Attitudes of teachers and headteachers towards inclusion in Lebanon

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In the Arabic region, the drive towards inclusive practices in mainstream schools is at a relatively early stage, although, in Lebanon, the recent initiative of the National Inclusion Project (NIP), a project managed by a consortium of four organisations aimed at addressing the exclusion experienced by people with a disability, has the potential to promote rapid change in provision. This study explores the attitudes of teachers and headteachers towards people with a disability in mainstream primary schools in Lebanon, a middle-income Arab country. A mixed method approach was used to collect data. Forty teachers from mainstream schools within the Project completed questionnaires, and key headteachers as well as the consortium managers were interviewed. The sample was purposively selected in order to examine the attitudes of participants with previous experience of students with disabilities. In general, the findings indicate positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students in mainstream schools. However, participants expressed reservations about including all students, especially those with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Further challenges include limited training, availability of qualified specialist teachers and the high cost of supporting inclusion. These findings will inform future research, as more studies regarding the implementation of inclusive education in the Middle East are warranted.

Keywords: attitudes; inclusion; inclusive education; Lebanon; disability; special educational needs

Introduction

The concept of inclusive education (IE)[1] gained significant international recognition when the United Nations (UN) promoted the idea of 'Education for All' at the World conference in Thailand in 1990 (Kuyini and Desai 2007). Another significant driver was the Salamanca Statement of 1994 which challenged nations, schools and educators to provide effective education for all learners including those with significant special educational needs (SEN).[2] The international community confirmed their pledge during the Senegal convention of 1994 to achieve education for all by 2015 (UNESCO 2006). More recently, the UN General Assembly adopted and ratified the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which says, in Article 24, that state parties should ensure that people with disabilities 'are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability' (www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml). Many have critiqued the concept of

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special education because it places an emphasis on individual deficits that are to be remedied rather than cultural or environmental factors (Ainscow 2005; Slee 2004). Implementing inclusion, on the other hand, entails the removal of cultural and environmental barriers in order to increase the participation of those with disabilities in schools (Armstrong 2005). It is therefore fundamental to take account of the attitudes of key professionals since a negative mindset would constitute a significant barrier to implementation.

In line with the global trend towards IE, Lebanon has developed its legislation to advance the rights of people with a disability. Lebanese law 220/2000 states that the best way to educate people with disabilities is to integrate them into the community. This law goes further to guarantee equal opportunities to people with disabilities in terms of educational provision in a mainstream setting. However, despite such a clear directive, an anomaly exists: there is no legal imperative for schools either to accept students with SEN or to cater for the diverse needs of learners. Families, moreover, drive placement decisions and school principals determine their level of inclusiveness locally. Such a lack of strategic directive could not only lead to variability in provision but also to social injustice. The National Inclusion Project (NIP) was launched to address these issues and foster a more inclusive culture. It is therefore topical to ask: how is entitlement to IE played out in reality in terms of its practical implementation in Lebanon?

Close scrutiny of the current educational situation for learners with a disability in Lebanon shows that students are still excluded from the majority of mainstream schools (Thomas and Lakkis 2003). Furthermore, the minority who get an education are usually placed in special institutions run by 46 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) funded in part by the government. However, many families have rejected this and fought for their children to be educated in mainstream schools. Such actions reflect parents' belief in IE and show that they are highly committed to finding settings where their children can be educated in an inclusive environment.

Nevertheless, families' willingness to educate their children in mainstream schools is not sufficient for IE to expand and succeed. In Lebanon, the barriers that face schools in order to include learners with a disability are numerous. For example, most mainstream schools do not provide an accessible environment for all learners nor do they have the required resources to meet the various educational needs (Council for Development and Reconstruction 2005; Wehbi 2006). In addition, there is a problem convincing school managers of the feasibility and value of inclusion, together with the shortage of qualified and trained professionals. As part of the NIP, mainstream teachers receive 10 days training and are supported throughout the year in terms of problem-solving. A further challenge concerns the identification of learners with SEN and their educational needs because of the lack of established services and specialists. Indeed, in the NIP it is the responsibility of learning support assistants (LSAs) to play a key liaison role between parents, class teachers and the school and NIP management. Such considerable barriers to the implementation of IE in mainstream schools could provide justification for students to be continually educated in segregated special schools.

Research conducted by the Inclusion Network in 2004 examined IE programmes in all Lebanese schools implementing inclusion (Council for Development and Reconstruction 2005). The sample included the directors, teachers and special educators of 19 schools. The study showed that the programmes sought to improve children's opportunities to integrate into society and that schools felt that their teachers

had received adequate training. Commenting on the future, they indicated the need for more qualified human resources, vocational training for students and more material resources, including better funding. In a further Lebanese study, Rizic (2007) explored the barriers facing IE in schools. Consulting 160 teachers in 27 mainstream and three special schools, he found that the level of education and length of experience influenced teachers' inclusive practices in different ways. Teachers with higher levels of education were better at identifying the difficulties encountered by SEN students in school management, curriculum and society. However, they were less able than the less qualified, more experienced teachers to identify the students' difficulties in terms of the school environment, their relationship with teachers or the family. Having identified teacher strengths and weaknesses in identifying the needs of their students gives a clearer idea about their training requirements. Further issues include whether teachers had obtained SEN qualifications, or if the better qualified teachers were so in terms of the subjects they taught rather than their understanding of SEN.

Based on the above-mentioned information, several factors would be likely to increase the success of better inclusive practices. However, before any major measures towards inclusion are taken, it is important to survey the attitudes of the various groups involved in the teaching process. This is fundamental because, as shown elsewhere (e.g. Somerset Inclusion Project in the UK; Thomas, Walker, and Webb 1998), the more positive the attitudes of professionals, the more likely that IE will be accepted and implemented effectively.

Attitudes towards people with a disability are a significant influence on the inclusion or exclusion of them from all aspects of society. Educational professionals' attitudes are the most frequently identified success factors of inclusion, affecting their willingness to work collaboratively and to adopt the concept of IE (Kustantini 1999). However, movement towards more inclusive cultures is a continuous process and requires efforts on the part of the various groups involved. We clearly need more information about how to design research that evaluates strategies to modify positive attitudes towards IE for the purpose of raising public awareness regarding policy interventions in the future (Nagata 2007a).

Positive attitudes in schools can be fostered both through training in IE and constructive experiences with students who have a range of disabilities (Avramadis, Bayliss, and Burden 2000; Praisner 2003; Subban and Sharma 2006). During pre-service training may be an appropriate time to address teachers' concerns and possibly modify attitudes towards teaching diverse learners as well as towards people with a disability in general. This is important because if teachers leave universities with negative attitudes towards IE and disability then those attitudes may be difficult to change (Sharma et al. 2006).

A Ghanian study asked whether principals' and teachers' attitudes and knowledge of IE, together with principals' expectations of teachers in implementing inclusion, were predictors of effective teaching practices in their classrooms (Kuyini and Desai 2007). A sample of 20 principals and 108 teachers from 20 primary schools in two districts of Ghana completed questionnaires. Results showed that whilst attitudes towards inclusion and knowledge of inclusion predicted effective teaching practices, principals' expectations did not. The authors explain this finding in terms of their limited knowledge of IE and their dual roles as both teachers and principals as well as resource constraints. Indeed, other research from the University of Haifa suggests that several background variables influence attitudes: the greater the age of the principal, the higher the level of education, and increased training led to less inclusive

practices and more pull-out programmes being implemented (Avissar, Reiter, and Leyser 2003).

Kustantini (1999) studied the attitudes of teachers, parents and administrators towards the inclusion of children with SEN in Beirut. An extensive survey was conducted, including 45 administrators, 241 parents and 228 teachers of public, private and special schools. The findings showed, in general, positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children into the regular school system. However, Kustantini argued that IE in Lebanon remains in its early stages and educators lack adequate knowledge and understanding of SEN, leading to the ignoring of the academic needs of youngsters with disabilities. This situation has changed in some settings to some extent but remains unchanged in most schools, including where IE is still in its early stages and often where inclusion presents many challenges.

Teachers may hold generalised systems of beliefs, despite variation from one situation to another and from one kind of disability to another. Those who have previous experience of people with a disability, and relevant professional training, hold more positive attitudes (Subban and Sharma 2006). Attitudes not only vary according to the precise nature of the disability but also result from cultural values, living environment and age (Nagata 2007a). Thus, teacher attitudes towards students in the NIP may depend on the type and severity of the student's disability. Giangreco and others studied teachers who had a student identified as having severe SEN in their class for one year (UNESCO 2006). Results indicated that most teachers reacted to the initial placement cautiously or negatively. However, a sizable proportion (17 of 19 teachers) experienced increased ownership and involvement with the student over the course of the school year. Teachers indicated attitude improvement and a willingness to undertake a similar experience. They also reported that the participation of a student with severe needs not only had a positive impact on the child but also on non-disabled students.

Through interviews and questionnaires, Gaad and Khan (2007) examined the issue of IE and the attitudes towards inclusion among private mainstream primary teachers in Dubai. Results showed that teachers in the private sector favour special schools over applying full inclusive practices. They believed that students with disabilities lack the skills needed to master the mainstream classroom curriculum. Teachers also stated that their heavy teaching load made it hard to meet the needs of students with disabilities. However, it is less clear what type of training the teachers had received and the human and physical resources that were in place. In the United Arab Emirates, it appears that students with severe disabilities do not enter mainstream schools at all, and parents have to find placement alternatives for their children. As a result, many parents keep their children at home (Bradshaw, Tennant, and Lydiatt 2004).

The specific nature of a disability or special need is a factor influencing teachers' attitudes, and students with behavioural, emotional or intellectual disabilities may be most at risk of rejection. Cant (1994) reported that teachers in Alberta, Canada, were more reluctant to accept students with 'psychotic' behaviour because they considered themselves insufficiently trained to deal with such difficulties. Indeed, it is not an easy task to change someone's attitudes and beliefs. Throughout the years, changing beliefs and attitudes about the disabled and special education have been frequently debated, but little has been done to understand how change may be brought about. This is the case in the Middle East, and especially in Lebanon, where lack of detailed surveys and studies is a major hindrance.

Our research investigates the attitudes of teachers and headteachers towards people with a disability in mainstream primary schools, selected because they participated in the recent NIP. Furthermore, we provide empirical data about barriers to implementing inclusion in Lebanon that can be used as a platform for future research. We posed these questions:

- What are the attitudes of primary mainstream school teachers and headteachers towards inclusion in Lebanon?
- To what extent do teachers think that they are teaching inclusively?
- Do headteachers consider mainstream classrooms a suitable teaching environment for all learners?

Sample and methods

The participants were purposively selected in order to obtain the opinions of teachers and headteachers who already had experience of working in an inclusive environment, had received some training in teaching inclusively and had direct experience of youngsters with disabilities. The sample included the primary teachers and headteachers of six private and inclusive mainstream schools in Lebanon that were part of the NIP. To eliminate regional bias, the schools were located in different geographical areas of Lebanon: Beirut, Beqaa, South Lebanon and North Lebanon. For example, Beirut is a more wealthy area of Lebanon with more social opportunities than Beqaa, which ensures that the data are representative.

As shown in Table 1, teacher participants were mainly female and their ages ranged from 20 to 50. They averaged 8.1 years of teaching experience and 3.3 years experience of teaching students with SEN. The survey also revealed that the majority gained their SEN knowledge through reading, attending lectures, training and working directly with students with disabilities. Several teachers had also acquired skills and knowledge in the field of disability through working as a volunteer and from friends and/or family members with disabilities. None of the teachers had knowledge of disabilities through being disabled themselves.

The questionnaire was adapted from previous studies that explored the attitudes of educationalists towards IE (Almotairi 2007; Kustantini 1999). It included four sections: (1) demographic questions regarding the teachers' personal profile and educational experiences; (2) teacher attitudes towards people with a disability; (3) attitudes towards the training necessary for inclusive practice; and (4) social opinions about inclusion. Teachers were informed of the aims of the research, the researcher-adopted definition of inclusion and the content of the questionnaire. The questionnaire and its cover letter were written in English and then translated into Arabic. The back translation technique was applied, in which the Arabic questionnaire was re-converted into English to ensure the Arabic answers were compatible with the English translation (Almotairi 2007).

Prior to distributing the questionnaires, a pilot study was run to determine how much time it took participants to complete, to establish whether they had understood the instructions, and to examine whether the measures which were being made were reliable (Barrett 2006). The participants shared similar characteristics to those used in the main study as they were specialists in the field of SEN, both in Lebanon and in the UK. A number of questions were changed: for example, some types of disability listed in the questionnaire were reworded to make them more easily understood. After the

Table 1.   Teacher participants.

	Gender	Phase	Teaching experience in years	SEN experience in years	Experience of disabilities
T1	F	I	17	3	HI
T2	F	S	13	1	HI
T3	F	S	5	4	HI, VI, PD
T4	F	I	4	1	HI
T5	F	I, S	7	7	HI, VI, PD
T6	F	I, S	5	3	HI
T7	F	I, S	4	2	lcd, HI, VI, PD, ebd
T8	F	I	3	1	HI, PD
T9	F	I	7	2	PD
T10	F	N	20	2	lcd, PD
T11	F	N	10	2	VI
T12	F	N	4	1	lcd
T13	F	E	1	1	VI
T14	F	N	3	3	HI
T15	F	E	4	–	HI
T16	F	N	7	–	PD
T17	F	I	10	3	HI
T18	F	N, E	7	7	HI, VI, PD, ebd
T19	F		4	3	HI
T20	F	I	3	3	HI, PD, ebd
T21	F	I	6	6	PD
T22	F	N	8	8	HI, VI, PD
T23	F	E, I	10	7	HI, PD, LD
T24	F		15	2	HI
T25	M	I, S	30	2	HI, PD
T26	F	E, I	13	9	PD, LD
T27	F	E, I	9	9	PD
T28	F	N	6	6	HI
T29	F	E, I, S	8	5	lcd, VI, PD
T30	F	N	6	2	lcd, VI, PD, LD, ebd, MD
T31	F	S	8	2	PD, LD
T32	F	S	25	–	PD
T33	F	S	18	3	PD, LD
T34	F	E	18	7	lcd, ebd
T35	F	N, E	23	4	lcd, VI, PD
T36	F	E	19	1	lcd, ebd
T37	F	I	16	3	lcd, VI, PD, ebd
T38	F	S	20	1	VI
T39	F	S	23	10	lcd, HI, VI, PD, ebd
T40	F	E	16	9	lcd, HI, VI, PD, ebd

Notes: Gender: female (F), male (M). Phase of school: nursery (N), elementary (E), intermediate (I), secondary (S). Disabilities: language and communication difficulties (lcd), hearing impairment (HI), visual impairment (VI), physical disability (PD), learning difficulties (LD), emotional and behavioural difficulties (ebd), multiple disabilities (MD).

Table 2. Manager participants.

Role	Gender	Education	Manager experience in years	SEN experience in years	Experience of disabilities	Knowledge of disabilities
HT (A)	F	BA	12	20	lcd, LD, ebd	Work as T
HT (B)	M	BA	20	20	lcd, LD, HI, VI, PD	Work as HT
HT (C)	M	BA	4	8	lcd, LD, HI, VI, PD	Work as HT
NIP (A)	M	Dip	18	20+	VI, LD	manage, read, train, own dis
NIP (B)	F	MA	10	10+	ebd	Read, train, dis rel

Notes: Role: headteacher (HT), NIP manager (NIP). Gender: female (F), male (M). Disabilities: language and communication difficulties (lcd), sensory impairment (SI), visual impairment (VI), hearing impairment (HI), physical disability (PD), learning difficulties (LD), emotional and behavioural difficulties (ebd), multiple disabilities (MD). Knowledge: direct work as teacher (T) or headteacher (HT), work as manager (manage), reading (read), training (train), own disability (own dis), relative/friend with disability (dis rel).

headteachers had given permission for their staff to be approached, questionnaires were distributed by the NIP managers to potential respondents through the teacher in charge of SEN. Forty questionnaires were returned that stated only the name of the participant's school. The questionnaire data were collated onto MS Excel spreadsheets and the percentages of respondents' answers to each question in the survey were calculated.

Five interviews were conducted, three of them with headteachers and two with the NIP's consortium managers. As shown in Table 2, most managers were male, had an average of 12 years of experience, including extensive experience of working in the field of SEN/inclusion. The headteachers' interviews were semi-structured which afforded opportunities for further exploration of key issues and clarification of any misunderstandings. The questions were open-ended and focused on attitudes towards accepting students with SEN in mainstream schools and whether they considered such children should be included. The interview also addressed how they implement inclusion in their schools, which definition of inclusion they adopt, what barriers they face and what they think would make inclusion work better in their setting.

When interviewing the managing directors of the educational domain of the NIP consortium, we asked five open-ended questions about the execution of the project, whether it had achieved its aims and what barriers it had faced. In addition, the management body's attitudes were explored regarding: (1) how the project prepares teachers to teach inclusively; (2) to what extent they perceive school members of staff to be involved in the inclusion of SEN students; and (3) to what extent the NIP management considers the project's specialised teachers to be adequately trained to meet the needs of pupils with SEN.

All interviews were conducted by the first author at dates, times and locations agreed with the interviewees. The purpose of the study and the identification of the researcher were clarified, and anonymity and confidentiality were promised. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed and translated from Arabic into English. The interview transcripts were re-visited on several occasions in order to identify recurrent themes across interviewees.

Findings

Teachers' attitudes and training

In general, teachers reported positive attitudes, three quarters (76%) reporting that people with a disability are the same as everyone else. Concerning provision of special schools, more than half (56%) thought that provision should not be segregated. On the other hand, some attitudes were more negative. With reference to relationships, a high percentage (92%) agreed that it is harder to get along with people with severe disabilities rather than with people with minor disabilities whilst the remaining 8% slightly agreed. In terms of whether or not a person with a disability is able to lead a normal life, half thought that it is impossible although 41% were in disagreement. Over half (62%) believed that people with a disability tend to be isolated.

Concerning the relationship between disabled and non-disabled children in mainstream schools, views were mainly positive. Almost all (90%) responded that students without disabilities accept those with a disability within their classes, but many (68%) said that only a few non-disabled children are friends with children with a disability. Most (85%) disagreed that students without disability resist including students with SEN in the mainstream school. A high number (90%) agreed that students without a disability are willing to communicate with their peers, although many (82%) thought that local communities' perceptions about IE hinder its implementation.

In terms of training, most teachers (63%) said that they are equipped with the necessary skills to teach students with disabilities and 55% thought that they themselves had received training and the necessary skills to teach inclusively. In contrast, most (86%) believed that mainstream teachers have insufficient training and a very high percentage (93%) said that inclusive teaching will necessitate extensive training of the mainstream teaching profession. The entire sample (100%) agreed that teachers need training to select and develop materials and activities appropriate for students with disabilities if they are to teach inclusively. Finally, very many teachers (82%) expressed the view that students with disabilities require more of the teacher's time than non-disabled children.

Headteachers: 'we are an inclusive school but …'

The following key themes emerged from the headteacher interviews:

- A need for more and better training and qualified people.
- The positive influence of inclusive practices on peer and professional attitudes towards disability.
- The continuing need to monitor the everyday implementation of IE in Lebanon.
- The types of disabilities that can be accommodated in mainstream schools.
- The problems headteachers face with their staff.
- The relationship between students with disabilities and their peers without disabilities.
- Parents of non-disabled students' acceptance of their children being educated together with students with disabilities.

Although some similar views emerged, it is important to highlight the differences in implementation across the different schools. In terms of the types of disabilities that can be accommodated in their own schools, headteachers, on the whole, indicated

positive attitudes about including all types of disability. These attitudes were based on the belief that IE can be successful if implemented properly. However, there was nonetheless a common belief that not all students with a disability can be successfully included. Indeed, the heads found it most difficult to include students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBDs) and students that they describe as having 'mental difficulties':

> Last year we rejected two cases with mental difficulties … These were impossibilities. (Headteacher A)

With regards to staffing, a key issue that emerged was the high turnover of teachers and the constant need to make new appointments and to train newly appointed staff in teaching inclusively. This also featured in the interviews with the NIP management (see below). Another aspect of staffing is that the NIP provides an LSA in each of the targeted schools. Despite this additional resource in their schools, fresh problems emerged. In the words of two headteachers:

> At the beginning, the class teachers did not comprehend the idea of the LSA role. (Head-teacher B)

> Teachers first did not accept being directed by the LSA and found having their work interfered with a problem. (Headteacher C)

In terms of the relationship between SEN students and their peers, headteachers were uniformly positive. They highlighted the NIP consortium and their own efforts to foster good relationships between students with different needs:

> The training sessions we did with our children before the arrival of any student with disability raised their awareness. (Headteacher A)

The headteachers also mentioned that newer pupils in the school harboured more negative attitudes towards students with SEN, especially when new students join established inclusive classes. Concerning the attitudes of parents of non-disabled students towards inclusion, headteachers were positive on the whole:

> The parents have got used to the concept, and some of them even want their children to be in our school … because we are an inclusive school.

However, the fear of educating non-disabled children together with students with disabilities in the same classrooms still worries some parents. When speaking about obstacles and challenges, all interviewees mentioned lack of finances, human resources, training and educational resources as the most significant barriers to better inclusive practices. For example, one headteacher said that it is common for SEN students' fees to be as much as double their non-SEN peers (Headteacher A).

Asking headteachers about inclusive procedures in their schools illustrated several differences in implementation between different schools. In the words of one headteacher:

> First the SEN student applies and we study the application with the parents and the child. We get to know them in a six-week summer programme and work with them to see what they do and do not need. Then we create a plan for the academic year, an individualised

> educational plan and offer them a place. Of course this plan changes through the year depending on the required needs. (Headteacher A)

In contrast, other schools openly accept students with disabilities because their clear mission is to offer education for all learners and to get to know the students with SEN during the academic year whilst trying to accommodate them through reasonable adjustments. Overall, the interviewed headteachers expressed positive attitudes towards having students with disabilities enrolled in their schools but want to be better supported in terms of funding, staffing and training.

NIP consortium managers: education for all?

Interviews with the NIP managers uncovered the ideas behind implementing such a project, how the NIP is managed in these schools and its outcomes. These interviewees believed that more is needed for inclusion in Lebanon to be properly implemented, and that what they have done so far has just been the start of the process. For example, one manager said:

> Where we worked we placed a good foundation. (Manager A)

They elaborated on this point when discussing the management of the project in schools, saying that within the NIP there are educational consultants and trained LSAs based in each school who work with the class teachers and the child with SEN. However, for this to happen, headteachers first need to foster an inclusive environment in their schools. Both NIP managers highlighted a crucial issue that teachers were not able to distinguish between types of disability. As a result there is a tendency to use the expression 'learning difficulties' as a generic term to indicate several types of disability. Another important issue that both managers mentioned was the quick turnover of trained teachers. One manager said:

> (Turnover) is a real problem but unavoidable in a country like Lebanon. (Manager A)

Echoing the perspectives of the headteachers, another issue concerns the inclusion of children with SEBDs. Both managers expressed reluctance towards including students with this type of difficulty:

> I can say that is one of the most difficult to deal with. (Manager A)

Together with negative attitudes towards including children with SEBDs, negative attitudes towards inclusion came from parents of children with and without SEN. For example, one NIP manager said:

> There are many parents that tell us if a disabled child is in the classroom then they will withdraw their child from the class. (Manager A)

> Some parents of SEN children still prefer special schools. (Manager A)

When asked about how they gained their knowledge in the field of inclusion, managers reported, in a similar vein to the teachers, that it was through working in this field. One of the managers explained that:

> In 1993 we began experimenting with what works and what doesn't, we started with two visually impaired children in one school … acquired our knowledge through our own experiences, and also through our own readings … benefited from other inclusive practices. (Manager A)

Regarding the management of the project, both managers believed that there were essential ingredients for such projects to improve and succeed. They talked in particular about collaboration between all parties involved, including NIP management, school managers, school staff, parents, disabled and non-disabled students and even the bus driver.

Discussion

The findings report mainstream teachers' and headteachers' beliefs about inclusion and how they fulfil their responsibilities to meet the needs of their students with disabilities in a mainstream environment. Some key themes emerged which resonate with research findings from other countries and these will now be explored.

'Taking the plunge' and working with a range of disabilities

In terms of teachers, our findings show that experience of educating students with a range of disabilities is associated with positive attitudes in the NIP schools. Although attitudes towards including students with a disability in mainstream schools remains a major obstacle to IE in Lebanon, the evidence suggests that those who doubt inclusive practices are positive about inclusion once they have had direct experience and 'taken the plunge' themselves. A sizable proportion, however, held onto negative beliefs about the lifestyles of people with disabilities: only half were in agreement that it is possible for such a person to lead a normal life and many were of the view that people with disabilities tend to be isolated.

Consistent with the findings of Nagata (2007b) and others (Cook 2001; Evans and Lunt 2002), the type and severity of the disability are significant factors that influence attitudes; a perception persists that people with severe disabilities are harder to get along with than people with minor disabilities and children with 'mental impairment' are more likely to be excluded. No substantial comparative study covering the inclusion and exclusion of primary and secondary school students with different disabilities in Lebanon has been conducted. However, a UK study showed that children with SEBDs are the most difficult pupils to accommodate in mainstream settings and that schools are more ready to receive children with learning or physical difficulties than those with behavioural difficulties (Evans and Lunt 2002). Our study highlighted the complex needs of students with SEBDs: the fear that disruptive behaviour may cause underachievement, threaten others' achievements and impact on the learning environment by lowering the school's scores/ranking in national competitive tests.

Training and experience: adjusting the balance

Both the education professionals leading the NIP and the teachers gained most of their knowledge through practical experiences and readings, sometimes receiving only 10 days training prior to starting work in the NIP schools. LSAs also gained most of their knowledge through experience. So, one may ask, despite limited training, do teachers

perceive themselves as capable of teaching inclusively? Well, less than half thought that they themselves had the necessary skills to teach students with a disability. More importantly, the vast majority thought that mainstream teachers in Lebanon have insufficient training to teach inclusively. This is a concern, because as Thomas and Vaughan (2004) showed, teachers responsible for students with disabilities are uncomfortable when they do not have the expertise required to teach those students, and/or if they do not have sufficient training to teach inclusively.

However, Oliver (in Thomas and Vaughan 2004) claims that the main problem is not the need for training per se, but the issue of specifying exactly what the content of the training should be. Initial training does not necessarily need to cover every type of issue that teachers might face, but instead, to provide an overview of inclusive teaching. When it becomes clearer what type of needs their students have, teachers can attend specific training relevant to the needs of their pupils. Having acquired some inclusive skills and practised teaching inclusively, teachers have the potential to become experienced in delivering lessons for diverse learners. This is how the majority of the current sample acquired their knowledge about teaching inclusively. The NIP managers also gained their knowledge of SEN and inclusion through working in the field and reading about inclusive practices. However, the lack of proper training as a foundation for inclusive practices continues to cause difficulties. For example, assessing the needs of a student with a disability could be problematic if similar cases had not been encountered.

The tension between adequate resources and positive attitudes

Multiple factors were found to influence attitudes towards inclusion. All of the head-teachers and NIP managers mentioned the dearth of finances, human resources, training and educational resources as barriers to inclusive practices in the project schools. The provision of suitable accommodation, individual plans, inclusive teaching methods and services for students with disabilities require the investment of such resources in different areas of the school and in classrooms. According to Wehbi (2006), in Lebanon, as a result of inadequate funding, teachers, headteachers and administrators are often reluctant to bear additional costs for delivering inclusion (e.g. teacher release time for training). Indeed, the burden of additional costs is borne by the student's family or an NGO (Wehbi 2006). In our study, the low income received by teachers in Lebanon, the lack of staff development opportunities together with political instability are possible reasons behind the resignation of many teachers. Yet, the most significant obstacle to implementing inclusion may not be money or shortage of physical and human resources but arguably negative attitudes on the part of many non-disabled peers, parents, teachers and community leaders towards inclusive practices.

Fostering positive attitudes through peer relationships

Attitudes as well as knowledge were found to be associated with effective inclusive teaching (Kuyini and Desai 2007) which implies that both are critical to the success of inclusion. According to the theory of reasoned action, children's attitudes to disability depend on what children know and understand about disability (Law and Kelly 2005). Our research shows how teachers' understandings of disability are associated with children's likelihood of interacting positively with their peers with disabilities. Most of our teachers thought that the perceptions of people in the community

about inclusion hinder its implementation. Understanding and fostering successful peer relationships is critical to ensuring the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools and for supporting all children's social and emotional development.

Towards inclusive education: a journey with a purpose

The present research confirms Mittler's (2006) view that inclusion is not a one-time achievement but rather a journey with a purpose. During the course of that journey, teachers will build on their experiences and increase their skills in reaching all children. Yet, they also have a right to expect high-quality professional development and support along the way. At the same time, we must also recognise that there is considerable variation in practices across schools. Whilst one headteacher accepts students with SEN because he perceives his school to be inclusive, another accepts students with SEN when the NIP management makes a recommendation, whereas a third works more rigorously, by studying each student's application on a case-by-case basis and building suitable individual plans for them. However, all acknowledged their responsibility to fulfil and monitor the educational requirements of their students with disabilities.

Despite different approaches to implementing IE, professionals were generally positive about including students with SEN. For many, the question is no longer that should students with SEN be included or not but how inclusion can be sustained, improved and made more effective for all learners. However, this study has not addressed issues such as children's interpersonal skills in mainstream schools or where students with disabilities can be better educated, which are crucial measures of changing attitudes. Nor do we claim that the attitudes of the sample represent the attitudes of the wider population of educationalists, only the attitudes of those involved in the NIP project.

Recognition of positive change is required in order to get as many schools as possible involved in IE. A number of schools adopted inclusive practices and embraced positively the education of students with disabilities in mainstream settings. However, some negative attitudes persist, which vary according to the type and severity of the disability, and the phase/age of teaching experience. In order for attitudes to change, increased contact between people with and without a disability is recommended. This is vital because a major means of reducing inter-group prejudice is through building contacts between groups, arguably one of the most important elements. Thus, interaction between both disabled and non-disabled people where inclusion is implemented in a positive and efficient way will create the basis for a more inclusive society. It has been shown that raising awareness of one disability (Down syndrome) through integrated university study and school experience led to changes, not only in knowledge and attitudes regarding that particular disability but also attitudes towards disability in general (Campbell and Gilmore 2003).

One of the challenges in designing this study was a lack of published literature on IE in Lebanon. This presents a problem for researchers and calls urgently for more studies about attitudes. For example, it would be valuable to compare the attitudes of those with and without experience of teaching inclusively. Further work is also needed to identify the factors that hinder and challenge the effective implementation of inclusion in Lebanon. Clearly, the implementation of inclusion is a key area for investigation, not only because of the immediate implications for the students and their families

but also because of the wider issues related to shifting attitudes and increasing acceptance of disability in society.

Notes

1. For the purposes of this research, inclusion is viewed as a process that promotes *useful* participation for all learners, irrespective of their difficulties.
2. We use the phrase 'special educational needs' (SEN) to refer to the categories that are used within education to allocate resources. There is no space within this paper to unpick the complex assumptions on which such systems of categorisation are based or to explore whether or not they are appropriate.

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