

Teachers Who Face the Challenges of Educational Integration in Palestine

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Abstract: The objective of this study was to investigate and recognise teachers' perceptions regarding the most significant difficulties faced by the programme for integrating students with disabilities into regular classes in Bethlehem; in particular, perspectives of the current situation and the ideal scenario were obtained. A descriptive methodology was utilised, and the parameters of reliability and validity were applied to the elaboration of a survey. The results were organised in accordance with the topics addressed by teachers' opinions, which included students, teachers, parents, schools, curricula, extracurricular activities, classroom management, teaching methodology, and awareness and attitude.

Keywords: Integration, Students with Disabilities, Challenges.

INTRODUCTION

All students have a right to an education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [1], regardless of their particular characteristics or difficulties. This right is justified from an educational perspective because the need to integrate education for all children requires schools to create modes of teaching that accommodate different individuals from a social perspective because an integrated education for all children creates the foundation for a more just society by encouraging individuals to peacefully coexist and, from an economic perspective, because an integrative education for all children is less costly than the establishment of different types of schools [2-4].

The principles of integrative education involve the termination of labelling, special education, and special classrooms; however, this approach does not entail ending the support and services that should be provided in integrated classrooms [5-7].

Current educational policies emphasise the accommodation of the diverse traits of every student who participates in an educational process, allowing all of these students to learn together in the same community. In the integration model, there are no

admission prerequisites for selecting which children access an educational system. Thus, there is no discrimination in these selections, ensuring that all students enjoy equal educational rights, opportunities, and prospects for participation [3, 4, 8, 9]. Integrative education also entails the identification and elimination of barriers and the transformation of the educational system to address children's diverse educational needs, including any applicable disabilities, therefore guaranteeing a quality education for all students [12, 10-13].

An integrated school attempts to guarantee that everyone's right to be considered is recognised. These types of schools also seek to ensure that all students regard themselves as members of their educational community, regardless not only of their social class, culture, ideology, sex, and ethnicity but also of their personal situations with respect to intellectual giftedness or physical, intellectual, or sensory disabilities [14]. In this context, we refer to the Education for All (EFA) movement, which has the objective of engaging populations that are excluded or at risk of exclusion from education.

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In Palestine, much work must still be accomplished to achieve educational integration. Although Palestinian regulations adhere to the international framework [1, 15] for integration, educational realities differ from these ideals. Thus, educational integration faces many challenges, and there exist certain programmes, regulations, and organisations that inadvertently reinforce inequality. For this reason, a change in attitudes and mentalities is necessary among both teachers and members of the educational administration in Palestine.

Teachers and Integration

Various studies addressing teachers' attitudes and opinions regarding disabilities, students with disabilities, and integration have indicated that the success and implementation of any integration policy is greatly dependent on teachers' attitudes and beliefs [16, 5, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21].

Certain authors [22] have suggested that if teachers are not involved in planning and training, they will develop negative attitudes towards integration that affect their roles. These authors have also argued that teachers' indifferent or negative attitudes can have damaging repercussions for students with disabilities, causing these students to experience feelings of alienation, psycho-social anxiety, and a profound sense of inferiority due to their disabilities [16, 23]. Students with positive attitudes towards their disabled counterparts can facilitate integration, whereas students with negative attitudes can impede integration [24-26]. Teachers should receive the training and resources necessary to provide children with personalised instruction and thereby facilitate successful integration. We therefore conclude by noting that the success of educational integration is greatly dependent on whether teachers possess the desire and skills to implement educational and integrative approximations.

The mere provision of education for all is inadequate if this education does not guarantee quality and integration. Teachers are recognised as a crucial factor in achieving optimal educational practices. The classroom is the setting in which understanding and respect for diversity are learned; in the classroom, students acquire values, obtain knowledge, and form ideas about societal expectations and responsibilities. Teachers serve as models and mediators in these learning processes and are therefore indispensable to the establishment of an integrative society that values, allows, and promotes the participation of all citizens in the development of a nation.

The current study therefore provides a timely and relevant examination of the issue of inclusive education, a topic that has been addressed by a large body of international research, particularly in the Arab world [27-34].

Moreover, there is a current need to generate greater awareness regarding the need for and right to an integrative education and the importance of an integrative education for disabled children in Palestine. This study attempts to explore teachers' perspectives and attitudes with respect to integration. From this basis, this investigation seeks to generate awareness regarding this issue and encourage participation in the search for just alternatives that improve the current situation and offer genuine opportunities for integration. It is necessary to change teachers' perspectives as well as the attitudes of all interested parties, including local governments, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, teachers, parents, and educational advisors. Furthermore, it is important to improve support and services for disabled children in schools.

This study is intended to inform the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education regarding the state of integration practices in schools that contend with students with disabilities as well as the most significant difficulties that teachers face in executing the existing programme for integrating special needs students into regular classes.

It is hoped that the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education will utilise this report as a basis for beginning to implement positive changes in the current education system, strengthen the programme for integrating students with specific support needs into regular classes, and foster appropriate integration practices in all schools.

Study Objectives

The objective of this study was to explore teachers' stances regarding difficulties related to the current programme for incorporating students with disabilities into regular classrooms in Bethlehem.

On one hand, it touches on how the teachers of Bethlehem (Palestine) view the present integration (the reality of the schools), and on the other hand, how they would like integration to be (the ideal situation for integration in their schools). In order to enhance their answers, they were asked to list ten linked aspects of the development of any kind of educational process, and finally, an integrative process. They were then to describe what is going on (the reality) and what should occur (the ideal) during the integration process with the following ten aspects: students with disabilities, professors, parents, school administration, school, curricula, class work, extracurricular activities, teaching methodology, and finally, awareness and attitude.

METHOD

Study Sample

The study's sample was composed of 340 Palestinian teachers who teach in regular classrooms that include students with disabilities. The study was performed during the 2016-2017 academic year in

Bethlehem, and participants were chosen using a stratified random sampling approach. The sample size was calculated using an online sample size calculator (accessible at <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>) and incorporated a margin of error of 5%.

The city of Bethlehem was selected for examination in this study in part because this city features an average educational area that is representative of the country of Palestine as a whole with respect to population density and number of schools. In addition, Bethlehem contains private schools. This city was also chosen for this investigation because of its geographic location as it includes three refugee camps with Red Cross schools. Moreover, another factor impacting the selection of the study setting was that Bethlehem was the first educational district to implement the aforementioned integration programme; in particular, this city has not only implemented initiatives to supply classrooms with integration-related resources but has also provided three guides for an integrative education.

Study Procedure

This study used polling as the sampling method and a survey as the data collection instrument. This survey contained two sections. The first survey section was utilised to collect information regarding various demographic characteristics of Palestinian teachers, such as gender, academic qualifications, years of experience, school authority, school location, type of student disabilities, and grade level taught. The second survey section asked respondents to address the difficulties and challenges associated with the integration of disabled Palestinian students in regular classrooms. These survey items were categorised into the 10 aforementioned areas of consideration, as described in Annex 1 (attached). Participating teachers provided two responses to items in this section of the survey. In particular, the left column was used to indicate “current reality” with respect to integration-related difficulties, whereas the right column was used to indicate responses in an “ideal world”. In both columns, the scale used for each item ranged from 1-4, with scores of 1, 2, 3, and 4 representing “strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, and “strongly agree”, respectively.

The Validity and Reliability of the Study Instrument

The survey was validated using the expert opinions of 24 specialised arbitrators from various institutions, including Al-Quds University, Bethlehem

University, Birzeit University, Al-Quds Open University, the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Higher Education, the Bethlehem District Education Director’s Office, Bard University in the United States, and the University of Granada. These experts provided comments that were incorporated into the final version of the survey.

Survey reliability was calculated separately for the responses that reflected “current reality” and the responses given the supposition of an “ideal situation”. Tukey’s test for non-additivity produced a significance value of 0.000 for the former responses, and a reliability analysis of these responses by blocks using Cronbach’s alpha produced values of 0.949 and 0.951, confirming the high reliability of the survey. Therefore, the study instrument’s first use, measuring the “current reality” of school integration in Palestine, exhibited high reliability. The same procedure was used for reliability assessments of the second use of the study instrument, which involved measuring the “ideal situation” regarding school integration in Palestine; similar results were obtained, with Cronbach’s alpha values between 0.979 and 0.980, reaffirming the survey’s high reliability in this context.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

To attain our research objective, we calculated descriptive statistics using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; v20). Which tests were used? t-test or others? Please clarify here. Did you just compare based on mean scores? Why you did not check the significant difference? Since you have data. you may add to your study....

FINDINGS

We have addressed our research objective by providing comparisons between teachers’ opinions regarding the reality of integration (integration-related difficulties) and the ideal of integration (integration-related challenges) in the 10 areas examined by the survey.

The following chart (figure 1.1.) depicts a global and panoramic view of the two series of results. The first series (in blue) indicates the average scores that Palestinian teachers provided regarding their current realities and the difficulties of school integration. The second series (in red) indicates these teachers’ wishes or their beliefs regarding required changes, revealing the challenges that must be overcome to achieve educational integration.

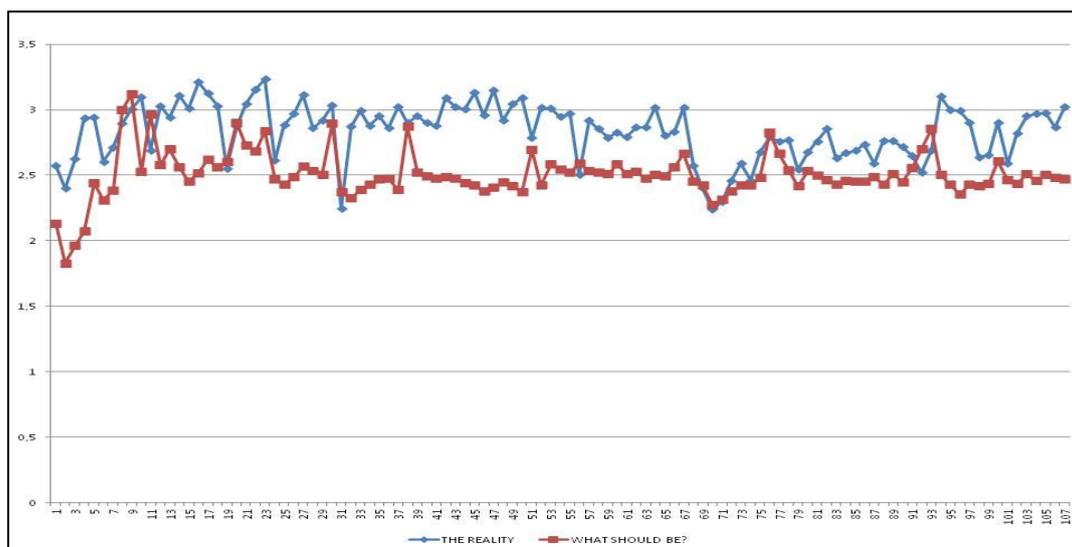


Fig-1.1: A General Mean Comparison between the Reality and the Ideal

The initial analysis indicates that the teacher participants of the study maintain the position that the professors, parents, and school are doing well with regard to integration. In other words, the parents, professors, and school are assuming responsibility for the functioning of the integration's development process. On the other hand, survey respondents perceive the current integration to have problems with the students, administration's behaviour, curricula, class work, extracurricular activities, teaching methodology, and degree of awareness and commitment.

With regard to the ideal situation, or the integration that they desire, the results are clear: all of the dimensions should be improved.

In continuation, we offer a more profound analysis that allows us to understand the real difficulties, and which changes are required to achieve the ideal situation in each of the examined dimensions.

1) With regard to Students with Disabilities (items 1 to 10): Teachers stated that among the difficulties encountered in the integration process, disabled children are not accepted by other children, face negligence and rejection in regular classrooms, are ashamed to engage in school activities in front of other children, feel that they do not belong in the regular classroom, and exhibit unsatisfactory academic progress and growth. Changes and challenges in integration processes should be oriented towards not only helping students with disabilities develop their potential and their motivation for learning but also designing programmes that prepare these students for classroom participation and assist their efforts to form good social relationships in their immediate environments.

You should put your proof...for example mean scores....

2) Concerning Teachers (items 11 to 23): In this area, current realities (difficulties) coincided with the desired situations (challenges). Teachers recognised that integration-related problems exist and agree that these issues must be overcome to achieve change. Teachers' difficulties and challenges pertain to a lack of training regarding the treatment of students with disabilities, differing convictions regarding the integration process, a lack of psychological stimulation, inadequate teacher support services, and a dearth of financial and human support.

3) With regard to Parents (items 24 to 30): Teachers believed that various integration-related difficulties existed among parents. In particular, respondents stated that parents do not accept the integration of their children into regular classrooms, are unaware of the importance of the integration process, do not maintain lasting and effective communications with schools, and do not participate in decisions that affect educational programmes. The challenges included developing conferences, workshops, or brochures that explain the benefits and importance of the integration process and facilitating communication between the families of children without problems and the families of children with disabilities.

4) Regarding School Administrators (items 31 to 42): Teachers stated that administrators did not foresee the conditions required for the integration of students with disabilities; thus, administrators not only offer inadequate support services for these students but also provide insufficient psychological care, health and rehabilitation services, and private institutions for diagnosing and detecting disabilities among students at an early age. Overcoming these challenges would require transforming the disposition of the Palestinian educational system to welcome students with disabilities and implementing increased coordination

among the control mechanisms of the institutions responsible for working with these students.

5) Concerning the School Environment (items 43 to 52): Teachers noted the absence of a special budget for activities involving students with disabilities, a lack of appropriate sanitary conditions not only in school classrooms but also in the few extant activity areas, and a dearth of tables, chairs, and toilets adapted to the sizes and other physical requirements of disabled children. The responding teachers expressed a desire for facilities that could assist students with disabilities and for the needs of these students to be considered in the construction of schools, classrooms, bathrooms, halls, and patios.

6) With regard to the Curricula (items 53 to 64): Teachers agreed that current curricula do not promote integration and that existing courses of study do not develop positive attitudes towards students with disabilities. The responding teachers also stated that there is a lack of scientific and educational methods for evaluating students with disabilities that account for these students' individual differences from typical norms. Moreover, no system has been implemented to identify the educational needs of either regular students or students with disabilities. Therefore, the challenges that must be addressed to achieve the educational reality that teachers desire include developing a course of study that diversifies the approaches used to satisfy the different needs of students with disabilities; providing clear instructions for evaluating student performance, accounting for disabilities; adapting curricular content to stimulate creativity and scientific thought among students with cognitive disabilities; and creating after-school programmes to monitor disabled children.

7) Regarding Classroom Management (items 65 to 75): One highly relevant difficulty in the Palestinian educational system is a dearth of effective communication between students and their parents. There also exists a lack of familiarity with teaching methods for behaviour modification that could be implemented to incorporate students with disabilities into regular classrooms. Changes to classroom management should address the need to account for individual differences among students and the objective of equitably applying the same punishment and reward methods for all students.

8) Concerning Extracurricular Activities (items 76 to 81): At present, teachers neither teach daily life skills to students with disabilities nor promote the full participation of these students during trips and excursions. Teachers also do not involve students with disabilities in activities with other schools. Changes should focus on training students with disabilities in various activities, such as dressing themselves, transportation, and shopping, and facilitating sporting activities adapted for these students.

9) With regard to Teaching Methods and Teaching Aids (items 82 to 93): Current methods and teaching aids do not account for the needs of students with disabilities. They also do not foster active learning and participation, stimulate thinking skills, or focus on either the humanities or social learning. Educational activities neither reflect the diverse natures of students' actual lives and environments nor effectively incorporate the use of modern technologies. The survey results indicate that teachers' desired changes are centred on increasing the diversity of teaching methods and aids that may be adapted to a particular educational context, correctly utilising these methods, and providing resource rooms and special education teachers to help disabled children.

10) Regarding Awareness and Attitudes (items 94 to 107): There is currently a dearth of specialists and information (such as brochures, studies, or seminars) to orient teachers and students regarding the treatment of students with disabilities. Due to a lack of awareness of the importance of integration processes, teachers have not changed their attitudes towards disabled children, and many teachers believe that the presence of these students in classrooms could produce negative effects. Schools are unsupervised and lack knowledge of legislation pertaining to the integration process. There are neither specialised centres for early diagnosis and detection of disabilities nor adequate materials and equipment for the development of integration programmes. As reflected by the study results, considerable integration-related difficulties continue to persist in Palestine, and substantial changes are required. The first change that is enacted should entail increasing the involvement of parents of students with disabilities in the integration process.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Our objective was to understand the reality of integrative education and the position it should have in Palestine. Nevertheless, we recognize the great limitations of having a reduced sample size, restricted to the city of Bethlehem, and not having studied the entire country. In spite of this, our sample is comprehensive and our data has been treated with the utmost rigor.

The principle conclusion of this study is that professors are experiencing quite a few difficulties in the integration process of their classrooms. Among these, the lack of training and planning is considered to be an aspect that influences the integration process, similar to in the study conducted by Beyene and Tizazu [22].

But there is still hope. The faculty's attitude influences the success of the integration process. This idea is supported by the studies produced by Thaver and Lim [16], Kim [5], Ojok and Wormnaes [17], Sheylin *et al.* [18], Slee [19], Florian *et al.* [20], Larrivee and

Cook [35,36], and is also reflected in our work. The faculty understands that the integration process must be modified and that a series of changes must occur in order to make progress. The fact that professors make a critical evaluation about the aspects that must be changed makes us think positively towards the possibility of change occurring. In this way, the faculty proposes undertaking a diverse set of changes in different areas: a) the education legislation in favour of a greater flexibility in the institutions and in the training of involved agents; b) designing an educative curricula to diversify possibilities for tending to the needs of students with disabilities; c) amplifying the means and methods of class work in teaching methodology in order to adapt to every distinct situation; d) changing the school's infrastructure (hallways, classrooms, bathrooms, courtyards) so that the establishment adjusts to sanitary and academic criteria; and e) raising awareness between the faculty, parents and students in the classroom about the importance and benefits of the integration process.

We have hope that this study will allow Bethlehem's Ministry of Education and the District's Education Department to make decisions that will favour the integration process and drive the reforms demanded by the faculty.

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