
Special Needs Education and the Achievement of Universal Primary Education: Personal Observations and Reflections

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Introduction

Special need education is one of the means to achieve Universal Primary Education and Millennium Development Goals. Creating access and enhancing quality education is an unanswered question for all people, children with disabilities and special needs in Ethiopia that need to be quickly responded. Of course, responding to the needs of children with disabilities requires social and political decisions. Earlier and even nowadays, disability seems to be understood by many people as a purely medical issue rather than social and political one. This condition may lead to critical questioning of medical interventions which attempts to cure impairments or to restore "normal" bodily functioning, rather than providing social services, for incurable conditions. Social and political solutions are sought to challenge disability discrimination. One of the social and political solutions is access to school and the provisions of education for people with disabilities and special needs according to their needs and potential. People with disabilities are lagging behind, in their education in many aspects due to unfavourable attitude and discriminations, in the past and present. The purpose of this article is to reflect my personal observation of the challenges of people with disability in getting access to education, in Ethiopia. The article includes causes of disabilities, attitudes and prevalence, trends of educational provision for people with disabilities and the policy issues and its implementation, the issues of education for all, and the role of special needs education teachers.

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Causes of Disabilities, Attitude and Prevalence

It is very well known that historically, people with disabilities have been treated as different from mainstream society, in many parts of the world. Public lack of awareness about the causes, apathy and negative attitudes towards people with disability has consistently been identified as a major prejudice which is a barrier and limits life options of people with disabilities. Actually, the level and types of attitudes towards persons with disabilities vary from place to place in various countries and in Ethiopia as well. Attributing the causes of disability to various agents, such as a curse or punishment from God, visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the children, incidents or sights affecting pregnant women, or the work of evil spirits is an every day event in some rural communities of Ethiopia. These conditions may create unfavorable attitude towards people with disability. For example, the study conducted by Tibebe (1995) revealed that the attitude towards all persons with disabilities in aggregate was found to be negative. For some historical, traditional and cultural reasons, society in Ethiopia may marginalize people with disability due to the aforementioned unscientific understandings and beliefs. Negative attitudes and lack of knowledge about the assets of persons with disabilities, coupled with misconceptions of disabling factors and disability, are the causes for most children with disabilities to be hidden from sight, kept at home and deprived of education in Ethiopia (Tirussew, 2005). Such attitudes may emanate from out looks, superstitions and diversified theories existing through time. Contrary to this, there are also some positive approaches that work from the perspective of people with disability such as social and humanistic approaches.

In Ethiopia, the major scientific causes of disability could be poverty, civil conflict, disease, drought, harmful traditional practices and the like (Alemayehu, 2010). From such causes and other disasters, about 10 per cent of the population in the world is in one way or another is the victim of certain kind of disability (WHO, 1982). Based on WHO estimate there are over 600 million persons with disabilities live in the world, 150 million of whom are children and 80% of them live in developing countries with little or no access to services.

According to this estimation, the number of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia could go as high as 7.7 million. The UNESCO (2006) Global Monitoring Report of Education for All has also estimated that 90% of children who are out of school have disabilities. This may be 98% for Ethiopia. Furthermore, according to this report the largest number of out of school children was in Nigeria, Pakistan, India and Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, among the school age children with disabilities only less than two-percent has access to education (MOE, 2009).

Education of Persons with Disabilities in Ethiopia

Education is a fundamental human right and one of the main factors that reduce poverty and improve socio-economic conditions. Education for all must include people with disabilities and should provide means to decrease disadvantages and remove barriers of broader social inclusion. It is concretely visible in Ethiopia that exclusion of people with disabilities and special needs from educational opportunities increases disadvantages and contributes to broader exclusion in society. It seems also that the fate of people with disabilities is living with poverty or being handicapped (dependent). Education could create sustainable development for all people and enables them lead their life independently, if its provision has quality. Quality education includes all people and sets the foundation for equitable and inclusive socio-economic development. It must give opportunities to individuals and community benefit from social life. Education for people with disabilities was neglected for ages in Ethiopia and has made them deprived from developments. However, in line with international declarations and conventions, policies and constitutions are established in Ethiopia on the universal right to education, emphasizing the need to allocate resources and provide assistance to disadvantaged groups. This is with an assumption that education is a guarantee for development, if it would have been inclusive.

Before the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia, some religious organizations have contributed for the education of people with disabilities. All religious organizations in Ethiopia might have contributed to the education of

visually impaired and physically disabled people, but this may not be documented well. The Ethiopian Orthodox church has contributed a lot, educating visually impaired and physically disabled people in Ethiopian traditional church education. The church has produced visually and physically impaired church scholars, priests, teachers, preachers, singers and the like. In modern education system, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church of Mekane Yesus has played significant role and a pioneer in establishing training centers and schools for some disability groups. The first training centers in Ethiopia for children with mental retardation were opened by this church. Nowadays the church is running schools for hearing impaired and mentally retarded in the various parts of the country. As I have already said, others whom the data is not available to me may also have contributed to such developments.

The participation of children with disabilities or those with special educational needs in all the educational structure; that is, in early childhood education (ECD), general education (primary and secondary) and technical vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education is extremely a daunting phenomenon until recently. The 1994 Education and Training Policy has clearly stated the right of children with disabilities towards education. Recent report of the Ministry of Education (MoE, 2005a) indicates the participation rates of children and adolescent at different levels as follows: early childhood education (age 4-6) about 186,728 children in 1,797 pre-schools (2.7%) out of 6,959,935 children; primary education (age 7-14) grade 1 through 8 is 12,657,342 (85.8 %), out of 14,753,159 . If we include Alternative Basic Education, the figure becomes 91.3%. Secondary general education (age 15-16), grade 9 through 10 is 1,056,423 (33.2 %).

On the other hand, the participation rate of children with disabilities in the different levels of the educational system seems negligible. As indicated earlier only two percent of children with disabilities have access to education, out of the 3.4 million school age children with disabilities. These are by and large served in 24 special schools (day and residential schools for the hearing impaired, the blind and training center for children with intellectual disabilities

(MoE, 2006) which run by the public schools, Nongovernmental Organizations and National associations of persons with disabilities, and 140 special classes in regular Government schools (MoE,2006). Totally, there are only about 164 schools that are open to serve very limited number of children with hearing, visual and intellectual disabilities, compared to more than 25,000 primary schools for children with non-disabilities in the country. There is only one rehabilitation center for autistic children. Care and support for children with behavioral problems, learning disability, and multiple disability is not attempted at all, however there are legislations in place. How Ethiopia could achieve UPE and MDG with all these weakness in the remaining seven years time?

Policy Issue and its Implementation

The issue of people with disabilities has been included in the Ethiopian constitutions, education and training policy, social welfare policy, health policy and Ethiopia has accepted many of the international conventions concerning people with disabilities, as part of its law. Based on these major guidelines considered in the General Education and Training Policy, the Ministry of Education (2006) includes the implication of new thinking in inclusive education by articulating in the school objective and strategy for children with special needs. The ratification of international convention and the issuances of legislations are the opportunities on the ground. But the implementation of these legislations is slow, which could be a challenge. One of the challenges is the exclusion of children with special needs from regular school programs that hinders the achievements of Universal Primary Education and Millennium Development Goal (MDG).

What are the statements indicated in the UPE and MDG concerning people with disabilities? There are six EFA and eight MDG Goals listed. Most of EFA goals are included into the MDG. The six Educations for All (EFA) *goals* adopted at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, express the major goals for educational development which were agreed upon at the international level. These EFA goals (UNESCO, 2008) are the followings:

1. Expanding and improving comprehensive early childhood care and education, especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children;
2. Ensuring that by 2015 **all** children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to, and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality;
3. Ensuring that the learning needs of **all** young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programs;
4. Achieving a 50 percent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women, and equitable access to basic and continuing education for **all** adults;
5. Eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005, and achieving gender equality in education by 2015, with a focus on ensuring girls' full and equal access to and achievement in basic education of good quality; and
6. Improving all aspects of the quality of education and ensuring excellence of **all** so that recognized and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by **all**, especially in literacy, numeracy and essential life skills.

Both EFA and MDG goals were set for all people. Education for All is for all and it is a responsibility of all to avoid discrimination. We are expected to meet this goal with the principle of all means all and no discrimination. Because we cannot meet the Global Development Goal and Universal Primary Education in 2015 excluding children with special needs. We can either meet the targets or not. If we move with the same pace, we cannot achieve the goals, but if we give special emphasis as of today, we can get all children in the school systems. The inclusion of education of children in the policy is a great opportunity, but delaying to respond appropriately to the need of children with disabilities is a challenge. The challenges may be presented in the question form as follows:

1. Do we have manpower in special needs education in all education levels?
2. In the other words, can we assign Special Needs Education teachers in more than 25, 000 schools to realize inclusive education? How?
3. Can we afford appropriate equipments and materials?
4. Can we adapt curriculum to the need of all types of disabilities in this period of time, (the coming 5 years)? If we can do all this, the Education for all will be a reality, otherwise “all cannot be all”. This is one of the most challenges to all of us.
5. To respond to this need, how should we go forward? This is a question everybody needs to ask him/herself and provide practical answers

Ethiopia with the population of over 77 million and 10-20% children with visible and invisible disabilities is the third big country in Africa, following Nigeria and Egypt, respectively. The need to expand higher education for the discipline of special needs education is unquestionable. As it is now considered in ESDP III, (MOE, 2005b), ESDP IV and special needs program strategy (MoE, 2006) of the government of Ethiopia, those who are concerned and do have interest in Ethiopian special needs education, it seems that there are more favorable condition to contribute at all levels of education system which primarily need higher education to train teachers and other personnel that facilitate the learning of children with special needs. The policy frameworks and strategies are good opportunities for responding to the education of children with disabilities in the country. However, there are still negative attitudes, barriers, misconceptions at family and societal level. Furthermore, shortage of human and material resources and lack of coordination among the stake-holders are major obstacles to effectively enforce policies and proclamations.

Education for All and Realizing Inclusive Education

Education for all is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Right of the 1948. The convention establishes that basic education should be compulsory as a multifaceted challenge, with special attention to marginalized groups.

Children and adults with Special Needs Education are one of the target groups in the Education for All movement. This was clearly laid down at the Jomtien Conference, 1990, the World Conference on Special Needs Education, Salamanca 1994, and then in Dakar in 2000. Inclusive education was adapted at the Salamanca World Conference as a principle in addressing the learning needs of various disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded groups. Many educators and scholars in Ethiopia misunderstood the inclusion of children with disabilities in the regular schools. Few are of course integrated, but the majority about 98% may not be in the school at all. Inclusive education does not mean just the integration of children and young with physical, sensory, intellectual or other disabilities into ordinary schools. Inclusive education is a two way process of increasing participation in learning and identifying and reducing or removing barriers that inhibit learning and participation. It is a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners and will involve changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and learning strategies.

To this end, there is a need to plan in advance and develop effective implementation mechanisms of inclusive education on the part of the government to make the enrollment of all children in the country. Above all, the line management groups including the implementing body should be aware of the fact that the vast majority of children with disabilities are living under poverty line in Ethiopia. Unless and otherwise, they are provided with the necessary education and training opportunities, the vicious connection between poverty and disability will not break for years to come in the country. That means, in the coming seven years, serious measures should be taken to achieve the UPE and MDG before the time is looming. One of the serious measures that need to be given priority is producing teachers that need to understand diversities and provide supports, accordingly.

Role of Special Needs Education Teachers to Achieve UPE and MDG

The direct role of the general education teacher has demanded an increased understanding of various types of disabilities, types of appropriate

assessment, curricular and instructional modifications, and interactions with the students with disabilities in the classroom (Sabornie and deBettencourt, 1997). Pre-service and in-service teacher education and training in special needs education is vital and continues to be addressed as schools move to an inclusive model. Teacher education programs need to be in a position to ensure that teachers acquire the knowledge, dispositions, and performances required to succeed in educating students with special needs before they get to the classroom. However, the time given for the delivery of the course is very limited to address the aforementioned tasks of the classroom teachers.

Of course, even the allowed single course could yield significant differences in attitudes and instructional competencies among teachers, if it would be offered by competent teacher educator in special needs education. Special needs education emphasizes the adaptation of the content, instructional and curricular techniques appropriate for the developmental, cognitive, social, cultural, and physical needs of diverse learners. The teacher education program should create such an opportunity for the teachers. But at least one special needs education specialist need to be assigned in every school of Ethiopia to help the best way of teaching and learning of all learners. The special needs education professional can play significant roles in supporting the classroom teacher, the learners with special needs, the whole school system and the community. What could be the details of these roles?

To my understanding the role of special needs education teacher is enormous and vital. For the purpose of this article, I would like to reflect only some major assumed roles of a special needs education teacher. He or she may provide instruction and support to children, regular class teachers, principals, parents and community which facilitate the participation of students with disabilities in regular education classroom and special classes. Assists school with the implementation of inclusion by providing assistance regarding scheduling, grading, and appropriate placements for students with special needs. Encourages the teachers to use innovative instructional strategies, (e.g. cooperative learning, peer tutoring, hands-on activities) in meeting the needs of all children in their classroom. Assists the teachers in recognizing students'

individual abilities and encourages the use of various teaching techniques to facilitate learning of all students in the classroom. The special needs education teachers can support other teachers to monitor and evaluate the progress of learning of all students and provide them constant feedback and encouragement (dynamic assessment). Together with the regular teachers, the special needs education teachers can identify pupils who have difficulties in learning and assess what kind of special needs education they may have. He or she can help the teachers in planning the educational program for the students with special educational needs and give them guidelines how they could modify their teaching accordingly (differentiation). He or she can support the teachers in planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating the Individual Educational Programs (IEP). He/she can identify equipment and educational materials that help in teaching children with special needs. Provide all teachers with consultative services regarding modifications of curriculum, provision of individual support, teaching/behavior management strategies. He/she can provide the necessary information to the classroom teacher prior to the child entering the class regarding the student's disability, medical concerns, and/or equipment operation (ways to meet unique needs), and develop learning and enrichment center for those who are unique needs.

Furthermore, special needs educator may sensitize and provide training to the community. He/she may prepare short term school based training programs on barriers to learning and meeting diverse learning needs in classrooms, to teachers and administrators. He/she can raise awareness about the importance of education for individual development among the community, teachers, students and people working in various sectors. Empower school communities not to treat children with disabilities less favorably than non-disabled pupils and empower schools to take reasonable steps to ensure that they do not put children with disabilities pupils at a substantial disadvantage and assist the Implementation of School Improvement Program and Continuous Educational Development, in relation to SNE.

In order to realize inclusive education, special needs educators are also expected to facilitating the learning environment. He or she may improve the

learning environment by training general education students, hearing impaired students, teachers, and other school community members' in sign language. The teacher may improve the learning environment of the school by training a general education teachers and blind students in Braille skills, mobility and orientation. In collaboration with principal and other decision makers develop the school social (attitude and acceptance of diversity) and physical environment (accessibility, adequate light in class, acceptable back ground noise level, separate toilet for girls and boys) to accommodate all children. Interpret assessment findings to parents, teachers, principals, and other professional staff. Assist families to understand how their child can be supported and learn despite any disability and prevent activities that negatively discriminate against children with disabilities in school admission, in participation of school activities.

Conclusion

If special needs education teachers are assigned and successfully accomplish the aforementioned responsibilities, in all schools, Education for All could be a reality; learning barriers may be reduced or removed; inclusive education could be in a place and quality education may be enhanced so that all children with disabilities and special needs freed from any discrimination and leave independent life. Finally, with the inclusion of people with disabilities, Universal Primary Education and Millennium Development Goals could be successfully achieved.

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