How Teachers in Mainstream Schools Perceive Inclusive Education of Students with Disabilities (Mixed Methods)

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Abstract

Inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, alongside their peers, has become a major concern for interested educators, professionals and parents in many countries around the world and the attitudes toward implementing it vary between opponents and proponents. This research focused on the attitudes of teachers towards the implementation and practice of inclusion of students with disabilities in the mainstream schools and what the obstacles hindering it. Mixed methods approach was adopted using questionnaires and interviews as main tools to explore teachers attitudes. Findings of the study showed an overall lack of awareness about inclusion and its appropriate practices was reported.

Introduction

Inclusive education has witnessed positive trends and developments globally, driven by the acknowledgment that all students, including those with disabilities, have a right to education. The inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools, alongside their typically developing peers, has become a significant focus for educators, professionals, and parents worldwide. This shift is influenced by factors such as the growing recognition of education's role in achieving social justice for pupils with disabilities, the right of individuals with disabilities to be educated alongside their peers, and the benefits of equal opportunities for fostering self-growth and societal participation (Al-Quraini, 2011).

In terms of policy and practice, inclusion has diverse interpretations. One perspective emphasizes that students with disabilities can and should be educated in the same settings as their typically developing peers, highlighting the importance of providing learning opportunities for all students (Ferguson, 2014). Attitudes toward inclusion vary, with proponents seeing it as a means for students with disabilities to access equal opportunities, achieve their full potential, participate in social settings, contribute to society, and gain acceptance among their peer groups (Forlin and Cole, 1993). Increased societal participation challenges stereotypes and diminishes stigmas associated with individuals with disabilities (Helena Martins et al., 2018; Allan, 2003).

On the contrary, opponents argue that inclusive education hinders a child's learning by removing specialized strategies and interventions. They advocate for teaching students with disabilities in special schools that offer tailored educational services (Hegarty, 2001; Antoinette, 2002). Critics question whether inclusion is always the best approach to meet the needs of students with disabilities, especially those with severe educational disabilities

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(Imray and Colley, 2017). Concerns also arise about the potential lack of alternative options for parents, particularly if their child has severe disabilities, as inclusive settings might eliminate special educational placements (Fuchs and Fuchs, 1998). Another critique centers around the accommodation of all children, as mainstream settings may lack the necessary additional services and provisions required by students with disabilities, potentially incurring high costs (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002).

In Saudi Arabia, there is a positive trend favoring the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. The country has implemented inclusive education policies, aligning with the principle that education is a fundamental right for all citizens, with or without disabilities. This approach is emphasized in the KSA Education Policy Document (2002), which considers the education of people with special educational needs as an integral part of the general education system (Al-Mousa, 2004). The human rights movement in Saudi Arabia has further underscored the shift in focus, elevating disability services from voluntary to a fundamental right, in alignment with principles of equal opportunities, self-respect, and dignity (Al-Mousa, 2004). This study aims to shed light on the reality of inclusion in Saudi Arabia by examining teachers' attitudes toward the implementation and practice of inclusive education for students with disabilities in mainstream schools, as well as identifying potential obstacles hindering its effective implementation.

Literature Review

Teachers play a crucial role in shaping and sustaining an inclusive school environment, with their attitudes serving as significant predictors of their actions. The development of inclusive schools is a collective responsibility, and teachers, being the primary support for children with disabilities, contribute significantly to the success of inclusive education (Yada et al., 2018; Pearson et al., 2015). Attitudes, being influential in shaping behavior, can impact teachers' willingness to embrace inclusion, and negative attitudes may lead to hesitation in teaching pupils with disabilities (Yada et al., 2018; Todorovic et al., 2011).

Extensive research has explored teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, highlighting that the success of inclusive education is closely tied to the attitudes of those responsible for its implementation (Salend, 2001; Van Reusen et al., 2001; de Boer et al., 2010; Poon et al., 2019; Rojo-Ramos et al., 2022). Teachers' attitudes have been identified as a key factor influencing the success of inclusion, and studies indicate that active teacher involvement is crucial for successful implementation (Malone et al., 2001). The classroom teacher's attitude and application of inclusive strategies are identified as influential factors (Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019). Negative teacher attitudes have been recognized as a significant barrier to successful inclusion, impacting collaborative relationships among teachers in schools, which are essential for fostering an inclusive school culture (Ali et al., 2006).

Inclusive education should be integrated into all aspects of the school, with diversity embraced as the norm. Collaboration among all stakeholders in the school setting is essential for effectively implementing inclusive education practices in public schools and meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, and it is crucial that they demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusion, along with possessing the necessary skills and knowledge. The present study aims to examine these aspects.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1.   What are the perceptions of primary teachers toward the inclusive education of students with disabilities in mainstream schools?

2.   What challenges do teachers face when striving to create an inclusive education learning environment for students?

3.	What recommendations do teachers believe would enhance the quality and success of inclusive education for students with disabilities in their schools?

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a mixed-method research approach has been adopted to capitalize on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, enhancing the overall validity of the research findings (Creswell, 2014; Bryman, 2015). Quantitative methods provide objective and reliable data, while qualitative methods offer insights into opinions and attitudes, allowing participants to elaborate on responses. This mixed-method approach ensures a comprehensive exploration of teachers' opinions on obstacles hindering the inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools.

Mixed Methods Design (Convergent Parallel Design)

The research design employed is the convergent parallel design, considered the most recommended and commonly used approach for researchers conducting mixed methods research (Creswell, 2014). In this design, quantitative and qualitative research approaches are simultaneously employed during the same phase of the research process. Each approach is given equal emphasis, with separate analysis of findings. The results from both methods are then interpreted, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample comprises female special education teachers from public primary girls' schools in the five main districts of Saudi Arabia (North, South, East, West, and Central) that have implemented inclusion programs. These teachers were selected due to their extensive knowledge and experience in disabilities and inclusion, making them well-suited to identify barriers hindering inclusion in public schools. A total of 331 teachers participated in the study, with representation from each district.

Prior to the study, informed consent was obtained from participants, assuring them that their data would remain confidential, not shared with third parties, and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The use of both questionnaires and interviews provides a nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the research problem, with the data being collected and analyzed separately before being related, compared, and interpreted in the discussion chapter.

Table 1: Number of teachers from each district

District	Number of completed questionnaires	Percentage
North	51	15.4%
South	74	22.4%
Central	47	14.2%
East	74	22.4%
West	85	25.7%
Total	331	100%

The table presented below shows the geographical locations of the participating special education teachers, as well as the number of teachers from each district who took part in the research survey.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved administering questionnaires through local education authorities, collecting responses, and then conducting both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The 331 returned questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Windows, version 21.0). Quantitative data analysis included descriptive statistics such as mean, frequency, percentage, and standard deviation. Inferential statistics, specifically a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), were employed to identify statistically significant differences in mean scores among the five independent groups from different geographical districts.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data underwent theoretical thematic analysis following the six guiding steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). This process involved systematically identifying, organizing, and interpreting themes within the qualitative dataset to gain meaningful insights.

The combined use of quantitative and qualitative analyses ensures a comprehensive understanding of the research problem, allowing for nuanced insights derived from both types of data.

Findings / Results

Demographic Information:

In table 2, 3 below, the demographic details of the sample i.e., their qualification (table 2) and years of experience (table3) are presented.

Table 2: Distribution of teachers by special needs qualifications

Special education qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Diploma (two years in special education)	78	32.5-17.3%
Bachelor	232	70-76.7%
Master	20	6 %

* n = 331

Table 3: Distribution of teachers by years of experience in teaching students with disabilities

Years of experience	Frequency	Percentage
< 5 years	179	45.7%
5 – 10 years	64	19.3%
10 – 15 years	46	13.8%
> 15 years	34	10.2%

Questionnaire Results:

The key aim of the present work is to examine the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in public primary schools and how this impacts the development of an inclusive culture within the school. In Table 5, the responses of the sample in this aspect are summarised.

Table 4: The overall teacher's responses to the survey statements

Aspect	Mean	Standard Deviation
There is a lack of understanding of the concept of inclusion amongst school staff	1.62	.81
There is an absence of shared understanding that inclusion is about increasing participation of student with disab in, as well as access to, the school	1.68	.80
There is a lack of collaboration between general and special education teachers in teaching students with disabilities	1.74	.94
Students with disabilities are seen by school staff as individual with lower level of abilities and skills	1.88	.94
Staff avoid labelling children according to notions of ability	1.53	.68
School head teacher do not feel responsible for making the school inclusive	1.70	.89

Analysis of Survey Results

Overview of Key Findings

The survey results highlight several key findings related to teachers' perspectives on inclusion. The mean scores and standard deviations for specific statements indicate the level of agreement among the participating special education teachers.

1.   Labeling of Children based on Abilities:

•   Strong agreement (M = 1.53, SD = [not provided]) suggests a prevalent practice of labeling children based on their abilities, indicating a potential barrier to inclusive education.

2.   Understanding of Inclusion by School Staff:

•   More than half of the teachers (55.9%) reported a poor understanding of inclusion among school staff.

•   High agreement (M = 1.68, SD = 0.80) that there is an absence of shared understanding that inclusion is about increasing participation and access.

3.   Collaboration Between Teachers:

•   Agreement (M = 1.74, SD = 0.94) that collaboration between teachers in teaching students with disabilities is lacking.

•   Strong agreement (53.5%) and agreement (25.1%) on this point.

4.   Perception of Children with Disabilities:

•   A significant percentage (43.2%) strongly believes that children with disabilities are viewed as having lower skills and abilities by school staff members.

5.   Overall Perception of Barriers to Inclusion:

•   Overall mean score (M = 1.69, SD = 0.53) suggests general agreement that the identified factors are significant obstacles hindering inclusion.

Differences Between Districts

To explore potential variations, an ANOVA test was conducted, revealing significant differences between districts (p<.001). The detailed results of these differences can be

found in Table 5. The ANOVA test results provide evidence of statistically significant differences in mean attitude scores between districts.

These findings lay the groundwork for further discussion on the specific challenges and opportunities for inclusive education in different geographical areas, offering valuable insights for targeted interventions and improvements

Table 5: One-way ANOVA in mean attitude scores between the districts

Aspect	Mean by location					ANOVA test	
	North	South	East	West	Central	F	p-value
Attitudes towards inclusion	1.74	1.84	1.70	1.81	1.43	8.215	<.001*

 *highly significant

The findings presented in Table 7 indicate a significant difference (p <.01) in teachers' opinions regarding the inclusive culture of their schools between the five districts [F (df= 4,326) = 8.215, p<.001]. However, the mean scores for the five districts suggest that there are barriers hindering inclusive culture development in the schools. Pairwise comparisons were also performed (see Table 8) and the findings indicate a significant difference between the Central District and all the other districts. This suggests that teachers from the Central District demonstrate higher levels of agreement than other districts with the statement that the lack of inclusive culture in schools is a significant barrier hindering the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools.

Qualitative Findings (Interviews):

The interview transcripts were coded by the researcher, and this process highlighted a number of common features relating to inclusive culture and practice in public schools. These are outlined in the table below.

Table 6: Sub-themes and codes determined for the theme of attitudes towards inclusive education

Sub-theme	Codes
Attitudes towards inclusive education	Positive attitudes- negative attitudes-lack of collaboration- separation in all aspects of the school-responsibility of special teachers only- different level of supportive leadership- insufficient knowledge and training.

the outcomes suggested that, at best, inclusion is accepted and, at worst, viewed as a cumbersome responsibility leading to increased workload. The majority of participating educators conveyed a deficiency in understanding inclusion—its meaning, principles, and practical applications—within their school. Responses varied across the study, with teachers in the West District reporting more positive approaches, framing inclusion as a process ensuring active participation of students with disabilities in school activities. Conversely, some educators noted instances where inclusion is perceived as achieved merely by placing students with disabilities in public schools without modifying systems to address their needs.

Furthermore, interviewees attributed this poor understanding to a lack of awareness among general education teachers in Saudi Arabia, despite considerable efforts by special education teachers to educate them about inclusion. This lack of awareness was underscored by statements from T4 and T6, indicating that workshops and leaflets distributed to school members have not effectively addressed the issue. The prevailing

belief that educating students with learning difficulties in mainstream schools falls solely on special education teachers implies a reluctance to collaborate and a fundamental misunderstanding of inclusion, which fundamentally involves working together to address the specific needs of each child (T6).

Teachers from the Central District specifically highlighted the lack of shared responsibility as a major barrier to inclusion in their schools. This suggests that the distribution of responsibility is not universally seen as essential for improving inclusion practices for students with disabilities, as most staff members perceive it as the sole responsibility of special education teachers, fostering a culture of separation. The understanding of inclusion emerged as a critical factor influencing teachers' attitudes toward its concept and practical application. When questioned about their school's overall attitudes toward the inclusion of students with disabilities, interviewees indicated an underlying apathy. For instance, T8 explained that inclusion in their school is neither denied nor prioritized. Additionally, T5 suggested that the school has no issue with students with disabilities being part of the school as long as special education teachers assume responsibility for them, indicating a distancing of general education teachers from inclusive practices.

Despite these sentiments being reported in the South, West, and East Districts, participants from the Central District expressed more negative responses. They conveyed that the inclusion of students with disabilities in public schools is perceived as an additional rather than integral part of the general education system, as exemplified by T10, who stated that the inclusion of students with disabilities is considered an extra workload by both the headteacher and general education teacher. Following inquiries about general attitudes toward inclusion, interviewees elaborated on more specific areas, including the attitudes of headteachers and the level of support provided by school leadership teams. Starratt (2010) underscores the significance of school leadership teams in shaping a school's inclusive culture.

Discussion

The statistically significant differences observed among districts in Saudi Arabia, as identified in this study, align with a recent report from the Economic Reports Unit in Saudi Arabia (2013). The report noted notable variations in the number of teachers and students across different districts in the Kingdom. These differences encompass factors such as varying student and teacher populations, as well as differences in the number of schools per district (Arab Economic Journal, 2013). This underscores the need for the Ministry of Education to carefully consider the distribution of students, teachers, and special education services both within and between districts.

The observed variances may be attributed to the geographical location of schools and their proximity to service providers. Notably, the Central District, encompassing a substantial geographical area in KSA, stands out with the largest population and the highest number of schools among all districts. Norwich and Gray (2007) emphasize the significance of location as a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of inclusive education. Students residing in areas with limited access to educational staff capable of meeting their needs may face challenges in accessing essential special services. The findings of this study align with Norwich and Gray's perspective, indicating that the geographical locations of inclusive schools significantly impact the availability and quality of special services in public schools.

Furthermore, the research suggests that smaller districts may enjoy a slight advantage, as they tend to have higher-quality and more time-efficient special education provisions. This advantage could be attributed to the ease of managing schools distributed over smaller geographical areas by Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Conversely, schools located at greater distances or in rural areas may face neglect. Norwich and Gray (2007) identified a

similar challenge in countries with more experience in inclusive education, such as the United Kingdom, where schools often struggle to meet the needs of students with disabilities due to factors like a lack of specialist units or appropriate support services.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study reveals prevalent negative attitudes toward inclusive education, primarily stemming from a lack of understanding and awareness within schools. Teachers overwhelmingly expressed that while inclusion is not a novel concept, it remains poorly comprehended by a significant majority of the teaching staff in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, many teachers viewed inclusion solely in terms of physical proximity, neglecting the crucial aspect of enhancing the participation of students with disabilities in all aspects of school life. Another significant barrier identified in this study is the pervasive belief that inclusion falls exclusively under the purview of special education teachers, absolving other school staff members of responsibility for fostering an inclusive school environment. In essence, a prevailing sentiment among school staff is that dealing with inclusion-related issues is solely the duty of special education teachers.

Acknowledgments

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