Lived Experiences of Social Inclusion and Exclusion of Visually Impaired Students at Two Public University Campuses and Classrooms in Ethiopia

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Abstract: The main purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of social inclusion and exclusion among visually impaired students enrolled at regular undergraduate programs at Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities. A descriptive phenomenological study design with a qualitative research approach was employed. To collect data for the inquiry, we utilized a one-on-one semi-structured interview guide with 8 participants (4 males and 4 females from 20-23 years of age) who were selected using purposive sampling technique. The interview data were analyzed thematically based on the framework of descriptive phenomenological research as provided by P. Colaizzi. Findings reveal that visually impaired students were experiencing both social inclusion and exclusion in the same classroom settings and campuses. To this end, the article concluded that social exclusion is still a threat to visually impaired students in the universities selected for this study. Most of all, two points were drawn from the study: (a) Though physically placed together with fully sighted peers, visually impaired students are encountering moments of both inclusion and exclusion in the same classrooms and campus, (b) Classrooms and campuses where they pursue their education are not social exclusion-free environments. To alleviate these problems, awareness creation, inclusive teaching strategies training for teachers, and creating an accessibility policy are important in addressing social exclusion and thereby building on the existing social inclusionary practices in higher education classrooms and campuses.

Keywords: Social inclusion, Social exclusion, Accessibility policy, Higher education, Colaizzi's method

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Background of the Study

The notion of social inclusion and exclusion are inseparable sides of the same coin (Apie & Moses, 2019). These concepts are multidimensional and dynamic and subsequently lack a precise definition (Levitas et al., 2007). In the context of disability, social inclusion and exclusion are understood from the perspectives of the inclusion/exclusion of persons with disabilities (Islam, 2015). In education contexts, social inclusion and social exclusion are vastly understood from the perspectives of the inclusion and exclusion of students with disabilities (SWDs) in the inclusive education setups (Beteinaki, 2019). More importantly, available literature shows that education settings such as higher education institutions (HEIs) are presently viewed through an inclusive lens and avenues of exclusionary trajectories (Sanger, 2020).

In the Ethiopian schooling system, certainly, the SWDs who have the opportunity to attend HEIs have access to physical spaces in the classrooms and campus settings as other students without disabilities. Studies revealed that the physical placement of such groups of students in education settings does not necessarily warrant their full social inclusion. In this regard, the recent research on disabilities conducted by Heyder, Sudkamp and Steinmayr (2020) stated the following: *"…all students should feel good, valued, and accepted by their learning environment, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, cultural or other conditions"* (p.1). This implies that the physical placement of these students in inclusive education systems, together with other non-disabled peers *per se,* does not guarantee their full and real social inclusion. This shows that real social inclusion should be more than physical placement (Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018).

Relatedly, prior researchers also noted that true social inclusion needs to be *holistic*, which involves social inclusion, academic inclusion, and psychological inclusion (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018; Dimitrova-

Radojichikj, 2018). Likewise, Ethiopian researchers chiefly expressed their dreads that SWDs who are physically included in education settings are still susceptible to social exclusion (Teferi, 2016; Getachew, 2018; Asmerom, 2019). Nevertheless, in an earnest attempt to promote social inclusion, public universities have embedded different policy issues and provisions, and legislatively proclaimed the rights of their SWDs. For instance, Debre Berhan University has its own bill to provide equalization of opportunities for its SWDs in their social and academic lives (Debre Berhan University Senate Legislation, 2012). Additionally, Addis Ababa University has determined that all SWDs have equal rights to lead an active and independent campus life as able-bodied students (Addis Ababa University Senate Legislation, 2019).

It seems that other HEIs also announced institutional disability rights provisions, legislative actions, or programs that significantly play roles in the equalization and inclusion of their SWDs. However, empirical studies uncovered that SWDs, including those with visual impairment, are still facing the challenges of social exclusion that seriously impact real inclusionary practices in the classrooms or outside of the classrooms (Tirusew *et al.,* 2014; Yohannes, 2015; Biniam, 2016; Asmerom, 2019). By synthesizing the evidence from studies, it was indicated that, although the Ethiopian education system has significantly progressed towards social inclusion, students with disabilities (SWDs), particularly those with severe visual impairment, remain at a higher risk of social exclusion. This was a reminder of the imperative to closely observe and record in-depth, descriptive accounts of visually impaired students' experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the classrooms and campuses of the chosen higher education institutions (HEIs).

Statement of the Problem

Interestingly, enrolling visually impaired students in higher education settings is an enormously important opportunity for them to form

instantaneous social networks, participate in activities, and develop friendships. Nevertheless, it is quite certain to generate an assertion based on research evidence that these students are at significant risk of being socially excluded (Tirusew *et al.,* 2014; Yohannes, 2015; Teferi, 2016; Biniam, 2016; Getachew, 2018; Asmerom, 2019; Beteinaki, 2019; Heyder *et al.,* 2020). A synthesis of the empirical evidence reveals that, although physically integrated with their non-disabled peers, students with disabilities (SWDs) experience social exclusion as a reality that cannot be excluded. This led us to the firm conviction captured by the familiar proverb, "Being in the same boat doesn't mean rowing in the same direction." That is, though visually impaired students physically occupy the same mainstream learning spaces as totally sighted students, they are nonetheless socially excluded. Hence, we understood that we had to look very closely at their lived experiences of exclusion and inclusion in the broader picture of the higher learning institutions.

Therefore, studying social inclusion and exclusion among visually impaired students who are pursuing their studies at Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities constitutes the crux of the issue of the present study. Our interest in conducting the study comes from professional enthusiasm to show efforts toward addressing the problem of social exclusion. Inevitably, we found it more imperative that unless the experiences on the phenomenon are documented, and evidence-based awareness is created about the issue of social exclusion, it will undoubtedly affect our efforts to promote social inclusion, and thus effectively implement quality inclusive education in the selected education settings. In a related view, we strongly believe that leaving it unstudied would aggravate exclusionary practices that can threaten the realization of the future agenda of building an inclusive university, which is one of the national priority areas of the country (MOE, 2017). There are many studies conducted at the primary and secondary levels on visually impaired students in Ethiopia, mainly in relation to their educational provisions. These studies utilized descriptive and case study designs. However, as far as our knowledge is concerned, there

are no studies conducted in higher education institutions utilizing a phenomenological design. This is a research gap we have observed and are thus inspired to investigate.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following principal research question: *How do visually impaired students describe their experiences of social inclusion and exclusion in the classrooms and campuses of Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities?* Specifically, the study sought to answer the following basic research questions:

1. What are the experiences of social inclusion for visually impaired students in the classrooms and campuses of Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities?
2. What are the experiences of social exclusion for visually impaired students in the classrooms and campuses of Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities?

Definition of Key Terms

Social Inclusion: A process whereby persons with disabilities have full access to academic or social activities, social roles and relationships, as well as having valued presence, and equal opportunity to participate in social set-ups at higher education institutions that are commonly available to other individuals without disabilities.

Social Exclusion: The denial of, or limited access to, academic or social activities, goods and resources, social relationships, and restrictions in the equalization of opportunities to participate in higher education social-and-academic set-ups.

Accessibility policy: Policy instruments and legal frameworks that set out what needs to be done to ensure accessibility issues for persons with disabilities.

Higher education: Education offered to students who attend programs leading to the award of a diploma, first degree, second degree, or doctoral degree in Ethiopia.

Colaizzi's method: A step-wise interview data analysis framework that can mostly be utilized by phenomenological research methodologists.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences of visually impaired students' social inclusion and exclusion. To meet this aspiration, we employed a qualitative research methodology that specifically applies a descriptive phenomenological research design. Phenomenological qualitative research is used in this study as it best fits to investigate their perceptions and attitudes towards a group of people identified by sight loss. Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience, as a group of people experiences with their peers of different identities (Van Manen, 1997). It focuses on how blindness is perceived in consciousness to uncover the internal meaning structures of lived experiences (Van Manen, 2017). Creswell (2007) also indicated that the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology of different writers rest on some common grounds: the study of the lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones, and the development of descriptions of the essence of these experiences. The main goal of phenomenology is to create an understanding of the socially constructed realities in the past and how they are exactly formed (Vettori, 2018). In the present study, the phenomenological method

was used to examine the social inclusion and exclusion of visually impaired students in two higher education institutions (Lueger & Vettori, 2014).

Research Settings

The present study was conducted in two university campuses and classrooms: Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities. Addis Ababa University, established in 1950, is the oldest university in Ethiopia and a pioneer in admitting more than 100 visually impaired students every year for many decades, and also a large number of students with disabilities in Africa. It has rich experiences and the oldest history of enrollment of visually impaired students, almost all of whom are admitted to the Social Sciences stream at the main campus, Sidist Kilo. The campus boasts four colleges —Social Sciences, Humanities, Law, and Education.

On the other hand, Debre Berhan University is one of the second-generation universities in the country, officially established in 2007 in the city of Debre Berhan. The university also admits about fifty students with visual impairment every year. The rationale for sampling these two universities includes the accessibility to the research participants and the convenience of their location. These universities are relatively better resourced and experienced in admitting visually impaired students, together with sighted ones, in the undergraduate regular education program. The selection was also partly attributed to the different geographical locations and historical backgrounds of the universities, which entice the interest to explore the common experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the two discrete universities, basically not to compare, but rather to investigate the phenomena common to participants in the two universities. In this study, Addis Ababa University is coded as “1”, and Debre Berhan as “2”.

Participants and Sampling Technique

In phenomenological studies, researchers often utilize purposeful sampling techniques (Creswell, 2007), using a criterion-based selection strategy to make participants eligible for the research (Patton, 2002). Therefore, we sampled the participants using a purposive sampling technique from among the visually impaired students in the target universities.

The descriptive phenomenological approach requires a relatively small number of participants for a detailed and in-depth investigation of the phenomenon under study (Morrow et al., 2015), with the number ranging from 5 to 25. In our case, participants consisted of 8 visually impaired students (3 females and 5 males).

Accordingly, 2 males and 2 females were selected from Addis Ababa University, and the other 3 males and 1 female were selected from Debre Berhan University. All of the participants were from senior batches because it is likely that the longer they stayed in the universities, the more they would have experience with social inclusion and exclusion, and the better they might know the phenomena under study. The inclusion criteria to purposefully select the participants included: (i) all participants had to be visually impaired with no additional disabilities; (ii) all participants had the onset of vision loss either congenitally or adventitiously; (iii) all participants had to be able to understand and speak Amharic language; (iv) all participants had to be non-freshman students (i.e., 2nd year and above) and (v) all had to be Addis Ababa or Debre Berhan University students. All were willing to take part in the study. A detailed description of their background and academic information is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Summary of demographic characteristics and academic information of participants

Name	Sex	Age	Onset of Blindness	Field of Study	Year of Study	Current Institution
Aster	F	23	After birth	SLGG	UG 4th year	University 1
Agumase	M	22	After birth	SLGG	UG 3rd year	University 1
Sunny	F	20	At birth	SNE	UG 2nd year	University 1
Endashaw	M	21	After birth	English	UG 2ndyear	University 1
Belew	M	22	After birth	CEE	UG 2nd year	University 2
Shibire	F	23	After birth	Sociology	UG 2nd year	University 2
Yimer	M	23	At birth	SLGG	UG 4th year	University 2
Be'amlak	M	23	At birth	SLGG	UG 4th year	University 2

Note:

- All names used are pseudonyms.
- University names are code names.
- F- Female, M- Male, SNE- Special Needs Education, CEE- Civic and Ethical Education, SLGG- School of Law and Good Governance, UG- Undergraduate

Data Collection Tools

We were entirely responsible for developing the interview guide and the interview questions, too. The guide starts with an introduction that involves the description of the aim of the study in general and the purpose of the interview in particular. It has four parts. Part one provides background information and the previous history of participants. It specifically involves their general or demographic information such as gender, age, date and place of birth, the onset of

blindness, year of study and department, and also their home-related environments, their early childhood life, and pre-tertiary schooling experiences. Part two focuses on their previous inclusionary and exclusionary experiences at home and school. Part three consists of the main part of the guide. It involves a series of key semi-structured interview questions organized based on the research questions, experience of social inclusion and exclusion, challenges related to social exclusion, and strategies of addressing social exclusion.

The data were collected via one-on-one semi-structured interviews following an interview schedule (guide). The interviews were held in the Amharic language, and the responses were audio-recorded and noted, as well. All interviews took place at a time and place where the participants felt comfortable discussing the issue. In Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenology design, the interview is a tool to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' views or perspectives (Patton, 2002). Thus, a face-to-face in-depth interview with open-ended questions is a common data collection instrument to explore the inside perspectives and feelings of participants who have experienced the phenomenon (Morrow et al., 2015). Other researchers also noted that in most instances, the typical method of data collection for phenomenological studies is an in-depth, open-ended one-on-one interview (Seidman, 2006).

Consistent with this idea, we employed in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews as a principal data gathering tool to sufficiently explore the lived experiences related to social inclusion and exclusion among participants. The interviews were more exploratory and focused on the research questions. More specifically, the questions, in addition to social inclusion and exclusion, covered challenges that create conditions that reinforce social exclusion, and addressed social exclusion in higher education campuses and classrooms. As highlighted below, the interview data were collected based on the interview guide. We listened to the participants' voices and carefully considered their perspectives, stories, and beliefs on their lived

experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. In short, we mainly utilized an emic perspective in combination with etic narrations throughout the analysis.

Procedures of Data Collection

The following sequential steps were carefully utilized for the whole interview process: First, the authors contacted each participant in person through their cell phones. The initial meeting helped us seek their consent to participate in the study, and gave them access to set a time and place for the actual interview. Once this was done, each of them was cordially invited to choose a pseudonym for themselves. They were told that they could respond to the questions as they felt and understood. Then, we wound up the process of data collection after we determined no new interview data were gained from the participants, or when repetition of the narratives of the participants occurred. As quoted in Seidman (2006), "Saturation is the point at which there is no more or new information coming in from the research participants" (p. 55). In attempting to achieve this point of saturation, 4–5 interviews were done with each participant, each approximately one hour long. We followed the interview guide rigidly during the process so that all the participants were questioned in the same order with the same questions. Although each of the individual interview sessions took 50–60 minutes on average, the entire data gathering exercise was conducted over another three months to facilitate the multiple interview sessions as well as to achieve depth and clarity in the participants' responses.

Second, the process of scheduling the interviews was accomplished in collaboration with the participants. By default, all the interviews began at Addis Ababa University, and the interview held at one institution was used as a base for further interview processes in the other institution. Upon the completion of each interview session, we provided heartfelt thanks and appreciation for their time and cooperation, and reminded them that they will come back for other interview sessions. Then we

performed translation and verbatim transcription as part of preliminary analysis tasks. We translated the interviews collected in Amharic narrative into English for data display.

Methods of Data Analysis

This study employed a thematic qualitative method of data analysis, applying the Colaizzi framework analytical procedures to establish common themes and sub-themes of the participants' experiences. The descriptive phenomenology used a thematic approach to analyze the interview data to satisfy a scientific method.

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method of data analysis, which involves the seven distinctive steps of analyzing interview data. The steps are depicted in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Colaizzi's sequential steps of phenomenological data analysis

Steps	Descriptions
Step 1: Familiarization	We familiarized ourselves with the data by reading through all the participants' accounts several times.
Step 2: Extracting significant statements	We identified significant sentences that pertain to the research questions and then recorded them on a separate sheet, noting the page and line number.
Step 3: Formulating meanings from significant statements	We created direct or explicit meanings from each significant statement identified in step 2.
Step 4: Identifying themes	We organized the formulated meanings into clusters of themes based on conceptual similarities.
Step 5: Writing an exhaustive description	We developed the write-up that consisted of an overall description of the themes related to the phenomenon.
Step 6: Identifying the essential structure of the phenomenon	We developed a composite description of the final essence of the phenomenon.
Step 7: Returning to participants for validation	We returned to each participant with a copy of the findings to validate the trustworthiness of the study.

Ensuring Trustworthiness in the Study

To demonstrate the credibility and/or trustworthiness of the findings, we employed the member checking strategy (i.e., Colaizzi's 7th step of descriptive phenomenological data analysis). The trustworthiness of the findings was verified through prolonged engagement in the data collection; processing; participant checking through debriefing with peers and professional colleagues (Gay et al., 2006); and triangulating data sources that involved male and female participants from both universities studying at the Departments of Special Needs Education, Civic and Ethical Education and School of Law and Good Governance. We also applied theoretical triangulations, and rich and thick description of the research process, including the design, study sites, participants, data collection methods, procedures, and analysis through a thorough review of literature to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2014)

Ethical Considerations

We took the following ethical considerations into account in the study: securing oral consent from the participants and maintaining anonymity when presenting the study's findings. In addition to this, participants were provided with an information sheet, which helped them determine whether or not to participate.

Results

The participants engaged in this study reported two contrasting stories: experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. These themes that represent the lived experiences of the participants are presented below using participants' word-for-word responses to the basic research questions. The incidence of social inclusion and exclusion described is not from the same population but rather from diverse backgrounds of sighted students.

Experience of Social Inclusion among the Participants

The narratives of eight participants revealed three themes that can address the first research question posed in this study: differences being recognized, feeling valued, and access to physical interaction facilitated. These core themes are discussed in the following sections.

(a) Differences Being Recognized

The participants' responses show that they have equal access to basic student services and facilities such as dining halls, libraries, and dormitories with their sighted peers. They perceived that their uniqueness (difference) as visually impaired students was recognized by their respective universities, and they felt that they had valued recognition. In other words, enjoying equal access to such services and facilities gave them a sense that, being blind, they were not treated differently. They are not entitled to differential services but rather obtain the same services and facilities as their sighted peers. For example, Endashaw, a 21-year-old participant from University 1, said: "…our dormitories are isolated from the dormitories of sighted peers. It seems like discrimination, but it is not. Instead, it is positive discrimination. The segregation is for our sake! Even I consider that the university is considering me like any member of the campus.*"*

Other participants also reflected similar feelings that their university has rightly recognized them as visually impaired students, but gave them equal access as sighted students. Importantly, Aster, a 23-year-old interviewee in University 1, said: *"*…our reading room is different from that of the sighted students. For this, my feeling is positive. I feel I am part of the campus life just like the sighted peers, because I get the same services and facilities provided to them.*"* In addition to this, Sunny, a 20-year-old and a second-year student at University 1 disclosed her observations, saying:

> *I am proud to be at this university. It is one of my successes. I do not blame my disability after all. I understand that the university has accepted and recognized me as one of its students, though I sometimes feel discomfort on the campus due to a number of challenges to my learning and existence. However, thanks to God, I am with sighted students and I appear to enjoy what they get. (2nd year)*

Shibire, a 23-year-old participant from University 2, also said the following: "We all get the dining services as the sighted peers, but in separate areas within the hall." Likewise, the majority of the current participants (6 of 8) have the same perspectives regarding the segregated dormitories, libraries, and seating areas in the dining hall. Other interviewees also reflected similar views on having valued recognition. The majority acknowledged the situation of getting services and facilities in physically segregated areas. However, two of them (Agumase and Belew) have objections regarding the differential treatment in relation to dormitory placement. Agumase, a 22-year-old participant in University 1 said the following:

> Our dormitory is deliberately isolated from that of our sighted peers. The ground floor is for us, and the sighted peers are assigned to the upstairs of the blocks. Hence, we have no shared dormitory life with them. The university might think positively, but it has a negative impact on our relationships and interactions with our sighted peers. For me, this has created distance between the visually impaired and the sighted students.

Similarly, Belew, a 23-year-old male participant and 2nd year student in University 2 reflected his observation, saying, "Our placement in separate dormitories denied us access to meet and develop relationships with sighted peers. This affected our social lives because dormitories are the best places that open rooms to establish and maintain new relationships." Based on Agumase's and Belew's

arguments, it seems that dormitory placement has both advantages and disadvantages.

(b) Feeling Valued

The participants expressed that they felt respected or valued by some sighted peers, because they receive ample personalized support services from such students on the basis of their needs and interests. In the first instance, Sunny, a 20-year-old participant from University 1, said the following, focusing on how some sighted peers extended to her an extraordinary respect: “Members of the Orthodox Christians Congregation are more chivalrous, and are very kind in that they often showed us great courtesy or civility. Once, they gathered us at the students’ lounge, and expressed their heartfelt respect to us.” Other participants have also added to this description that some sighted peers were extra polite when providing support. This has contributed a lot to them feeling respected by their sighted peers. In this respect, Endashaw, a 21-year-old participant, added to the above idea, saying, *“…*the treatment of some of the sighted peers is very respectful and welcoming. In some ways, I feel that I am truly part of them, though some others consider us different.” In this vein, Agumase, a 22-year-old participant from University 1, explicated the general situation of their classrooms as follows:

> I am thankful to some of my classmates. They have never shown hostility because of my blindness. They often displayed altruistic behavior. In the classrooms, the front chairs are left for us! This is our preferred seating place, because it helps us hear clearly and follow when teachers give lectures. We can also move out of the classroom easily when the class is over. The classmates do not want to sit on chairs in front of the classrooms because they know that these are our seats. However, there are times when the opposite is true for some other males, 3rd year.

In the same fashion, other respondents recounted a similar idea that their access to spontaneous, informal, and personalized support from some sighted peers granted them the feeling of being respected. However, it should be acknowledged that there are others who act in the opposite way.

(c) Access to Physical Interaction

The participants reported that they have access to close physical interaction (contact) with some of the sighted individuals when receiving personalized supports. This resulted in a positive feeling as it has relational values of increasing intimacy and initiating their interactions and relationships with some sighted individuals, but not with all. An exemplar account was given by Yimer, a 23-year-old participant from University 2: He said, “when they support me, I feel that they are a friend to me, and I consider that they are interested in me. Sometimes, I also disclose my interest for further interaction; of course, there are others who played the opposite roles.”

Another description was given by Sunny, a 20-year-old participant who said:

> I understand that some sighted peers do not hate me because of my blindness. Instead, they help me during difficulties. For me, this created good opportunities to anticipate being wanted for a relationship whilst support is provided by these people, though there are others who do not provide the support I need.

Moreover, Be’amlak, a 23-year-old male participant and 2nd year student at University 2, reported the following: “When they contact me during support, I become satisfied because I know that they are not far away from me because of my blindness. Again, my contact and proximity with some sighted students helped me to recognize their behaviors” (3rd year).

We drew from Be'amlak's narrations that their close personal (physical) contact with some of their classmates opens opportunities for them to get to know sighted individuals. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews helped us to deduce that the physical contact during personalized support can create circumstances for proximity, close personal relationships, interactions, and intimacy between students with and without visual impairment. This can discourage exclusion and help to promote inclusion, though there are still sighted students in the same classes who act the opposite.

Experience of Social Exclusion among Participants

In this part of the study, the following four themes reflect the participants' experiences of social exclusion: classroom marginalization, being perceived as another, being ignored, and lack of participation in extracurricular activities. The following sections highlight the discussion of each theme.

(a) Classroom Marginalization

The participants' narratives showed that classroom marginalization represents forms of social exclusion in the classroom settings. Their interview responses showed that such an experience was manifested through sidelining during the teaching-learning process and favoritism in teacher-student classroom interactions. In the first instance, their description revealed that they were denied equal access to teachers' teaching-learning processes, and consequently became sidelined in their classrooms. In this sense, it is implied from their interview response that they were not equally benefited from their teachers' teaching freely available to other sighted classmates. Regarding this, all of the participants resounded in the same style and tone. However, the best of all narrations was given by Agumase as follows: Agumase, a 22-year-old adolescent student from University 1, said the following:

> In the classroom, all of us are in the same playground or running track, but we are not able to play the game equally with the sighted ones. The teacher did not attempt to create equal access. Often, he gave brief lectures by writing notes on the whiteboard, which we, unlike our sighted peers, cannot see. I remember that while teaching in the classroom, some teachers said: 'this is'; 'this means'; 'see this '; 'look at this'; 'this means'; 'you see this is'…etc. This is meaningless for us because we cannot see what they are trying to show. This is accessible only for sighted peers, and not for us (Male, 3rd year).

Like Agumase, the responses of other interviewees showed that their teachers' teaching-learning process was inclined toward the sighted students. Adding more, this description closely aligns with the ideas reflected by Shibire, a 23-year-old participant from University 2: "In the same classrooms, our teachers never teach us…. They utilize the same instructional strategy in the classroom that most favors the sighted." The second instance of the experience of classroom marginalization drawn from the interview responses was favoritism in the teacher-student interactions. Regarding this, they explained that they were treated unequally when it comes to teacher-student classroom interactions in comparison to their sighted classmates.

In this vein, all of them agreed that they have had bigoted interactions with their classroom teachers. For instance, Belew, a 22-year-old male participant and 2nd year learner at University 2, claimed the following about the classroom teacher-student interaction: "We are two in the classroom, but have no equal access to ask and answer questions. When I raise my hand to ask or answer, my teacher refuses to give me a chance; rather, he gives more opportunities for my sighted peers!" Yimer, a 23-year-old participant also echoed the above narration, focusing on the nature of teacher-student task-related interaction: "… my teacher gave me very short and precise answers. He never gave me further elaboration on the questions I asked. Contrarily, he spent more time and had detailed and lengthy discussions with the sighted

classmates." Aster, a 23-year-old 4th year female participant from University 1, added: "The relationship of the teachers with us and with the sighted peers is not the same. My teacher gave more attention to sighted peers. When he communicated with them, it was very attractive, lengthy and satisfying. With us, it is very short."

As shown in the description given by the interviewees above, teachers in the classes were inclined more towards the sighted students than to the visually impaired ones. This shows that they practiced individual differences and patterns in their classroom interactions with their students. Addressing the visually impaired students in the classroom is the beginning of inclusive education; however, unless they are supported to fully participate in the classroom discourses, they cannot achieve their learning goals like the sighted students.

(b) Being Perceived as "Other"

Through the face-to-face semi-structured interviews, it has been revealed that the participants were perceived as "Others" (We took the idea from their Amharic expression: *በተለየ ዓይን ማየት፤ ከራስ አንጻር የተለዩ አድርጎ መፈረጅ*) by some sighted peers. In other words, the narrations showed that the current participants were treated or considered as different, or as outcasts from the majority of their sighted peers of their age in the classrooms and on the campus. Of course, there were some students who treated the visually impaired students positively, as shown in the above analysis. In this sense, we affirmed that they endured unacceptable treatment in the sense that they are treated unequally without any justifiable reason (s) in comparison to their sighted peers. More specifically, it is deeply uncovered in the data that they were typified as aggressive in nature, often complaining, and academically weak (poor) by majority of the sighted student population. The first instance of being typified as aggressive in nature was best narrated by Aster, a 23-year-old female interviewee from University 1. She thoroughly shared the following idea without fear:

> The majority of the sighted students recognized that visually impaired students are bad-tempered or arrogant. Once upon a time, one of our visually impaired friends behaved angrily with the Department Secretary. From that day on, the sighted peers in our department generalized that all of us are intolerant and aggressive. This obstructed our relationships in the department and created gaps. Leave alone on this campus, even in the community, it is believed that the visually impaired are bad-tempered, rigid, and satanic in their behavior. Due to this, most of the sighted individuals distance us and avoid having interactions and relationships with us.

The remaining participants also reflected similar opinions. It was suggested that the sampled participants were often considered as behaviorally complaining or nagging in or outside the classrooms. They were thus treated as behaviorally different from the majority of their sighted peers. This situation was explained by a 23-year-old female participant as: “Most of the time, majority of the sighted peers conclude that all of us are often nagging and complaining, arguing on minor things, and believed that the visually impaired can never hear what others say.” The rest of the interviewees also revealed similar viewpoints. The final instance of the participants’ experience of “otherness” is that they are perceived as academically weak (poor) and intellectually incapable compared to their sighted peers. For example, Sunny, a 20-year old female participant said that some sighted individuals think that blindness is inability, and doubted the participants’ intellectual capacity:

> I awfully felt that I could not be valued by some of the sighted peers, not all. I am considered uniquely different from them. They mistakenly judge me as “weak”, “easily brittle or fragile”, or “incapable”. For example, my sighted classmates viewed me as lazy, unable to do things by myself, and less contributing in group tasks. They believed that I was “help-seeker” or dependent on them and on what they have done. Now, I have

> no interest and effort to work with them because I know that they have wrongly judged me as weak.

Echoing Sunny's views, Endashaw, a 21-year-old participant, said the following regarding the overwhelming belief of the sighted peers: "In the classrooms; the sighted peers believed that I have no skill or ability as them. You see, this is simply the nullification they have for me." The rest also divulged that some of the sighted peers failed to acknowledge their academic performances. Simply put, it can be understood from the interviews that participants were viewed as different by some of their sighted peers. It is revealed from the data that sighted peers, including classmates, exercised the idea of "otherness".

(c) Being Ignored

We were able to derive from the interview that the visually impaired students encountered being ignored by some sighted peers. This phenomenon was tacitly exhibited in the following two related instances: (a) Being overlooked or unnoticed - This involves total shut up and is exhibited in unresponsiveness of peers when asked, for example, for help or something else, or when they were not greeted or talked to at all; and (b) Being disregarded – They are not given attention or are ignored during ordinary conversations or free dialogue, or when their ideas are not properly recognized, listened to or when they are paid little or no attention during normal communication. Initially, the interview data showed that participants were paid less or no significant attention by some sighted peers in communication scenes. This made their relationship awkward and uncomfortable. A case narrated by Endashaw, a 21 year-old participant attests to this.

> One day, I sat together with one of my peers. I attempted to talk to him calling him by name, but he remained silent and vacated me. He hid himself when I looked for him, but I knew he was around me. On another day, I was walking towards the

> University's main gate with one of my sighted classmates and this student, with his friend, was coming towards us, and they called the one who was with me by name, and gave him a very warm greeting, but they never considered me as one of them. It was painful!

Endashaw's descriptions showed that he was given a cold shoulder by his sighted peers. He also reflected that being ignored by peers is painful. Similarly, Agumase, a 22-year-old male participant from University 1 utterly recalled his experiences of being disregarded by his own sighted peer saying: "Once up on a time, the rain comes while I was with three of my classmates on campus but they did not tell me about the rain, and they left and run away to their dormitories. They told me nothing, but simply left me behind!" Also, Yimer a 23-year-old participant from University 2 said the following:

> Being together with sighted students in the same class, they sometimes unnoticed me! Surely, I often felt like I was being forgotten. Once, I was forgotten in the classroom when I was in year one. We were 65 in a classroom, where I was the only visually impaired student. After lecture, they never told me to leave the room together. I remained sitting while everyone else had left. I waited for half an hour till I heard a voice outside the classroom. The student help me go to my dormitory, and I do not forget that tormenting instance ever (Male, 4th year).

It can be concluded from above that Endashaw, Agumase and Yimer faced disregard by some sighted peers. Generally, the interview data above elucidated that the participants were frequently facing peer ignoring, and it is documented here as one of their serious and pervasive experiences they encountered in their campus lives. However, such a behaviour was not exhibited by all sighted classmates. As reported above, there were sighted students who made their visually impaired friends feel valued, and allowed access to physical interaction and become intimate. This means there are mixed

trends among the sighted classmates: inclusiveness and exclusiveness.

(d) Non-participation in Extracurricular Activities

The participants construed that they encountered adversities in the involvement and participation in campus-based extracurricular or non-academic activities. The interview broadly showed that they are totally detached from activities such as clubs, organized sports, recreational and leisure time activities (e.g., hobbies, special day and occasional events). In the first instance, they described that they were excluded from participation in different clubs (e.g., HIV/AIDS Club, Charity Club, Discover Your Country Club, and Ethics and Anti-corruption Club). An example of a description by a 22-year-old male from University 2 is shown below:

> I was not involved in clubs. I did not really know about clubs here in this university, because I was not a member. Unlike visually impaired students, the sighted peers have open opportunities to be registered as members in clubs. For the most part, the calls for registration or memberships in clubs are made through notice boards, which is not accessible to us (Belew, 2nd year).

Succinctly, Belew has stressed in his explanation that they have no equal access to actively participate in clubs. As a final best narration, Shibire, a 23-year-old female participant, added as:

> I can say that I am prevented from participating in clubs by virtue of my blindness as there is no access for me to do so. Even, I do not know anything about the existence of clubs in the university. Because of the discouragements, I lost interest at all, because and did not give sense to me. From the very beginning I was never invited, or encouraged to be a member in clubs.

> There is no information for me about these clubs. As usual, information in relation to these clubs is posted via notice-boards in ink print, which are not reachable for visually impaired students (4th year, University 2).

In the second instance, the interviewees generally expressed that they were excluded from sports activities (e.g., ordinary ones like table tennis, chess, athletics and inter-departmental football games including basketball) and other recreational/leisure time activities (e.g., special day social happenings, occasional events, or sporadically occurring campus-based ceremonial programs like color day, culture day and ethnic day). Thus, participants had no opportunity to participate in such activities. A narration by Be'amlak, a 23-year-old participant at University 2, goes as:

> We have no opportunity to be involved in sporting events and activities like inter-departmental sport competitions. I think we may not be eligible because of our blindness. For example, we can't play football with sighted peers in the playground. But the university can buy a ball that has sound for the visually impaired. If it is fulfilled, we can have equal access to playing football as other sighted individuals (Male, 2nd year).

In conformity with this, Aster, a 4th year 23-year-old female participant from University 1, said: "I have already accepted my non-attendance from such activities. I know I have no way to, for example, equally play basketball as sighted students. No opportunity at all. I have acknowledged my exclusion." In more specific terms, sports and other games are what the current participants were excluded from the most. In general, participants were excluded from involvement and participation in campus-based extracurricular activities mainly due to the inaccessibility of physical environment and lack of visual information accessible to the visually impaired students.

Summary of Key Findings

In this article, we explored the experiences of social inclusion and exclusion of eight visually impaired students in two public universities. Recapping the descriptions, valued recognition, feeling respected, and access to physical interaction represent their experience of social inclusion. Contrarily, it was deeply expressed that they were also experiencing social exclusion in the form of classroom marginalization, being ignored, being perceived as “other”, and non-participation in extracurricular activities. Based on the descriptive phenomenological analysis, it seems to us that the participants of the present study experienced mixed social inclusion and exclusion in their respective universities. Such mixed reality may be due to diverse backgrounds of the sighted students and the lived experiences of the visually impaired students while in the university in various classroom settings and campus life.

Discussion

The study explored two contrasting stories of visually impaired students in the same classroom and campus environments: social inclusion and social exclusion. The findings show that although achieving meaningful social inclusion has been possible on the one hand, total exclusion, on the contrary, has remained to be a problem in the selected universities. This is in conformity with research studies that social inclusion is the most difficult type of inclusion to fully achieve in the inclusive education set-ups (Anderson, 2006; Matlosa & Matobo, 2007). The findings in this article are discussed below with support from pertinent literatures and empirical evidences, as well.

Experiences of Social Inclusion among Visually Impaired Students

(a) Differences (Uniqueness) Being Recognized

The study identified that participants obtained equal access to basic campus-based (residential) student services and facilities such as library, dining room and dormitories on an equal basis as sighted peers. These made the visually impaired students feel that they enjoy a valued recognition like the majority of their sighted peers in such a way that their uniqueness or disability is taken into consideration by their university leadership. Different studies indicated similar findings. For example, the research outcome from Qvortrup and Qvortrup (2018) disclosed that recognition of individual differences and uniqueness is a core aspect of social inclusion of individuals in the context of disability. In addition, Katz, et al., (2012) showed that SWDs are truly socially included if they are recognized and treated as individuals without disabilities in the same campus or classroom environments.

Long ago, a quote by Aristotle, *"Man is by nature a social animal"* indicates that humans are naturally social species that have common values, strong linkages and life interdependence that help them to recognize each other. Based on the above proverb, being recognized and valued by others, and forming groups and partaking in relationships and activities are pervasively a fundamental human desire (Levitas *et al.,* 2007). Being recognized consists of fortunes and positive social experiences of all human beings all the time (Heyder, Sudkamp & Steinmayr, 2020). This finding implies that providing equal treatments, services, facilities and amenities has tremendous roles to realize that our learners are achieving valued recognition by their institution, and peers around them, too. In contrast, differential treatment results in the feeling of devalued recognition by their own peers and institutions. In general, being equally included in educational settings as other non-disabled students is one of the components of inclusive education (Heyder *et al.,* 2020).

(b) Feeling of Being Valued

In this article, it is revealed that the visually impaired students receive ample personalized support services from some of their sighted peers. This prompted them feel respected (valued) by their sighted peers. Similar to this view, the study conducted by Mbugua, Odini and Chege (2018) revealed that the type of support given to someone needing it, has multiple advantages for the recipients of the support services. Nonetheless, their study did not support the findings of the current descriptive phenomenological study. Another study by Getachew (2018) also uncovered that students with severe visual disabilities got intensive peer support services, which was determinant for their academic life. However, his study did not reveal similar outcomes to those in the current study.

Nonetheless, the main concern of this study was reflected by Cappo (2002) in that one is said to be included in situations if he/she feels respected (valued) by others around. The current study indicates that providing ample personalized support for the visually impaired students makes them feel respected by others around them. Progressively, it increases their sense of being respected by other members in the social environment or institution (Cappo, 2002). Respecting and valuing visually impaired students is one of the moves towards inclusive education; because, as pointed out by Galaterou, inclusive education is an approach to overcome exclusion and promote inclusion (Galaterou, 2017). Kearney (2009) also contends that promoting inclusive practices in education contexts requires abolishing exclusionary practices.

(c) Access to Physical Interaction

In this paper, it is disclosed that visually impaired students have access to physical contact (interaction) with some sighted individuals during support provision. This gives them opportunities to develop intimacy and further relationships with particularly sighted peers. Consistently, other studies copiously reported that social (physical) contact of SWDs with other individuals without disabilities promotes social inclusion and positive attitudes (Mckay, 2018; Schwab, 2017; Dare & Nowicki, 2018). In this vein, Koster et al., (2009) noted that contact and intimacy with typical peers is part of the peer groups and represents one of the social dimensions of inclusion that has a positive impact on the social-emotional development of students.

Another study also noted that contact is vital to improve interactions, relationships and social (peer) acceptance between individuals and groups (Scheepstra & Pijl, 2016). In this regard, the prominent intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954, as cited in Mckay, 2018) apparently proposed that the able-bodied peers' prejudices, stereotypical views or misconceptions about their peers with disabilities can be decreased as they get to know and understand the experiences of each other through meaningful and collaborative contact (p.21). Resultantly, the theory implies that physical contact minimizes prejudices and stereotypical views in the mainstream education settings (Schwab, 2017). By contrast, being excluded from interaction, relationships and participation involves unpleasant social experiences, and threatening phenomenon (Mathieson, Popay, Enoch, Escorel, Hernandez, Johnston, Rispel, 2008).

Therefore, the placement of students with diverse disabilities (SWDs) in regular classrooms together with other able-bodied peers is a promising way of promoting intergroup contact and creating positive attitude toward students with disabilities (Mckay, 2018; Koster *et al.,* 2009). This implies that promoting collaborative contact and proximity between visually impaired students and their sighted peers can

contribute to fostering their interactions and relationships. If the visually impaired ones are not truly included, there is no doubt then that they suffer from social exclusion. Hence, the solution is creating a successful inclusionary practice in HEIs to achieve equal opportunity for all students (Sanger, 2020), by removing, social, attitudinal, institutional, physical and psychological barriers.

Experiences of Social Exclusion among the Visually Impaired Students

(a) Classroom Marginalization

This study uncovered that visually impaired students face classroom marginalization when the teachers' sideline teaching practices, and relegate classroom interactions. We found that visually impaired students did not have equal classroom learning opportunities compared to their sighted classmates. This implies that they were treated differently than other students in the same classrooms. A study conducted by Florian, (2014) similarly revealed the situation that such students faced was marginalization that mostly *"… occurred when some students were treated differently"* (p. 289). More precisely, this study identified that teacher-student classroom interaction was more skewed toward the sighted classmates than the visually impaired students. In contrast to this finding, the AAU Senate Legislation proclaims that classroom teacher-student relationship should be fair. Chapter 2, Article 171, Sub-article 171.1.4 of the legislation states that: *"… [All] students shall have the right to be entitled to fair treatment in all respects of the teacher-student relationship and to an environment conducive to stimulate learning"* (Addis Ababa University Senate Legislation, 2019, p.154). [Emphasis added].

Nevertheless, the current finding revealed that the teacher-student relationship in the classrooms was biased and more inclined toward the sighted classmates. This shows that there still is a gap in praxis in the university. It has also been documented in the current study that the

visually impaired participants lacked equal access to the teachers' teaching-learning process and were thus sidelined. Likewise, studies conducted by Morris (2014) and Yohannes (2015) showed that university students with visual impairments (SWVI) have no equal classroom opportunities as their sighted peers. Due to this, they become marginalized in their own classroom contexts (Lewise, 2009). This implies that classroom teachers who teach visually impaired students have little awareness about their students and how to fairly teach in the same classrooms. Based on this result, it can be suggested that awareness creation on inclusion in the form of in-service training programs should be given. Such training is necessary to bring about change in the attitudes of classroom teachers (Lewise, 2009). A number of research findings show that university students are not truly socially included and that the effective realization of inclusive education in higher education is still in doubt (Robo, 2014; Yohannes, 2015; Teferi, 2016; Apie & Moses, 2019).

(b) Being Ignored

This study also revealed that visually impaired students have endured being ignored (ostracized) by their own peers. Other studies have also shown that SWVI are more susceptible to subtle ignoring by their own peers (Khurshid & Najeeb, 2012; Subrayen, 2011; Lourens, 2015) due to their vision loss. Relatedly, Joshi (2006) reported that these students are highly susceptible to peer ignoring due to the subsequent difficulties in interpreting visual cues that are vital for interactions, and reciprocal communications, which is a symptom of exclusion and a threat to inclusion (Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Nonetheless, this finding is a step forward to proposing an idea that sighted peers should be given awareness creation and sensitization training on blindness and their visually impaired peers. Hopefully, the training will produce positive attitudes and reduce misconceptions.

(c) Being Perceived as "Other"

The current study disclosed that visually impaired students were perceived, or considered as different from their sighted peers in the same classroom or campus circumstances, or situations without any justifiable reason. Specifically, being typified as aggressive in nature, complainant, and academically poor were identified as "othering" practices by which they were marked as different from their sighted peers. Collectively, different empirical evidences showed that SWDs including those with visual impairment are viewed as individuals different from the majority without disabilities (Subrayen, 2011; Saltaga, 2017; Getachew). In a more specific instance, the current study identified that visually impaired students who learn together with sighted peers were considered behaviorally as different from their sighted peers.

Visually impaired students have also been labelled by their sighted friends as aggressive and complainants. Such findings, however, were not reported by prior studies. In fact, this could be due to the different socio-culturally ingrained beliefs and misconceptions of the sighted peers. In most Ethiopian scenarios, there is a myth that persons with disabilities are satanic in behavior and are thus aggressive, complainant, energetic, overactive, and the like (Adugna, 2015; Tirusew, 2005). These socio-culturally deep-seated misconceptions and negative attitudes seem to have been brought to universities by the sighted peers who believe their visually impaired friends are different - a misconception with no justifiable reason! The final instance of being "othered" was the situation by which the visually impaired students were seen as academically poor. In this particular vein, other researchers also revealed that these students were treated as academically weak (Almog, 2011; Slee, 2007). As highlighted above, findings pertaining to the experiences of "otherness" among the visually impaired students indicates that courses of actions are needed to minimize misconceptions and negative attitudes of the sighted peers.

(d) Non-participation in Extracurricular Activities

This study uncovered that visually impaired students were non-participant in clubs, sports and recreational activities that are openly available for their sighted peers, and which can provide great socializing opportunities. Steadily, other qualitative and quantitative empirical evidence revealed that adolescent students with total blindness are certainly denied of equal access to campus-based extracurricular or non-academic activities such as clubs, sports and recreational (occasional) activities compared to their sighted peers of their age mates (Almog, 2011; Alhammadi, 2014; Dimitrova-Radojichikj, 2018; Beteinaki, 2019). Most significantly, recent research finding by Asmerom (2019) revealed that the Ethiopian university SWDs including those with blindness do not participate in extra-curricular activities in their campuses (p.135). As implied in the interview data provided by participants, the inaccessibility of physical environment (buildings and physical spaces) and that of visual information and notices is the main challenge related to non-participation of students in extracurricular/non-academic activities.

To alleviate the challenges of inaccessibility, it is widely suggested in literatures that institution-based policy should be created with an aim to improving the accessibility of physical environment, visual information and notices (Getachew, 2018). This shows that legislative and policy frameworks are needed to promote social inclusion of learners in the institutions. Asmerom (2009) suggested that disability-related inclusive policy should be formulated at institutional level proposing accessibility policy as one of the typologies of social inclusion policy.

Conclusions

Upon the findings of the current phenomenological study, it can be drawn that visually impaired students are encountering moments of both inclusion and exclusion in the same higher education. Two kinds

of sighted students were identified by visually impaired students: the first one includes those who are friendly, supportive and inclusive while the second one involves those who are neglecting, “othering” and discriminating. The general environment and classrooms where they undertake their education are not social exclusion-free.

This study broadens our current knowledge about the existence of both the phenomena of social exclusion and inclusion of visually impaired students within HEIs. Particularly, it brings to light that social exclusion still exists, despite earnest attempts to enhance social inclusion at Addis Ababa and Debre Berhan Universities. In this regard, the findings presented above, and the aforesaid conclusion imply that the placement of visually impaired students with other sighted students *per se* does not warrant their full and true social inclusion. Thus, more has to be done yet in these learning institutions to contribute to the fruition of social inclusion of visually impaired students. On the basis of the present findings of this study, we propose peers’ awareness creation for sighted students, and training for instructors on inclusive teaching. Accessibility policy is also suggested as an avenue for addressing social exclusion and thereby promoting social inclusion in the target HEIs.

Finally, we have to make clear that the findings of this study, indeed, may not be generalizable to all visually impaired students at all higher education institutions in Ethiopia, because of limitations in the scope and methodological rigor of the study. Future studies can be conducted applying research designs other than qualitative phenomenology to examine the generalizability of their findings. The views of sighted students may also need to improve in relation to their perspective about visually impaired students.

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