

The Practice of Using Appropriate Curriculum for Students with Intellectual Disability in two Primary Schools of Gondar City

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Abstract

The aim of the present qualitative case study is to explore teachers' current practice of using appropriate curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities (SwID) in special classes of primary schools in Gondar city. The study involved six special needs education teachers using purposive sampling. The data collected through interviews, classroom observations and document review were analyzed using thematic analysis technique. The analysis revealed four major themes: Conceptualization of curriculum for SwID, the kind of curriculum content being offered, preference of functional curriculum to the academic curriculum and challenges teachers faced during curriculum implementation. Teachers' limited knowledge and skills in adapting curriculum for SwID and consecutively the absence of adapted curriculum for SwID were found to be the major challenges. Implications for practice and recommendations were forwarded including the need for arranging a series of short term training for these teachers to help children with intellectual disabilities that they have the right to quality education using appropriate curriculum.

Keywords: *Intellectual disability, special needs education, teachers, curriculum, academic.*

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Introduction

People with intellectual disabilities have been given different labels, definitions, and classifications throughout human history. They were also denied access to many opportunities including education (Keith & Keith, 2013). They have been ill defined and labeled as those who cannot be educated, but trained. In this study, the concept of intellectual disability (ID) is understood based on the definition given by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAID) and World Health Organization (WHO). The current AAID manual, defines intellectual disability as: *“a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills. This disability originates during the developmental period* (Schalock et al., 2021, p. 1). Based on the above authoritative definition, students with intellectual disabilities (SwID) are those who have limitations in general mental ability, that consists of the ability to reason, solve problems, plan, think abstractly, make judgment, academic learning, comprehend complex ideas and learn from social experience (AAID, 2019; Moljord, 2018). They also have limitations in adaptive behavior that involve daily living skills such as language and communication, social participation, independent living skills across multiple environments, including school (American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2013).

Classification of ID has also shown a shift of emphasis over years from focusing on the severity of the disability—mild, moderate, severe, and profound—to focusing on the intensity of supports required: intermittent, limited, extensive, or pervasive according to AAIDD manual. This has changed the whole conceptualization of ID and its classification system (Harris & Greenspan, 2016).

The development in cognitive functioning and adaptive behavior, requires special educational provisions such as appropriate curriculum, which means a curriculum adapted to students needs and level of intellectual disability such as modifying the curriculum content, which is the focus of the present study. If proper adaptation in the design and delivery of a curriculum is well done for SwID, they can benefit and develop educationally, socially and psychologically in the school system (APA, 2013). Since AAIDD gives equal emphasis to both intellectual and adaptive functioning, the overall functioning of these children may improve over time, if they get proper support (Moljord, 2018). However, due to societal misconceptions about people and the absence of competence to support them, SwID have long been mistreated, excluded and denied access to education (McDonagh, Goodey & Stainton, 2018; Keith & Keith, 2013; Winzer, 2009).

Later, society started to show some humane treatment to people with SwID as a result of changes in social, education philosophy and legislation at international level (Keith & Keith, 2013; Metzler, 2016; Winzer, 1993). Now, children with disabilities, including those with ID have access to a continuum of educational services ranging from special schools to inclusive educational settings. Regardless of educational settings, the main objective of teaching SwID must be preparing them to make a smooth transition to adult life (Alodat, Muhaidat, Algolayla t& Alzboun, 2020) with destination of living an independent life. This can basically be realized based on the type of curriculum they learn.

A Curriculum for Students with mild and moderate Intellectual Disabilities

According to Hanreddya&Östlundb (2020), the term curriculum is broadly defined as “*what happens in the classroom to meet the learning goals defined by the state. This includes: lessons, assignments, and materials teachers use*” (p. 237). Abbott (2014), cited in Ramirez (2021) specifically defined Curriculum as “*...the knowledge and skills students are expected to learn, which includes the learning standards or objectives they are expected to meet; the units and lessons the teachers teach; the assignments and projects given to the students.*” (p. 14). Al-Zboon(2021) also presents a set of curriculum components for students with disability (SwD): “*General and specific outcomes documentation, student textbooks, teacher textbooks and supported learning resources*” (p. 61). In this study, the definition of curriculum is viewed as the content of instruction or what Shurr&Bouck (2013) define as “*the ‘what’ of teaching or knowledge and concepts driving pedagogy and assessment in instruction*” (p. 76). An appropriate curriculum, in the present study, means a curriculum content that is adapted to address the learning needs and capacity of SwID in special class.

Over the decades, there was a shifting philosophy in the field of SNE and legislative acts. Against the backdrop of these changes, the nature of curriculum content also continued to evolve over time, i.e., shifting from developmentally appropriate curriculum to functional curriculum, and now to standards-based curriculum (also called general education or academic curriculum) (Ain, 2018; Downing, 2010; Griffen, 2017).The developmental approach to curriculum was based on the student’s mental age and was used regardless of the chronological age of the person with disabilities. In the developmental model, instruction has failed to

consider the student's chronological age and "*created learning environments that looked very juvenile*" (Downing, 2010, p. 18). Besides, it did not allow for the students acquisition of the skills needed to become independent (Downing, 2010;Griffen, 2017) in their life.The question, "*which type of curricular approach should be appropriate for students with Intellectual disabilities?*" is still a critical one that has been the subject of debate among the professionals in the field, focusing mostly around standards-based(academic) versus functional curriculum models, both of which have significant supports in the field (Ain, 2018;Alodat et al., 2020; Ayres et al., 2011; Courtade et al., 2012).

To see a clear picture of each approach, it is then important to understand the underlying assumptions behind each side of the argument. As a result of the inherent limitations in the developmental model, functional curriculum was introduced and became the dominant curricular content for SwID through the 1980's and 1990's. A functional curriculum is defined as "*a curriculum that focuses upon independent living skills and vocational skills, emphasizing communication and social skills*" (Evans & Fredericks, 1991, cited in Ramirez, 2021, p. 15). Functional curriculum gives emphasis to the general life skills needed for productive and independent living in the community. It includes: self-determination skills, and community participation skills, functional reading and writing (Alodat et al., 2020; Ayres et al., 2011). The whole decision of selecting a curriculum for SwID, of course, needs to be based on their needs and potentials.

According to proponents of functional curriculum (Ayres et al., 2011), to plan a curriculum for SwID, one should take into account the students' current and future needs and learning potentials.They further argue that since students are in a school

for a limited period of time, focusing on a general education curriculum alone may give them no chance to learn functional skills (Ain, 2018). Supporters of this approach (Ain, 2018; Alodat et al., 2020; Ayres et al., 2011), also argue that since limitation in adaptive behavior is one major characteristic of SwID that entails lack of practical, social and conceptual skills that have to be learned and are performed by people in their everyday lives (Schalock et al., 2021), teachers are expected to fill these gaps by setting students' individual education plans (IEP). In this case, a functional curriculum would, then, be the best curriculum model in realizing these goals (Ain, 2018; Moljord, 2018) and meeting the needs of SwID. Besides, proponents of functional curriculum question the content of standards-based curriculum for taking too much time that could have been used for teaching vocational skills, which are important for these students adult lives (Alodat et al., 2020; Ayres et al., 2011). According to Alodat et al. (2020), for example, standards-based curriculum fails to provide these students "*with opportunities to develop skills they will need to succeed after school*" (p. 1238).

Proponents of standards-based curriculum (Courtade et al., 2012) on the other hand, claimed that the content of the curriculum should focus on instruction, assessment, and grading in various core subject areas including language, mathematics, science, social studies, etc. Courtade et al. (2012) put forward seven reasons for why they believe standards-based curriculum is the best curriculum model for SwID. In their first justification, for example, they argue that a standards-based curriculum provides SwID the right to full educational opportunity.. They asserted that to have full access to standards-based curriculum content is a fundamental right of every student. Supporters of SBC stressed the importance of providing an academic curriculum for SWID that

would help them later in life such as getting jobs, and living independently. Courtade et al. (2012) further elaborated that since some jobs require academic knowledge and skills such as mathematics, it is important to provide an academic curriculum for SwID (Almalki, 2018). These authors also defend the use of standards-based curriculum model on the ground that since the academic potential of SwID is still largely unexplored and not yet known, it is not right for teachers to restrict these students from learning academic contents (Courtade et al., 2012).

From the above discussion, it is possible to conclude that both functional curriculum and a standards-based curriculum approaches have sound rationales behind their arguments. Many researchers agree on the importance of using both approaches to help SwID learn effectively. Even proponents of standards-based curriculum (Courtade et al. (2012) admitted that it will be unfair to “*focus on grade-aligned state academic content standards without providing opportunities for community-based instruction and job tryouts*” (p. 4), which is the domain of functional curriculum. Whereas, functional skills enable SwID to integrate themselves within the community they live in and to make important life decisions. The general education /standards-based/ curriculum helps them not only have the right to learn in general-education classrooms with their peers who have no disability, but also develop academic proficiency that is critical to prepare themselves for the world of job. To provide SwID meaningful access to the general education curriculum, teachers must be well prepared (Hanreddya&Östlundb, 2020) to adapt curriculum.

Curriculum Adaptation

Curriculum adaptation refers to “*efforts to modify the way in which content is represented or presented in which the student engages with and responds to the curriculum*” (Lee, et al. 2006, p. 200). Although access to the general education curriculum has often been practiced in the regular classroom, legislations in many countries recommended access to this curriculum regardless of the setting, where students are being educated (Hanreddya&Östlundb, 2020; Jia-Wei, 2014), through curriculum adaptation. Using a content-analytic review method, Moljord (2018) reviewed studies conducted on curricular contents for SwID from 1994 to 2016 and concludes that research articles on standards-based curriculum content had the highest coverage in terms of the number of publications. One possible reason for this could be the “*influence of the ideology of inclusion and access to the general curriculum, which implicitly may shape research interest*” (Moljord. 2018, p. 19).

To enable SwID participate in both general and special education processes and have access to classroom instruction and assessment procedures, they need adaptations (Kurth et al., 2012, cited in Finnerty, 2015; Sarva, 2016). Regarding the curriculum adaption process, scholars propose a number of different strategies. The major curriculum adaptation strategies involve, “*instructional goals, instructional contents, instructional strategies, instructional settings and student behavior needs*” (Jia-Wei, 2014, p. 262). However, according to Hanreddya & Östlundb (2020), many teachers, including SNE teachers, often fail to take into account the strengths and needs of each student, which is the basis for curriculum adaptations.

Some studies documented the problems in the areas of the curriculum and teaching SwID. Alyazori (2017), cited in Al-Zboon’s (2021), for example, reports that the

curriculum for SwID has a low priority in the Arab world, resulting in a lack of resources and funding. Similarly, using content analysis and field observations, Al-Zboon's (2021) study also revealed such challenges as absence of resources as "general framework document, reference book or teacher guidebook to help in designing or delivering the curriculum" (Al-Zboon, 2021, p. 64) that would have increased the ability of teachers to teach SwID.

Another challenge these teachers face is related to lack of competences in designing and delivering curriculum for SwID. According to McBride & Al-Khateeb (2010), cited in Al-Zboon (2021), this is due to lack of teachers' adequate training in curriculum adaptation and their engagement in education without having enough training to teach SwID.

Generally the major challenges SNE teachers face in the implementation of the curriculum for SwID is mainly summarized by Al-Zboon (2021) in his findings: the absence of reliable assessment tools to determine students' current performance levels; teachers' low expectation for SwID, inaccurate diagnosis and categorization of student disabilities; and teachers' inadequate proficiency in adapting the curriculum, to mention some.

The problem is also more evident in Ethiopia as the government official documents clearly attest (MOE, 2012a, 2016). Children with intellectual disabilities have long been among one of the most excluded group from both social life and educational settings, in Ethiopia. This has been confirmed by Kassahun(2014) in a study using survey research design on the nature and difference of prejudice and discrimination society has towards people with various types of disability in a

preparatory school in Addis Ababa. The result shows that the level of prejudice and discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities were stronger than those with other types of disabilities.

To properly address the problems observed in making education accessible for all, including those with ID, the government has taken some important policy measures. The 1994 Education and Training Policy and its revised version (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia [FDRE] (2021), which are all based on the country's constitution, are significant ones. A series of Education Sector Development Programs (ESDP) has also been developed to be implemented within some years interval (from ESDP I to ESDP VI). It was Education Sector Development Program III (ESDP III) (MOE, 2005) and the subsequent programs that gave serious attention to SNE (MOE, 2016). During ESDP III (2005/06-2010/11), the Special Needs/Inclusive Education Program Strategy (MOE, 2006), which is the first of its kind in the country, was launched and was revised later in 2012. According to this strategy, children with severe disabilities are required to receive education in special schools and special classes, attached to regular primary schools (MOE, 2012a) and will be integrated in the regular classroom after completing grades 3 and 4 in special classes, developing basic communication skills

Ethiopia follows three different systems of education: Special schools, integrated schools, and "inclusive education." Special schools are schools for certain category of learners with disabilities such as the deaf, the blind and those with sever and profound ID. In an integrated system, for example, special units/classes are organized within the compound of primary schools and are meant to serve students with severe disabilities in separate classes (MOE, 2016). In *inclusive education*,

children with disabilities are placed in regular classes, supported, fully participated and are expected to become successful like any other children without disabilities, which happens rarely in Ethiopia (Alemayehu, 2016). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2016) also introduced a ten year “Master Plan for Special Needs/Inclusive Education (2016-2025), during which a curriculum review was planned from preprimary to Grade12, which are appeared in the General Education Curriculum Framework (MOE, 2020). This curriculum framework allows teachers to maximize the individual growth and success of each student. The new General Education Curriculum Framework (MOE, 2020),like its predecessor, adopted a competency-based approach, and is intended to be:

a more cross-curricular, thematic, inter-disciplinary and collaborative approach that reflects real life situations and encourages transfer of skills from one learning area to another and discarding an exclusively subject-based approach that favors fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge (MOE, 2020. p. 25)

Following these policy measures, tremendous progress has been made at all level of the education system. For example, the number of students with special needs who had access to education, increased dramatically (MOE, 2021; Getachew, 2004); teacher education programs in all institutions of higher learning are made to offer *Inclusive Education* as a common course, and institutions of teacher education (ITE) have also organized departments to train teachers specialized in special needs/inclusive education from diploma to PhD level (MOE, 2016). Although considerable progress is made in the education of students with special needs,

including those with intellectual disabilities, there is much to be done to realize quality inclusive education for SwID. This is evident from some evaluation reports made at national level. For example, the revised strategy (MOE, 2012a) reveals that there was “no guideline for the implementation of curriculum adaptation and/or modification at the school level” (p. 16). These problems have repeatedly been reported in the ministry of education documents, but no concrete measures were taken to solve it. As a result, some studies show that SwID have faced frequent repetition in grade one and experienced very high dropout rate (Chanie, 2010). To study teachers’ practice in relation to applying appropriate curriculum for SwID is, therefore, critical in understanding how the needs of these students are catered for, in special classes at primary school level. There are some studies in relation to the curriculum for children with intellectual disabilities in a general sense (Ain, 2018; Al-Zboon, 2021; Ayres et al., 2011; Courtade et al., 2012; Downing, 2010; Griffen, 2017; Shurr & Bouck, 2013) but to our knowledge, little research has been conducted on adapting or using appropriate curriculum content for SwID in special units/classes at primary schools in Ethiopia in general, and in Gondar city in particular. Hence, the present study will focus on the research gap related to teachers’ experience in applying appropriate curriculum for SwID in the Ethiopian context, particularly in two primary schools of Gondar city administration.

Statement of the Problem

Although the choice of curriculum content for SwID is central to address their educational needs and potentials (Moljord, 2018), few studies were conducted on special needs education (SNE) teachers’ perception and experiences related to

teaching the curriculum for SwID. Even though SNE teachers are responsible for curriculum adaptation, many experience uncertainty on how to deliver the right support for SwID (Finnerty, 2015).

The problem is more evident in Ethiopia, where there is no official guideline for curriculum adaptation (MoE,2016). To our knowledge, little research has been conducted on adapting or using appropriate curriculum content for SwID in special units/classes at primary schools in Ethiopia in general and in Gondar city in particular. Hence, the present study will focus on the research gap related to teachers' experience in applying appropriate curriculum for SwID.

Ethiopia, a signatory of Salamanca framework for action (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,UNESCO, 1994), issued education and training policy the same year and adopted an inclusive education strategy in 2006 (MoE, 2006). Teacher education for children with disabilities has been offered since 1993; however, the majority of students with intellectual disability still do not get their education through the adapted curriculum; rather, they are forced to follow only standards-based (general education) curriculum without adaptation, that does not consider their mental capacity. Teachers engaged in supporting SwID in Ethiopia have difficulty making curriculum adaptation, for there have been no guideline for curriculum adaptation (MOE, 2012b).

Furthermore, having lived in the Amhara region as a teacher educator for many years in colleges of teacher education,the first author had the opportunity to observe SNE teachers being confused on what contents to teach SwID. Teachers, of course, tried to teach the readymade curriculum for all, regardless of the level of intellectual capacity of the learners in special classes. Many teachers are heard

complaining that the lessons being provided to SwID in primary schools are not meeting their needs and potentials. From the authors' many years of experience in observing SwID, it was also evident that these students were not making progress in their education; rather, they are often neglected, and their learning is largely overlooked or neglected. In fact, their destiny seems to stay in "O" class for more than half a decade in their twenties. As the role of SNE teachers in using appropriate curriculum for SwID is critical, we found it essential to understand their experience and practice from their own perspective through empirical research.

The main purpose of the present study is, therefore, to explore the current practice of using curriculum content for SwID who were reported to have mild and moderate level of ID in special classes of the primary schools in Gondar city with the basic research questions listed below.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the current study and help to explore the experiences of SNE teachers in relation to teaching the curriculum content for SwID in their classroom settings:

1. How do special needs education (SNE) teachers conceptualize curriculum for students with intellectual disability (SwID)?
2. How do SNE teachers describe their experience of teaching the curriculum content for SwID?
3. What difficulties did teacher participants face in teaching SwID?

Methods

To understand SNE teachers' perceptions and practices in dealing with the curriculum content for SwID in special classes, qualitative research methodology was found to be the best approach, which is based on *Interpretive/Constructivist* paradigm. Unlike *positivist/post-positivist* paradigm, the interpretive/constructive paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed that there is no such a thing as single observable reality; rather, there are multiple realities or interpretations of a single phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), in relation of the teaching of teachers and the learning of SwID. Unlike a quantitative research approach, qualitative research gives more detail descriptions of the practical teaching experiences of the teachers in words and meanings rather than numbers (Cohen et al., 2018). This enabled the researchers to effectively explore the complex practices of SNE teachers about the curriculum they were teaching for SwID in two selected primary schools.

Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was used to understand teachers' practices on the appropriateness of the curriculum being taught for SwID in special units of two primary schools in Gondar city. This design allowed us to make an in-depth exploration of teachers' everyday school experience from a holistic perspective (Merriam, 2009). Yin (2014) also defined a case study as an "empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (p. 18), which is also the intention of the present study to describe the details of the phenomenon of the practice of teachers teaching SwID. This design was selected as the most appropriate design, that enabled the researchers to explore teaching which

is a complex social phenomena (Yin, 2018) and focus on “*understanding*” (Merriam, 2009) teachers’ practices in teaching the curriculum for SwID in primary schools.

Research Site

The research was conducted at two primary schools that are found within the jurisdiction of Gondar city administration. Gondar city is a historic city found 724Km northwest of Addis Ababa. We chose the two schools, because they are the only primary schools in Gondar city admitting SwID in special units/classes. Besides, the city is the home town of the first author who is working at the University of Gondar that is situated near the two schools. This helped the first author have easy access to the schools and keep in touch with the participants to collect data going back and forth using ample time and explore in depth. Although teachers in the two special units are serving students with three major types of disabilities (i.e., visual, hearing and intellectual) from grade “O” class to grade 4, those with intellectual disabilities (ID), those who were reported to have mild and moderate ID assigned in “O” class are the primary area of interest for the present study. The problem is more pronounced in teaching these students than students with other disability categories. Progress in education is relatively much better for students with the above mentioned sensory impairments compared to SwID, those are detained in “O” class for years and limited progresses have been observed.

Sampling technique

Purposeful sampling was employed (Patton, 2015) as a technique to select the two schools and the teachers to describe their practice of curriculum implementation for

SwID. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to understand and gain insight into the phenomenon of interest and therefore must select a sample from which someone can learn the most (Patton, 2015), because of their rich experiences in the issue under investigation. Some criteria were set to select the participants (Creswell, 2013). These criteria include that the teachers: should be working as a special needs education (SNE) teacher, in a public primary school at least for more than three years' experience of teaching SwID and is willing to participate in the study. Since qualitative case study research focuses on interpretation and meaning, not on generalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), only six SNE teachers who met the criteria were selected purposefully as potential samples from nineteen SNE teachers in the two primary schools. It was strongly believed that the sampled teachers were key informants as they have served for more than three years which helped us to explore in-depth data (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021).

Instruments

In the present study, three instruments were employed: semi-structured interview, observation and consultation of some documents.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide: The main data collection instrument used in this study was *semi-structured interview*. This instrument helped us to find out what is "*in and on someone else's mind*" (Patton, 2015, p. 426). It also gives more insight into the meanings the practices of the teachers and complexity of their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) in teaching SwID. To gain contextual understanding (Seidman, 2006) of the participants, we developed a semi-structured interview guide based on the research questions and on extensive reviews of literature specific to curriculum for SwID. The interview questions were written

in English and then translated into Amharic language for making communication easier with participants. Some of interview items include: “How do you describe curriculum?” “What kind of curriculum do you use in teaching SwiD?” “Tell me about the kind of curriculum you think is appropriate for SwiD?” “What challenges do you face in using appropriate curriculum for SwiD?” Such open-ended questions of the interview were used to explore in-depth practical experiences of teachers’ on the nature and appropriateness of the curriculum they are teaching for SwiD.

The interviews with teachers were conducted in a separate room in the school compound in order to secure their information. The interview time, place and all conditions were as convenient as possible for participants. Before the interview took place, all necessary information was discussed with the teachers, such as the purpose of the study, the way of securing their information and the like. Then, the first author, conducted the interviews in person in each school setting, in a place and time convenient to the participants. Each interview lasted from 40 to 50 minutes. The data was recorded on audio-tape, and then transcribed for analysis.

Observation checklist: Another instrument we employed in this study was observation checklist that helped to gain additional information about the classroom environment. The observation checklist was recorded by note taking in the actual teaching and learning process in the classroom designated for SwiD. To remain unbiased and refrain from influencing teachers’ behaviors, the first author conducted classroom observations as “an outsider of the group under study...recording data without direct involvement with activity or people” (Creswell, 2013, p. 167). The actual data collection was conducted after strong

rapport was established that has helped to decrease the level of biases on the part of the participants and also helped to collect reliable data for the study. It was finally proved that the participants did consider the data collector as a colleague rather than a supervisor to reduce teachers' bias. The first author observed the six lessons being offered for SwID in each school for about 30 minutes for each lesson. During these classroom observations, the author looked for evidence on the type of curriculum content and instructional strategies being used.

Document analysis: We also found document review yet another important means of data collection for the study. We must first decide what documents are relevant to the present study. We then decided to collect documents that are believed to reflect the participants' instructional practice using appropriate curriculum and the availability of policy guidelines that help teachers execute their roles effectively as major criteria. Accordingly, we reviewed such documents as curricular materials (e.g., lesson plans, subject area manuals, etc.) that highlighted their choices of classroom activities, records of students' profile in each school and relevant national and regional policy documents. By collecting these documents, the first author was able to observe the participants' actual practice in teaching appropriate curriculum for SwID (Patton, 2015)

Data Analysis

In order to gain a deeper insight into the practice of the participants, a thorough data analysis is critical (Creswell, 2013). Attempt was then made to accurately represent the stories and experiences of the participants while teaching the curriculum used

for SWID. Thematic analysis was appropriate for this study, because it enabled us to explore themes and patterns within and across cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yin, 2003). It also provides an opportunity to identify patterns and themes of the issue under investigation that transcends the participants' perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The results of the interviews from teachers were transcribed and translated. The interviews conducted with teachers in the Amharic language were transcribed from the recorded tape as stated by respondents, translated into English, word by word. The transcription and translation were carried out all the time, immediately after data collection is over. The transcribed information in the Amharic language and its translation into English were written down on a notebook, analyzed, typed in a computer using Micro-soft word, and was printed out. The data that appear in transcriptions were selected, focused, abstracted and transformed. The analyzed data were systematically organized and presented to answer the research questions.

For Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis has six phases. These six step-by-step guidelines include: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. We tried to follow this procedure strictly. Applying a multiple case study design, the data were first analyzed on individual responses, under each theme side by side (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and later cross-case analysis was made to identify similarities and differences between the cases based on their relevance to the research questions (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Due to limited space, all the data were not displayed and described. Data reduction helped the analysis to be focused, organized and condensed for final discussion and conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are given due consideration, such as considering confidentiality principle to protect participants from any type of harm. We, for example, used no participants' or schools' actual names in the report. Instead, we assigned letters and numbers to teacher participants (e.g., T1, T2 T3...) and schools (S1 & S2) so as to respect the principle of confidentiality. To maintain the scholarly and scientific standard of the study, we also strictly followed some ethical standards developed by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) and Addis Ababa University.

Trustworthiness /quality of the Study

To ensure the quality or trustworthiness of the study, we used different strategies. One of these is observing credibility principle and maintaining accuracy of responses from each participant (Merriam, 2009). To do this, we consistently applied such strategies as member checks with the participants as well as triangulation throughout the data collection and analysis process. Credibility/validity/ was enhanced by the use of multiple methods for collecting data (e.g. interviews, observation/field notes and document review). Another way of securing trustworthiness was making repeated interviews of the same issues with all the informants after sometime, verification. Furthermore, the findings of the research were also reported in depth along with the basic research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Results

The present study aimed at exploring teachers' practice of using appropriate curriculum for SwID in special classes of the primary schools in Gondar city. The

findings are presented based on the research questions as well as the themes emerged during data analysis. Results and discussion includes demographic characteristics, teachers’ conceptualization and practice of curriculum for SwID and challenges teachers faced during curriculum implementation.

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Table 1 indicates the number and qualification of the research participants in the two sample schools.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Participants

| Qualification | School 1 | | | School 2 | | | Total | | |
|------------------------|----------|----|----|----------|---|---|-------|----|----|
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| 1 st Degree | 1 | 10 | 11 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 2 | 13 | 15 |
| 2 nd Degree | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 4 |
| Total | 1 | 12 | 13 | 1 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 17 | 19 |

Source: Field data (2022); M=Male; F= Female

As indicated in Table 1, only two teachers were males and the rest were females. As to the educational qualification, of all 19 SNE teachers, 15 have 1st degree and four teachers have 2nd degree in SNE. From all SNE teachers in the two schools, six participants were selected as sample, of which three from school 1 (all female) and three from school 2 (1 male and two female) participants. All participants have graduated from SNE departments of different teacher education colleges and universities in the country. This makes them qualified to teach SwID

even though no one was specialized exclusively in teaching SwID or had any practical training after graduation as almost all participants reported during the interview.

From the data gained through interview, observation and the review of students' admission records, it was found that there were students with three major types of disability categories in the special units of the two primary schools: visual impairment, hearing impairment and intellectual disability. The total number of students with these disabilities enrolled in the two schools in the 2022/2023 academic year was 104 (male 72, female 32), of which the majority were those with intellectual disabilities (56). S1 was serving 40 (27 male, 13 female) SwID and S2 had 16 (9 male and 7 female) students. Unlike those with visual and hearing impairment, SwID are all assigned in a single classroom in both schools.

The major findings of the study presented below are based on the research questions as well as the themes evolved as the data analysis was underway. The major themes are: (1) Conceptualization of curriculum for SwID (2) The kind of curriculum content being offered (3) Preference of functional curriculum to the academic curriculum and (4) Challenges teachers faced during curriculum implementation. The subthemes are discussed under each major themes but they are treated separately under the overarching theme: "Theme Four: Challenges Teachers Faced During Curriculum Implementation" The findings will then be discussed with some illustrative quotes taken from teachers' interviews integrated with the data gained through observation and document review.

Theme One: Conceptualization of Curriculum for SwID

In this part, teachers' understanding of the very concept of curriculum, their practice of the specific curriculum contents and the appropriateness of curriculum for SwID are discussed.. With regard to their conceptualization of curriculum, some participants from both schools have defined it from their own perspective as follows: *“Well, I think, curriculum involves the materials with which we deliver our lessons such as student text books and teacher’s guide”* (T4 from S1). Another participant also added: *“It means what students learn in a classroom”* (T2 from S2). Finally, a participant from the same school defines Curriculums : *“To me, curriculum includes both the student text book and teachers’ guide like we have for students in the regular classrooms”* (T1 from S2).

Interview data analysis revealed that all participant teachers seemed to have no comprehensive understanding of a curriculum except mentioning some components of it such as student textbook and teacher’s guide. To know more about the nature of curriculum currently offered to SwID, interview was conducted with participant teachers, classroom observation was made and lesson plans were reviewed and described in the next parts.

Theme Two: The kind of curriculum content being offered

When asked what specific curriculum areas they are actually teaching to SwID at the moment, most participants described what they have actually been doing in the classroom as follows: *“As a teacher of fine arts & handicrafts, I teach my students such skills as fine motor skills as dressing, sewing, etc. Dressing skill, for*

example involves such sequence of activities as buttoning & unbuttoning; fastening; zipping; tying one's shoes, etc.”(T2). Another participants from school 1 also added, “I'm now teaching general physical exercise which includes such contents as running, jumping, various games and other related physical activities that help to develop their gross motor skills” (T5).

Form the document review, it was also confirmed that SNE teachers choose curriculum contents selected arbitrarily, i.e., based on what they think was right for SwID, not based on official curricular material. These subjects include: Amharic language (reading and writing), mathematical skills, daily living skills (hygiene or sanitation), physical exercise, fine arts, handicrafts, and social skills, for which annual, weekly and daily lesson plans need to be developed. The annual plan for each subject area was designed at the unit level at the beginning of the school year from which each individual teacher would develop a weekly lesson plan for their specific subject. All teachers were found to have weekly lesson plans but no daily lesson plans at all. Why teachers did not prepare daily lesson plans? A participant explained it as follows: *“I don't have a daily lesson plan, because I believe that it is difficult for SwID to learn or master these skills in a short period of time. We all agree on this issue” (T3 from S2).* Similarly another teacher commented: *“We find it impractical to design a daily lesson plan because SwID are unable to easily understand even a single alphabet or number. To your information, what we plan for a week will often be repeatedly taught for a month or two” (T1 from S2).*

The data analysis also revealed that all participants in the two schools identified six curriculum contents for SwID with minor difference. For example,

while participants of S1 teach a subject simply called “fine arts” the nomenclature given to this subject by S2 is “fine arts and handicrafts” the rest five subjects are all the same. A list of subjects mentioned by teachers was not based on an official curriculum guideline. They just teach the contents of each subject as part of the curriculum based largely on their personal choice, for there is no curriculum framework document specifically adapted for SwID. These subjects were initially taken from a short training manual or trial curriculum that was prepared at a workshop in 1994. It was the school director of one of these two schools who brought a copy of the manual after attending that workshop. Then, those who were teaching in the school, where this director was in charge, have tried to adapt it to their school context.

Theme Three: Preference of functional curriculum to the academic curriculum

The participant teachers were asked about the appropriate curriculum for SwID. Almost all participant teachers in the present study seemed to favor the functional curriculum as presented in the following ways: *“I believe vocational and life skills are more important than academic skills in my classroom context. I think these children need more than reading and writing. They need to have vocational skills that are meaningful to their lives”* (T1). Another participant also added: *“Most of these students are not good at academic subjects. For some, it takes a year or two to learn even the first two Amharic letters. In my classroom, I have just two students out of 40 who can perform well in reading and writing Amharic letters* (T4).

Similarly, another participant from S1 was critical of the provision of too much emphasis to academics for those students who are adolescents and fit for doing

vocational activities, “*Given their productive age and physical fitness, I think it’s a waste of time to keep them for years, here in the same grade-level, just for reading and writing Amharic letters* (T6). The data from classroom observations and records of students’ profile also confirmed that most of the students in SwID classroom were adolescents having good physical strength and some of them are capable of doing amazing physical activities such as sports, watering plants, but, had difficulty reading letters or numbers. Almost all of them have been in the same classroom for more than five years attending lessons that are more of pre-primary in their contents. Detaining SwID in the same class for five years is not morally acceptable for any one and it is more frustrating for parents and teachers who are engaged in serving these children.

Theme Four: Challenges Teachers Faced During Curriculum Implementation

Teachers were asked about the challenges they have faced in relation to the curriculum they are teaching. The major challenges SNE teachers were facing in teaching SwID were found to be the absence of adapted curriculum, teachers’ lack of competence to adapt curriculum and lack of resources.

Subtheme One: Absence of a curriculum designed for SwID

The majority of participants singled out the designed or adapted specifically for SwID as the most serious problem as presented in the following ways: “*We do not have any textbook, manual or teacher’s guide. I, for example, teach my students entirely based on the lesson plan that we always design at the department/unit/ level using our common understanding and agreement among ourselves*” (T1). T5 was

also of the same opinion: *“There is no curriculum or manual prepared specifically for SwID as such. The only material that has been serving as a manual for teaching SwID is the one prepared in a workshop held more than 30 years ago. That piece of paper is not even adequate and it has not been updated since then”*. Some teachers from S2 describe that they do not even know the existence of such a manual at all, as disclosed by one of the participant: *“Even though we teach similar subjects with S1, we have no uniform contents or methods of teaching. So it is a critical to have a standardized curriculum or manual that describes the contents or subject areas that are appropriate for SwID”* (T3).

From the data obtained through classroom observation and document review, it was found out that the curriculum material available were minimal. There were only annual and weekly lesson plans, which were often designed based on what they assumed was appropriate, not on any standards of curricular document. In fact, most teachers depend on lesson plans they developed based entirely on their personal experience.

Subtheme Two: Lack of teacher’s professional competence

Most participants reported the importance of having a curriculum designed specifically for SwID because they find it difficult to adapt the general education curriculum as they often do to teach students with other disability category. This was due largely to lack of professional competence in curriculum adaptation, among other things. The data analysis revealed that there were three major areas in which SNE teachers reported to have poor professional competences: subject area

knowledge, designing and using individual education plan (IEP) and curriculum adaptation as participants from the two schools obviously admitted:

The first challenge identified by participants was related to **subject area knowledge** as reported by participants: *“We don’t know what to teach and how to teach. For example, I’m currently teaching fine arts, but, I had no background knowledge or training on it. First I had hard time drawing a simple picture on the chalkboard.”* (T6)

Another from school 1 also reflected: *“The subjects or contents we are currently teaching are designed based simply on an agreement among the staff. We identified contents that we believe are appropriate to the level of SwID capacity with no sound assessment”* (T5).

Most teachers also experienced difficulty in **designing IEP**, as one participant obviously admitted: *“My lesson plan is for the whole class and I don’t use IEP, because, it is very difficult to implement in a class of 40 students. It is just impractical. By the way, I also teach students with other disabilities in other classes in addition to SwID”* (T1). Another participant also added, *“ Basically, I don’t use IEP for my students simply because I have no sufficient skill to design IEP”* (T4).

With regard to **curriculum adaptation**, unlike the ones being offered to students with visual impairment and hearing impairment, the contents currently being taught for SwID are not related to the general education curriculum, as described by almost all participants: *“We actually don’t use the regular curriculum, because it is too difficult for SwID to understand. Even if we want to adapt it, we*

have no skill and knowledge to do that because we had no training on curriculum adaptation” (T6).

T1 from school two was also of the opinion:

If I want to teach grade one text book of the regular class, it will be difficult to apply it in classroom for SwID. Besides, I do not know how to adapt the curriculum, based on needs and potentials of SwID. There should be a series of in-service teacher training in curriculum and current teaching strategies for those providing educational service for SwID.

I don't actually use the general education curriculum, simply because they are too difficult for SwID to understand. Besides, I had no professional competence in adapting the regular curriculum. There is no adapted/designed curriculum in our region. This makes the learning of children and our teaching waste of time (T4).

Generally, data from the interview revealed that most SNE teachers from the two schools consider themselves as having inadequate professional knowledge and skills in the specific area such as knowledge in each subject areas, in developing IEP and curriculum adaptation which are all important to meet the needs of students with intellectual disability. Besides the incompetence of the teachers, there are also scarcities of resources to fully accommodate the learning of SwID and meet their needs. The shortage of appropriate instructional resources was yet another challenge SNE teachers encountered in relation to implementing the curriculum as indicated

by participants in both schools: *“As a teacher of fine arts & handicrafts, I teach my students such skills as fine motor skills as dressing, sewing, etc. To do these activities, we need some materials and facilities”* (T5). A participant from another school also emphasized: *“The school I am teaching is a resource center/a cluster schools. There are some instructional media in the resource room, but they are very few in number and, above all, they are not designed specifically for SwID”* (T1). Furthermore, data analysis of resource room observations and school document reviews also revealed that the shortage of instructional materials are relatively more evident in S1 than S2 because the later has been selected and funded by the Amhara regional government as part of its project to expand the resource centers that serve the surrounding satellite schools.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to explore teachers’ practice of using appropriate curriculum for SwID in special classes at the primary schools in Gondar city. This study used qualitative case study design to describe the current practice of curriculum for SwID from the teachers’ perspective. In this section, the main findings are presented interwoven with theories and our own theoretical and practical knowledge. Some selected literature reviews were also used to discuss the findings. The findings are then presented based on the research questions as well as the themes evolved as the data analysis was underway. As a result, four major themes emerged as discussed below.

Conceptualization of Curriculum for SwID

The findings reveal that the majority of participants had a limited knowledge of what curriculum means and define it in its narrow sense. Some of them, for example, consider textbooks and teacher's guide as the only components that constitute a curriculum as the data from the interview indicated. Curriculum as the sum total of all experiences learners undergo during school life (Igbokwe et al., 2014). According to another author:

Curriculum is the totality of experiences that a pupil receives through the manifold activities that go on in the school, classroom, library, laboratory, workshop, playgrounds and in numerous informal contacts among pupils, peer, teachers, parents, family members as well community members (Taneja, 2012, p. 292).

In sum, curriculum is regarded as all learning experiences a learner has under the guidance of a teacher.

The Kind of Curriculum Content Being Offered

In actual practices, the curriculum areas being taught in special classes of the primary schools in Gondar city are a combination of both academic (reading, writing and mathematical skills) and functional skills (daily living skills, social skills, motor skills, etc) The functional skills were relatively more favored and practiced by teachers compared to the teaching of academy. Although a new curriculum framework was introduced in Ethiopia in 2010 and its revised version in 2020 (MOE, 2020), the curriculum says little about the inclusive education of SwID. Absence of

inclusion means, SwID are admitted to school, but without receiving support, full participation and the achievements of the learners, inclusion cannot be in a place (Alemayehu, 2016). Practically, however, these students are currently learning different curriculum contents separately in special classes, where we can say little about inclusive education.

Teachers from the two schools utilized curriculum that they had developed themselves. The self-developed curriculum focuses on teaching academic skills and life skills. Many participants reported that it took a week or a month for SwID to learn even a single Amharic letter.

Teachers Favored Functional Curriculum over Academic Curriculum for SwID

The need to identify appropriate curricular content has long been an important issue in the field of SNE in general and for students with intellectual disability in particular (Ain, 2018; Bobzien, 2014). In the present study, almost all participants seemed to favor the functional curriculum as more appropriate for SwID, even though they do not call it by name as such. For example, one participant from S1 was critical of the provision of too much emphasis to academics for those students who are adolescents and physically fit to do vocational activities, *“Given their productive age and physical fitness, I think it’s a waste of time to keep them for years here in the same grade-level teaching writing letters or numbers”* (T6 from S1).

Some studies, of course, concur with the present study’s findings on relative importance of functional curriculum over academic curriculum for students with severe intellectual disabilities (Almalki, 2018; Alodat et al., 2020), for it was thought

that it could help these students engage in the vocational activities to achieve independence and success in their future lives (Ayres et al. 2011). Many studies show that curriculum adaptation provides increased access to learning content among SwD (Zhang et al., 2014; Buli-Holmberg et al., 2014); adaptation helps SwID to develop potential at their own level (Zhang et al., 2014); education should be adapted to the abilities and aptitudes of individual learners (BuliHolmberg, et al., 2014). This means, modifications in the curriculum conveyance allows learners with various learning needs to access the content. Hence, Teachers should have adequate capacity to adapt curriculum and make differentiation in the curriculum implementation to meet the needs SwID.

But the fact that some teachers described their belief that the nature of curriculum to be offered to SwID should be easy and should focus on such simple daily living skills; not on academic subjects, irrespective of the severity of their disabilities (Courtade et al., 2012) because this leads teachersto have low expectations to all SwID including even those with mild ID. Low expectations are often considered to be factors negatively affecting the progress of SwID (McGrew & Evans, 2004). This is tantamount to ascribing students' failure solely to their intellectual limitations instead of looking for other factors such as faulty teaching methods and inaccessible school environment, etc. Saad et al. (2015), cited in Al-Zboon (2021), indicate that there is *“a high probability of mastering this content, if SwID are provided with materials of interest to them throughout the learning process”* (p. 60). Teachers should have adequate knowledge and skills to meaningfully adapt curriculum in relation to the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of children (Caengolosi, 2015). In general, in adapting a

curriculum teachers should have adequate competences that help them to offer differentiating instruction, modifying resources, adjusting the learning environment and differentiating assessment as SwID learn and make progress, instead of detaining them in grade one for half a decade.

Challenges SNE teachers face in teaching curriculum for SwID

The other major finding is related to challenges teachers faced in teaching curriculum appropriate for SwID which include: absence of curriculum adaptation for SwID, lack of teachers' professional competence and lack of resources.

The data analysis reveals that there are almost no officially recognized curriculum resources available for SwID. This finding is contrary to the principle and practice in many countries as many studies (Ain, 2018; Bassey, 2020), confirm that curriculum standards are available in almost many countries to provide a clear guideline for schools in the development of appropriate curriculum for SwID. This means SwID in the study are not provided with adapted curriculum to learn according to their needs and potentials.

Additionally, lack of teacher training on how to adapt curriculum, such as adjusting teaching materials, methodologies and handling large class sizes made learning of SwID difficult (Faiz et al. (2019). Similar study also indicated that in many local schools, teachers in Jordan were found to be not familiar with the adaptation of the curriculum (Manley, 2018). The education of children with intellectual disabilities appears to be the most neglected one and need serious attention. The curriculum should be adapted to the level of their potentials so that they can progress in their learning and lead independent life.

It was then observed in the two schools that the curriculum being used included those subject areas whose contents were randomly selected by teachers themselves. These subjects were based more on what teachers assumed appropriate rather than on any official standard curricular document. Lesson plans were often designed accordingly. This is because of the absence of both curriculum framework document for SwID as well as a guideline for the implementation of curriculum adaptation and/or modification at the school level (MOE, 2012b), which are both critical in identifying the curriculum objectives and contents as well as in designing and delivering the curriculum (Al-Zboon, 2020). In fact, the data analysis shows that most teachers use lesson plans they developed based entirely on their experiences, rather than following certain guidelines.

The data analysis revealed that there were three major areas in which SNE teachers reported to have lack of professional competence: (1) the content of a subject area, (2) IEP development and (3) curriculum adaptation as participants from the two schools reported. This finding is in line with previous study (Al-Zboon, 2021) that focuses on the low level of professional competence regarding curriculum related issues among SNE teachers. Participants of this study were expected to adapt the curriculum for SwID from five perspectives: instructional goals, instructional content, instructional strategies, instructional settings, and student behavioral needs (Jia-Wei, 2014)

Most participants also admitted that they have lack of *subject area knowledge (content)*. Curriculum content is not, of course, the only core element of the whole teaching and learning process, but it is also a critical aspect of curriculum development and adaptation (Bassey, 2020). Therefore, it is important for teachers

to have a mastery over the contents of the curriculum they were teaching because unless they have adequate knowledge on the contents of the curriculum, it would be difficult for them to deliver it in a manner suitable to students' needs and potentials.

Designing and implementing IEP is another skill area, where many participants identified as yet another challenge. IEP is of critical importance in realizing the educational progress of this group of students (Al-Zboon, 2021). Since IEP is a part of a curriculum, it was important to see how teachers apply it in a classroom for SwID. The results revealed that all teachers from both schools do not develop IEP for SwID because of three reasons: the first one is due to the large class size (e. g., as much as 40 students in a class in School 1); teachers' workload and lack of skill and knowledge to design IEP. If SNE teachers do not have adequate pedagogical knowledge and feel ill-prepared to teach SwID, they were more likely to, "*adopt a deficit-view of the students with severe disabilities and have low expectations for academic achievement*" (Eswine, 2021, p.34).

Teachers' inadequate professional knowledge on areas related to curriculum adaptation to address individual needs of their students is also a serious problem that teachers from the two schools identified. This was attributed to: poor college preparation and lack of in-service training in this particular area, lack of teachers' guidelines for curriculum adaptation, absence of published relevant reference materials that help teachers update themselves on the current teaching strategies appropriate and scarcity of instructional resources hampered the education of SwID. This finding is similar to other related studies that came out with the same finding that SNE teachers were facing a challenge in developing and implementing effective teaching strategies by adapting and integrating the general education

curriculum with functional life skills for SwID (Al-Zboon, 2021; Asaaju, 2015; Bobzien, 2014; Faiz et al., 2019).

Implications

As the result shows, teacher education institutions should recognize the urgent need for improving SNE teachers' knowledge and skill in identifying and adapting appropriate curriculum for SWID. The schools in collaboration with the nearby colleges and local education authority (Woreda) should give more attention to professional development programs for teachers and organize a series of workshops to update teachers' professional and practical skills in designing and implementing curriculum for SWID. Furthermore, the study suggests that local education authority should avail resources such as equipment and facilities necessary for schools so that the individual needs of SWID will be met. Finally, the study suggests that it would be essential for SNE teachers to make themselves updated with the current knowledge and skills on current trends in curriculum for SWID by consulting the latest literature and sharing from each other's experiences on a regular basis.

Conclusions

The findings show that six curriculum contents were being offered to SwID, which were partly self-developed, not based on an official curriculum guideline or the general education curriculum. In actual practice, the curriculum contents being taught in special classes of the primary schools in Gondar city were a combination of both academic skills and functional skills. There were no official standardized curriculum or adapted curriculum for SwID and SNE teachers were teaching contents that they believe are convenient for the students. Almost all participant

teachers favored the functional curriculum as appropriate for SwID that includes daily living skills, keeping personal hygiene and doing physical exercises but not on academic subjects. Lack of teachers's professional competencies in curriculum adaptation, subject matter knowledge and designing individual education plan (IEP) were the major challenges which were attributed to poor college preparation and lack of in-service training as well as absence of a guideline for curriculum adaptation and a chronic shortage of instructional materials necessary for supporting students with intellectual disability.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is not without limitation. In a case study research design like this, the small sample size and the involvement of teachers only as participants cannot make the findings generalizable to other contexts. Even though qualitative research cannot be statistically generalized, this does not mean that there is no information to be learned from a qualitative inquiry (Merriam, 2009). Anyways, to make the study more comprehensive and complete, further study need to be designed involving parents of SwID, SwID themselves, school principals and experts from local authority.

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