

# Education Of Students With Visual Impairments: Review On Disregards And Prospects In Ethiopia, East Africa

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## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this review of articles was to analyze the opportunities and challenges in education of students with visual impairment (SwVI) in Ethiopia. Though, nine studies those conducted in Ethiopia regarding opportunities and challenges SwVI were included in the review. The review investigated the frequently mentioned and key findings challenges and opportunities SwVI experiencing in educational institutions. Accordingly, poor policy enforcement, inaccessible environment, poor placement, lack support, poor assessment practice, lack of educational resources and experts, and inflexible curriculum and instructional strategies are core problems of students. Also opportunities of SwVI having are; some students allowed change their department to their preferences, presence of few teachers who provide moral support for SwVI, support from friends, the availability of students text books and minimum monthly stipend by the government. Finally, suggested that the necessity of efforts has be made to reduce challenges students experiencing and working more on opportunities to realize inclusive education and benefit SwVI.*

**Keywords:** *students with visual impairment, challenges, opportunities*

## **Introduction**

Visual impairment (VI) is one the common type of disability we encounter in our day today life. As to Deiner, (2010: 457) visual impairment is defined in a variety of ways; the legal and medical definitions typically emphasize visual acuity, or how clearly the child can see. The term includes both partial sight and blindness. It may be mild or moderate to severe in nature. The educational definition emphasizes the extent to which the child can use his visual ability to read printed material for learning. According to Tirussew, (2000) the visual impairment that includes blindness is an impaired vision that, even with correction, adversely affects a child's educational performance. Learners who are blind are unable to read print and usually learn to read and write using Braille.

Students with visually impairment need education which will minimize the effect of their disability and develop their powers and potentials adequately. Students with visual impairments do not need pity and sympathy. They can never live comfortably on these and as such what they need is improved opportunities for education so that they can have increased versatility in employment. Farouk (2003) stated that education is a social benefit regarded as the right of every citizen. He stressed further that individuals must be given equal opportunities to education.

The right to education is ensured in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Accordingly, article 26 states that everyone has the right to education because education is the road to equality. Without education people cannot be adequately employed in productive work that is a means of allowing a person to contribute to the development of a country as well as a means of personal development. Compared to early times, the modern period gives great emphasis for education. Persons with different kinds of disability as well as persons without disability have the opportunities to attend in learning situations. Among these different kinds of disabilities are students with visual impairment.

The basics learning procedures of SwVI do not differ from those of the sighted children (Taylar and Sternberg, 1989). Impression of the world is perceived through all our senses. More impression reaches the brain for interpretation through the senses of sight than other sense organs. While the other senses play important parts in man's development and education, the loss of serious impairment of vision takes away him\her the chief medium of learning. Regarding this point, (Zahl, 1982 and Chandra and Gilbert, 2010) state more than one fourth of what is learned is acquired through eyes .Visual impairment not only creates influence on the learning activities of an individual but also on his physical, mental, emotional, social and opportunities aspects. Vision is the major channel through which people perceive their environment and the relationship of themselves and objects within it. It is clear that people with low vision cannot function effectively and as a result they require more help. This tells us that vision is not only very important for early development in infancy, but also that visual information is used and processed by many different parts of the brain.

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In Ethiopia, the historical development of school for SwVI was rooted within the Orthodox Church, which gave traditional education. Since instruction was given orally and reading and writing were kept to a minimum, it was possible for students who are visually impaired to follow the traditional type of education. Therefore, this oral method of teaching opened the way for teaching of the students who are blind. Unlike traditional education in modern education in developing countries like Ethiopia SwVI encounter different kinds of problems like lack of special training, unavailability of educational materials, inadequate guidance and library services, difficulty of getting enough information on different subjects and problems related to mobility and others (Tirussew, 2000).

Moreover, educating persons with visual impairment is problematic. This is because an individual with visual impairment is often confronted with a number of challenges ranging from participation in social activities, locomotion, and education to mention a few. It is more expensive to educate SwVI than their sighted peers. This results from high cost of equipment and materials used in educating those (English, 2011). English also explains further that the cost of Braille machines, type writers, moving to and from the school, church, mosque and other places of importance is definitely higher for children with visual impairment than the sighted children, since they have need for a companion most of the time. Obani (2004) affirmed that a child with visual impairment may not be able to move around easily and may have to be carried for a longer time than a non-disabled child. Unlike sighted children who can easily learn so many things merely by observing and imitating, the child with visual impairment will need to be guided and supervised when learning so many concepts, thus requiring more time to be cared for.

It may be difficult to take care of SwVI in developing countries unlike that of in the developed world. Because knowledge and attitude about children with visual impaired varies according to our educational background and socio-economic situation of the country. In Ethiopia, there is a general tendency to think of persons with disabilities as weak, hopeless, dependent and unable to learn and the subject of charity (Tirusew 2005:83). When we think negatively towards their disability, they will develop low self-esteem and may increase dependency and hopelessness. If people treat, respect and give value for Children with visual impairment in a good manner, they may have good perception for themselves.

Admittance to education is a huge problem for SwVI, particularly for the blind ones all over the country (MoE, 2006; Tirusew, 1999). These days, MoE is applying inclusive education to make equal opportunity of learning for all students regardless of poverty, gender, ethnic background, language, learning difficulty, and impairment (MoE, 2006; Kassie, 2013). On the dissimilarly, as it is reported in MoE (2006) common schools tend to refuse to register children with special educational needs, particularly those with apparent disabilities like blindness and deafness. This implies that the written educational policy and strategies have not been fully implemented yet.

The execution of inclusive education requires the provision of the necessary human and material resources for the varied needs of all students (MoE, 2006). For example, according to Heward (2006), to address the educational needs of SwVI, the schools should have specially trained teachers or itinerant teacher consultants and provide different types of special instructional materials and skills. A blind student needs to have access of Braille, Braille's speak, tactile aids and manipulative technological aid for reading; prints such as optacon (optical to tactile converter) and Printed E, computer and orientation, listening training to improve listening skills, and mobility training, electronic travel aids and cane skill. Similarly, a student with low vision needs to access optical devices, large print and classroom adaptation in terms of light and sitting arrangement (Heward, 2006; Heward & Orlansky, 1988; MoE, 2006). Thus, supplying schools with the required diversified educational resources for all children is a big assignment as well as a problem that needs to be solved for MoE.

Many studies portray the challenges SwVI encountered in education in Ethiopia and global context, but little has been thought about the existing opportunities. Thus, the review was presented the challenges and opportunities SwVI in some sites of Ethiopia.

## **Method**

This review has been carried out on challenges and opportunities within education of SwVI in Ethiopia. Nine research articles conducted were reviewed; all of them are conducted in Ethiopia from year of 2017 to 2020 and addressed topics related prospects and disregards of SwVI in their educational endeavor. The articles taken for review were conducted almost on all cycles of education ranges from primary school to university level. The findings were summarized in table to identify the major findings in the studies. Problems and prospects that SwVI facing are presented and analyzed in form of thematic approach (i.e. the themes were developed after all the way through reading the studies was made and categorized according to their similarity)

## Results and Discussion

### Challenges and Opportunities Students with Visual impairment Facing

**Table 1** Summary of five Studies Conducted in Ethiopia on Challenges and Opportunities in SwVI

| Author                            | Study Site             | Method                   | Key Finding on Challenges of Students with Visual Impairment  | Key Finding on Opportunities in Education of SwVI         |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|---|---|
| Endalkachew and Dessalegn, (2017) | Addis Ababa University | Qualitative and thematic | Poor Infrastructures; buildings, roads labs, dormitories, recreational centers and dining rooms, lack support from sighted and teachers, assign to the fields randomly,   | Some allowed change their department to their preferences |
| Teferi (2018)                     | Addis Ababa University |                          | Inaccessibility of building, lack of well-organized support structures, adequate experts, absence of responsible body, inadequate funding, absence of mobility orientation, lack of adjustment in assessment, teaching. | Friendship, financial support                             |
| Zelalem (2018)                    | Weldeya, Amhara        |                          | Environmental barriers, not getting both financial and material support, poor attention SwVI, lack of awareness in school, lack social interaction, lack of remedial action   | Support of friends, text books, monthly financial         |
| Mulat and Sileshi (2020)          | Bahirdar, Amhara       |                          | Lack periodic assessment, teachers' of adjustment, Braille, reference book, skilled man power and same examination etc.   | Support of friends, text books.                           |
| Paulos and Dawit (2019a)          | Harar, Harari          | Quantitative             | Lack of teachers receiving supports, specialized equipment, appropriate teaching strategies, knowledge in adapting teaching materials, training on Braille reading and writing  |   |

**Table 2** Summary of four Studies Conducted in Ethiopia on Challenges and Opportunities in SwVI

| Author                          | Study Site        | Method       | Key Finding on Challenges of Students with Visual Impairment   | Key Finding on Opportunities in Education of SwVI   |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|--------------|--|---|
| Tadesse, A. & Dawit, N. (2019). | Gondar University | Qualitative  | students has poor knowledge of rights, poor communication skills with teachers and the university communities, lack leadership characteristics in terms of mobilizing fellow SWDs to pressurize/influence the community to address their needs for appropriate services and supports and |   |
| Kahsay, H. (2020).              | Mekele, Tigray    | Qualitative  | Classrooms in the schools are crowded, few teachers use to help learners, teachers are not using appropriate teaching strategies, lack of materials and resources  | School community has better awareness about visual impairment and inclusion than the outside community. |
| Paulos, D. & Dawit, N. (2019b). | Harar, Harari     | Quantitative | Lack adapting and using appropriate teaching strategies, larger class sizes. However, lack teachers' collaboration and lack classroom supplies and equipment.  |   |
| Mathewos, A. (2019)             | Sebeta, Oromiya   | Mixed        | Scarcity of Braille materials like slate, stylus, textbook, embosser, Perkins, tape recorder and reference materials, lack mobility training and cane  |   |

### the difficulties faced by visually impaired students

#### Poor Policy Enforcement

Policies are important in implementation of inclusive education in schools and helpful to aware obey the right of people with visual impairment. According to Endakachew & Desalegn (2017), school administrative lack knowledge of policies adopted regarding education of students with visual impairment. Similarly, Teferi (2018) mentioned the absence of information about legal frameworks and theoretical principles that inform lecturers about inclusion of SwVI in school. This deficiency leads to lack execution of inclusive education and resulted to inappropriate handling of students with disabilities. Moreover, failure to inform teachers about the existing rules, regulations and legislation that govern inclusive education and lack of knowledge about the appropriate disability model that teacher should apply for handling students with visual impairment are prevalent problems.

In addition, Tadesse & Dawit (2019) studied that, students has poor knowledge of rights, poor communication skills with teachers and the university communities and lack leadership characteristics in terms of mobilizing fellow SWDs to pressurize/influence the community to address their needs for appropriate services and supports.

### **Inaccessibility of the Environment**

Without access to school environment, it is difficult to think about inclusion of students with disabilities; especially it very crucial for students with visual impairment mobility with low vision or no vision needs favorable environment than others. MoE (2006) stressed that teaching-learning environment and equipment in the classroom, library, laboratory, cafe and dormitories expect to accessible for SwVI to engage in learning process.

Oppose to the above fact majorities of schools in Ethiopia found inaccessible for students with visual impairment. Endalkachew & Dessalegn, (2017) lack of Infrastructures; buildings, roads, laboratories, dormitories, recreational centers, playgrounds, dining rooms and others were reported as not accessible for students with visual impairment. Teferi (2018) identified inaccessibility of buildings, their fixtures and pathways for students with visual impairment. Students face difficulties in the use of buildings and roads in the campus. Teferi also added inaccessibility of general and academic information in alternative formats other than writing. Zelalem (2018) also stressed presence of environmental barriers in order to move from classroom to classrooms as well as from playgrounds to buildings safely. Carelessly erected poles and uncovered ditches are the main obstacles not to study with their counterparts and participate in social events outside the classrooms. Stone and other things which are leftover during the previous constructions were barriers in schools and threats for free movement of students with visual disabilities. Kahsay, (2020); Dawit & Paulos, (2019) added classrooms in the schools are crowded with large number of learners. In such classrooms, learners with visual impairments' inclusion is very limited. Among other things, environmental barrier was the one which often got in the way of equal participation of students with visual disabilities. Literatures reveal affirmed that a child with visual impairment may not be able to move around easily non-disabled child in complex environments (Obani, 2004).

### **Poor Placement Practice**

During admission of SwVI following sort of clear, supportive, establishing flexible entry criteria, supplying information and counseling about fields of study to students for making informed choices and giving priority to students with disabilities pivotal way on ensuring participation of SwVI. In contrary, study conducted in Addis Ababa University (AAU) showed lack uniformity implementing this principle of assigning students to their to the discipline of their choice among colleges (Endalkachew & Dessalegn, 2017; Teferi 2018). Findings show that students were joined departments without their will experience frustrations while the others enjoy learning and productive.

### **Lack of Support System**

According to studies revealed most teachers fail to support SwVI. It is also reported the lack of financial support in the university and inadequate allocation of funds (Endalkachew & Dessalegn, 2017, Zelalem, 2018, Kahsay, 2020)). Another research conducted by Teferi (2018) absence of practical responses to the needs of SwVI through establishing supportive offices which check their need were addressed or not and ensures equal opportunities for these students. Lack of well-organized support structures emanated from absence of adequate experts at the center for students with disabilities and leads to missing delegated person and responsible bodies to provide SwVI support like orientation and mobility training on how to find classes and offices and treating in the same way as sighted students without taking their special needs into account.

Not only students, but also teachers, leaders and others concerning bodies can be benefited from getting support from experts in order to address the needs of student disabilities. Study outlined that, teachers have not been receiving support from other professionals who might work directly with SwVI or with general classroom teachers particularly in the adaptation of teaching strategies and specialized equipment to make it suitable learning environment for students with visual impairment (Paulos & Dawit, 2019). This deficiency causes lack of knowledge and skills for teachers on how to teach SwVI, lack of adjustment to the times, places and modalities of assessments to students and inability of teacher to properly support students with visual impairment.

Obani (2009) asserts that SwVI should be guided and supervised when learning so many concepts, thus requiring more time to be cared for. It obvious that support is central philosophy inclusive education. Without right need based carry for students with disabilities, it is difficult to make students enjoy learning. These research works are evident that schools were not in the position to facilitate learning through provision of appropriate support for SwVI by trained man power responsibly.

### **Poor Assessment practice**

Assessment for SwVI expected to flexible; giving copies of handouts and assignments weeks prior to submission to be available on time for Braille transcription, allowing them extra time to do assignments and examinations, replace written examinations with oral assessments, using assessments in alternative formats, allowing reader, including oral examinations and review the arrangements for assessments in collaboration with SwVI. In contrary, Teferi (2018) uncovered lack of adaptations and interventions for continuous and summative assessment of such students', inappropriate examination venues and absence of time extensions for assessments affecting the performance of these students. Similarly, Mulat and Sileshi (2020) stated deficiency of periodic assessment which able the teacher know the challenges SwVI facing in teaching learning process and help to evaluate and monitor their progress from time to time.

### **Lack of Resources**

The implementation of inclusive education requires the provision of the necessary human and material resources for the diverse needs of all students is meeting (MoE, 2006). For example, according to Heward (2006), to address the educational needs of visually impaired children, the schools should have specially trained teachers or itinerant teacher consultants and provide different types of special instructional materials and skills.

Endalkachew & Dessalegn, (2017); Teferi (2018); Zelalem (2018); Paulos & Dawit (2019); Mulat and Sileshi (2020); Mathewos, (2019) stressed lack facilities were challenging education of SwVI. Researchers have repeatedly mentioned the shortage of educational material like slate and stylus, braille paper, abacus, white-cane, digital recorder, cassette recorder, having large printing and player. Since education of learners with visual impairment enhanced by supportive devices absence such materials interfere educational intervention and their success.

In addition to material resources almost all reviewed research works stated that lack of trained human power in the area of special needs/inclusive education is below the expectation. This leads to be short of knowledge and experts in the area who able support teachers and students (Endalkachew & Dessalegn, (2017); Teferi (2018); Zelalem (2018); Paulos & Dawit (2019); Mulat and Sileshi 2020). These experts have awareness on utilizing adaptive devices, provision of mobility and orientation training, familiarity with SwVI, skill of helping teachers of students with disabilities, students, leaders and parents.

### **Inappropriate Curriculum and Instructional Strategies**

Endalkachew & Dessalegn, (2017) conducting regular discussions with SwVI to determine their needs in order to modify curriculum materials, such as syllabus, modules, course outlines, lecture-notes, handouts, worksheets and assignments for learners with visual impairment in their preferred formats and adapt curriculum content and enhancing accessibility crucial for SwVI are pivotal. Although, employing alternative formats, updating the skills of teachers and adjusting instructional processes to suit SwVI through keeping front row seats open for students with visual impairment, provide instructional material in alternative formats, allow recording of lessons, verbalize written notes, pace presentation according to time constraints of SwVI, let sighted volunteers assist them during group work activities, make timely arrangements for field trips, apply collaborative teaching and cooperative learning strategies were instructional strategies recommended.

According to Paulos & Dawit (2019); Mulat & Sileshi (2020), schools were identified as exercising inflexibility in teaching method, assessment, teaching material and content delivery. They stressed that, schools were employing traditionally dominated teaching approach in which teacher enter the class and deliver the subject matter, up to the students to catch up the pace and learning environment. Also, Kahsay (2020) mentioned that, teachers are not using teaching strategies to include learners with visual impairments in secondary schools due to factors including lack of professional training, professional collaboration, large class size and limited access to assistive technologies and materials. Due to these fact participants in the studies reported as if it affected their participation and engagement in learning process.

### **Opportunities Students with Visual Impairment Experiencing**

Regarding opportunities in education SwVI in Ethiopia context very little can be mention since inclusive education emerging in the country. Review also comes up come more weight for challenges rather than positive prospects. Accordingly, Endalkachew & Dessalegn, (2017) stated some SwVI allowed change their department to their preferences even though it lacks consistency across colleges and institutions. Mulat & Sileshi (2020) reported that the presence of few teachers who provide moral support for students with visual impairment could be considered as an opportunity to implement inclusive education effectively and positively contribute for SwVI.

Moreover, Teferi (2018), Zelalem (2018) students' network and support of friends can be taken as opportunity to achieve educational objectives, the availability of student text books considered as opportunity and the monthly financial support by the government also something to be appreciated.

### **Conclusions**

The data obtained on the educational challenges and opportunities of SwVI gathered from university, primary and secondary school from different parts of Ethiopia. Accordingly, challenges identified by those studies overweight the opportunities in educational institutions. Although it is difficult to identify the leading challenges of students with visual impairment experiencing according to their severity and repetition on the basis of such type of fragmented data, but the review identified poor policy enforcement, inaccessible environment, poor placement, lack support, poor assessment practice, lack of educational resources and experts, and inflexible curriculum and instructional strategies as core problems. Regarding opportunities SwVI; students allowed change their department to their preferences, presence of few teachers who provide moral support for SwVI, support of friends, the availability of student text books and minimum monthly stipend by the government. Thus, studies concluded that practice is far from theoretical principle and a lot has be done to reduce challenges these students experiencing in their education and working more on opportunities to realize inclusive education and in order to benefit SwVI.

### Recommendations

Based review of studies on challenges and opportunities experienced by SwVI the following recommendations were drawn;

Educational policies and legislation expect to introduced and enforced to service provider for implementation.

Creating accessible environment for students with visual impairment is crucial to make the part of teaching learning process.

Teacher and other service providers supposed to undergo the necessary training concerning the paradigm shift, including measures incorporated in the action plan.

Financial and other school guidelines should be designed flexibly to address the special needs of students with disabilities. Teachers have to use different/flexible instructional strategies for effective and successful inclusion.

It important to make sure the availability of supportive material for students with visual impairment which enable helps them to cop up with their education.

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