Barriers to Including Children with Disabilities in Egyptian Schools

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate teachers' perceptions of barriers to including children with disabilities in general schools in Egypt. This descriptive, qualitative study drew on a purposive sample of twelve general and special education teachers within two educational districts in Cairo, Egypt. Through in-depth interviews, teachers were asked about their perceptions of the barriers that hinder the implementation of inclusive education in Egypt. Four categories of barriers were identified: structural-organizational, personal, interpersonal and socio-cultural barriers. The findings showed that these barriers are related and interact to affect teachers' beliefs about the possibility of the implementation of inclusion in Egypt. In addition, the study argues that "barriers to inclusion" is a very complicated issue that includes many interrelated contextual factors that should be addressed to implement inclusion effectively. The results indicate that differential change procedures should be followed if we would like to enhance the learning of children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Key Words: Inclusive Education, Disabilities, Barriers, Teacher Education, Egypt

BARRIERS TO INCLUDING CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES IN EGYPTIAN SCHOOLS

A number of countries around the world have committed to providing all children the right to an education without discrimination by signing the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). An important focus of both the CRC and the CRPD is that educational practices be *inclusive*, rather than merely integrative, to create equal opportunities for all children. Whereas integration implies that children with disabilities are to be brought into a pre-existing framework of prevailing standards, inclusion is possible only when schools are designed and administered so that *all* children can experience quality learning together. As such, inclusion requires a significant amount of reform across most countries' education systems.

Egypt signed and ratified the CRC and the CRPD in 2007, thereby obligating themselves to eliminate discrimination against children with disabilities and to make their inclusion into the educational system a priority (Ghoneim, 2014). However, inclusive education represents a relatively new practice within the Egyptian education system, as children with disabilities continue to be educated in segregated settings and integration is practiced only on a limited basis (Hassanein, 2015). Following Egypt's endorsement of the CRPD, Egypt issued a Ministerial Decree in 2009, updated in 2015, mandating the admission of students with mild disabilities in public and private schools, with the goal of supporting 5,040 schools to successfully include more than 152,000 students with

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disabilities by 2012 (Ministry of Education (MoE), 2014; Parnell, 2017).

Although some progress has been made towards advancing inclusive education in Egypt, the progress made to date falls woefully short of the targeted goals outlined in Egypt's National Strategic Plans. For example, in 2013, Egypt's Ministry of Education (MoE) estimated that less than 2% out of an estimated two million school-age children with disabilities were enrolled in schools of any kind, with most receiving services in segregated special education schools (Alkhateeb, Hadidi, & Alkhateeb, 2016; Hassanein, 2015; Parnell, 2017). Of the small percentage of students with disabilities enrolled, only 7% were enrolled in general education schools across Egypt (MoE, 2014; Parnell, 2017). Moreover, some studies indicate that the overwhelming majority of students with disabilities enrolled in general education schools remain only partially included or integrated, spending the majority of their school day in special education units or special classrooms and receiving instruction of limited quality (Emam & Mohamed, 2011; Hassanein, 2015; Parnell, 2017).

The challenge of translating the commitment to inclusive education as outlined in the CRC and CRPD into a sustainable practice implemented with fidelity plagues many education systems around the world, including Egypt's (Hassanein, 2015). The education system in Egypt has been a topic of criticism by both politicians and scholars due to the lack of facilities, equipment, and qualified teaching staff in addition to the absence of model curricula that can support inclusive education practices (Emam & Mohamed, 2011; Hassanein, 2015). Monitoring reports of the CRC acknowledge that the challenges faced by children with disabilities in realizing their right to education remain profound, and that they are one of the most marginalized and excluded groups with respect to education (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019).

It has been argued that the successful implementation of inclusion will require the complete reconstruction of the educational system in order to dismantle the barriers to inclusion (Slee, 2016). As such, there is a need to identify barriers to inclusion as a way for developing both policy and practice that leads to more successful implementation. A number of studies conducted in various countries throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have attempted to document the challenges that hinder the type of changes needed for inclusive education. Reported barriers include a broad array of factors, including teaching position, previous teaching experience, gender, and general education teachers' negative attitudes and perceptions towards the inclusion of learners with disabilities (Alquraini, 2012; Emam & Mohamad, 2011; Ghoneim, 2014). Teachers' negative attitudes may stem from a lack of preparation and training, which limits teachers' ability to differentiate and to provide appropriate instruc-

tion for all students. Therefore, limited preparation and training opportunities are also frequently cited as a significant obstacle towards more effective inclusive practices (Alquraini, 2012; Al-Zyoudi, 2006; Gaad & Almotairi, 2013). Reviews of policies in MENA countries have also indicated that a lack of clearly defined roles, responsibilities and dedicated infrastructure for collaboration and appropriate planning further contribute to teachers' inability to effectively implement inclusive practices (Boutebal & Yahi, 2018; Eleweke & Rodda, 2002). Finally, limited resources including the funding to invest in curriculum, transportation, facilities and professional development are universally cited as significant obstacles towards inclusion (Sobhy, 2012).

Although similar barriers to inclusion have been identified across various countries, the complexity of each single barrier must be examined within the environment in which it is experienced, as the impact on implementation may be context specific (Malinen, et al., 2013). In fact, some researchers and practitioners argue that a major challenge to implementing inclusive education is the attempt to directly adapt the special education system designed in Western nations to countries everywhere (Hassanein, 2015; Kim, 2014). The attempt to directly overlay policies and procedures developed in other nations is thought to contribute to limited progress towards inclusive practices because the specific cultural, political, educational, and material contexts are not considered, and therefore implementation is impractical (Hassanein, 2015; Kim, 2014; Malinen et al., 2013).

An examination of barriers to inclusion is especially important for Egypt, as the role of contextual barriers on the teaching and learning process has been largely missing from the literature (Mansour, 2007). Implementation science research suggests that designing education approaches without regard to contextual and cultural relevance reduces both the fidelity and sustainability of implementation (Sugai, Simonsen, Freeman, & La Salle, 2016), and this appears to be the case for the implementation of inclusion in Egypt. Despite the commitment and efforts towards the development of inclusive education, current practice falls far short of the stated goals as outlined in the Education Egypt National Project 2014-2030 plan (MoE, 2014), underscoring the urgent need for an examination of the barriers that most impact implementation efforts.

One way to better understand the barriers to inclusion is to explore the perceptions of one of the most important stakeholders in any education policy change, teachers. Teachers are the key element in delivering an effective, inclusive education (Alhammad, 2017), sometimes referred to as the street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) who have wide autonomy to implement policy on the ground as they understand and interpret it. Therefore, it is important that teachers have a clear understanding of inclusive education

and a strong commitment to teaching all children. Given that there is limited research in this area in the Egyptian context, the current qualitative study will explore teachers' perceptions about barriers to inclusive education in order to provide some insights for developing current and future policies and practices.

METHOD

This study was conducted using a qualitative design to explore teachers' concerns and advice for creating and maintaining inclusive classrooms for students with disabilities in general education schools in Egypt. A descriptive study was conducted using in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of teachers (Guetterman, 2015).

Participants

Twelve teachers were purposively selected from four schools in Egypt using the maximum variation strategy (Maxwell, 2013). Teachers were recruited through faculty at two universities in Egypt who helped identify teachers based on the sampling criteria. Prior research on inclusion conducted in other MENA nations indicated some differences in teachers' perceptions based on gender, training, experience and context (Alquraini, 2012; Al-Zyoudi, 2006; Muhanna, 2018), therefore, the sampling was designed to include a broad variety of informant experience based on gender, years of experience, school type and grade level. Specifically, the sample consisted of 12 general and special teachers (4 males, 8 females) who taught at different grade levels in different school types. Their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 22 years (M = 12.91 years). Anonymity of the participants is preserved by using alphabetical letters as pseudonyms for teachers. Each interviewee's profile is presented in Table 1.

Procedures

The semi-structured interview format was used in the current study because it is a uniquely sensitive method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world (Kvale, 1996). Questions of the semi-structured interview were piloted with two teachers. The pilot study indicated the time required to conduct the interview, and helped to identify inappropriate or ambiguous wording and the validity of the interview questions. Most of the interview topics and questions were prepared in advance. However, in conducting the main interviews, the order and the wording of the questions were modified and some questions were added or varied as the interview unfolded to ensure the participants grasped the meaning. This means that the interview protocol was fluid and responsive for both the interviewees and interviewer (Kvale, 2008). This approach to interviewing is valuable because it allows the same general information to be collected from each participant, while allowing for a level of flexibility to help the interviewer relate to the participant

Table 1

Interviewees' Profile: Gender, Years of Experience, Position and Work Place

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of experience	School type	Grade level
A	F	22	Sp	S
F	F	10	G	P
G	F	3	Sp	P
H	F	12	G	P
I	F	7	G	P
K	M	18	Sp	S
M	M	9	G	S
S	F	15	Sp	S
T	F	13	Sp	S
U	M	22	G	S
Y	F	16	Sp	P
Z	M	8	G	S

Note. F = female, M = male, Sp = special school, G = general school, S = secondary, P = primary

and follow up on interesting lines that might not otherwise be pursued (Kvale, 2008; Turner, 2010). Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to beginning the interview. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed immediately afterward. Transcripts were returned to each of the teachers for their review before the beginning of the next interview. All interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Figure 1 contains the questions that were used as the basis of the interview.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim, sorted and categorized according to emergent themes around barriers toward including children with disabilities in general schools. The authors used an open coding approach through which an in-depth understanding of the teachers' perceptions and experiences was developed (Kvale, 2008). The analysis began with two of the authors reading through each of the interviews several times and noting key emerging themes and patterns. Codes were developed, examined, compared and re-defined as needed. A constant comparative approach of organizing the data with continual adjustment and discussion among the research team was used throughout the analysis (Kvale, 2008). This process helped to ensure that the codes captured the range of ideas expressed by the participants (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Silverman, 2000). An audit trail of key analytical decisions regarding themes and codes was kept (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 2006). Code–recode and peer examination helped to establish the trustworthiness of the findings (Cohen, et al., 2007; Silverman, 2000).

- Can you please describe how long you have been teaching for (probe for demographics, number of years taught, phase taught, training, etc.)?

- What is your approach to teaching children with disabilities?

- Do you think all children can be included in general school? Why or why not?

- What works well within your classroom in terms of including children with disabilities (educationally, and socially)?

- How far do you think your school is ready for inclusion? (Probe for resources, curriculum, educational environment, teachers' training and attitudes, social views about disabilities, support from MOE and local educational authorities and parents' attitudes and concerns, etc.)?

- In your view, what are the barriers to the implementation of inclusive education in Egypt now? (Probe for personal, social, school related issues, etc.)?

- Do you have any suggestions/advice for how teachers could facilitate the inclusion of children with disabilities in the classroom?

- Is there anything else that you would like to add that we did not get a chance to talk about?

Figure 1:   *Interview Guide*

RESULTS

Teacher responses were coded and then organized into the following four categories: (a) Structural/Organizational, (b) Interpersonal, (c) Personal and (d) Socio-Cultural. We present the data by category, highlighting the major themes within each category and including select data excerpts to support generalization. We analyzed the data to determine whether different themes emerged for teachers based on gender or whether they taught special or general education. For the categories in which differences based on gender or school placement emerged, we included selected data to highlight these differences. Quoted statements are attributed to teachers using the corresponding alphabetical letter assigned to them (see Table 1).

Structural/Organizational Barriers

This category refers to factors related to the way schools in Egypt are organized and structured to preclude successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Several major themes were included in this category: including (a) class sizes and teacher-to-student ratios, (b) the accessibility of school facilities for students with physical disabilities, (c) access to resources to support differentiating the curriculum, (d) access to and relevance of the curriculum, instruction and assessment system, (e) teacher work load and time constraints, and (f) limited financial resources including teacher pay.

Class size. All teachers identified concerns about how to meet the individual needs of students in the context of large teacher to student ratios which are characteristic of most Egyptian schools. All teachers felt that large class sizes would significantly affect the extent to which inclusion could be successfully implemented. One secondary school teacher commented, "Do you think inclusion can work with class sizes of 40 to 50 students? We actually face lots of problems with students in large classes and I think it will be worse if we put some more students with special education needs in such classes" (Teacher K). Nine of the teachers felt there would be a significant demand on their time in providing individualized attention to students with special education needs and that this would compromise their ability to attend to the needs of the other students in their class. One secondary teacher stated that, "Of course if I have a child with special education needs in my class I will have to give him extra attention to ensure that he is

fitting in, and sometimes this takes attention away from other students" (Teacher U).

Accessibility of school facilities. The poor conditions of public schools are one of the major problems facing the education system in Egypt (Ibrahim, 2016), and this was reflected in the teachers' responses. Despite recent efforts by the Egyptian government to build new schools and to improve the existing school facilities (Ibrahim, 2016), all teachers voiced a strong belief that the current condition and structure of most schools in Egypt have limited accessibility for students with disabilities, and this presented a major barrier to inclusion. "Our schools are not designed in a way that gives children with special education needs the opportunity to be in them. The schools are not accessible to them because [when they were being built] there was a dominant understanding that children with disabilities must be isolated – students with intellectual disabilities in a separate school, students who were deaf or hard of hearing in a separate school. . .. So the general schools are not designed and equipped in a way that helps in including children with disabilities" (Teacher S).

Access to and relevance of the state curriculum, instruction and assessment system. Ten teachers indicated concerns with regard to the design of the current curriculum and assessment system. Interestingly, many teachers believed that the goals of the curriculum should be the same for all children – to help develop good citizens. However, the majority of them were concerned that the content of the curriculum couldn't be delivered to all students under the current system. Nine teachers felt that they would be expected to continue to deliver instruction in ways they were currently, using a predominantly lecture and memorization-based approach to instruction to help students meet standards on state assessments, and that this approach would be challenging and ineffective for students with special education needs. One special education teacher commented, "It is impossible to give the same syllabus to students with intellectual disabilities. How can they understand what is expected? To give them such complicated materials, I do not think it would be wise" (Teacher T).

A secondary teacher also commented on the need to differentiate instruction to better meet the needs of students with special education needs, "Curriculum should be simplified while keeping the general aims, and there should be flexibility in teaching. We have to avoid lecturing which most teachers use nowadays. Teachers should be creative and change their teaching styles to support children with special education needs" (Teacher M). Teachers also felt that the assessment system needed to be adapted to provide more opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning. "Exams come in one format to

check students' ability to memorize the content of their textbooks. This needs to change." (Teacher T).

Although teachers recognized the need to differentiate the curriculum, they also indicated a frustration over the lack of resources with which to do so. One of the most common themes in teachers' responses was the limited availability and access to resources to help make instruction more accessible to students with special education needs. "We do not have special equipment which we can use to teach children with special education needs. We need materials like computers" (Teacher G). This prompted at least four teachers to comment that even when their schools had the resources, they were frequently 'off-limits' for routine use. "In our school, all the computer rooms and educational resources rooms are closed. People in charge are close-minded – the most important thing for them is to keep the stuff in good condition?" (Teacher F).

This category was one of the only topics for which differences according to gender or school placement emerged. Male general educators tended to believe that the curriculum should be the same for all children, stating "We are all looking for good citizens, so I do not think that we need to change the aims of the curriculum" (Teacher Z). Female special education teachers believed that a variety of curricular materials and approaches to assessment would be needed within an inclusive system. Comments included, "We need materials like computers" (Teacher G), and, "We should think about other alternatives in assessment and evaluation" (Teacher T).

Teacher work load and lack of time. Related to the issues about differentiating the curriculum, the majority of teachers (n=10) felt that they would be over-loaded with more work and subsequently, they would not have enough time to effectively support the students with special education needs in their classroom. They identified the need for planning and developing educational materials and behavior management as the main additional demands on their time. A secondary teacher said, "I do not think I will have enough time to plan or prepare different materials. Moreover, I cannot find enough time to gain the necessary specialized knowledge from experts" (Teacher Z). Demanding and changing school schedules were also noted as a constraint on teacher time. One teacher commented, "The shortage of teachers and the demands of teaching five periods a day is a lot. Shortages lead to changes in our schedules, and this causes problems to our routine – we frequently have to learn to work with new classes and new schedules" (Teacher M).

Financial resources. There was a consensus that the structural barriers were due in large part to the limited financial resources available to improve the education system, although these concerns tended only to be highlighted by male respondents. One teacher said, "Funding is a major problem. Realistically, inclusion

cannot work without a reasonable budget" (Teacher Z). Financial constraints not only limit the ability to provide adequate facilities and resources but also impacts teacher salaries. As reported in the Egyptian media, the average teacher salary is below the international poverty line of 1,015 Egyptian pounds ($60 USD) per month. The inadequate salary level of teachers has been demonstrated to force many teachers to find supplementary incomes to provide for their families (Bray, 2006; Sobhy, 2012). Many teachers find additional work as private tutors either 'in-school' or after school as a way to increase teacher salaries (Sobhy, 2012), which further limits teachers' opportunities to participate in professional development opportunities. "After 22 years' experience my salary is 750 Egyptian pounds ($45 USD) per month. How can we live and satisfy the needs of our family? No way. Fortunately, I can give private lessons - what about teachers who cannot give private lessons? I know some teachers who work night shifts in restaurants or coffee shops. How can they do this and work in the morning in the school?" (Teacher U).

Interpersonal Barriers

The opportunity for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers, administrators, related services personnel, parents and students with disabilities is frequently cited as critical for successful inclusion (Al-Zyoudi, 2006). It is unsurprising then, that in addition to the limited time to collaborate with each other, all participating teachers indicated concerns about the barriers related to the limited opportunities they had to develop and engage in collaborative relationships with a variety of stakeholders, including school administrators, parents and general education students.

School administrators. Low salaries impact not only teachers but also school administrators in Egypt, resulting in shortages and overworked personnel (Sobhy, 2012). Eleven teachers reflected on the current difficulties which they face with school administration, including requests for additional supports, training and resources, which they indicated went largely unfulfilled. Teachers expected that these difficulties might get worse in the case of inclusion. One teacher said, "The school administration does not care about supporting additional activities at all, which I think is a main part in the education of children with special education needs. The administration considers such activities a waste of money and time. They focus only on getting students through the exams" (Teacher A). Another teacher echoed these concerns stating, "Inspectors and head teachers are mainly concerned with the teacher's preparation notebook. And it is only a formal concern. They care about such trivial elements like the date of the class, the elements of the lesson plan, the title of the lesson, organizing the blackboard, but they don't care about the actual instruction" (Teacher U).

Parents' attitudes. Teachers anticipated that both parents of students with and without disabilities may not view inclusion favorably. All teachers believed that parents of students with disabilities would prefer to keep their child in the special school where they would receive specialized instruction. One teacher said, "I think that parents of children with disabilities will not support inclusion. They may say, I want my child where they are doing well with their special teacher in the special school" (Teacher T). Teachers were also concerned that parents of children without disabilities would resist inclusion based on a belief that including children with disabilities would take away from their children's learning. "Parents of typical children will not accept inclusion. They will say my child's learning will be affected" (Teacher Z).

Peers' attitudes. In addition to concerns about parents' attitudes about inclusion, eight teachers mentioned that the negative attitudes of general education students could preclude the successful inclusion of students with special education needs. A teacher said, "Students with disabilities might be mocked by their peers" (Teacher S). Another teacher said that students' attitudes towards children who were different were not positive, commenting, "They are too naughty. They will call names and laugh at the students with disabilities" (Teacher T).

Personal and Professional Barriers

A number of studies have investigated general education teachers' self-efficacy and have reported that a variety of factors can impact teachers' feelings of self-efficacy, depending on the context in which inclusion is implemented (Malinen, et al., 2013). Across studies, teacher training and experience working with students with disabilities was a common variable that affected a teacher's belief in their ability to implement inclusion. All participating teachers indicated similar concerns, as well as additional pressures and their own beliefs about students with disabilities.

Lack of training and experience. Considerable evidence in the responses indicated that both general and special educators feel inadequately prepared to serve students with disabilities in general education classrooms. One teacher said, "Honestly, I could say that teachers in general schools do not have the sufficient abilities and skills to teach students with disabilities because they have not got training" (Teacher S). Most teachers (10/12) agreed that pre-service programs did not emphasize or include enough focus on how to effectively teach students with disabilities. The comments of one teacher highlight this point, "The programs which we have studied are not enough at all. It is very important to teach preservice teachers about students with disabilities" (Teacher Z). Another teacher added to this criticism, stating, "At the university, they just pour theories which have no relation

to the reality. I do not think that some of the lecturers have been to the field before" (Teacher A).

Teachers' attitudes and beliefs. Eight teachers' responses acknowledged the importance of their own beliefs about inclusion in its successful implementation. Eleven of twelve teachers indicated that their own attitudes towards including students with disabilities were positive in theory, but given the significant constraints faced in practice, they were less optimistic. A common response among teachers was, "I am absolutely committed to inclusion in principle, but…" (Teacher Z). Male teachers tended to be less optimistic about teachers' beliefs on inclusion, stating, "All children have the right to education, and all children with disabilities have the right to be educated in the general schools, but first we need to change the whole system in our schools" (Teacher M). Some teachers explicitly stated that the negative attitudes and behaviors of several of their colleagues were significant barriers to inclusion, noting, "Teachers' negative attitudes have undermined the whole process" (Teacher T), and "I don't think that there is enough awareness among people to accept the education of children with disabilities in general schools" (Teacher Z).

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Finally, multiple teacher responses indicated concerns regarding socio-cultural barriers such as the social view of school and schooling, social view of disability, and the educational policy. Following is a detailed description of these barriers.

Social view of school and schooling. The majority of teachers (n = 11) believed that the negative impact of the failing infrastructure and reduced financial support for schools was eroding the social role of public education and therefore, presented a significant barrier to inclusion. One teacher lamented, "Students and parents do not believe that schools can provide learning. They depend mainly on private lessons. If students come to school it is only because of the attendance requirements. If you do not believe me, come to schools and see if there is any student after students fill the exams forms in March. You know what we say - when March comes there are no schools" (Teacher T). Nine teachers suggested that for inclusion to be accepted within the larger social context of schools, policy makers should not simply adopt models of inclusion that have been implemented in other countries where the culture is significantly different. One teacher summarized this belief saying, "Yes, inclusion is good, but our schools are not ready for it. Our schools should be radically changed. If inclusion has been successful in Europe or America we should not implement it blindly here, we have to consider our school system and our culture" (Teacher Z).

Social view of disability. The most frequently identified barrier across all the interviews was a lack of social awareness, understanding and acceptance of disability. According to the teachers, Egyptian people are not aware of the difficulties and needs of people with disabilities, and they are not aware of the importance of education for them. A secondary teacher said, "The main barrier to inclusive education in my view is society; people are not aware of the difficulties of people with disabilities, and the society does not help those people" (Teacher S). The majority of teachers (n = 10) highlighted that there are some common, contradictory religious beliefs about disability. One common belief is that disability is a test of people's faith, patience and confidence in Allah. Those who 'succeed' in this test will be rewarded in the hereafter. The other common belief suggests that disability is viewed as if Allah is punishing them for some transgression they have committed. One teacher commented, "Actually some people hold strange and wrong views about disability. If a family has got a child with disability, especially with intellectual disability, they feel stigmatized and they feel as Allah is punishing them for their sins and they will not send their child to school" (Teacher Y).

Although teachers did not clearly state whether they believe either of these views, it seems wise to conclude that such views have affected teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Realistically, teachers are part of this society and we cannot assume that they do not hold similar beliefs. The implication here is that religious beliefs about disability, either positive or negative, affect teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and affect the movement towards inclusion.

Educational policy. Finally, teachers commented that the lack of policy or legislation supporting inclusive education in Egypt is a major barrier to inclusion. A secondary teacher said, "There are initiatives from international organizations, but unfortunately, there is no real national educational policy of inclusion" (Teacher S). In addition, teachers mentioned that the current educational policy for children with special educational needs does not include all children. A special education teacher said, "Children with intellectual disabilities are still classified as educable and non-educable. Unfortunately, this is the ministry policy. Teachers have no choice. Non-educable children according to this classification system have no space in schools at all" (Teacher A). Teacher U commented, "Current education policy focused only on special schools. It is not clear at all about inclusion and what that means."

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that teachers in Egypt tend to have significant concerns regarding the potential barriers toward the successful inclusion of students with disabilities. Results also indicated that some of the identified barriers are consistent with those identified in the existing research

about inclusion in other MENA nations (Alhammad, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Alquraini, 2012; Al-Zyoudi, 2006), including limited resources, lack of training, and teacher attitudes. However, the specifics shared by the participating teachers in how these issues are experienced within the Egyptian context have important implications for what is needed to begin to align the multiple systems and stakeholders to move towards inclusive education. For example, the limited investment in public education and the growing use of private tutors to provide instruction creates a context in which students with disabilities may be further denied access to inclusive education practices that address their learning needs.

As summarized by Parnell (2017), barriers to inclusion reported in the literature to date have been identified through a very limited number of studies examining the specific Egyptian or Arab context, but include: (a) negative attitudes, (b) limited teacher preparation and training, (c) physical inaccessibility of schools, (d) fragmented systems and access to resources, and (e) limited alignment across education legislation and policy to support effective inclusion (Gaad, 2010; Ghoneim, 2014). These themes were certainly represented in the responses provided by teachers in the current study, but a closer look at the depth and complexity of each of the issues raised by teacher respondents indicated that significant, multi-faceted reforms may be required to more effectively achieve the goal of inclusive education for all children.

The Inclusion Mandates issued by the MoE in 2009 and 2011 focused only on requiring schools to admit a specified number of students with disabilities to general schools, but neither ensured the education was high quality, nor identified the additional resources needed to invest in such a system. As noted throughout the teachers' responses, this lack of comprehensive legislation and policy guidance has resulted in limited progress being made towards ensuring high quality education experiences for students with disabilities. A common theme throughout the responses was the need for larger systems reform. Teachers noted large class sizes, the impact of private tutoring demands on the public school system, the poor state of most school facilities, the stifling structure of the curriculum and assessment system, and limited training opportunities not only as barriers to the inclusion of students with disabilities but as barriers to effective education for all students. These concerns are similar to those of advocates of inclusive education, particularly in developing nations, who have argued that school improvement and the transformation of the learning environment is an essential prerequisite for inclusive education (Miles, 2000). Whereas teacher attitudes and perceptions of self-efficacy to implement inclusion are often cited as the main barriers to effective inclusion in other nations examining this issue (Emam & Mohamed, 2011; Lifshitz, Glaubman, & Issawi, 2004; Weisel & Dror, 2006), it is difficult to imagine that teachers

confronting the challenges identified within Egypt would be able to change their attitudes and beliefs working within a system that does not support the ideals and principles of inclusive education.

One reason why larger system reform needs emerge from investigations of inclusion is that much of the focus of special education reform is on the structural (Ferguson, 2008; Liasidou, 2007) with less attention to challenging the basic assumptions or the epistemological foundations of special education (Slee, 1997). Structural transformations do not lead to changing instructional practices (Ainscow, 2007; Vislie, 2003). Although the results of this study showed that teachers believe there is a significant need for structural changes, the ideological changes are the most important. The participants' responses underscored the need to critically challenge issues like curricula, pedagogy and assessment. Teachers' concerns about the curriculum were reflected through responses about how to teach a class full of students with diverse learning needs and abilities to achieve a common standard on a common timeline. This is in line with the arguments of many authors that moving beyond the structural changes requires fundamental changes in the "core of educational practice" (Elmore, 1996, p. 23). Teachers working within the Egyptian system feel as though they have no control over decisions regarding developing appropriate curricula or planning effectively for inclusive education.

Considerable evidence in the data indicated that both general and special education teachers feel ill-prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities in the general classroom. These findings are consistent with the existing research (Alhammad, 2017; Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Gaad & Amotairi, 2013), and suggest that a reform of teacher preparation programs (both general and special education) must also be undertaken to support inclusive education. A meta-analysis of professional development on inclusive education suggests that teacher attitudes can be positively impacted through well-designed pre-service and in-service trainings (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013), although none of the included studies in the analysis were conducted in MENA nations.

The findings in this study also highlight the powerful influence of interpersonal barriers such as the school administration and inspectors, parents' expectations, and peers' attitudes on teachers' practices. As described by Lipsky (1980), street-level bureaucrats (in this case, teachers) are faced with the constant demands of serving students with limited resources and they develop coping mechanisms in response to these demands. Cornbleth (2001) refers to these coping mechanisms as socialization pressures. To avoid controversy and any unintended, negative consequences of innovations, teachers tend to withdraw from communicating their concerns about

inclusion with stakeholders to presumably safer, traditional subject matter, materials, and activities.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that while this study is informative, there are several limitations that warrant caution when interpreting the results. First, the study included a relatively small sample of teachers from four schools in Cairo. Including a larger or more geographically diverse participant group may have resulted in additional barriers being identified or emphasized. Nevertheless, the responses demonstrate a need to transcend the discussion of inclusion away from a pragmatic emphasis of technical skills and resources towards a greater appreciation of the complex interaction among a range of variables. As a complex system, barriers to inclusive education are dependent on the existing context in which these policies are being carried out. In the case of Egypt, it appears that significant reforms are still needed to reach the ideals for inclusive education included in the CRC and CRPD.

Specifically, the teachers' responses in this study suggest that Egypt continues with a policy of *integration* rather than one of *inclusion* for educating all students, and teachers are struggling to figure out how to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities within a system that many indicated was not serving most students (with or without disabilities) well. In an integration approach, children with disabilities are brought into the pre-existing framework of prevailing standards, and the frustration that teachers' experience with this approach was evident throughout their responses. The barriers that teachers confront as they work to implement inclusive practices can shape their belief systems as teachers' attitudes and perceptions are rooted in experience (Powell & Birrell, 1992), and influenced by the norms, structures and practices in which they work (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Without substantive changes to the education system, it is quite likely that as teachers continue to grapple with how to support students with disabilities in a system that was not designed with them in mind in the first place, they will conclude that inclusion in Egyptian schools is not possible.

Rather than working to assimilate into a system that maintains the perception of disability as an exceptional condition, Egypt has an opportunity to pursue a transformative agenda of inclusive education which could encompass participatory and instructional strategies such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL; Rose, Meyer, & Hitchcock, 2006). UDL moves teachers away from integrating students with disabilities to normative ways of teaching and learning toward considering the spectrum of children's diversity as a design for instruction from its inception (Waitoller & Artiles, 2013). An approach like UDL could provide curriculum design principles to create flexible learning environments where all students can access, participate, and learn (Rose et al., 2006).

Also implicit in the teachers' responses in this study was the need to question and dismantle forms of exclusion that children with disabilities may experience in their communities and personal lives. In addition to instructional strategies that are inclusive, it will be critical to develop teachers' and students' understanding of ideologies of difference (Baglieri, Bejoian, Broderick, Connor & Valle, 2011) that position some students as normal while placing others in the margins. Inclusive education provides a concept around which many strands of educational reform can cohere (Baglieri et al., 2011). As indicated in this study, although the participants discussed the barriers to inclusion commonly identified in the literature, in the case of Egypt, a comprehensive approach to reforming the current educational system and societal beliefs will be needed to effectively translate Egypt's stated commitment to inclusive education to practice.

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