

# The Journey of Special Needs Education in Ethiopia: An overview

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## Abstract

The purpose of this review is to map out the journey of special needs education in Ethiopia. This journey is from mountainous churches where students used to attend theology scattering under trees and small huts to fenced and relatively favorable classrooms. By that professionals in the field of special needs will have the opportunity to know how the delivery of special education for persons with disabilities was associated with early Christianity and compare the historical development of special needs education between Europe and ancient Ethiopia.

## The Overview

In the early society of Ethiopia, people with disabilities used to earn income by such skills as spinning and weaving clothes, intertwining basket work, playing some of the traditional and instrumental music and offering traditional medicine (Bairu, 1967). As the same author observed, the blind, among group with disability for instance, were in the habit of leasing their lands under an agreement similar to that of sharecropping to receive a certain amount of crops of the annual production. In addition to the above listed means of survival, people with disabilities earn their living by teaching bible and Koran in churches and mosque schools respectively. Sometimes, people with disabilities used to serve as private tutors to the children of the well-to-do to ensure their subsistence (Bairu, 1967; Nebiye Luel, 1962).

With the introduction of Christianity to Ethiopia, therefore, church education took the role of cultivating children of nobility and with visual, physical and those who are gifted and talented. In this regard, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had played a matchless position in enlightening government and church leaders of that time (Fikru, 2013).

Hence, before the introduction of western education, the country has a long history of church and mosque education. In the history of Ethiopian church education, hence, people with disabilities had a convincing role in taking part of scholastic voyage. For this, Francisco Alvarez gave his witness while he paid visit to Ethiopia in the early 16th century. During the Portuguese visit to Ethiopia in the 1520's Alvarez recorded his surprise of seeing the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the ranks of the Ethiopian priesthood (Alvarez, 1854). Following his visit to Ethiopia, what Alvarez had seen in the host country regarding the participation of persons with disabilities in priesthood was quite different from his nation. Alvarez signified his observation as follow; "a friar had come entirely blind, how was he, who never had eyes, to be made a priest for the mass: also another entirely paralysed of the right hand, and four or five who were paralysed in the legs: these also they made priests" to the contrary of this, the writer denoted European's particularly what Portuguese's practice about persons' with disabilities (Alvarez, 1854). As Alvarez narrated, persons with disabilities in Europe particularly in the narrator's country had no opportunity to serve churches and monasteries. Rather, the fate of people with disabilities was to be captive in large hospitals which were set up for custodial. To the worst of this, Europeans had horrible experience against people with disabilities. They used to kill and throw away the group into jungles, rivers, roadsides, even to lakes (Howard and Orlansky, 1988). Still, with better situation the blind ring bells and blow organs for churches and other spirituals events (Alvarez, 1854).

After a century, another Portuguese traveler wrote a theological debate that he had made with a well-be taught Ethiopian blind monk (Fikru, 2013).

Even after several decades, as documents compiled by British expeditionary force from 1867 to 1868 against emperor Tewodros II confirmed what the Portuguese' travelers reported about the inclusion of persons with disabilities in church schools in the 16th and 17th centuries. Particularly, the expeditionary force found five up-to six church schools in operation at the town of Adowa. In these churches, the expeditionary force observed some blind boys among pupils who were attending church education (Richard Pankhurst, 1990).

In this existed education system people with special needs or with disabilities like, for example, the blind people have been highly involved as learners and teachers. As Bairu in (1967) well-noted in Braille monitor, education has for centuries been recognized by most people as the light of the blind. However, it must not be forgotten that the idea that the blind are exceptionally gifted is often concomitant to the general belief in the education of the blind. The result is that the failure of a blind person is attributed to his/her reluctance and laziness rather than his/her disability. The implication of the above cognizant is the astonishment of ancient Ethiopians that they had for persons with disabilities.

During the earlier times when the lives and work of Ethiopian society was dominated by the Christian faith, education of the persons with visually and physically impaired as well as those who were gifted and

talented was the responsibility of the Ethiopia Orthodox Church (Fikru, 2013). The church in central and northern regions where it has been dominant for the last sixteen centuries and the mosque, in strong Muslim communities, have been the two chief institutions of traditional and formal education in the country (Richard Pankhurst, 1990). The education in these religious sects had a demand of memorization and the ability of narrating the Holy Scripture, theological interpretation of the text, composition of sophisticated poetry, and singing of hymns (Bairu, 1967).

Like their fellow friends, persons with disabilities were expected to pass through all levels of church education, which requires a long time. However, persons with hearing and intellectually impaired weren't part of church education because of the nature of schooling. Predominantly, the teaching methodology of church education was oral. Historically, those who succeeded in their education were able to get positions and power (Adane, 1991).

Special education program in its modern type was started in Ethiopia in 1925. Before this time, as it is mentioned earlier, blind people were attending traditional church education, and with that they had high achievement, especially in oral learning and teaching in the Orthodox Church. (Adane, 1990) reported, "The Ethiopian orthodox church has a long history of schooling persons with special needs who have advanced to positions of decision makers in various churches and monasteries.

This practice has continued until the beginning of the twentieth century that is with the coming of 'western education' to the country. Even today, though their number is insignificant, they are still good witness in many monasteries for what I recognized above.

As church chroniclers narrate the situation, in Ethiopia, people with disabilities/special needs were participating in the traditional education earliest than modern education, though few in numbers. There were students around churches and mosques who were visually and physically impaired. These students were successful since the education was given orally. This was confirmed by the presence of visually and physically impaired teachers around mosques and monasteries who teach Koran, bible, poem, and rhythmical religious songs even today.

Religious organizations played a vital role in establishing special schools and centers in Ethiopia as they did in the development of special schools & individuals are among the ones who established training centers and special schools as well as in training and teaching people with special needs (Bairu, 1967; Adane, 1991).

Western education officially commenced in 1908 with the opening of Minilik ii in Addis Ababa. The introduction of westernized education gave therefore, an alternative education system to the country and marked a significance step in the history of education of Ethiopia. Seventeen years from here later, the first institutional school for children with visual impairment was established at the town of Dembidolo in 1925 even though it was interrupted by Italian invasion (Teshome, 2006). The opening of this institutional school marked a significance step in the history of special needs education in Ethiopia. Therefore, the foreign missionaries were the first to establish institutional schooling for people with special needs in Ethiopia. For this, united Presbyterian mission of North America took the credit in introducing other choice of education for people with disabilities with the existed church education since Christianity. The Swedish Lutheran mission and the seven day Adventist mission also have used by training teachers and translators who had different disabilities particularly the blind. Many of these people are equipped with Braille facilities. The history of Braille in Ethiopia therefore, is as old as the coming of Presbyterian missionaries of North America to Ethiopia (Bairu, 1967). It was the first to open a modern school for the blind in western part of the country, in 1925 (Teshome, 2006; Bairu, 1967).

Thereafter, other disability groups were considered for special schools when public schooling were expanded. The emphasis in the early special schools was on vocational skills. Their curriculum was thus different from that in public schools. Hence, children with disabilities have to follow a different curriculum from that of the regular school. In addition, and as I already mentioned; these early special schools belonged to private philanthropic organisations. In 1956 and 1959 special schools for deaf children were set up by American and other missionaries. However, the involvement of the government in the area came in much later.

For the first time in history, the 1994 education and training policy stated about special needs education even though it is inadequate. Article 2.2.3 of the policy demands the necessity of special units and class for students with special needs. Hence, the policy has allowed special units and classes to be established for students with disabilities in regular schools (education and training policy of Ethiopia, 1994). From 1994 onwards, so many special classes, units within ordinary schools were established for the children with visually and hearing impaired and for the mentally retarded and are giving service this time. Most of the above mentioned special schools and units serve children up to grade 8 (MoE, 2012).

Subsequently, nine pilot resource centers have been established in selected six cluster schools and three special schools in the country to serve children with disabilities in the neighboring and satellite schools (MoE, 2012) according to this document, campaigns were conducted in all the regions and city administrations and tried to raise the awareness of over 9000 regional and woredas educational heads and experts, as well as community members on various special needs issues, and data has been collected regarding children with

disabilities for the first time at national level since 2006/07(MoE, 2012). However, the collected data focused only on five types of disabilities groups. Namely: visual impairment, physical impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, and others.

The annual education statistics abstract of MoE for 2010/11 showed that the number of children with disabilities who have received education in primary schools in the country were 55,492 (ibid.). Hence, the above figure indicates as school coverage of students with disabilities is still 3-4 percent of the total population of the group. The rest 96-97 percent are still beyond school gets. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the pace of journey of special needs education in Ethiopia is at its infant stage.

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