

## Teachers' Perceptions on Fostering Inclusive School Culture for Students with Disabilities

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### Abstract

Despite ongoing efforts to promote inclusive education in Ethiopia, fostering a culture of inclusivity for students with disabilities (SWDs) in primary schools remains a significant challenge. This study examined the level of inclusivity of school culture for SWDs in Addis Ababa, as perceived by teachers. Utilizing a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, data were collected through a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions (FGD). A proportional sample of 324 teachers from primary schools participated in the survey, while 72 teachers were purposefully selected for the FGDs. Results indicated a significant gap in the sense of school community-building efforts to support the inclusion of SWDs ( $M = 2.889$ ,  $SD = 0.3099$ ,  $t = -6.437$ ,  $p < .050$ ), despite an encouraging foundation in establishing inclusive values ( $M = 3.065$ ,  $SD = .2685$ ,  $t = 4.386$ ,  $p < .050$ ). Overall, teachers' perception of fostering inclusive school culture (ISC) for students with mild impairments was moderate ( $M = 2.977$ ,  $SD = 0.2298$ ,  $t = -1.777$ ,  $p = .077$ ). However, a significant challenge persists in fostering ISC for all students, particularly those with moderate and severe impairments. The results of the FGDs corroborated this finding. These findings underscore the critical role of school community engagement in fostering ISC for all students, particularly those with moderate and severe impairments. Policymakers and stakeholders must prioritize initiatives that strengthen the creation of inclusive school cultures that support inclusive practices for all students.

**Keywords:** Inclusive culture, School culture, Students with disability, Teachers' perceptions

## Introduction

Inclusive education (IE) is a transformative approach that empowers all learners, regardless of their abilities, by providing equitable access to quality education within mainstream settings (Mitosis et al., 2023). This approach benefits all students, including those with special needs, by fostering independence, improving academic abilities, and developing social skills (Chaudhary et al., 2022).

To operationalize these ideas, three key dimensions must be addressed: fostering a culture of inclusion among educators and students, translating this culture into comprehensive policies that guide educational practices, and applying straightforward and effective strategies to bring IE into practice (Alexaki, 2022; Booth & Ainscow, 2011). While all three dimensions are essential for the development of inclusive schools, a culture of inclusion serves as the foundation element for improving school outcomes by increasing the presence and participation of all students (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). The cultivation of shared inclusive values and building a sense of community among students, parents, and educators can facilitate the implementation of policies and practices, ensuring their sustainability within the school community (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). This culture plays a significant role in the creation of inclusive environments by embodying the relationships, values, and beliefs that embrace diversity (Rafique & Hameed, 2021).

The formation of inclusive cultures in schools relies heavily on school leaders, teachers, and community partnerships. While school leaders set the tone for inclusion, teachers are on the front lines, directly influencing students' experiences and interactions. Effective principals engage all stakeholders and are essential for fostering inclusive environments (Budiarti & Sugito, 2018; Lee & Louis, 2019; Khaleel et al., 2021). By committing to inclusivity, redesigning school structures, enhancing staff capacity, and promoting collaboration, they can address the diverse needs of students, including those with special needs (Khaleel et al., 2021). Reflecting on their leadership practices and improving responsive teaching skills also contribute to a supportive school culture, ultimately leading to better outcomes for all students (Tanzi & Hermanto, 2024; Aljaser, 2020).

Teachers also play a crucial role in fostering ISC, with their attitudes towards students with special needs significantly influencing social interactions (Budiarti & Sugito, 2018). Effective IE requires teachers to employ diverse teaching methods, maintain a strong theoretical foundation, and believe in students' potential (Paseka et al., 2020). Achieving true inclusivity involves changing school cultures and recognizing how teachers' beliefs affect educational practices within various social and cultural contexts (Deroncele-Acosta & Ellis, 2024). Continuous professional development, mentorship, and collaborative discussions among teachers are vital for promoting reflective practices in inclusive schools (Paseka et al., 2020).

Furthermore, studies emphasize the significance of strong partnerships between schools, parents, and communities in promoting IE. Key factors for successful collaborations include a positive school culture, effective leadership, and

a commitment to student success (Francis et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2015). Schools that foster these partnerships create mutual benefits and improved outcomes for all stakeholders involved. Effective communication, a sense of belonging, professional competence, and strong leadership are essential for building trusting relationships (Francis et al., 2016). Ultimately, strong connections among schools, parents, and communities are crucial for supporting student learning and inclusivity (Gross et al., 2015). This paper examined teachers' perspectives on inclusive school culture for SWDs.

### **Contextualizing the study**

*IE has become a prominent alternative to traditional special education for SWDs. Ethiopia, as a developing country, has shown a strong commitment to IE by aligning its national policies with international standards. The Ethiopia Constitution (Article 41, Sub-articles 3 and 5) explicitly supports the education of CWDs, guaranteeing their right to equal access to education and requiring the allocation of state resources for their support (FDRE, 1995). The 1994 Education and Training Policy (ETP) aims to expand educational access for all, including SWDs, by enhancing their physical and mental potential and problem-solving skills (MoE, 1994). Moreover, the policy promotes Special Needs Education (SNE) for both SWDs and gifted students and ensures special education and training for CWDs. Despite these policy frameworks, the effective implementation of IE in classrooms remains a challenge due to various factors, including teacher perceptions and community involvement. To facilitate the execution of IE, the policy emphasizes the importance of SEN teacher training and the development of support inputs for SNE.*

To ensure the delivery of quality, coordinated, and systematic educational services for students with special needs (SEN), Ethiopia has implemented a series of IE strategies. The initial strategy, developed in 2006, primarily focused on special needs education (SNE). However, a revised strategy was introduced in 2012, which is deeply rooted in the principles of IE (MoE, 2012). This strategy has set clear directions, increased stakeholder engagement, and addressed budgetary challenges through the General Education Quality Improvement Program (GEQIP) for Equity (World Bank, 2022).

To support its implementation, Ethiopia has invested in teacher training, developed instructional materials, and established inclusive education resource centers. Several universities in the country offer training in IE at various academic levels, and teacher education colleges provide diploma-level training. The integration of IE into Education Sector Development Programs (ESDPs) and GEQIPs has further strengthened its implementation. Capacity-building training has been provided to various education professionals, including school principals, teachers, and regional education bureau staff. As a result, the enrollment of students with SEN in primary schools has significantly increased. Recognizing the need for continuous improvement, the 2012 strategy was revised in 2022 to incorporate

emerging best practices and align with international standards. This updated strategy aims to strengthen the implementation framework and further enhance the quality of IE in Ethiopia (MoE, 2022b).

Regional states and city administrations in Ethiopia are responsible for implementing national education policies and strategies. At the national level, from a population of 2,995,309 children aged 7-14 with special educational needs (SENs) (1,512,378 males and 1,482,931 females), 352,410 students (196,076 males and 156,334 females) attended primary schools (grades 1-8) in 2022/23, accounting for 11.8% (MoE, 2022a). In contrast, Addis Ababa City Administration (AACAA) has achieved a higher enrollment rate of 34.2% for a population of 78,974 children aged 7-14 with SENs, with 27,015 students attending primary schools in 2022/23 (MoE, 2022a). This significant disparity between national and AACAA enrollment rates for students with SENs underscores the need to study the factors contributing to the higher enrollment rate in Addis Ababa, particularly in terms of the primary school teachers' perceptions of fostering inclusive school culture (ISC) for SWDs.

This study is the first of its kind to investigate teachers' perspectives on inclusivity of school culture for SWDs in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Drawing inspiration from the ongoing efforts to implement IE practices in the city, this study aimed to uncover teachers' perceptions of the factors that influence ISC and the challenges they face in creating inclusive learning environments for SWDs.

### **Research Gap**

Despite Ethiopia's commitment to IE and the implementation of various policies aimed at promoting inclusivity for SWDs, creating a genuinely ISC in primary schools remains a significant challenge. Existing literature highlights the vital role that teachers' perceptions and attitudes play in shaping and executing inclusive practices. However, there is a notable lack of empirical research specifically focused on these perspectives within the context of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This study sought to fill this gap by exploring teachers' perspectives regarding the promotion of ISC, particularly their views on fostering inclusive values such as equity and respect for diversity, as well as the importance of creating a positive, discrimination-free environment where everyone feels valued. It also examined developing a sense of community characterized by positive relationships, belonging, collaboration, mutual support, respect, and teamwork among all members. By investigating these aspects, the study aimed to identify the factors influencing teachers' perceptions of ISC and provide insights into how these perceptions impact their engagement in inclusive teaching strategies. Ultimately, this research will contribute to a better understanding of the factors that hinder or facilitate the creation of ISCs in Addis Ababa, informing the development of more effective strategies to support the inclusion of SWDs.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are teachers' perceptions regarding the cultivation of inclusive values and the development of a sense of community in primary schools for the inclusion of SWDs?
2. How do teachers perceive current practices in fostering an inclusive culture for SWDs in primary schools, particularly in terms of cultivating inclusive values and developing a sense of community?

### **Research Objectives**

1. To investigate teachers' perceptions concerning the cultivation of inclusive values and development of a sense of community in primary schools supporting the inclusion of SWDs.
2. To examine teachers' overall perspectives on fostering an inclusive school culture for SWDs in primary schools.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research design**

This study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (QUAN→qual approach), where quantitative data is collected first, followed by qualitative data. This approach, among the three core mixed methods designs (convergent, explanatory sequential, and exploratory sequential) outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018), is deemed robust for investigating complex educational phenomena (Ivankova et al., 2006), such as teachers' perceptions of inclusive school culture for SWDs. Recognizing the limitations of solely relying on either quantitative or qualitative methods to fully capture the intricacies of these perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), this explanatory sequential design was chosen to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding. By collecting quantitative data initially to identify patterns and trends, followed by qualitative data to explore underlying motivations and contextual factors (Toyon, 2021), this approach enhances research validity and reliability by leveraging the strengths of both methods, enables researchers to examine teachers' perspectives within cultural contexts (Engelbrecht & Savolainen, 2018), and allows for adapting the qualitative phase based on initial quantitative findings, leading to more insightful results (McCrudden & McTigue, 2019). While careful consideration of data collection and integration techniques is crucial, this iterative process provides a deeper understanding of complex educational issues, such as teachers' perceptions of inclusive school culture for SWDs.

To investigate the research questions effectively, this study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, following the principles outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2018). This approach consists of two stages: the initial phase involved the collection and analysis of quantitative data through surveys administered to teachers, followed by a subsequent phase of qualitative data collection and analysis (Wipulanusat et al., 2020; Yan, 2017), as visualized in Fig.

1 below. Given that this design has the potential to fulfill a broader, transformative role in advocating for marginalized groups, such as individuals with disabilities (Shannon-Baker, 2016), it was deemed appropriate for this study. This approach was deemed appropriate for offering enhanced descriptions and comprehensive explanations regarding the inclusiveness of school culture for SWDs (McBride et al., 2019). In the quantitative phase, a survey was administered to explore teachers' perspectives on the inclusivity of primary school culture for SWDs through statistical analysis. To further illuminate and corroborate these findings, qualitative data was collected through FGDs. The qualitative phase was designed based on the quantitative results, ensuring that the themes and gaps identified in the statistical analysis guided the development of the FGD guides.

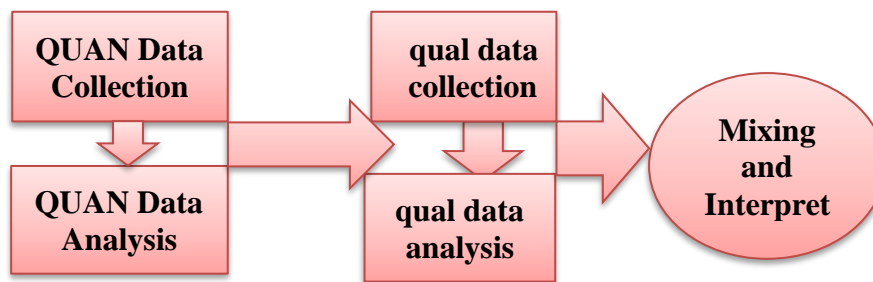


Figure 1. Visual representation of the study's sequential design.

### Participants

A multistage sampling technique was employed to select participants. Three sub-cities (Arada, Gulele, and Yeka) were randomly chosen using the lottery method from the 11 sub-cities of AACAA. Within each selected sub-city, four public primary schools (grades 1-8) enrolling SWDs were randomly selected using the lottery method. This resulted in a target population of 1,369 teachers across 12 schools.

Determining the appropriate sample size is crucial for the validity and generalizability of the survey. Researchers typically consider factors such as confidence intervals, power analysis, and research objectives when calculating sample size (Singh & Masuku, 2014). Using Yamane's (1973) formula, researchers can determine the optimal sample size based on the population size (N) and a desired margin of error (e), usually set at 0.05 for a 95% confidence level in social science research (Cohen et al., 2018). Hence, the sample size (n) was calculated as

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e^2)}$$

After a sample size of 310 teachers was initially calculated and then increased by 10% to 341 to account for potential attrition. Teachers were selected proportionally from each school by size relative to the total sample.



Additionally, a total of 96 teachers were purposefully selected from each 12 sampled schools for FGDs. Each FGD consisted of 8 teachers from different grade levels (1-8), each with at least five years of experience at their current school and ten years of experience teaching SWDs. FGDs were conducted at each school to generate rich, in-depth data through participant interaction (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020).

### **Instrument**

A modified version of the Index for Inclusion's *Creating Inclusive Culture* questionnaire (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) was used to collect quantitative data. This instrument, utilizing a five-point Likert scale (agree/disagree) measured teachers' perceptions of two sub-dimensions of ISC: *building community*, and *establishing inclusive values*. To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of teachers. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the scales was 0.865 and 0.867 respectively, and 0.861 overall, indicating high reliability (Cohen et al., 2018).

To triangulate the quantitative findings and gain deeper insights, FGDs were conducted with teachers. The FGD protocol was informed by the key themes and gaps identified in the quantitative analysis, ensuring a focused and relevant exploration of school culture inclusivity.

### **Data collection procedure**

Data collection was conducted at the participants' respective schools. Prior to data collection, formal ethical approval was obtained from the AACA Education Bureau, as well as relevant sub-cities and school authorities. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were informed about the study's purpose, their role, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Quantitative data was collected through a structured survey questionnaire administered to teachers on-site at their schools. To ensure consistency and minimize bias, participants completed the paper-based questionnaires in a controlled environment. Researchers followed up with participants to facilitate timely completion and return of the questionnaires.

To explore deeper into the experiences and perspectives of participants, FGDs were conducted with groups of eight teachers at their respective schools. Trained moderators facilitated the FGDs, encouraging open and honest dialogue in a supportive environment. Discussions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes.

To ensure ethical Considerations, necessary permissions were obtained from relevant authorities. Participants were fully informed about the study and provided their informed consent, with the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions (Farrugia, 2019). To maintain confidentiality, all data were anonymized. Unique codes were assigned to survey responses and FGD transcripts, and data were stored securely. Participants were assured of complete

confidentiality. Researchers prioritized participant well-being and conducted FGDs in supportive and non-threatening environments (Ajemba & Arene, 2022). Regular debriefings were conducted to maintain ethical compliance throughout the study.

**Data analysis**

SPSS software (version 28.0) was used to analyze the 324 valid responses (out of 341 distributed) after excluding incomplete item responses. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were employed to analyze participants' demographic information. A one-sample t-test was conducted to assess the overall level of ISC. Qualitative data, derived from FGDs, were thematically analyzed following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, developing themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and finally, writing up the findings.

**Results**

**Teachers' Demographics**

Of the 324 participating teachers, 53.7% were male and 46.3% were female. Most participants were aged 31-40 (42.9%), followed by those aged 30 or younger (30.9%). A smaller proportion were aged 41-50 (19.8%) and 51 or older (6.5%). Regarding qualifications, 58% held a degree, while 42% held a diploma. Teaching experience varied widely, with 12.7% having 1-5 years of experience, 32.4% having 6-10 years, 31.8% having 11-15 years, 11.7% having 16-20 years, and 11.4% having over 21 years of experience.

**Teachers' perceptions on fostering Inclusive school culture (ISC)**

This section presents the findings from a one-sample t-test and FGDs regarding teachers' perceptions of their school's efforts in community building and defining inclusive values to promote inclusivity for SWDs.

**Table:** One-Sample t-Test Results (N=324, Expected Mean=3)

Item	M	SD	T-test	P-value
SWDs are welcomed in the school.	2.914	1.0284	-1.513	.131
Staff collaborates for the inclusion of SWDs.	3.235	.7912	5.337	.000*
Students with and without disabilities help each other	3.000	.9075	.000	1.000
Staff and students, including SWDs, respect one another.	3.256	.7583	6.081	.000*
Staff and parents of SWD work together for the inclusion of SWDs	2.651	.7029	-8.931	.000*



Staff and leaders have good cooperation for the inclusion of SWDs	3.269	.9171	5.271	.000*
School encourages SWDs to express their opinions and ideas.	2.978	.5366	-.725	.469
School community promotes the inclusion of students with various disabilities.	2.432	.6572	-15.55	.000*
Schools and local community collaborate for the inclusion of SWDs.	2.627	.7544	-8.911	.000*
Teachers connect school activities to the daily lives of SWDs at home.	2.673	.7197	-8.182	.000*
Sub-total for Community Building for inclusion of SWDs	2.889	.3099	-6.437	.000*
School fosters inclusive values for SWDs.	2.966	.8738	-.699	.485
School encourages respect for the rights of inclusion for SWDs.	3.281	.7370	6.860	.000*
Inclusion is viewed as increasing the participation of all students.	3.278	.7568	6.607	.000*
SWDs are valued equally as their peers without disabilities.	2.657	.8920	-6.914	.000*
SWDs are treated equally as their peers without disabilities.	2.744	.8248	-5.591	.000*
School is committed to creating a discrimination-free environment for SWDs.	2.775	.6502	-6.237	.000*
School encourages positive interactions among students.	3.343	.7966	7.741	.000*
School encourages SWDs to feel confident about themselves	3.327	.7656	7.692	.000*
School expects SWDs to achieve at a high level as their peers.	3.025	.7746	.574	.567
School contributes to the well-being of SWDs as their peers.	3.287	.7045	7.334	.000*
Sub-total for Establishing Inclusive values for SWDs	3.065	.2685	4.386	.000*
Overall Inclusivity of school culture for SWDs	2.977	.2298	-1.777	.077

*T*-test, 2- tailed, *DF* = 323, \**P*<0.05, *Mo*=Observed Mean, *SD*= standard deviation, *Me*=Expected Mean

**a) Teachers' perceptions on fostering building sense of school community**

The findings revealed that teachers' perceptions in fostering sense of school community formation among students, parents, and educators for the inclusion of SWDs were statistically significantly lower than expected (*M* = 2.889,

SD = 0.3099), as indicated in Table. This suggests a limited sense of community building within regular primary schools concerning the inclusion of SWDs.

Nevertheless, the findings revealed a statistically significant increase in teachers' perceptions of school efforts to promote staff collaboration, foster mutual respect among staff and students, and ensure effective cooperation between staff and leadership regarding the inclusion of students with mild impairments. However, teachers also indicated that the exclusion of students with moderate and severe impairments was evident in the sampled primary schools. These findings were supported by FGD participants, who emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts, the cultivation of respectful relationships, and the presence of supportive leadership in schools to foster the inclusion of all students, including those with moderate and severe impairments.

For instance, In School B, participants stated, "Our school community understood the value of mutual respect and collaboration in school events. Also, our principals support this." Similarly, at School C, participants shared, "All staff values mutual respect and teamwork in our tasks. Principals encourage us to do this well." School D's staff stressed, "Our staff fostered a culture of respect and collaboration to cultivate a conducive school for all students. Special needs students are our main concern for this, but those with severe impairments are not our school issue." Likewise, School H's participants noted, "Our school community valued mutual respect, teamwork, and common goals, and principals encouraged this culture."

Table shows that teachers perceived moderate levels of welcome, peer support, and opportunities for SWDs to express their opinions. However, data from FGDs reveals that significant changes are needed to foster the inclusivity of school culture for all students, including those with moderate and severe impairments. Participants identified several contributing factors, including limited staff awareness of the needs of students with severe disabilities, accessibility issues for wheelchair users, inconsistent peer support programs, and inadequate opportunities for some SWDs to express their views. These findings underscore the crucial need for the development and implementation of effective strategies to enhance the inclusion of all students, particularly those with moderate and severe impairments.

Conversely, teachers' perceptions indicated statistically significant differences between observed and expected mean scores (which is 3) in collaboration between staff and parents ( $M = 2.651$ ,  $SD = 0.7029$ ), building partnerships with the local community ( $M = 2.627$ ,  $SD = 0.7544$ ), and aligning school activities with students' home lives ( $M = 2.673$ ,  $SD = 0.7197$ ). This indicates a significant gap between perceived reality and the ideal level of these crucial practices. These findings were substantiated by FGD participants, who emphasized the need for better collaboration, community engagement, and alignment of school activities with students' home experiences. Notably, challenges highlighted by FGD participants included limited parental involvement, weak community partnerships, and a disconnect between school activities and students' lives, with community

involvement often limited to participation in school committees across all sampled schools.

Moreover, teachers' perceptions indicated that the observed mean scores ( $M = 2.432$ ,  $SD = 0.6572$ ) regarding the school community's initiatives to promote the inclusion of students with various disabilities were statistically significantly lower than the expected mean, suggesting limitations in current practices within the school community to fully support the inclusion of all students, regardless of the type or severity of their impairment. Additionally, FGD data suggested that inadequate current practices, coupled with insufficient support from the school community, pose substantial barriers to acknowledging and celebrating individual differences among students. Notably, all FGDs reported that students with moderate and severe disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, autism, and Down syndrome, are frequently segregated in special classes rather than fully included in regular classrooms.

FGD participants from various schools expressed frustration with the current state of IE. School A's participants shared, "Our school cannot currently accommodate all students, especially those with severe disabilities. We worry about the type of education they receive if we include them in regular classes. Instead, they are placed separately and receive self-care training skills." Similarly, School E's participants explained, "We are doubtful to apply inclusion for all students. Mostly, we accept and include students with visual, hearing, and physical disabilities in regular classes together with nondisabled students. Others, like those with complex disabilities, are placed in special classes." School G's participants echoed these sentiments, admitting, "Due to resource constraints, we are still implementing inclusive education for mildly disabled students. Currently, our school do not provide education for students with severe disabilities in a regular class, but they receive education in separate classes by special education teachers." These voices underscore the challenges schools faced in providing IE for all students, particularly for those with severe disabilities in a regular class. These collective voices highlight the absence of ISC, illustrated by the significant challenges that schools encounter in delivering IE for all students, especially those with severe disabilities, in regular classroom settings.

For further clarification, Figure 2 presents a visual representation of the findings regarding the extent to which the data indicate the inadequacy of the current school community in fostering an inclusive environment for SWDs.

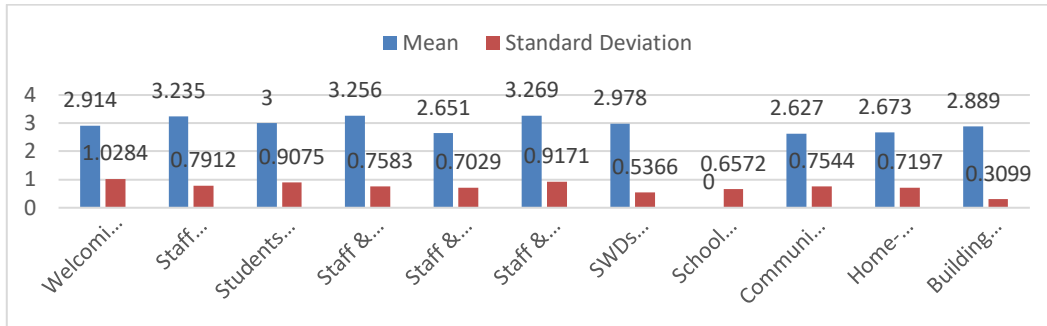


Figure 2. Visual Representation of Teachers' Perceptions on building a Sense of School Community

Generally, while schools have demonstrated promising internal progress in fostering a sense of community among students, parents, and educators to promote the inclusion of students with mild disabilities, significant gaps remain in providing IE for all students, particularly those with severe disabilities. Furthermore, limited efforts are observed in strengthening external community partnerships to realize ISC for all students, especially those with moderate and severe disabilities.

#### b) Teachers' perceptions on fostering establishing inclusive values

Analysis of teacher perceptions revealed a statistically significant positive perception ( $M = 3.065$ ,  $SD = 0.2685$ ,  $t = 4.386$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) regarding the school's efforts in promoting shared inclusive values for SWDs, exceeding the expected mean score. This finding suggests that teachers perceived the school as demonstrating a reasonable level of commitment to inclusive values. As presented in Table, the results indicated statistically significant high levels of teacher perception regarding the school's efforts in promoting respect for SWDs' rights ( $M = 3.281$ ,  $SD = 0.737$ ), noticing inclusion as increasing participation ( $M = 3.278$ ,  $SD = 0.7568$ ), encouraging positive interactions between students with and without disabilities ( $M = 3.343$ ,  $SD = 0.7966$ ), fostering SWDs' self-confidence ( $M = 3.327$ ,  $SD = 0.7656$ ), and contributing to SWDs' well-being ( $M = 3.287$ ,  $SD = 0.2685$ ). These quantitative findings were further corroborated by qualitative data from FGDs, which provided valuable insights into how schools were fostering inclusive values through concrete examples shared by teachers. However, despite these positive perceptions, significant gaps remain in fostering inclusive values regarding the inclusion of students with moderate and severe disabilities.

FGD participants from various schools highlighted various strategies employed to foster inclusive values. These included emphasizing the respecting rights of all students, including non-discrimination, equal access to education, and addressing the specific needs of SWDs (Schools A, E, F, G, H, K, L). Schools B, H, and I emphasized increasing the participation of SWDs in various school activities, creating inclusive learning settings where all students feel valued, respected, and involved. Fostering positive interactions between SWDs and their

peers, including creating a welcoming environment, promoting respectful interactions, and encouraging friendships, was a common theme among participants from Schools B, C, D, F, G, H, I, and J. Other schools (A, B, H, and I) also highlighted their efforts to build SWDs' self-confidence by creating supportive environments where they feel valued, respected, and confident in their abilities. Finally, participants from Schools A, B, H, and I emphasized the importance of enhancing SWDs' well-being through support services, a safe environment, and positive social interactions. However, despite these positive initiatives, a negative attitude towards the inclusion of students with severe impairments persists within certain segments of the school community, as evidenced by the continued segregation of students with moderate and severe disabilities and concerns expressed by teachers regarding their inclusion in regular classrooms.

Furthermore, FGD participants identified several barriers to achieving ISC. These included a lack of clarity in the school's vision and mission for inclusion, inconsistent application of existing inclusive values, and insufficient staff training, particularly regarding support for students with severe disabilities. Such factors impede the effective implementation of inclusive practices. For instance, while some schools have integrated inclusive values into their policies, they often struggle to apply them consistently due to a lack of shared understanding and a clear vision for inclusion.

FGD participants raised concerns about setting high expectations for SWDs, particularly those with severe disabilities, citing concerns about potential negative impacts on other students, increased workload demands, and insufficient resources to support these students. These concerns, along with the identified challenges in effectively implementing high expectations, are supported by the quantitative findings, which indicated a moderate emphasis on high expectations while acknowledging the practical limitations in achieving these expectations in the current context. To address these challenges, FGD participants suggested prioritizing a shared vision and mission for inclusion within the school, ensuring consistent application of inclusive values, and providing adequate staff training, particularly for supporting students with diverse needs. This includes preparing teachers to meet the diverse needs of SWDs through clear expectations, differentiated instruction, and individualized support.

However, the teachers' perceptions of the school's efforts to create a discrimination-free environment for SWDs were found to be statistically significantly low ( $M = 2.775$ ,  $SD = 0.6502$ ), as detailed in Table. This finding is corroborated by FGDs data, which highlighted persistent challenges in fostering a discrimination-free environment for all students, particularly those with severe disabilities. Participants reported that, despite some attempts to reduce discrimination, persistent issues remain, including the absence of well-defined anti-discrimination guidelines, the underestimation of their capabilities, being treated as dependent individuals, and assumptions of unfitness for inclusion. For instance, the following sentiments illustrate these issues:

As we know, there are no clear anti-discrimination guidelines in our schools. There are incidents of teasing and social exclusion particularly students with severe disabilities. (School A, E, F, G, J)

Especially, students with mental retardation, Down syndrome, and autism are not able to learn together with non-disabled students. For instance, autistic students may shout and disturb others. Mentally retarded students cannot be attentive to learning. (School B, C, D, G, I)

Mostly students with mild and severe disabilities often require much support from teachers. So, they are dependent on others rather than learning independently. (School A, D, E, K)

Students with severe disabilities should learn in special classes by special needs educators. These students are not fit to learn in mainstream classrooms with other students. Because they require much support, this brings a workload on teachers. (School B, F, G, L).

FGD participants further emphasized that addressing the identified challenges, including the absence of clear anti-discrimination guidelines, the underestimation of their capabilities, and assumptions of unfitness for inclusion, is crucial for creating a discrimination-free environment for SWDs. This requires a multi-faceted approach that includes the development and implementation of clear anti-discrimination guidelines, teacher training, the provision of individualized support, and proactive efforts to promote positive attitudes towards disability.

Additionally, respondents rated their school's efforts to value and treat SWDs as statistically significantly below average, with means of 2.657 (SD = 0.8920) and 2.744 (SD = 0.8248), as shown in Table. FGDs supported these findings, highlighting that SWDs, particularly those with severe disabilities, often faced unequal opportunities and were often placed in segregated classes. FGD participants identified several factors contributing to these disparities, including teachers' lower expectations for students with intellectual disabilities and autism, which can limit their opportunities for participation and achievement. The FGD report further indicates that negative stereotypes hinder interactions and support, causing some staff to express pity instead of recognizing potential. The lack of individualized support and accommodations further marginalizes students with severe disabilities, resulting in differential treatment compared to their peers. Segregation within the school compound worsens these inequalities.

Furthermore, the lack of understanding regarding the unique challenges faced by SWDs has worsened these issues, leading to unequal valuation and treatment. To tackle these ongoing challenges, the participants stressed the importance of working together to challenge low expectations, break down negative stereotypes, provide adequate support, and foster the inclusivity of school culture that appreciates the diversity of all students.



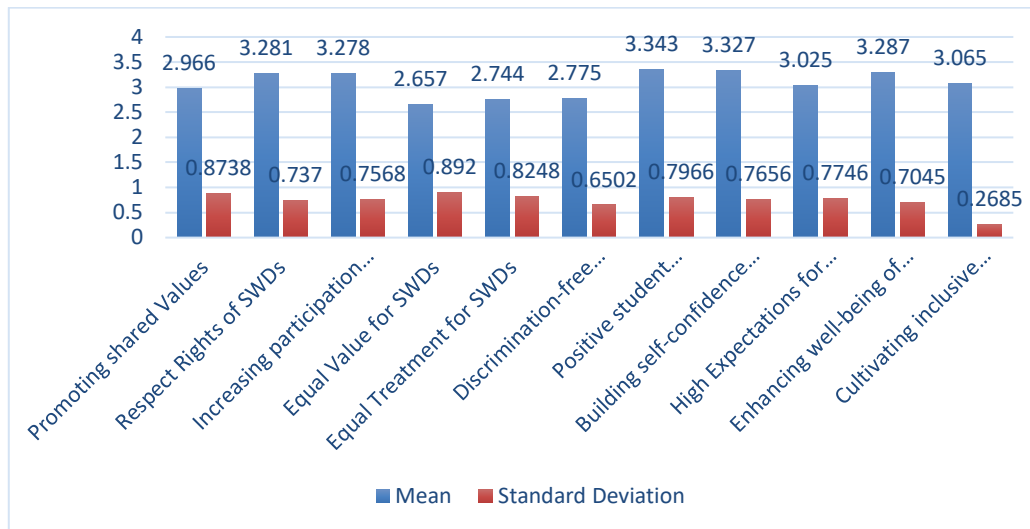


Figure 3. Visual Representation of Teachers' Perceptions on Establishing Inclusive School Values

The data presented thus far indicate that, while schools have made progress in establishing inclusive values—evident in the positive perceptions expressed by participating teachers (visualized in Figure 3 above)—the development of a shared sense of school community among students, parents, and educators remains notably low, as reported by teachers' perceptions, as illustrated in Figure 2. This discrepancy has significant implications for the development of ISC for all students, particularly those with moderate to severe impairments. Despite the overall mean score for ISC was 2.977 (SD = 0.2298), suggesting a moderate level of inclusivity in school culture for SWDs, illustrated in Figure 4 below, the item analysis of the quantitative data, along with findings the qualitative data from the FGDs, revealed that the formation of ISC for all students—especially those with moderate and severe impairments—is insufficiently developed. This underscores the critical need for further improvement in this area.

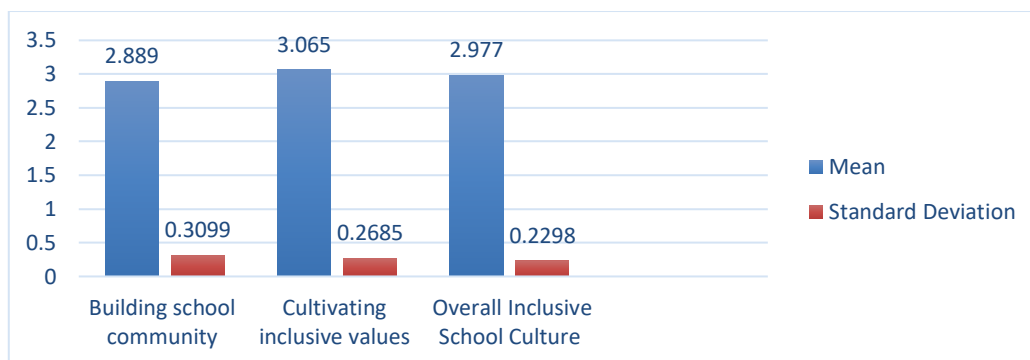


Figure 4. Teachers' perceptions on fostering Inclusive School Culture (ISC)

## Discussion

### Teachers' perceptions on fostering inclusive school culture (ISC)

Creating ISC is crucial for successfully implementing IE. As Booth & Ainscow (2011) emphasize, these cultures are characterized by a strong sense of community and shared inclusive values among staff, leaders, students, and parents. The following section presents a discussion of the findings regarding Teachers' perceptions on fostering ISC, focusing on these two key dimensions of ISC.

#### a) Teachers' perceptions on building a sense of school community

While primary schools in Addis Ababa have made efforts towards creating an inclusive culture for SWDs, significant challenges remain in fostering a strong sense of community among staff, students, parents, and the local community, particularly in effectively including students with moderate and severe impairments. The low level of school community building, as indicated by a mean score of 2.889, underscores the need for refining the school's ideology to cultivate a shared understanding of inclusive approaches, beliefs, and views among all stakeholders. As Raguž & Zekan (2017) emphasize, this shared understanding is crucial for building a supportive school community, while Alexaki (2022) highlights the pivotal role of the community in shaping inclusive culture for effective implementation of IE.

Simply providing access to IE for SWDs is insufficient if the school culture does not support the sense of community development. This study highlights that the gap between access and community building may significantly hinder inclusive school culture for all students, those with severe impairments in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. IE goes beyond just providing access; it emphasizes the importance of fostering school communities that value mutual acceptance, respect, and love among all members (Zidniyati, 2020). However, building such a community requires reassessing traditional beliefs about learning that lead to inequality (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). The development of ISC is an ongoing process of reflection, renegotiation, and experience (McMaster, 2015).

A detailed analysis of the findings identified significant challenges in fostering a sense of community for the inclusion of SWDs in regular schools. Notably, the lowest levels of implementation were observed in four key areas: staff-parent collaboration ( $M = 2.651$ ,  $SD = 0.7029$ ), school-community promotion of inclusion for students with various disabilities ( $M = 2.432$ ,  $SD = 0.6572$ ), school-community collaboration ( $M = 2.627$ ,  $SD = 0.7544$ ), and the alignment of school activities with the daily lives of SWDs ( $M = 2.673$ ,  $SD = 0.7197$ ). FGD findings further supported these quantitative results, indicating that current practices were not adequately addressing the diverse needs of SWDs, particularly those with severe impairments.

These findings align with existing literature. For instance, Carrington & Robinson (2006) emphasize the importance of challenging traditional assumptions about learning and fostering inclusive school communities through strategies such as developing learning communities, valuing parent and community input, and engaging students as citizens. Similarly, (Hudgins, 2012) highlights the need for improved staff-parent collaboration, school-community partnerships, and alignment of school activities with students' daily lives. These findings are further corroborated by studies conducted in Ethiopia, which reveal low implementation levels in critical areas such as staff-parent collaboration, school-community partnerships, and alignment of activities with SWDs' daily lives (Kocha & Senapathy, 2022).

Although there were moderate levels of welcoming environments for students with mild impairments, students' cooperation, and opportunities for these students to voice their opinions in schools, continuous improvement is necessary to optimize outcomes to any students. To address these challenges, schools should prioritize creating welcoming environments, enhancing cooperation among students, and providing real-world learning experiences (Singh, 2024). This approach not only benefits SWDs but also enriches the learning experiences of all students by fostering a stronger sense of community, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among all members (Molina Roldán et al., 2021; Singh, 2024).

The school's commitment to fostering a welcoming environment for students is commendable, as this is fundamental to building a strong school community that embrace the inclusion of all students, regardless of their disability (Sánchez et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2017). Also, the emphasis on student cooperation is important in developing a sense of school community for enhancing learning for all students, including SWDs (Sánchez et al., 2019). Finally, empowering SWDs to voice their opinions helps them to participate actively in their learning and contribute to the school community building. IE strives to create an environment where all students, no matter their abilities, feel empowered and welcome (Ashokan, 2023).

#### **b) Teachers' perceptions on establishing inclusive values**

On the other hand, the formation of inclusive values for SWDs within the schools was found to be statistically significant ( $M = 3.065$ ,  $SD = 0.2685$ ). These schools demonstrated a strong commitment to fostering inclusive values by prioritizing respect for the rights of SWDs, promoting increased participation, encouraging positive interactions with peers, and enhancing overall well-being. However, there are gaps that may hinder their ability to fully accommodate all students with diverse needs, particularly those with severe impairments who require extensive support. Moreover, the schools have prioritized child-friendly learning approaches to meet the individual needs of each student. To further advance ISC for particularly students with moderate and severe impairments, all stakeholders

involved in the implementation process must collaborate effectively to address existing challenges and develop constructive solutions.

These findings align with existing empirical findings, which emphasize the importance of fostering inclusive values and creating supportive school environments (Levine et al., 2024). Schools with strong inclusive values prioritize respect for rights of SWDs, increase their participation, and promote positive interactions between students with and without disabilities (Shogren et al., 2015). These practices contribute to increase confidence and enhanced well-being for any SWDs, fostering a sense of belonging in the school (Shogren et al., 2015).

The sustainable development of ISC is an ongoing process of personal and collective reflection, renegotiation, and experience over time (McMaster, 2015). Effective collaboration among educators, parents, administrators, and community members is crucial for creating an inclusive ecosystem that supports diverse learner needs (Anam et al., 2022).

While the findings indicate a moderate level of practices in fostering inclusive values and setting high expectations, there is still a gap in improving the school situations special for those students with severe impairments. Studies emphasize the crucial role of fostering a strong foundation of inclusive values and setting high expectations for all students. This approach is essential for creating inclusive learning environments where diversity is understood, valued, and celebrated (Aguis, 2023). Educators must actively work to dismantle barriers, promote a sense of belonging, and support the holistic development of each student (Barnard & Henn, 2023).

Despite these promising practices, low levels of implementation were observed in creating a discrimination-free environment ( $M = 2.775$ ,  $SD = 0.6502$ ), valuing SWDs equally ( $M = 2.657$ ,  $SD = 0.892$ ), and treating SWDs equally ( $M = 2.744$ ,  $SD = 0.8248$ ) in schools. These findings align with previous studies, identifying persistent barriers to promoting equitable treatment and discrimination-free settings for SWDs (Taub et al., 2021). In Ethiopia, negative attitudes and discrimination can impede social integration and educational opportunities for SWDs (Negash & Yadavalli, 2020). This persistent challenge underscores the ongoing need for comprehensive interventions to cultivate ISC for all learners in Ethiopia, regardless the extent of their impairment.

Generally, this study's findings suggest that while primary schools in Addis Ababa have made some progress towards IE for students with mild impairments, significant challenges persist towards the inclusion of students with severe impairments. The moderate level of inclusivity of school culture observed ( $M = 2.977$ ,  $SD = 0.2298$ ,  $t = -1.777$ ,  $p = .077$ ) indicates a need for further improvement to provide educational access for all students, irrespective of their impairments' level.

One of a significant barrier to creating ISC is the lack of effective collaboration among stakeholders. Staff, parents of SWDs, and the broader community often fail to work together to promote the inclusion of SWDs, especially

those with moderate and severe impairments. This includes limited efforts in collaboration between staff and parents, fostering community partnerships, and aligning school activities with students' home lives. Additionally, there are gaps in recognizing the equal value and treatment of SWDs and instituting discrimination-free school settings. These factors hinder the creation of ISC and limit opportunities for SWDs to fully access and participate in schooling.

To bridge this gap and create an inclusive environment, schools must critically engage with inclusive ideals, collaborate with parents and community members, and involve students as active participants in school development (Carrington & Robinson, 2006). The relationship between society and school culture is reciprocal, with each influencing the other to foster inclusivity and adaptation (Sihaloho et al., 2023). A positive school culture that aligns with the community can help students develop and contribute to society, while community influences can shape an inclusive and adaptive school environment (Sihaloho et al., 2023).

Creating ISC requires effective collaboration among stakeholders, including staff, parents, and the broader community (Carrington & Robinson, 2006; Gross et al., 2015). Key factors in fostering inclusive environments include developing a positive school culture, strong administrative leadership, and trusting partnerships (Francis et al., 2016). These partnerships are mutually beneficial, with community partners often gaining new perspectives on disability and inclusion (Gross et al., 2015). Teachers play a crucial role in creating ISC and must be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and support to effectively meet the diverse needs of all students (Abba & Rashid, 2020). Strong school leadership, an inviting culture, educator commitment, and effective collaboration are essential for facilitating these partnerships and creating inclusive school cultures (Gross et al., 2015).

Overall, the findings of this study offer crucial insights into the current state of ISC within primary schools in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. These findings have significant implications for the broader educational landscape and, more specifically, for the impact and significance of IE in the context of Ethiopia. The findings underscore the pressing need for a paradigm shift in how inclusive education is implemented in Ethiopia, moving beyond merely providing access to education toward cultivating truly inclusive school cultures that value diversity, foster a strong sense of belonging, and prioritize the holistic development of all students, particularly those with disabilities.

### **Policy Implications**

A significant gap exists between Ethiopia's national education policy frameworks and their actual implementation. While these policies aim to ensure equitable access to education, the study reveals substantial challenges in fostering a shared sense of community and fully embracing inclusive values, especially for students with moderate to severe impairments. Therefore, a critical review and

refinement of national education policy frameworks are essential. This necessitates explicitly addressing the identified challenges, such as the barriers to fostering a sense of school community and inclusive values, particularly for students with moderate to severe impairments. Furthermore, the development of clear and measurable standards for creating and sustaining inclusive school cultures is crucial. These standards will provide schools with a valuable framework to assess their progress and identify areas for improvement. Finally, incorporating incentives for inclusive practices, such as financial and non-financial rewards for schools demonstrating significant progress in creating and maintaining inclusive cultures, can serve as a powerful motivator to drive meaningful change.

### **Teacher Training and Professional Development**

Effective implementation of these policy changes hinges on substantial investment in teacher training and professional development. This training must prioritize fostering a sense of school community by equipping educators with effective strategies for collaboration with parents, building strong partnerships, and aligning school activities to meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Furthermore, training should emphasize the development and implementation of inclusive values by focusing on challenging discriminatory attitudes and creating respectful, discrimination-free learning environments. Finally, strategies should be developed to create welcoming and inclusive environments that encourage cooperation and active participation from all students, including those with disabilities.

### **Community Engagement**

The study underscores the critical role of community engagement in establishing and sustaining ISC. Strategies to enhance community involvement should be integrated into school improvement plans. These strategies include organizing community awareness campaigns to educate parents and community members about the importance and benefits of inclusive education, actively involving parents and community members in school decision-making processes through the establishment of parent-teacher associations and community forums, and connecting families with local resources such as therapists and support groups to provide necessary assistance for SWDs.

### **Resource Allocation**

Increased and equitable resource allocation is vital for supporting the implementation of IE. This includes providing adequate resources for teacher training, such as allocating sufficient funds for training programs, high-quality materials, and ongoing professional development. Additionally, it necessitates investing in infrastructure development and accessibility improvements, ensuring that schools are equipped with necessary features like ramps and accessible restrooms. Furthermore, supporting the development and dissemination of high-



quality, accessible learning materials that are appropriate for all students is crucial for creating an inclusive learning environment.

### **Need for a Paradigm Shift**

This study calls for a fundamental shift in how IE is approached in Ethiopia. This paradigm shift emphasizes the need to value diversity and celebrate the unique strengths and talents of all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. It also highlights the importance of fostering a strong sense of belonging by creating welcoming and supportive environments where all students feel valued and respected. Furthermore, embracing collaborative partnerships among schools, families, and communities is crucial to build a strong support network for all students. Finally, prioritizing the holistic development of all students, encompassing their social, emotional, and academic growth, is essential to ensure that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the necessity for a holistic approach to IE that prioritizes fostering a strong sense of community, cultivating inclusive values, and addressing the specific needs of students with diverse disabilities. Achieving this vision requires collaboration among policymakers, educators, and community members to revise and refine national IE policies, create clear guidelines for inclusive school cultures, invest in ongoing professional development for educators, and build strong community partnerships. Adequate resources must also be allocated for training, infrastructure development, and inclusive teaching materials, as this multifaceted approach is crucial for creating and sustaining inclusive school cultures that effectively support all students, regardless of their abilities or disabilities.

While the study indicates some progress in cultivating inclusive values for students with mild impairments, significant challenges remain in establishing ISC for all students, particularly those with moderate and severe disabilities. Notably, the findings reveal a significant gap in community-building efforts to support the inclusion of students with various level of disabilities. Strengthening community engagement is crucial, as without a strong sense of community, initiatives aimed at valuing every student and addressing diverse needs will likely fall short.

To further advance our understanding of ISC for SWDs in Addis Ababa, future research should explore the perspectives of school leaders, students, and parents. This exploration will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with promoting ISC. The findings of this study, combined with future research, can inform the development and implementation of effective IE policies and practices that prioritize the creation of truly inclusive school environments for all students.\*\*\*

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