strategy contains no specific achievement targets or guidelines, ESDP IV has set the following targets for the 2014/15 school year: (1) increase primary school enrolment of children with SEN from 47,461 to 1,739,000; (2) increase teachers trained in SNE and the number of schools capable of meeting SNE students' needs by 25%; and (3) increase the number of resource centres from 9 to 500 (MoE 2010, 78).

Following the decentralised, federalist governance structure of education in Ethiopia, each region is expected to adapt and implement these goals based on their own local contexts. Focusing on the strategy's implementation in the Tigray Region, we now assess whether Ethiopia has pushed beyond integration to achieve greater inclusion and what possible lessons other developing countries might gather from its experience.

III. Methodology

Our field research took place over six months in 2014 in Tigray, one of Ethiopia's nine regional states. Located in the country's far north, Tigray is home to over 3 million people, approximately 83% of whom are farmers (FDRE 2015). As the lead author of this study worked in the region's education system for two years as a volunteer prior to beginning this research, we had the advantage of familiarity with the education system, local culture, and a network of local collaborators. During this time, the author worked in both segregated 'special' and mainstream primary schools in the public education system and had the opportunity to observe local- and foreign-led inclusive education efforts which often seemed to overlook local expertise of those experiencing the disability or classroom experience themselves. This left the authors interested in knowing what the local concept of inclusive education entailed and what ideas teachers had, and were already using, to facilitate it. The regional education bureau was also in the process of evaluating their regional SNE plan, and was eager to document and disseminate examples of best practices. To ensure that data collected

in this research project would be of value to current efforts, the authors designed the research process in close collaboration with the bureau. A report was produced with the bureau which included best practices, teachers' suggestions, major challenges, and a SWOT analysis.

We strived to maintain reflexivity and critical awareness of our own positionality in this study to minimise problems associated with 'researcher's gaze' (Seaton 1987). Researcher's positionality impacts access to research sites and participants, what respondents are willing to share, and how researchers pose questions and filter information gathered from participants. In our case, both researchers are North Americans, a graduate student who spent time in the field and had previously lived in the region, and a professor who has not. The former worked together with an interpreter in this project who played a key role in building rapport with local teachers. Having both a field participant and an outsider on our team, we aimed to achieve an emic–etic balance. In line with Burawoy's (2003) reflections on the punctuated 'ethnographic revisit' we worked to enhance our study's replicability by trying as much as possible to let local voices speak for themselves. Aiming to be self-conscious, we used methods such as keeping a log, peer consultation, and reviewing interview notes several times after the original analysis (Berger 2015, 230).

Following Bernard (2011), our inductive and qualitative data collection involved a triangulation of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to enhance our understanding of local perceptions, nuances, and cultural contexts under which inclusive education policies are being implemented. Like Johnstone and Chapman (2009) and Singal (2008), our research was based on a purposeful sampling of schools identified as inclusive education models according to regional education officials' hearsay of school activities. Our study included three schools located within two neighbouring *woredas* (districts) covering one urban and two rural schools. We selected neighbouring *woredas* to draw comparisons based on relatively commensurate access to resources in the form of a structured, focused comparison (George and Bennett 2005). All schools examined were cluster centres, a component of Ethiopia's decentralised school system that groups schools around a centrally located school, the cluster centre school, which is expected to maintain a Cluster Resource Center (CRC) that facilitates teacher trainings and sharing of experiences.

At each study site, interviews were first conducted with *woreda* education officers. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with school principals and vice principals followed by interviews with five teachers at each site who had students with disabilities in their classes. SNE experts at each school were also interviewed. Following interviews, two focus groups were held, one with parent-teacher association (PTA) members and another with teachers, school principals and vice principals, when available. In total, 44 interviews were conducted including 15 teachers, 3 SNE experts, 6 school administrators, 16 PTA members, and 4 education officers. All interviews were conducted in the Tigrigna language, with the assistance of a translator, except for six interviews conducted with participants in English. Interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and later transcribed. What follows is our qualitative analysis of the information we collected.

IV. Findings

A. Attitudes and community outreach

Participants revealed that inclusive education activities officially began in their schools three to four years earlier starting with awareness-building programmes to counter negative attitudes towards children with disabilities. Stigmatisation of the disabled was discussed as a persisting barrier to inclusion in Ethiopia and several of our study participants described occurrences of children kept in their homes. As one interviewee explained:

> There was a mother and she has a child, a kid, with a single eye, with no hand […] and she locked that kid up every day. She brought to a sun when people are not around here. She hid him when people come to the house. […] Especially mothers are considering that as the envious act of God. The god becomes angered with our

> action and he give us blind child, a handicapped child, or something. So, this is the gift of ghost. So, it should not be found here. We have to throw somewhere away, in the forest or in the flood.

To combat such practices, each school composed outreach teams of teachers, directors, students, PTA members, and members of the women's development army to visit households to identify out-of-school children and convince their parents to enrol them.

While the teams encountered cases of stigma, their visits also revealed other barriers to enrolment; some parents and community members thought that children with disabilities could only attend segregated schools for deaf and blind students. They did not know that services in local schools were available: '"They can learn?!" They ask to me. "Even, is there any school in [our town] that addressed these disabled students? Maybe we heard [town B and town C] has for deaf students. But [our town] has not."' It also was clear that, in situations of limited resources, parents were more likely to first educate children with better chances of future employment, and could often not provide transportation for children with physical impairments. As one participant described:

> They assume as gift to the education for the so-called normal they can send. Maybe they have a bright future. After he graduates, they become doctor. They can a teacher. They can agriculture officer. For those disabled, they cannot use. They cannot support themselves. They cannot support their families.

Thus, the presence of employed people with disabilities in the community influenced enrolment decisions. As one teacher exclaimed, 'The parents of disabled, when they observe in town the vision-impaired teachers can access jobs. When they observe that, they are very happy.' But other parents doubted their child's ability to learn and opted instead for daily visits to holy water. Many participants made suggestions reflecting the value attributed to children's ability to contribute to the family's livelihood and learn skills useful for earning income to support schooling: 'Parallel to the education, they must get vocational education, skills training. Because they are highly skilled to manage themselves or to manage their parents, they must get.' One teacher suggested that teachers could be rewarded for their achievements in SNE in ways that could enable SNE students to participate in such activities:

> Not in terms of money, it can be material. If we get materials for those 8th grade, 7th grade, like container for cleaning of shoes. If the students get this like of container, the students can treat [support] half time working outside, and half time can learn here. He can treat [support] himself.

Participants emphasised that inclusive education would enable students with disabilities to contribute to national development and avoid dependence:

> If we didn't address to them, they keep to the government, or to parents, or society, dependent. To solve the dependent of those childrens, we must give education addressing for all [...] They can contribute to the country's development.

Many participants mentioned the physical presence of children with disabilities interacting with classmates at school could facilitate attitudinal change in the community. One parent described his first experience witnessing hearing-impaired students at his children's school:

> There was a student here in this school. His name was Dawit. He was not talent only in education but also he was very talent in games like football. He was playing football here in front of us, and we realized that kids with special needs can achieve everything what they need.

Changing attitudes and community outreach helped to expand enrolment of children with disabilities. At one of our study schools, they increased from 10 to 74 out of 1881 students. Teachers worked to prevent dropouts by developing relationships with disabled students' parents, bringing parents examples of their child's progress or counselling them in how to encourage their physical and emotional development:

> I communicate he must get full food and treatment [support]. I took what he makes in the class, in the compound he can draw, the skills and the potential, I will tell to his mother, and the mother will keep the potential and treat [support] easily.

Such support often resulted in parents eventually deciding to offer their own financial resources to advance their child's education. Many participants' narratives also told of cultural and economic changes in their communities. In one town where long-held beliefs had treated some disabilities as a curse, anti-stigma messages emphasised religious teachings against discrimination:

> The religious background by itself taught us not to discriminate such kind of special need peoples. So, due to that, we try to support, we try to teach our community in order not to stigmatize such kind of people … if we give enough educational opportunity in a school, they can be effective people.

That town also extended its outreach to include people with disabilities as members and beneficiaries of their local Community Care Coalition (CCC), a social protection initiative.

In addition to community outreach, Ethiopia's SNE strategy includes national and school-level educational workshops to inform teachers, directors, and educational leaders about inclusive education's importance to achieving EFA and the SDGs. It seems that these workshops have had some success in disseminating ideas of students with disabilities' rights to 'share services and wealth' and enjoy 'educational freedom'. As one education officer explained:

> They are human beings and they are citizens. They are people who can do well like the other peoples … So, they are a part of the society. They are part of the development. They are part of the community. Like you and me … So, they shouldn't be discriminated because of their disability.

One PTA member mentioned how the 'intrinsic motive and capability' of a physically impaired girl who travelled between her village and school by donkey provided inspiration to a community dealing with 'the hindrance of drop outs'. Witnessing examples of a successful educational experience leading to higher education and/or employment increased beliefs in the community that inclusive education has merit. But that leads us to question why people with disabilities have remained absent from community outreach activities since their direct involvement might contribute positively to the success of anti-stigma interventions.

We also found that teachers' and directors' concern for assisting students with disabilities frequently involved deep emotional and financial commitments. One director's account of finding an out-of-school hearing-impaired boy and deciding to bring him to school – even before the inclusive education policy was implemented – represents sentiments expressed throughout our study. He recalled:

> One time, in a local *kebele*, I got one deaf child around 8 years old. He tells what he suffered [separated] from the other peers, he keeps sheep, cows and goats. He suffered more than other friends. He told in the way of crying, 'I suffer more without my friends and without my peers. Why don't you support to me?' he told me. I came to the school and discussed with four teachers. After we discussed, the teachers were committed, we will support him through money, [we collected] 10 … 10 … 10 birr each [teacher], 400 birr for him. Is that the final solution for him? I asked the teachers. No, that is not the final answer. Let me try to teach here by bringing him here and giving him education. Through this motivation, through this awareness, we will encourage and we will call him here and support him.

Despite these positive signs, discriminatory attitudes were still evident in the community. During one PTA focus group, a teacher commented on how community members used such derogatory terms as '*tsemam*' and '*owur*' towards the disabled. Participants frequently referred to this as a problem of a 'disabling society' responsible for the difficulties of 'handicapped' people and as something anyone might encounter. As one person noted, 'If you come from the USA to here and can't speak the language, you are disabled. Without anyone to understand your ideas, your expertise won't help.' Another concurred, 'I myself am disabled because I am not complete […] I need support from you. You need support from me.'

B. Teacher skills and training

Implementation of inclusive education requires not only supportive attitudes but also teachers with requisite skills and training. The two rural schools in our study offered educational provision for students with disabilities exclusively by general education teachers while the school in town had a foreign SNE expert offering a twice-weekly, 45-minute 'special' class to students ranging in age from 8 to 16. Many teachers emphasised concerns about their skills, expressing a desire to teach students with disabilities but lacking in the knowledge to do so. None of the general education teachers we interviewed had training in Braille or sign language, nor were they prepared to implement individualised education programmes (IEPs) or a modified curriculum, all part of the SNE strategy (MoE 2012). Several teachers described students with disabilities as 'not progressing equally' with their peers. Yet, they asserted that teacher skill deficits, rather than students' impairments, were to blame. As one teacher commented:

> This problem is not the problem of the students, but the problem of the teachers. Through the methodology of the teacher, the students will go or run equally with the normal students. They lag during writing, during answering and during asking questions because of barriers of communication. I feel, because I couldn't support easily to them.

To enhance teacher training, the Tigray Region has introduced an SNE introductory course requirement for all pre-service teacher trainees. However, teachers described this class as purely theoretical without practical skills for implementation. Teachers also indicated that the course has not been offered to many teachers and directors who have already completed their teaching diplomas. Although the national strategy calls for in-service training (MoE 2012, 22), all but one teacher said that they received no in-service workshops or trainings for inclusive education. Conflicting with information provided by education officials, this suggests that teachers' perceptions of the trainings did not associate them with inclusive education or that perhaps trainings were not offered to all teachers. When asked for recommendations for the future, all teachers said 'training', with several adding, '*practical* training'. Skills training is important because a lack of skills can cause teachers to doubt the possibility of educating students in mainstream classes (Miles, Wapling, and Beart 2011) and can even produce negative attitudes towards inclusive education itself (Beyene and Tizazu 2011).

Despite self-doubt due to lack of training, teachers drew on their skills and creativity to facilitate inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms. Modifications included writing in large letters on the blackboard, speaking loudly, and placing students with disabilities at the front of the class. One teacher cut the legs off a chair so a tall student with multiple disabilities could sit in front without obstructing others' view. Some teachers allowed students with disabilities extra time to complete their tasks or gave students their notebook to copy at home. Teachers tried to minimise classroom noise for students with vision impairments and offered exams orally when needed. Several devised systems of signs to communicate with hearing-impaired students. Teachers also encouraged peer support among students, describing it as a notable benefit of inclusion in mainstream schools. Partnerships among students were established to assist with classwork and travelling to and from school. A networking system commonly found in Ethiopian schools also grouped students according to their class performance along with a high-performing student for assistance.

To support student morale and prevent dropouts, all students in Ethiopia are promoted through Grade 4 regardless of competency as part of an automatic promotion policy in schools. However, teachers expressed uncertainty about teaching children with intellectual disabilities and had difficulty conveying a clear educational objective beyond behavioural change. It is possible that schools' inability to provide them a relevant and adapted education has also left them particularly excluded from enrolment, as suggested by one school director. According to the 2012 SNE strategy, teachers are required to provide an adapted curriculum and develop IEPs for students with SEN. However, our study indicated that neither classroom teachers nor itinerant teachers were able to do so.

Itinerant teachers played prominently in teachers' perceptions of human resources needed to make inclusive education work, but of the three school clusters we studied, only one had an active

itinerant teacher. A second school had two teachers with SNE diplomas, but they were not assigned as itinerant teachers. All three SNE qualified teachers expressed a strong desire to fulfil the role they were promised in their diploma programmes – to work as itinerant teachers. However, two of them were assigned 30 periods per week while the third was assigned as an itinerant teacher in addition to 12 periods per week as a classroom teacher. Due to high workloads, the itinerant teacher's activities often took place during her free time on weekends and evenings with activities limited to the cluster centre school. Although several education officers agreed that balancing hours as a general teacher and itinerant teacher was not ideal, they explained that it occurred due to teacher shortages and lack of precise guidelines regarding itinerant teachers.

Interviews with teachers revealed additional inadequacies such as the absence of sign language in the classroom. Several participants expressed concerns that itinerant teachers were insufficiently skilled in Braille or sign language to effectively train other teachers, and one assigned SNE teacher was described as 'inactive', indicating gaps in monitoring itinerant teachers' activities. One interviewee suggested: 'They are facing a challenge how to assist practically their students […] The strategy of how they are delivering the lesson for those SNE diploma holders has to be changed totally.'

An important component of SNE teacher training is a practicum to offer trainees an opportunity to practise for their future jobs. Currently, this occurs in segregated 'special' schools for blind or deaf students, with the exception of one school for deaf students that also has a segregated class for students with intellectual disabilities. This placement does not offer trainees practice for their future role as cluster centre facilitators. Moreover, it risks preparing a large number of trainees to work exclusively with blind or deaf students to the neglect of other SEN students. These special schools might not prepare trainees for the realities of mainstream classes, such as large class sizes, multiple SEN, and fewer adapted resources.

Our study even revealed that itinerant teachers might actually be inadvertently de-skilling other teachers by encouraging them to send students with SEN to segregated classes, even though these classes may be sporadic at best. For example, one SNE teacher argued that segregation of students was better because other students would be disturbed if the teacher used sign language and that including students with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classes would be a 'big problem'. The assumption expressed here that inclusive education is only for students with disabilities reinforces a psychological divide between disabled and non-disabled children when genuinely inclusive methods such as more varied assessments, a flexible curriculum, and more individual attention can benefit all students. Such assumptions can influence classroom practices when a teacher facing a classroom with 55 students including one with SEN must choose which methodology to use – those taught in her SNE class, or those taught in general teacher education. Although not necessarily intended, the addition of SNE as a separate class can undermine inclusive ideology if not accompanied by efforts to incorporate inclusion throughout the teacher education curriculum (Slee 2001, 120).

C. Resources

Inclusive education also requires sufficient resources including relevant teaching materials and aides. However, our participants identified a lack of modified educational and supportive materials. Desired resources included Braille books and paper, sign language materials, puzzles, pictures, and assistive devices such as walking canes, wheelchairs, hearing aids, and crutches. Some teachers created their own materials from locally available resources, such as models of human body systems. One school produced a sign language manual and a teacher with vision impairment gave several students Braille training so that they could assist in transcribing his textbooks for teaching. A school director allocated school funds to send a teacher to the Regional Labor and Social Affairs Bureau to request a wheelchair while several *woreda* officers successfully procured voice recorders and Braille paper from governmental and non-governmental sources, but typically less than needed.

Frequently, schools had to provide newly enrolled students with exercise books, pens, and uniforms which are usually the responsibility of parents. A teacher explained that some families consented to enrolling their child, but would leave it up to the school to provide the necessary educational materials. One school director overcame this by paying a child's transportation for the first few days of school until the parents realised the value of the education. As mentioned above, our interviews revealed that many teachers and directors contributed personal funds to assist students. However, inadequate budget allocations might ultimately perpetuate perceptions that children with disabilities are dependent on charity which contradicts the rights-based approach Ethiopia is trying to promote. One teacher suggested that a fund should be available for educational supplies for new students with disabilities; the fact that most parents eventually assumed these costs suggests that this is a worthwhile recommendation.

Even under conditions of resource constraints, there is still potential for school management to facilitate dialogue among teachers and with the community, to establish linkages, and to encourage teachers to own their teaching practice. Each school in this study was working to establish a system of cooperation and communication with a chain of stakeholders, from the community to national and international organisations. As one PTA member said, 'When we make a bridge with the society we can easily be supported.'

As one of the school's teachers explained:

> We have a mission and an objective … To solve the problems of the school, to solve the problems of the society, and to improve the quality of education. We have a plan to solve our problems, any job is already planned. First the school management agree, discussion with the teachers and with the society, and with the parents. After discussion, we have common understanding, we have a mission and objective of support each children, the children are our childrens.

Due to active communication between the school and the surrounding community, the PTA and CCC were able to help purchase eyeglasses, clothes, and food for students and assist physically impaired students in coming to school. Their aim is to ensure 'that they can learn and that they can become top rankers and they can realize their dream'. The PTA said that the community now shares the school's slogan, 'Any guy should not be left behind.' As another teacher stated:

> The staff members are discuss there is educational right for each students. After discussing the right of the children, the right of education, we agree to decide the plan and the objective together as teachers and the management of the school. Even the management style is leadership style, coaching style, discussion style. He [the director] believes with the teachers through discussion, with commitment, the teachers highly committed to support each students according to their interests and needs.

This school community has welcomed involvement from vision-impaired farmers in the CCC, classroom teachers without any SNE training, SNE experts, and regional bureaus among others. As one educational officer stated, he believed that through collaboration 'many hands make light'.

Although the other two schools' PTAs described their communities as less able to assist with resource procurement, they still developed systems for communicating and trying to fulfil their needs. One established a strong line of communication that ran from the women's development army, to the school and PTA, and on to NGOs and the *woreda*. Another school communicated directly with NGOs to successfully establish a computer lab, which offers extra classes for hearing-impaired students.

V. Discussion

As this last example illustrates, working towards an inclusive education system requires a multifaceted approach driven by a variety of stakeholders. Awareness building, technical training and resource procurement need to happen simultaneously and continuously in a mutually reinforcing fashion. Combating stigmatisation and discriminatory attitudes is a challenging, yet necessary, starting point. In a survey conducted in a cluster of schools with mainstreaming of disabled students in

Ethiopia, 93.5% of the disabled students reported difficulty gaining support from their parents, teachers, and peers (Dagnew 2013). Schools' community outreach activities using valuable local resources, such as the women's development army, have made an impact in convincing parents to enrol their out-of-school children. Likewise, teachers' relationships with parents have helped to convince them of their children's abilities and resulted in increased investments from parents to cover costs such as school supplies and transportation. Schools also recognised that to achieve sustained, wide-reaching inclusion, outreach activities need to work on reducing community stigma. In Ethiopia, disability is often attributed to sins committed by parents or the family. Community reactions such as throwing coins at parents with their disabled children assumed to be beggars leads to feelings of shame and results in parents hiding their children at home (Weldeab and Opdal 2007, 7). Therefore, establishing inclusive education as a new community norm while labelling as 'backwards' those parents who do not comply risks marginalising those who cannot participate because of social and structural barriers. At the same time, participants' accounts suggest that stigma is not always solely to blame for disabled children being kept at home, as in the cases of parents who did not know that services were available at local schools but willingly registered their children when given the chance. Thus, as teachers suggested, it was important to engage in door-to-door outreach for enrolment while simultaneously improving attitudes among the general population.

Several teachers commented on the possibilities of using the media, mentioning a successful national television programme that showcases the achievements of people with disabilities. One *woreda* officer described:

> We [promote] students […] becoming achievable and successful in education after they come to the school […], and after they learn their academic, they become significant people in the community […] We [promote] in brochure, in circular papers, in media, in meetings, conferences, we recognize these children. When we recognize those children, people who have such kind of kid in their home will simply convinced what if we send our children to the school?

They wanted to send parents the message that their disabled child 'might be by tomorrow a country leader, a regional leader, a school director, and something, a health medical doctor'. One director used *woreda* meetings as a forum for open discussions about the value of inclusive education for the community. As Lewis (2009, 24) argues, Ethiopia's SNE strategy emphasises community partnership and local relevance, but lacks a discussion concerning characteristics of Ethiopian culture that can contribute to inclusivity. There are strong community-level structures and traditions that could be used to encourage such dialogue including coffee ceremonies, PTA and *idir* meetings, and religious gatherings (Weldeab and Opdal 2007, 9). At the same time, employment opportunities for disabled graduates need to be expanded so that parents are willing to invest their limited resources in their education.

Teachers demonstrated, however, that changing attitudes alone was not enough, and that even high levels of teacher commitment could be undermined by shortages of needed resources and skills. We also found that teachers wavered in their arguments that inclusive schools were the best option. Although there was a prevailing perception among teachers that inclusive schools were better for fulfilling students' psychological needs, segregated schools or classes were seen as better prepared to meet students' educational needs. In one teacher's words:

> In class, since we are not well trained, since the disabled students are not well supported, it is very difficult to make them parallel with their friends. So, separated is good, better than that of inclusive. On the other side, though separation has its own advantage, it has its own disadvantage. They will be psychologically damaged because of their discrimination. One important thing is that if they got the necessary support, they are equal to their friends. If not, they are still lagging behind.

When asked for recommendations, teachers indicated their desire to continue progressing towards inclusive education, requesting training, an itinerant teacher, and other resources to facilitate this. In one focus group, teachers expressed how much educational provision has expanded compared to when only one SNE teacher training programme and a few special schools existed. They conveyed hope for the future, assuming the provision of supportive training and resources. Another means is

to have trainings provide teachers more opportunities to interact with students with disabilities. Creating an environment that allows teachers to experiment can also make a difference and be supported with 'enabling legislation' encouraging creativity by allowing for adaptations to the curriculum and assessments (Bines and Lei 2011, 423).

Reviewing national policy also indicates ambiguity in the definition and intention of 'inclusive education' and 'special needs education', which are often used interchangeably. While inclusive education is described as entailing 'full-time placement of learners with SEN in regular classes', integration, 'involves such learners being placed in regular classes for full or only part of the school day [… and] in some countries […] is seen as a transitional arrangement before full inclusion is implemented' (MoE 2012, 38). SNE is seen by the Ministry of Education as offering a 'range of provisions', including 'everything from special schools, through special classes, to inclusive education' (MoE 2012, 35). Thus,

> although the majority of Children with Disabilities and learning difficulties are being served in an inclusive classroom setting, those few number of children with severe physical, intellectual, autistic, deaf-blind, etc. disabilities, must also be served in special schools and/or special classes. (MoE 2012, 4)

In reality, however, there is little consistency; for example, while vision-impaired children are supposed to learn in mainstream classes, 'special' schools for the blind remain open; in fact, one director explained that vision-impaired students left his school due to the limited technical and material support available and enrolled at a special school instead. It is also unclear where special classes will be held, as the only special class found in our study was primarily facilitated by a foreign teacher. Here, Singal's (2006, 366) advice calling for reflection on the meaning, motivations, and goals of inclusive education and creating a shared vision that reflects the local context is useful. One starting point could be to create locally produced definitions of 'inclusion' and 'inclusive education' (rather than borrowing those promoted by UNESCO) (Ferri 2008). This potential was revealed by several participants who described disability as a shared experience connected to interdependence, rather than a negative, stigmatising experience. As many participants emphasised, the combination of both inclusive education and post-graduation employment opportunities for persons with disabilities will help to combat negative attitudes about their dependency while helping to fulfil local values and expectations emphasising each person's contribution to the family household economy.

VI. Conclusion

We conclude by returning to the question of whether Ethiopia's SNE strategy has pushed beyond the boundaries of integration to offer a world of inclusion. For inclusive education to work, all teachers, parents, and communities must believe that all students can learn (Ocloo and Subbey 2008). But material and technical resources must also be there which is one reason implementation of Ethiopia's SNE strategy has not yet produced the kind of educational system transformations needed for inclusion to develop and thrive. Under current conditions, without the needed material and technical inputs, expecting teachers to implement inclusion may actually perpetuate views that some students are more 'teachable' than others based on their ability to adapt or integrate as was seen in teachers' interviews. For example, blind students were characterised as active and academically successful, whereas students with intellectual disabilities were described as limited to learning basic hygiene and mimicking of their peers' behaviour. In addition, national policy lacks a clear and consistent definition of inclusive education and how it relates to SNE.

However, our study identified encouraging inputs into the system, including increased enrolment of students with disabilities, the deployment of SNE teachers, and the development of SNE teacher training programmes. Instead of taking an 'add-on' approach of deploying experts or developing extra courses (Johnstone and Chapman 2009, 144), there is arguably an opportunity now, while implementation is still in its beginning stages, to take a more transformative approach that may at times involve experts or extra courses, but is not limited to or wholly dependent on them. Schools

demonstrated such an approach in the work of community outreach teams and increasing awareness about educational rights of children with disabilities. Many teachers and administrators accustomed to a system which previously segregated students with disabilities have also shown a willingness to help build an inclusive system and demonstrated an interest in learning how to better support their students. All of these achievements create an opportunity to unite proponents of change, from community members to teachers, to address the remaining challenges in the education system.

Several participants mentioned the importance of an evidence-driven path forward, informed by local experience and challenges, yet examples of experience sharing are still lacking. Schools were eager to have a platform for sharing their practices. As one PTA member suggested,

> Even the *woreda*, the zone and the region must be sending to here and observe and taking this best experience to disseminate or to explain for others. And […] registering this work through paper and the paper will be disseminated for others.

While our study has contributed to this goal, we agree that locally driven research should be further encouraged and facilitated. One teacher explained that as part of her Continuous Professional Development (CPD), she conducted research on SNE practices; promoting similar projects could encourage teachers to develop research projects relevant to their daily experiences while fulfilling professional requirements. One director also mentioned the involvement of university students in door-to-door enrolment activities; involving this group of students as co-researchers could open the doors for research partnerships with universities and teachers' colleges. *Research areas that might be worth exploring include:* production of assistive devices locally, forming communities of support for parents, job creation and expansion for people with disabilities, the role of local disabilities organisations, cooperation between medical/rehabilitation and educational service providers, systems for equitable distribution of NGO resources, improving the role of itinerant teachers, and last but not least, the development of locally based and locally relevant evaluation frameworks.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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