

**PRIMARY MAINSTREAM TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS INCLUSION OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR: A PERSPECTIVE FROM DUBAI**

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*One of the main challenges facing primary mainstream teachers in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stems from the current educational movement towards inclusion. It is an international phenomenon, a process that emphasizes providing special education services to students with special educational needs within the regular classrooms. The purpose of the study was to identify perceptions about educating students with special educational needs in the mainstream education setting. The researchers examined the issue of inclusive education and the attitudes towards inclusion among the primary mainstream teachers in Dubai in the large private sector. The study was also designed to identify whether these teachers perceived themselves capable of adapting to what inclusion requires.*

*The study relied on qualitative methods. Questionnaires were given to primary mainstream teachers working in two large private schools in Dubai. Additionally teachers were interviewed too. All teachers involved in the study are expatriates.*

*An analysis of data collected indicated that primary mainstream teachers in Dubai in the private sector favour traditional special education service delivery models over full inclusive practices. These teachers felt students with special educational needs lack skills needed to master the mainstream regular classroom course content. The teachers also expressed that the heavy teaching load in the mainstream classroom makes it hard to meet the needs of students with special educational needs in the private sector. However, results also indicated that teachers perceive additional training, support from administrators, and access to related services and resources as necessary in order to meet the needs of their students with special educational needs in the mainstream education setting. The study ended with research based recommendations for future practice.*

There is a movement towards educating students with special educational needs (SEN) in the mainstream classroom and it has generated considerable discussion. While the original principles of the inclusion model originated within the social justice movement (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987), the actual implementation of educating students with SEN in the least restricted environment has received much of the criticism (Lieberman, 1985).

Supporters of inclusion have argued that students with SEN can and should be educated in the mainstream education classroom with the provision of supplementary aids and services (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989). The special educator instructing students in separate classrooms to the general educators instructing all students in the mainstream education classroom has occurred. It is generally agreed that in order for inclusion to be effective, the demands of educating students with SEN alongside their non-disabled peers should be met.

This study is of interest on both a personal and professional level. The authors are both interested in the area of inclusive education in this part of the world. Some of the data were collected for a research-based masters dissertation. One is as a teacher of 10 years who has worked in the primary section of a large private school in Dubai, who had noticed that there has been a continuing concern about meeting the needs of individual students. She also noticed the growing concern that statutory requirements were not being met. The co-author is special educationalist with a particular interest in the area of effects of social values and beliefs on adoption of, and implementation of inclusion of children with special educational needs in regular classrooms.

Research, as well as practical experience has demonstrated that teacher perception are important in determining the effectiveness of inclusion, as teachers are the school workforce and most responsible for implementing inclusive service delivery models. The purpose of the study was to identify teacher perceptions about educating students with SEN in the mainstream classroom. The study only focused on primary private classroom teachers in Dubai (UAE). In addition, this study was designed to identify whether these primary mainstream teachers perceived themselves capable of applying effective inclusive education if students with SEN were to be included in their classrooms. Skills and requirements necessary for implementing effective inclusion such as adopting required curriculum modifications, using strategies for teaching students with SEN, identifying characteristics of students with SEN and using strategies for managing students' behaviour were also examined.

The study is arguably significant and relevant to this part of the world. A previous study by Alghazal and Gaad (2004) on general education teachers employed by the Ministry of Education and Youth in the UAE, (now known as the MOE, after a merger with Ministry of Higher Education in 2005 and a separation once again in early 2006) noted that a majority of the teachers had less than encouraging attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms. This finding affirms a need for surveying teachers at the primary school level in the private sector in the UAE. Therefore, the following research questions were the focus of the study.

1. What are the primary classroom teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classroom in the private sector in Dubai?
2. Do mainstream primary classroom teachers in the private sector perceive themselves capable of delivering inclusive education?

According to Moffett (2000), teachers need to be sensitive to the educational needs of students with SEN, and utilize strategies such students need to learn, if they are to be provided with the most appropriate educational services. It is hoped that the research-based recommendations offered by this study will help with future practice such as structured training programmes for mainstream teachers aimed at facilitating inclusion. Studies pertaining to the evaluation of training programs, Brownell and Pajares (1999) argued that educating special and general classroom teachers is not only effective in helping them improve their teaching strategies but also leads to the development of more positive attitudes towards exceptional children and the concept of inclusion.

#### *Education provisions for expatriate students with SEN in Dubai*

The Ministry of Education issues licenses to private sector schools that follow the curriculum and syllabi of their homeland. The Principal of the school appoints teachers in the private schools and later the application goes to the MoE for approval. The Ministry of Education requires all private schools to provide extra support if they knowingly accept students with special needs (Bradshaw, Tennant & Lydiatt, 2004).

There are very few published texts concerning education in general, or SEN relating to expatriates in Dubai. The schools within the private sector vary considerably in organizational structure for supporting students with special needs. The Ministry's goal for the private schools system is to be able to indicate the requirements for accepting and supporting students with special needs. The Ministry is also interested in developing awareness and to fostering effective intervention approaches for students with special needs. These efforts are being worked in partnership with the same group who are responsible for special needs services within the public sector.

The students with disabilities such as Hearing Impairments, Communication Disorder, Intellectual Challenged and PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) enroll in Special Centers. The students with special educational needs such as learning difficulties (LD) sometimes enroll in mainstream private schools. However, without any training in special needs, teachers often cannot involve them in the class and, hence, such students tend to become demoralized and take extra classes after school as parents are worried about anything that might hold their child back. Nearly all teachers surveyed in the study had not received any pre-service training in supporting students with special needs.

#### **Method**

The overall research problem investigated in this paper is the attitude of mainstream teachers of students having special educational needs (SEN) within the context of the expatriates in Dubai. The data for the study was obtained from a sample of mainstream classroom teachers (research society), teaching students in grades one to six serving in two different private mainstream schools in Dubai.

The teachers are mainly from the sub continent (India and Pakistan) and the majority of them do not have teacher training. In schools in the country of their origin a B.Ed. degree after graduation is a must to be a qualified teacher. All the students in the school are Arab expatriates or from the subcontinent (Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka). The socioeconomic status of the school community is mostly middle class in the UAE context. The average class size is 30 students with one teacher. The mainstream classroom teachers who participated in this study did so voluntary and had five or more years of experience in teaching students in private mainstream classrooms.

Methods of data collection were mainly two qualitative methods: questionnaires, and interviews. Qualitative methodology allows for self-evaluation and flexibility whilst taking the researchers along a process of discovery. The researchers used three different complementary research methods in order to triangulate data.

A two-part questionnaire was written to obtain the participants' attitudes towards inclusion of students with SEN. This questionnaire also identified whether the participants perceived themselves capable of adapting instruction to students with exceptional needs and considered themselves knowledgeable of information needed to work in inclusive classrooms. Data pertaining to teacher training in working with students with SEN was also collected. Twenty-five questionnaires were distributed in two private mainstream schools in Dubai and all responses were returned. Participants were asked to complete the questionnaire anonymously.

Hopkins (1993) explains that one of the advantages given for using the questionnaire is that it is *highly specific, easy to administer....* and it can provide *specific feed back*. However, through experience the contrary was found. It was difficult to keep questions very simple whilst obtaining answers that were of any use. Whilst the administration of questionnaires may be *easy*, analysis of the data may not be. Its use within the paradigm is that it may help with the triangulation of the data and that as part of a multi-strategy approach it may be useful. The data from the questionnaires was analyzed using a coded table. The coded information from the questionnaires was cross referenced under the research questions.

In items 1-25, mainstream teachers were asked to tick responses to questions and statements asked and to indicate if they agreed or disagreed with the statements by selecting one of the following three choices.

*Disagree*

*Agree*

*Maybe*

This scale followed each question and statement. This scale was modified from the 5 item Likert-type scale format (disagree, tend to disagree, tend to agree, agree and not applicable). The reason for such modifications is that the participants involved in the pilot study opined that it was difficult to differentiate between what was required in the different columns. They felt the information needed was too similar. Therefore, it was decided to modify, as this would have no impact on the value of the information obtained.

The interview method was considered appropriate as a means of asking individuals about their views on inclusion as Silverman (2001) states that interviews give data, which has authentic insight into people's experiences. For this reason, mainstream teachers were interviewed to get in-depth data on the study that was conducted. Interviews with fifteen teachers working in private mainstream schools in Dubai were conducted. These teachers had five years and above experience in teaching mainstream students in private schools. The main questions revolved around attitudes towards accepting students with SEN in mainstream schools, and reasons of their acceptance of, or opposition to, inclusion.

A pilot study was designed to examine the semi-structured interview questions before interviewing participants from the research community. Interviews were designed for mainstream primary teachers. The participation for the interview was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed.

Semi-structured interviews were used with this research community because unlike in the case of structured interviewing where one has a basic interview plan that is kept in mind, but have a minimum of control over the informant's responses. The semi-structured interview is characterised by minimum control over the respondent's responses. A structured interview was also avoided because questionnaires were also being used. Questionnaires are close in design to a structure interview where all respond to as nearly identical set of questions. However, interviews with open-ended questions are not an easy option as the researchers may lose the pace of the interview. Hence, the semi-structured method was used when employing an interview strategy as the researchers are able to look for hidden

meanings and to look further than the apparent or expected meaning. This approach allows the researchers to gain deeper levels of understanding.

To keep a record, participants were interviewed alone, otherwise, it would be impossible to be certain which of the participants said what, and one participant would influence the thinking of the other. See appendix B for draft transcript sheet. All notes were jotted down during the interview and were written up in full immediately and before the next interview.

Each participant whether contributing to a questionnaire or an interview was asked to provide general demographic information including their gender, subjects the teacher was teaching at the time of this study, total number of years teaching experience and qualification. Teachers were then asked if they had any training on teaching students with SEN and information on the type of training they had received. Lastly they were asked to identify the students with SEN they have in their classrooms. Data showed that all teachers were teaching all major subjects in their classes and hence were class teachers. The majority of respondents indicating that they had 11-15 years of experience. The number of teachers indicating that they had 6-10 years and 16-20 years was close (7 and 5 years respectively). Only 3 teachers had 21-25 years of experience. All teachers in the study were females. The study consisted of all female teachers, as the majority of the teachers were females in both schools. The respondents were highly qualified teachers, with some with masters degree in their related subjects. Majority of the respondents however did not have a teacher training degree (19 teachers).

The ethics of social science research were adhered to throughout the study by respecting the rights and dignity of all participants, avoiding harm to participants caused by their involvement and by carrying out the research with honesty. All interview participants were asked if they agreed to take part in the study and were informed of the precise purpose of the data collection. The identity of all respondents was kept anonymous. The researchers ensured all participants confidentiality of all information collected. In reporting the findings, no number, letter or name will be used. Protecting and safeguarding accessibility of the hard data stored in the computer was also assured. The participants were given the option of reading the typed transcripts for comments. The participants were also given a chance to add in comments to the transcripts if they desired.

#### *Limitations of the study*

As for the limitations of the study, there are a number of obvious limitations, which may not allow this research to be generalized, such as the small number of subjects and the always-present concern about socially desirable responses with survey-type research. The major limitation of the study was the time frame as both authors (researchers) are heavily involved in other professional duties. A rather small number of mainstream teachers were researched. The fact that the sample population chosen for the research was only expatriates means that the applications of the findings to a wider population, or indeed to the population of UAE as a whole, needs careful consideration. The expatriate population differs between areas within Dubai and their opinions may differ. It is not suggested by any means that the expatriate community in this study is presented as one group. The expatriate population in Dubai consist of different nationalities with different beliefs, values and cultures.

A second limitation is one common to all research by questionnaire. Social desirability may influence responses. Based on the results of the questionnaire, we really do not know if the teachers were saying what they believe. However, all teachers were urged to produce an honest account and they were assured of confidentiality. Another limitation was that they were unaware of the term 'inclusion' and the whole concept. Inclusion was first explained and the research questions were again asked, sometimes rephrased. In a Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO 1994), subscribed to by 92 governments and 25 international organizations, inclusion was defined as ....

*Ordinary schools accommodating all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other condition. (p.6)*

This is the definition adopted in this paper.

#### **Results**

The study focused on two large schools in Dubai. School 1 has around 3000 students and school 2 has around 1800 students. Both schools provide primary and secondary years of schooling to their students. School 1 has around 150 teachers mainly from India and Pakistan, school 2 has around 70 teachers mostly Indian. The average class size in both schools is 30 students with one teacher. All students and teachers in both the schools are expatriates mainly from the subcontinent but regulated by

MOE. The school community is mostly middle class in the UAE context. Both schools are owned and run by expatriates from the subcontinent. The majority of the teachers who were employed 5 years and above do not have a teaching certificate. These teachers have degrees of bachelors and masters in science, commerce or art subjects. The policy of both the schools has changed and the school management currently is only employing teachers who have a qualified teaching degree.

*Perceptions towards working with students with SEN in mainstream classroom*

The findings reported that all the mainstream teachers surveyed held the opinion that students with SEN were disruptive to other students in the class. Teachers had a positive attitude towards educating students with Learning Difficulties, some of them were of an opinion that students with Behavioural Disorders, Physical Disability and Health Impairments could be included in the mainstream classrooms. However, the teachers had negative attitudes towards inclusion of students with Hearing Impairment, Communication Disorder, Intellectual Challenges and PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities). The majority of mainstream teachers also felt that students with SEN lacked skills needed to master the regular classroom course content. All teachers in the survey indicated that mainstream teachers would be overburdened by work if students with SEN had to be included. The following section will describe the respondent's perceptions towards their ability to adapt instruction to students with SEN.

*Perception towards adapting instruction to students with SEN*

The response data to this part consists of five statements designed to identify the respondent's ability to adapt instruction to students with SEN. Under this section, the findings indicate that mainstream teachers are less confident about their ability to facilitate remembering and move on to the next lesson. More than half of the teachers were 'not sure' if they could adapt the lessons and materials for their students with SEN. In addition, the majority of the teachers surveyed also indicated that they could not make adjustments in assignments. Nearly all teachers reported that they did not ensure that all students understood the course content before proceeding to the next chapter. The respondent's knowledge of relevant information needed for working with students with SEN in mainstream classrooms will be discussed in the following section.

*Knowledge of relevant information needed for working with students with SEN in mainstream classrooms*

This factors which consists of five statements was designed to identify the respondent's knowledge of information needed to work with SEN students. The findings from this study revealed that the mainstream teachers had less knowledge of information pertaining to strategies for teaching students with SEN than for other students. The majority of teachers were not sure if they knew identification characteristics of students with SEN. More than half of the teachers surveyed were not sure if they knew behavioural and collaborative management strategies. Twenty teachers out of twenty-five were not sure if they wanted to be in a class with different types of students. As such, the teacher's responses indicate that they were less confident about working with students with SEN than other students.

*Interpreting interviews*

Generally, all teachers in the study defined the concept of inclusion as *interesting*. Some teachers perceived inclusion of students with SEN as *doable but with lots of effort*. About the same number of teachers perceived that inclusion involved *a lot of support from school administrators, parents and fellow teachers*. Very few teachers also said, *It is a good philosophy but can it really be achieved?*

A grade three teacher from school 2 indicated that her school included only students with mild disabilities, as clarified by her statement about the characteristics of the student population at her school.

*We don't have any.....really handicapped students enrolled in our school. We have students who I would say have learning difficulty.*

*This (referring to inclusion of students with SEN) can be implemented in music, art and physical education (P.E) lessons but is not possible in other subjects.*

The majority of teachers expressed that no special services or resources were provided for them. These teachers explained that most related services were obtained by parents outside the school. In addition, another grade three teacher from school 2 said,

*Well, I guess in our school, we don't have all those resources, so one can't help.....*

All 15 teachers viewed the provision of related services as being beneficial as it would support them in helping the students with SEN. All teachers also perceived that training involved in working with students with SEN in the classroom would be beneficial for them and educationally helpful for their students. The majority of the teachers had received two-day staff development programs at the beginning of the new academic year. Most teachers reported no or very little pre-service training but stated that the little training once in few years they had received was primarily due to in-service given by their school which these teachers insisted was very little.

A grade two teacher from school 1 also stressed that they were not trained enough to teach students with special needs. These teachers feel under qualified to meet these students' *special needs*. These mainstream teachers feel that they are burdened by having these students in their mainstream classrooms. One may argue that such attitude barriers exist amongst the mainstream teachers because they do not feel prepared to work in an inclusive setting. Their lack of knowledge, training and administrative support is what keeps them from having such attitudes towards inclusion of students with SEN.

Teachers from both the schools pointed out that they had classes of 30 students and with no assistance, if they were given students with SEN it was impossible for them to perform their best. Likewise, a teacher who has 8 years of experience in school 1 teaching grade two emphasized that she resented having students with special needs in her large class with no assistance. She said, *I have no training in special education as the special education teachers do*. She said she was a *regular classroom teacher*. With the class load, she had and with a very short planning period, she felt unqualified to teach *these* students and resented having to do so.

The teachers gave their insight of inclusion of students with SEN in their schools. A grade one teacher with 7 years teaching experience in school 1 perceived that including students with SEN into the classroom was an absolute power of the school's overall philosophy. *All students as young as 5 years sit for an entrance test before they are selected and enrolled in the school.*

This view was also shared by a grade four teacher from the same school who stated:  
*If a student was identified as having mild learning difficulty then the parents are asked to sign a form that puts the responsibility of the student on the parent for extra classes outside the school so that the child can come to the level of the class.*

Some teachers did believe that some aspects of inclusion were certainly positive, many of them perceived a challenging factor to inclusion of students with SEN that imposed hardship on the teacher and the student, in either managing behaviour or in providing effective instruction. Two teacher's comments from school 1 were:  
*It might be the happening thing, but it will be very exhausting. Everyday I would go home drained, but on the other hand it would be rewarding.*

*I don't think these students would benefit that much as it is talked about.*

In addition some teachers credited their negative attitudes towards educating inclusive students with SEN in terms of delivering the curriculum, providing necessary modifications within the classroom and meeting the needs of all students. A grade four teacher with 9 years experience from school 2 commented:  
*It would become very difficult to provide special attention to disabled children in a classroom where you have 30 students, particularly so in the primary school.*

Three teachers of varying grade levels and years of teaching experience discussed the positive aspects of including students with SEN in their classrooms. Their belief was characterized by the rewards of being challenged as a teacher. One grade two teacher with 13 years experience from school 2 commented:  
*There's so much reward that's priceless. If you're going to have a child with special needs in your classroom, you would want to help.*

A grade five teacher with 11 years experience from school 2 said, *We as teachers should accept the challenge, think of different ways..... if they have to be included.*

A grade four teacher with 13 years experience from school 2 commented:  
*Teaching is just not another profession.....its noble....so we should try.*

The majority of teachers shared viewpoints that special education teachers had specialized training that could provide benefits to the students with SEN. Some teacher comments were:

*We can have these children in our classroom but these children would only benefit from a special educator and not just by being in our class.*

*I in the mainstream class would go nuts, this child should be with a special educator who could handle him one to one.*

*I am not the right person to teach the retarded child, he should be sent to a person who specializes in these things.*

Teachers interviewed did not know about individual educational plan (IEP) and reported that students with SEN in their class had no written IEP and furthermore that the teachers themselves were responsible for making study plans for these students.

Some teachers responded with their viewpoints about the role of the parent in educating students with SEN. One teacher with 9 years experience from school 1 commented:

*The parents should not be over ambitious and should only accept what this child can deliver.*

Another teacher from the same school commented:

*The parents should take most of the responsibility in supporting the child outside the school and reinforce what the teacher has taught in the day.*

These teachers perceived parents as having a critical place in the support system and these teachers believed that successful inclusion was highly dependent upon the supportive role of the parent.

The majority of the teachers revealed a high degree of work satisfaction tempered by frustration over discipline problems in class, lack of parental awareness, frequent turnovers of staff and the small stipend for the job. Despite their minimal training, all the teachers questioned reported having to deal with one student with SEN types, often including students with behaviour and intellectual challenge.

The majority of teachers made comments related to how they perceived their students. Some comments from two teachers from school 1 regarding students indicated that teachers perceived low-self esteem of students with SEN. In some cases, they further commented that the self-esteem could be increasingly damaged and relayed concern as to whether or not their students would continue to experience success at any level throughout their school years.

*These children could have a emotional turmoil ...how come I'm different.*

*These students confidence is gone as they won't be able to learn like the rest of the class and would be called names.*

Comments were made by all the teachers regarding their views on the key issues facing them if inclusion of students with SEN is implemented. These key issues and concerns included ways of changing the educational system and underlying demands of these systems in meeting student needs. Some teachers also discussed about the positive attitude of school administration if inclusion had to be implemented. Teachers felt that the educational system placed excessive demands on students as well as teachers. Teachers commented on the changes in the expectations of the educational system that have occurred throughout the years. The majority of the teachers described that the current expectations have become too extensive. One teacher from school 2 with 13 years experience commented:

*We're more concerned with test scores and the learning is cantered on tests. From the age of two children are subjected to competition. The child is estimated by his school marks: if he is good at school he is a good child, if not he is the failure of the family.*

Another teacher from school 1 said:

*Our school follows a very exam oriented education programme and hence all students are required to learn a certain amount of information.*

Teachers discussed the research questions. They commented on the training they had received and any additional training perceived to be necessary. The teachers expressed their perceptions about the nature of the practice of inclusion. The majority of teachers reported some experience of having a student with SEN. The majority of teachers also reported having some type of in-service training, with majority of them reporting that they had received training through staff development programs. Teachers perceived that training in working with students with SEN was necessary and would be beneficial. All the teachers also stressed that they would like more training in working with students with SEN. However, all teachers predominantly indicated that they don't receive any support in working with students with SEN. In addition to the comments made, teachers indicated that the type of support could be better.

Many teachers held both positive and negative views of inclusion of students with SEN. The teachers who perceived inclusion as positive, their comments reflected a challenging factor to inclusion of students with SEN that forced hardships on the teacher in either managing behaviour or in providing effective instruction. The positive attitude toward inclusion of students with SEN was characterized by the rewards of being challenged as a teacher and value of observing students with SEN experience success.

Teachers were concerned regarding the low self-esteem that students with SEN will experience as a result of the demands placed on them in the mainstream classroom. Comments that teachers made regarding parental involvement were positive in nature, as most teachers perceived that parents played a critical role as part of the support system.

Teachers' views regarding the key issues if inclusion of students with SEN is implemented were discussed. Some of the points raised included the education system and the underlying demands of these systems in meeting special needs. Concerns related to the excessive demands of the system included changing expectations that have become too extensive. The next section will summarize information pertaining to the teachers' area of needs in working with students with special needs.

#### *Areas of need in working with students with special needs*

Teachers identified areas of need in working with students with SEN in mainstream classrooms. Samples of direct teacher quotes are provided to illustrate the findings.

##### *1. Support*

Majority of the mainstream teachers indicated that they need support from their administrators and parents, particularly when it comes to understanding what is accepted of their students. Most of these teachers also indicated they need more resources such as tried instructional material and equipment appropriate for students' level and special needs. They also mentioned alternative tests or modified papers and individualized educational programs designed to support the exceptional students need in preparation for being in the mainstream classroom, more resource people (i.e. teacher's aide, special education teachers etc.) in mainstream schools and most important more funds. Many teachers also felt that inclusion of students with SEN can not work without the help from the special educators. To sum up majority of the teachers reported that necessary services were needed if students with SEN had to be successfully included in mainstream classrooms.

##### *2. Training*

Many teachers who participated in the study indicated they would like to receive training in special education, particularly in terms of learning about the characteristics of students with special needs, inclusion and the individualized education program. Most of these teachers also indicated they would like to receive training on strategies on behavioural management, discipline and strategies for adapting instruction and incorporating various instructional methods into a lesson. Some of the teachers also requested training on strategies for teaching a variety of students with special needs, testing and assessing student's progress, adjusting class requirements and communication. Interestingly, this high agreement of teachers could indicate that they are experiencing changes in classroom composition and that their student populations are becoming more diverse, necessitating in-service programs on serving the needs of students in the special needs population. Some teachers also suggested the need to train the school administrators. In general, some teachers commented on specific areas of training that they would like to receive and others made more general statements such as:

*If we are to have inclusion, then more help on how to work with them in mainstream classroom is needed.*

*The kind of training where we can be taught specific strategies to use in the classroom.*

*What's the best approach to these students.....*

*A list of things like this works with these type of students or that works with those.....*

Some of the teachers mentioned needed training that addressed students with dyslexia and specific ways for teaching students with learning difficulties. These teachers mentioned that they had previous in-service training on dyslexia, which was not enough.

### *3. More time and reduced class size*

All teachers in the study reported having 30 students under their class. Nearly all the teachers indicated they would like to have extra time for planning and some shared time to collaborate with their co-teachers. All the teachers noted that they need reduced class loads if they were expected to individualize instruction and meet the needs of students with special needs.

### *4. Other needs*

Some of the teachers indicated motivation and understanding from the school administrators. Quotations provided by some of the teachers emphasized the fact that administrators need to understand the need for teachers to get involved in scheduling in addition to moving away from 'grade level goals' to 'individual goals for all students' if inclusion is to work.

### *Summary of results*

All teachers in the study were teaching in private schools and had no public school experience. Years of experience ranged from 5 to 23 years with the majority of respondents indicating that they had 11-15 years of experience. All the teachers reported some experience of students with SEN in their teaching experience.

Data collected indicated that majority of the teachers interviewed did not support the philosophy regarding inclusion of students with SEN into the mainstream education classroom without training and resources. Some teachers had a more positive attitude towards inclusion of students with SEN. Teachers were less willing to educate students with Hearing Impairments, Communication Disorder, Intellectual Challenged and PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) in the mainstream classroom. These teachers also felt students with SEN lack skills needed to master the mainstream classroom course content. Expatriate teachers had this feeling maybe because they are here for a short time however Alghazo and Gaad (2004) study on the Emarati (nationals) mainstream teachers had similar findings.

An analysis of responses collected from teachers also indicates their ability to adapt instruction to students with SEN, especially when it comes to their ability to increase retention or make instructional adaptations for students with SEN. In addition the mainstream teachers expressed concern about the availability of support, resources and appropriate instructional material needed to work with students with SEN. These teachers also may have a negative attitude towards inclusion because of the availability of sufficient time needed to consult with other experienced teachers. Teachers in general felt the large teaching load in the mainstream classroom makes it hard to effectively meet the needs of students with SEN in their classrooms.

An analysis of data pertaining to the type of support received and areas of needs in working with students with SEN indicates a large number of the mainstream teachers need support and training and reduced class loads. In addition, teachers indicated they need a description of responsibilities and motivation.

Overall, the goal of this study was not necessarily to generalize data collected to all primary mainstream expatriate teachers working in mainstream schools in Dubai. Rather the interest was in identifying whether primary mainstream teachers working in mainstream schools have the perception, ability, resources and support needed to work with students with SEN if they were to be included in the mainstream classrooms.

As such, generalizing data collected to all primary mainstream teachers should be done with caution, given some findings may reflect bias, since data analyzed was based on teachers' perceptions. As such, additional research focusing on the attitudes and needs of primary mainstream teachers working in mainstream classrooms needs to be carried out to support the results found in this study, thus, providing a basis for generalizations.

### **Discussion, conclusion and recommendations**

This study focuses on current mainstream teachers' attitudes towards inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream classrooms and if these teachers perceive themselves capable of delivering inclusive education in the private schools for expatriates in Dubai. The study examined issues that are related to inclusion of students with SEN. Such issues as whether the primary mainstream teachers have skills and resources to promote effective inclusion such as being able to adapt required curriculum modifications, use strategies for teaching students with special needs, identify the characteristics of students with SEN and use strategies for managing students' behaviour.

The review of literature demonstrates that provision of education for students with SEN enabling access to mainstream classrooms and curricula, rather than set them apart from their peers, can be a reality. However, if such SEN provision is to be effective then a number of factors have to be carefully considered. Analysis of the findings of this small, limited study reveals that not much has been achieved in terms of providing for students with SEN in the UAE, and there remains a lot to be done. In order to gain insight on teacher perceptions qualitative methods were used. Participation in the study was voluntary. All teachers involved in the study were sub-continental expatriates teaching in private mainstream classrooms.

#### *Attitude towards inclusion of students with special needs*

Majority of the teachers did not support the idea of full inclusion of students with SEN in their mainstream classrooms. Students with Learning Difficulties and dyslexia were accepted. The teachers were less willing to educate students with Hearing Impairments, Communication Disorder, Intellectual Challenged and PMLD (Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties) in the mainstream classroom. These teachers also felt that such students lack skills needed to master the mainstream classroom curriculum. These findings suggest primary mainstream teachers are willing to include students with Learning Difficulties, some of them were of an opinion that students with Behavioural Disorders, Physical Disability and Health Impairments could be included. These findings are in agreement with Liu *et al.* (1999). Teachers tend to be more willing to educate students in their classrooms as long as the students do not have severe special needs. These findings are also in line with the conclusion of the research done by Al Ghazo and Gaad (2004).

The fact that most teachers from both schools have positive attitudes towards inclusion of students with mild special needs may be related to the findings that they had experience of teaching such students and had received short in-service trainings. As such these teachers are more willing to include students with certain special needs, given their awareness of how to work with them. DeBettencourt (1999) support this position by emphasizing that the number and type of courses taken by mainstream teachers influence their acceptance of inclusion. In short, teachers who have received training tend to be more willing to work with students with special needs.

Some teachers indicated that they could try having students with SEN in their classrooms but believed that special classes should also be provided. Teachers had both positive and negative views. The teachers' perceived inclusion as positive, but their comments reflected a challenging element to inclusion that imposed hardships on the teacher in providing effective instructions. Marshall, Stojanovik and Ralph (2002) investigated PGCE students and found that they had positive attitudes but some of them expressed concern about workload. The positive attitude towards inclusion was characterised by being challenged as a teacher. Many teachers commented on equality of educating students with SEN along with non-disabled peers. Teachers preferred the provision of special classes in situation that required too much time taken by the classroom teacher in order to address the needs involved.

#### *Cultural beliefs and values*

The majority of the teacher's beliefs were contributed by the social construction of the expatriate community from the sub continent. There is a conflict between the constructions of a *normal* student. As revealed by the study these schools are exam oriented education programs and hence all students are required to learn a certain amount of information. So the *normal* student according to these teachers is a one that retains all the information and delivers in the exam even if he does not understand what he is learning. Getting a job is very important to the expatriate community involved in the study. This education was more goals oriented in accordance to earning a living. On the other hand, curriculum content must be designed to meet the interests, abilities, experiences, understandings and knowledge of students.

As of now, the teachers and schools in Dubai still follow the traditional approach that suggests that students with SEN especially those with obvious or severe special needs should be in centers rather than being included in mainstream classes. Teachers interviewed had views of school education for *intelligent* and *vocational* training for the others, instead of education for all. Gaad (2001) undertook a study on students with SEN in the UAE. She found that cultural beliefs and values are behind the assumption by some teachers that the best place for such students is in a Centre for Preparation and Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (this is how centers for special needs are known in the UAE). Culture plays a very important role here, in some cultures students who are *naughty* are considered active students but in some cultures, these students are labeled as having behavioural problems. Culture, tradition and attitudes play a very important role and effects mainstream teachers judgment and provision. Culture and the whole school approach should be positive in meeting needs of students with special needs.

#### *Abilities to work with students with SEN in mainstream classrooms*

The majority of the teachers who participated in the study were less confident about their ability to facilitate remembering and make instructional adaptations for students with SEN. These findings suggest, in accordance with researchers such as DeBettencourt (1999) and Minke *et al.*, (1996) that mainstream teachers make few adaptations in instruction when working with students with SEN. These outcomes emphasize the importance of ensuring teachers know how to adapt instruction to students with SEN. To be specific, researchers such as Hutchinson *et al.* (1999) and York *et al.* (1990) stressed that teachers working in inclusive classrooms need to know how to break complex skills and concepts into small, easy to understand steps, provide immediate feedback to students about accuracy of their work, and conduct instruction in small groups to allow for frequent student-teacher interactions. The school system should plan and implement personnel development programs designed to not only help teachers adjust instruction to students with SEN, but also help them identify and implement effective instructional strategies if inclusion is to succeed.

#### *Availability of resources and support needed*

The teacher's rejection of inclusion in many cases stemmed from their perceived lack of support and resources. Firstly, the mainstream teachers indicated they lack appropriate instructional material needed for students with SEN. Secondly, the teachers did not have sufficient time to produce instructional material and consult with experienced teachers. Teachers indicated that the large teaching load in the mainstream classroom makes it hard for them to meet the needs of their students with SEN effectively. These results are in line with studies done by O'Shea *et al.* (2000) and Federico *et al.*, (1999) and suggest that mainstream teachers lack sufficient time, resources and support needed to effectively work with students with SEN. Given limited funding and the cost of instructional material and equipment needed for students with SEN, these findings are not surprising. School systems vary in terms of the availability of resources needed to get what they require. More efforts needs to be put into helping teachers to find innovative ways of making their own instructional material and adapting what they have to suit their needs. This can be achieved through in-service training, possibly in conjunction with teacher training institutions.

#### *Knowledge of relevant information needed for working with students with SEN in mainstream classrooms*

All teachers agreed that they had received a short in-service training on dyslexia. However, all teachers responded that additional in-service training in working with students with SEN was desired. Since all the teachers agreed that more in-service training was needed, findings appeared to support previous research in that teachers do not believe that they have adequate training in working with students with SEN (Scott, *et.al.*, 1998). Some teacher's perception about the type of training needed included effective strategies that could be applied to common problems that arise in the classrooms. Some other teacher asked for training on understanding characteristics of students with SEN. Emphasis should be placed on training all teachers to work with students of all abilities. General and special education departments at institutions of higher learning must work collaboratively to determine skills or strategies teachers should be taught, if teachers are expected to implement inclusive education successfully.

#### *Types of support currently needed for working with students with SEN*

Data collected indicates that school systems and administrators need to provide more help to primary mainstream teachers working in mainstream schools. Researchers such as Brownell *et al.*, (1999) and Barnett *et al.* (1998) stressed that successful inclusive effort are associated with administrative support and adequate material and personnel resources. As such, school systems need to involve parents,

teachers, students and key community members in planning, if inclusion of students with SEN is to be implemented successfully.

The teachers in the study identified different areas of needs. In particular, these mainstream teachers indicated they need administrative and parental support in understanding what is expected of their students. In addition, these teachers indicated they need more instructional resources, additional resource people, more funds and assistance in dealing with school administrators. Furthermore, they indicated the need for training on the characteristics of students with special needs, the individualized education program and strategies for adapting instruction, behaviour management and discipline. Other requests consisted of training for school administrators. These findings are in accordance with information provided by Brownell *et al.*, (1999) and Barnett *et al.* (1998). These authors indicate that mainstream teachers need training in special education, strategies for teaching and reinforcing students with SEN and strategies for collaboration and behaviour management.

Teachers working in mainstream classrooms are not sure of what is expected of them, do not have a clear picture of how an inclusive program operates, and do not have sufficient expertise for inclusion. Steps need to be taken to ensure teachers have the required training and support needed to implement inclusive programs successfully. Brownell *et al.* (1999) indicate inclusion of students with SEN is facilitated when teachers know their roles and responsibilities.

Teacher training experiences should include enough opportunities to collaborate with colleagues who are implementing strategies of inclusion, visit classrooms where teachers focus on student learning styles. Furthermore, teachers could participate in activities that foster learning styles at workshops and in-service programs.

Information provided in this study, together with comments made by some teachers clearly emphasize the importance of making changes in classroom instructional procedures and the significance of providing mainstream teachers with training, additional instructional and planning time, reduced class sizes, assistant help and adequate instructional and curriculum material (Soodak *et al.*, 1998). It could be argued that teachers do not really need to learn some kind of magical instructional strategies to work with students with special needs as some students with SEN are already included in the regular classrooms with no clear identifications or plans. Rather, students can be taught using what teachers already know, as long as their needs are identified.

#### *Summary of recommendations*

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that schools along with teacher training institutes should provide primary mainstream teachers working in mainstream classrooms in the private sector in Dubai with:

1. Information sharing workshops and adequate in-service training designed to enhance their knowledge of special education and strategies for teaching students with SEN, adapting and adjusting instruction, adapting and grading tests and classroom management.
2. Time management for planning.
3. Adequate resources, equipment, teaching assistants and teaching material suitable for included students and help teachers to modify current tools to help students with SEN to achieve educational goals.
4. Reduced class sizes.
5. Training needs to be provided for school administrators.

In addition, media should also play a role by running awareness programme, which should help understanding and eliminate misunderstanding about students with SEN.

#### **Conclusion**

Information discussed thus far leads to few conclusions. A few teachers hold a positive attitude towards inclusion of students with SEN (i.e. believe students with SEN should be educated with the mainstream peers to a certain point) but all teachers in particular felt students with SEN lack skills needed to master the mainstream classroom course content. Some students with SEN were more accepted than others. Specifically, the teachers were less willing to educate students with Hearing Impairments, Communication Disorder, Intellectual Challenged and PMLD in the mainstream classroom. All teachers surveyed held the opinion that students with SEN were disruptive to other students in the class. Teachers had a positive attitude towards educating students with Learning Difficulties, some of them were of an opinion that students with Behavioural Disorders, Physical

Disability and Health Impairments could be included in the mainstream classrooms. All teachers in the study expressed the need for reduced class sizes, more resources and support services. Since most teachers did not receive any special education training in their university studies, they feel that they are not qualified to carry through with the inclusion process. The findings of this study are in line with the literature as Treder *et al.*, (2000) state that if inclusion is to be effective, teachers have to be receptive to the principal and demands of inclusion. A study looking at the importance of adapting instruction to the needs of children with disabilities (Federico *et al.* 1999) indicate that teachers need to use a variety of instructional approaches towards meeting individual student needs and learning styles. Some teachers say that inclusion cannot work without the help from the special educators. These findings are inline with international research. A study undertaken by Prom (1999) indicates that teachers do not believe that the academic and social needs of the majority of students with SEN can be best met in mainstream classrooms. By providing successful opportunities for teaching, a positive attitude may be reflected. It is very important to focus on teachers' attitudes in order to implement reform recommendations. It is more important however to examine reasons and factors behind such attitudes if we wish to change them.

Lastly, it is not advisable for school systems to view mainstream classrooms as the least restrictive environments for all students. Rather inclusion of students with SEN should be based on each student's individual needs and adequate in-service training designed to prepare teachers for working with students with SEN. Addressing the areas of needs identified in this study would help mainstream teachers accept and implement inclusive programs successfully.. It would be beneficial if university programs and schools address these needs, if they are to help implementing inclusive programs for students with SEN. Failure to do this will only result in placing students with special needs in classroom environments where teachers cannot help them to reach their full potentials.

Inferences drawn from questionnaires and interviews with teachers indicated that students with SEN pose a challenge to teachers. These challenges require changes in thinking and in the practices in the relevant institutions so that they can provide sufficient resources and conditions for successful implementation of inclusive education policies. More than two decades ago, Altman (1981) stressed that if teachers hold a positive attitude towards students with SEN, this allows and encourages the establishments of policies that guaranties the student's right to be educated in regular classrooms. For inclusion to work, it requires multiple efforts. Brownell *et al.* (1999) stressed that inclusion is facilitated when school administrators, principals, parents, teachers and students support it. Adopting inclusion certainly requires bringing a change in the current educational system in the UAE. Lieberman (1990) in Al Ghazo & Gaad (2004) stated that if people do not see the need for change, the task of bringing about change becomes more difficult, if not impossible. Inclusion is a process. For it to be successful, existing school, system in provisions of curriculum, teaching methods and leadership roles, will have to change.

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