

Mainstreaming and Inclusion of children with Developmental Disabilities in Learning in Ethiopia

Summary

Although inclusion in mainstream schools is promoted by Ethiopian national policies, children with developmental disabilities, including **autism** and **intellectual disabilities**, are often **excluded from educational services** due to attitudinal, material and human resource barriers.

Our research team at Addis Ababa University and King's College London, in partnership with Nia Foundation and Neurodiversity Center Ethiopia, have explored **stakeholder views** and collaborated with them to **develop and pilot evaluate** MIDDLE (“Mainstreaming and Inclusion of children with Developmental Disabilities in Learning in Ethiopia”). MIDDLE is an **intervention** aimed at promoting effective inclusion and support of children with developmental disabilities in mainstream primary schools in Addis Ababa.

MIDDLE has four components:

1. a **community awareness** raising session
2. a **teacher training** and supervision programme
3. the creation of **two education pathways** for children with developmental disabilities with different support needs, either learning in inclusive classes or in special units subdivided in groups
4. supplementary resources for inclusion

The pilot evaluation of MIDDLE suggested that its key components were **feasible, acceptable** and **perceived as useful** in Addis Ababa inclusive education resource centres. MIDDLE has the potential to be implemented in mainstream schools across Addis Ababa to promote their capacity to include and support children with developmental disabilities.

At the same time, our studies highlighted the **need for systematic changes** in the education system, including an increase in trained human resources and material resources and increased cross-sectoral collaboration, to maximise the potential of interventions like MIDDLE.



Figure: a MIDDLE teacher training session

Background

Access to quality **education is a fundamental human right** for all, uphold for example by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006)¹, to which Ethiopia is a signatory. Recently, Ethiopian action plans² and Education Sector Development Programs^{3,4} have recognised that the educational needs of children with disabilities in the country are largely unmet. These policies have set goals to promote the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream education services.

For children with **developmental disabilities**, including autism and intellectual disabilities, unmet educational needs have been identified as **one of the largest service gaps** in Ethiopia⁵. These children are often **excluded from mainstream schools** and resource centres, while the few special schools available have limited capacity and only accommodate a small proportion of school-aged children with developmental disabilities⁶. The Master Plan for Special Needs Education/Inclusive Education in Ethiopia² highlights **greater challenges and training and resource needs** for including children with developmental disabilities compared to including children with other disabilities.

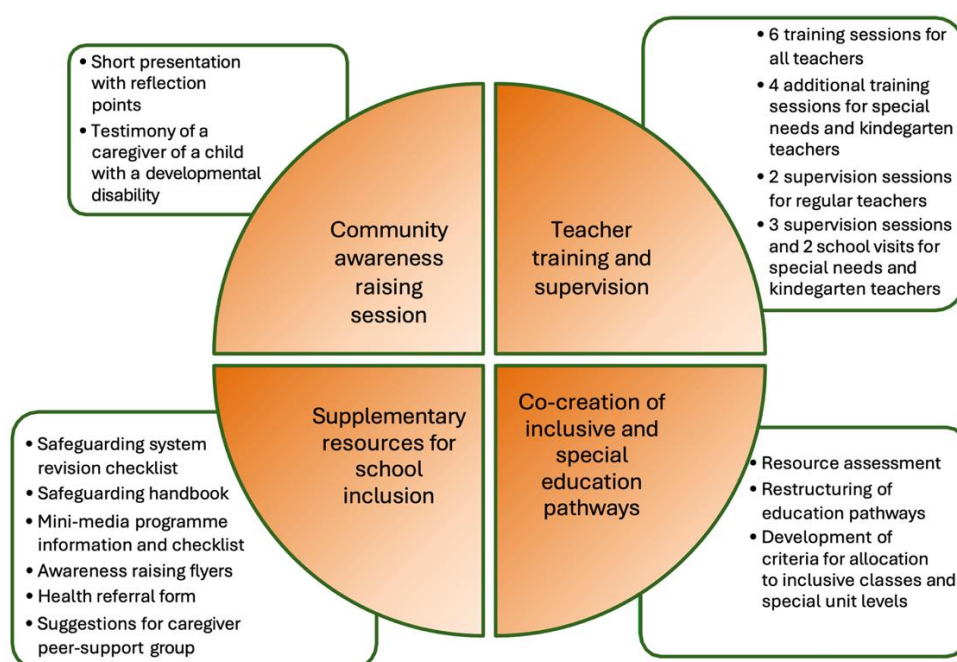
MIDDLE aims to help address some of these challenges, in particular training and awareness needs, to promote effective inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in mainstream schools.

What did we do?

- **We explored stakeholder perspectives** on **current challenges** for the education of children with DD, potential **benefits and concerns of inclusion** in mainstream schools, and **recommended interventions**. Stakeholders interviewed included caregivers of children with developmental disabilities and a variety of professionals.^{7,8,9}
- **We co-developed MIDDLE**, “Mainstreaming and Inclusion of children with Developmental Disabilities in Learning in Ethiopia”, by working with over 80 stakeholders through iterative **meetings** and drawing from **existing materials** and evidence.¹⁰
- **We pilot evaluated MIDDLE** in four mainstream primary schools with inclusive education resource centres in Addis Ababa.¹¹

What does MIDDLE do?

MIDDLE aims at **promoting effective inclusion and support** of children with developmental disabilities in mainstream primary schools in Addis Ababa. It includes **four components**:



What did we find?

- **Inclusion in mainstream primary schools is considered potentially beneficial to children with developmental disabilities.** Most stakeholders think that those with mild support needs can be included in regular classes, while those with moderate to high support needs are best supported in special units and special schools.

The good thing about including children with autism in regular classrooms is that they learn by seeing. They learn from their non-disabled peers. (caregiver of a child with a developmental disability)

- **A few contextual barriers hinder access to mainstream schools for children with developmental disabilities.** Among needs for effective inclusion, stakeholders highlight community awareness,
- teacher training, an increase in human and material resources, measures to address bullying and enhance safety, and updates to the national curriculum, for easier teaching adaptations, and to the Education and Training Policy¹², which currently does not promote education access and inclusion in the way recent action plans do.



Figure: brainstorming of needs in a stakeholder workshop

- **MIDDLE was feasible to implement and well-received by stakeholders.** It was perceived as effective in improving inclusivity in the school, supporting outreach of children with developmental disabilities in the community, enhancing teachers' confidence and skills and ultimately producing positive change in children's school experiences and development.

We have noticed [that] the teacher training and the awareness raising session contributed to the teaching process being more stable and the teachers being more confident in what they have to do.

(principal of a school where MIDDLE was implemented)

Implications and recommendations

- Stakeholders strongly recommend **updating the national Education and Training Policy**¹² to explicitly encourage inclusion of children with developmental disabilities and producing a more flexible national curriculum that facilitates adaptations.
- **Increasing available training programmes and human and financial resources** allocated to inclusion and schools more generally is also encouraged where possible.
- **MIDDLE is a feasible and relatively low-budget intervention that could help address awareness raising and training needs in Ethiopian primary schools** to enhance the support offered to children with developmental disabilities

Resources

MIDDLE materials in English and Amharic:

<https://www.thesparkproject.net/middle-intervention>

References

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Contact details: Dr Fikirte Girma, Addis Ababa University, fikirgirma@yahoo.com

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