

Policy Intentions on Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Ethiopia

Tesaka Mebratu^{1*}, Alemayehu Teklemariam², Tilahun Achaw³

Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, Etiopia

*Corresponding Author: mosesadeoluagoi@gmail.com

<http://doi.org/10.33650/ijess.v3i2.9948>

Received: September 2024, Revised: November 2024, Accepted: December 2024

Abstract:

Despite international commitments to inclusive education (IE), many students with disabilities (SWDs) in Ethiopia face barriers to accessing education that meets their unique needs. This study aimed to assess the inclusivity of existing policy frameworks for SWDs in the country. Using a multiple case study design, the data were collected by analyzing relevant policy documents and semi-structured interviews with 16 educational practitioners selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using an inductive content analysis approach. The findings revealed a lack of a distinct national IE policy in Ethiopia. Despite this, existing legal frameworks, programs, strategies, standards, plans, and implementation guidelines related to education provision support the inclusion of SWDs. However, their practicality is limited due to insufficient education law, weak structural support, limited capacities and resources, restricted access to quality education for SWDs, unreliable data and reporting systems, and inadequate financing mechanisms for IE. To ensure IE for SWDs, Ethiopia must develop a national IE policy, strengthen its organizational structures, address resource constraints, and establish a reliable data system. These findings are crucial for policymakers and practitioners seeking to address the special educational needs of SWDs in Ethiopia. This research provides important insights as a contribution of the paper for policymakers and practitioners to design more effective and integrated policies to ensure genuinely inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Key Words: Policy Intentions, Inclusive Education, Students with Disabilities

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Mebratu, T., Teklemariam, A., & Achaw, T. (2024). Policy Intentions on Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities in Ethiopia. *Indonesian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 3(2), 86-101.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, persons with disabilities (PWDs) have been commonly excluded from educational systems, making them one of the world's most marginalized communities. This lamentable circumstance has persisted for extended periods. Consequently, many PWDs were excluded from school systems, including complete exclusion, with very few attending segregated schools or being integrated into regular schools (Buchner et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2021; Göransson & Bengtsson, 2023). Individuals with impairments are more likely to never enroll in school or to drop out early compared to their peers without disabilities. This exclusionary trend is evident in the region's high rates of exclusion for children with disabilities from any form of schooling.

Despite this long history of exclusion, the late 20th century witnessed a shift towards Inclusive Education (IE). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (SNE) established IE as an international policy vision (UNESCO, 1994), emphasizing the importance of providing equitable access to education for all students, regardless of their differences. This paradigm shift has gained significant momentum, making inclusion a pivotal concern in educational agendas globally (Albrecht, 2021; Cappiali, 2023). The aim is to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities (Bekana, 2020; Beken, 2021; Setegn, 2020), have equal opportunities to learn and participate fully in their communities (Mortier, 2020; Bueso, 2022; Ehlinger & Ropers, 2020). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) further reinforces this commitment by mandating the right to IE for all individuals at all levels, regardless of ability (UNICEF, 2017).

In line with the global platform, modern education systems are undergoing significant reforms to ensure IE for all, including CWDs (Nhapi, 2020; Sharma, 2021; Halefom, 2022). Many countries have pledged to acknowledge the special educational needs of SWDs by providing the necessary resources and support in mainstream schools (Hodkinson, 2020; Shevlin & Banks, 2021; Gibbs & Bozaid, 2022; Shutaleva et al., 2023). The inclusion of SWDs in regular schools has improved significantly in several countries worldwide (Chakraborty et al., 2022; Arora, 2023).

In light of these global perspectives, the Ethiopian government has formulated and implemented policies and legal frameworks that support access to education for all. Consequently, IE was introduced to the country's education system (Mergia, 2020) and defined as enhancing the education system's capacity to accommodate the unique needs of every student. While the government has officially recognized the importance of SNE and education for CWDs, the Master Plan for SNE/IE from 2016-2025 explicitly states that IE solely pertains to the education of children and youth with disabilities.

Despite the efforts made by the Ethiopian government, many SWDs do not have access to schools in reality. As per the Ethiopian Education Statistics Annual Abstract (ESAA) report, only 310,014 out of 2,967,526 school-aged CWDs (ages 7–14) had access to the general education system. This means that merely 10.4% of these groups have access to education, while the rest, 89.6%, do not attend school. These population figures were derived based on the assumption that 15% of the worldwide population lives with disabilities. However, the prevalence rate of disability in developing countries is higher, at 17.6%. Consequently, if we compute the number of school-aged CWDS (ages 7–14) in Ethiopia, the figure is likely to be much higher. In light of this, the proportion of SWDs who currently have access to the general education system is less than 10.4%, which is negligible. The limited access to education for SWDs in the

general education system of Ethiopia is a pressing issue that requires a thorough examination of the relevant policies and legal frameworks and how they are implemented at various levels of the education system.

Although Kocha and Senapathy (2022) reported that inclusion for CWDs began in specific regular school classes in Addis Ababa, extensive investigation about including CWDs in Ethiopia's general education is scarce. Additionally, dependable data regarding the inclusion or exclusion of students with special needs and disabilities is lacking in Ethiopia. The position of the education and training policy (ETP) of Ethiopia regarding the inclusion of SWDs in technical and vocational education and training programs has been studied (Melesse & Belay, 2022; Woldehana & Teferra, 2021). Furthermore, a study has been carried out to assess the status of Ethiopia's inclusive higher education system's policy provision and implementation practices. However, to the researcher's knowledge, no study has comprehensively examined the broader policy landscape and legal frameworks about including SWDs in Ethiopia's general education system. This research offers novelty by examining the perspectives of educational practitioners at various levels of the education system in Ethiopia regarding the policy and legal framework that supports IE for SWDs.

This study examined system-level educational practitioners' perspectives on existing policies and legal frameworks related to IE for SWDs in Ethiopia. The investigation focused on the following research questions: What are the intentions of existing policies and frameworks related to IE for SWDs in Ethiopia from the perspective of educational practitioners? How do educational practitioners perceive the practicality of these policy frameworks in supporting IE for SWDs? This study argues that despite a policy framework supporting IE in Ethiopia, the success of inclusive education is still constrained by structural, financial, and human resource factors that need to be improved so that the goals of educational inclusion can be achieved effectively for students with disabilities. The main contribution of this research is to provide a clearer picture of how existing EI policies translate into practice on the ground and identify structural, financial, and human resource barriers that hinder successful inclusion.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative multiple-case study design, following Yin's (2003) framework, to comprehensively examine the Policy on Inclusion for SWDs in Ethiopia. By analyzing multiple cases, this approach aimed to gain a holistic understanding of the policy from the perspectives of educational practitioners at various levels of the system, allowing for the identification of commonalities and variations in its implementation across different contexts.

Convenience sampling was utilized to select case study sites, including the federal MoE office, the Addis Ababa City Administration Education Bureau

(AACAEB), and three sub-city education offices (SCEOs) such as Gulele, Arada, and Yeka. Within these organizations, the Pastoralist and SNE Desk within MoE, the SNE and Adult Education Directorate in AACAEB, and the SNE and Adult Education Team in the SCEOs were purposefully selected due to their specific mandate to oversee educational services for CWDs. Participants were chosen based on their experience, roles related to CWD education, and willingness to participate. Sixteen participants were purposefully selected for interviews, including four experts from the MoE desk, three from the AACAEB Directorate, and three from each SCEO's Team.

Semi-structured open-ended interview questions explored participants' perspectives, beliefs, and experiences on the issues being investigated (Ponce et al., 2022). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for emerging themes. Formal permission was obtained from each organization to conduct the interview. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, data collection methods, and their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms and secure data storage maintained confidentiality.

An inductive document analysis was also conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the development of disability inclusion policies in relevant domestic legal and policy frameworks from 1994 to 2023 in Ethiopia. These included the 1994 ETP, the 1995 Constitution, ESDP programs (III-VI), the 2006 SNE Strategy, the GEQIP phases, CD/EIP guidelines (2012), the National School Health Strategy (2012), SNIE Strategy (2012), SNE Teacher Standards (2015), IE Resource Center Guidelines (2015), the 2017 SNE/IE Master Plan, and the new 2023 ETP. Terminologies like CWDs, SWDs, PWDs, SNE, IE, and equal access for all students focused on document selection. This approach ensured respect for the policy documents' original context and intended meaning (Ponce et al., 2022).

Table 1. Participants' Demographic

No	Work place	Sex		Qualification		Work experience				Current position	
		M	F	Degree	MA	1-10	11-20	21-30	> 30	Expert	Team leader
1	MoE	3	1	2	2		3	1		3	1
2	AACEB	2	1	2	1		2	1		2	1
3	Gulele SCEO	2	1	2	1		3	1		2	1
4	Arada SCEO	1	2	2	1	1	2			2	1
5	Yeka SCEO	2	1	2	1	1	2			2	1
Total		10	6	10	6	2	12	3		11	5

Table 1 shows that the participants were a diverse and well-qualified group of educational practitioners. The group consisted of 10 male and six female participants. Regarding educational qualifications, 10 participants held a bachelor's degree, while 6 had a master's degree (MA). Regarding work experience, 2 participants had between 1 and 10 years, 12 had between 11 and 20

years, and 4 had between 21 and 30 years. The current roles of the participants included 11 experts and 5 team leaders. These individuals were affiliated with the MoE, the AACEB, and three SCEOs. This diversity ensured a variety of perspectives and experiences, enriching the data collected in the study. The demographic data indicated that the participants were well-qualified and experienced, which will likely enhance the study findings' quality and comprehensiveness.

The data were analyzed using a three-step inductive content analysis process outlined by Creswell (2003): data preparation and organization, theme identification, and data representation (Harrison et al., 2020). Open coding was employed to identify emerging themes. Initially, a within-case analysis was conducted to identify each interview's key themes. The identified themes were then grouped into two main categories: key provisions in policies and legal frameworks and practitioners' perceptions of policy practicality. To enhance the validity and reliability of the results, the data were analyzed through repeated readings of the guided interviews, coding data portions, and identification of emerging themes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Policy Frameworks Intentions on Inclusion of SWDs

Analysis of key Intentions of Policy documents

The 1994 Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (ETP) laid the foundation for inclusive education (IE) by aiming to expand educational access to all, including students with disabilities (SWDs). Its general objective (2.1.1) emphasizes the development of both physical and mental potential, and its specific objective (2.2.3) calls for the inclusion of both "handicapped and gifted" students in regular schools through special units and classes. Despite these inclusions, the policy fails to explicitly affirm the right to IE for persons with disabilities (PwDs), hindering the comprehensive implementation of IE in Ethiopia. Moreover, the policy acknowledges the importance of teacher training, including special education. However, it overlooks sign language as a medium of instruction for children with hearing disabilities, limiting the accessibility of education for these students.

The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP) III (2005–2010) made notable progress by developing strategic plans for Special Needs Education (SNE) and establishing support systems for SWDs. It highlighted the importance of including SNE in educational planning, budgeting, and reporting. The 2006 SNE Strategy aligned with the Millennium Development Goals and Education for All targets, seeking to create a more inclusive system through various approaches such as mainstream schools, special classes, and resource centers.

Despite the positive direction, the approach was not fully inclusive, reflecting a gap between policy intent and the practical inclusion of SWDs in the general education system (Ginja & Chen, 2023).

The General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP), launched in 2008, aimed to enhance the quality of education and improve access for all students, including SWDs. GEQIP-I (2008–2012) focused on teacher training, while GEQIP-II (2013–2018) targeted improvements in school accessibility and institutional capacity. Although both initiatives contributed to including SWDs, the results fell short of their goals, with only 10.4% of school-aged children with disabilities (CWDs) accessing education by 2022 (MoE, 2022; World Bank, 2022). The continued low enrollment rates and challenges in providing an inclusive environment reflect systemic issues such as inadequate teacher training and institutional support.

ESDP-IV (2010–2015) placed IE as a cross-cutting theme to increase participation and reduce exclusion in education. Targets for increasing enrollment and improving school facilities were set, such as raising the number of schools with accessible facilities to 25% and expanding resource centers from 9 to 500. Despite these efforts, enrollment rates of SWDs remained low, with only 4% of CWDs enrolled in primary education in 2013/14. These figures underscore the challenges in translating policy ambitions into reality, driven by structural weaknesses, inadequate funding, and insufficient training of educators.

The revised SNE Strategy 2012 emphasized the importance of inclusive education and addressed key challenges such as poor identification methods and inaccessible school environments. The establishment of Inclusive Education Resource Centers (IERCs) played a critical role in supporting SWDs, with 113 centers established by 2018 and an increase to 1,017 by 2023 (World Bank, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these centers was constrained by inadequate teacher training and insufficient resources, pointing to the gap between policy development and on-the-ground realities.

Despite the progressive intentions of the 2016 SNE/IE Master Plan, which aimed to strengthen policy frameworks, improve human resources, and ensure access to quality education, its execution has been limited by a lack of comprehensive legislation, weak organizational structures, and unreliable data systems. The low enrollment rates of SWDs and the underdeveloped support systems further highlight the difficulties in achieving the goal of inclusive education, especially when coupled with limited financial resources and inadequate infrastructure.

The 2023 revision of the ETP reaffirms the commitment to providing equitable and inclusive education. However, it fails to explicitly recognize sign language as the mother tongue for children with hearing impairments, thus neglecting a critical aspect of inclusive education (MoE, 2023). Moreover,

although the policy outlines objectives to improve access and quality of education for all students, including SWDs, it lacks a strong emphasis on the rights of children with disabilities to IE. Ministry of Education (MoE) practitioners revealed uncertainty regarding whether the insights of SNIE professionals were sufficiently considered in the formulation of the revised policy. This absence of comprehensive consultation may contribute to the policy's limited effectiveness in addressing the practical needs of SWDs, especially regarding implementing inclusive education at the school level.

While Ethiopia has made strides in promoting inclusive education through various policy frameworks, significant gaps remain in implementing these policies. The lack of a cohesive national policy, insufficient teacher training, and limited access to quality education continue to hinder the full inclusion of SWDs in the educational system. To achieve meaningful progress, Ethiopia must address these challenges by strengthening policy enforcement, improving resource allocation, and ensuring greater participation of SNIE professionals in policy formulation. Through such efforts, Ethiopia can ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are fully realized and that inclusive education becomes a reality for all.

Participants' Perspectives on Intentions of Policy Frameworks

In the view of the participants, the government introduced IE to facilitate CWDs in acquiring fundamental knowledge, attitudes, and skills and actively participating in their school and community life while also influencing positive attitudes towards them. Participants could not agree on the historical context of IE in Ethiopia. Some claimed it was influenced by global agreements like the 1994 Salamanca Statement and UNCERPD. Ethiopia was one of the signatories, while others claimed it was always a government policy concern. Regarding the government's efforts, a participant from the MoE noted, "The 1994 education policy offered access to education and training for disabled citizens, making their lives easier and enabling them to participate in nation-building." While the government initially prioritized inclusion in education, global accords may have fueled Ethiopia's ongoing efforts.

Along with policy and legal frameworks, Ethiopian education programs, strategies, guidelines, standards, and plan documents support the IE approach, with participants from the MoE, AACAEB, and sub-city Education Offices valuing the ESDP and GEQIP programs as more supportive. Despite the importance of government strategies and plans, ESDPs have significantly contributed to promoting the inclusion of SWDs by setting the platform, as a participant voiced,

“The ESDP has initiated efforts to improve access to education for disabled students, with ESDP-III laying the groundwork for mainstreaming their learning. ESDP-IV included funds for special needs teacher training, improving school capacity, and organizing resource centers. ESDP-V stressed joint responsibility for inclusive education, and ESDP-VI also prioritizes using assistive technologies for students.”

In the same vein, one participant expressed about the impact of GEQIP on shaping the provision of IE for SWDs:

“Ethiopia launched GEQIP in 2008 to improve the quality of general education. GEQIP-I focused on teacher training for disabled students, and GEQIP-II emphasized resource provision and extra school grants for these students. GEQIP-III focused on equity and establishing more inclusive education resource centers in schools.”

This reflection shows that the ESDP and GEQIP have greatly supported the federal government's efforts to include SWDs in general education, which participants from the MoE appreciated. The MoE participants emphasized the importance of education strategies and working documents in promoting inclusivity for CWDs. They identified key contributors such as the 2006 SNE Strategy, the revised 2012 SNIE Strategy, and the 2016 'Master Plan for SNIE.' Additional documents like the 2012 'School Health and Nutrition Strategy,' 2015 'SNE Teachers Professional Standards,' and 2015 'Guidelines for Managing and Establishing Resource Centers' were also mentioned. Participants agreed that these national documents have been instrumental in supporting the inclusion of SWDs at the system level. Findings indicated that Ethiopia's education programs, strategies, guidelines, and plans have included SWDs, aligning with the country's policy and legal frameworks.

Practicality of Policy Frameworks on Inclusion for SWDs

Despite establishing policies and legal frameworks for IE for SWDs, concerns persist regarding their execution. Many participants have noted slow execution and inadequate attention from the government system. A participant from AACAEB highlighted that despite the federal government's SNIE strategies, these are not being effectively executed across education systems due to insufficient resources and support provisions. Similarly, a participant from Gulele SCEO expressed the challenges of including SWDs in regular schools, a sentiment echoed by others in AACAEB. A participant from Arada SCEO also explained that despite receiving attention, including SWDs remains unachieved, “the current efforts in inclusive education for disabled students are inadequate, with only a small number of students having access to limited inclusive

classrooms. This is mainly those who are blind, deaf, or have mild intellectual and physical disabilities. Those with severe or multiple impairments are either segregated or completely ignored.”

The Ethiopian education system, while prioritizing quality education for all, has given less emphasis on the inclusion of students with various disabilities, particularly those with severe or multiple disabilities and intellectual difficulties, resulting in their educational exclusion. Participants noted insufficient resources to implement existing policies and legal frameworks, including inadequate assistive devices, learning materials, and teacher training, posing significant obstacles to supporting IE. A practitioner from Yeka SCEO further noted, “while inclusive education strategies are essential, their high resource demands make challenging them to execute in our educational system. For instance, disabled students require adequate resources (like braille materials, hearing aids, wheelchairs, etc), a physically accessible school setting, and teachers trained in inclusive pedagogies. However, the existing system has not effectively met these desires.”

Participants' reflections emphasized the need for strengthening the educational system's support for IE, highlighting its execution challenges due to insufficient resources, physically inaccessible school settings, and a lack of trained teachers in inclusive pedagogies in schools. Further, executing policies and strategies promoting IE for SWDs has been a major challenge due to an undesirable attitude. For instance, as one practitioner, "Special schools are more suitable for disabled students, mainly for those with severe impairments as regular schools are not often welcome, sufficiently resourceful and physically accessible to them." While policies and legal frameworks for inclusive education (IE) for students with disabilities (SWDs) have been established, their implementation remains a significant challenge. The slow execution of these policies, coupled with insufficient resources, lack of trained educators, and inadequate physical infrastructure, continues to hinder the inclusion of SWDs in regular education settings.

Discussion

The government has not explicitly committed to PWD's right to provide EI. However, the Ethiopian government has committed to accepting international declarations and conventions, including the right to education. This lack of commitment has resulted in an unclear policy on EI for CWD, limiting their access to education and exacerbating their exclusion from the mainstream education system. This underscores the need for policies that explicitly recognize the unique educational needs of PWD in Ethiopia. Such policies would ensure that CWDs receive quality education and can reach their full potential alongside their peers.

The Salamanca Statement emphasized the need for countries to "adopt as a matter of law or policy the principle of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary" (p. ix). This calls for Ethiopia to take the necessary steps to implement EI through legal or policy measures that facilitate the attendance, participation, and academic success of all children, including those with special needs unless there is substantial justification for alternative approaches. This is in line with the findings of local studies that emphasize the urgent need for a concrete disability EI policy in Ethiopia that recognizes the special educational requirements of persons with disabilities (Melesse & Belay, 2022; Massa, 2022), as well as a law that mandates their education within the country's education system.

The findings also show that the 1994 and 2023 ETPs do not explicitly advocate the rights of persons with disabilities to access EI, which contradicts UNESCO's 1994 recommendation that "Education policies at all levels, from national to local, should provide that children with disabilities should attend neighborhood schools, that is, the schools they would attend if they did not have disabilities". Furthermore, access to education for all is a human right affirmed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UNCRC, and the Sustainable Development Goals.

Various existing programs, strategies, guidelines, and plans explicitly promote the inclusion of SWDs in the general education system, although Ethiopia lacks a distinct national IE policy. This finding aligns with the Salamanca Statement's emphasis on "The practice of 'mainstreaming' children with disabilities should be an integral part of national plans for achieving education for all". However, the effectiveness of these working documents in supporting the inclusion of SWDs is limited due to several factors.

A key challenge in implementing education sector programs, strategies, plans, and guidelines for SWDs in Ethiopia is the lack of a specific law mandating educational institutions to provide education for SWDs. This gap, highlighted by local researchers (Ginja & Chen 2023; Šiška et al., 2020), leads to inconsistent resources and support. Without legally binding legislation, accessibility of school environments, educational resources, curricula, reasonable accommodation, and mandatory teacher training on IE are not ensured (Beyene et al., 2023; Tsega et al., 2023). To address these issues, Ethiopia must enact an education law mandating the provision of IE.

Despite efforts to strengthen its internal structure at the MoE, AACAE, and its lower-level education offices, the provision of IE in Ethiopia continues to be hindered by significant systemic challenges. These include weak data management, unclear policies for IE execution, scarce human resources, inadequate career structures for SNE professionals, scarce compensation, limited multidisciplinary support, and a lack of defined support service modalities.

While the Pastoralist and SNE Directorate was established to promote IE at the federal level, its focus on emerging regions due to political factors has limited its effectiveness. Although the AACAEB recently established an SNE and Adult Education Directorate and extended this structure to the sub-city levels, there remains a lack of a robust systemic organizational structure and administration for IE at all levels. Despite the government's endorsement of international conventions, IE remains a low priority in Ethiopia (Beyene et al., 2023; Bekana, 2020; Halefom, 2022). This has negatively impacted planning, budgeting, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting. Additionally, the insufficiency of a structured system for employing qualified SNE educators at the school level further hinders the effective implementation of IE (Mergia, 2020). These challenges highlight the need for a more comprehensive and focused approach to promoting IE in Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian government has attempted to enhance teacher development policies by incorporating courses such as inclusiveness and SNE into pre-service and in-service training. However, implementing these strategies has been limited due to the considerable difficulties associated with training teachers in IE in the country. While the number of teachers trained in IE has increased (Beyene et al., 2020), it remains low, with only 228, 586 teachers receiving such training.

Teachers without specialized training in SNE often lack the necessary skills to support the needs of SWDs. Even those specializing in SNE may have gaps in their knowledge, particularly in areas like supporting deaf, blind, or deaf-blind students or providing instruction in Braille, sign language, orientation and mobility, and behavior management. While progress has been made, refresher courses for teachers proficient in these areas are still needed. Addressing these training gaps is crucial for advancing IE for SWDs. As Rouse (2008), cited in Hardesty et al. (2020), noted, educators who lack adequate preparation may struggle to implement IE effectively. Thus, it is essential to enhance teachers' capacity to create inclusive learning environments for all students.

Despite Ethiopia's MoE prioritizing IE and implementing strategies to ensure access to quality education for all learners, challenges remain in executing these priorities. The analysis have revealed a lack of awareness among stakeholders regarding IE, a failure to recognize sign language as a medium of instruction for deaf children, inadequate curriculum adaptation, shortages of educational materials and assistive devices, inaccessible school settings, and a lack of adequate preparation among educators in IE. Addressing these issues requires a more focused approach to IE and concerted efforts from educators, policymakers, and the wider community to establish an IE system that meets the needs of all students.

Despite the Ethiopian government's efforts to establish an Education Management Information System (EMIS), the current system for collecting and reporting data on SWDs remains unreliable. It cannot gather comprehensive data on key aspects such as enrollment, dropout, repetition rates, types of impairments, identification of students with invisible impairments, and specific educational support needs. Local studies have also revealed data collection and management limitations regarding enrollment, dropout and repetition rates, and student needs (Mergia, 2020). The existing data on SWDs in the education system is based on the gross enrollment rate rather than the net enrollment rate, leading to inconsistencies in data reporting from schools to the MoE due to the inadequacies of the current database system.

Creating a financing system that supports IE in Ethiopia has proven to be a formidable task. The 2016 Master Plan for IE has recognized the urgency of addressing funding issues and has outlined a series of significant measures to be executed until 2025. One such measure involves forming an abiding budgeting structure in the education sector. However, the practicality of designing such a funding system that effectively allocates earmarked budgets for the education of CWDs is still difficult and unclear. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on inclusive education by offering practical solutions that could guide future policy development and improve the educational outcomes for SWDs.

CONCLUSION

IE is an educational system that provides equal presence, support, participation, and achievement opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. The policy on inclusion should delineate the guidelines, principles, roles, structures, and responsibilities for executing all activities conducted within the mainstream system or through alternative learning pathways. In light of this, IE necessitates addressing all obstacles that hinder equal access to education. This study examined the impediments to including SWDs in Ethiopia's general education system. The absence of a distinct IE policy stands as the most prominent obstacle. Subsequently, the lack of education law, inadequate structural and administrative support, limited capacities and resources, restricted access to quality education for CWDs, an unreliable data and reporting system, and insufficient financing mechanisms to ensure the gradual realization of IE were identified as issues.

To make inclusion meaningful in Ethiopia, the government should formulate an IE policy and/or education law that upholds the universally recognized rights of CWDs to receive education. Also, the education system must prioritize the reinforcement of organizational and administrative support, the enhancement of capacities and resources, the improvement of access to quality

education for CWDs, the creation of a reliable data and reporting system about the education of CWDs, and the formation of sufficient financing mechanisms for IE. The study is limited to covering only certain regions and institutions, which may not fully represent the national context of Ethiopia, especially the differences between urban and rural areas. It is also limited to analyzing existing policies and legal frameworks, with no in-depth discussion of potential legal reforms or broader political and social factors that may influence future policy developments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend sincere gratitude to the interview participants.

REFERENCES

- Albrecht, D. (2021). The Journey from Traditional Parent Involvement to an Alliance for Empowerment: A Paradigm Shift. *Theory Into Practice*, 60(1), 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2020.1827897>
- Arora, R. (2023). Access of Students with Disabilities (SWDs) to Higher Education in India with Special Reference to Panjab University, Chandigarh, India. *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, 69(2), 360-371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00195561231154387>
- Bekana, D. M. (2020). Policies of Gender Equality in Ethiopia: The Transformative Perspective. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 43(4), 312-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2019.1628060>
- Beken, C. V. D. (2021). External and Internal Secession in Ethiopia's Multinational Federation. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 28(5), 944-971. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-bja10037>
- Beyene, W. M., & Giannoumis, G. A. (2023). Inclusion, Access, and Accessibility of Educational Resources in Higher Education Institutions: Exploring the Ethiopian Context. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(1), 18-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1817580>
- Buchner, T., Shevlin, M., Donovan, M. A., & Corby, D. (2021). Same Progress for All? Inclusive Education, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Students with Intellectual Disability in European Countries. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 18(1), 7-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jppi.12368>
- Bueso, L. (2022). Civic Equity for Students with Disabilities. *Teachers College Record*, 124(1), 62-86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01614681221086092>

- Cappiali, T. M. (2023). A Paradigm Shift for a More Inclusive, Equal, and Just Academia? Towards a Transformative-Emancipatory Pedagogy. *Education Sciences*, 13(9), 876. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13090876>
- Chakraborty, S., Yerramilli, S., & Kumar, P. (2022). Sustainable Inclusive Education: The Other Way Round. *International Journal of Society Systems Science*, 14(2), 89-105. <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSSS.2022.129397>
- Dube, T., Ncube, S. B., Mapuvire, C. C., Ndlovu, S., Ncube, C., & Mlotshwa, S. (2021). Interventions to Reduce the Exclusion of Children with Disabilities from Education: A Zimbabwean Perspective from the Field. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 7(1), 1913848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2021.1913848>
- Ehlinger, E., & Ropers, R. (2020). "It's All About Learning as a Community": Facilitating the Learning of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education Classrooms. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(3), 333-349. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0031>
- Gibbs, K., & Bozaid, A. (2022). Conceptualising Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia Through Conversations with Special Education Teachers. *Improving Schools*, 25(2), 101-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13654802211021756>
- Ginja, T. G., & Chen, X. (2023). Conceptualising Inclusive Education: The Role of Teacher Training and Teacher's Attitudes Towards Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Ethiopia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(9), 1042-1055. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1879958>
- Göransson, K., & Bengtsson, K. (2023). 'They Would Be Bullied in Ordinary Schools'—Exploring Public Discourses on Inclusionary Schooling. *Disability & Society*, 38(2), 287-304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1921700>
- Halefom, A. (2022). Integrating Traditional and State Institutions for Conflict Prevention: Institutional, Legal and Policy Frameworks in Ethiopia. *Mizan Law Review*, 16(2), 339-368. <https://doi.org/10.4314/mlr.v16i2.4>
- Hardesty, C., Moody, E. J., Kern, S., & Root-Elledge, S. (2020). Enhancing Professional Development for Educators: Adapting Project ECHO from Health Care to Education. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, 40(1), 42-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870520960448>
- Harrison, R. L., Reilly, T. M., & Creswell, J. W. (2020). Methodological Rigor in Mixed Methods: An Application in Management Studies. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 14(4), 473-495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689819900585>
- Hodkinson, A. (2020). Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, Moving Forward but Standing Still? A Critical Reframing of Some Key Issues. *British Journal of Special Education*, 47(3), 308-328. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12312>

- Kocha, D. F., & Senapathy, M. (2022). Practice and Challenges of the Implementation of Inclusive Education Strategy in Secondary Schools: The Case of Gofa Zone, Southern Ethiopia. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 11(1), 94-111. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v11i1.5177>
- Massa, A. (2022). "All We Need Is a Home": Eviction, Vulnerability, and the Struggle for a Home by Migrants from the Horn of Africa in Rome. *Focaal*, 2022(92), 31-47. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2022.920103>
- Melesse, S., & Belay, S. (2022). Curriculum Conceptualization, Development, and Implementation in the Ethiopian Education System: Manifestations of Progressive Curriculum Orientations. *Journal of Education*, 202(1), 69-79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022057420966760>
- Mergia, A. T. (2020). Education of Children and Youth with Disabilities in the Ethiopian School System. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 10(4), 732-742. <https://doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.10.04.2020.p10079>
- MoE. (2021). *Education Sector Development Programme VI (ESDP VI) 2013-2017 E.C. 2020/21-2024/25 G.C.* The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.
- Mortier, K. (2020). Communities of Practice: A Conceptual Framework for Inclusion of Students with Significant Disabilities. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 24(3), 329-340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1461261>
- Nhapi, T. (2020). Zimbabwe's National Case Management System for Child Protection and Enhanced Rights Realisation for Children with Disabilities (CWDS). *African Journal of Social Work*, 10(2), 124-131.
- Ponce, O. A., Galán, J. G., & Maldonado, N. P. (2022). Qualitative Research in Education: Revisiting its Theories, Practices and Developments in a Scientific-Political era. *IJERI: International Journal of Educational Research and Innovation*, (18), 278-295. <https://doi.org/10.46661/ijeri.5917>
- Setegn, M. T. (2020). Legislative Inaction and Judicial Legislation Under the Ethiopian Private International Law Regime: An Analysis of Selected Decisions of the Federal Supreme Court's Cassation Division. *Journal of Private International Law*, 16(1), 112-137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441048.2020.1744262>
- Sharma, R. (2021). "Them in our world": Examining Disabling Discourses that Pass from Disability Policy to Practice. *Jindal Global Law Review*, 12(2), 371-394. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41020-021-00158-1>
- Shevlin, M., & Banks, J. (2021). Inclusion at a Crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's System of Special Education. *Education Sciences*, 11(4), 161. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11040161>

- Shutaleva, A., Martyushev, N., Kukartsev, V., Tynchenko, V., & Tynchenko, Y. (2023). Sustainability of Inclusive Education in Schools and Higher Education: Teachers and Students with Special Educational Needs. *Sustainability*, 15(4), 3011. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043011>
- Šiška, J., Bekele, Y., Brown, J. B., & Záhorský, J. (2020). Role of Resource Centres in Facilitating Inclusive Education: Experience from Ethiopia. *Disability & Society*, 35(5), 811-830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1649120>
- Tsega, S., Sapo, S., & Aschenaki, W. (2023). Organization and management of inclusive education resource centers in Gamo Zone primary schools. *The Ethiopian Journal of Education*, 43(2), 101-142.
- UNESCO. (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report: Inclusion and Education – All Means All*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718>
- Woldehana, W. E., & Teferra, D. (2021). Competencies and Proficiencies in Special Education. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa/Revue de l'enseignement supérieur en Afrique*, 19(1), 29-44. <https://doi.org/10.57054/jhea.v19i1.1887>
- World Bank. (2022). *Ethiopia General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (P163050): Implementation Status and Results Report*, 1-14.
- Yin, R. (2003). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.