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# Teachers' Professional Development for Inclusive Education, A perspective from Saudi (Mixed Methods Study)

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**Abstract:** This study explores teachers' attitudes toward the availability of professional development for inclusive education in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. Teachers' professional development is essential for implementing inclusive education and raising the quality of outcomes of the educational services. A sequential exploratory mixed methods approach was adopted in this research using questionnaires and interviews as tools of collecting the data. 331 teachers participated in the quantitative part of the research by completing the study survey and Nine teachers participated in the qualitative part of the research by being interviewed. Finding of this research revealed a lack of continues professional development programmes and training. It was reported that pre-service training was perceived as mostly theoretical with short course in practice which is in turn lead teachers to struggle with students in the schools. Similarly, in service training was perceived as insufficient.

**Keywords:** Professional development, Inclusive education, In-service training, Pre- service training, Mixed methodology.

## 1 Introduction

Teachers have a great impact on developing and implementing educational policy inside the classrooms. Teachers also have significant effect on students' levels. Therefore, the professional development of teachers is very important area of research in the education circles [1, 2, 3]. It is also important to develop teachers' professional aspects to reach an inclusive education for students [4]. Friend et al [5] argued that professional development contributes to creating a successful and sustainable inclusion for students. Special education brought many changes and development in the recent years, as educational institutions began to include students with special needs into regular schools. This led to an increase in teachers' responsibilities, which required these teachers to have sets of skills to be able to deal with new conditions.

### Study Aims and Questions:

This study explores teachers' beliefs about the current professional development provided to them in order to implement inclusive education in primary schools in Saudi Arabia. In order to achieve the study aim, the following research questions was proposed:

How do teachers perceive professional development provided to them for implementing inclusive education?

## 2 Literature Review

Professional development is increasing the knowledge levels of professionals working in a specific field for the purpose of sustaining their performance at work [6]. The concept of professional development entails three main areas of discussion. First, teachers' training [7, 8, 9, 10], second, the availability of human and physical and third, supervision and monitoring [11].

The literature revealed that training is very important for teachers' full understanding of the best practices in inclusive education. Carrington et al [12] argued that the nature of inclusive education plays an important role in shaping the perceptions and beliefs of teachers. Avramidis and Norwich [7] also indicated that many teachers perform less when they do not acquire training in inclusive education.

There is consensus among scholars that there is a direct relationship between training and performance. The more teachers are trained on inclusive education settings, the better their performance is [9, 10]. Scholars also argue that if the teachers' training is reduced and cut lower than usual, teachers tend to become ineffective and insufficient in their skills and

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expertise [13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

Recently, an increasing number of research studies have focused on the relationship between career needs and the attitudes of teachers [19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24]. As mentioned earlier, the negative attitudes are a major cause of the lack of an inclusive culture in schools, which are associated with lack of knowledge and training [15, 25, 26].

Avramidis and Kalyva [7] revealed that the teachers who were trained in special education are willing to perform better with students with special needs. Koutrouba et al [27] also revealed that teachers who trained in special education have positive views toward inclusion of students with special needs. Teachers' ability to adapt to the diversity of learning environment and their teaching style are also important determinants in inclusive education [28].

Therefore, teachers who have training in dealing with SEN have different perception about students with special needs more than other teachers who did not receive any training in this regard [27]. However, O'Gorman and Drudy [29] argued that teachers in both special education and regular education should receive training in dealing with students with special needs.

Abbott [30] proposed a way to address the concern among new teachers regarding adapting to dealing with students with SEN. He argued that it is important to reduce the 'culture shock' that new teachers have when they encounter a diverse environment in the classroom, which could be done by more socialized training. Winter [10] argued that preparation of teachers is very important, especially for pre-service teachers, which will help in increasing their efficiency and develop their skills. Roach and Salisbury [31] also conducted their study in the United States to conclude that ensuring long-term in-service training programmes is based on meaningful institutional change.

The UNESCO [32] emphasised the importance of having a standardised and practicable approach to inclusive practice, which reflect the bulk of emphasis from existing literature about inclusion and the importance of training. More importantly, the UNESCO also highlighted the vital roles teachers have in inclusive education. Given the critical importance of teacher preparation as a key component to fostering successful inclusion, the lack of this component represents a barrier to its success. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to the levels of professional development in the Saudi Arabian context.

An essential component of professional development includes the ongoing monitoring and supervision necessary to make teachers more confident and trustworthy of their own competence and teaching methods, and to enhance teacher development [22]. However, supervision creates better educational outcomes in the education process. It helps teachers diversify their teaching methods and adapting to the different levels of students [34]. Teacher supervision includes teacher practice to develop professional skills and learning about teaching through discussion. To develop inclusive practices, all stakeholders in the education process need to understand the nature of inclusiveness. This is important for raising the levels of performance, as shown in a recent study by Alila et al [34] in Finland.

Hobson et al [35] believe that supervision creates a guidance for teachers and provides them with advice and new skills. Hammad [11] also argued that the continuation of supervision creates a connection between the educational process and other elements related to educations, especially, administration, such as the Ministry of Education. This connection creates a bridge between the reality of education and the decision-making process. Therefore, the Saudi special education teachers' attitudes toward SEN needs to be investigated to form an informed picture of the reality of the situation.

The availability of talent resources in schools is also another important component of professional development. Such resources might include the presence of therapists in different areas in the school [36]. The presence of these resources allows teachers and students to benefit the most during the education process. Mastropieri and Scruggs [37] suggested that students have better academic achievement when they receive their education in a resourceful environment.

Similarly, schools should have enough resources, such as physical and human resources. Avramidis and Norwich [7] argued that teachers give better performance when all the needed human resources are available to them inside the school, which might include other staff to support the educational process. They typically have daily guidance and role models for good practice and are involved in facilitating and providing training to work in partnership with parents [38].

RSES in the Saudi context is used to consult instructors who've excessive qualifications in unique schooling and are within the role of unique schooling manager however primarily based totally at a specific college. In addition to those responsibilities, the expert additionally features as a hyperlink among instructors and the better management level [39]. Pearson et al [16] observed that, higher inclusive faculties should expand their work in training for inclusive education. It is important to have suitable coaching materials, sources and centres has been observed to beautify academic consequences for students with SEN [7, 27].

Professional development of teachers is therefore essential to improve inclusive education. Teachers must be equipped, trained, and equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to interact directly and personally with SEN students and to meet their needs. Teachers must pay attention to preparing themselves for challenges that might arise during the

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educational process. Therefore, change is important to improve inclusive education in terms of the preparation of teachers and other school personnel, as well as in terms of the mainstream school organizational system as a whole is clear human resources.

### 3 Methodology

A sequential exploratory mixed methods approach was adopted in this research using questionnaires and interviews as tools of collecting the data. This approach was used to investigate the reality of parents’ involvement with schools to enhance their children’s learning from different angles [40, 41, 42]. This study combined both questionnaires and interviews to provide a comprehensive description of the research area and used both quantitative and qualitative research to increase the depth of the results [43, 44]. It also aims to fill gaps in data collection and identify barriers to inclusion by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. In other words, the mixed-methods approach provides a better understanding of the research problem and enables detailed answers to research questions [45, 46, 47].

#### *Questionnaires:*

Using a questionnaire as an instrument for this study was largely based on its advantages in generating a large and diverse sample [48, 49]. In this study, the questionnaire collected data from a wide geographic area, ensured a larger sample size than would have been possible with other tools, and allowed generalization of results [49].

#### *Interviews:*

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study by conducting interviews, which allowed researchers to discover or refine information important to participants that they may not have previously considered [40, 48].

#### *Sample:*

331 special education teachers were involved in this study and answered the research questionnaire from which nine special teachers were interviewed. Working in the settings most relevant to the research question –schools attended by students with disabilities – these teachers are in the best position to talk about the practical aspects and details of inclusion. Consent was obtained from all participants before the study was conducted.

#### *Procedures:*

500 questionnaires were distributed among special education teachers working in schools that have inclusion programmes on them and 331(66%) answered questionnaires were returned. Nine teachers who expressed an interest in being interviewed visited the school and were interviewed face-to-face, usually during breaks in the school's conference room. Prior to recording the interviews, consent was obtained from all participating teachers to ensure a thorough understanding of the instructions. In this regard, the researcher sought support from all respondents, had them understand the research being conducted, and had a clear desire to be included.

All interviewees followed a uniform interview protocol. However, during the interviews, explanations were given to the respondents as necessary. If a participants’ answer was not clear, additional questions were asked to gather more information. Data were then transcribed and sent to participants for accuracy and allowed for analysis at a later date.

#### *Data Analysis:*

Quantitative data analysis was initiated upon receipt of finished surveys from the 331 participants in the survey. Descriptive statistics included the extracting of standard deviation, mean scores and frequencies. In contrast, when analysing qualitative data (in this case interview transcripts), a thematic analysis is performed by following the six steps for conducting a thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke [38] on the levels of parental school participation and factors that influence parental school participation.

### 4 Findings

#### *Quantitative findings:*

This part of the questionnaire identified barriers to including SEN students in schools in terms of career development opportunities. Table 1 shows the overall sample responses using He's six statements as part of the survey questionnaire.

**Table 1:** Participants’ response to the six items of the survey.

Item	Mean	S.D
Limited technical support from local education authorities to facilitate school participation of students with special needs.	1.75	1.01
School staff are not properly trained to deal with students with special educational	1.83	1.07

needs, which may reduce the effectiveness of inclusion		
Teachers are trained to develop and manage collaborative learning activities	2.03	1.29
Regular visits are conducted by local education authorities and/or professional supervisors from the Ministry of Education to monitor the effectiveness of the inclusion program.	1.57	.80
Limited technical support from local education authorities to facilitate school participation of students with special needs.	1.49	.72
The school does not have a multidisciplinary team of psychologists, speech therapists, speech therapists and behavior support staff.	1.35	.65
Total	1.67	.554

Table 1 above shows the highest percentage of teachers with more than two-thirds (72.2%) stating, "Schools lack a multidisciplinary team that includes psychologists, speech therapists, speech therapists and behavioural therapists. I completely agree with the statement 'I agree with M'. = 1.35 (SD = 0.65), showing strong agreement as a barrier with this statement, according to the criteria used in this study. In addition, 61.9% of teachers rated their LEA for facilitating the inclusion of students with her SEN in schools, one of the barriers to including students with their SEN in schools, agreed that the professional support from overall averages for statements that "regular visits are made by local education authorities and/or professional supervisors from the Ministry of Education to monitor the effectiveness of inclusion programs" showed strong agreement (M=1.57, SD=0.80). Research standards. According to more than half of the study participants, teachers need training programs to learn new techniques in special education. Nearly half of the participants, 49% and 49.8% respectively. There was a similar split in teachers' opinions on the two statements 9 and 10 of the survey questionnaire. According to the respondent's criteria, an overall mean value of M = 1.67 (SD = .554) for the side became the criterion used in this study.

### Qualitative findings:

The overall analysis of the qualitative data, in this case interviews, revealed two themes. First, training and qualifications and Specialist human support. Table 2 shows the Sub-themes and codes determined from participants interviews.

**Table 2:** Sub-themes and codes determined from participants interviews

Themes	Codes
Training and qualifications.	Lack of in-service training, discrepancy between previous training of special education teachers and actual practice - Lack of interprofessional cooperation - Lack of learning communities.
Specialist human support.	Inadequate supervision of supervisor visits - Lack of special education caregivers for inpatients - Lack of special offer providers (speech therapists, physical therapists) in schools.

### Training and Qualifications

All respondents to the study discussed the importance of training in collaboration with students with special needs in developing the knowledge base of all school staff. Therefore, most interviewees believe that lack of training is a major barrier to inclusion, and that currently incumbent general and special education teachers work with students with special education needs. It emphasizes that there is no training available. For example, one interviewee said:

*"General education teachers and principals have no special educational background and are not trained to work with students with special educational needs" (T9).*

Teachers also mentioned that: *"we as special education teachers tried to conduct training workshops for general education teachers" (Teacher 5).*

Teachers consider pre-service training as insufficient in terms of duration and a longer in-service training course would be better. Another view expressed is that pre-primary training should cover general education teachers as well as teachers with special needs. As teacher responses indicate, even though these teachers had adequate experience in dealing with students with special educational needs, they welcomed and actively sought further training.

In general, there was a consensus that training helps improve not only the skills of teachers, but also their views and motivations for inclusion. It is important to provide training to teachers in a continuous manner. Second, there is the case of providing training to empower general education teachers and change attitudes about working with special education teachers. One teacher added that: *"for inclusion to be successful, on-going training programs for both of us [special education teachers] and for other staff should be provided" (T9).*

### **Specialist Human Support**

Special education teachers interviewed for this study noted the availability of specialized support staff. Teachers felt the urge to expert advice to tackle the challenges during the process of inclusion. Respondents to teachers regarding the extent to which they receive professional aide from special education teachers reported having positive experiences, with one respondent stating:

*The special education supervisor does several visits to the school, monitoring, supervising and also giving feedback and suggestions about teaching students with SEN. Also, she goes over any new approaches that she knows are useful (T4).*

However, another teacher reported a less positive experience because there was not enough support available. Another issue raised in this context by most surveyed teachers is the importance of having supervisors in schools. For example, the need for RSES is reported to be able to provide advice, guidance, and counselling to general and special education teachers teaching students with special educational needs LEA.

Against this background, we conclude that an analysis of teacher interviews on aspects of professional development demonstrates the central importance of education to fostering the inclusion of students with special educational needs can be attached. Ongoing training of special education teachers, as well as training of school leaders and general education teachers, was considered important. Teachers also provided training for their peers, but this was met with general opposition. Overall analysis of interviews revealed inadequate support provided by education supervisors and suggested that distance from the LEA to school was a factor influencing enrolment. Special Education Supervisors (RSES) have been seen as a solution to the shortage and lack of training of special education supervisors in the LEA. In addition, schools need to have more specialists such as speech therapists and psychologists.

## **5 Discussion:**

Pre-employment and in-service education were central to inclusive education programs [10, 7, 8, 9, 22]. A representative view on this is given by Carrington et al. (2010) found that educational practitioners' perceptions, beliefs, and skills correlated with the nature and effectiveness of inclusive education. Teachers show that the training they received before is far from what they actually need to do, highlighting the gap between theory and practice in teacher training programmes. This highlights the need for an ongoing training program. This is confirmed by Winter [10] assertion that job preparation is only the first step to a successful career start and the discussion on how teachers struggle to meet the diverse needs of their students. In addition, Anderson [50] found that special education teachers may be less knowledgeable than general education teachers, and that special education teachers are not always well educated in college and have specialized skills. Some reported less knowledge than developed general education teachers and training.

Additionally, some of the teachers I surveyed said that it would be very helpful if the pre-service training was longer and more hands-on. A similar suggestion was made by Sari [21], which reported in Turkey that faculty members are expected to provide in-service training, improve special education programs, and reduce the time for the practical side. The need for long-term, extensive, practice-oriented training before and during service is therefore evident. Based on previous studies [20, 31, 12]. It is suggested that to overcome this problem, both university administrators and faculty should ensure that prospective teachers are adequately trained to teach students with special educational needs in mainstream schools and classrooms.

The lack of training reported by teachers in this study was consistent with the need for professional resources, particularly residential special education supervisors (RSES) in schools, whom teachers could rely on to fill training gaps. The need for such personnel in all schools is recognized, as is the importance of their role in enhancing inclusion.

Another important problem reported in this study is the lack of interdisciplinary teams of physiotherapists, speech therapists, and psychologists to support schools [14]. A possible explanation for this shortage is that the number of professionals specializing in these particular fields is higher in the health sector than in the education sector [40]. The availability of such professionals is extremely important as they play a key role in helping students and teachers perform their duties. We found that teachers with access to experts performed better because it meant better support. For example, additional human resources such as experts and teaching her assistants, a wide range of facilities and other educational resources, and accessible opportunities for training and professional development have enabled teachers to achieve success.

## **6 Conclusion:**

Taking into consideration the findings of this study, I recommend school-based professional development programs, in which teachers receive in service training within their contexts. I also recommend that the LEAs provide continuous support instead of one-time visit or one-time lecture. A collaborative and supportive relationship should be established



between supervisor from the LEAs facilitators and teachers in schools. Despite the fact that the matter of knowledge is very important, educators should focus on fostering relationships, sharing information, and collaborating with each other during their professional development to maximise the benefits. The quality of existing pre-service teacher preparation programs should also be examined.

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### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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