INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN PRIMARY EDUCATION IN SAUDI ARABIA: STAKEHOLDERS PERSPECTIVES

N. Alshalhoub

University of Glasgow (UNITED KINGDOM)  
Princess Nourah University (SAUDI ARABIA)

Abstract

The inclusion of students with various levels of ability in mainstream classrooms is a worldwide trend. A shift in speaking about inclusion can be traced to the international agenda through such key documents as the Salamanca Inclusion Statement [1] and the UN Convention on the rights of Persons with Disability [2]. These international agenda items have encouraged the implementation of equal forms of education by emphasizing the importance of meeting the needs of children who are excluded or marginalized, including those with disabilities. According to its national educational policies, Saudi Arabia is among the countries seeking to move towards more inclusive schools. It is therefore important to find the best practice with which to implement the process of inclusive education. Because of the substantial role played by teachers in the implementation of an inclusive educational process, their understandings and attitudes are crucial to achieving successful inclusion.

This study aimed to interview 12 teachers who are teaching in inclusive classrooms in Saudi primary schools. These interviews sought to discover these participants’ understandings regarding the implementation of inclusive education, and their views of students with disabilities. The data of this study’s investigation were qualitatively analysed to provide in depth findings on the ways that teachers understand and implement inclusive education, and their attitudes to it. It also aims to provide insight regarding how teachers view students with disabilities who are included in inclusive classrooms. Primarily, the findings suggest that teachers’ gender, experience, and level of education are important variables affecting their attitudes.

Keywords: Inclusive Education, Disability, Teachers, Perspectives.

1 INTRODUCTION

In the Middle Eastern region, Saudi Arabia is one of the countries promoting inclusion in education. This is being done using a model for inclusive practice derived from the U.S., and in Saudi Arabia the strategy is referred to as the Tatweer Project. Tatweer, supported by the Saudi government to develop education, presents itself as aiming to improving all students’ education and outcomes, including those with different abilities. It locates inclusive education at the centre of the development agenda, with Goal 3 focusing on access to quality and equal education and giving support to all students based upon their needs, regardless of their race, sex, or social and economic circumstances [3].

This study aims to examine this model and to discuss the nature of the inclusive practice that Tatweer has introduced to create effective practice which includes students of different abilities. This study is mainly focused on enhancing understanding of the ways in which representatives of Tatweer speak of inclusion, define inclusive practice, and view pupils with additional support needs. In considering teachers’ attitudes towards the inclusion of disabled students, prior studies have shown that teachers’ attitudes differ according to several variables. Avramidis & Norwich indicated that these variables can be divided into three main categories. First, student-related variables are based on the type or severity of disability involved; second are environment-related variables; and third are the variables that could be considered as the most important in this context: teacher related variables such as age, gender, teaching experience, experience with children with special needs, and level of training [4].

The present paper focuses on this group of teacher-related variables. There is evidence to suggest that teachers are one of the most important elements of effective inclusion ([4];[5]), largely because teachers have the responsibilities of planning, preparing, and delivering lessons for all students [6]. Because of the substantial part played by teachers in the implementation of an inclusive educational process, their understandings and attitudes are crucial to achieving successful inclusion [8]. Accepting students with disability can be done through understanding their individual characteristics and having knowledge of
suitable ways to teach them [9]. Some teachers are not in favour of working with students with disabilities, especially if they have special instruction, because they feel they lack confidence and competence regarding how they should teach them.

In summary, studies that have examined the inclusive education of students with disabilities in regular classrooms are limited with regard to teachers’ attitudes [7]. This study could therefore provide insight into how to identify the areas that teachers struggle with in the process of inclusive education in light of sociocultural theory to gain better understanding of the concept.

2 METHODOLOGY
The theoretical framework selected for this study is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It focuses on addressing the knowledge which can be constructed by examining social and cultural factors [14]. Vygotsky (1978) – and many scholars working in his tradition (e.g. Rogoff 1990; Qi, Wang and Ha 2017) – all assert that human knowledge is not produced by the individual, but is instead the product of a process of sociocultural activity within communities. In other words, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory proposes that human understanding and knowledge is constructed through interactions with others (Rovegno & Dolly, 2006, cited in Miller, 2003). Culture plays a key role in learning, and both learners and instructors bring their cultural experiences, beliefs and expectations to construct knowledge and understanding [14].

In conducting this study, qualitative methods are utilized to allow an in-depth understanding of the chosen phenomenon [12]. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Arsenault and Anderson (1998) define qualitative research as an activity or inquiry that places the researcher in the world to enable them to study things in their natural settings by trying to understand and interpret the phenomena in the social world using multiple methods [15];[16]. As the aim of this study is to gain stakeholders’ perspectives and understanding, qualitative research will allow the researcher to collect data from specific educational settings, involving the implementation of inclusive education practice, to reflect on various realities from participants’ perspectives [9].

Empirically, this study relies on twelve semi-structured interviews with teachers (seven females and five males), at Tatweer schools. These interviews allow an enhanced understanding of the ways in which these representatives of Tatweer speak about inclusion, define inclusive practice, and view pupils with additional support needs. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews as a study tool because interviews are a helpful relevant and method when the researcher seeks to understand the thoughts, views, and beliefs of individuals (in this case, teachers), and to investigate issues more thoroughly in a specific context (in this study, education in Saudi Arabia). The study participants were purposively selected from among teachers who are currently teaching in inclusive classrooms in four primary schools in Riyadh (two boys schools and two girls schools), as schools in Saudi Arabia are segregated by gender. The data gathered in this study were then qualitatively analyzed to produce in-depth understanding of teachers responses.

This study utilizes thematic analysis, a method which is widely used in qualitative research. According to Braun & Clarke (2006), “thematic analysis should be seen as a foundational method for qualitative analysis”. Thematic analysis can be seen as a technique for identifying, assessing and reporting the themes which are present within data using an analytical framework approach [13]. The analytical framework method is based on inductive analysis, which identifies the patterns, themes, and categories which emerge out of the collected data.

The research question: What are the attitudes of Saudi Arabian primary school teachers regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms?

3 RESULTS
The current study investigates teachers’ understanding of inclusive education and how their views of students with disability affect their attitudes. Teachers’ attitudes are considered one of the essential keys that may affect their ways of teaching, as well as their expectations of, all students including those with disability. In this study, Twelve interviews with teachers (seven females and five males), were conducted to explore their attitudes towards including students with disabilities in regular classrooms. The data revealed that teachers differs in their attitudes based on different variables.

Avramidis & Norwich described those teacher related variables as including a range of factors such as age, gender, teaching experience, experience with children with special needs, and level of training[3].
The primary finding of this study is that teachers’ gender differences could play a major role in the inclusion of students with disabilities. More specifically, male teachers tend to be more open to accepting students with disabilities, whereas female teachers tend to not to be in favour of accepting students with disabilities, and to focus more on the perceived unacceptable behaviour that girls pupils show which they see as a barrier to including them. In contrast, male teachers mostly see it as acceptable for boys to act this way. Behaviour like this includes not following the teacher’s instructions, or leaving a classroom without permission. It should be stressed that the gender of teachers in this study appears to be one of the factors influencing their perceptions of students with disabilities, and therefore their approach to inclusion.

Furthermore, regarding education level and training, as might be expected, special education teachers generally have a better understanding of the situations faced by students with disabilities and the best ways to deal with these, as they have been specifically trained to work with disabled students. Special education teachers are positive about the inclusion of students with disabilities. Furthermore, special education teachers were more supportive of including students with disabilities and they did not mention students’ behaviour as a challenge. Instead they focused mostly on how they can improve the students’ learning and engagement in and out of class. Also, when they talked about students’ behaviour they described it as something needing a little bit of time to change.

In addition, in terms of teachers’ experience, teachers who have more experience with students with disabilities show a more positive attitude towards students with disabilities. On the other hand, special education teachers mostly focus on students’ academic learning and how they can improve it, and are more supportive of including students with disabilities. Moreover, they did not mention students’ behaviour as a challenge; instead, they focused mostly on how they could improve the students’ learning and engagement both in and out of class.

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study has aimed to explore teachers’ attitudes towards, and perspectives of, students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. The interviewed teachers showed different perspectives based on their gender, experience, training, and education. Male teachers were more willing to have students with disabilities in their classes, whereas female teachers were not in favour of that. However, Kraska and Boyle have suggested that there is no difference in attitude between gender, and that both male and female teachers have similar attitudes towards including students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms [8]. Also, teachers with a special education background and education show more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities and the process of including them in regular classrooms. However, Alquraini found that general education teachers have more positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with severe intellectual disabilities. Also, they reported that the training that teachers had received did not have a significant relationship with their perspective [6].

A variety of studies in the United States have suggested that teachers tend not to be willing to teach pupils with severe or behavioural disabilities [10]. Similar to Alquraini’s findings in his study on teachers’ attitudes towards students with severe intellectual disabilities, teachers in Saudi Arabia are generally not in favour of the inclusion of those students.

In light of the above, teachers need to be trained intensively to be able to implement an effective inclusive practice where all students have sense of belonging and to meet their different needs. Further research is needed to promote teachers positive attitude towards the inclusion of students with disabilities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher is funded by Princess Nourah University.

REFERENCES


