Inclusive Education and Children with Disabilities in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Educational provision for students with disabilities is essential if Ethiopia is to reach Education for All goals; however, despite a series of strategies and new legislation aiming to support inclusion of people with disabilities, a majority of children with disabilities are still out of school. This paper seeks to understand why achieving inclusive education has remained elusive. It begins with an overview of global and national definitions of ‘inclusive education’. The reality of schooling options currently available to students with disabilities are then discussed, followed by an exploration of how stigma, inadequate training and institutional barriers have rendered these provisions inadequate and inequitable. Three case studies of inclusive education programs in Ethiopia, Zambia and Uganda are then presented and recommendations made based on their successes. The paper concludes by arguing that inclusion will not be achieved by merely focusing on access, but must involve changes in society and systems and a critical reflection on the objectives of inclusive education for students with disabilities.

(Key words: inclusive education, disabilities, Ethiopia)
Ethiopia has an estimated 691,765 disabled children; of these, only about 2,300 are enrolled in school (Lewis, 2009)\(^1\), with a high risk of dropping out (MoE and UNESCO, 2012). These numbers are concerning in the context of a country which has committed itself to international proclamations advocating for the rights of children with disabilities to educational access, included ideals of supporting people with disabilities in its constitution, and developed national plans for special needs education (International Labor Organization, 2013)\(^2\). However, when one looks beyond these policies and declarations and views the realities of primary school classrooms and their surrounding communities, it becomes clear that achieving Education for All, most specifically children with disabilities, involves much more than establishing policies and placing students in classrooms. Achieving true inclusion in Ethiopia will require action that is rooted in the conviction that inclusive education is not merely about access, but about changes in society and systems.

**Development of Concepts: ‘Inclusion’ and ‘Disability’**

There are a myriad of definitions for inclusive education, integrated education and special needs education, leading to different interpretations in policy language and implementation (Lewis, 2009). According to a UNESCO-commissioned report on Education for All, Ethiopia utilizes the terms ‘special needs education’ and ‘inclusive education’ as one concept, defined as ‘focus[ing] on children and students who are at risk of repetition and dropout due to learning difficulties, disabilities, socio-emotional problems, or are excluded from education’ (ibid: 22). Importantly, this statement recognizes children with disabilities as a group at risk of drop out, echoed in Ethiopia’s *Study on Situation of Out of School Children* (2012); however, further clarification is needed to understand the core of the term inclusion. In the same UNESCO

\(^1\) See Appendix 1  
\(^2\) See Appendix 2
Report, inclusion was defined as ‘brining about change in the education system by identifying and solving barriers to presence, participation, and achievement for every learner within mainstream settings’ (ibid: 5). This statement mentions the crucial difference between ‘inclusive education’ and ‘integrated education’, with the former demanding changes in the education system and the latter demanding changes within the learner (Lewis, 2009; Kangwa and Bonati, 2003; Chhabra, Srivastava and Srivastava, 2010). In this context, simply placing a student in a mainstream classroom, without the necessary adjustments in the education system does not qualify as inclusive education; rather, it is merely integrating. Inclusion is thus a ‘process’, not merely about access but also about education ‘quality and completion’ (Miles and Singal, 2010: 10, 14).

The definition of ‘disability’ is likewise varied and deals with the concept of external barriers. The World Health Organization’s (2013) definition of disability involves the interplay between ‘impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions’ whereby disability is the interaction between the impairment that a person has and the limitations imposed by their physical or social environment (WHO, 2013). Thus, it is through interactions with society that one’s disability becomes a limitation. In this way, society itself can become ‘disabling’ (UNESCO, 1994). This idea of impairments interacting with external limitations is echoed in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Handicap International (United Nations, 2006; Handicap International, 2013). This definition illuminates the idea that when people with disabilities are excluded from education, it is this exclusion that limits them, not the impairment itself (Peters, 2009: 149).

The Current State of Education for Disabled Children in Ethiopia: the Case of Vision-Impaired Students in Northern Ethiopia
The Ministry of Education has asserted that Ethiopia ‘can not [sic] attain MDG ignoring the marginalized and those with learning difficulties and impairments’ (Lewis, 2009: 23). The connection between poverty and disability is widely acknowledged (Singal, 2009), with disability being both a cause and a result of poverty (Handicap International, 2013). Thus, this issue is critical not only to individuals but also to Ethiopia’s development. It is therefore urgent that changes are made in the education system and society that allow for equal participation of people with disabilities in education so they will have the opportunity to contribute to Ethiopia’s progress.

The education system in which these changes need to be made has challenges in its structure and founding principles. Educational provision for students with disabilities offers the following primary school options: fifteen special schools, 285 special units attached to mainstream schools, and an unknown number of schools offering integration into mainstream classes (MoE and UNESCO, 2012). Special schools in many developing countries are characterized by low quality and lack of regulation (Miles and Singal, 2010). The special schools in Ethiopia are not exception to this, and are often crowded, poorly staffed, under-resourced, and generally concentrated in urban areas (Lewis, 2009). The following example3 from northern Ethiopia is provided to give a brief glimpse into the special and mainstream school settings that disabled students experience. This description begins with a boarding school for vision-impaired students, which, like many special schools, was founded by a charity organization but is now government-run. The school’s poor sanitation, overcrowded housing and inadequate childcare staff reflect the immense challenges, and the ethical dilemma, of maintaining segregated schools for disabled students in an already resource-scarce context. The students are not offered

3 Information based on personal observation as a Peace Corps education volunteer in Mekelle, Ethiopia. 2011-2013.
vocational or life skills training and are thus ill-prepared for life in the community; therefore, the students often must resort to begging after exiting the boarding school, despite having completed their primary school education. The children rarely see their families during their eight-year stay at the school and are excluded from community life. Until very recently, however, this school was one of very few options for disabled children, and every year, there are more requests for enrollment than the school can accept.

Beginning in fifth grade, the students from the boarding school are mainstreamed at two local primary schools. Access itself is dangerous, as students must travel on foot to the schools without walking canes. Due to teachers’ inability to read Braille, students are not expected to complete homework or take notes in class, unlike their sighted peers. They are also not provided with any textbooks or learning materials. Students must remain outside of their classroom during subjects that the schools deem unsuitable for blind students, namely math and science. Exclusion from these classes has a long-term impact on the students’ future; without attendance in these classes the students are excluded from these subjects on the national exams, thus disqualifying them to study or test on these subjects in secondary school. This type of pattern results in the exclusion of many university students in developing countries from certain departments, such as science, because of the prerequisites (Chataika et al, 2012).

In light of the shortcomings of these limited educational provisions for children with disabilities, the Ethiopia government established a special needs strategy focused on the inclusion of students in mainstream classes close to their homes (MoE, 2006). The picture of special and mainstream schools provided above supports the urgency of this strategy, but also suggests a long road ahead. As the experience in mainstream schools shows, inclusive education is not only about children with disabilities being able to enter mainstream classrooms. Inclusion
requires support, both moral and educational, and adequate resources, both human and material. The long-standing barriers integrated into the system affect their access to education and development of life skills to enable them to survive outside the classroom. Most notable is the stigma attached to disabled students in this current system.

**Barriers to Inclusion in Mainstream Classrooms**

Societal beliefs about people with disabilities have a strong impact on inclusion. Disability in Ethiopia is often perceived as connected with a person’s immorality or curse. Disabled children and parents of disabled children are often stigmatized (Lewis, 2009). Ethiopia’s *Study on Situation of Out of School Children* (MoE and UNESCO, 2012), states that even though Ethiopia’s 1994 Education and Training Policy and the MoE special needs education strategy opened the doors of schools to students with disabilities, attitudes in society remained unchanged and many children were still kept at home. These beliefs vary throughout Ethiopia; with 80 ethnic groups and more than 250 languages, it is inevitable that different cultural ideas and linguistic expressions of the concept of disability and the attitudes towards people with disabilities will develop (MoE and UNICEF, 2012: Peters, 2009). Thus when addressing attitudinal barriers, the local context must be considered.

In a survey conducted in a cluster of schools with mainstreaming of disabled students in Ethiopia, 93.5% of the disabled students reported difficulty with gaining support from their parents, teachers and peers (Dagnew, 2013). As many school-aged children are kept in the confines of their homes rather than brought to schools (MoE and UNESCO, 2012), working with parents in getting disabled children into classrooms, and providing them support while there, is important. A number of factors could be involved in their refusal (or inability) to enroll them in school, including the stigma which is attached to parents of children with disabilities, lack of
community support, inability of mainstream schools to include them, or distance from schools who offer inclusion for disabled children (Lewis, 2009). Parents might be worried that their children will be a burden to teachers and negatively impact other children’s learning, fail to recognize the value of their child being educated, or simply have no hope for their success (Kangwa, Patrick and Grazyna, 2003). Until regular schools can offer well-resourced and welcoming settings for disabled children, and parents become more aware of these options, urban special schools will likely be perceived as the only option for disabled children. However, the urban location of most special schools in Ethiopia (Lewis 2009) could limit even this option for parents even if they want to send their children to school. Also, if parents choose to send their child to a distant special school with boarding facilities, the possibility of them filling the important role as advocates for their children’s education (Chataika et al, 2012) is diminished.

Teachers are not immune to society’s belief systems and these beliefs also have the power to influence their teaching practice (Ocloo and Subbey, 2008). Teachers’ attitudes, like those of parents, are extremely important in successful inclusion in schools (Dagnew, 2013). This issue is two-fold, including not only their beliefs about disabled children, but also their beliefs about themselves. Teachers who participated in an inclusive education project in Uganda expressed more uncertainty about their own abilities than about the abilities of the disabled students (Miles, Wapling and Beart, 2011). This is not meant to diminish the importance of teachers’ doubts about the abilities of disabled children; it does however reveal how important it is to also consider teachers’ visions of themselves and the ways in which low self-confidence, or even simply lack of understanding about disabilities (MoE and UNESCO, 2012), may result in rejection of inclusive education plans.
For inclusive education to work, it is critical that teachers believe that all students are capable of learning (Ocloo and Subbey, 2008). According to the idea of ‘teachability’ as presented by Singal (2008)\(^4\) in a study of Indian schools, teachers, informed by their previous experiences and quality of training, make a distinction between the children who belong in mainstream classes and those who do not. ‘Teachable’ students are those who can learn in a lecture- and test-focused classroom without assistance. In this model, students who do not fit into this one-size-fits-all learning process are referred to special education teachers (Singal, 2010). Facilitation of inclusion also relies on teachers utilizing child-centered teaching methods (UNESCO, 1994). However, in the survey of Ethiopian mainstream schools (Dagnew, 2013), 81.7% of teachers reported that they did not consider learners’ needs in their teaching; furthermore, 83.9% of students with disabilities said the teachers’ methods did not match their needs.

The assumptions of the mainstream classroom (listed in the middle of the ‘teachability’ chart) illustrate that the teacher was not fully to blame for the inability to implement inclusive education; factors such as large class size, test-based lessons and an often inflexible curriculum are issues which stem from the education system—and are prevalent in Ethiopian schools. It is also possible that inclusion plans were implemented top-down, without input from teachers (Dagnew, 2013; Chhabra et al, 2010; Singal, 2008), and thus their resistance to inclusion could be a reflection of their frustration at being excluded from the planning process or not being given adequate training. Teachers also face shortages of resources: 100% of the teachers included in the survey in Ethiopia (Dagnew, 2013) said students with disabilities were not provided sufficient instructional materials and 100% of surveyed disabled students agreed.

\(^4\) See Appendix 3
This highlights the need for education policy leaders to acknowledge that these systemic issues that give rise to difficulties for disabled students in the classroom reveal ‘broader challenges in an education system which is grappling with issues of quality, drop-out/push out factors for all children’ (Singal, 2009: 37). This idea echoes the underlying theme of inclusive education as presented in the Salamanca Statement, and quoted in Ethiopia’s special needs education strategy, that inclusion is about meeting the needs of all students, including—not exclusively for—those who are disabled (MoE, 2006; UNESCO, 1994). This argument can be an effective entry point for garnering political will for special needs education by locating it under the umbrella of inclusive education for all students, highlighting the benefit, and cost-effectiveness, of inclusion for society as a whole (Bines and Lei, 2011). However, as some voices in the education sector point out, until there is equity in educational resource distribution for students with special educational needs, there is a need for affirmative action in budgeting for these students. Otherwise, simply grouping children with special educational needs will likely perpetuate the ‘fragmented efforts’ and lack of funding that has characterized special needs education in Ethiopia thus far (Teklemariam and Ferja, 2011: 132).

A frequent barrier to resource allocation for the education of disabled children in developing countries is the misconception that adults with disabilities will be a burden on the system (Elweke and Rodda, 2002; Chataika, 2012). This perception overlooks the likelihood that those instances in which disabled people completed their education yet were not able to become economically self-sufficient could be due to the system failing to provide them with the opportunities education affords an individual: to be empowered to take part in development efforts and develop one’s own capabilities (Miles and Singal, 2010). To counter this, governments also need to enact supporting cross-sector legislation, which not only supports the
children in school, but also in employment, vocational training and health (Eleweke and Rodda, 2002). To break down barriers of stigma, disabled children need to be able to exhibit to the community their ability to successfully complete school, attain gainful employment and become economically independent. However, with less than 1% of disabled children in Ethiopia enrolled in primary school (Lewis, 2009), combined with lack of support from vocational training, universities and other options for educational opportunities, the number of success stories will likely be too low to make an impact on these negative beliefs. This becomes a vicious circle in which the means and the end goal are the same—awareness of the potential of people with disabilities.

**Case Studies of Inclusion: Ethiopia, Uganda and Zambia**

Although the challenges of inclusive education within the Ethiopian education system may seem numerous, they are far from insurmountable. The Ministry of Education’s special needs education strategy outlines a plan to move away from the situation of special schools described above, and develop a system in which disabled children can live in their home communities and attend neighborhood schools. This will require an assessment of the capabilities and potential that already exists in Ethiopia, as well as a sharing of experiences with countries that have tried similar inclusion projects in comparable contexts. The following three case studies offer a starting point for such assessment: the German Church School in Ethiopia, a community-led inclusion project for deaf students in Uganda and the Mpika Inclusive Education Project in Zambia. They illustrate how, in a similar context of issues with stigma, difficult classroom conditions and lack of resources, inclusive education programs were able to meet some success.
The German Church School (GCS) provides a model of full inclusion of vision-impaired students in mainstream classes. GCS offers a preparatory class for new vision-impaired students in which they learn reading, writing, life skills and mobility training, after which they are included in the classroom with their sighted peers. To improve retention, enable disabled children to remain with their families, and encourage children to focus on studies instead of spending time on the street begging or shining shoes, GCH provides small stipends through ‘fosterships,’ a stark contrast to boarding schools in which students often live far from their families. The school’s social worker conducts home visits and encourages parents to support their child’s education. The school’s vision is to give these students ‘the chance to receive a good education and thereby give them a future in which they can take responsibility for themselves’.

The existence of a preparatory class and the encouragement of full inclusion in mainstream classrooms are important aspects of this program’s success. It is argued that including disabled children in early childhood education will not only better prepare them for mainstream primary schools, thus increasing their retention rates, but also contribute to the creation of an inclusive society as the other students would perceive differences as normal (Lei and Myers, 2011). This idea of inclusion creating a society that respects differences is also championed by proponents of inclusive primary schools (UNESCO, 1994).

The Mpika Inclusive Education Project also focused on integration, but through gradual transitions of students from special unit classes into mainstream classes. The project addressed issues of stigma in the community by arranging sensitization workshops for parents, teachers and community members. Community leaders and school children were tasked with identifying children with disabilities in the community and encouraging them to attend schools. A peer

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support method, or “twinning” was used among the school children. The results saw an increase in transitions from special units to mainstream classes and enrollment of new students from the community (Kangwa and Grazyna, 2003).

The project in Bushenyi, Uganda utilized the approach of special units attached to mainstream schools, focusing on training mainstream teachers in sign language so they would be able to teach deaf students. To address issues with parents’ attitudes against educating their deaf children, parents were invited to learn sign language, and eventually, gaining confidence in their children’s abilities to learn, the parents formed an organization in which they shared their experiences, participated in sign language instruction, and advocated for education of deaf students in the community (Miles et al, 2011).

Discussion

These examples highlight several key elements of developing inclusive education strategies. All of these programs focused on enabling children to remain with their families by addressing attitudes and financial hardships rather than encouraging them to attend special schools with boarding facilities. Enabling disabled children to access quality education close to their homes is not simply a matter of cost-effectiveness—it is crucial to building inclusive communities and to preserving important support systems. Parents especially can play an important role in helping their disabled children to remain in school and advocate for awareness in the community. Although the GCS’s system of providing ‘fosterships’—enabled by the school’s private support—would likely be a budgetary hardship for a government school in Ethiopia, it is possible some families may need financial assistance to enroll their disabled child in community schools, considering the support that they could obtain from special schools (such as food and housing).
The training of teachers implemented in Uganda and Zambia are illustrations of the evolving role of mainstream and special needs teachers and schools in the inclusive education conversation. Rather than ‘deskilling’ (Singal, 2010:52) the general teachers by advocating the belief that only special needs teachers are capable of working with students with disabilities, mainstream teachers were given the tools to work with disabled students rather than relying on special needs teachers. In the Mpika project, special needs teachers were utilized as resources and facilitators in trainings (Miles et al, 2011). The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) recommends such a transition, suggesting that special schools be used as resource centers. Beins and Lei (2011) recommend assigning special needs teachers to a school or a group of schools, an idea that could pair well with Ethiopia’s established school cluster system. Implementing these changes could contribute to breaking down the ‘large-scale institutional inequalities’ that can result from having ‘parallel systems which essentially segregate disabled people (and teachers) from their peers’ (Peters, 2009: 154). These ideas are evident in Ethiopia’s special needs education strategy (MoE, 2006), which calls for the deployment of special needs teachers to school clusters and links to be developed between special and mainstream schools. The issue of parallel systems, however, remains complicated. Ethiopia’s strategy allows for special schools to remain an option for students with ‘severe’ disabilities; however, enrollment of blind students in these special schools continues, although these students should, according to the strategy, be able to enroll in mainstream schools (MoE, 2012: 4). This contradiction highlights the need for a clear plan detailing how special schools will transition into their new role in inclusion.

The case studies also offer useful lessons in the importance of local knowledge and context. Trainings conducted at the mainstream schools in northern Ethiopia mentioned earlier in this paper were often conducted for two days, once or twice per year, and were led by foreigners
who were known as special needs specialists. Despite the location of the training on the special school campus with ninety-eight students and two vision-impaired teachers present, none of the students or teachers were called upon to co-facilitate the training. This exclusion of local knowledge and expertise perpetuates the idea that teaching students with disabilities requires specialized knowledge from developed countries. The trainings were also lacking a system for continuous monitoring and evaluation. On the contrary, trainings should not be sporadic and must include the reality of the classroom, reflecting the school’s needs (Chataika et al, 2012). Research has illustrated that short-term workshops or trainings void of ongoing support will not be effective (Johnstone and Chapman, 2009). The Mpika project was successful in its efforts as it included local people with disabilities, special needs teachers, and health care professionals as facilitators. Ethiopia’s Ministry of Education has called for inclusive education to become a part of Ethiopia’s teacher training curriculum in teacher’s colleges and regional education bureaus have begun establishing special education needs degree programs (MoE, 2012). In addition, in order to encourage a focus on local knowledge and skills, regional bureaus of education in Ethiopia could consider establishing requirements for NGOs that wish to give trainings that they must include local teachers, disabilities organizations or students with disabilities in the development and implementation of workshops. This seems to be more cost-effective for donors and bureaus than repeatedly bringing in a team of foreigners.

The teachers in these case studies were also innovative in their teaching methods and would divert from the regular curriculum when necessary. This suggests that their education systems or schools offered more flexibility so as to encourage child-centered teaching. For example, in the Mpika project, when a disabled child was introduced into the classroom and shunned by the other students, the teacher stopped the lesson and engaged the students in a team-building exercise (Child-to-Child DVD, Handicap International).
programs were implemented on small, local scales, which could potentially work well in the context of Ethiopia’s decentralized education system. The programs in Uganda and Zambia did not focus on materials or costly methods; instead they worked to build community awareness and buy-in, thus encouraging the community to develop solutions to shortage of resources on their own.7 In a low-resource setting plagued by stigma, unsustainable NGO activity, and high numbers of disabled children left out of schools, such domestic and international experiences can be useful for developing a feasible and effective path forward in Ethiopia.

Conclusion

A final question then remains: What are the hoped-for outcomes of Ethiopia’s goal to end exclusion of disabled children from educational opportunities? As Singal (2008: 1527) asserts, ‘There is a need for re-examining perceptions around the values and purposes of education for children with disabilities.’ It is important to see the education of children with disabilities in the context of the nation’s educational goals and objectives as stated in national policy8. According to these objectives, disabled students should not only have access to the classroom, but also be included in explorations in science and technology, given opportunities to access skills training, and develop an appreciation for democracy, equality and human rights (UNESCO, 2010). If disabled students are excluded from these objectives, then important questions must be asked about the objectives of their education.

7 For example, students helped transport students with physical disabilities to and from school; a carpenter and physiotherapist gave a child crutches to go to school (Child-to-Child Trust, 2003).
8 See Appendix 4.
Bibliography


Appendix 1

Note on statistics used in this paper:

It is important to note that in this paper, many statistics presented in the literature reviewed include the caution that statistics collected on people with disabilities in developing countries are often unreliable, and are thus many of them are estimates. This could be due to data collection, different constructs of the concept of disability, and willingness of people to report disability due to stigma (Lei and Myers, 2011; Lewis 2010; Miles and Singal, 2010). However, as Lei states, “Despite these question marks over statistics, many agree that disability is not a minority issue” (Lei and Myers, 2011: 1170)
Appendix 2
Governmental support for people with disabilities

The Government of Ethiopia has adopted and implemented a number of laws, policies and standards pertaining to people with disabilities, including their right to productive and decent work. The main ones are:

- Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, adopted in 1995. Article 41(5) of the Constitution sets out the State’s responsibility for the provision of necessary rehabilitation and support services for people with disabilities.
- Proclamation concerning the Rights to Employment for Persons with Disabilities, No. 568/2008, makes null and void any law, practice, custom, attitude and other discriminatory situations that limit equal opportunities for persons with disabilities. It also requires employers to provide appropriate working and training conditions; take all reasonable accommodation measures and affirm active actions, particularly when employing women with disabilities; and assign an assistant to enable a person with disability to perform their work or follow training.
- The Federal Civil Servant Proclamation No. 515/2007, provides for special preference in the recruitment, promotion, and deployment, among others, of qualified candidates with disabilities. This provision is applicable to government offices only.
- Labour Proclamation, No. 377/2003, amended by Labour Proclamation No. 494/2006, makes it unlawful for an employer to discriminate against workers on the basis of nationality, sex, religion, political outlook or on any other conditions.
- Proclamation on Definition of Powers of Duties of the Executive Organs of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, No. 691/2010, provides for conditions of equal opportunities and full participation of persons with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS.
- Building Proclamation, No. 624/2009, provides for accessibility in the design and construction of any building to ensure suitability for physically impaired persons.
- Proclamation No. 676/2010 on the Ratification of the “UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” (UN CRPD) by Ethiopia.
- Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP) 2010-2015, establishes disability as a cross cutting sector of development where focus is given to preventing disability and to providing education and training, rehabilitation and equal access and opportunities to persons with disabilities.
- National Plan of Action of Persons with Disabilities (2012-2021) aims at making Ethiopia an inclusive society. It addresses the needs of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia for comprehensive rehabilitation services, equal opportunities for education, skills training and work, as well as full participation in the life of their families, communities and the nation.

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Appendix 3

Constructing the notion of ‘teachability’

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Appendix 4

Ethiopia’s “Principles and general objectives of education” ¹¹

- to bring up citizens who can take care of resources and utilize wisely, who are trained in various skills, by raising the private and social benefits of education;
- to bring up citizens who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, as well as for equality, justice and peace, endowed with democratic culture and discipline;
- to bring up citizens who differentiate harmful practices from useful ones, who seek and stand for truth, appreciate aesthetics and show a positive attitude towards the development and dissemination of science and technology in society;
- to cultivate the cognitive, creative, productive and appreciative potential of citizens by appropriately relating education to environmental and societal needs.