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The experience of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their non-disabled student mates: The case of Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education and Tikur Anbesa Secondary Schools.

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted for a degree or diploma at any other academic institution. All sources of information and reference materials used in the preparation of this thesis have been duly acknowledged.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	1
1. Introduction	3
1.1. Statement of the problem.....	8
1.2. Objective of the research.....	12
1.2.1. General objective	12
1.2.2. Specific objectives.....	12
1.3. Significance of the study	12
1.4. Scope of the study.....	13
1.5. Limitation	13
2. Literature review	14
2.1. Evolution of models of disability.....	14
2.2. The rights of children with disabilities to their specific situations.....	16
2.3. Components of Social Skills.....	17
2.4. Conceptualization of Children's Social Interaction	19
2.5. What is inclusive education	21
2.6. Education of children with disabilities in Ethiopia	23
3. Research method	25
3.1. Research design	25
3.2. The study site	26
3.3. The study participants.....	28
3.3.1. Research setting.....	28
3.3.2. Sampling technique.....	29
3.3.3. Sample size.....	29
3.4. Data collection instrument.....	31
3.5. Data collection procedure.....	32
3.6. Data analysis procedure	33
3.7. Ethical considerations	33
3.8. Quality assurance	35
4. Finding.....	37
4.1. Understanding of the study participants with disabilities about social interaction and its importance from their specific situation perspective.....	37

4.2. The factual assessment of participant students with disabilities on their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled student mates.....	39
4.3. The study schools' engagement in providing intervention for the improvement of the social skills of students with disabilities to their specific condition.	52
4.4 Measures and interventions recommended by the participants of the study for the improvement of social skills and better interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.	56
5. Discussion.....	58
5.1. The perception of the participants of the study towards social interaction from disability perspective.....	58
5.2. Overview of participant students with disabilities and informants on the social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.....	59
5.3. The role and duties of schools for the improvement of social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.	62
5.4. Measures and interventions recommended by the participants of the study on the way forward.	63
6. Conclusion and recommendation	64
6.1. Conclusion.....	64
6.2 Recommendation.....	65
Implication for social work practice	66
List of References	69
ANNEX I: Data collection instruments.....	74

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Abstract

It is known that mutual engagement through social and interpersonal interaction of individuals is the reality and naturally occurring social phenomenon of any society. As it is the fact of life individuals are required to establish interpersonal relationship and engage in social activities for their mutual benefit and success. Hence, this study aims to investigate the response of students with disabilities to their social and interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled peers. Qualitative research approach was applied to undertake the study in two selected secondary schools. A total of 13 discussants with disabilities and 10 key informants recruited from the management staff of the study school where the participants of the study. Focus group discussion and interview were also used as data collection instruments to gather the opinions of the participants of the study. As confirmed the finding of the study, most of the participants of the study did believe that participant students with disabilities were aware of the importance of social and interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled peers, and even if such interaction results in mutual benefit, most likely students with disabilities were found advantageous by earning better benefit from such relationship. Furthermore, their limited engagement in extracurricular activities, negative attitude of the people towards disability, lack of due attention on the part of the government and appropriate intervention were mentioned as critical challenges that affected the social and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers. On contrary, appropriately practiced inclusive education was reported to be as doable strategy that contributed for the improvement of social and interpersonal interaction of students with nondisabled peers. Based on the key findings of the study, the strengthening of resource centers, the promotion of inclusive education, the involvement of relevant stakeholders and the availability of multidisciplinary support services in schools were enumerated as

recommendations for the improvement of the social and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers.

1. Introduction

Historical shreds of evidence witness that in ancient and medieval periods, persons with disabilities were explicitly excluded from all aspects of the life of the society where they lived due to the harmful beliefs and practices of people towards disability. They were labeled as inadequate, incapable, and the ones who deserved compassion rather than the entitlement to access opportunities and the values of social inclusion (Sisay, 2022). Even though this scenario was experienced in a wider section of the population of the world, the situation of persons with disabilities including children with disabilities in this respect was severe and tragic in the context of Ethiopia.

The exclusion of children with disabilities from learning or educational opportunities can be mentioned as one of the guilt-ridden experiences of societies and governments that affected the lives of children with disabilities for many centuries. This situation, however, was overturned by the litigation of parents of children with disabilities which was a part of their relentless struggle undertaken in stride in the post-industrial period that forced governments to formulate legislation for the entitlement of children with disabilities to access education in compliance with the UN human rights instruments such as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989.

Regardless of this worth mentioning progress undertaken in the second half of twenties century for the recognition and promotion of educational opportunity for children with disabilities and the impact of new thinking that emerged as a result of the age of reasoning that instigated philanthropists to be involved in providing support to teach children with disabilities, institution-based teaching was applied to teach children with disabilities in which this practice was latter on termed as institutional segregation. As a result, special schools for the blind, the deaf, and

children with intellectual disability came into being in the eighteenth century in Europe and North America (de Bruin, 2019).

It is obvious that even though these schools played a significant role in providing specialized service to meet the special educational needs of children with disabilities as they were residential schools, students with disabilities were not able to have contact and develop friendships with their non-disabled peers and local communities that adversely affected their social communications skills.

In the 1970s and 1980s, concerned scholars who specialized in special needs education started a new campaign arguing that specialized services of special schools may contribute to the provision of quality education in accessible and friendly learning environments using a pedagogically sound teaching approach. Simultaneously these institutions may play a negative role by affecting the social communication skills of students with disabilities and the ownership and responsibility of local communities in accommodating children with disabilities in local communities. These scholars further argued that teaching children with disabilities in special or residential schools is not cost-effective in a condition where millions of children with disabilities are out of school throughout the world (Lemos et al, 2013).

This heated debate was accepted and supported by families of children with disabilities, the advocates of the then newly emerged social model of disability, and the UN agencies as well. Shortly, the practice of integration of children with disabilities into the regular school system was gradually practiced which enabled them to learn their study in a regular classroom setting with their nondisabled peers. However, this approach brought only the success of placement of students with disabilities in the regular school system without system change that would create an inclusive learning environment for full and effective participation and achievement of

children with disabilities in their academic performance on an equal basis with their nondisabled student mates (Slee & Allan, 2011). As a result, considering this critical challenge that blurred the genuineness and effectiveness of the participation of children with disability in regular school systems, in 1994 UNESCO developed a new and appropriate strategy for the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in a regular school system known as “inclusive education”, and this approach was introduced in Salamanca conference where more than 95 countries including Ethiopia participated (UNESCO, 1994).

The framework promoted not only the placement of children with disabilities in regular class together with their nondisabled peers but also declared the need for system change that allows them to participate equally and achieve in their academic performance removing all forms of impediments. Hence, the framework was used globally as “The guiding principle that informs...is that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions.”

This approach requires children with disabilities to develop social skills to establish interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled peers being self-worthy and self-esteemed. In turn, the role of their nondisabled peers for the success of such a relationship is highly valued in a condition where most of the local communities in low-income countries including Ethiopia exercised entrenched negative attitudes towards the potential capacity of children with disabilities that deemed them as cursed objects who deserve compassion. As stated above, the gradual transformation of the school communities in understanding disability will be a remedial instrument for the creation of an inclusive environment that ensures the social inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools. inclusive environments promote positive attitudes toward disability among non-disabled peers, building empathy and understanding while

dismantling societal barriers created by society attributed to its harmful beliefs and practices towards disability (Dyson, 2005).

For children with impairments, social connection is essential since it ignites not only their academic performance but also their mental health and possibilities for the future. As noted by Stainback and Stainback (2016), "inclusive schools, where students with disabilities learn alongside their typical peers, provide the most natural and effective context for developing social skills" (p. 6). This researched fact justifies the argument that even though special schools are the right place to provide specialized services needed for children with disabilities there is no opportunity in these institutions for children with disabilities to develop their social skills which are the foundations for their better future. It is based on this experience of the past, the service of special schools for the deaf, the blind, and children with intellectual disability was declared by the social model of disability advocates as institution segregation. On the other hand, through peer interactions, children with disabilities who can learn in an inclusive or conventional class setting develop critical skills including conflict resolution, cooperation, and communication (Gouin & Davis, 2018).

Even though interpersonal relationship is a natural phenomenon to be established within school communities and benefit all students in their academic performance and socioemotional development, social interaction in schools isn't simply a bonus for children with disabilities; it's a crucial crucible where their development is shaped and honed. Within inclusive environments, these interactions become pathways to a brighter future. Peer-to-peer engagement, as argued by Gouin & Davis (2018). This interaction weaves the threads of friendship and belonging, a tapestry that McAfee and LeClerc (2004), highlight as fundamental to enhancing self-esteem and academic engagement. Alongside these socioemotional developments and academic performance

success of children with disabilities, Inclusive environments, as highlighted by Dyson (2005), foster empathy and understanding among peers who are not impaired, hence eroding societal barriers and prejudices. Through these exchanges, seeds of tolerance are sown in fertile ground, leading to the development of a more equitable and inclusive society in which diversity is celebrated rather than shunned.

On the contrary to these reciprocal multiple and positive benefits of social interactions established between children with and without disabilities, the discrimination of children with disabilities or none availability of opportunities for children with disabilities to attend their study with their nondisabled peers in inclusive learning environment will have a persistent and irreversible negative impact on their overall socioemotional development, social skills including communication and academic performance success. This is the typical challenge or failure of the modality or program applied to teach children with disabilities in special or residential schools. A certain type of impairment affects the communication skills of children with disabilities making their communication and interaction difficult with their non-disabled peers. Ansell (2013), highlights those barriers to successful communication, such as difficulty with expressive and receptive language, cognitive disabilities, or sensory processing issues, can result in social disconnection and miscommunication. Reciprocal communication and interpreting social cues, for example, might be difficult for kids with autism spectrum conditions. Making deep relationships may be hampered by their literal readings of words and issues with nonverbal communication. Similar to this, children with intellectual disabilities could find it difficult to communicate their wants and feelings in a clear way, which could cause misunderstandings and frustration. As Florian (2004) notes, people with communication difficulties may also find it difficult to speak up for themselves, which further marginalizes their experiences and voices.

Under this circumstance, the support of professionals and the understanding of nondisabled members of school communities is decisively important to tackle the problem and gradually help those children with disabilities improve their social skills and interact with their nondisabled peers. The understanding of their nondisabled peers, however regarding their specific situation and the availability of professional engagement and support coupled with the positive response of school management and teacher staff towards the requirement of children with disabilities is significant. Hence, this study aims to investigate the status of the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates based on their reflection on the point under discussion.

1.1. Statement of the problem

The current global trend and practice have shown that placement of students with disabilities in a regular school may not be a problem at policy and school entry levels. The prevailing challenge is practicality in integrating them effectively with the enablement of full participation and achievement in their academic performance and social interaction with their nondisabled student mates through avoiding all forms of barriers created within the regular education system. One of the tangible pieces of evidence for this argument is that regardless of the presence of policy and legal frameworks and programmatic documents that promote inclusive education or the integration of students with disabilities in regular classroom settings to attend their study with their non-disabled peers, the 2022/23 annual abstract of the FDRE Ministry of Education reported that 6.29% of school-aged children with disabilities in Ethiopia are out of school.

Concerning several factual reasons behind the limited participation of children with disabilities and the multifaceted challenges they may encounter in attending their study in regular schools, the none availability of specialized services, adaptive education material, and devices, physical

environment inaccessibility, the unpreparedness of schools to accommodate their requirements including lack of appropriate pedagogical instruction that meets their special educational needs in particular, and the long-lasting negative attitude of people towards the potential capacity of children with disabilities can be mentioned as the chronic problem of the sector. However, their limited social skill and opportunity to interact with their peers is a remarkable and notorious challenge for students with disabilities who have been attending their studies in the regular school system. As stated above studies conducted in the areas of communication and interaction skills of children with disabilities, some types of impairments may be hindering factors for children with disabilities to establish interpersonal relations with their nondisabled peers. For instance, effective communication can be hampered by sensory processing issues, cognitive deficits, or problems with expressive and receptive language, as Ansell (2013) notes. This can result in social isolation and miscommunication. Furthermore, reading social signs and having reciprocal conversations can be challenging for kids with autism spectrum disorder. Making deep relationships may be hampered by their literal readings of words and issues with nonverbal communication. Similar to this, kids with intellectual disabilities could find it difficult to communicate their wants and feelings in a clear way, which could cause misunderstandings and frustration. As Florian (2004) notes, people with communication difficulties may also find it difficult to speak up for themselves, which further marginalizes their experiences and voices.

Regardless of these communication challenges of students with disabilities emanating from their various forms of impairments, the condition that they are aerated to social exclusion in the school environment is the prevailing challenge for students with disabilities who have been attending their study in regular schools affecting their self-esteem, emotional development, academic

performance which is unresolved phenomena so far particularly in low-income countries including Ethiopia.

Ethiopian culture tends towards indirect communication, relying on nonverbal cues and subtle hints more than explicit statements. This can create confusion for students with disabilities who might struggle to interpret these cues, leading to misunderstandings or social awkwardness (Dereje, 2017). The strong emphasis on collectivism in Ethiopian society can sometimes overshadow individual needs. This can make it difficult for students with disabilities to advocate for themselves and their specific needs in social interactions (Mekonnen, 2014).

Information and resources on disability awareness and support might be scarce in local languages, further marginalizing students with disabilities and hindering their social integration within their communities (Hailu, 2020). Unfortunately, negative attitudes and stereotypes towards disability are still prevalent in many Ethiopian communities. This can lead to social exclusion, bullying, and limited opportunities for students with disabilities to engage in meaningful social interactions (Asfaw & Gebre-Medhin, 2017). As stated above, many Ethiopian schools lack the resources and infrastructure to cater to the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This can make it challenging for them to participate in social activities or receive the support they need to navigate social interactions effectively (Shimelis & Hailemariam, 2018).

Even though, the typical challenges students with disabilities encounter in the course of their study in a regular school system with their nondisabled peers have been discussed in the studies conducted at international and national levels stated above the author of the research could not find studies that investigated the status of social interaction of students with disabilities based on their reaction towards their school experience. Hence, this study focuses on the assessment of the

reaction of students with disabilities toward the status of their interaction with their non-disabled peers. This study is designed to incorporate the views of special needs education experts/ teachers and high profiles of the management staff working in the study schools about the central theme of the study as supplementary information considering the value and validity of their professional expertise and responsibility to implement interventions for their students, when necessary, respectively. To address the focus area of the research implicitly, the following research questions will be raised and discussed in the course of the study:

1. How do the participants of the study (students with disability) understand social interaction and its importance in their specific situation?
2. How do the participants of the study (students with disability) evaluate their interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled student mates?
3. How do special needs education teachers evaluate the interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled schoolmates and their involvement in extracurricular activities?
4. Is there any social support intervention intended to improve the social skills of students with disabilities taking their specific situation into account?
5. What should be done to enhance the social skills of students with disabilities targeting the improvement of their interaction with their nondisabled peers?

1.2. Objective of the research

1.2.1. General objective

The overall objective of the study is to investigate the status of social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates in the view of the informants.

1.2.2. Specific objectives

This study specifically aims to:

- Assess the role of students with disabilities in establishing relationships with nondisabled student mates.
- Illuminate the reaction of students with disabilities to their existing relationship with their nondisabled classmates.
- Document the views of special needs education teachers and the school management staff of the study schools on the overall situation of the interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers while attending their study in an inclusive class setting.
- Understand and share the valuable recommendations of the respondents forwarded on the way forward.

1.3. Significance of the study

It is known that the significance of the study can be appraised by the following points:

- The finding of the study presents researched facts about the status of the social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates to be used as an evidence-based reference for the professionals to provide appropriate intervention.
- The research community will have additional information on the reaction of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their non-disabled peers and vice versa.

- The findings of the research will be the springboard for the conduct of further research when necessary

1.4. Scope of the study

As the title of the research signifies, the research is confined to analyzing mainly the reaction of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their nondisabled student mates though the opinion of the school management staff and special needs education teachers is supplemented. In addition, the study is conducted only in selected two public schools where the special needs education unit is operational. The opinion of nondisabled peers is not also incorporated in the study.

1.5. Limitation

The study will be governed by the method of choice which is the qualitative research method. Hence the study utilizes a qualitative approach to study the issue of interest, all the methods of analysis and data collection tools used will be influenced and limited to the garnering and analysis of only qualitative data. A qualitative data analysis will also be used denying any chance of quantitative analysis.

2. Literature review

2.1. Evolution of models of disability

The way the world perceived disability changed over time as a result of movements or events that caused shifts in the way people understood it. The concept of disability has seen numerous changes throughout history, both in terms of its etiology and related issues. The oldest model of disability, known as the moral/religious model, is present in many religious traditions, including the Judeo-Christian tradition (Pardeck & Murphy 2012). This model believes disability should be viewed as God's retribution for a specific sin or crimes that the person with a disability or parents of the person with a disability may have committed in the past.

Disability was also viewed as a test of faith or perhaps a means of salvation is a prevalent concept in the moral and/or religious model of disability. According to Black (1996), some believe that passing the test of faith equates to being physically healed. If the individual's condition does not heal physically, it is assumed that they lack faith in God.

After the moral or traditional model of disability, the following models were distinguished from one another based on what they focused on regarding disability. The medical model of disability emphasizes impairment and considers decreased function as a result of deficiencies present in the disabled. On the other hand, the social approach to disability suggests that environmental, social, and cultural variables influence the relationship between diminished function and the feeling of impairment (Norwich, 2002). The impact of these concepts has led to distinct, often contradictory, behaviors in medical and educational contexts, which may have divergent developmental outcomes for children (Rees, 2017).

According to Carlson (2010), the medical model sees disabilities as a pitiful condition that should be averted and, if possible, remedied. They are also seen as a personal tragedy that affects

the person with the disability and her family. Furthermore, several dubious medical procedures carried out on persons with disabilities, such as forcible sterilization and euthanasia, are a result of this negative perception of disability. The medical model, prominent in the early 1900s, perceived impairment as an inherent medical condition present in every individual, marked by deficits and necessitating treatment or cure. While acknowledging the biological nature of impairments, this approach often contributed to the medicalization and marginalization of individuals with disabilities, fostering stigma (Oliver, 1990&Shakespeare, 2006).

In contrast, the social model, emerging in the 1970s, redirected attention from individual deficits to societal limitations. This framework suggests that impediments to engagement and inclusion in the environment are societal, psychological, and physical in nature. The amalgamation of these barriers with an individual's limitations culminates in impairment (Barnes, 2012; Shakespeare, 2006). The social model emphasized the imperative of reshaping society to eliminate these barriers and create an environment accessible to all.

The functional model introduced additional complexity by recognizing the constraints imposed by impairments and emphasizing the person's ability to operate in their surroundings (Oliver, 1990). This paradigm, according to Morris (1993), the importance of support services and rehabilitation in assisting individuals with disabilities in performing daily tasks and realizing their full potential. Still, criticisms emerged regarding the social model's tendency to minimize the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities (Hughes & Paterson, 1997). As a result, a more sophisticated biopsychosocial model was created, one that recognizes the intricate interactions between biological, psychological, and social elements that shape the lives of people with disabilities (Beckett, 2017). This model avoids the reductionist traps present in previous models while acknowledging the significance of both society and individual elements.

Discussions on power, oppression, and identity are more in-depth nowadays. The notion of disability oppression is emphasized by Charlton (1998), who draws attention to the way that societal institutions and policies systematically devalue and marginalize people with disabilities. According to this viewpoint, disabled people should be empowered to take collective action, oppose discriminatory policies, and fight for their rights (Charlton, 1998). Bickenbach and Schalock (2018) investigate the relationship between equity and disability in the workplace, advocating for policies that actively support opportunities for leadership and advancement for people with disabilities, going beyond simple inclusion. This emphasizes how disability models must be continuously reassessed and improved to meet new issues and advance more social fairness and inclusion.

2.2. The rights of children with disabilities to their specific situations

As children with and without disabilities are exposed to different forms of social crimes United Nations and its member countries developed international and domestic policies and legal frameworks that promote the human rights of children with and without disabilities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, the 1960 anti-discrimination declaration of UNESCO, the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be mentioned as noteworthy human rights instruments among other international laws and treaties that specifically recognize the rights of children with and without disabilities.

As per Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), discrimination against children based on their ethnicity, language, socioeconomic background, religion, and disability is declared illegal action. The convention, article 23 (1) further declared that “States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in

conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community.” This legal foundation implies the rights of children with disabilities to intermingle in the lives of children in local communities including their families and peers they live in. Under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities article (1,2 & 3), state parties are obliged to promote, protect, and ensure the rights of children with disabilities and treat them respecting their interests.

Regardless of whether social protection and human rights of children with disabilities are recognized by these international human rights instruments, it is an inescapable fact millions of children with disabilities in sub-Saharan countries including Ethiopia are neglected and left to live in poverty. The 2017 national children’s policy confirmed that children with disabilities have limited access to socioeconomic opportunities. Even though children with disabilities should not be discriminated against based on their disability as declared by this national policy, thousands of children with disability have been forced to suffer from social stigma and harmful cultural beliefs and practices. Irrespective of these existing challenges, this national children’s policy declares the obligation and commitment of the government of Ethiopia to ensure the right of children with disabilities to access education in inclusive learning environments and other social services.

2.3. Components of Social Skills

Our daily lives are replete with social skills, which are the cornerstone of effective contact and communication. To successfully navigate the complexity of social dynamics, one must have a thorough understanding of both their parts and the many advantages they provide. Emotional intelligence, or the capacity to recognize, comprehend, and regulate one's own emotions as well as those of others, is a fundamental component of social skills (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). The elements of emotion perception, emotion comprehension, emotion usage,

and emotion regulation are highlighted in Mayer and Salovey's (1990) four-branch model of emotional intelligence, highlighting their critical importance in effective communication and relationship formation (Lopes et al., 2003).

Next to emotional intelligence, another fundamental point of social skills is possessing good communication skills. According to DeVito (2012), active listening, empathy, assertiveness, and nonverbal communication are critical skills for promoting transparent and mutually productive interactions. These abilities enhance and promote cooperation, dispute resolution, and the development of rapport and trust in both personal and professional contexts, Hargie (2011).

Additionally, negotiation techniques add value to social skills. In negotiating scenarios, Stuhlmacher and Walters (1999) emphasize the importance of assertiveness, clear communication, and conflict resolution techniques in achieving mutually agreed results. These abilities are beneficial in social situations, professional contexts, and even day-to-day encounters.

Social skills go beyond communication, they also incorporate components that go beyond face-to-face communication. Effective time management, organization, and self-motivation are all examples of self-management abilities that are essential for both personal and professional success. Barker (2003) emphasizes the value of concrete control in self-managing teams, demonstrating how cohesiveness and productivity within the team are enhanced by competent self-management. Well-developed social skills have several, indisputable advantages. Strong social skills enhance mental and emotional health on an individual basis (Lopes et al., 2003). Strong social skills are associated with reduced levels of stress and anxiety, higher levels of self-esteem, and greater emotional resilience, according to studies.

Enhanced communication, cooperation, and teamwork at work result in higher output, more creative solutions, and happier employees (Hargie, 2011). Successful agreements and dispute resolution are made possible by adept negotiating techniques, which further contribute to organizational success. Strong social skills promote more tolerance, empathy, and understanding across various groups on a societal level (DeVito, 2012). This may result in less bias, discrimination, and conflict, fostering the development of a society that is more tolerant and peaceful.

2.4. Conceptualization of Children's Social Interaction

According to Piaget's stage theory, which is a cornerstone of developmental psychology, children's understanding of social interaction develops over the course of multiple stages (Piaget, 1932). Babies primarily engage with people in an egocentric way throughout the first two years of life, also referred to as the sensorimotor stage, focusing on their actions and experiences. They gradually gain the capacity to portray other people's viewpoints during the preoperational period (2 to 7 years), which promotes more cooperative and reciprocal interactions. Lastly, the development of logical reasoning and the capacity to comprehend social norms and conventions occurs throughout the 7 to 11-year-old concrete operational stage.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes how social interaction and cultural setting shape children's worldviews, in contrast to Piaget's focus on individual cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1978). Children absorb the standards and expectations of their societies through encounters with peers and more experienced adults, gradually creating their understanding of social relations. By providing children with short-term support, a process called scaffolding enables them to advance beyond their current developmental stage and acquire progressively sophisticated social skills.

Children must learn to comprehend not only their behaviors and perceptions but also others' mental states a concept known as the theory of mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Theory of mind development is frequently evaluated using false belief tests, such as Sally-Anne, which show that toddlers usually develop this capacity by the time they are four years old. Children who have developed a theory of mind are better able to anticipate and explain the actions of others, which promotes collaboration, empathy, and clear communication.

The ecological systems theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the interdependence of the many environmental elements such as family, school, community, and cultural norms that have an impact on children's development. Children's cognition and experiences of social interaction are shaped by the interactions between these systems, which are considered nested within the larger one. As an illustration of the impact of various social situations and expectations, a child's interactions with siblings may differ from those with peers.

New and complex viewpoints on conceptualizations of children's social interactions are emerging as research advances. For instance, it is becoming more widely acknowledged that cultural differences in social norms and expectations have an impact on how young people perceive and participate in social interactions (Rogoff, 2003). Furthermore, there is increasing research being done on how digital media and technology affect kids' social experiences (Livingstone, 2009).

The field of understanding children's conceptions of social interaction is intricate and constantly changing. Through the application of theoretical frameworks such as Piaget's stage theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, theory of mind, and ecological systems theory, scholars can further explore the complex web of social interactions that makes up a child's environment. We can better assist kids in acquiring the fundamental abilities required to successfully negotiate the

complex dance of social interaction throughout their lives if we can recognize and value these varied points of view.

2.5. What is inclusive education

Three overarching strategies have been proposed for the teaching of children with disabilities. They include inclusion, where there is an acknowledgment of the need to change school cultures, policies, and practices to accommodate the various needs of individual students, as well as an obligation to remove the barriers that stand in the way of that possibility. Integration, where children with disabilities are placed in the mainstream system, often in special classes, or a general classroom with no or inadequate adaptations and support, is one of them (UNICEF, 2014). Segregation, on the other hand, involves classifying children according to their impairment and allocating them to a school tailored to that specific impairment. An inclusive education system accepts and encourages all students to study, regardless of who they are, what they can do, or what their needs are. This entails making certain that the curriculum, instruction, school facilities, play areas, transportation, and restrooms are suitable for all children (Kocha, Fantaye & Senapathy 2022).

Equal rights and opportunities are the cornerstones of inclusive education's democratic structure (UNESCO, 2004). It is so essential to ensure that students with disabilities are valued, accepted, and not subjected to discrimination in schools. It also highlights the need to modify the learning environment to accommodate all students' demands. Special needs children face many different learning obstacles. These learning obstacles are frequently linked to inclusion and involve several variables, including the standard of assessment, placement, services, interactions between teachers and students with disabilities, the sociocultural setting, and the accessibility of facilities.

One of the key elements in the successful implementation of inclusive education is service quality (Vincent, C. and Warren, S. 1997).

If inclusive education is implemented to the fullest to a realistic extent of practicality it brings forth multiple benefits for children with disabilities. Many studies in the past have brought to attention the many benefits of enrolling students with their non-disabled peers within an inclusive setting. As Cole, Waldron, &Majd, (2004); and Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, &Theoharis, (2013) stated, in children with disabilities, the amount of time they spend participating in the general education curriculum has a substantial and favorable correlation with their reading and math proficiency. This was further supported by the fact that compared to children served in special schools, students with intellectual disabilities who were fully incorporated in general education classrooms demonstrated greater growth in literacy skills (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). Similarly, according to Kurth and Mastergeorge, (2010) when compared to kids with autism in self-contained settings, students with autism in inclusive settings considerably outperformed each other on academic achievement exams.

Inclusive education settings didn't bring good outcomes just to those who are disabled they brought benefits to nondisabled students who learned alongside their disabled peers in these settings. Students without disabilities taught in inclusive environments showed noticeably faster progress in math and reading (Cole, Majd & Waldron, 2004). Not only this but increased academic success, assignment completion, and classroom participation were among the favorable academic results exhibited by students who supported their peers with disabilities in general education courses. (Kennedy & Cushing, 1997). In addition, in their 2007 meta-analysis of inclusive education studies, Kalambouka, Farrell, and Dyson discovered that 81% of the

outcomes that were reported indicated that incorporating students with disabilities had either positive or neutral benefits for students without disabilities.

2.6. Education of children with disabilities in Ethiopia

The government of Ethiopia has embraced global legal and policy structures pertaining to inclusive education. These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); the Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the World Declaration on Education For All (1990); the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993); the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) (UNESCO, 2020).

The inception of special education in Ethiopia can be traced back to the creation of the first school for visually impaired children in Dembidolo in 1925 (Temesgen, 2014). This progress was halted due to the Italian invasion. Before this, the church had a significant role in welcoming and educating students with disabilities. Even though it wasn't a secular education, religious institutions, particularly the Christian church, provided religious education to students with disabilities. These religious institutions have played a crucial role in the evolution of special needs education in Ethiopia. The roots of special needs education in Ethiopia can be found in the mountainous churches where students would gather under trees and in small huts for theological studies. Individuals with disabilities often made a living by teaching the Bible and the Quran in church and mosque schools respectively (Temesgen, 2014).

The advent of Christianity in Ethiopia marked a significant shift in education, with church education becoming instrumental in nurturing not only the children of the nobility but also those with visual and physical impairments. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church held an unparalleled role

in educating the government and ecclesiastical leaders of that era. Francisco Alvarez, a visitor to Ethiopia in the early 16th century, documented his astonishment at witnessing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities within the Ethiopian priesthood (Schiemer, 2017).

Over the past ten years, Ethiopia has been undertaking reforms to improve the education of marginalized children, including those with disabilities. The government has adopted a holistic approach, collaborating with local communities and employing a range of strategies to address challenges. Since 2018, the General Education Quality Improvement Program for Equity (GEQIP-E) has played a significant role in expanding these efforts. As a result of GEQIP-E interventions, 91,000 children with disabilities have been enrolled in inclusive education resource centers (Temesgen, 2014).

3. Research method

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research approach was employed to conduct this study. As the research is intended or designed to measure or analyze the response of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their non-disabled student mates, the data was collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions and the data generated was analyzed using descriptive approach. Qualitative research as an approach for the conduct of this study was chosen understanding the fact that it facilitates to probe smoothly the opinions of the study participants who involved in the interview and focus group discussion. This situation allows the author of the research to incorporate the voice of the participants of the study and tangibly reflect their opinions as the finding of the study.

This study was undertaken using a qualitative research approach as the central theme of the research belongs to social studies. Hence, qualitative research approach was applied for the conduct of the study due to the reason that it allows a researcher to delve into complex phenomena, understand lived experiences, and uncover unexpected patterns Creswell (2018).

Furthermore, this approach was selected and used for the conduct of the study believing that qualitative research facilitates researchers' comprehension of the world from the perspective of the participants. Hence, the qualitative research approach is more relevant to the context of the issue intended to be investigated by the research collecting information from the owners of the central theme of the research. Qualitative research allows researchers to understand and interpret situations based on the social and cultural meanings of those involved. This is particularly important in studying social interactions as these are heavily influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which they occur (DeJaeghere et al, 2020)

3.2. The study site

The study sites, TikurAnbesa Secondary School and Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education are the earliest schools established following the introduction of modern education in Ethiopia. TikurAnbesa secondary School, located Arada Sub city was established in 1964. The school is recognized as one of the best schools among public schools run by the government. The school holds special part in the history of modern education if the country. It was part of the efforts undertaken by the nation to expand and make education more accessible. From the outset, the school aims to nurture well-rounded individuals who could contribute meaningfully to society. Other than educational excellence the school focused on fostering students with good character development and leadership skills distinguishing it from other schools of its kind.

The data garnered form the report of the school indicates that in 2023/24 academic year there was enrollment of 1327 students with and without disabilities. Of the total of these students, 164 (12.35%) students were students with disabilities. In addition, in this academic year 95 teachers and support staff were deployed to undertake the teaching and learning process of the school.

The history of the school witness that for many years, TikurAnbesa Secondary School has upheld a strong academic standing. Its committed teachers have mentored numerous students over the years, helping them navigate a demanding educational program. The diverse achievements of TikurAnbesa Secondary School's alumni across various fields are a testament to the quality of education and the values instilled by the institution. The fact that many graduates have gone on to hold leadership positions and contribute to Ethiopia's progress speaks volumes about the school's impact on society. It's clear that TikurAnbesa Secondary School not only focuses on academic excellence but also prioritizes the development of well-rounded individuals with strong values and a commitment to making a positive difference in their communities.

A Unique aspect of this school its affiliation with students with hearing impairment. The school is among the first choices for heading impaired students due to the availability of relatively accessible learning environment in the school with special focus on the facilities needed for students with hearing impairment. In fact, the school still uses separate special class for students with hearing impairment that makes the school different from other where inclusive education is operational as an approach to teach students with disabilities.

In 1906, Emperor Menelik II issued a proclamation that legitimized modern education, paving the way for the foundation of Menelik II primary school in 1908 so that Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education is the extension of this historical process. Hence, the school was a pioneer for the introduction of modern education and playing a pivotal role in shaping the country's educational landscape. The school boasts a high enrollment rate that includes diverse student profiles. It has a long history given that it is the first modern school in the nation and has produced generations of students. The school was also among the first schools to accept students with disabilities next to dedicated schools for students with disabilities founded by different foreign missionaries in the country.

The information gathered from garnered form the report of the school indicates that in 2023/24 academic year there were 2337 students enrollment, and 89 of the students were students with different disabilities which makes up around 3% of the student population. Additionally, in this academic year 215 academic and school managerial staff were deployed to undertake the teaching and learning process of the school.

TikurAnbesa Secondary School and Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education were willingly chosen for the study due to the following reasons:

- Special needs education units are operational in the study schools.
- A number of students with disabilities are attending their study at the secondary school level with appropriate age and maturity to respond to the research questions.
- Both Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education and TikurAnbesa Secondary Schools have relatively a long history teaching of students with disabilities.

3.3. The study participants

3.3.1. Research setting

The research participants were selected from grade 12 students with disabilities who were attending their study in the research target schools in 2023/24 academic year considering their prolonged stay in the schools and relatively better experience on the issue under discussion. In addition, members of the management of the study schools such as principals, counselors, unit leaders and special needs education teachers were also selected and used as key informants with a view to utilizing their opinions as supplementary and complimentary information taking the relevance of their position and responsibility to the central theme of the research.

The participants students of with disabilities were selected from 253 students with disabilities who have been attending their study in the study schools in 2023/24 academic year as the detail information of the total number of students with disabilities disaggregated in gender and type of impairment is presented here under.

Table 1. Profile of students with disabilities who were attending their study in the study schools in 2023/24 academic year.

No.	1			2		
Name of school	Menelik II preparatory school for higher education			TikurAnbesa Secondary school		
Type of		Sex	Total		Sex	Total

Impairment	Visual impaired	M26, F28	54	Visual impaired	-	-
	Hearing impaired	M15, F16	31	Hearing impaired	M84, F76	160
	Physically impaired	M1, F3	4	Physically impaired	M3, F1	4
Total	253					

3.3.2. Sampling technique

Participant students with disabilities were selected among grade 12 students with disabilities of the study schools using random sampling to select participants for the focus group

Menelik Preparatory School for Higher Education

discussions simple random sampling was chosen with a view to ensuring the representation of the major types of impairments such as visual, hearing, and physical impairments. Moreover, this sampling was preferred to be used for the purpose of this research due to the reason that the number of eligible respondents was high as indicated above. Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, A. (2012), stated that ideally, a sample size of more than a few hundred is required in order to be able to apply simple random method in an appropriate manner.

On the other hand, purposive sampling was applied to select key informants from the school management staff and special needs education teachers of the study schools taking the relevance of their position and responsibility into account in reference to the central theme of the research. Hence, school principals, special needs education teachers, counselors, and unit leaders were used as key informants to enrich the substance of the data. Purposive sampling involves the selection of participants based on their unique features or experiences that are pertinent to the research question. This guarantees that the study's participants will be able to supply rich and insightful data (Patton, 2016).

3.3.3. Sample size

	Sex	Age	Type of impairment
1	Male	19	Visual impairment
2	Male	19	Visual impairment
3	Female	18	Visual impairment
4	Male	20	Visual impairment
5	Female	20	Hearing impairment
6	Male	19	Visual impairment
7	Male	19	Physical impairment
TikurAnbesa Secondary School			
	Sex	Age	Type of impairment
1	Female	22	Hearing Impairment
2	Male	18	Hearing Impairment
3	Male	20	Hearing Impairment
4	Male	19	Hearing Impairment
5	Male	19	Hearing Impairment
6	Male	19	Physical impairment

As per the approach, stated above, a total of fourteen students with disabilities were selected among grade twelve students to be the participants of the study as the detail information disaggregated in gender, sex, and the type of impairment is presented here under.

Table.2 The profile of participant students with disabilities

Likewise, a total of eleven key informants were chosen from the study school management staff and special needs education teachers as the detail information disaggregated in gender, position, work experience, and academic qualifications is presented below.

Table. 3 Profile of key informants

Menelik II secondary School for Higher Education					
	Sex	Age range	Position	Qualification	Years of experience
1	Male	31-45	Vice principle	MA	16-30
2	Male	46<	Unit leader	MA	16-30
3	Female	31-45	Special needs education teacher	BA	1-15
4	Male	46<	Special needs education teacher	BA	1-15
TikurAnbesa Secondary School					

	Sex	Age range	Position	Qualification	Years of experience
1	Male	31-45	Vice principle	MA	1-15
2	Male	31-45	Counselor	BA	1-15
3	Male	31-45	Special needs education teacher	BA	1-15
4	Female	31-45	Special needs education teacher	MA	1-15
5	Male	45<	Special needs education teacher	MA	1-15
6	Female	31-45	Special needs education teacher	BA	1-15

3.4. Data collection instrument

In this research face to face interviews and focus group discussions were employed for the purpose of the collection of the data. Focus group discussions are a useful tool for gathering data about shared opinions and the assumptions that underlie them. They are also helpful in producing a deep comprehension of the experiences and opinions of participants (Gill, Paul & Stewart, 2009).

Accordingly, two focus group discussions, one consisting of seven discussants and the other comprising six discussants were organized to collect data from participants with disabilities. A sign language interpreter was used to facilitate the communication of discussants with hearing. Moreover, their consent was secured before and during the discussion. As a result, one student with a physical impairment who was identified in the course of random selection declined not to participate in the study prior to the beginning of the focus group discussion. All focus group discussions were undertaken in the compound of their respective schools for the sake of their convenience.

Likewise, face-to-face interviews were conducted with selected high-ranking school management staff and special needs education teachers of the study schools as key informants for collecting supplementary information on the central theme of the study. Key informants possessing specialized knowledge or expertise on the subject should be interviewed to obtain

supplementary insights and confirm the results obtained from participant interviews. (Flick, 2019). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), these interviews will provide a more thorough examination of people's experiences, perspectives, and opinions concerning the study issue.

Interview and focus group guides were separately prepared and used to maintain the consistency and quality of both the interviews and the focus group discussions. In addition, all interviews and focus group discussions were recorded on digital recorders based on the consent of all participants of the study. The author of the research took note to properly gather the opinions of deaf discussants. The information collected from the participants of the study was used only for the purpose of the study.

3.5. Data collection procedure

A letter of cooperation was secured from the department and submitted to the study schools to obtain official permission and launch the process of data collection from the informants and focus group discussants. Thereafter the consent of the informants was secured so that the interview will be undertaken per their convenience including the time and place of their choice.

In addition, cooperation was requested from special needs education teachers to identify discussant students with disabilities based on the criteria set by the author. For instance, as stated above, discussant students with disabilities over the age of 18 were the prime choice of the author of the research due to their relevance to properly address the research questions. Similarly, the consent of discussant students with disabilities was requested by explaining the purpose of the study as a prerequisite to undertaking the focus group discussion.

The resource rooms of the study schools were used as centers for the conduct of the focus group discussions and the facilities of the centers such as sign language interpretation was used to effectively communicate with deaf participants.

3.6. Data analysis procedure

Upon the completion of the process of data collection, the information garnered from the key informants and focus group discussant students with disabilities was compiled and organized in thematic areas based on the research questions presented in chapter one of the manuscript of the research. This process involved examining and honing on the topics identified and examining how they relate to, conflict with, or reinforce one another. In addition, it included making sure every theme has a clear connection to the research question and is backed up by the facts (Clarke and Braun, 2006). The compiled data was interpreted and analyzed qualitatively using an inductive approach, and the key information gained from the informants and discussants was presented in the form of verbatim to directly reflect the voice of the participants. The research employed triangulation which looks for supporting evidence from a variety of data sources to increase the validity and reliability of the results (Guba & Lincoln, 1985)

3.7. Ethical considerations

Qualitative research delves into the nuanced experiences and perspectives of individuals and communities, often through in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Although these approaches provide useful insights, they also bring up special ethical challenges that must be navigated. Protecting participants' dignity and well-being while simultaneously gathering valuable data necessitates a careful balancing.

According to Flick (2014), there is a possibility that the researcher will use implicit or explicit authority to control the subject during an in-depth interview. This disparity in authority has the

potential to result in coercion, manipulation, and the collection of data without the full consent of the subject. Informed consent is crucial for reducing this risk; thus, researchers must make sure participants are aware of the study's objectives, their ability to withdraw, and how their data will be utilized (Creswell & Miller, 2007). It is important to explain to prospective participants the purpose of the study and the format of the interviews. Before conducting any interview, consent must be obtained, and interview subjects should have time to indicate their willingness to participate. Furthermore, it's critical to create a secure and encouraging atmosphere where participants feel free to voice their thoughts (Punch, 2016).

An additional ethical dilemma is privacy and anonymity. Ensuring participant anonymity is crucial since sensitive information is frequently included in qualitative data. The degree of anonymity required must be carefully considered by researchers, who must strike a balance between the necessity for anonymity and the potential for person identification through context clues in the data (Bryman, 2016). It is crucial to have clear communication during the permission process regarding data storage and anonymization protocols. Researchers should also be aware of the possibility of psychological and social harm that could result from taking part in qualitative research. Participants in focus groups may experience discomfort or distress due to delicate subjects and group dynamics. Scholars must be ready to tackle these problems and provide assistance when required (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

Hence, As the study requires human relationships all procedures and requirements need to be applied regarding ethical issues were seriously taken into account. As a result, in the course of the interview and focus group discussion, the consent of the participants of the study was secured and the confidentiality of the information gathered from them was kept cautiously. Hence, the informants and discussants were facilitated to make informed decisions for their participation in

the study. Hence one of those participants of the study used this information and approach to decline participating in the study.

3.8. Quality assurance

Various ways have been implemented to maintain the quality of the data-gathering methods and other aspects of the processes needed to finish this research. In order to guarantee the caliber of both the final results and the preparatory procedures, a researcher must utilize a variety of methods. Therefore, in addition to using multiple data collection strategies, the research employed different procedures to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of its findings.

This study made in use of credibility, dependability, and conformability strategies to assure its quality or trustworthiness. Credibility is the degree of trustworthiness that a given investigation's conclusions have for the topic and environment in which it is conducted (Shenton & Andrew, 2004). In this study, credibility was assured by triangulation and member-checking techniques, use of multiple data gathering instruments and requiring for the validation of participants for accuracy of data gathered have been undertaken.

This study employed a focus group discussion, during the conducting these focus group discussions the researcher used methods such as clearly presenting the research objectives, selecting diverse and representing sample size and facilitator for the discussion, these are considered the best practices that a researcher should adhere to when conducting focus group discussion (Flick, 2019). Careful attention was also paid during the data collection process while employing this method to ensure audio recordings were at the highest possible quality.

Another data collection used for this research as mentioned in the research method section is interviews, in order to maintain the necessary level of quality required for research of this

quality, different measures have been taken. The researcher has used clear protocols and standardized question to ensure consistency across all participants of the study. This method is required and assures the quality of the data collection tool (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In addition, clear communication with the preferred language was undertaken during the interviews to further ensure quality and reduce interview bias. Interviewers should possess strong communication skills and receive training to minimize interviewer bias (Miles et al., 2014).

Qualitative research cannot be deemed credible unless it is dependable. Thus, the researcher made sure that the finding of the study is only based on the data collected from the study participants. The researchers have carefully considered the design, implementation, and analysis of their studies and has implemented actions deemed best practices of qualitative research. By employing best practices and following ethical guidelines, researchers can enhance the trustworthiness of their qualitative research and contribute to the advancement of knowledge within their field (Mays & Pope, 1995).

4. Finding

Based on the detailed profile of the participants of the study depicted in the tables above, key information garnered from all respondents has been presented in this part of the manuscript of the research. As discussed under subchapter 3.7 above the key findings presented below are organized in four organically linked thematic areas. The focus group discussion that conducted with the participant students representing Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education will be referred to as “focus group discussion 1” while the other focus group discussion conducted with participants students with disabilities from TikurAnbessa secondary school will be referred to as “focus group Discussion 2” for the rest of the manuscript of the research.

4.1. Understanding of the study participants with disabilities about social interaction and its importance from their specific situation perspective.

All focus group discussion participants were asked about the condition and how they perceive social interaction. In their response, the discussants reflected their understanding in different, but in parallel ways. Among the focus group discussion 1 participants, four discussants described social interaction as daily interaction with their disabled, and none disabled members of local communities where they live in. They further explained their opinion that social interaction includes the relationship of people to occur within families, local communities, and institutions such as schools and workplaces.

The remaining three participants of focus group discussion 1 also defined social interaction as living together in harmony, love, and peace and experiencing and sharing all encounters of life such as ups and downs or success and challenges by assisting each other. They did believe that social interaction is a viable instrument to overcome multifaceted challenges of life that every member of a given community may encounter.

One of the discussants of this focus group discussion unilaterally raised his view to further express his understanding of the issue under discussion saying that “social interaction is the involvement and contribution of an individual in all forms of social activities and roles where he/she is nurtured by the cultural value, norms and customs of that society.”

With regards to the response of the participant of focus group discussion 2, one of the discussants of this group reported that social interaction is the establishment of positive contact with people and creating friendly connections to assist each other. The participants of this focus group discussion unanimously expounded that social interaction is the creation of mutual relationships among people in different aspects of life and social engagements such as economic, political, and cultural activities.

The other question raised and discussed by the participants of this focus group discussion was about the importance of social interaction. Among the participants of the focus group discussion-1, four discussants pinpointed that the significance of smooth social interaction can be measured by its worth mentioning role in enabling individuals to cope with and relieve their stress caused by the multiple and multistage crises of life. The other two discussants also concurred on the points attributed to the importance of social interaction that it helps those who succeeded in experiencing healthy interaction with others build self-confidence, a sense of belongingness, and self-worthiness and feel that they have a purpose in life.

The remaining discussant of this focus group discussion argued that the significance of social interaction should be appraised from the fact that “no one can lead his/her independent life without the others, hence he did believe that social interaction does affect all aspects of the human life and humanity as well, positively or negatively as human beings are created to live in unity and diversity.”

In their response, the focus group discussion 2 discussants unanimously reflected the same points raised and acknowledged by focus group discussion 1 participants about the significance of social interaction. However, one of the participants differently expressed his opinion that successful social interaction contributes to the self-development of individuals and their acceptance within local communities where they live.

Overall, the participants of the two focus group discussions concurred that social interaction is one of the manifestations of the peculiar nature of humanity that harmonizes the independent living of individuals which is the core foundation of local communities. In addition, they unanimously argued that no meaningful social life does exist without well-ordered social interaction of individuals.

In another aspect of the assessment of the participants of the study, all school management staff interviewees agreed that even though both disabled and non-disabled peers will mutually benefit from their successful social interaction, students with disabilities may enjoy more advantages from such relationships by utilizing the assistance and support of their non-disabled peers. One of these interviewees said that “since public schools do not have the financial capacity in the context of Ethiopia to hire assistance for all students with disabilities, there is no doubt that the contribution of non-disabled peers will fill the gap and ease the challenges of students with disabilities.”

4.2. The factual assessment of participant students with disabilities on their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled student mates.

All participant students with disabilities were asked relevant questions to revisit and assess the overall situation of their interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled student mates. These questions were willingly delivered to all discussants of the focus group discussion following the

discussions undertaken on their opinion about the general perspective of social interaction to enable them to analyze the status of their interpersonal interaction from their specific situation and the importance of social interaction perspective.

Accordingly, all participant students with disabilities were asked to deal with the question in their discussion whether they were involved in extracurricular activities together with their non-disabled peers and what they benefited from their engagement in reference to improving their interpersonal interaction with them. In their response, only three discussants of the focus group discussion 1 confirmed that they have been participating in extracurricular activities together with their non-disabled student mates. One of these participants noted that he has been working in the music band of the school being a vocalist based on his proclivity, the other two also succussed in involving in two sports clubs which are specialized in sports games and martial arts. Regarding the benefit they earned from their participation in those extracurricular activities, “the vocalist” participant argued that:

“I would have been unable to access opportunities that enabled me to meet my disabled and non-disabled peers who have been attending their study in other sections and grade levels. Hence it was a golden opportunity to me to have friends out of my class and enhance my interpersonal interaction with others. The consequence of this scenario is clear that I was able to contribute to the school community with confidence extracting my potential capacity and natural gift in music. I do believe that my unique performance enabled me to win the attention of my non-disabled peers and the school community as well which created a superb opportunity for me to sensitize the awareness of the school community about the potential capacity of persons with disabilities.”

The other two discussants also expressed the same views discussed above concerning the benefit they enjoyed in their interpersonal interaction experienced as the result of their engagement in extracurricular activities with their non-disabled peers. The important and different issue they reflected on the issue under discussion was that their participation in such extracurricular learning activities helped them broaden their horizon on understanding the world of other students without disabilities and see their social life engagement from different perspectives.

However, the remaining four participants of this focus group discussion acknowledged that they lacked such opportunities to enhance social interaction with their non-disabled peers due to their failure to participate in extracurricular activities of the school.

Regarding the opinions reflected by the participants of focus group discussion 2 on the same question under discussion, they unanimously confirmed that they were not able to participate in extracurricular activities organized on different areas of focus of exercises and learning. The major bottlenecks that obstructed their participation in extracurricular activities are summarized and listed below.

- Lack of proper attention and support from the school management that infringed their entitlement to enjoy reasonable accommodation that would enable them to access opportunities on an equal basis with others.
- The entrenched misunderstanding of the school staff that students with disabilities are required to fit the school system, versus changing the school services to be accommodative of their special educational needs and requirements.
- Lack of access to information and communication barriers that severely crippled the communication of deaf students in the absence of sign language interpretation service. For instance, most school advertisements, including adverts for registration in school

clubs are announced during flag ceremony where there is no sign language interpretation service.

- Disregarding interest by parents to participate in extracurricular activities due to their ignorance towards the potential capacity of students with disabilities.
- Negative attitude within school management and teachers staff towards the abilities of students with disabilities, that a great majority of them did believe that students with disabilities are incapable to participate and effectively engage in extracurricular activities with their nondisabled peers.

In this respect, one of the participants of this focus group discussion shared his encounter as follows

“I have asked the school management to participate in a question-and-answer competition organized by the school on different subject matters to enhance the general knowledge of students. However, the school management said no, and the organizer of the competition told me to wait for another competition to be prepared only for deaf students. The organizer told me that it would be difficult for deaf students to participate in such a competition as the media of communication in the competition is verbal. He further told me that there is a procedure to deliver my complaints to the principal of the school. Even if I have tried to share my grievance, my relentless effort came to an end without success due to communication barriers.”

The other relevant issue raised in the focus group discussions was the question of how the discussants evaluate their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers. Of the total of the participants of the focus group discussion 1 three discussants corroborated that their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers was positive. They unanimously expressed

sample manifestations of their positive interaction with their non-disabled student mates that they didn't face serious challenges to communicate and establish close friendships with their non-disabled peers. They also confirmed that they have never faced any form of discrimination due to their disability as their non-disabled friends progressively became aware of their potential capacity and ability regardless of their impairment.

The other discussant did believe that his interpersonal interaction with his non-disabled peers was somewhat positive so far. He acknowledged that while he was a new entry in the school his interaction was confined to the group of blind students for fear of discrimination from his non-disabled classmates. However, he gradually succeeded in familiarizing himself with the school environment which enabled him to improve his social interaction with his non-disabled peers. He further argued that it was by his personal effort that he was able to successfully scale up his interpersonal interaction with his non-disabled peers.

The remaining three participants of this group discussion, however, argued that they were not comfortable with the overall situation of their interpersonal interaction established with their non-disabled peers. As they explicitly explained the reason why they couldn't establish social interaction with their non-disabled peers, some of them had a fear of bullying owing to their impairment, and the others also experienced unpleasant sympathy and sometimes mocking that frustrated them. One of these discussants also reported that she was tired of giving responses repeatedly to trivial questions coming from non-disabled students emanating from their ignorance about disability. As a result, they preferred to isolate themselves and spend their time in the resource center of the school.

Likewise, of the total of the discussants of the focus group discussion 2 three participants claimed that their social interaction with their non-disabled peers was positive. They confirmed

that regardless of their communication barrier due to their hearing impairment, most of their friends treated them friendly even trying their best to learn sign language and interact with them as much as possible. They further reported that the enthusiasm of their non-disabled student mates was a moving spirit for them not only for their successful social interaction but also for the betterment of their academic careers.

The other three participants in this focus group discussion, however, reported that they were disappointed and displeased in their relationship with their non-disabled peers. They did believe that the condition that they are not allowed to be integrated within regular classroom settings and attend their study in inclusive class settings with their nondisabled peers negatively contributed to their limited interaction with their non-disabled peers. Communication barrier was also mentioned as one of the typical factors behind this scenario that impeded their social interaction with their non-disabled peers.

The same question was also delivered to the informants to assess the situation of social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers based on their observation and involvement in the management of students' affairs. Special needs education teachers who participated in the interview representing Menelik Preparatory School for Higher Education reported that the condition of the social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers is somehow good. As they confirmed, the situation is not easy for students with hearing impairment due to communication barriers that significantly impede their smooth interaction with their non-disabled peers. However, they concurred that visually impaired students were more successful in establishing effective interaction and friendship with their non-disabled peers. They further witnessed that blind students were able to actively engage in group

assignments and other forms of joint activities, and their impressive academic performance also enabled them to win the attention and acceptance of their non-disabled peers.

The other four interviewee special needs education teachers of TikurAnebesa Secondary School also reported inclusive education as a strategy and program to teach students with special educational needs in inclusive class settings with their non-disabled student mates has multi-fold advantage for students with disabilities. Hence, students with disabilities who have been rolled into the regular school system to attend their study in inclusive class settings with their non-disabled peers have better opportunities to establish effective social interaction and friendships with their nondisabled classmates. These informants revealed that the situation of deaf students who have been attending their studies at TikurAnebesa Secondary School is contrary to this reality due to the reason that deaf students are still required to attend their studies in separate special classes. They did believe that this practice exposed deaf students to isolation so that they were deprived of their inalienable right to attain their study with their non-disabled peers which would have been a bridge to establish social interaction with their student mates.

Besides, the informants who were interviewed representing the management staff of the study schools reflected the same opinion shared by special needs education teachers. As confirmed by all informants, communication barrier remains a big challenge for the social interaction of deaf students while students with other impairments benefited a lot from the legacy of inclusive education to establish effective relationships and cooperation with their non-disabled peers for their mutual interest.

Considering the specific situation of the participant students with disabilities, all discussants of the focus group discussions were asked to reflect their opinions on the issue whether their disability affected their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. In their response most of

the participant students with disabilities, nine out of thirteen discussants reported their disability was not the reason to negatively impact their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. Indeed, they acknowledge that their respective impairment might have resulted in activity limitation which may slightly restrict their interaction with others. They further described the situation that the level of this activity limitation will be circumscribed by the severity and type of the impairment.

On the contrary, the other four discussants of the focus group discussion argued that even though it is not the direct effect of disability, they did believe that persons with disabilities are not sufficiently successful in establishing effective social interaction with their non-disabled peers due to the existing negative attitude of people towards disability. Hence, they noted that attitudinal barriers continued to impede normalizing the social interaction of persons with disabilities with their non-disabled counterparts. Deaf discussants also reported that communication barrier was also another adverse effect of their impairment that restricted their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. They further described the situation that even though post-lingual students with hearing impairment are found in a better position to communicate with their non-disabled peers, they have learned that their non-disabled student mates were not interested in using lip reading with precaution and tolerance and they are annoyed and displeased by the irregularity of the pitch of the voice of the post-lingual hearing-impaired speakers.

Likewise, in line with the relevance of their position and responsibility, informants working at the school management level and special needs education program of the study schools were asked to reflect their opinions on the issue under discussion. Hence, they concurred that activity limitations resulting from their respective type of impairment might have influenced the level of

their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. But they unanimously argued that the lack of proper facilities and due attention from the school management and the negative attitude of people that hindered their full participation in school activities suppressed their potential capacity to communicate with their non-disabled peers and establish friendships with them. One of the interviewees working as a special needs education teacher expressed the severity of their disappointment caused by limited access to regular services of the school as follows.

“I have learned that as most students with disabilities could not secure food due to the poor economic status of their families, they spent their time searching for options that would enable them to obtain food rather than focusing on their social interaction and academic career. In addition, students with severe and multiple physical impairments will never drink water or eat food during their stay in the school due to challenging situations where they cannot use the toilet due to the inaccessibility of toilets. All these upsetting conditions affected and limited the independence of students with disabilities to be actively engaged in social activities.”

Another question interwoven with the issue under discussion was delivered to the focus group discussion discussants to reflect on their assessment of their effort to strengthen their interpersonal relationships with their non-disabled peers. The response of most of the participants with disabilities is summarized and presented briefly hereunder:

- Conduct personal effort and take the first initiative for conversation and establish friendly contact with their non-disabled student mates.

- Actively participate in group work and projects with diligence and academic performance efficacy and use this opportunity to win the attention and trust of their non-disabled groupmates.
- Enhance their academic performance to enable them to win the acceptance and intimacy of their non-disabled classmates and the school community as well.
- Engage actively in extracurricular activities and events organized by their schools.
- Scale up their self-confidence, self-worth, and self-reliance which enables them to be independent learners and attract the acceptance and trust of others.

On the other hand, one of the focus group discussants said

“I have tried to create another option beyond the school environment to improve my social interaction with my non-disabled peers. For instance, I have succeeded in participating in church rituals, events, and services together with my non-disabled peers. I do believe that this situation helped me have more engagement time in our common interest and gradually experience the feeling and practice of close friendship and intimacy that extended to other aspects of our life.”

All focus group discussion discussants were further asked to assess their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers comparing the situation inside and outside their school community. The responses of the discussants had coherence with the answers they provided for the question discussed above. Those who claimed that they succeeded in establishing positive relationships with their non-disabled peers in the school community reported that they have experienced the same social interaction and engagement with their non-disabled peers outside the school

communities. Likewise, those who failed to establish positive social interaction with their non-disabled student-mates encountered the same failure in the local community they live in.

In addition, those who had successful involvement in different social activities exhibited the same achievement in their social interaction outside the school. For instance, one of the discussants of focus group discussion 2 substantiated that

“As the teaching of the bible shapes the attitude of the believers to live together in love and peace, harmonizing their interest and suppressing their ego, I have learned that believers will intensively engage in creating an inclusive and friendly environment where all believers regardless of their difference in gender, ethnicity, race, and disability are accommodated and respected. I do believe that this religious moral teaching enabled me to feel as a part of the believers of our church as a single community.”

Even though they exhibited different experiences, all participants of the focus group discussion were asked to reflect on the challenges, if any, they encountered in their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. They were also further asked about the impact of those challenges on their overall situation including their academic career and how they overcame the problems. Of the total of the participants of focus group discussion 1, three discussants reported that they didn't encounter serious challenges that may meaningfully affect the situation of their social interaction with their non-disabled peers, however, the remaining three participants of this group discussion revealed that they faced several challenges in their social interaction with their non-disabled peers as briefly discussed hereunder.

One of the participants of this focus group discussion reported that bullying can be mentioned as one of the big challenges of students with disabilities to establish positive interactions with their non-disabled peers. He confirmed that he was isolated for a while from the rest of his classmates for fear of being bullied which adversely affected his academic career. It was as a result of his relentless personal endeavor and initiative that the situation gradually changed and he succeeded in creating close contact and friendship with his non-disabled student mates.

The other fascinating experience shared by one of the discussants of focus group discussion 1 in the discussion was that even though he wanted to maintain his privacy and carry out a personal issue that requires confidentiality, he asked for the support of his intimate friends as he recognized the fact that he was unable to do what he planned due to his visual impairment.

Unfortunately, breaching their promise, his friends disclosed the issue to the public. The consequence of this crisis is clear that he isolated himself being ashamed of the exposure of his personal affair to his disabled and non-disabled student mates. In this situation, he could not regularly attend his study that ultimately affected his academic career. He did believe that it was by his persistent religious commitment and prayer, and the psychological support of his blind friends that he was gradually able to reinstate his confidence and academic performance.

Regarding the response of focus group discussion 2 discussants, they unanimously substantiated that they have experienced several challenges in their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. One of the participants of this focus group discussion expressed her feeling that the challenge of students with disabilities in their social interaction with their non-disabled peers was attributed to bullying and mocking committed by their non-disabled peers against their will and dignity. She bitterly explained her opinion that since deafness is a hidden type of impairment, no one can detect it easily so deaf people are highly exposed to communication challenges and

misunderstandings from the hearing world. Consequently, a number of deaf students have been frustrated and reacted negatively towards their interaction with the hearing world as a whole. Hence, they have been forced to remain isolated from social engagement which adversely affected both their social and academic performance. Being tired of the negative reaction of the school community towards the need for social inclusion of students with disabilities most of the deaf participants of this focus group discussion acknowledged that they preferred to strengthen their social interaction and commitment with their deaf friends.

On the other hand, interviewee participants of the study shared their experiences and observations regarding the challenges of students with disabilities in the establishment of friendly interaction and joint social engagement with their non-disabled peers. They did believe that isolation, lack of due attention on the part of the school community, prejudice, and ignorance of the people towards disability can be mentioned as the typical challenges of students with disabilities that affected their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. They said that the consequence of these entrenched problems is clear that students with disabilities inculcated negative perceptions in their minds towards society, and they have been forced to wrongly think that they are unwanted before others. Hence, they concluded in a condition where there is no inclusive society that treats people equally regardless of their differences, it is impossible to expect healthy social interaction between persons with disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

Regardless of these challenges enumerated by the participants of the study, participant special needs education teachers were asked to reflect on their opinion based on their observation and professional engagement on whether they detected positive reactions of non-disabled peers towards their student mates with disabilities in their reciprocal relationships. Of the total of the participant special needs education teachers, two interviewees reported that they have observed

positive signs that verify the presence of positive reactions and enthusiasm of non-disabled students towards their relationship with students with disabilities. As per their argument, the number of non-disabled students who visited the resource center to meet students with disabilities and spend their time with them to learn together and have friendly conversations increased significantly. They further noted that some non-disabled students have shown interest in learning sign language with a strong desire to communicate with hearing-impaired students and establish consequential friendships. The other three interviewees also expressed their positive feelings on the situation that encouraging progress has been observed in the improvement of mutual interaction of non-disabled students with their disabled peers. However, the remaining one participant special education teacher said “I have never seen worth mentioning progress on their mutual relationship: rather I have observed that deaf students still prefer to establish intimacy and friendship with their deaf peers.”

4.3. The study schools’ engagement in providing intervention for the improvement of the social skills of students with disabilities to their specific condition.

Considering their role in putting the intervention into practice all participants of the focus group discussion were asked whether they received and benefited from professional support intended to improve their social skills and interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers. In their response, discussants of the two focus group discussions unanimously confirmed that there was no such endeavor on the part of the study schools’ management aimed at organizing professional intervention needed for the improvement of the social skills of students with disabilities who have been attending their study under their jurisdiction. As reported by the participants of the focus group discussions, regardless of the failure of the school management to undertake interventions needed for the enhancement of their social skills which would have been highly

valued support to improve their social interaction with their non-disabled peers, all discussants of the focus group discussions acknowledged that they have benefited a lot from the encouraging rehabilitation services made available in the schools that played a significant role for the success of their academic performance. The obtainability of textbooks transcribed into braille, human reading, and sign language interpretation services were mentioned by the participants of the focus group discussion made available in their respective schools.

As unanimously reported by the participants of the focus group discussion if the study school managements were aware of the importance of such professional support and willing to deliver the service within available means including the utilization of collaborative engagement with interested nongovernmental stakeholders, they would have been able to improve their self-confidence, social and communication skills.

With regard to the response of key informants, one of the interviewees recruited from the management staff of Menelik II Preparatory School for Higher Education acknowledged that

“Even though we may not call it an intervention, our management tried to implement system change as a strategy to integrate students with disabilities in regular classroom settings to attend their study with their non-disabled peers. Previously they were attending their study in special classes organized separately for students with special educational needs. But after a while, we learned that this approach segregated students with disabilities from the rest of the school community which adversely affected their social interaction with their non-disabled student mates. It was on the basis of this learning process that we have taken corrective measures through system change to create an inclusive environment and integrate them into the regular school system and have the opportunity to establish interpersonal

interaction with their non-disabled peers. We further encouraged and facilitated them to participate in extracurricular activities and tutorial services with their non-disabled peers.”

The other informant interviewed from this school management also reflected his opinion on the issue under discussion saying that “personally I will never organize a specific intervention for students with disabilities assuming that they may feel incapable and those who need the support of others.” This contradictory information garnered from the same management staff indicates that there was no organized intervention provided to students with disabilities with the objective of helping them improve their social skills.

One of the high profiles of the TikburAnbessa Secondary School management staff reported that while he was serving as a member of the leadership of the school management, he had never received serious complaints submitted by students with disabilities on the challenge they encountered related to their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. He acknowledged that they may face minor social crises, but not problems that may severely affect their social interaction attributed to their impairment. He further noted that, even though the school management didn't apply intervention for the improvement of social skills of students with disabilities, efforts have been made to create awareness using academically successful students with disabilities as role models to sensitize their non-disabled peers about the potential capacities and abilities of students with disabilities. The counselor of the school also added that even though the management didn't postulate and implement specific interventions his team is sensitive to the issue of disability so the management is keen to conduct close follow-up on the overall situation of students with disability.

All informants who participated in the interview representing their respective study school management staff were asked to assess whether the management of their schools had hands-on commitment and engagement in mainstreaming the issue of disability in their service delivery as a pre-requisite for the provision of interventions needed for persons with disabilities stated above. In their response, they unanimously confirmed that in the last many years, efforts were made to mainstream the issue of disability in their service delivery. One of these informants who belongs to the management staff of Menelik Preparatory School for Higher Education said

“We always take action to consider the special educational needs of students with disabilities beginning from their registration. We have designed the mechanism to identify the type of special educational needs of each student with a disability to determine the type of special support he/she needs. This screening process will guide us to provide support services to those who need intervention as much as possible.”

The other informant who participated in the interview representing TikurAnbessa Secondary School management staff argued that “we are committed to the issues related to students with disabilities as we are equally committed to the issue of non-disabled students.” He, therefore, confirmed that disability is one of the areas of focus of the service delivery of the school recognizing the educational rights of students with disabilities.

However, regardless of this verification and claim of the informant, the response of the focus group discussion discussants presented above revealed that students with disabilities particularly were prohibited from participating in some extracurricular activities such as question-and-answer competitions due to the unpreparedness of the school management to facilitate their media of communication.

On the other hand, the special needs education teacher interviewees of the study schools concurred that even though there is no appropriately organized intervention needed to support students with disabilities to improve their social interaction skills due to lack of professionals who have relevant expertise and qualifications, they have tried to address the need of such intervention by organizing counseling and coaching sessions.

4.4 Measures and interventions recommended by the participants of the study for the improvement of social skills and better interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

As the title of this sub-section signifies, all participants of the study were asked to suggest relevant measures and interventions needed to be undertaken on the way forward for the improvement of social skills and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. Based on their concern the discussants of the focus group discussion demanded the following measures to be taken as viable interventions for the improvement of the social skills as well as interpersonal relationships of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

- Identify students with disabilities who have visible social interaction problems, and provide them with appropriate support including counseling service.
- Conduct organized efforts for the creation of an accessible and inclusive school community through awareness-raising campaigns, pay due attention to sensitize the school communities to be aware of the use of positive language in their interaction with students with disabilities.

- Facilitate non-disabled students to provide volunteer services in the resource centers of the school so as to allow them to create intimacy and friendship with students with disabilities and be aware of their special educational needs and requirements.
- Implement organized intervention aimed at improving the proficiency, self-confidence, self-worth, and self-reliance of students with disabilities.
- Organize events dedicated to students with disabilities and use mini-medias of the schools to create disability-sensitive cultural value within the school communities.
- Build the capacity of teachers and support staff on disability inclusion from a human rights perspective.
- Improve the existing sign language interpretation service to facilitate the social communication and engagement of deaf students.

On the other hand, key informants, (special needs education teachers and management staff) also added what needs to be considered on the way forward for the improvement of social skills and interactions of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers as follows:

- Motivate students with disabilities to take the initiative for the improvement of their interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers and develop the capacity to overcome challenges through their own efforts.
- Increase the government's commitment to provide multi-disciplinary services for students with disabilities through improving the existing disorganized and poor quality of services of the resource centers.
- Create an inclusive culture within the school community using different mechanisms such as demonstrating the high-level academic success and achievements of ranked

students with disabilities and organizing platforms where renowned professional with disabilities can share their experiences for school communities

- Pay due attention to students with disabilities with particular emphasis on the overall situation of their social interaction with their non-disabled members of the school community
- Increase the proper utilization of inclusive education as a strategy designed to accommodate the special educational needs of students with disabilities on an equal basis with others regardless of the barriers to inclusion exhibited so far.
- Allocate earmarked budget to address the unmet needs of students with disabilities.
- Undertake unreserved effort for the creation of an accessible environment for the mobility and full inclusion of students with disabilities in school activities on an equal basis with others.
- Work collaboratively with concerned stakeholders to ease the disappointing economic challenge of students with disabilities that reduced them to be dependent upon others and consequently jeopardize their self-confidence, self-worth, and self-reliance.

5. Discussion

5.1. The perception of the participants of the study towards social interaction from disability perspective.

As confirmed by the findings of the study, regardless of differences observed in their expression, most of the participants of the study recognized that social interaction is a peculiar nature of humanity and the foundation for the existence of a given society. They further substantiated that the presence of diversity in a society magnifies the importance and decisive role of social interaction in cementing the relationship of individuals. The studies conducted in the areas of

disability highlight that social interaction contribute to emotional and cognitive development of children with disabilities, social interaction further support students with disabilities to develop their social skills and self-esteem which are crucial for their wellbeing and effective integration to a sociality (Finnvold, 2021)

Regardless of their mutual benefit, the finding of the study revealed that persons with disabilities are more advantageous in advancing their acceptance with in the society through their successful interaction with their non-disabled peers. Hence, their effective social interaction with their non-disabled peers would enable them to enjoy the support of others and offset the opportunities they lost due to the impact of their impairment. In cooperative learning which is an appropriate strategy for practicing inclusive education, Milsom (2006), described that the paring of students with disabilities with those who do not have disabilities, allows for socialization and learning from each other's unique strengths and knowledge. This approach not only develops social skills, independence, and problem-solving abilities but also plays a pivotal role in helping students with disabilities overcome their impairment limitations and fosters unexpected friendships.

5.2. Overview of participant students with disabilities and informants on the social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

Even though a number of reasons that hindered the full and effective participation of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities were raised and discussed among the focus group discussions participants, most of the discussants of the focus group discussions and informants concurred that the involvement of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities enabled them to enhance their social interaction and benefit from such opportunity. The finding of the study, therefore, confirmed that the effective involvement of students with disabilities in social activities facilitated them to be successful in their social relationship. Milsom (2006), found that

group activities and engagements create a sense of belonging and acceptance among the participants so that students will be enthusiastic to actively participate and interact with each other.

With regard to the current status of social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers, almost half of the focus group discussions' discussants and informants reported that the social interaction of students with disabilities was in one way or another positive. The finding of the study has proven that there was the sign of progress on the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. In addition, as accounted by special needs education teacher participants, there is sign of improvement of the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers in school where inclusive education was applied which helped students with disabilities be integrated in regular classroom setting and attend their study with their non-disabled peers rather than schools where special need education units or classes are operational. Kart and Kart (2021), stated that even students without disabilities can benefit from inclusive learning environment. Because inclusive education reduces and ultimately eliminates fear, hostility, prejudice, and discrimination as well as it increases tolerance, acceptance, and understanding. Hence, this feature of inclusive education indicates the fact that positive social interactions in inclusive classrooms can foster a more accepting and inclusive school environment for all students. Maciver et al. (2019), found that all-inclusive environments foster social interaction versus the hindrance of exclusive and discriminatory learning and social environment.

Besides, irrespective of their relentless effort to improve interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers, communication barrier was mentioned by most of the participants of the study as a critical challenge for deaf students that seriously impeded their interpersonal interaction with

their non-disabled. Batanero et al (2022) and Bondurant (2016), noted that communication barrier significantly impact the social and academic career of deaf students and it extended beyond the class setting by affecting their interaction with their non-disabled peers and teachers

In fact, most of the participants of the study argues that disability might have indirect impact on the extent of social interaction of students with disabilities. Rather as the finding, of the study disclosed, attitudinal barrier seriously affected the magnitude of social relationship of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. De Boer, Pijl, and Minnaert (2012), substantiated the fact that the attitude of non-disabled students towards disabilities significantly influences negatively or positively the social interaction of students with disabilities. This analysis of the authors is attributed to rationale that negative attitudes can lead to social exclusion, while positive attitudes can foster inclusion and social interaction.

The finding of the study further confirmed that concerted effort and motivation of students with disabilities with a sense of optimism may ensure the success of the social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers. In fact, the support of multidisciplinary intervention was highlighted by the participants of the study as doable strategy for the improvement of the social interaction of students with disabilities. Presently, multidisciplinary intervention, (the collaborative engagement of professionals consisting of regular teachers, special needs education teachers, psychologists and social workers) has been identified as valuable instrument to improve social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers (Watkins et al, 2015).

As affirmed by the finding of the study, social exclusion and isolation were the main manifestations of the unhealthy social interaction of students with disabilities. As a result, most of the participant students with disabilities reported that they have been exposed to bullying,

mocking and different types discrimination that affected their academic performance. Schwab et al, (2021) stated that lack of interaction can lead to social exclusion and isolation, which can negatively impact the self-esteem and academic performance of students with disabilities.

5.3. The role and duties of schools for the improvement of social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

The participant students with disabilities confirmed that regardless of some efforts made by the study school managements to provide support services needed for their academic career in a regular school system, there was no organized intervention undertaken to improve the social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. However, as claimed by the informants, the study school managements used and applied holistic rehabilitation services such as the delivery of adaptive educational materials, human reading and sign language interpretation service to encourage the involvement of students with disabilities in all aspects of the school activities and easily integrate them their non-disabled members of the school communities including their non-disabled peers. As UNICEF (2024), publicized, in order to address barriers for social interaction of students with disabilities in schools such as social stigma and communications impediments, holistic approach is needed to involve changes in behavior, attitude and school structure.

As confirmed by the finding of the study, lack of professionals who have relevant experience, qualification and expertise can be mentioned as a big challenge for the study school managements to provide organized and specialized interventions needed for the enhancement of the social skill and interaction of persons with disabilities with their non-disabled peers. It is known that students with disabilities may face difficulty to scale up their social interaction by

overcoming challenges emanated from the ignorance of their non-disabled peers without the support of trained professionals (Inman, 2016).

In fact, as stated above, the managements of the study schools made concerted efforts to apply different mechanisms for the integration of students with disabilities to their non-disabled peers which had a considerable contribution for the improvement of the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

5.4. Measures and interventions recommended by the participants of the study on the way forward.

As discussed in the finding section of the manuscript, most of the participant student with disabilities suggested measures needed to be undertaken on the way forward for the improvement of social interaction of students with disabilities within school communities where they have been attending their study with their non-disabled peers. These include organized counseling service, the creation of inclusive culture within school communities with a sense of mutual coexistence and the enhancement of the participation of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities and other school community engagements. They further suggested that identification of the core social skill problems of students with disabilities is a prerequisite to prescribe the appropriate remedy for the problem. Schwab et al. (2021), suggested that teachers are the main actors to identify the social problems of students with disabilities and support them to establish friendly relationship with their non-disabled peers while attending their study in inclusive class setting.

The recommendations refereed by the informants revolve around the strategy needed to instigate the motivation of students with disabilities to take initiative for the improvement of their social interaction with their non-disabled peers. They also suggested that the creation of accessible

environment facilitates students with disabilities to develop the feeling of self-confidence to be engaged in social activities of the school communities. Accessible and inclusive environment is suggested by Milsom (2006), for effective academic career and personal/social development of students with disabilities.

6. Conclusion and recommendation

6.1. Conclusion

As confirmed by the finding of study, the participant students with disabilities are aware of the importance of social interaction for their overall life and academic career. It is possible to infer that this reality disclosed by the study is compatible with long lived cultural value of different communities of Ethiopia that promote social cohesion as a bondage of different groups of people with diverse needs and social statuses.

However, the finding of the study revealed that regardless of some progresses observed in regular schools where inclusive education is relatively operational, students with disabilities have been experiencing unhealthy social interaction that resulted in their isolation and social exclusion due to entrenched attitudinal barrier and lack of appropriate intervention needed to improve their social interaction considering their specific situation and requirements. In fact, as reported by the participants of study the involvement of students with disabilities in extracurricular activities, positive reaction of the school management staff and their commitment towards the issues related to disability and the support of special needs education teachers and counselors contributed for the betterment of social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disabled students. In addition, inclusive education has been mentioned as a workable strategy to create accommodative learning and social environment where students with disabilities will be equally treated, hosted and respected.

On the other hand, the participants of the study substantiated that the challenges of students with disabilities to establish positive interaction with their non-disabled peers is not necessarily related to their disability. Indeed, they acknowledged that the activity limitations emanated from the type of their impairment might have limited the extent of their social interaction with their non-disabled peers compared with the same situation of persons without disabilities. In view of this, communication barrier was mentioned as an example how it has affected the social interaction of deaf students with their non-disabled peers where verbal communication is the main media of interaction in hearing world including the teaching and learning process of schools.

Taking these multifaceted and multistage challenges of students with disabilities that affected their social and interpersonal interaction with their non-disabled peers in to account the participants of the study recommend multidisciplinary interventions to be used as instrument and remedy to mitigate and ultimately solve the problem.

6.2 Recommendation

Based on the key findings of the study, the following recommendations are suggested to be referred by the concerned stakeholders who are responsible and authorized to take appropriate action for the creation of inclusive learning and social environment where students with disabilities are equally and a properly embraced. The recommendations are identified and suggested in reference to the existing global trends and practices shaped by human rights-based model of disability that views disability from human rights perspective.

- Promote inclusive education and utilize the opportunities introduced by this approach that ensures equal participation and recognition of students with disabilities in all aspects of services and facilities of regular school systems.

- Establish disability-awareness clubs with a mandate to sensitize members of the school communities with special focus on non-disabled peers to recognize disability as human diversity and discharge their responsibility accordingly.
- Strengthen the holistic services and facilities of resource centers to the extent of the provision of multidisciplinary intervention needed for the improvement of social skills of students with disabilities and their motivation to be engaged in social activities and exhibit academic success with a sense of self confidence.
- Enhance the collaborative engagement of the resource centers with interested nonstate actors with an intention to utilizing their resource support and expertise.
- Ensure that the issue of disability is mainstreamed in the annual action plan of schools with earmarked budget.

Implication for social work practice

Studying how students with disabilities social interact with their non-disabled counterparts has important ramifications for social work practice. The knowledge gathered from this research can help in the creation of successful interventions and advocacy campaigns for students with disabilities. In order to better understand the needs and experiences of students with disabilities, social workers must keep researching how they interact with others.

As per the 2014 IASSW General Assembly definition of social work “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.

Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”

Among the important key elements of this definition rests social cohesion, understanding fundamentals of this key element is important for social work.

The study's objective revolves around the social interaction of students with disabilities, which can be considered to have a direct connection with the social cohesion of people. Social work as a discipline will benefit from studies of such kind as they examine social interactions of people which by understanding them is possible to create strategies that effectively support individuals and improve social experiences. Hence, social workers can benefit from the learnings and recommendations of this study to carveout a tailor-made intervention in order to address problems seen in the social interaction students with disabilities with their non-disabled student mates and enhance their social participation on equal basis with others. Social workers can provide services to improve social skills and self-esteem of students with disabilities by having a better understanding of the difficulties they confront (Mitchell, W., Franklin, A., Greco, V., & Bell, M, 2009). Additionally, by examining these relationships, social workers can gain insight into how external elements, including the structure and operations of the school, affect the social experiences of these pupils (Monteverde, 2023).

Not only this but social workers have the responsibility of representing and advocating for social segments that are marginalized or mistreated by the society. People with disabilities are among the social marginalized segments of the society in Ethiopia (Sissay, 2022). This study will contribute to the efforts of different stakeholders which aim in changing the social statues of persons with disabilities which students with disabilities are subset of. Social workers are required by ethical standards to manage and advocate for marginalized communities and enabling them to take independent action (Smith-Hill, 2022).

Social work practice in the Ethiopia is relatively a young practice although it has showed promising growth in recent years (Kebede, 2020). It can be quite obvious that emerging disciplines or practices might have lack of litterateur which this study tends to contribute in reducing. The study also aims to serve as a learning tool for upcoming and practicing school social workers to help them better understand the social interaction of students with disabilities with their non-disable peers. the role of social workers working in schools in addressing social interaction issues of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers is huge. School social workers have a crucial role in helping students and their families overcome educational obstacles associated with impairments by offering efficient psychosocial and mental health interventions (Sarah Binks et al., 2024).

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ANNEX I: Data collection instruments

Addis Ababa University

College of Social Science: School of Social Work

I am pleased to inform you that I have been engaged in research writing for the partial fulfillment of my study at MA level in the School of Social Work of Addis Ababa University. my research is entitled “The reaction of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their none disabled student mates: the case of Menelik II and Tikuranbessa secondary schools” and the purpose of the study is to investigate the status of social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates in view of the participants of the study. Hence, this is kindly to request your consent for the interview intended to share your information about the central theme of the study stated above in the context of your school. It is my great pleasure to confirm that your information will be kept confidential, and will be used as a valuable source only for the study. In addition, I can assure you that whenever you feel uncomfortable with the interview you are exclusively mandated to withdraw from the interview, and you are not required to write your name. The interview is planned to be recorded on a digital recorder to maintain the quality of the interview and avoid unnecessary wastage of information. However, it will be undertaken only based on your consent.

Profile of the discussants

Sex_____

Age_____

Type of impairment_____

Name of the school_____

Grade level _____

Focus Group Discussion guide for participant students with disabilities

1. How do the participants of the study (students with disability) understand social interaction and its importance in their specific situation?

1.1. Are you aware of the conceptual definition of social interaction? If yes, please elaborate on your understanding briefly.

1.2. In your opinion, how do you explain the importance of social interaction?

2. How do the participants of the study (students with disability) evaluate their interpersonal interaction with their nondisabled student mates?

2.1. Do you engage in extracurricular activities with your nondisabled peers? If not, why? If yes, what benefit from your engagement in terms of your interaction with them

2.2. How do you evaluate your interpersonal interaction with your nondisabled peers? If your answer is negative or positive, please explain its manifestations respectively.

2.3. Do you believe that your disability affected your interpersonal interaction with your nondisabled peers? Please elaborate on your arguments based on reliable evidence or your past experiences regarding the response of your nondisabled peers to disability.

2.4. How do you evaluate your effort intended to strengthen your interpersonal relationship with your nondisabled peers?

- 2.5. Have you faced serious challenges in your interpersonal relationship with your nondisabled peers? If yes, how do you explain the impact of the challenge on your overall situation including your academic career? how did you overcome the problem?
- 2.6. How do you evaluate and compare your interpersonal interaction with your nondisabled studentmates in and outside your school? Is there any visible difference? If yes, why?
3. Is there any social support intervention intended to improve the social skills of students with disabilities taking their specific situation into account?
- 3.1. Have you received professional support intended to enhance your interpersonal interaction with your peers or social communication skills? If yes, how do you evaluate the contribution of such professional support to your personality development?
- 3.2. If your answer is yes to the above question, do you believe that such professional support is needed for your peers? If no, and yes, why?
4. In your opinion what should be done to enhance the social skills of students with disabilities targeting the improvement of their interaction with their nondisabled peers?

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Many thanks for you cooperation!

Profile of the informants

Sex_____

Age

- 19-30
- 31-45
- 46 ≤

_____in SNE

Year of experience

- 1-15
- 16-30
- 31 ≤

Position_____

Name of the school_____

Interview guide for special education teachers

1. How do you evaluate the interpersonal and social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in your school community?
2. Do you believe that your students with disabilities have been experiencing challenges in their interpersonal relationships with their nondisabled peers due to their disability?
3. Have you encountered or hosted complaints of students with disabilities who experienced negative response from their nondisabled peers in their interpersonal interaction with them? If yes, what kind of intervention have you applied for solving the problem? Please explain briefly about the result of your intervention.
4. Do you have follow-up mechanism on the statuses of interpersonal and social interaction students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in your school community? If no why?
5. Do you have professional support intended to enhance the interpersonal and social interaction skills of students with disabilities? If not, why?
6. Do you believe that the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers will be affected by the reasons attributed to their disability?
7. If your answer is yes for the above question, please elaborate the major factors behind the issue under discussion that may affect the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers?
8. Have you observed positive reaction of nondisabled peers towards their student mates with disabilities in their reciprocal relationships?
9. If your answer is yes for question number 8, what is your assumption for such positive response of nondisabled peers to their interaction with students with disabilities? Is there the hand on opportunity for the improvement of mutual and positive interpersonal relationship among students with and without disabilities?

10. In your opinion what should be done to enhance the social skills of students with disabilities targeting the improvement of their interaction with their nondisabled peers?

Addis Ababa University

College of Social Science: School of Social Work

I am pleased to inform you that I have been engaged in research writing for the partial fulfillment of my study at MA level in the School of Social Work of Addis Ababa University. my research is entitled “The reaction of students with disabilities towards their social interaction with their none disabled student mates: the case of Menelik II and Tikuranbessa secondary schools” and the purpose of the study is to investigate the status of social interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates in view of the participants of the study. Hence, this is kindly to request your consent for the interview intended to share your information about the central theme of the study stated above in the context of your school. It is my great pleasure to confirm that your information will be kept confidential, and will be used as a valuable source only for the study. In addition, I can assure you that whenever you feel uncomfortable with the interview you are exclusively mandated to withdraw from the interview, and you are not required to write your name. The interview is planned to be recorded on a digital recorder to maintain the quality of the interview and avoid unnecessary wastage of information. However, it will be undertaken only based on your consent.

Profile of the Informants

Sex_____

Age

- 19-30
- 31-45
- 46 ≤

Academic qualification_____

Year of experience

- 1-15
- 16-30
- 31 ≤

Position_____

Name of the school_____

Interview guide for key informant principals/ supervisors

1. Do you've information on what the interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers looks like in your school community? If yes, please elaborate on it briefly.
2. Do you have the hands-on commitment and engagement in mainstreaming the issue of disability in your service delivery? If not why? If yes, please elaborate on it.
3. Do you have a specific intervention postulated to facilitate the social and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers? If yes, please elaborate on it briefly.
4. What kind of challenges and opportunities have you encountered in the areas of social and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in your school community?
5. Do you believe that the social and interpersonal interaction of students with disabilities with their nondisabled student mates will be affected by the reasons attributed to their respective disability? If not, and yes, why?
6. How do you evaluate the importance of social and interpersonal interaction between students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers in terms of their specific situation?
7. Do you believe that inclusive education is a workable strategy for the overall personality development and career of students with disabilities? If not, please elaborate on your argument and explain the other option if applicable.
8. In your opinion what should be done to enhance the social skills of students with disabilities targeting the improvement of their interaction with their nondisabled peers?