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INTERNATIONAL VIEWS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS IN JORDAN, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe teachers' perceptions of their inclusive practices. In this comparative international quantitative research an attitudinal demographic survey is distributed to 300 teachers in mandated inclusive public schools in urban areas of Amman/Jordan, Sharjah and northern areas/United Arab Emirates, and Southwestern/U.S.A. The main highlighted themes include: different support, cultural, and educational experiences that affect inclusive practices in different contexts.

Keywords:

Teachers' perceptions – Inclusion practices - Political, Cultural, and Educational backgrounds that affect inclusive practices in different contexts.

Introduction

According to Billings and Kowalski (2008), in successful inclusive schools, students with different kinds of disabilities have the services and the support they need. Also, they gain the opportunity to be full members and to grow in productive ways in the social and learning contexts of their nondisabled peers. This comparative study adds new insights that provide an understanding of the complexity of practices of inclusive education. Although all educators in the study agree and advocate for the idea of inclusive education, the practices vary among them. One reason for this difference could be the difference in the history of inclusive

education in Jordan, UAE, and USA. Historically most of the students with disabilities have been served in segregated special education classes. In the United States inclusion received a clear attention across the States since the national passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142) (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Prior to this time few students with disabilities were provided services in public schools. Those students were served in separated classrooms. The following improvement was the legislation that students with disabilities should provided education in the least restrictive environment. In the 1980's more integrated services were provided. In 1990 the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) legislation highlighted that instead of taking students with disabilities out of the general education classroom and providing them with special instruction in a resource room, the supporters of total inclusion propose that all students with moderate to severe disabilities should be educated in the general education program. As a result, the students with special needs were eligible to receive the services they need in the general schools, whereas the passage of the Handicapped Law of 1993 in Jordan was the first step towards assuring the rights of persons with disabilities. The law emphasized that individuals with disabilities are entitled to equal education, training, work, and care (Ministry of Education (1998) as cited in Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003). In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) however, until 2003 there were no laws that are geared specifically toward persons with disabilities. Yet, in the UAE constitution there are several sections that address the needs of persons with disabilities. Section 16, for example, emphasizes the issue of rehabilitating and caring for persons with disabilities. Section 25 also dictates that all individuals are equal (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003). This difference in history affects the practices of individuals. As a result, hearing from different contexts may help improve the current practices in the developing countries. In addition, understanding these complex ecologies may influence the policy makers in these different countries to improve their own practices in the field of inclusion. This understanding may influence other countries to improve and enhance their practices. They can benefit from the experiences of these countries in establishing a well-rounded policy that match their own context.

Research Question

The purpose of this research is to explore and describe teachers' perceptions of the inclusive practices in their classrooms. The central research questions are: "What are teachers' inclusive experiences?" and "What are the factors that contribute to or hinder their success in inclusive

classrooms?” In this comparative research an attitudinal demographic survey is distributed to a sampling of teachers in primary public schools in three different countries: Jordan, United Arab Emirates and the United States of America in demographically similar settings.

The focus of this paper is the description of early childhood teachers’ perceptions of inclusion practices in three different contexts of the world. The main highlighted themes include: the different political, cultural, and educational backgrounds that affect inclusive practices in different contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The framework is based on a constructivist theoretical base. With this in mind, inclusive education provides the arena where general and special educators, students, and parents can come together to create quality, democratic schools (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996; Wotherspoon, 2004). The teacher's role in such a process is to model and think aloud the thoughts and strategies of effective communication in the process of seeking for truth (Vygotsky, 1986) and how they construct and reconstruct their personal experiences with inclusive education. According to Dewey (1976) as cited in (Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996) the goal of public education should be to prepare citizens for democracy by turning schools into communities of inquiry. As constructivist researchers our role is to “construct data with informants, so their interviews will likely include more participation... and more active sharing” (Hatch, 2002, p. 110). In this research we specifically utilize the constructivist principles of voice, collaboration, and inclusion that are implicit in the school restructuring and inclusive education reform movements (McHatton & McCray, 2007; Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996; Wotherspoon, 2004). By honoring the voice of early childhood teachers from different geographical contexts we examine the perceptions within and across complex social and cultural ecologies. By doing so we open new windows of collaboration and knowing the other.

A second lens that we utilize in this research is the deconstruction theory. According to Kincheloe (2005) “inquiry and the knowledge it produces are never neutral but are constructed in specific ways that privilege particular logic and voices while silencing others” (p. 35). Like Kincheloe, Bourdieu’s (1977) social theory highlights the same thought. Perna and Titus (2005) mentioned that “the amount of social capital to which an individual may gain access through social networks and relationships depends on the size of the networks as well as on the amounts of economic, cultural, and social capital that individuals in the network possess” (p. 488). Based on this social theory, we as researchers tried to expand the size of the research-networks to include different contexts where the individuals within these networks bring varied

economic, cultural, and social power. In this situation all of the participants have an equal opportunity to voice their visions, thoughts, and attitudes toward inclusion education. We hope by inviting these parties a clearer picture of inclusive education can be presented. Furthermore, Cannella (1997) discusses critical issues in regards to early childhood education and how we as teachers need to “problematize what we know” (p. 12) and start to deconstruct the dominant discourse. Deconstruction from Cannella’s point of view is “a method of reading and interpreting (the word and/or the world) that reveals hidden meanings, silences, contradictions, and sites of power” (p. 16). These thoughts connect with the idea of this research that focuses on problematizing how teachers perceive the idea of inclusive education.

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) focus on the narrow meaning of interpreting early childhood issues that present the ready recipe for teachers, administrators, families and students without giving them the opportunity to be creative based on their own experiences and knowledge. Our hope, as researchers in this study, is to give teachers from different contexts the opportunity to construct their own meaning toward inclusive education. Cannella’s (2002) critique of the current dominant discourse “does not allow for ambiguity, uncertainty, freedom, or the construction of multiple new worlds and ways of being” (Cannella, 2002, p. 107). So, our intention through this study is to open new windows for early childhood teachers in different contexts to construct their own experiences and perspectives toward what is currently happening for them with inclusive education.

Research Methods

For the purpose of this study the researchers designed a survey and distributed it to a total of 300 teachers in mandated inclusive public schools in urban areas of Amman/Jordan (teachers), Sharjah and northern areas/United Arab Emirates (teachers) and Southwestern/U.S.A (teachers). Respondents were informed that the purpose of the research was to learn what the teachers think about the inclusion of students who have disabilities into a regular education system. The respondents were also assured that their responses would remain anonymous. The teachers who completed and returned their surveys were 225 respondents (75%). 15 participants were selected to participate in separate interviews in each setting.

In relation to the sample characteristics, the sample was predominantly female (90%), teachers' ages ranged from 30-39 years old (49%), bachelor's degree (85%), teachers' general experiences ranged from 8 years and above (50%), first grade level taught (38%), three years and above as a previous inclusive teaching experience (47%), and none

college courses taken in special education formed (46%) of a research sample.

Measures

The research method includes a questionnaire survey. The survey was designed to determine the extent to which variables such as training, experience, and program factors were related to teachers' attitudes. As a result, the researchers designed the survey that includes two major aspects. The first aspect is teachers' attitudes toward academic aspects and the second focus is teachers' attitudes toward social and emotional aspects.

In this survey twenty-two items on a five-point Likert-type scale with 12 items reverse scores were used to measure the scale of teachers' attitude towards academic aspects and Cronach's Alpha coefficient for these items = 0.81. Typical items include, "inclusion does not meet the needs of children with special needs due to the lack of qualified teachers" and "regular education teachers receive little assistance from special education teachers in modifying instruction for children with special needs". On the other hand, teachers positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects were measured by twenty-seven items on a five-point Likert-type scale with 13 items reverse scores and Cronach's Alpha coefficient for these items = 0.93. Typical items include, "inclusion does not cause aggressive behavior among children" and inclusion practices do not reduce the level of competition of general learners".

The questionnaire survey included demographic questions about early childhood teachers' educational experiences with inclusive education. Sub areas of the survey include background information of inclusive education, demographic information, and open-ended questions about teachers' satisfaction and attitudes of inclusive practices. The survey was sent through the researchers to 20 primary inclusive public schools in Amman (Jordan), 20 primary inclusive public schools in Sharjah and northern areas (UAE), and 20 primary public schools in Las Cruces, New Mexico in the USA.

Research Results

The first hypothesis of this research indicates that: there is no significant relationship between teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects and the demographic variables (areas, gender, ages, level of education, general teaching experience, grade level taught, previous inclusive teaching experience, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion).

The results indicate that teachers who have negative attitude towards academic aspects is positively related to the areas (United Arab Emirates, America, and Jordan); Chi-square value = 164.909, $df = 102$, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$, $r = 0.38$; $P = 0.00 < 0.05$, grade level taught; Chi-square value = 237.360, $df = 204$, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$, $r = 0.18$; $P = 0.008 < 0.01$. While it is positively related to previous inclusive teaching experience; Chi-square value = 201.358, $df = 153$, $P = 0.005 < 0.01$, $r = 0.28$; $P = 0.00 < 0.05$, it is negatively related to the number of college courses taken in inclusion; Chi-square value = 223.691, $df = 153$, $P = 0.000 < 0.01$, $r = -0.31$; $P = 0.00 < 0.05$. On the other hand, teachers who have negative attitude towards academic aspects is not related to teachers gender; Chi-square value = 37.233, $df = 51$, $P = 0.92 > 0.05$, teachers ages; Chi-square value = 166.331, $df = 153$, $P = 0.22 > 0.05$, educational levels; Chi-square value = 140.983, $df = 153$, $P = 0.75 > 0.05$, general teaching experience; Chi-square value = 177.890, $df = 153$, $P = 0.08 > 0.05$. However, these results would lead to accept the null hypothesis partially. Specifically, there is a significant relationship between teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects and areas, grade level teaching, previous inclusive teaching experience, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion. In contrast, there is no significant association with teachers' gender, ages, educational levels, general teaching experience, and level of education.

The second hypothesis: There is no significant relationship between teachers' positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects and the demographic variables (areas, gender, ages, level of education, general teaching experience, grade level taught, previous inclusive teaching experience, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion).

The results indicate that teachers who have positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects are negatively related to the areas since Chi-square value = 170.046, $df = 138$, $P = 0.03 < 0.05$, $r = -0.54$; $P = 0.00 < 0.01$, and negatively associated with previous inclusive teaching experience; Chi-square value = 255.542, $df = 207$, $P = 0.01 < 0.05$, $r = -0.25$; $P = 0.00 < 0.01$.

On the other hand, teachers' positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects are not related to teachers gender; Chi-square value = 46.463, $df = 69$, $P = 0.98 > 0.05$, teachers ages; Chi-square value = 234.656, $df = 207$, $P = 0.09 > 0.05$, and educational levels; Chi-square value = 204.234, $df = 207$, $P = 0.54 > 0.05$. It is not related to the general teaching experience; Chi-square value = 194.921, $df = 207$, $P = 0.71 > 0.05$, grade level taught; Chi-square value = 239.008, $df = 276$, $P = 0.95 > 0.05$, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion; Chi-square value = 236.268, $df = 276$, $P = 0.08 > 0.05$.

However, these results would lead to accept the null hypothesis partially. That is, there are significant associations between teachers' positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects and areas, as well as negatively related to previous inclusive teaching experience. On the other hand, there is no significant association between this dimension and teachers' gender, ages, general teaching experience, grade level taught, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion.

The third hypothesis: There are no significant differences between the negative attitude of Emirates, Jordanians, and Americans' teachers towards academic aspects.

The fourth hypothesis: There are no significant differences between the positive attitude of Emirate, Jordanians, and Americans' teachers towards social and emotional aspects.

To test the third and fourth hypotheses Mean values were examined initially by country. As table 1 shows, Jordanian teachers held more negative attitude towards academic aspects than American and United Arab Emirates' teachers. Similarly, United Arab Emirates teachers showed more negative attitude towards academic aspects than American teachers did. While the United Arab Emirates teachers exhibited more positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects than American's and Jordanian teachers did, American teachers held more positive attitude than Jordanian teachers did. Since these indications are not enough to determine the significant differences, One-way Analysis Of Variance (ANOVA) techniques associated with Tukey-HSD were employed to examine hypotheses 4 and 5.

As shown in table 2, the (F) ratios suggest that at least one nation differs from others across the dependent variables. The F ratios ranged from 46.34 to 60.92 and were statistically significant at the level $P = 0.00$, $df = 2$. The size of F ratios reflects a high variability of the three nations' attitudes towards research dimensions but do not reflect which nation (s) of has/have the superiority across the dependent variables. Therefore, Tukey-HSD paired comparisons test were used. As shown in table 3, Tukey-HSD test shows that the Emirate teachers are more likely to have positive attitudes towards academic aspects than Jordanians teachers (mean diff. = -12.16283, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) and American teachers have more positive attitudes than Jordanian teachers (mean diff. = 15.46667, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) but there is no difference between Emirate and American teachers who have the same attitudes ($P = 0.50 > 0.01$). Similarly, Emirate teachers are more likely to have more positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects than Jordanians teachers (mean diff. = 22.58, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) and American teachers (mean diff. = 11.69, $P = .028 < 0.01$). Jordanians teachers have less positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects than American teachers (mean diff. = -

10.88667, $P = 0.046 < 0.05$). These results would partially reject the null hypotheses.

Table 1: Means comparisons

| Country | Academic aspect | | Social and emotional aspects | |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------------------|----------------|
| | Mean | Std. Deviation | Mean | Std. Deviation |
| United Arab Emirates | 62.63 | 10.07 | 99.85 | 99.85 |
| Jordan | 74.80 | 9.66 | 77.28 | 14.46 |
| America | 59.33 | 6.15 | 88.16 | 6.79 |
| Total | 67.87 | 11.53 | 89.20 | 18.46 |

Table 2: ANOVA results

| Dependent variables | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|--|----------------|----|-------------|-------|------|
| Teachers negative attitude towards academic aspects. | 8771.209 | 2 | 4385.605 | 46.34 | .000 |
| Teachers' positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects | 27058.439 | 2 | 13529.219 | 60.92 | .000 |

Table3: The pairwise comparisons of the group means (Tukey HSD)

| Dependent Variable | (I) Group name | (J) Group name | Mean Difference (I-J) | Sig. |
|--|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|------|
| Teachers negative attitude towards academic aspects. | Emirate | Jordan | -12.16283(*) | .000 |
| | | America | 3.30383 | .504 |
| | Jordan | America | 15.46667(*) | .000 |
| Teachers' positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects | Emirate | Jordan | 22.57841(*) | .000 |
| | | America | 11.69174(*) | .028 |
| | Jordan | America | -10.88667(*) | .046 |

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Results and Discussion

Many of the findings in this study corroborate the results of earlier studies (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007) regarding the components of inclusive education that involve being responsive to the diversity of the classroom

and helping the students to focus on their culture, attitudes, and beliefs while working with other classmates.

Responses on survey items indicated that Emirate teachers are more likely to have positive attitudes towards academic aspects that relate to inclusion than Jordanians teachers (mean diff. = -12.16283, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) and American teachers have more positive attitudes than Jordanian teachers (mean diff. = 15.46667, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) but there is no difference between Emirate and American teachers who have the same attitudes ($P = 0.50 > 0.01$). As a result the study shows that Emirate and American teachers are committed to implementing inclusion and were prepared to alter services for students as students' needs changed. One reason of this result could be the lack of pre-service training that Jordanian teachers received prior to the work with children with Special needs comparing to the pre-service preparation that is provided in USA or UAE. In this regard, the mean values of teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects were ranged from 1.99 to 4.10. Specifically, teachers scored the highest mean on curriculum (mean = 4.10, Std. 1.126). They believe that the "curriculum does not meet the needs of children with special needs" followed by item "general teachers do not have the adequate training to deal with children with disabilities" (mean = 4.07, Std. 1.099).

This result agrees with previous research that emphasized the need for general education faculty to be trained in order for the inclusion movement to be successful (Hammond, 2003; Praisner, 2003).

When it comes to the items related to the attitudes toward the academic aspects the majority of Jordanian and UAE teachers highlighted that special and general educators do not collaborate enough to provide services to students in their schools. USA early childhood teachers were more positive and more than half of them stated that collaboration with special education was a big success for their inclusion work. This success was due to the support of administration. With the same line of thought, Praisner (2003) demonstrates the importance of principals' attitudes for the successful inclusion of students with disabilities.

On the other hand, the findings of this study reveal that the lowest mean value of teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects is associated with teachers who believe that the resource rooms and facilities do not support inclusive efforts (mean = 1.98 Std. 1.013). Conversely, teachers believe that an inclusion creates discipline problems portrays the lowest mean of score on the social and emotional aspects (mean = 2.40 Std. 1.057). In general, the overall mean values show that teachers are more likely to have positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects (mean = 89.20, Std. 18.46) than negative attitude towards academic aspects (mean = 67.87, Std. 11.53).

Like Freire (2009) this study reveals many contradictions on the legislative level that make the implementation of the teachers' new ideas of inclusion difficult to be achieved. In addition, the invisible parts of teaching such as philosophy and value as well as attitude of teachers in three different geographical contexts were different. For example, the previous research about Arab teachers' attitudes toward inclusion showed negative attitudes toward the idea of inclusion (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003). This study describes the shift in the attitudes to a more positive values and more understanding that the basic role in teaching children with special needs is the responsibility of regular education and not special education.

In general, there was a support of the idea of inclusion but there were many obstacles in Jordan and UAE schools. For example, there was an agreement that curriculum does not meet the needs of children with special needs. So, when it comes to implementation and demonstration general education teachers do not know how to modify the guidelines of this specific curriculum to the individual needs in their classrooms. This fact increases the instructional load of regular education teachers.

The study revealed an important difference between USA, Jordan, and UAE contexts with regard to family support of inclusion practices. In USA, teachers mentioned that children's parents play an important role in facilitating teacher's efforts with their child whereas UAE teachers and Jordanian teachers did not show the same level of family support regarding inclusion practices.

On the other hand, the study findings show that Emirate teachers are more likely to have more positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects than Jordanians teachers (mean diff. = 22.58, $P = 0.00 < 0.01$) and American teachers (mean diff. = 11.69, $P = .028 < 0.01$). Jordanians teachers have less positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects than American teachers (mean diff. = -10.88667, $P = 0.046 < 0.05$). Although teachers from three different countries shared their attitudes and thoughts about different inclusion practices, all of them shared similar goals and values with regard to the equity that can be achieved in the quality inclusive classroom. But when it comes to practice there was gap between the theory of inclusive education and the actual practices which are influenced by economic factors, especially in Jordan and the UAE which negatively affect the adequate services that are needed to achieve successful inclusion. In this regard, one recommendation from teachers of this study is that in order to achieve a successful inclusion practices complex issues need to be addressed. These issues include: adequate training for general early childhood teachers and families and the principals, class load, support, time and collaboration.

Conclusion

Exploring the views of early childhood teachers in different contexts and their attitudes of inclusive education reveals some overlapping themes and other new ideas and themes. Additionally, the importance of international collaboration and dialogue cannot be overemphasized (Yssel, et.al, 2007). This study highlights that inclusion movement as an international trend needs more challenging efforts to have its philosophy being heard. It needs more collaboration efforts starting from the child with special needs, his or her family, regular children and their families, general teachers, special education educators, principals, and the whole community. Inclusion philosophy reflects hope and positive values but it needs to be implemented correctly in our classrooms. Specifically, training is needed in order to prepare general teachers to adjust their practices. This highlights an important implication which is the importance of revisiting study programs at the university level and revising it. Policymakers should revise curricula and make it clear for all of the institutions in the country that the success of inclusion movement is a success of the nation where every child's needs are met. As a result, administrators, special education teachers need to be more understanding and open-minded to further opportunities for support by continuously providing in-service training for general education early childhood teachers. The findings of this study supported previous research and added new insights from different contexts in order to help improve the current practices in the developing countries. In addition, understanding these complex ecologies hopefully can influence the policy makers in these different countries to improve their own practices in the field of inclusion by establishing a well-rounded inclusion policy that matches their own context.

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