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Research Article

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Exploration of In-Service Teachers' Preparedness and Perceived Challenges about Inclusive Education in the United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) global pandemic led to the deterioration of exclusive pedagogical practices in different learning institutions. This is because the pandemic forced teachers to make an abrupt instructional switch from face-to-face to online learning without having sufficient time to prepare. Various studies have reported that students with special needs in learning have to tolerate the burden of this tumultuous instructional transition. The educational policymakers have requested that in-service teachers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) attend an inclusive education professional development program to equip them with knowledge and skills for teaching and supporting special needs children. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which in-service teachers were prepared to teach inclusively and the challenges they perceive after completing a six-month inclusive education teacher professional development (TPD) program. The study was done using a qualitative case study within an interpretive paradigm. Fourteen teachers from different schools across the country were purposively selected to complete an open-ended questionnaire and participate in semi-structured interviews. It was found that teachers gained comprehensive knowledge from the program and they felt confident and ready to implement inclusive pedagogical approaches in their classrooms.

Keywords: *Inclusive education, Professional development; Pedagogy; Special needs*

1. Introduction

According to UNICEF, the term 'inclusive education' implies that every child has the right to quality education and learning. Children with disabilities are subject to the highest-level barriers to education across the globe. The term 'special needs in education' in pedagogy refers to children who differ socially, mentally, or physically from general students to an extent that they require modifications of routine teaching practices in school for efficient learning to take place (Alkahtani, 2016; Block et al., 2019). In education, the students' success is measured as self-sufficiency and

academic achievement, along with their future contributions to society. Special needs students may not be able to achieve these criteria if they do not receive proper attention and help from their teachers (Benitez Ojeda & Carugno, 2021). Many general education teachers suffer from the absence of proper training programs and they lack any preparation to accommodate students with learning disabilities in their mainstream classes. Therefore, teachers' special training programs play an extremely important role in inclusive education and for the management of students with special needs (Feng & Sass, 2013; Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). Due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, most educational institutions shifted the mode of instruction from face-to-face to online. Special needs students were the most affected group because many of their requirements in education were dependent on teachers' physical assistance (Bakaniene et al., 2022). Further, a considerable number of teachers across the globe, including those in the education sector in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), were not prepared enough for the drastic transition from face-to-face teaching to the online mode of instruction (Erfurth & Ridge, 2020; Dawson & Heylin, 2022; Maatuk et al., 2022). The requirements for inclusive education, which teachers achieved through their direct physical help in the classroom, became a challenge for teachers with the online mode of instruction (Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021; Paramasivam et al., 2022). In the UAE context, there is a dearth of studies related to in-service teachers' preparedness and the challenges they face in inclusive education. Therefore, the present study aimed to establish whether in-service teachers in the UAE are prepared enough for teaching students with special needs, and also to explore their perceptions regarding the challenges they face in inclusive education.

2. Literature Review

Professional development of teachers related to inclusive education is not something new. It is conducted in a different context as it helps to enhance teachers' knowledge, skills and attitude towards teaching students with special needs. Royster et al. (2014) conducted research related to professional development of teachers in inclusive education and found that the program was instrumental in terms of increasing their knowledge and skills about inclusion and special needs. Teachers' attitudes were also changed from negative to positive after completing the professional development training. Such programs play a vital role in preparing teachers to teach inclusively and overcome challenges that they may face relating to inclusion. Boscardin (2005) argues that professional development is helpful in terms of supporting teachers to implement inclusive evidence-based teaching practices in their classrooms. The program is also vital as it can change teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Singh et al. (2020) contend that pre-service and in-service teachers had different attitudes toward inclusive education in India. Those with negative attitudes could benefit from attending professional development training sessions to help them understand that they have to provide full support to special needs children in mainstream classes. It would be hard for teachers to teach, particularly during the current time of COVID-19, without professional development programs to help them learn new strategies. In Kazakhstan, it was reported that the need for a well-articulated inclusive education teacher program was needed to equip teachers with a new set of strategies to accommodate special needs students (Makoelle & Burmistrova, 2021). This aligns with a view that "teachers need more specialized training or courses to reach the level of confidence and certainty that qualify them to teach or deal with different students in inclusive classes" (Badr, 2019, p.89).

If teachers do not have access to training sessions related to inclusive education, they are likely to have negative attitudes towards inclusion in general. Yusoff and Marzaini (2021) postulate that pre-service teachers felt inadequately prepared to implement inclusive education in schools. Similarly, some teachers in the UAE had different attitudes and reactions towards the implementation of inclusive education (Badr, 2019). Negative attitudes normally result in poor implementation of inclusion in schools. This is different from positive attitudes towards inclusion which were shown by in-service teachers in Indonesia. The teachers demonstrated readiness to implement inclusive education compared to pre-service teachers who did not have experience (Rumalutur & Kurniawati,

2019). Medan (2020) concurs that although some teachers in Indonesia faced acute challenges to inclusive education, they implemented the concept successfully. This shows teachers' preparedness to accommodating the diverse needs of children in mainstream settings.

From the review of literature, it is clear that teachers' technical and mental preparedness is crucial for the successful implementation of inclusive education. Therefore, the present study aimed to analyse the in-service teachers' perceptions regarding their preparedness and their perceived challenges in inclusive education in the UAE context.

3. Methods

This study used a qualitative interpretative paradigm to assess the key areas of concern in the UAE inclusive education program. The researchers opted for this study because there are not many studies in the UAE context related to the perceived opportunities and challenges of in-service teachers regarding inclusive education. Therefore, the researchers assessed the perceptions of in-service teachers in the UAE regarding their preparedness and challenges they faced during inclusive education sessions.

3.1 The specific objectives

- a. To analyze the perceptions of in-service teachers regarding their preparedness to teach inclusively.
- b. To analyze the perceived challenges faced by in-service teachers during the delivery of inclusive education sessions.
- c. To identify the key areas of concern in inclusive education in the UAE context.
- d. To suggest methods/ways for improving the inclusive education sector in the UAE.

3.2 Sample

This is a case study of an AlJalila Foundation inclusive education teacher professional development (TPD) program which involved 14 teachers from eight different schools across the UAE. The in-service teachers were interviewed after they had undergone the six-month long TPD program for disability inclusion.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

All the participants enrolled in this study did so voluntarily after providing written informed consent. The data collection was achieved through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the 14 in-service teachers who participated in the TPD program. The open-ended questions were designed as per the directions given in the study by Gibson and Brown (2009). To avoid bias, the teachers were given adequate time to think about, respond to and describe their perceptions. The participants were primarily Emirati Arab citizens; therefore, they were allowed to express their perceptions in their mother tongue to enable them to express their perceptions completely. Further, they were allowed to withdraw or modify their answers during the course of the interview. After recording the perceptions of the in-service teachers in Arabic, the researcher manually transcribed the results from Arabic to English. A double check was done independently by a research associate to avoid misinterpretations while transcribing. Qualitative data was analyzed using the content analysis method to identify the themes and important areas of concern in inclusive education in the UAE context.

3.4 Ethical considerations

The present study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) and Institutional Review

Board (IRB). Further, to reduce ethical issues, the researchers followed the ethical guidelines laid down by Bell and Bryman (2007). Written informed consent forms were obtained from all participants and participation was purely voluntary. Any personal questions were excluded to maintain the participants' dignity. Names and personal information of the participants were kept strictly confidential. The participants were allowed to withdraw their consent to participate at any time during the course of this study.

4. Results

Results of this study are categorised into two main themes, namely preparedness to teach inclusively and perceived challenges about inclusive education. Each of these themes is presented in detail along with direct quotes from the participants.

4.1 Preparedness to teach inclusively

All teachers who participated in the program attested that the program helped them to gain comprehensive knowledge about teaching children in an inclusive classroom. Some teachers did not specialize in special needs education and were learning content for the first time. Teachers who specialized in special education during their Bachelor's degree stated that the TPD program was more of a refresher course and the content helped refresh their memories about implementing inclusive pedagogical practices. For teachers who studied general education without majoring in special education, the program was very transformative as it provided them with detailed information about inclusive education. One teacher said:

Before joining this program, I was worried about having special need children in my class. But, after this program, I am excited to have them and to go to other teachers' classes to see the type of special needs their children require and how they are teaching them. I am happy to tell other teachers what I learned from the program in order to help them improve their inclusive teaching approaches. After the program, I am now able to tell that special need children are not different from other children who do not require additional support and I am welcoming one or two children in my class.

The program was praised for helping teachers gain new knowledge about inclusion. This subsequently made them feel prepared to teach as was confirmed by a teacher who said: "I am 80% prepared. I now have a new way of looking at students with learning difficulties. I now know how to identify and support them. Before this program, I did not know." The program enabled teachers to learn how to teach and support children with diverse learning needs. This is confirmed by a participant who said:

The program gave me a chance to follow up on special need children and to follow up their own blanks and to know how to deal with them. After the program, I began to assist children with different learning needs and I got more ideas and experience. The program was very helpful to me.

Similarly, another teacher reiterated how the program prepared her:

The program actually helped me in preparing materials and looking at things differently. There is no one strategy that works. A strategy that works with one student may not work with another. So, the program provided me with some ideas and strategies to help young learners with special needs. I do believe that I have a lot to learn and I am only in the beginning process.

Another participant echoed the same sentiments about gaining knowledge from the program and how that helped improve students' development:

Every strategy and method that we learnt we could apply them in the classroom. We applied some of the strategies that were taught from the program. Thank God, we noticed development in the students' level,

whether development in terms of students' academic level or in terms of the behaviour.

Some participants who specialized in special education and had experience of working in inclusive classrooms found the program helpful and stated it was more like a refresher course. One participant who had prior knowledge of inclusion said:

"I had most of the information already since I am a teacher. But I benefited from the new experiences, the new things they presented, and the discussions that were facilitated."

Another participant said:

I had prior knowledge of inclusion. But this program refreshed and gave me more information. I gained a lot of data and experience. I struggled to recognize mental illness, or if a student had learning difficulties, but the program taught us the characteristics that distinguish each category, how to deal with them and special strategies for this group or special for students with physical disability.

A participant who specialized in special education said:

I was not certified in special education, yes, it would have prepared me. It would have given me a better insight. It was more of a refresher course. I have taught special education for ten years. So, they did not prepare me, but refresh my memory.

Teachers who participated in this program felt it was worth their time and wished it was offered to all classroom practitioners as the content helped them prepare to teach inclusion more effectively. One teacher said:

I would suggest that they take a teacher in each subject. That would be more beneficial. Now, there are only Arabic and English language teachers. If they would take the mathematics teacher, and the science teacher to attend the program as well. So, one teacher from each subject that would be more beneficial.

Similarly, another participant said:

One thing I would really push for them is that the organizers should not just get elementary and homeroom teachers. We have Arabic and Islamic teachers here and they need to go to this as well. The science teachers need to come to this as well because they deal with our children as well as kindergarten teachers. If all teachers attend this training, they will improve their inclusive approaches and teaching.

Although teachers reiterated the effectiveness of the program in terms of preparing them to teach inclusively, they acknowledged that there are some challenges that they perceive. In-service teachers' perceived challenges about inclusive education are discussed in the next section.

4.2 Perceived challenges about inclusive education

Collaboration between teachers and parents was noted as a perceived challenge by all the teachers. Teachers reported that they felt some parents with special needs children may not be cooperative.

One participant said:

Parents can be a big challenge. We may want to assist their special need children. When we tell them about their children's learning problem and suggest ways to assist the learners, parents may not allow us to do this. So, this is the main challenge which we might face.

Participants said that some parents did not collaborate with teachers. When they were informed about their children's disability or learning difficulty, they tended to leave everything to be handled by the school without supporting the teachers. This was confirmed by a teacher who said:

“not all parents are cooperative. Sometimes we tell them that their child is handicapped or has some learning difficulties. Some are not cooperative and they leave the child and everything to be done by the school. “Another participant echoed the same sentiment about parents not being cooperative, saying:” some parents do not know that their children have special educational needs. When we inform them, they either do not accept it or do not know how to deal with it. So, these are two challenges we might face.’ Another teacher said:” it will be difficult to work without parents’ support. We need their consent and support to be able to teach their special needs children effectively.’

Another perceived challenge that was stated was that there were a large number of students in classes. Teachers raised this as a concern as there could be one special needs student in a large class and it was hard to meet the needs of all the students, especially the child with special needs. A teacher confirmed this saying:

I perceive number of students in a class as a challenge. You may have one handicapped student with thirty other healthy students in one class. So, it will be hard to plan for that class because the teacher is not specialized in special education and it will be difficult to support all children in such a large class. So, we were hoping that the Ministry of Education would consider putting the merged handicapped students in classrooms with less density of students rather than the regular classrooms of children who are all healthy.

Teachers were worried that they may not have adequate time to support all students if classes were too large. A participant supported this statement saying:” time to support all students in my class will be limited if classes are too big. There is no time. I need to give each student enough time, but that will be hard.’ Another participant echoed the same sentiment saying:” large numbers of students and absence of an assistant teacher will make it hard to teach and support special needs students in classes.” Participants reported that some classes were merged and they became too large; this would make it hard to teach effectively. A participant who commented on merged classes said:

I foresee a challenge about large number of students in classes. They made a lot of merge processes this year due to the lack of teachers. After merging, the number of students in each class reached 35. When you have a handicapped student, that will make you slow down the progress of the lesson. You want to take care of him, and you do not want him to distract other students.

Another participant mentioned the point of merged classes, but with reference to online learning. She said:

The challenge I foresee is that there are merged students or handicapped who are unable to come to school. They ask us to teach them online. And honestly, I do not have experience in online education other than my student who was just sitting there, not responding, and not doing anything. I do not know how to get their attention and deal with them especially in online teaching.

Some participants argued that shortage of assistant teachers or shadow teachers was a problem that may hinder the implementation of special education. One teacher said: ‘we do not have shadow teachers. We miss that. We hope that every student with a learning difficulty has a shadow teacher with him during class.’ Teachers reported that they needed assistant teachers to support them when teaching mainstream classes with special needs children. They also needed special education teachers for some specific subjects like English. This was supported by a participant who said:

‘we have educational need supporting teacher for Arabic and Math, but not for English. That can be a challenge. We need a special education teacher for English.’

Some teachers reported the issue of resources as a possible challenge. One teacher said: ‘so some of the challenges would be lack of resources. We need to use some resources with special need children, but some schools may not have them.’ Another participant reiterated the point of resources,

saying: 'we are missing a large part of the materials that are needed when teaching. Some of our schools' lack readiness as they do not have required tools for us to use.' Another participant agreed with the point of readiness, saying: 'I feel some schools do not have coordinators and helpers to help teachers with special needs children. They do not have enough tools to enable teaching and learning.'

5. Discussion

Several important themes and key areas which require attention were identified through analyzing the perceptions of the participating in-service teachers. One such theme was the in-service teachers' positive perceptions regarding their preparedness for teaching inclusively. After undergoing the six-month long TPD training program for disability inclusion, the in-service teachers believed that they were well-prepared to teach inclusively. The study findings are in line with the study by Zagona et al. (2017) which reported a direct relationship between the teachers' preparedness for inclusive education and the receipt of special training on inclusive education. Similarly, a study by Gathumbi et al. (2015) reported that lack of teacher training in inclusive education results in teachers being unprepared to manage students with special needs in education. Miskolci et al. (2020) state that socio-political factors influence the teachers' understanding about inclusive education, even after their training in special education and inclusion. Although socio-political factors can influence the teachers' preparedness for inclusive education, special education training programs are vital to prepare teachers for inclusive education.

Notably, the in-service teachers participating in the present study viewed the special education training program as an opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge regarding inclusive education. Those who already had basic knowledge in special education regarded the TPD program as a refresher course whereas those who were new to this topic perceived the program as highly transformative because it provided them with detailed information about inclusive education. Indeed, such training sessions in special education can improve the teachers' attitude towards students with special needs in education and can make them skilled enough to manage classrooms which have one or more student with special needs (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Yuwono & Okech, 2021).

Another point to discuss here was the teachers' perceived challenge with regards to including the special needs students in general classrooms. Teachers often reported that they battled to plan their lessons effectively to include the special needs student in the general classroom. In such scenarios, the general students' attitudes toward the student with special needs were of great importance. Alzyoudi et al. (2021) reported that students in the UAE had negative attitudes towards students with special needs in education. The authors suggested that creating an environment that is conducive to learning is essential for accommodating both special needs and general education students in one classroom. Methods for enhancing amicable relationships between general education students and their peer special needs students may be used. Similarly, counseling programs for the general students could be held to elicit empathy and proper understanding about the condition and requirements of the differentially-abled student. However, more sophisticated educational programs may be necessary in classrooms in the UAE, which include students from different socio-economic and cultural strata.

An important challenge perceived by the in-service teachers was the lack of parental support in special needs education. Previous studies have affirmed the essential role of parents in ensuring proper education for their child with special needs. The need for parents' support becomes more prominent in online education. For instance, Yazcayir and Gurgur (2021) reported that due to the enforced shift of teaching mode to online during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the special needs students suffered to keep up with the pace of the other students. Teachers delivered their lecture notes through WhatsApp or via other online tools, and those special needs students who lacked parental support either could not grasp the lessons properly or in many cases they completely missed the online classes. Many of them were unable to follow the lessons online because the method of teaching was different to what the special needs students experienced in the classroom. Furthermore,

the lack of feedback from their teachers made the learning process much more difficult because the special needs students primarily depended on the teachers' and colleagues' feedback during their educational activities. Similar issues were noticed in recent studies (Bakaniene et al., 2022; Paramasivam et al., 2022), wherein the special needs students reported mental stress challenges because they were not familiar with online teaching mediums such as Skype, Zoom and Google Meet. Further, they were not familiar with other modern electronic gadgets used for online learning. These findings suggest that the special needs students were not ignorant about their circumstances but that they needed help, especially from their parents, to overcome their challenges and excel in education.

Most importantly, the present study identified that the UAE in-service teachers from specialisations other than English, mathematics and Arabic don't have many chances to improve their knowledge in inclusive education through taking part in a TPD program. Furthermore, many in-service teachers complained about the lack of tools and instructional materials to support special needs learners. This scenario is similar to the one reported by Hay et al. (2001) and Gathumbi et al. (2015). The aforementioned studies described how lack of resources adversely affected the teachers' preparedness to teach inclusively. The scenario reported by the in-service teachers who participated in the present study implies that special needs students in the UAE who are studying subjects other than English, Maths and Arabic may suffer from their teachers' lack of competency in inclusive education, or due to the lack of resources for effective culmination of special education. This scenario needs to change if the authorities of the UAE want the differentially-abled community to make significant contributions to society in the future.

6. Conclusions

Through the analysis of the results obtained in the present study, the following conclusions have been drawn:

The in-service teachers who participated in the present study perceived training in managing special needs students in a highly positive way. Some of the teachers, who were previously trained in special needs education, also found the program to be beneficial because it acted as a 'refresher course' for them, and the group discussions during the program gave them new insight into and methods regarding inclusive education.

According to the viewpoints of the participating in-service teachers, refresher courses and training in inclusive education is limited - only English and Arabic specialization in the UAE receive such training sessions. Teachers from science and mathematics specialisations are not benefitting from training in inclusive education. Special training in inclusive education is of great importance to in-service teachers from all specialities because almost every classroom will have one or more student with special needs. Their needs for effective learning are different from general education students. Therefore, such training in managing special needs students should be given to all teachers in the UAE.

In-service teachers often battle to identify special needs students with mental disabilities because, unlike identifying the students with visually differentiable physical disabilities, identifying and managing students with mental disabilities requires special training. Therefore, inclusive education training programs for identifying and managing special needs students who are challenged by mental issues may be beneficial for the UAE community.

Lack of support from the parents of special needs students is a major issue faced by in-service teachers in the UAE. This scenario is primarily due to the lack of awareness and also due to the parents' unwillingness to admit the fact that their child is different from others. Therefore, social awareness programs and counselling programs for the parents may be conducted to improve the scenario.

When the special needs student is included in the classroom along with general education students, teachers often struggle to plan lessons for both because their learning capacities are different. In addition, previous studies have reported that in Arab countries, some of the co-students

have indifferent behaviour towards the special needs students (Alzyoudi et al., 2021). In such scenarios, counselling for the co-students may be helpful because once other students are aware of the special needs students' struggles, they may become empathetic and adjust with the teachers' lesson plans for the benefit of special needs students.

This study has identified key issues and strengths of the inclusive education practices in the UAE. However, the present study is limited by the number of participants (n = 14), which also reflects a lack of teachers' inclusive education training in the UAE in specializations other than English, mathematics and Arabic. Further, the future baton holders of education - the pre-service teachers - are not included in this study. For this reason, the researchers consider broadening the scope of inquiry in future by adopting more explorative and qualitative approaches. Additionally, there is a need to investigate influential factors like socio-cultural and economic status which may influence the parents' indifferent behavior towards inclusive education. To conclude, the present study demands policymakers to avail special education training to all teaching faculties and to also provide counseling to general education students and parents to impart understanding and empathy towards special needs students.

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