# Barriers of the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Classes from Pre-service Teachers' Viewpoints

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# المجلة الدولية للأبحاث التربوية
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# العقبات التي تواجه دمج ذوي الإعاقة في المدارس من وجهة نظر طلاب كلية التربية الأساسية في الكويت

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate the barriers towards inclusion of children identified as having SEN in mainstream classes in Kuwait as seen by 452 pre-service teachers at the College of Basic Education. The researchers used a mixed-methods design that involved both an open-ended questionnaire and focus group. Each method investigated dimensions of the barriers towards inclusion in Kuwait as well as the SEN categories that participants believed would be most or least possible to include in mainstream classes. It was found that there are five different dimensions of possible barriers to inclusion: barriers from teachers, social barriers, academic barriers, physical barriers, and psychological barriers. It also found that the SEN categories seen as most possible to include were: moderate intellectual disability, specific learning disabilities, and giftedness, respectively. On the other hand, the SEN categories seen as least possible to include were: severe needs, severe intellectual disability, and autism. The study suggested that the government should institute new courses to prepare pre-service teachers for the challenges, revealed by this research, which prospective teachers expect to face when teaching in inclusive schools. This could help teachers build up more positive attitudes towards inclusion. Therefore, colleges of education should develop their academic courses so that they take into account the findings of this study and work accordingly

*Keywords:* Inclusion, students with SEN, barriers, Kuwait

# العقبات التي تواجه ذوي الإعاقة في المدارس من وجهة نظر طلاب كلية التربية الأساسية في الكويت

## مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى معرفة العقبات التي قد تواجه الطلبة من ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدارس العادية من وجهة نظر أربع مئة واثنان وخمسون طالب وطالبة في كلية التربية الأساسية في دولة الكويت. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة في منهجها على الطرق النوعية في البحث حي استخدم الباحثين طريقة الاستبيان الذي يحتوي على أسئلة مفتوحة وكذلك على طريقة المقابلات الجماعية وذلك لمعرفة أنواع العقبات التي قد تواجه الطلبة من ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة في المدارس العادية وكذلك لمعرفة أي من أنواع الصعوبات أو الإعاقات التي قد تواجه صعوبات بدرجة أقل وكذلك أي من هذه الصعوبات الإعاقات التي قد تواجه عقبات بدرجة أكبر من غيرها من وجهة نظر طلبة وطالبات كلية التربية الأساسية. كشفت النتائج أن هنالك خمسة أنواع من العقبات تتمثل في العقبات التي تواجه المعلمين والعقبات الاجتماعية والعقبات الأكاديمية والعقبات المادية وأخيراً العقبات النفسية. كذلك وجد أن الإعاقة العقلية البسيطة وصعوبات التعلم والمتفوقين عقليا هم الفئات المتوقع أن يتم دمجهم بشكل أسهل من غيرهم من الفئات، أما الفئات التي يعتقد بأنها الأصعب في الدمج كانت هي ممن لديهم احتياجات شديدة وكذلك الإعاقة العقلية الشديدة وأخيرا الأطفال من ذوي التوحد. اقترحت الدراس على أن يتم أخذ العقبات المطروحة بعين الاعتبار عند تصميم برنامج تربوي لطلبة كلية التربية حتى يتم تهيئتهم للعمل في المدارس.

*الكلمات المفتاحية:* الدمج، الطلاب ذوي الاحتياجات الخاصة، العقبات ، الكويت

# Introduction

Inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms remains a key challenge in education systems around the world. Inclusion has direct benefits for the students involved and it is also a human right. Therefore the segregation of students with disabilities from many school activities needs to be challenged (Mortier, 2020). Sharma et al. (2012b, p.12) claim that "*Under an inclusive philosophy, schools exist to meet the needs of all students; therefore, if a student is experiencing difficulties, the problem is with the* schooling *practices not with the student".*

Barriers to inclusive education have been discussed by many researchers in the field of disability and inclusion. Parey (2020), for example, examined the accommodation made for the inclusion of children with disabilities in regular schools in Trinidad. A multiphase mixed methods design consisting of three phases was used. The integrated findings indicate that the existing environmental accommodations, qualified human resources, educational materials, physical access, supportive learning systems, law and policy do not fully support the inclusion of children with disabilities in Trinidad. They further illustrate the need for national discourses to move beyond access to maximum participation, and for stronger legislation to ensure inclusion in schools.

Avramidis and Norwich (2002) have stated that there is a connection between teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and the existence of school factors. Similarly, in Middle East countries researchers (Alenezi, 2016, Gaad, 2004; Sakız & Woods, 2015) have investigated the situation of inclusive education and the challenges to achieving it in their own country's context. In Kuwait, for example, Alenezi (2016) has indicated that mainstream teachers have raised concerns about moving towards inclusion, such as the existence of organizational and structural barriers, a lack of resources, limited support from the Ministry of Education, bullying of these children, the limited abilities of "slow learners" and the marginalization of their rights in mainstream schools.

In Turkey, Sakız and Woods (2015) have investigated the legislative attempts to achieve inclusive education and the actual progress of inclusion. They indicate that, in Turkey, all aspects of the system (at school, society and policy level) are barriers to full inclusion of students with disabilities. They highlight some key issues, which are stifling inclusion, such as the lack of understanding of, and support for, inclusion of students with disabilities in Turkish society at large. They argue that inclusion is perceived as a type of integration of special education into mainstream schools by means of a separate form of provision. Further, the identification and placement of students with disabilities depends on medical and educational diagnoses and such a process reflects the medical model, which is in contrast with the principles of inclusion which are based on a social model of understanding disability. Accordingly, inclusion is not seen in its holistic concept, principles and philosophy; it is still perceived under the umbrella of special education in the Turkish context. Such a situation can lead to confusion in the process of implementing inclusive education.

There have also been several studies showing the importance of social barriers. Research has demonstrated that children with SEN (Special Educational Needs) have problems interacting with non-SEN children in mainstream schools and that they are more likely to face social problems compared to their typically developing peers within mainstream settings (e.g., Koster *et al.*, 2010). Further research, carried out by Pijl et al. (2008), found that 25% of children with SEN did not participate socially in inclusive classrooms, while only 8% of their non-SEN peers experienced social difficulties (Pijl et al., 2008). A longitudinal study by Kuhne and Wiener (2000) regarding the social position of children with learning difficulties found that 50% of rejected children by their peers had displayed aggressive behavior and 87.5% of rejected children had learning difficulties. Thus, the social barriers toward inclusion seem to be the main ones facing child with SEN in mainstream classes.

Prominent research on inclusion indicates that the physical obstacles are among the main barriers to implementing inclusion. According to Ahmad (2018), some children with disabilities have the stigma of not being able to access services as they experience problems accessing the building to receive their education (Ahmad, 2018). Other research has illustrated that ramps and toilets are the most significant physical barriers that prevent children with disabilities from participating in inclusive education, in addition to playgrounds not being adjusted to allow for inclusive play (Armitage & Woolley, 2006).

Additionally, research has identified numerous academic barriers to inclusive education. For example, research in the UK reported that accommodating the national curriculum, pedagogies, and assessment methods to support inclusive education is the main challenge (Lloyd, 2008). Some researchers have described the academic barriers as walls that stand between children and their education, with the national curriculum and exams being one of these walls (Jha, 2007). The literature has also pointed out the psychological effects on children with SEN prevent them from accessing inclusive education. Previous research conducted in Jordan has illustrated that children with SEN may develop psychological disorders as a result of being mistreated by their non-SEN peers, which then affect their self-confidence (Amr et al., 2016). The social comparison of children in the same settings also affects a child's self-concept (Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978). Therefore, feeling rejected by the significant people around us can lead to negative emotions and low social self-perception (Schmidt & Čagran, 2008). Mather and Ofiesh (2005) confirmed this when they stated that facing social difficulties in school leads to low self-perception of children with disabilities.

Teachers' insufficient experience in the field of disability and the lack of training for pre-service as well as in-service teachers affect teachers' confidence and Attitudes towards inclusion and are also among the most

important barriers to inclusion. Subban et al. (2018) have indicated that the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers often influence their attitudes, readiness, motivation and ability to adopt inclusive education practices in their classrooms. Findings from this study reflect on how self-efficacy beliefs are impacted by internal and external factors, validating the need for professional development for in-service teachers, and adding impetus to the call for university courses on the accommodation of students with additional learning needs. Teachers' lack of training and knowledge, as key barriers to inclusive education, have been widely reported in previous research, which has shown that lack of teacher training and professional development are crucial barriers to inclusive education (e.g., Alenezi, 2016; Florian, 2008; Lovet et al., 2015; Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2011; Santoli et al., 2008). These studies support the argument of Avramidis and Norwich (2002, p.139) that, "without a coherent plan for teacher training in the educational needs of children with SEN, attempts to include these children in the mainstream would be difficult".

**Research problem**

Kuwait is a signatory of the Salamanca Statement, and, in response to this, it has introduced the Regulation of law 4 of 1996 as the policy document outlining inclusive education in Kuwait. It includes ten articles providing general instructions to schools about the process of inclusion (Alenezi, 2016). Yet, the Kuwaiti educational system has not applied full inclusion in mainstream schools. This may hopefully change soon, as there are serious attempts by the government to implement inclusion. Accordingly, the education system in Kuwait could experience a major change; therefore, it would be helpful to address the possible barriers that children with SEN could face in mainstream schools. Furthermore, teachers play a central role in including students with disabilities, and as such, they must understand the importance of including these students and commit to this goal (Mortier, 2020). Hence, it is important to prepare the pre-service

teachers for inclusive education to help them design an academic curriculum that would consider the barriers and raise the awareness of the different possible ways of overcoming those barriers. Subsequently, this study aims to investigate the possible barriers towards including children with SEN in mainstream school by investigating the following research questions:

## Research Questions

1. What are the possible barriers towards including children with SEN in mainstream schools in Kuwait from the perspectives of pre-service teachers?
   a. What are the possible academic barriers to inclusion in Kuwait?
   b. What are the possible social barriers to inclusion in Kuwait?
   c. What are the possible psychological barriers to inclusion in Kuwait?
   d. What are the possible physical barriers to inclusion in Kuwait?
   e. What are the possible barriers to inclusion in relation to teachers?
2. What SEN categories would be the most feasible to include in a mainstream class, and why?
3. What SEN categories would be the least feasible to include in a mainstream class, and why?

## Method

It is important to clarify that this study will follow the interpretive paradigm to investigate in the above research questions. Pring (2000) indicated that the interpretive paradigm opposes the positivist realist ontology and the objective epistemology. As an alternative, the interpretive paradigm believes in social constructivist ontology and inter-subjectivist epistemology. To clarify further, those who adopt the interpretive paradigm believe that reality is constructed within people's minds and that there is no absolute truth "out there", as positivists claim, but instead there are multiple realties (Crotty, 1998). According to Avramidis and Smith (1999):

interpretive approaches based on qualitative data seem more appropriate for studying unique children with SEN. Thus the current study will based on the qualitative methodological to investigate the possible barriers toward inclusion in Kuwait.

**Participants**

The sample of this research consisted of 452 pre-service teachers at the College of Basic Education who were asked to answer four open-ended questions. Participants came from three specialisms: 163 specialized in teaching children with specific learning disabilities, 100 in general learning disabilities, and 189 in teaching non-SEN children. The sample consisted of 66 males and 386 females, and the age range was 18 to 50 years old, as some of the students had joined the college after years of working as employees. This may clarify why there are some students at the age of 50 in the college.

In addition, four pre-service teachers were chosen to participate in a group interview, drawn from four majors: teaching non-SEN children, teaching children with specific learning disabilities, teaching children with general learning disabilities, and teaching gifted children.

As the intent of a qualitative inquiry is to develop an in depth understanding of a central phenomenon rather than to generalize to a population. Thus, the participants in the focus group were selected and sited, which can help understand the central phenomenon, purposefully or intentionally with an aim to learn about people, events, or phenomena, in addition to an understanding that provides voice to individuals who may not be heard otherwise (Creswell, 2012).

**Sampling procedures**

The intent of a qualitative inquiry is to develop an in-depth understanding of a central phenomenon rather than to generalize to a population. Thus, the qualitative researcher intentionally selects individuals and sites which can help understand the central phenomenon, with an aim

to learn about people, events or phenomena, and to provide voice to individuals who may not otherwise be heard (Creswell, 2012). Considering these points, we adopted purposive sampling in the current study and therefore selected individuals with different perspectives on inclusive education. According to Wellington (2000, p.59), "purposive sampling, as its name implies, involves using or making a contact with a specific purpose in mind". Therefore, the participants (pre-service teachers) were selected purposively to gain rich data about including slow learners in mainstream schools in Kuwait.

Two main qualitative methods were adopted in this research to investigate the pre-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion as following:

***Open-ended questionnaires***. The open-ended questionnaires had three main questions regarding barriers to including children with SEN in mainstream classes, as follows:

1. Could you explain the possible barriers facing the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools in regards to teachers, the SEN student themselves, non-SEN students, and any other barriers?

2. Could you identify the categories of SEN that you think it would be most possible to include in mainstream school? and why?

3. Could you identify the categories of SEN that you think it would be least possible to include in mainstream school? and why?

The aim of these questions was not to investigate whether participants preferred the inclusion children with SEN in mainstream classes, as was done by (the name of the original authors). Rather, the main aims were, firstly, to investigate the possible barriers facing implementation of inclusion in Kuwait and, secondly, to assess the perceptions of the participants who were specializing in SEN.

### Focus group

The focus group is often used as a qualitative method to reach in-depth understanding of social issues (Ochieng, Wilson, Derrick, & Mukherjee,

2018). This method is based on purposely selecting participants rather than using a representative sample of a certain population (Ochieng, et al., 2018). The focus group is similar to the one-to-one semi-structured interview in its aim of uncovering participants' perceptions and thoughts (Parker & Tritter, 2006); however, the difference lies in the nature or the relationship between researchers and the participants (Smithson, 2000). In the semi-structured interview, the researcher tries to carry out an in-depth conversation with an individual where the researcher adopts the role of investigator and tries to control the dynamic of the discussion. In contrast, in the focus group the researcher plays the role of moderator between the participants and does not try to control the discussion or engage in depth with certain participants, rather taking the role of facilitator for the discussion between participants (Ochieng, et al., 2018). This approach was followed in the present research where the researcher played the role of moderator between participants around three main areas of discussion. First the researcher asked the group about possible barriers that could face including children with SEN in mainstream schools in Kuwait, then gradually the researcher tried to encourage the discussion among participants through asking them to illustrate their answers with examples and to share their personal experience within the discussion to cover all the aspects of the interview.

**Data analysis**

This qualitative investigation offered detailed and rich information on pre-service teachers' perspectives towards including "slow learners" in mainstream schools in Kuwait. All the interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic, then codes were used to identify the participants' points of view and these codes were translated into English, following Creswell (2012, p.239).

Before starting the transcription process, key points were written down as notes to highlight principle issues to consider during the transcription process, such as barriers to inclusion and other main aspects of the research questions. However, other important issues that emerged were also transcribed. Thus all the participants' views and perspectives

about the studied phenomena were transcribed and this revealed surprising and unexpected issues. The main aim was to highlight the voices of pre-service teachers as clearly as possible. First, the researchers read all the participants' answers (i.e., from the open-ended questionnaires and the transcribed group interview) to become immersed in the data and get a broad sense of the nature of the responses. Then, paper and pencil were used to tag hard copies of the interviews for aspects that appeared at this stage to be relevant and interesting, to identify key points and to ensure that they were identified across all transcripts. As recommended by Kvale (2007, p.8), "reading the transcribed interviews may inspire the researcher to new interpretations of well-known phenomena". Thus, the data were continuously re-examined in an effort to obtain a deep understanding and interpretation of it.

After the completion of the management and organization of the qualitative data, the next step was the coding process. In the current study we followed a visual model of the coding process in qualitative research, as proposed by Creswell (2012). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*A Visual Model of The Coding Process in Qualitative Research (Creswell, 2012, p. 244)*
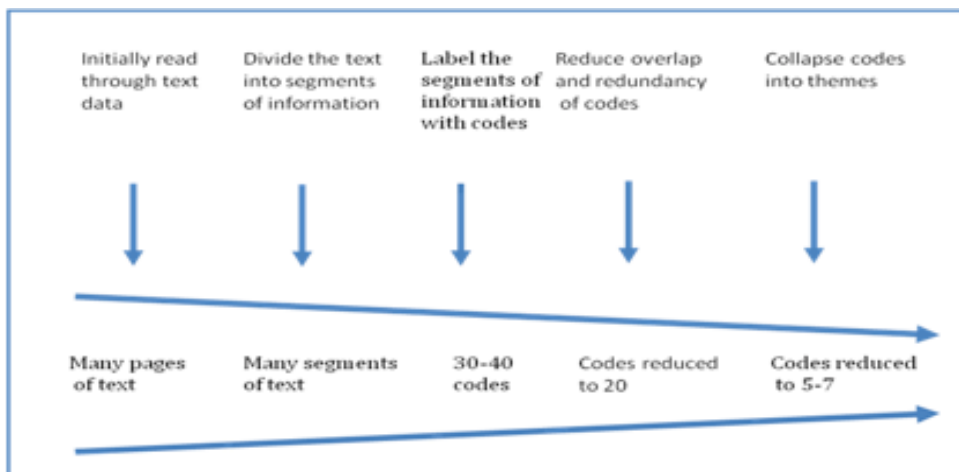
Coding is an analytical process that requires the researcher to review, select, interpret and summaries information (Walliman, 2011). Creswell (2012) describes this process as identifying text segments, bracketing them and assigning codes or phrases that accurately describe their meaning. After reading all the questionnaires' answerers and transcriptions carefully and jotting down some ideas as they came to mind, the coding of each answer was commenced. The coding process was undertaken on the Arabic language. Then we translated the codes, and the quotations related to each code, into English. The translation was checked and verified by a professor of English at the University of Kuwait.

We designed a color and shape guide for the process of reducing the codes and categorizing them under broad themes. It was essential to read the transcribed data more than once to generate the initial categories of themes and sub-themes. Grouping and categorizing the codes needed a continuous process of modification, including adding emerging themes, relevant categories, and deleting non-related ones and combining others. It was challenging to combine all these data under specific themes and categories. We started reading the lists of codes and writing down each idea we came across. Different colors and shapes, available in Microsoft Word, were used to distinguish the variety of themes generated. Then we attached text segments that related to each cooler code in order to easily identify the themes that each code related to. In this way, we reduced a number of codes to broad themes rather than working with an unwieldy set of codes. Microsoft Word was used to cut and paste the codes from the lists of codes and categories under specific themes. It is also worth saying that the analyses of this study did not include variables such as age, years of students' experiences, and gender, because those variables have been covered quantitatively in different research by the same authors using the exact sample of this research (see Alenezi et al., 2020). Therefore, this research attempts to investigate different aspects of the varying dimensions of the barriers to including children with SEN in mainstream schools in Kuwait using a qualitative analysis.

**Pilot study**

A pilot study with pre-service teachers was conducted to evaluate the open-ended questions before conducting the main study. These participants were not included in the main study. A pilot study allows the researcher to identify potential problems that might occur during the survey. Furthermore, it allows clarification of ambiguous questions, re-adjusting the focus if necessary, changing question order, and removing any redundancies. All this helps the researcher to ensure that the main study will proceed as planned (Gillham, 2005).

## Results

In this section the findings of this study will be presented. First, the findings concerning the barriers towards inclusion of children with SEN will be presented, followed by the data drawn from the question of which SEN categories could most easily be included in mainstream classes and, finally, the findings concerning which SEN categories would be most difficult to include in mainstream classes.

**What are the possible barriers that could face inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools in regards to teachers, the SEN students themselves, non-SEN students, and any other barriers?**

The analysis of the open-ended questionnaire revealed five families of themes as the barriers were divided into five different kinds, as follows:

1. Barriers facing teachers towards inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream school (11 sub-codes come under this family theme).
2. Barriers related to the social relationships between SEN children and others (9 sub-codes).
3. Barriers related to the emotional or psychological impacts on children in inclusive schools (9 sub-codes).
4. Barriers related to the physical environment that could be a challenge to the implementation of inclusion (7 sub-codes).
5. Barriers related to the academic performance of children at school (6 sub-codes).

In order to reach a better understanding, the next section gives some explanatory quotes drawn from the original answers of the participants from the open-ended questionnaire as well as the focus group interview for each family theme individually.

**Barriers facing teachers towards inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream school**

According to Table 1, there are 11 kinds of possible barriers might face teachers when including children with SEN in mainstream class; the most frequent codes were: Lack of Services, Lack of Knowledge, Pedagogies and Extra time (see Table 1 for definition of the codes). To clarify, the participants believed that teachers need to have sufficient resources and services provided in mainstream schools for inclusion to work successfully. The mainstream schools were not yet ready for inclusion, as the current services provided by the schools are modest and do not help teachers to meet the basic needs of those with SEN, as the participants in the focus group clarified:

Participant 1: *It is too hard for teachers to teach children with SEN while there are not any additional services to help teachers.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean by additional services? What kind of services do you mean?*

Participants: *There is no teacher assistance (TA) … inclusion needs many things, among those things I think we all agree about is the resources rooms, which are yet not in any of the mainstream schools in Kuwait, correct me if I am wrong.*

Participant 2: *That is right!*

Other participants: *[nodding as body language that indicates their acceptance of what they hear].*

Some other participants in the open-ended questions mentioned that the mainstream schools in Kuwait had no behavioral centers or any special educational programmed for those with special needs. The second

barrier that could face teachers is their lack of knowledge regarding dealing with SEN children, as one of the participants' answers revealed:

*Few teachers are specialized in teaching those with disabilities. Whereas the majority of teachers in mainstream schools have no knowledge to teach in mixed ability class, they don't know the characteristics of each kind of disability as we do. They don't know the special pedagogies for children with SEN … I don't think they know the principle of differentiated learning.*

Some other barriers emerged from participants' answers in relation to teachers, such as that teachers need extra time and effort to teach those with special needs and that this could affect the non-SEN students as the teacher may give more time for children with SEN. At the same time, some interesting points emerged from the focus group meeting where some participants had concerns in regards to the ability of teachers to discipline the class of the absence of teacher assistants (TA):

*I really cannot imagine how teachers could deal with students' behavior in an inclusive class. I am just imagining if a teacher has three students with intellectual disability who may stand in the middle of the lesson and walk around the class, the teacher will not be able to enforce discipline in the class without the support of the Tas who do not even exist in the education system in Kuwait.*

- Barriers related to the social participation between SEN and others

The social participation barriers showed the highest number of codes compared with other kinds of barriers with 263 codes all focused on different kinds of social relationship difficulties that could result from including children with SEN in mainstream school. The first and main social barrier was bullying. The participants believed that children with SEN could be exposed to a bullying behavior from non-SEN students. As one of the participants from the focus group clarified: "*I have no doubt that normal children will keep teasing and mocking the disabled children, especially those*

*who have apparent disability such as children with down syndrome. They will definitely hear something annoying from other students"*. Another interesting answer indicated that:

> *The idea of diagnosing a child as having a kind of disability will it-self lead to a stigma which can be used by other children against the disabled child in many ways. When the ministry of education agree to give such a negative labels like slow learners or mentally disabled, then we should not blame other children when they called them crazy! We need to blame the ministry of education for using those negative terms.*

Some participants believed that the bullying behavior is not only from non-SEN children to their peers with SEN, but it could also be vice versa as some children with SEN have difficulties with adaptive behavior which could have negative impacts on their non-SEN peers:

> *As we know that some of disabilities are associated with severe behavioral problems, so they may tease other children, annoying them, treating them badly, playing with them roughly or they may mock others and in return other children will not be able to remonstrate on the behavior of the disabled child.*

Bullying is not the only barrier emerging from the data but friendship and peer acceptance are key codes that participants believed to be some of the social participation barriers toward inclusion. A total of 81 codes were about peer acceptance and friendship (see Table 1 for Code clarifications). Some of the participants assumed that children with SEN would have few friends and would face serious issues with the unwillingness of peers to play or work with them. One of the participants clarified that:

> *Not all SEN children are the same; some of them are really hard to communicate with. For example, you need to know sign language to communicate with those children with hearing disability but only a few people know that language. So if there is no communication there will not be any social relationship.*

Another interesting point designated to the peer acceptance code is the following:

*Let us be honest, people in general may judge you according to many things including your choice of your friends: children may not accept to play with special needs children as this may be seen as an inferiority in the eyes of others.*

Other participants believed that friendship between non-SEN and those with SEN may be associated with heavy responsibilities:

*In my point of view, to have a friend with disability is not easy and I don't think it will be the first choice for normal children. As it needs for them to take care of the disabled child during school time: that means to play with him, study with him, defend him against bullies and that is a heavy responsibility I don't think it is easy for any child to take.*

This social ignorance from non-SEN children toward their peers with SEN may lead in the end to social isolation as many of the participants indicated that children with SEN would be neglected and isolated in mainstream school:

*Participant: Inclusion is a big mistake; they [children with SEN] will end up isolated. This is a normal result: if you do not have any friends and people around you do not accept you socially and you are neglected wherever you go, then you will feel that you do not belong to that place and you will end up isolated. Is this what we want for children with SEN?*

*Interviewer: Do you think this will happen to children with SEN if we include them in mainstream school?*

*Participant: Definitely yes.*

Some other answers also emerged in relation to the social barriers as some participants believed that children with SEN have no awareness of how to socially engage with non-SEN students. Although this point was not mentioned frequently, it carries a significant meaning, as some participants elucidated that:

*Social interaction needs some skills, especially we as a Kuwaiti or as Arab we give a lot of attention to social skills. Those who are*

*not aware of social skills will face serious problems in our community and I think children with Autism and mental retardation or those who have cognitive issues, I think they are not aware socially.*

**Table 1**

*Clarification of the Used Codes Regarding Barriers toward Inclusion*

| Themes and Codes | Definition | Frequency of Codes |
|---|---|---|
| Teachers (theme) | Barriers that could face teachers when applying inclusion in mainstream classes | |
| Lack of services (code) | There are no support services or supplementary aids in mainstream schools like resource rooms, special teaching programmed or behavioral centers. | 43 |
| Lack of knowledge (code) | Teachers do not have enough knowledge to teach children with SEN. | 38 |
| Pedagogies (code) | Teachers are not aware of the pedagogies used to teach children with SEN. | 31 |
| Extra time (code) | Teachers need extra time to teach children with SEN. | 27 |
| No teacher assistance (code) | There are no TAs working in mainstream schools to help general teachers. | 16 |
| Lack of training (code) | Teachers are not trained enough to deal with children with SEN. | 14 |
| Class discipline (code) | Teachers will have difficulties controlling the class. | 9 |
| Extra work (code) | Teachers will spend extra effort when teaching children with SEN. | 5 |
| Less attention to non-SEN (code) | Teachers will give less attention to non-SEN students. | 5 |
| More attention to SEN (code) | Teachers will give more attention to children with SEN. | 5 |
| No differentiation (code) | Teachers are not aware of the idea of differentiation and individualized learning. | 2 |
| Total number of codes in the Teachers' theme | | 195 |
| Social participation (theme) | Barriers related to the social relationships between SEN students and others | |
| Bullying toward SEN (code) | Any negative verbal or physical behavior that could hurt a child with SEN which could be caused by others | 57 |
| No Peer acceptance (code) | Children without SEN will not accept children with SEN. | 42 |

| Themes and Codes | Definition | Frequency of Codes |
|---|---|---|
| No Friendship (code) | Children without SEN will not be friends with SEN children. | 39 |
| Social ignorance (code) | Children without SEN will socially ignore and neglect children with SEN. | 34 |
| Isolation (code) | Children with SEN will be isolated with not enough communication with their non-SEN peers. | 29 |
| Bullying from SEN (code) | Any negative oral or physical behavior that could hurt non-SEN caused by SEN students | 22 |
| No social awareness – non-SEN (code) | Children without SEN have no awareness of how to socially engage with SEN students. | 22 |
| No social awareness – SEN (code) | Children with SEN have no awareness of how to socially engage with non-SEN students. | 17 |
| Non-SEN teachers' acceptance of SEN (code) | Teachers who are not specialized to teach children with SEN will not be able to accept children with SEN socially. | 1 |
| Total number of Codes in the Social Interaction theme | | 263 |
| Psychological effects (theme) | Barriers related to the emotional or psychological impacts of children in inclusive schools | |
| Feeling difference -SEN | Children with SEN will feel that they are different from their non-SEN peers. | 18 |
| Anxiety - SEN | Children with SEN will feel anxious in inclusive class. | 16 |
| Feeling lonely - SEN | Children with SEN will feel lonely. | 12 |
| Look of pity  non-SEN | Children without SEN will see their SEN peers with a look of pity. | 9 |
| Low self-concept – SEN (code) | Children with SEN will have low self-concept. | 8 |
| Feeling hopeless – SEN (code) | Children with SEN will feel hopeless in inclusive class. | 2 |
| Feeling shy - SEN | Children with SEN will feel shy. | 2 |
| Jealousy non-SEN | Children without SEN will feel jealous of their SEN peers. | 1 |
| Feeling bored non-SEN | Children without SEN will feel bored | 1 |
| Total number of codes in the Psychological Effects Theme | | 69 |
| Physical barriers (theme) | Barriers related to the physical environment that could be a challenge to implementing inclusion | |
| School stairs (code) | Stairs in schools are not suitable for children with SEN. | 33 |

| Themes and Codes | Definition | Frequency of Codes |
|---|---|---|
| School classes (code) | School classes are not suitable for children with SEN. | 23 |
| School toilets (code) | School toilets are not suitable for children with SEN. | 5 |
| No ramps (code) | No enough ramps at schools | 5 |
| School corridors (code) | School corridors are not suitable for children with SEN. | 2 |
| Schools buses (code) | School buses are not suitable for children with SEN. | 1 |
| School labs (code) | School labs are not suitable for children with SEN. | 1 |
| Total number of codes in the Physical Barriers theme | | 70 |
| Academic barriers (theme) | Barriers related to the academic performance of children at school | |
| Academic performance – SEN (code) | Children with SEN will not benefit academically. | 37 |
| National curriculum -SEN (code) | Children with SEN will face difficulties with the national curriculum. | 24 |
| Special academic programs -SEN (code) | No special academic programs at schools for children with SEN | 8 |
| Academic performance non-SEN (code) | Children without SEN will have low academic performance. | 6 |
| Academic skills – SEN (code) | Some children with SEN have no academic skills. | 3 |
| Class rhythm - SEN (code) | Children with SEN will not be able to follow the inclusive class activities and rhythm. | 1 |
| Total number of codes in the Academic Barriers theme | | 79 |

**Barriers related to the emotional or psychological impacts on children in inclusive schools**

The psychological impacts of inclusion is one of the main themes found in this research. Some of the participants believed that children with SEN will feel different from their non-SEN peers:

Participant: *Although children with SEN will be surrounded by their teachers and their peers, they will feel that they are different.*

Interviewer: *How different?*

Participant: *Deep inside they will feel afraid and lonely. They know that they are not like others and the fact that they are a minority at mainstream school they will feel they are different from their peers, and this will affect their psychological status through time.*

One main point concerning the psychological barriers was that children with SEN would feel anxious.

As one of the participants demonstrated: "*I have* concerns *about children with moderate cognitive disability; they will have to interact with an environment they do not understand: when you live in an environment you do not understand you will feel terrified and so anxious*".

Not only that, but some also worried that the self-concept of children with SEN was in danger in mainstream school, so some participants supported the idea of segregation over inclusion because of this:

*Special schools are much better for disabled children than inclusive schools: special schools will give them the feeling of comfort away from a competitive environment such as it is in mainstream school. Special schools will make children feel good about themselves; they will feel that they are normal; they are smart - no one is better than anyone is - while in mainstream school they will feel that they are stupid, lonely, and unsocial; they will feel bad toward themselves.*

Two further interesting points were raised, once each. The first point was that children without SEN might be jealous of their SEN peers: "*I think that the normal students will feel jealous of the disabled children: They will see how lucky they are as their syllabus is simpler and less complicated and they will treated better by their teachers*". Jealousy is not the only feeling

that children without SEN may have but, according to one of the participants, they may also feel bored

Due to receiving less attention from their teachers, as teachers may give all their care and attention to those with special needs.

**Barriers related to the physical environment that could be a challenge to implementing inclusion**

The challenge most commonly cited by participants as a physical barrier toward inclusion was the school staircase, followed by the design of the classrooms, toilets, the absence of ramps, the design of corridors, school buses and labs successively. The following are some quotes exemplifying each code emerging from participants concerning physical barriers:

Stairs: *"All the schools in Kuwait are two floors minimum and are full of stairs. If we are going to include children who have disabilities we need to solve the problem of the stairs, especially for those who have a motor disability."*

Classrooms: *"The Ministry needs to restructure the classroom in schools as they are now just enough for 25 to 30 children. We need bigger classes to accommodate SEN children."*

Toilets: *"I do not want to generalize but all the schools I studied in from primary school to the end of high school: all have small toilets not suitable for wheelchair users. How are we going to include them in mainstream school?"*

Ramps: *"I think we need ramps in each entrance all over in the school. This means we need a major adjustment."*

-      Corridors: *"Blind people need a wall rail in all the school corridors so that they can know their way into their school."*

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Buses: *"I don't know if there are special buses designed especially for children with disabilities, but I know that the current buses are not suitable."*

Labs: *"As a science teacher - hopefully I will be in the near future - I don't think that the science labs could accommodate children with SEN. All the chairs and tables are high and some of the lab materials are dangerous if you do not know how to use them."*

- Barriers related to the academic performance of children at school

The majority of the participants agreed that children with SEN may not benefit academically especially when they receive their learning through the national curriculum, as some of the participants stated that the national curriculum "*will be above the academic level of those children with SEN*" and "*it would not match their limited skills*". This was clear from some participants' answers when one of them indicated that:

*It depends on the type of SEN. For example, those who have intellectual disability will not receive the same academic syllabus as those who do not have intellectual disability. So it would not be suitable to teach those with cognitive disability through the same national curriculum as others.*

Another point in relation to the principle of diversity and mixed ability classes is that it would be difficult for teachers to consider individual characteristics in teaching; the academic outcomes would not be good, according to some of the participants:

*I do not understand how we can include disabled children in a normal class as they have different levels and abilities compared with normal children who share the same cognitive level. Teachers will not be able to deal with such*

*heterogeneous groups; the academic outcome would not be good.*

Not only that, but some participants indicated that the mainstream schools had no special academic programs; this would not improve the academic outcome of children with SEN.

*As far as I know that there are no resource rooms. There are no any special academic programs for children with SEN in mainstream classes. How we can expect any positive academic outcomes while mainstream schools have no special resources for those with SEN?*

A significant point was mentioned in relation to the academic outcomes for non-SEN children, as some of the participants believed that inclusion would not only affect the academic outcomes for those with SEN, but also for children without SEN:

*Inclusion will lead to disaster; inclusion will bring no good either for children with SEN or for normal children … I am sorry if I am very honest, but the teachers will be between two fires; if they work hard with SEN children, they will give less attention to non-SEN, consequently low academic performance for non-SEN and vice versa.*

- Could you identify the categories of SEN that you think it would be most possible to include in mainstream school? and why?

The above question was asked of all participants through the open-ended questionnaire as well as those who participated in the focus group. Table 2 is a summary of all the frequencies of the participants' answers in relation to each SEN category. Several reasons were given by participants to clarify their answers, as this was asked of them, however only the most frequent reasons are shown here. According to Table 2, the SEN category it

would be most possible to include in mainstream schools, according to participants, is that of Moderate Cognitive Disability with 68 confirmatory answers (see Figure 1). Most of the reasons focused on the idea that children with Moderate Cognitive Disability do not need any physical changes in the environment to be included:

> *I think it will be easier if we start by including children with Moderate Cognitive Disability as their disability does not require the government to reestablish the current schools through changing the design of the physical environment of all the schools as is the case for those with physical disability.*

Specific Learning Disabilities took second place as Table 2 illustrates, with 56 participants believing this to be the SEN category most possible to include in mainstream classes (see Table 2). The main reason given was that this category was not much different from children without SEN:

> *Of course, I will chose Specific Learning Disabilities. They have some difficulties in reading or writing or calculating. I mean, who of us does not have this kind of difficulty? It is normal, they only need extra help with certain skills, we could easily include them in mainstream school, they will not cost the government anything.*

**Figure 2**
*Distribution of Participants' Answers in Relation to The SEN Categories Which* it Would be Most Possible to Include in Mainstream Classes
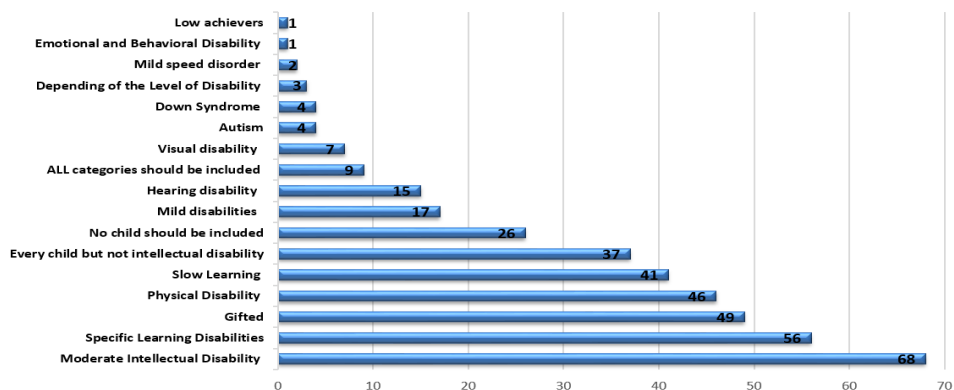
The third most commonly chosen category was that of Gifted children, with 49 choices. Several reasons were mentioned in regards to this category; some argued that gifted children are already in mainstream schools as we only have one special school for gifted children and it does not even accept all gifted children, the rest being placed in mainstream schools. Another reason was that *"Gifted children are smart, and they can adapt well with others; they only need special academic programs and activities to enhance their learning; this would be affordable".* An additional reason was that: *"including a Gifted child in mainstream class may help low achievers to enhance their academic outcome"*.

Physical disability came close to Giftedness, with 46 participants believing it to be the easiest category to include in mainstream class. The reason given was: *"because they do not have any cognitive issues, their IQ score is normal, so the national curriculum will go fine with them as any normal child".*

41 other participants believed that Slow learning was the category which would be the most suitable for inclusion as one of the participants illustrated that, in Kuwait, we already have a program to include children with Slow learning:

> *I have a brother who studies in a special class for children with slow learning in mainstream class. The government started this program since long time and my brother is quite happy in his school, so I think it is the time to include Slow learners in mainstream class*.

**Table 2**
*The Identification of The Codes Used in Data Analysis*

| SEN categories which would be most possible to include in mainstream class | | |
|---|---|---|
| No. | SEN Category Code | Frequencies |
| 1 | Moderate Intellectual Disability | 68 |
| 2 | Specific Learning Disabilities | 56 |
| 3 | Gifted | 49 |
| 4 | Physical Disability | 46 |
| 5 | Slow Learning | 41 |

| | SEN categories which would be most possible to include in mainstream class | |
|---|---|---|
| 6 | Every child could be included but not those with intellectual disability | 37 |
| 7 | No children should be included | 26 |
| 8 | Mild disabilities | 17 |
| 9 | Hearing disability | 15 |
| 10 | ALL categories should be included | 9 |
| 11 | Visual disability | 7 |
| 12 | Autism | 4 |
| 13 | Down Syndrome | 4 |
| 14 | Depending of the Level of Disability | 3 |
| 15 | Mild speed disorder | 2 |
| 16 | Emotional and Behavioral Disability | 1 |
| 17 | Low achievers | 1 |

A good number of participants also indicated that intellectual ability is the criterion which we should use to include children in mainstream class, as one of them clarified that:

*Inclusion means placement in mainstream class: mainstream class means studying through the national curriculum; the national curriculum needs normal intellectual abilities. Therefore only those who do not have intellectual disability could be included in mainstream class.*

Another way of looking at the category which it would be most possible to include, in the eyes of participants, was that it should be the severity of the disability which should count. Yet other participants believed that it would be wrong to identify any category to be the most possible to include, as all categories should be included: "*Inclusion is a right. I really cannot say which category should be included more than other categories; all categories should be included*". A few answers indicated different kinds of SEN, such as Hearing disability, Visual disability, Down syndrome, Autism and Speech disorder, for different kinds of reasons. Some were personal reasons like: *"I know a person with this kind of disability and he/she is lovely and could be included in mainstream schools"* or that *"I've read about this*

*kind of disability"* or *"I've studied the characteristics of this kind of disability and they could be included in mainstream classes"* and some other different reasons.

Could you identify the categories of SEN that you think it would be least possible to include in mainstream school? and why?

The above question was asked of all participants through the open-ended questionnaire as well as through focus group interview. According to Table 3, there were 14 different answers with several reasons given to clarify the reasons behind their choices, though only the most frequent reasons will be presented here. The interesting point in Table 3 is that the most commonly given answer, with 19% of the codes (see Figure 2) was about the severity of SEN. 78 answers indicated that children with severe needs would be the most difficult to include, for several reasons:

> *"It would be difficult for teachers to deal with the behavior of children with severe needs in the class as their behavior might be hard to control".*

> *"They* [children with severe needs] *will not be able to learn from national curriculum".*

> *"They* [children with severe needs] *will not socialize positively with other children".*

> *"This category* [children with severe needs] *will need medical staff in each school as many of them have severe health difficulties so they may need specialized medical interference and that will be very expensive to afford".*

Many participants (i.e. 13% of the answers) also indicated that children with severe intellectual disability could be the most difficult to include in mainstream class; most gave the following reason:

> [Children with severe intellectual disability] *are hard to include, they need significant change in mainstream schools,*

*not only in schools' structure but also they need change in the curriculum, schools' policy, schools' staff, they need supportive services … actually they need to change the mainstream schools from A to Z; therefore it is better to be placed in special schools.*

**Table 3**

*The Identification of The Codes Used in Data Analyses*

| No. | SEN Category Code | Frequencies |
|---|---|---|
| | SEN categories which would be least possible to include in mainstream class | |
| 1 | Those children with Severe needs | 78 |
| 2 | Those children with severe Intellectual disability | 56 |
| 3 | Autism | 52 |
| 4 | Down Syndrome | 46 |
| 5 | Physical Disability | 43 |
| 6 | Hearing disability | 35 |
| 7 | No children should be included | 27 |
| 8 | Visual disability | 24 |
| 9 | Speed and language disorder | 18 |
| 10 | Slow learning | 11 |
| 11 | Moderate Cognitive disability | 9 |
| 12 | ALL categories should be included | 9 |
| 13 | Specific Learning Disabilities | 8 |
| 14 | Gifted | 6 |

The third most commonly chosen category was Autism with 52 choices (i.e. 12% in Figure 2). They believed that Autism would be the most difficult category to include, for social reasons:

*As far as I know, children with Autism have difficulties to socialize with others and interact with the environment around them. I think in mainstream school, interaction skills are very important and those children who do not engage with the social life of school will end up being isolated. I don't think the Ministry of Education wants children with Autism to be socially isolated in mainstream schools.*

Bullying behavior was one of the main concerns that participants believed could be a challenge to children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools. 11% of the answers believed that non-SEN peers might show negative behavior toward their peers with Down syndrome:

> *I feel that Down syndrome children are different than any other kind of SEN categories. Their disability is clear on them; I mean they have specific facial features that could be used against them by their normal classmates. In contrast to other categories of SEN who just look normal from outside.*

**Figure 3**
*Distribution of participants' answers in relation to the SEN categories which would be least possible to include in mainstream class*
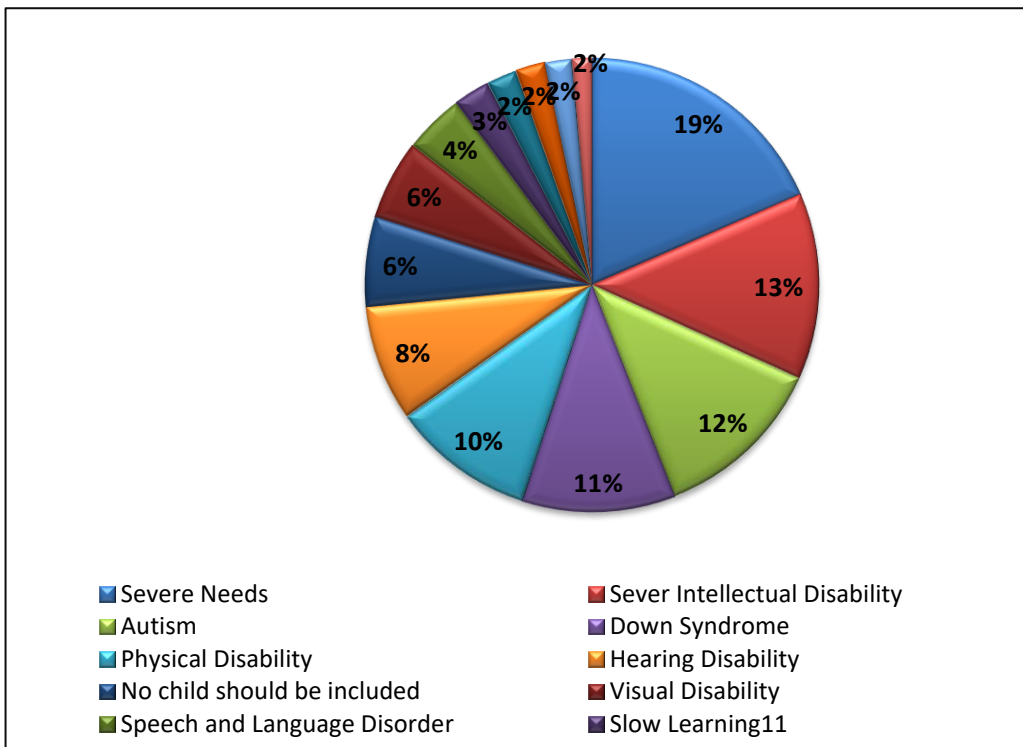


Concern about the high cost of inclusion was the main reason behind choosing physical disability as the most difficult to include in mainstream

class, with 10% of the total answers. As one of the participants in the interview indicated:

*The worst category for inclusion is physical disability … All schools at Kuwait would have to be rebuilt to change everything … Kuwaiti schools are not designed to accept a child with physical disability, the government would need to change everything … The government just now they announced that they have a fiscal deficit of 7 billion dinar for this year, so how they are going to pay for all schools' adjustments! It is impossible.*

Communication, once again, was the main reason behind some of the participants choosing hearing disability to be the most difficult

category to include, with 8% of the total participants' answers. One of the participant illustrated that:

*Not all children in mainstream class are aware of sign language: if they do not know sign language then how is it possible that they communicate with children who have hearing disability? … There was one of the students in our college who had hearing disability, once he came to me and he tried to tell me something but I really could not understand what he wanted. He seemed that he needed help, but I really couldn't understand him; he studied with us the whole semester but I never saw him communicating with any one of us. He was lost among us*.

Some of the participants believed that no child should be included while others believed that all children should be included, for a reason clarified above. A few participants believed that visual disability would be the most difficult category to include because of the current physical design of mainstream schools and the significant changes required to include them, while other participants chose speech and language difficulties because of concerns about bullying. There were also 11 answers indicating slow

learning due to the reason that those children would not cope with the national curriculum. Similar reasons were given for children with moderate cognitive disability. Only 2% of the participants believed that specific learning difficulties would be hard to include due to the lack of special academic programs at mainstream schools and, finally, only 2% of the participants designated gifted children as being the most difficult to include because of the complexity of their thinking and that was hard for teachers to understand their needs.

### Discussion

This study investigates the possible barriers that could face the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools. The study also investigates the SEN categories which participants felt would be the most possible or the least possible to include in mainstream class. The findings show that there are five dimensions of the possible barriers toward inclusion (i.e., barriers from teachers, social outcomes, academic barriers, physical barriers and psychological barriers). Some of these barriers had been reported elsewhere, according to the academic literature. For instance, a significant amount of research has investigated the social participation of children identified as having SEN in mainstream schools and found that such children have fewer friendships compared to their typically developing peers (e.g, Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Pijl et al., 2008; Ridsdale & Thompson, 2002); they have less peer acceptance than their typically developing peers (e.g, Bakker et al., 2007; Pijl et al., 2010; Yu, Zhang, & Yan, 2005); and they have less social interaction than their non-SEN peers (e.g, Carter et al., 2005). A study has also been carried out in Kuwait to investigate the social participation of children identifying as having slow learning in special classes in mainstream schools (Alqallaf, 2015). It found that the social participation of children in special classes within mainstream schools was limited to within their special classes and did not extend to their non-SEN peers. This literature supports the expectations of the participants in relation to the possible social barriers toward inclusion in this study.

The results of this study are also compatible with other studies illustrating that there are some physical barriers (e.g., Ahmad, 2018; Armitage & Woolley, 2006); psychological barriers (e.g., Amr et al., 2016; Rogers, Smith, & Coleman, 1978; ; Mather & Ofiesh, 2005; Schmidt & Čagran, 2008) and academic barriers (e.g., Jha, 2007; Lloyd, 2008) toward including children with SEN in mainstream classes. These results may help the government to highlight the main kind of barriers that should be considered and to prepare for them before applying inclusion. This result also asserts that preparing the buildings and accommodating curriculum, as well as providing the necessary supporting services and enhancing the social participation among children are the key factors to implement inclusion.

Regarding the barriers from teachers, several studies have examined factors that could be barriers for teachers in inclusive schools and found that one of the main factors was the teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Alenezi, 2016; Lovet et al., 2015). The current study confirmed this finding in relation to the teachers' barriers toward inclusion. This is an important finding which could relate to the academic program provided in the education colleges in Kuwait, as pre-service teachers were concerned that their lack of training in teaching SEN children could be a barrier to successful inclusion. This should be taken into account if the government of Kuwait is planning to apply inclusion, as the government needs to prepare the new generation of teachers to serve in inclusive schools. These inclusive schools have a different concept to that of current schools. Therefore, the governments needs new courses to prepare the pre-service teachers, which prepare teachers for the challenges they may face in inclusive schools.

This study has also investigated the SEN category that participants viewed as the most possible to include in mainstream class and the category they saw as the least possible to include. This is important again for the colleges of education, which are preparing a new generation to teach in inclusive classes. Every category of SEN has its distinct characteristics even while taking into account differences between individuals. Knowing which is

the most possible/least possible SEN category to include in mainstream school in the eyes of pre-service teachers may help the colleges of education to design modules which could focus on the chosen categories as in-depth case studies. The College of Basic Education where the current study took place has an academic module about inclusion that discusses the concept of inclusion, its dimensions and the requirements for full inclusion. The current study could be useful to improve such modules and help to prepare students for teaching in inclusive classes.

## Conclusion & Suggestions

To sum up, this research investigated the barriers toward including children with SEN in mainstream classes in Kuwait from the perspective of 452 pre-service teachers at the College of Basic Education using open-ended questions as well as a focus group. The result found that there are five different dimensions of possible barriers to inclusion: Barriers from teachers, social barriers, academic barriers, physical barriers, and psychological barriers. The findings highlighted several themes in each dimension of the five possible barriers; such themes may help the ministry of education to facilitate implementing inclusion. In relation to the physical barriers, the result of this study may suggest that the government should not only take into account ramps, but also classes, toilets, school corridors, buses, and school laps. The findings of this research also suggest that the ministry of education must take into account that accommodating for the national curriculum is considered to be a key factor to a better academic outcome for children with SEN in mainstream classes. Social acceptance and social belonging are the main requirements to inclusion.

The results of this study indicates that children with SEN may face some difficulties in their social participation in mainstream schools. Thus, a good suggestion to the ministry of education in this regard may be to raise the social awareness among children through designing some activities where children with SEN may be involved and fully participate with other non-SEN children. Enhancing their social participation could be one main key to facing the psychological barriers that may emerge from the negative

social relationships among SEN and non-SEN children, which may result in low self-confidence. It is also important for the government to prepare future teachers to take an effective role in inclusive education. One way to do this is to hear from pre-service teachers about the difficulties they would expect to face in an inclusive class, and subsequently, to discuss these difficulties as part of their pre-service academic course, with the aim of building a more positive attitude toward inclusion. This would only be achieved if the course addressed their concerns about the possible barriers toward inclusion.

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