Original Article

Accommodating Students with Special Needs in Puntland, Somalia: An Examination of the Current State, Existing Legal Frameworks, and Adaptable Accommodation Strategies

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Date Published:

ABSTRACT

The right to education is one of the critical human rights, and all governments have obligations and commitments to ensure every child has access to and enjoys the right to quality education. In Somalia, children with disabilities have minimal access to education and are disproportionately affected. This qualitative study aimed to explore the current state, access constraints, and accommodation strategies of students with special needs and disabilities in the education system in Garowe, Somalia. Seventeen key informant interviews have been conducted with parents, school headteachers, students with special needs, community members, officials from the Ministry of Education, and education experts. Nine themes have emerged from the interviews through an inductive approach. The study identified several constraints faced by students with special needs. These included academic difficulties, limited teacher training on special needs, teaching and learning materials shortage, financial constraints, inadequate inclusive school infrastructure, and negative social-cultural attitudes. The study emphasized the importance of school support, parental and community involvement, and inclusive strategies to promote the inclusion and well-being of students with special needs. Further efforts are needed to address the identified constraints and improve the implementation of inclusive education policies in Somalia.

INTRODUCTION

The right to education is one of the vital human rights, and all governments have obligations and commitments to ensure every child access and enjoy the right to quality education. The Education Sector Analysis (2022) highlighted that Somalia officially identified persons with disabilities as a vulnerable population in its Humanitarian Response Plan for 2020, signifying its recognition of the challenges of accessing public services.

The proportion of persons with disabilities in Somalia was estimated to be close to 20 percent as per the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, while the 2020 Somali Health and Demographic Survey estimated that just 3.6 percent of the school-age population had some form of disability (Directorate of National Statistics, 2020). All citizens in Somalia possess rights guaranteed by the country's interim constitution, regardless of their level of disability. The right to education in the FGS's Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Program was expressly extended to the Disability and Inclusive Education (SEND & IE) Policy of 2018.

The Special Educational Needs and Inclusive Education (SEND &IE) outlines its goals to mainstream special needs education, which include making physical infrastructure accessible, implementing a responsive and adaptable curriculum, offering community awareness-raising activities and disability education, introducing specialized training for teachers in SEND & IE, and offering tuition-free education in public institutions for students with special needs and disabilities(FGS, 2017).

In Somalia, the inclusion and accommodating of special needs students in the country's education sector face many challenges, and there is little data on the challenges they face. Therefore, this study will provide an understanding and insights into the accommodating and inclusion of students with disabilities in the country's education sector. Furthermore, this study can guide current and future interventions by the key stakeholders, designing and implementing Special Needs and Inclusion Policies as well as the schools to accommodate this group of people based on their needs and desires. Therefore, this study aims to explore the key challenges faced by students with special needs, the existing legal frameworks, and possible recommendations to the accommodate students with special needs in Puntlnad, Somalia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The inclusion and accommodation of students with special needs in schools have become critical factors in ensuring equitable and quality education for all. The current state of affairs regarding students with special needs in schools reflects a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive education. Recently, an increased focus has been on providing equal opportunities for students with special needs to access mainstream educational settings (UNESCO, 2020). Efforts have been made to enact policies and legislation that promote inclusive practices and support systems (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019).

Despite progress, numerous challenges persist in accommodating students with special needs in schools. One challenge is the inadequate allocation of resources, including funding, staff, and assistive technologies (OECD, 2020). Insufficient resources often hinder schools' ability to provide appropriate accommodations and support for these students. Additionally, negative attitudes and lack of awareness among teachers, students, and the wider community can result in social exclusion and limited opportunities for students with special needs (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Students with special needs often encounter academic barriers that impede their learning progress. European Agency for Special Needs and

Inclusive Education (2019) noted that these barriers can include limited access to appropriate instructional materials, insufficient support services, and a lack of accommodations tailored to their individual needs. Such challenges can hinder their academic achievement and limit their opportunities for success.

The challenges students with special needs face are not limited to the educational context alone. Morningstar et al. (2015) shed light on the perspectives of parents who often witness the difficulties their children encounter. These challenges may include social communication difficulties, sensory sensitivities, academic struggles, and difficulty in accessing appropriate support services. Engaging parents as partners in the educational process is crucial for addressing these challenges effectively.

Various strategies have been employed to address the challenges faced by students with special needs. One effective strategy is the implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, which emphasize multiple means of representation, engagement, and expression to meet diverse learning needs (Rose & Meyer, 2002). UDL promotes flexibility in instructional methods, materials, and assessments to ensure inclusivity.

Collaboration and teamwork among educators, parents, and specialists are crucial for successful inclusion. This collaborative approach enables sharing expertise, resources, and experiences, leading to more comprehensive support for students with special needs (Morningstar et al., 2015). Professional development programs that enhance teachers' knowledge and skills in inclusive education have proven beneficial (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2019). By implementing inclusive practices, allocating sufficient resources, and fostering a supportive environment, schools can better meet the diverse needs of students with special needs, promoting their educational success and overall well-being.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research design was employed for this study to investigate and explore how students with special needs in Somalia can be accommodated. Purposive sampling was employed since it determines which people in the population are most likely to have specific traits or experiences and be willing to share them. The population of this study included school headteachers, parents, students with special needs, community members, government officials, and education experts who have currently been working or residing in Garowe, Puntland, Somalia. 17 participants were sampled purposively, including 2 school headteachers, 4 parents, 4 students with special needs, 3 community members, 2 officials from the Ministry of Education, and 2 education experts. Participants were added until theoretical saturation was reached and no new themes could be derived in later participants' interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key informants, and close-ended questionnaires were used to collect basic respondent information. Initial data coding and categorizing were carried out using NVIVO software, and then themes were generated by applying an inductive approach. Research ethics approval was sought from the Ministry of Education and Higher Education in Puntland.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings that have been reached through the interviews conducted with the study participants. The demographic characteristics will be presented, followed by the themes that emerged from the interviews.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

As shown in the table below, out of the 17 key informants interviewed, 47% were secondary school leavers, 35% were bachelor's level holders, and only 3 had Masters degrees. More than half of the respondents were married, while both genders were equally represented. The majority of the

respondents were males between the ages of 30 and 40.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

Item	Characteristic	Percentage
Role of respondent	Community Members	17.6
	Education Expert	11.7
	Officials from the Ministry of Education	11.7
	Parent	23.5
	Students	23.5
	Head teachers	11.7
Age	15-20	23.5
	20 - 30	11.7
	30 - 40	47.0
	Above 40	17.6
Gender	Male	41.1
	Female	58.8
Educational Background	Secondary	47.0
	Bachelors	35.2
	Masters	17.6
Experience in disability service	Less than 2 years	5.8
	Between 5 - 10 years	47.0
	More than 10 years	47.0

Current State of Students with Special Needs: Likely Constraints and Support Available

After conducting the thematic analysis using NVIVO, 8 themes emerged from the 3 objectives of the study. They are all illustrated with their respective codes as below.

The first objective of this study seek to examine the likely constraints students with special needs tend to face from the community and their peers, as well as the support they receive from their parents, school management, and community members.

Figure 1: A concept map of the study themes
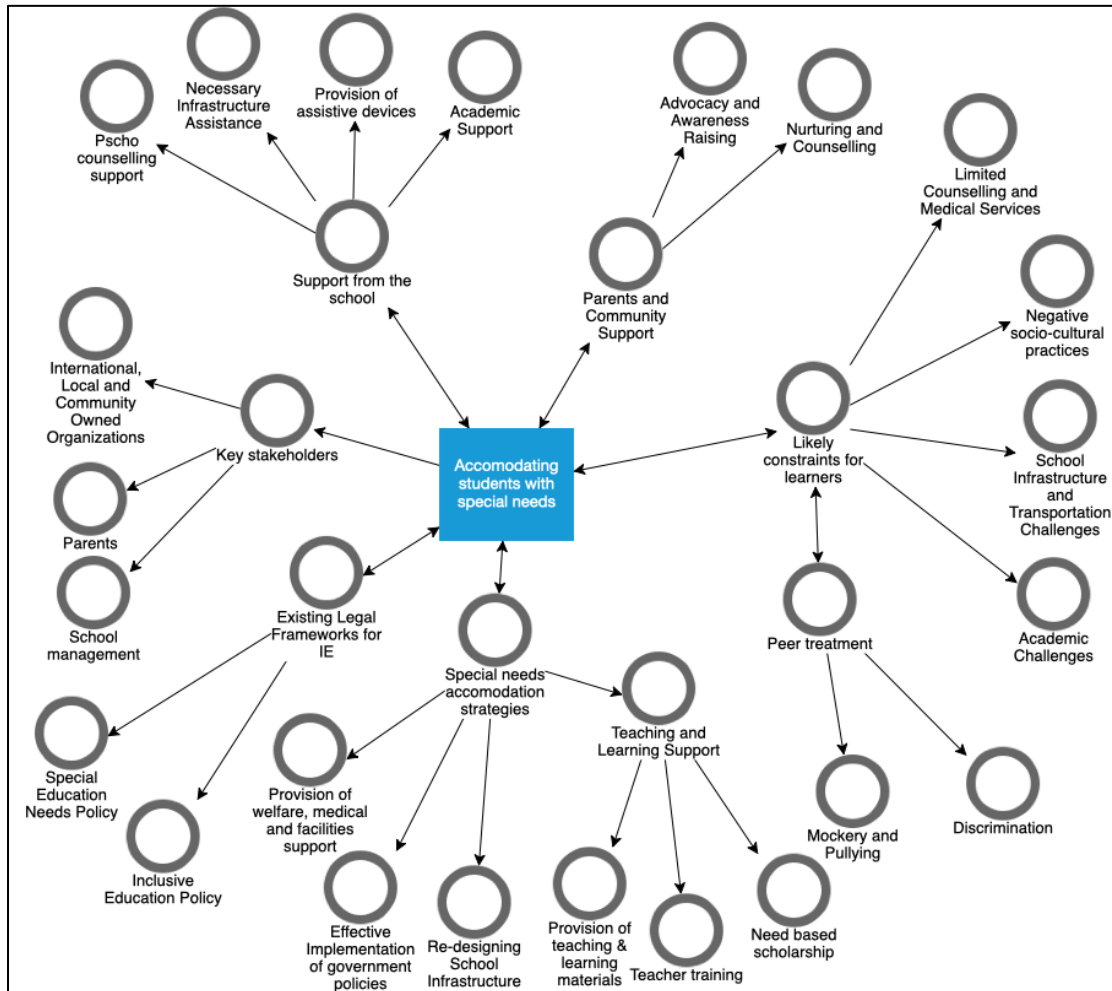
Support from the School Management

Responses invariably showed that some schools had offered assistance and support to students with special needs, which included but not limited to academic support, counseling services, provision of assistive devices, and provision of a conducive environment for learning that has supportive infrastructure for students with special needs.

Data from the respondents revealed that some schools have even awarded scholarships to students with special needs and provided them with equipment that would help them continue learning, like hearing assistive devices. This highlights the significant role that local schools play in accommodating and keeping students with special needs in schools.

> 'Students with special needs in our school have been identified and they have been getting support unlike other students. They have been getting assistive devices, and our school has even provided a conducive learning infrastructure for them. Those of them who come from poor or needy families have also been getting scholarship schemes to support their education' – School Head Teacher, Garowe.

Support from Parents and the Community

Views that emerged from the study participants quickly professed that parents and community members have largely given nurturing, counseling, and support to students with special needs. Furthermore, parents and community leaders have acted to raise awareness about the state and the importance of accommodating students with special needs within society. This happened by making these students participate in social activities and community programs.

It was also evident from the research interviews that parents and community leaders took the initiative to advocate for the rights of these students. This stresses the noteworthy efforts made by parents and community members in supporting students with special needs.

'Parents have been a key in the advocacy role of the students with special needs. They have been raising awareness, and have always been fighting for the rights of these students' – Parent, Garowe.

The Likely Constraints Faced by Students with Special Needs

From the narratives of the study, it was clearly described that students with special needs face academic challenges, negative sociocultural attitudes, school infrastructure design difficulties, and limited medical and counseling services.

On the academic challenges, respondents echoed that there is limited teacher training in dealing with students with special needs and a shortage of teaching and learning materials. Some of the students also face difficulties in paying school fees. Information from the key informants highlighted that most schools do not own inclusive school designs for students with special needs like ramps, emergencies, corridors, ventilation, flooring, and toilets.

'Our schools are not designed in an inclusive structure. Students with special needs do not get trained teachers in class, and many of them face the challenge of meeting the school fees prompting many the burden of financial hardship'. – Ministry of Education Officer, Puntland.

From a social perspective, the research found that students with special needs are faced with discrimination and negative social-cultural attitudes that significantly impact their retainment in the schooling system. Moreover, views from the participants of the research highlighted that the majority of their peers treat them with mockery, bullying, and sometimes even beating. This happens at a time when students with special

needs receive limited counseling and limited medical services.

'Students with special needs are treated negatively by their peers with mockery and beating. This happens when they even attract limited medical attention' – Community member, Garowe.

These findings generally articulate the tough environment in which students with special needs continue living and surviving.

Existence of Legal Frameworks and Guidelines for Inclusive Education and Accessibility

Existence and Effectiveness of Policies on Inclusive Education

From the interviews conducted, participants pointed out that the mandate of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Higher Education is primarily to ensure that there is inclusive education in the country through developing necessary guidelines, legal framework, and practical policies that ensure every child has a right to access relevant, quality, and valued education.

It was discovered through this study that only a few policies on inclusive education have been developed, namely, the Special Needs Education Policy (SNE) and the Inclusive Education Policy (IE). A handful of respondents have, however, questioned the effectiveness of these policies and whether they impact students with special needs.

"Yes, the ministry so far developed two essential policies intended to reflect special needs and inclusive education. The Special Needs Education (SNE) policy directs the overall regulations to handle the support and coordination of children with special needs. However, Inclusive Education policy is committed to bringing about genuine equalization of opportunity whereby the education provisions should ensure that all children could be included regardless of differences or difficulties. Although these policies are developed, currently the implication is not effective nor passed by the

government. The ministry is also struggling to improve the capacity of staff to implement, monitor and manage SNE and inclusive education interventions" (respondent, local organization for people with special needs).

Effective Strategies to Accommodate Students with Special Needs in Schools

Teaching and Learning Support

Most respondents suggested that teachers be trained to handle and teach students with special needs. Respondents severally asserted that need-based scholarships be developed and given to students with special needs so that financial difficulty does not hinder them from schooling. A handful of respondents pointed out the significance of providing learning and teaching materials to students with special needs to feel supported and accommodated.

> *'The empowerment and inclusion of students with special needs start with the recruitment of qualified teachers who provide academically supportive learning experience for these students'* – (Respondent, head teacher).

Redesigning School Infrastructure

The respondents mentioned the need to redesign the school infrastructure to accommodate students with special needs. The majority of the respondents stressed that ramps, entry/exit doors, corridors, ventilation windows, flooring, and toilets need to be attractive and accessible so that they can promote a sense of belonging for students with special needs.

Provision of Welfare, Medical, And Facilities Support

Respondents reported that students with special needs deserve to receive school-based medical screening services and that providing assistive devices wherever necessary is key in accommodating students with special needs. Data continued to show that welfare support such as transportation facilities, is also essential for accommodating students with special needs in school settings.

> *'For students with special needs to feel accommodated, they need to get medical attention whenever necessary, whenever possible. This makes them feel valued. They also need assistive devices depending on their need as well as welfare help'*- (Respondent, a student with special need).

Effective Implementation of Government Policies

There was a consensus that government policies should be provided with the necessary technical, financial, and logistical capacity to help improve inclusive education in the country. Responses highlighted the need to establish an interagency coordination meeting so that the effectiveness of these policies be measured in time and necessary interventions be timely and responsive.

> *'We have policies in place but they are not effective in leading positive change. So far, there are two policies on special needs and inclusive education, and therefore it is paramount to build the architecture that would facilitate its implementation'* – (Respondent, educational expert).

DISCUSSION

The research study aimed to investigate the current situation of students with special needs in Garowe, Somalia, analyze the constraints they face, and explore the support available to them. The study also examined the existing legal frameworks and guidelines for inclusive education and identified effective strategies for accommodating students with special needs in schools. The discussion section provides an overview of the study findings and presents them concerning the existing literature.

The study interviewed 17 key informants, including community members, parents, students with special needs, educational experts, head teachers, and government officials. Also, this study investigated the current state of students with special needs, considering the likely constraints and the support available. The study discovered that some schools in Garowe have provided assistance and support to students with

special needs, including academic support, counseling services, and the provision of assistive devices. Scholarships and a conducive learning environment were also mentioned as forms of support. These findings align with existing literature that emphasizes the crucial role of schools in accommodating students with special needs (Humanity and Inclusion, 2020).

The study also revealed that parents and community members had played a significant role in nurturing, counseling, and advocating for the rights of students with special needs. They have raised awareness and facilitated the participation of these students in social activities and community programs. This finding supports previous research by Morningstar et al. (2015) that emphasizes the importance of parental and community support in promoting inclusion and well-being for students with special needs, and their engagement in the educational process is crucial for addressing these challenges effectively.

On the other side, the study identified several constraints students with special needs faced. These included academic difficulties, limited teacher training on special needs, shortage of teaching and learning materials, financial constraints, inadequate inclusive school infrastructure, discrimination, negative social-cultural attitudes, limited counseling services, and limited medical attention. These findings corroborate existing literature highlighting the multifaceted challenges faced by students with special needs in accessing education and social integration (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

The study also explored the existence and effectiveness of legal frameworks and policies on inclusive education in Puntland, Somalia. It found that the Ministry of Education and Higher Education is responsible for developing guidelines, legal frameworks, and practical policies to ensure inclusive education. Two policies, the Special Needs Education Policy (SNE) and the Inclusive Education Policy (IE), were identified. However, some respondents questioned the effectiveness of these policies and

their impact on students with special needs. This finding suggests the need for further examination and improvement of policy implementation for inclusive education (FGS, 2018).

Finally, the study identified three key strategies for accommodating students with special needs in schools. The first strategy, "Teaching and Learning Support," emphasized the importance of teacher training, need-based scholarships, and the provision of learning and teaching materials. The second strategy, "Redesigning School Infrastructure," highlighted the need for inclusive infrastructure, including ramps, accessible doors, corridors, ventilation, flooring, and toilets. The third strategy, "Provision of Welfare, Medical, and Facilities Support," emphasized the importance of medical screening services, assistive devices, and welfare support such as transportation facilities. Additionally, the study emphasized the need for effective implementation of government policies through capacity-building and interagency coordination (Rose & Meyer, 2002; Morningstar et al., 2015; EASNIE, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The research study sheds light on the current situation of students with special needs in Garowe, Somalia, their constraints, and the support available to them. It also examines the existing legal frameworks and guidelines for inclusive education and identifies effective strategies for accommodating students with special needs in schools. The findings align with existing literature and emphasize the importance of school support, parental and community involvement, effective policies, and inclusive strategies to promote the inclusion and well-being of students with special needs. Further efforts are needed to address the identified constraints and improve the implementation of inclusive education policies in Somalia.

Recommendations

Enhance Teacher Training and Improve Access to Learning Materials: Provide comprehensive training programs for teachers to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to support

students with special needs effectively. The shortage of inclusive teaching and learning materials must be addressed by ensuring that schools have adequate resources and tools to cater to the needs of students with special needs.

Enhance Inclusive School Infrastructure: Take steps to make schools more inclusive by redesigning the infrastructure to meet the accessibility needs of students with special needs. This includes installing ramps, accessible doors, corridors, ventilation, flooring, and toilets that are designed to accommodate students with physical disabilities.

Strengthen Parental and Community Involvement: Encourage and support parents and community members to continue playing an active role in nurturing, counseling, and advocating for the rights of students with special needs.

Address Financial Constraints: Allocate sufficient financial resources to support the implementation of inclusive education practices. This includes providing scholarships and financial assistance to students with special needs and allocating funds for the procurement of assistive devices and necessary support services.

Improve Policy Implementation: Conduct a thorough review of existing policies, such as the Special Needs Education Policy (SNE) and the Inclusive Education Policy (IE), to identify gaps and areas of improvement. Ensure effective implementation of these policies through capacity-building initiatives, interagency coordination, and regular monitoring and evaluation.

Expand Counselling and Medical Services: Increase the availability of counseling services and medical attention within schools to address the social, emotional, and medical needs of students with special needs.

Foster Collaboration and Coordination: Promote collaboration and coordination among various stakeholders, including government agencies, schools, parents, community organizations, and NGOs.

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