

# **International Studies Concerning Teachers' Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs: Review of Literature**

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## **Abstract**

Over the years, the issue of inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) in mainstream schools is controversial worldwide. Evidence from research argues that without a positive teachers' attitude towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, the successful implementation of inclusion is most likely doubtful. The aim of this paper is to understand teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools from different perspectives and from different contexts. The conclusion drawn in this review can be that teachers' attitude is the most important key towards the appropriate inclusion implementation in mainstream schools. The disparity of teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools revealed in this review has related to different factors affecting this discrepancy. This article recommends future research to investigate the role of such factors.

**Keywords: teachers' attitudes, inclusion of students with special educational needs, mainstream schools**

## الدراسات الدولية لانجاهات المعلمين تجاه دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة: مراجعة للدراسات السابقة د. ليلى العمري/ جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية المملكة العربية السعودية / الرياض

ملخص الورقة:

على مر السنين، تعدّ قضية دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدارس العادية محل اهتمام على المستوى العالمي. وهناك أدلة لدراسات سابقة تؤكد بأنه عندما تكون اتجاهات ومواقف المعلمين تجاه دمج

الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدارس العادية سلبية فإن ذلك بدوره يؤثر على نجاح تنفيذ الدمج.

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى استعراض الدراسات السابقة لفهم مواقف واتجاهات المعلمين تجاه دمج الطلاب ذوي

الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدارس العادية من وجهات نظر مختلفة ومن دول مختلفة.

ومن خلال الدراسات السابقة المطروحة في هذه الورقة، فقد تبين أن الاتجاهات الإيجابية للمعلمين تجاه

دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة تعدّ هي المفتاح الرئيس للتنفيذ المناسب والناجح للدمج. فضلاً عن

أن هذه الورقة وجدت بأن التباين في اتجاهات المعلمين تجاه دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة مرتبط

بعدة عوامل أدت إلى هذا التباين. ولذلك فإن الورقة توصي الدراسات القادمة ذات الصلة بدراسة مثل تلك

العوامل المؤثرة والتي تلعب دوراً مهماً في اتجاهات المعلمين تجاه دمج الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة

في المدارس العادية.

## Introduction

The review in this article was based on different socio-cultural contexts to understand teachers' attitude towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools from different background. Also, the research wanted to review relevant research from different timeline, from old to more recent studies, to find out how such attitudes differ through the years and if there is any similarities and differences. It is important to add that, the studies in this review had adopted different methodologies, however, most of them followed quantitative approaches, which should assist more understanding of the issue when the conclusion is drawn.

Teachers' expectations regarding the academic and social progress of students with SEN in mainstream schools are significantly influenced by their attitudes towards teaching such students (Deisinger, 2000; Odom, 2000). Furthermore, the extant literature suggests that, in order for inclusion to be successful, teachers must adopt and demonstrate positive approaches to students who require special teaching methods (Beattie, et al., 1997; Freagon & Kachur, 1994; Giangreco et al., 1996). It is important to note that teachers' attitudes towards teaching students with SEN directly affect the students' education, since these attitudes have a significant impact on the way in which teachers conduct the educational process, and manage their classrooms (Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Nader, 1984; Smith, 2000; Winter, 1995). Specifically, a teacher's personal view of a student with SEN, and of their learning capacity, is a crucial factor which determines the extent of the modifications that a teacher is willing to affect in their teaching process, method, or curriculum, demonstrating whether the teacher is aware of the student's presence, and the learning problems which that student experiences (Fields, 1995). A teacher's confidence in teaching students with SEN, together with their positive expectations of such students' learning capacities, are vital to the educational process, and to the successful inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classes (Forlin, 1998).

The aforementioned attitudes of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with SEN have been the subject of multiple studies worldwide (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996). The character of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion has been examined in various studies (Ellis et al., 2008; Olson, 2003; Sadler, 2005), the findings of which were surprisingly similar in their emphasis on the attitudes of teachers as the most important factor determining the success or failure of inclusion. In other words, if the attitude of the teacher is positive, the inclusion is more likely to be effective while, in the case of negative attitudes, any attempt at inclusion is likely to fail.

### **International Studies concerning teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN**

This section primarily focuses on the comparable studies conducted in international countries, with an emphasis on attitudes, the consequences discovered, the challenges faced, and the overall findings.

A study conducted in the United States (US) by Waldrop (1998) to identify the attitudes of a school's members, including the teachers, administrators and parents, towards the inclusion of students with SEN, and its effects. Of the three categories of respondent, the parents possessed the most positive attitudes towards inclusive practice, particularly those whose children received SEN services. This contrasted with the attitudes of the mainstream teachers. Surprisingly, many of the teachers and parents demonstrated an above-average knowledge of students with SEN, and inclusion. The question of why the teachers appeared to be less receptive to the inclusion of students with SEN than parents has been much debated, and one possible reason is that, although there are many benefits to this practice, the greater demands of inclusion legislation that prompts teachers to implement inclusion have made teachers react adversely as they are required to gain additional skills (Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). This was supported by Harrington and Quinn-Leering (1996), who found that the testimonies of the teachers in their study supported the theory that increased pressure on teachers was the primary reason for their opposition to inclusion.

Several similar studies have also tried to identify the reasons for the development of the difference in the attitudes of teachers in relation to SEN provision, and the students in receipt of such provision. The findings demonstrated that a significant correlation existed between the attitudes towards inclusion and gender, years of teaching experience, and the type of SEN (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007; Glaubman & Lifshitz, 2001). It is noteworthy that teachers' competencies, in terms of speciality, qualifications, and training, were demonstrated to be a key factor (Boyle et al., 2013). However, these are not the only factors that can affect teachers' attitudes, as other factors may relate to the type of needs of a child, and the availability of physical and human support (Salvia & Munson, 1986). A study conducted in Malaysia by Spedding (2005) investigated the attitudes of stakeholders, including school staff, parents, teachers and administrators, regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in various primary schools. The results indicated that the negative attitudes towards inclusion held by all of the participants, including the school principals and teachers, had a significant potential to undermine the development of an inclusive education process. Similarly, in a study conducted in England, Avramidis et al. (2000) proposed that the successful implementation of any inclusive policy is largely dependent on the positive attitude of school staff. Thus, if teachers and school principals are not ready to accept students with SEN in

mainstream schools and classrooms, it will be challenging for inclusion provision to succeed.

Yuen and Westwood (2001) conducted a survey in Hong Kong, based on a sample of 345 teachers, and concluded that the teachers possessed neither a positive nor a supportive attitude towards inclusion. Although the fundamental concept of inclusive education, which is to say that every child should have the right to study in a mainstream classroom, was supported by the majority of the teachers (79.3%), only 42.4% of the sample considered inclusion to be desirable. Moreover, only 37.9% believed that the concept of inclusion could be successful. These findings indicate that, although a widespread awareness and concern about inclusive education existed, the actual support or participation of the teachers in inclusive education was lacking. Teachers require experience and specialist knowledge if they are to successfully support students in challenging contexts (Al-Sartawi, 1995; Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Elhoweris and Alsheikh, 2006; Olson, 2003). The disparity between the findings suggests a lack of alignment between the attitudes towards students with SEN, and the attitudes towards implementing inclusion provisions. Even when inclusion, and the equality of education, are perceived to be positive, a hesitancy to implement changes exists, because of the potentially negative effects they may have on current educational practices.

A comparative study of attitudes towards inclusion was conducted by Leyser et al. (1994) on a sample of more than 3,500 teachers from mainstream elementary schools in six countries (the US, Germany, Israel, Ghana, Taiwan and the Philippines). The findings revealed that teachers in the US possessed the most positive attitudes towards inclusion, with teachers in Germany in second place while, in the other countries, the prevailing attitude of the teachers towards inclusion was less positive. The teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were demonstrably affected by the following variables: previous training in special education, grade level, the age of the teacher, and their experience with general and special education. It was therefore clear that training and experience are important predictors of the success of inclusive education. The above studies suggest that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion vary from one country to another, and even UNESCO's (2000) description of how inclusion can be implemented noted that research findings on the subject are contradictory. This is referred to as the 'voice of reality'. While the previous studies tended to focus on one or multiple aspects, and on one or several countries, since a significant degree of variation exists in the results for each country, the conclusions drawn from research conducted in one country cannot be generalised to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, in many cases, the differences between countries concerning attitudes towards inclusion are not simply caused by differences between the countries themselves. Rather, they may be related to other contextual factors within the education systems and schools, such as the awareness and understanding of the staff, the amount of special education training provided, the type of additional needs that the students possess, and the time at which the study took place

(Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). As reported in a US study (Boucier, 2003), another factor influencing mainstream teachers' attitudes to the inclusion of students with SEN is the length of their teaching experience with students with SEN. The study consisted of a questionnaire with two separate components that was sent to a sample of 19 general education teachers, in order to gauge their attitudes towards students with SEN. The first part of the questionnaire collected basic information, such as the age and gender of the recipient, together with the length of their teaching experience. The second part asked the participants to answer 28 questions regarding their attitude towards teaching students with SEN. The results, which were analysed using a 4-point Likert scale, revealed that the more experience with students with SEN a teacher possessed, the more open they were to favouring inclusion. Nevertheless, the general attitude of the teachers towards inclusion was found to be negative.

The extant literature reveals the importance of the attitudes of both general and special education teachers towards the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. In particular, a number of studies have demonstrated that teachers who are not specialists in special education tend to possess less favourable attitudes towards inclusion than specialist teachers (D'Alonzo, 1997; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Possessing sufficient knowledge, skills, and information regarding special education, and students with SEN, produces positive attitudes, as teachers are able to teach such students, and manage any issues related to them. This fact was supported by the findings of the study conducted by Martha et al. (1999). However, in a study conducted by Vaughn et al. (1996), employing focus group interviews to examine the attitudes towards inclusion among general and special education teachers, the majority of the teachers were not participating in any type of inclusive learning programme at the time of the research, and expressed negative attitudes towards inclusion. Moreover, these teachers named several factors directly affecting their attitudes to inclusion, such as classroom size, lack of resources, and lack of preparedness. Similarly, a study conducted by Hastings and Oakford (2003) considered the effect of the various type of students, in terms of those with emotional and behavioural difficulties versus severe disabilities, on the attitude towards inclusion among teachers. The total number of participants who completed the questionnaires was 93, and the researchers concluded that these teachers possessed a negative attitude towards inclusion, but with a specific focus on the type of student needs. A more recent study conducted by Mahony (2016) revealed similar findings, after surveying 67 primary school teachers in Dublin. In total, 58 of the participants taught in an inclusive classroom, while nine did not. The researcher employed survey questionnaires to assess the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of students with SEN, and concluded that some of the teachers possessed negative attitudes towards inclusion in mainstream education.

The teachers also identified various factors that might hinder the success of inclusion, such as class size, and inadequate skills to manage the multiple needs of students with SEN.

A study conducted by Ali et al. (2006) produced different findings from those discussed previously. Their research focused on the attitudes towards inclusion of both general and special education teachers from primary and secondary schools, and on their knowledge concerning the subject. The results indicated that the teachers possessed positive attitudes towards the concept, and agreed that this type of education improves the possibilities for social interaction for students with SEN, thus minimising the negative stereotypes surrounding the needs of such students. The researchers also emphasised the importance of collaboration between general and special education teachers, and requested comprehensive guidelines to assist in implementing inclusive education. These findings helped to identify the requirements that school administrators, teachers, and other responsible parties, should satisfy in order to successfully implement inclusive education. Interestingly, the study identified collaboration between general and special education teachers as a factor able to affect the inclusion of students with SEN; this gives us an indication of the importance of communication between teachers, and the support or insights they might provide to each other. Since such collaboration between teachers is crucial to the successful inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools, it is vital to discuss the relationship between general and special education teachers, and also to determine how this collaboration can be maximised. The necessity for special and general education teachers to collaborate from the beginning of the academic year, in order to plan and implement changes to lesson plans, to teach and work together and to exchange information and advice, was stressed by Sisalem (2006). The issue of low-quality communication between the two types of teachers has far-reaching consequences, particularly when considering the fact that communication is vital for effective collaboration. Collaboration between special and general education teachers is not always effective, as demonstrated by Cohn and Safran (1981 cited in McNamara, 1989), and McNamara (1989) thus suggested that special education teachers should have a strong partnership with general education teachers, if they wished their students to be provided with effective inclusion practices.

In mainstream schools, a factor affecting the collaboration between special and general education teachers is the lack of understanding on the part of general education teachers regarding the role of their special education counterparts. This was reported in the findings of Griffin et al. (2008) in their examination of the relationship between special education teachers and their counterparts in general education,

during their first year of service. They identified conflicting, fragmented and often unclear expectations regarding the responsibilities of special education teachers on the part of their general education colleagues. Griffin et al. (2008) suggested that the majority of these expectations resulted from an absence of sufficient information regarding their proficiency and role, together with their importance. The authors concluded that this highlighted the need for general education teachers to have access to information, advice, or first-hand experience of working with students with SEN, or special education teachers. An argument can be advanced that the vague expectations Griffin et al. (2008) highlighted are indicative of more complex matters, connected with the clear and coherent assignation of roles, duties, and responsibilities to the two groups of teachers, with regard to students with SEN. It is unclear whether the role that special education teachers play is simply to support general education teachers in the process of providing education to students with SEN, or to take responsibility for this procedure. A clear understanding and definition of roles and responsibilities is regarded as best practice in many lines of work, not only teaching, and this can be especially important when the structure of a team, such as an academic teaching team, is undergoing change. It is apparent that general education teachers favour a clear distinction between their roles and those of their special education counterparts, as evidenced by a study of 20 general education teachers with a wide range of specialisms conducted in Georgia, US (Mousel, 2004). The authors discovered that the general education teachers were willing to teach students with



SEN in their classes, although they required further training in order to manage the task. In addition, these teachers were found to be appreciative of, and to recognise any support provided by special education teachers. This presented a positive outlook for the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream educational classrooms. However, Kellher and Colleen-Dare (2007) reached a different conclusion, based on a study of 20 general education teachers, and 20 special education teachers, with specific attention ascribed to the perceptions of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. The two groups of teachers displayed positive approaches regarding inclusion, indicating the importance of collaboration among classmates for the students' skills development. However, the study indicated that the general education teachers who participated were more inclined to relinquish some of their responsibility of educating students with SEN to their special education counterparts.

According to Friend and Cook (2006), the theoretical rationale for collaboration between general and special education teachers stems from the notion that each group brings a different type of expertise and knowledge to the process of learning. Hence, it is assumed that the expertise and knowledge available will increase when both groups of teachers are involved in teaching. However, it should not be overlooked that such benefits only arise when the teachers receive appropriate training, and when they are sufficiently motivated, since these variables predict the degree to which the teachers will share resources effectively, make decisions collaboratively, and exercise

joint responsibility for learning outcomes (Carter et al., 2009). Considering this fact, it is possible to account for poor instances of collaboration between special and general education teachers when the following issues arise: firstly, ineffective training initiatives for teachers (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Laframboise et al., 2004); secondly, insufficient school support for collaboration, limited time for collaboration, and classroom tension arising from power disparities between teachers; and finally, ineffective allocation of responsibilities (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the review of previous research shows a clear disparity in the attitudes of teachers of both groups and their acceptance to inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the implementation of inclusion students with SEN in mainstream schools is still a challenge worldwide. However, the review revealed that there are a number of factors affecting this distinguish. It should be stressed here that those factors are beyond the scope of this review. However, investigating such factors is recommended for relevant future research.

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