

**INTERNATIONAL VIEWS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF  
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR'S PERCEPTIONS IN JORDAN, UNITED ARAB  
EMIRATES, AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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*The purpose of this research was to explore and describe early childhood educators' perceptions of academic aspects and social and emotional aspects of inclusion practices. In this comparative international quantitative research an attitudinal demographic survey was distributed to 300 early childhood educators in mandated kindergartens and primary public schools in urban areas of Amman/Jordan, Sharjah and northern areas/United Arab Emirates, and Southwestern/U.S.A. The main highlighted themes included: teachers' attitudes toward academic aspects of inclusion practices, teachers' attitudes toward social and emotional aspects that affect inclusive practices in different contexts.*

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 non-disabled peers. This comparative study added new insights that provide an understanding of the complexity of practices of inclusive education. Although all educators in the study agreed and advocated for the idea of inclusive education, the practices varied 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 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 be provided education in the least restrictive environment. In the 1980s 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 proposed 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 (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 et al., 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 was to explore and describe early childhood educators' perceptions of the inclusive practices in their classrooms. The central research questions were: *What are early childhood educators' inclusive experiences* and *What are the factors that contribute to or hinder their success in inclusive classrooms?* Specifically, the research explores the perceptions of early childhood educators regarding the academic and social and emotional aspects of inclusive practices in kindergarten.

The hypotheses of this research are:

H1: 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).

H2: 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).

H3: There are no significant differences between the negative attitude of Emirate, Jordanians, and Americans" teachers towards academic aspects.

H4: There are no significant differences between the positive attitude of Emirate, Jordanians, and Americans" teachers towards social and emotional aspects.

In this comparative research an attitudinal demographic survey was distributed to a sample of early childhood educators in primary public schools and kindergartens in three different countries: Jordan, United Arab Emirates and the Southern United States of America in demographically similar settings.

#### *Theoretical Framework*

The framework of this research was built on the 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 et al., 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 was 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 utilized the constructivist principles of voice, collaboration, and inclusion that are implicit in the school restructuring and inclusive education reform movements (McHatton & McCray, 2007; Skrtic et al., 1996; Wotherspoon, 2004). By honoring the voice of early childhood teachers from different geographical contexts we examined the perceptions within and across complex social and cultural ecologies. By doing so we opened new windows of collaboration.

A second lens that we utilized in this research was 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 had an equal opportunity to voice their visions, thoughts, and attitudes toward inclusive education. We hoped that by inviting these parties a clearer picture of inclusive education could be presented. Furthermore, Cannella (1997) discussed critical issues in regards to early childhood education and how we as early childhood educators need to *problematize what we know* (p. 12) and started 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 connected with the idea of this research that focuses on problematizing how early childhood educators perceived 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, was to give early childhood educators from different contexts the opportunity to construct their own meaning toward inclusive education. Cannella's (2002) critique of the current dominant discourse in early childhood education is that 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 was to open new windows for early childhood teachers in different contexts to construct their own experiences and perspectives toward what was currently happening in their practice of inclusive education.

## Methods

### *Participants*

To test the research's hypotheses, 300 questionnaires were randomly distributed to solicit data from early childhood teachers who taught in mandated kindergartens and primary schools in specific areas of Jordan, United Arab Emirates and the Southwestern United States of America. Specifically, the questionnaires covered Amman city kindergartens and primary schools. Amman is the capital of Jordan and 100 questionnaires were sent to the schools of this city. With regard to the United Arab Emirates, Sharjah and the northern areas kindergartens and primary schools of the United Arab Emirates participated in this research. When it comes to the United States of America the focus was on a specific area in the Southwestern/U.S.A. The teachers were informed that the purpose of the research was to learn about early childhood teachers' perceptions about the inclusive practices in their classrooms of students who may have disabilities in the regular educational system. The participant teachers were also assured that their responses would remain anonymous. Several questionnaires were dropped from the analysis since teachers returned them late or lacked certain data, leaving a total of 225 respondents. No monetary incentive was given to the respondents who completed the questionnaire.

In relation to the sample characteristics, the sample was predominantly female (90%). When it comes to the field of early childhood education, the majority of teachers were female. Almost half of the teachers who participated in this research ranged from 30-39 years of age (49%). The demographic data showed that the majority of the participants had a bachelor's degree (85%). When it comes to the participants' teaching experiences, half of the teachers had general experiences ranging from 8 years and above (50%). Almost half of the participants had 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 included 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 included two major aspects. The first aspect was teachers' attitudes toward academic aspects and the second focus was 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 Cranach'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 Cranach's Alpha coefficient for these items = 0.93. Typical items included, *inclusion does not cause aggressive behaviour 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 included background information of inclusive education, demographic information, and open-ended questions about teachers' satisfaction and attitudes of inclusive practices. One hundred questionnaires were distributed through the researchers to 20 kindergartens and primary public schools in Amman (Jordan). Another 100 questionnaire were distributed to 20 kindergartens and primary public schools in Sharjah and northern areas (UAE).

Furthermore, 100 questionnaires were sent to 20 kindergartens and primary public schools in Las Cruces, New Mexico in the USA.

### Results

The first hypothesis of this research indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects of inclusion practices 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 indicated that the finding that teachers who had negative attitudes towards academic aspects of inclusion practices was positively related to the areas (United Arab Emirates, Southwestern USA, 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 this finding was 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 was 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 had negative attitude towards academic aspects of inclusion practices was 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 lead to accept the null hypothesis partially. Specifically, there was a statistically significant relationship between teachers' negative attitude towards academic aspects of inclusion practices and areas, grade level teaching, previous inclusive teaching experience, and the number of college courses taken in inclusion. In contrast, there was no statistically significant association with teachers' gender, ages, educational levels, general teaching experience, and level of education.

The second hypothesis indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between teachers' positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects of inclusion practices 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 indicated that teachers' positive attitudes towards social and emotional aspects of inclusion practices were not related to (1) teachers gender; Chi-square value = 46.463,  $df = 69$ ,  $P = 0.98 > 0.05$ , (2) teachers ages; Chi-square value = 234.656,  $df = 207$ ,  $P = 0.09 > 0.05$ , and (3) educational levels; Chi-square value = 204.234,  $df = 207$ ,  $P = 0.54 > 0.05$ . In addition, teachers' positive attitudes toward social and emotional aspects of inclusion practices were not related to (1) the general teaching experience; Chi-square value = 194.921,  $df = 207$ ,  $P = 0.71 > 0.05$ , (2) grade level taught; Chi-square value = 239.008,  $df = 276$ ,  $P = 0.95 > 0.05$ , and (3) the number of college courses taken in inclusion; Chi-square value = 236.268,  $df = 276$ ,  $P = 0.08 > 0.05$ .

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

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 of inclusion practices than Southwestern USA and United Arab Emirates' teachers who participated in this research. Similarly, United Arab Emirates teachers showed more negative attitude towards academic aspects of inclusion practices than Southwestern USA teachers did. While the United Arab Emirates teachers exhibited more positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects than Southwestern USA's and Jordanian teachers did, the Southwestern USA teachers held more positive attitude than Jordanian teachers did. Since these indications are not enough to determine the statistically 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 suggested that at least one nation differed 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 does not reflect which nation (s) has the superiority across the dependent variables. Therefore, Tukey's HSD paired comparisons tests were used.

**Table 1. Mean Comparison between the Participating Countries**

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
Southwestern USA	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

As shown in Table 3, Tukey's 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 Southwestern USA teachers who participated in this research (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.

**Table3. The Pair Wise Comparisons of the Group's 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
		USA	3.30383	.504
	Jordan	USA	15.46667(*)	.000
Teachers' positive attitude towards social and emotional aspects	Emirate	Jordan	22.57841(*)	.000
		USA	11.69174(*)	.028
	Jordan	USA	-10.88667(*)	.046

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

## Discussion

Some of the findings in this study corroborated the results of earlier studies (Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2009; Yssel et al., 2007) that highlighted 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. The other findings of this research highlighted specific issues related to the specific context of this study.

Responses on survey items indicated that Emirate teachers were more likely to have positive attitudes towards academic aspects of inclusion practices than Jordanian teachers, Southwestern USA teachers had more positive attitudes than Jordanian teachers. However, there was no Statistically significant difference between Emirate and Southwestern USA teachers. As a result, this study showed that Emirate and Southwestern early childhood educators were committed to implementing inclusion practices 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 ranged from 1.99 to 4.10. Specifically, teachers scored the highest Mean on survey items that highlights curriculum issues (Mean = 4.10, Std. 1.126). From the survey items teachers believed that the *curriculum does not meet the needs of children with special needs* followed by the survey item that states *general teachers do not have the adequate training to deal with children with disabilities* (Mean = 4.07, Std. 1.099). This result agreed 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 survey items that related to the attitudes toward the academic aspects of inclusive practices, 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. Southwestern 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 revealed 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 believed that inclusion created 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 showed that teachers were 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 revealed many contradictions on the legislative level that made the implementation of the teachers' new ideas of inclusion difficult to achieve. In addition, the invisible parts of teaching such as philosophy and value as well as attitude of early childhood educators 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 described 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 Southwestern USA, Jordan, and UAE contexts with regard to family support of inclusion practices. In Southwestern USA, early childhood educators 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's findings showed that Emirate teachers were 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 were influenced by economic factors, especially in Jordan and the UAE which negatively affected the adequate services that were needed to achieve successful inclusion. In this regard, one recommendation from teachers of this study was that in order to achieve a successful inclusion practices complex issues needed 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

The main aim of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions toward inclusion practices in different places of this world. The importance of international collaboration and dialogue cannot be overemphasized (Yssel, et al., 2007). The findings of the 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 early childhood educators, special education educators, principals, and the whole community. As the study findings highlighted that the general attitudes toward social and emotional aspects of inclusion idea were positive. The teachers 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. This fact negatively affected the adequate services that are needed to achieve successful inclusive practices.

Inclusion philosophy reflects hope and positive values but more efforts are needed to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of inclusion. This can be achieved by improving the services and the physical environment of the classrooms to be more welcoming. In addition, more investment should be given to improve the academic aspects of inclusion practices. Specifically, general early childhood teachers in UAE and Jordan need more training in order to be prepared to adjust their practices to meet the inclusion needs. This highlights an important implication which is the importance of revisiting study programs at the university level and revising it. In this way institutions of higher education should offer more courses about inclusion practices. Also, policymakers should revise curricula and edit it to meet the requirements of inclusion philosophy. 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 professional development opportunities by continuously providing in-service training for general education early childhood teachers.

When it comes to the relationship with parents of children in the inclusive classrooms, this study showed a gap between the American early childhood educator's practices and UAE and Jordanian practices. The success of inclusion practices is strongly related to parents' support. So, American teachers who participated in this research felt more comfortable in finding supports from parents whereas UAE and Jordanian teachers who responded to the questionnaires still find hardship in communicating and getting more support from parents of children in their classroom. This lack of communication hinders the possibility of implementing successful inclusive practices. These new insights from different contexts that presented in this research can help improve the current practices in the developing countries that need to work more on parent involvement if they aim to implement inclusive practices in early childhood settings. Understanding these complex ecologies hopefully can influence the policy makers in 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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