Research Article

Special Education Teachers' Attitudes Towards Teaching Students With Learning Disabilities in Middle Schools In Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

Teachers' practices are influenced by their attitudes and beliefs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Consequently, a large part of the success of inclusive education depends on teachers' attitudes. Understanding teachers' attitudes and beliefs is critical to the development and success of inclusive education practices (Hodkinson, 2005). In Saudi Arabia, limited research has been conducted on teachers' attitudes and beliefs at the primary school level and no research has been identified that investigates teachers' attitudes towards teaching students with learning disabilities (LD) at the middle school level. The present study sought to investigate special education teachers' attitudes towards teaching students with LD in regular classrooms and examine the collaborative efforts that create inclusive classrooms in Saudi public middle schools. The quantitative data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire. A vignette attached to the questionnaire was used to collect the qualitative data. Fifty-six special education teachers from a range of middle schools in Riyadh completed the questionnaire for this study. The results indicated that special education teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education were positive. There were no significant differences between teachers' attitudes according to their gender. However, the qualitative findings indicated that special education teachers thought their training was insufficient to meet the educational needs of students with LD in Saudi middle schools. The results of this study suggest that decision makers should consider in-service and pre-service training and education programs for teachers to enhance educational services for students with LD. Teachers should be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills before implementing inclusive education practices. Specifically, teachers need to learn to use evidence-based strategies to serve students with LD in inclusive classrooms and find ways to collaborate with colleagues and parents through on-going professional learning..

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INTRODUCTION

Following the Salamanca Statement (1994) in Spain, which emphasized the importance of implementing the philosophy of inclusive education, students with education special needs are increasingly being educated in regular education classrooms alongside their peers (UNESCO, 1994). Unlike the earlier terms of integration and mainstream, inclusive education does not refer to the placement of students with LD in regular classrooms; rather, inclusive education refers to the process of making educational settings available for all students, the acceptance of all students regardless of their abilities and to all students being members of regular classrooms and not belonging to special classrooms such as resource rooms (Halvorsen & Neary, 2009). The goal of inclusive education is to enable all students to participate in classrooms and to ensure that decisions are made about how best support then to achieve their individualized education goals within a rich and dynamic education environment (Snell, Janney, & Elliot, 2000).

It is common to find students with LD in regular education classrooms (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010). The most common definition cited is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) definition, which defined a specific LD as:

> a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or solve mathematical problems. (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009, p. 1)

For many years, special education resource rooms were the most common form of educational placement for students with LD. However, in the mid 1990s, in keeping with the trend for schools to uphold the principles of inclusion, regular classrooms surpassed resource rooms as the most frequent placement option for students with LDs. Researchers found that the needs of students with mild LD could be met in regular classrooms, if adaptations or modifications to the curriculum, instructions and teaching materials were made (Torgesen, 2009; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006). When teachers effectively address the individual educational needs of students with LD, these students should be able to succeed in regular classrooms (Westwood, 2008). Consequently, given that the goal of inclusive education is to help all students to access the curriculum, teamwork or collaborative teaming is needed to develop individualized education programs, plan collaborative instructions and incorporate special education services and supports into classrooms. However, students with LD do not need to be removed from regular classrooms to receive specialized instructions and related services (Snell et al., 2000).

Collaboration

Collaboration between special and general education teachers is a vital element of inclusive education practices (Friend & Cook, 2013). Collaboration has been defined as a communicative approach in which at least two professionals work together to achieve a common goal (Friend & Cook, 2013). It takes time and requires professional support; thus,

general and special education teachers perceive the benefits and limitations of collaboration differently. Friend and Cook (2013) linked successful collaboration with the presence of trust, respect and shared responsibility for students' educational success. Collaboration requires equality between colleagues, working towards clearly determined common goals, sharing resources to achieve goals and sharing the responsibility of making decisions and for the results of the decisions (Loreman, Deppeler, & Harvey, 2005). Collaboration is an umbrella term that covers a variety of activities, including co-teaching.

Teachers' Attitudes

Attitude is defined as "a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event" (Ajzen, 2005, p. 3). According to the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), performing a behavior is influenced by attitudes that individuals hold about that behavior, and the extent to which they possess the skills, resources and knowledge to carry out the behaviour (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Thus, the attitudes of teachers play a key role in the success of inclusive education programs (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; DeSimone & Parmar, 2006; Wiener & Tardif, 2004), as the positive or negative attitudes held by general and special education teachers influence their performances (Park, Chitiyo, & Choi, 2010).

Researchers have investigated the attitudes of special and general education teachers towards the inclusion of students with special education needs and the variables affecting affected teachers' attitudes. The majority of studies have shown that teachers hold either neutral or positive attitudes (Hwang & Evans, 2010; Mackey, 2008; Subban & Sharma, 2005); however, some studies have reported that teachers hold negative attitudes (Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010). It should also be noted that even teachers who hold positive attitudes towards inclusion have still expressed concerns about implementing inclusive education programs.

Previous research indicated that some factors may influence teachers' attitudes such as the severity and type of the disability; however, teachers usually accept the inclusion of students with mild to moderate disabilities (Avramidis et al., 2000). Dupoux, Hammond, Wolman and Ingalls (2006) reported that teachers' attitudes were more positive towards students with specific learning disabilities than towards students with emotional and behavioural disabilities. Further, studies have shown that teaching experience (i.e., the number of years teachers have implemented inclusive practices and taught students with special needs) has a positive influence on teachers' attitudes (Avramidis et al., 2000; Walker, 2012). Additionally, Subban and Sharma (2005) found that the amount of training in the field of special education appears to be linked to teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education and that even short-term training has a positive impact on teachers' attitudes (Beacham & Rouse, 2012).

Despite the importance of collaboration between general and special educators, few studies have examined teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards their roles and responsibilities in collaboration process. Studies on teachers' attitudes about collaboration

have shown that teachers support collaboration as an educational delivery model (Grahn, 2007; Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). However, teachers remained concerned about a lack of training and uncertainty in relation to their roles (Grahn, 2007; Mitchell, 2013). Researchers (i.e., Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Walther-Thomas, Korinek, McLaughlin, & Williams, 2000) have highlighted the negative factors influencing the collaborative relationship between general and special education teachers, including unclear responsibilities and roles, a lack of professional development opportunities and limited resources.

Learning Disabilities Programs in Saudi Arabia

The largest proportion of students receiving special education services in Saudi schools are those diagnosed with LD (Al-Mousa, 2010). Since 1995, special education services have been provided to students with LD at the primary school level (Al-Mousa, 2010). When programs for students with LD were first introduced, special education teachers faced a number of issues, including their role not being accepted by general education teachers and a lack of administrative support (Sheaha, 2004). In 2005, the Ministry of Education began to introduce programs for students with LD in middle schools and high schools; however, the number of programs in middle schools and high schools continues to be limited.

For many years, the core role of special education teachers has been to identify students with LD, create an IEP for each student, and teach them individually during part of the school day in separate classrooms called 'resource rooms'. More recently, special education teachers have been encouraged to use collaborative practices (e.g., co-teaching) to support students with LD in regular education classrooms. Previous studies in the Saudi context (e.g., Al-Ahmadi, 2009) have shown that teachers are not satisfied that they have the skills to teach students with LDs in regular classrooms. Indeed, both general and special education teachers have reported that they have insufficient skills and knowledge to teach in inclusive classrooms and implement such practices. None of these studies has focused on teachers' attitudes towards their responsibilities in collaboration process. Thus, special or general education teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for students with LD and teachers' responsibilities in collaborative practices at the middle school level is unknown.

Given that understanding attitudes is key to improving inclusive education practices in schools, this study sought to investigate special education teachers' attitudes toward collaboration and inclusive education for students with learning disabilities in Saudi regular classrooms in middle schools.

METHOD

Participants

Fifty-six special education teachers at public middle schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia participated in this study during the 2013–2014 school year. Table 1 shows the demographic information of teachers who completed the questionnaire. Of the

participants, five (i.e., 8.9%) of the special education teachers were male. Only 1.8% of the special education teachers had more than 15 years of experience in teaching.

Table 1

Demographic Information of the Participants

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	5	8.9
Female	51	91.1
Total	56	100.0
Years of teaching experience		
<1	1	1.8
1–5	13	23.2
6–10	21	37.5
11–15	20	35.7
16–20	1	1.0
Total	56	100.0
Qualification		
Bachelor degree	48	85.7
Postgraduate	8	14.3
Total	56	100.0
Previously worked as a regular education teacher		
Yes	25	44.6
Total	56	100.0
Service delivery model		
Resource room	24	42.9
Resource room and regular classroom	32	57.1
Total	56	100.0

Data Collection

This study used a mixed-methods design to develop a broad understanding of participants' attitudes while simultaneously investigating their deeper-set attitudes towards inclusion and the role of collaboration. The quantitative data were collected through a Likert scale questionnaire. A vignette attached to the questionnaire was used to collect the qualitative data.

The questionnaire that participants completed in this study was a modified version of one originally developed by Ragland (2005) that sought to examine inclusive education and collaboration in elementary or primary schools in the United States (US). Grahn (2007) further adapted this version for the use of secondary school teachers in the US. Both versions were used to formulate the questionnaire used in this study. The modified questionnaire comprised 32 items that participants were asked to rate using a five-point Likert scale. The first section of the questionnaire collected participants' demographic information so that grouping variables (e.g., gender, years of experience and level of education) could be used for the analyses. The second section comprised five items aimed

at measuring participants' attitudes towards the inclusive education of students with learning disabilities (LD) The third section comprised 15 items designed to measure participants' attitudes towards their roles, responsibilities, methods and commitment to the collaboration process. The fourth section comprised eight items that sought to explore and measure participants' feelings about collaboration.

The Cronbach's alpha for the total questionnaire was 0.907, indicating that the questionnaire had high internal consistency (Cortina, 1993). The correlation coefficients between the items and the dimension total score were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating that the items were related and contributed to the overall construct being measured. Based on the validity and reliability results, the questionnaire met the key indicators of technical adequacy for its purposes. Thus, the questionnaire qualified as a suitable measurement instrument that could be applied confidently in the study.

The researcher developed a vignette that described a situation in which a special education teacher provided learning support to a student with LD during his/her primary school education. The vignette highlighted the concerns of the student's parents about his/her enrolment in middle school. There were two versions of the story; in the first, the student was a boy and in the second, the student was a girl. Two versions were needed to reflect the cultural context of Saudi schools in which students are separated by gender. Participants were asked to respond to four open-ended questions. This provided participants with a chance to express their views and perceptions towards inclusion and collaboration in relation to the student in the vignette.

Procedure

The researcher provided the questionnaires to the principal of each school for distribution. This strategy was adopted to ensure that the researcher maintained an appropriate distance from the recruitment process. Participants returned the completed questionnaires to the school principals, sealed in the envelopes with which they had been provided. The researcher then organized to have the questionnaires collected and prepared for analysis.

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Attitudes towards Inclusive Education

Special education teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education for students with LD in Saudi middle schools were examined using five questionnaire items (i.e., items 1, 12, 13, 15 and 25). Table 1 shows the number of responses according to participants' level of agreement with each item. Participants generally had positive attitudes towards inclusive education. Table 2 also shows that participants agreed that special education teachers had specialist knowledge about the education of students with LD (i.e., Item 15). Further, the majority of participants disagreed with the statement that students with LD should receive the educational support in a resource room (i.e., Item 13). Participants also

agreed with the statement that general education teachers have the necessary professional knowledge to implement education practices that support the education of students with LD. The analysis of the results showed that demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, years of experience, qualification, they had worked as general education teachers, service delivery model) did not affect the degree to which participants agreed with concepts related to the first dimension.

Table 2
Frequency (Percentage) and Mean [Standard Deviation] for Items in the First Dimension (Inclusive Education)

Item	Statement	Degree of Agreement (%)					Mean [StdDev]
		SD	D	N	A	SA	
1	The regular education classroom is the best environment for students with learning disabilities	2 (3.6)	7 (12.5)	2 (3.6)	25 (44.6)	20 (35.7)	3.96 [1.11]
12	General education teachers have the professional knowledge to implement education practices that support the education of students with learning disabilities	2 (8.8)	14 (32.4)	13 (22.1)	21 (29.8)	6 (6.9)	3.26 [1.07]
13	Students with learning disabilities should receive educational support in a resource room	30 (53.6)	19 (33.9)	2 (3.6)	5 (8.9)	-	4.32 [0.916]
15	Special education teachers are knowledgeable about students with learning disabilities and the support they require to be included in the regular education classroom curriculum	-	1 (1.8)	2 (3.6)	14 (25.0)	39 (69.6)	4.62 [0.648]
25	Students with learning disabilities can be well served in regular education classrooms	1 (1.8)	12 (21.4)	10 (17.9)	25 (44.6)	8 (14.3)	3.48 [1.04]
	General mean						3.93 [0.496]

Attitudes towards Collaboration

Teacher's attitudes towards collaboration were examined using two dimensions: (i) knowledge of collaboration; and (ii) feelings towards collaboration. Twenty-seven items were used to measure teachers' attitudes towards collaboration. Tables 3 and 4 show the level of agreement of the participants by item. Across the items, the mean score on each dimension indicated that special education teachers displayed a high-level of agreement about collaboration. Most of the participants agreed with the negatively worded statement that: 'I prefer not to work with another teacher'. This could indicate that the

participants did not favour co-teaching as a model for inclusion. Further, most special education teachers did not agree that they should share the responsibilities of regular education classrooms. There were no statistically significant differences in participants' attitudes towards collaboration based on the demographic attributes (i.e., gender, years of experience, qualification, they had worked as general education teachers, service delivery model).

Table 3
Frequency (Percentage) and Mean [Standard Deviation] for Items in the Second Dimension (Collaboration)

Statement	Degree of Agreement (%)					Mean [StdDev]
	SD	D	N	A	SA	
3. Collaboration between special education and general education teachers is necessary for successful education of students with learning disabilities in regular education classrooms	-	-	-	3 (5.4)	53 (94.6)	4.94 [0.227]
4. Special and general education teachers should share equal responsibility for students' success	-	-	-	9 (47)	47 (83.9)	4.83 [0.370]
5. Lesson planning should be equally shared between special and general education teachers	-	3 (5.4)	3 (5.4)	23 (41.1)	27 (48.2)	4.32 [0.811]
6. General and special education teachers should share the same educational philosophy	-	3 (5.4)	6 (10.7)	26 (46.4)	21 (37.5)	4.16 [0.826]
7. Clear, open communication between general and special education teachers is imperative for successful collaboration	-	-	1 (1.8)	14 (25.0)	41 (73.2)	4.71 [0.494]
8. Clearly delineated roles and responsibilities are imperative for successful collaboration	-	-	-	12 (21.4)	44 (78.6)	4.78 [0.414]
9. Implementation of the classroom curriculum should be a responsibility shared equally between special and general education teachers	-	7 (12.5)	3 (5.4)	28 (50.0)	18 (32.1)	4.01 [0.94]
10. Regularly scheduled shared planning time is imperative for successful collaboration	-	1 (1.8)	1 (1.8)	31 (55.4)	23 (41.1)	4.35 [0.615]
11. General education teachers should participate in the collaborative process for developing individualised education	-	5 (8.9)	10 (17.9)	26 (46.4)	15 (26.8)	3.91 [0.900]

programmes(IEP) for students with learning disabilities.					
14. General education teachers should hold primary responsibility for planning and implementing the regular education classroom curriculum, with support from the special education teacher.	-	2 (3.6)	8 (14.3)	22 (39.3)	24 (42.9)	4.21 [0.824]
16. Teacher preparation courses at universities and colleges should prepare all future teachers for collaboration.	-	-	-	17 (30.4)	39 69.6)	4.69 [0.463]
18. Grading responsibilities should be equally shared between special and general education teachers.	-	7 (12.5)	3 (5.4)	20 (35.7)	26 (46.4)	4.16 [1.00]
24. The special education teacher should hold primary responsibility for making accommodations and modifications.	-	5 (8.9)	3 (5.4)	29 (51.8)	19 (33.9)	4.10 [0.867]
27. General and special education teachers must be committed to the concept of inclusion to be able to collaborate successfully.	-	-	2 (3.6)	35 (62.5)	19 (33.9)	4.30 [0.536]
28. I am willing to participate in a discussion with my colleagues regarding the educational needs of students with learning disabilities.	-	-	1 (1.8)	23 (41.1)	32 (57.1)	4.55 [0.536]
29. Acknowledging and valuing the knowledge and expertise of each member of a collaborative team is important.	-	-	1 (1.8)	29 (51.8)	26 (46.4)	4.44 [0.536]
30. Strong administrative support is a requirement of successful collaboration.	-	-	-	15 (26.8)	41 (73.2)	4.73 [0.446]
31. Responsibility for the implementation of accommodations should be shared equally between general and special education teachers.	-	-	-	28 (50.0)	28 (50.5)	4.50 [0.504]
32. General and special education teachers should equally share the responsibility of classroom management.	1 (1.8)	18 (32.1)	9 (16.1)	15 (26.8)	13 (23.2)	3.37 [1.21]
General mean						4.37 [0.33]

Table 4

Frequency (Percentage) and Mean [Standard Deviation] for Items in the Third Dimension (Feelings towards Collaboration)

Statement	Degree of Agreement (%)					Mean [StdDev]
	SD	D	N	A	SA	
2. A school culture of shared leadership for student success would increase my comfort with working collaboratively	-	-	1 (1.8)	17 (30.4)	38 (67.9)	4.66 [0.51]
17. I am knowledgeable enough to participate comfortably in serving students with learning disabilities in the regular classroom	1 (1.8)	3 (5.4)	5 (8.9)	26 (46.4)	21 (37.5)	4.12 [0.91]
19. In-service training would increase my comfort with implementing collaboration to support students in regular classrooms	-	1 (1.8)	1 (1.8)	20 (35.7)	34 (60.7)	4.55 [0.63]
20. Sufficient regularly scheduled collaborative planning time would increase my comfort with implementing collaboration to support students in regular classrooms	-	-	2 (3.6)	26 (46.4)	28 (50.0)	4.46 [0.57]
21. It is hard to imagine sharing teaching responsibilities in the regular classroom	14 (25.0)	18 (32.1)	14 (25.0)	10 (17.9)	-	3.64 [1.05]
22. I prefer not to work with another teacher	2 (3.6)	11 (19.6)	5 (8.9)	30 (53.6)	8 (14.3)	2.44 [1.07]
23.A school culture of open communication would increase my comfort with working collaboratively	-	-	-	21 (37.5)	35 (62.5)	4.62 [0.48]
26.I am comfortable with the concept of collaboration and support it as an educational delivery model.	-	3 (5.4)	3 (5.4)	27 (48.2)	23 (41.1)	4.25 [0.79]
				General Mean		4.09 [0.33]

Qualitative Results

Inclusive Education

The majority of participants responded positively to the item stating that the student with the LD could succeed at the middle school level, but their explanations varied. A few participants believed that the LD had already been addressed at the primary school level; however, the majority of participants were of the view that the student would succeed if his/her school had a program for students with LD. This positive response suggested that the participants believed that the student in the vignette could be educated within a general education context. This response also supported other items in the questionnaire, including Item 25 that stated: 'Students with learning disabilities can be well served in regular classrooms'). The mean response to this item was 3.48, suggesting a positive attitude.

Supporting Access to the Curriculum

In response to the question asking what teachers can do to help the student with the LD in regular classrooms, the following common themes emerged: developing an individualised education program (IEP) for the student, teaching the student learning strategies, helping the student to summarise the curriculum and giving the student's family tips on how to support the student. Most participants reported that they would take the student out of the regular education classroom to support him/her; however, a smaller number of participants reported that they would consult general teachers and support the student inside their regular education classrooms. The responses indicated that resource rooms still provide vital services and are the places in which students are expected to get help. Further, no solid emphasis on collaborative practices was found.

Collaboration with Colleagues

In relation to whom teachers could work with to assist students with LD in regular classrooms, the common themes that emerged from the special education teachers who answered this question included the general education teacher or 'classroom teacher', the student advisor and families. Some special education teachers commented that 'creating teamwork' should occur, but that, in reality, it did not. Other teachers stated that as special education teachers they would ask the student to attend the resource room.

Strengths in Collaboration

The last question asked participants what was the greatest skill that they could bring to the collaborative process when working with a colleague. Special education teachers referred to developing IEPs, teaching students individually in resource rooms, consulting with general education teachers when writing test questions and assessing students. Few of participants' responses mentioned to collaborative teaching. Little evidence was elicited from participants as to how they could work together in regular education classrooms (e.g., adjusting curriculum outcomes and materials, co-teaching content). If a student needed support, it seems that the special education teacher would work with this student in a resource room.

Additional Comments

Having answered the questions, some participants wrote further comments that revealed additional opinions and concerns. Special education teachers mentioned the need for training courses on collaboration and teamwork and the need to educate general teachers about LD and the role of special education teachers. The special education teachers were quite vocal about the need to have knowledge of different curriculum areas (e.g., mathematics, science). In addition, they stated that regular education teachers did not understand their roles. Finally, they reported the need for assistive technology, raising the awareness of the importance of collaboration and teamwork in schools, professional development, and workshops on collaboration and evidence-based strategies to teach students with LD.

In brief, while the attitudes of special education teachers towards inclusive education and collaboration were positive, their different views on some questionnaire items indicated that they did not prefer working with another teacher. Further, the results showed that most of the special education teachers did not agree that they should share the responsibilities of regular education teachers. This could be a consequence of special education teachers having a lack of training in curriculum areas or classrooms management skills. Their responses to the vignette also support these attitudes. Additionally, the special education teachers that reported that they would collaborate with general education teachers to support and educate students with LD in regular education classrooms specifically reported the two methods of 'observation' and 'consulting general education teachers'.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Around the world, the attitudes of both special and general educators have been shown to impact inclusion practices. Moving towards inclusive education needs all players to work towards quality education for all students. Teachers concerns in this study are similar to the concerns that teachers reported in other international studies (e.g., Ahmmed, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012; Grahn, 2007; Mitchell, 2013; Khairudin, Dally, & Foggett,, 2016; Strogilos, Stefanidis, & Tragoulia, 2016). Lack of professional development, collaborative teaming, inclusive culture in the school, and administrative support frequently reported as barriers that impact the development of inclusive practices.

In applying the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005), enhancing teacher's attitudes is key to upholding the principles of inclusive education. This could be achieved by enhancing teacher preparation

RECOMMENDATIONS

To maximize inclusive education, decision makers need to consider teachers' attitudes and concerns. Creating inclusive school culture is essential to help both general and special education teachers to work collaboratively, and to ensure that all students including students with LD are provided with appropriate educational support that they need. Teachers' preparation programs should be improved to ensure that future teachers are prepared to support students with special education needs, including LD effectively. In addition, the provision of significant administrative support (critical to facilitating the implementation of inclusive practices), and providing professional development programs are essential for the practice.

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