

## THE DIFFICULTIES FACING THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS (A POST-ANALYTICAL STUDY OF A SET OF RESEARCH WORKS ON CONCEPTS, METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES, AND FINDINGS)

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### Abstract:

The present study aims to examine a range of research works that have addressed the difficulties facing the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools. To this end, fifteen recent field studies dealing with the challenges of integrating children with autism into regular schools were selected. The researchers adopted the post-analytical approach in this study, focusing the analysis on the following elements: research methodology, sample, data collection tools, statistical methods, and results. Finally, the study presents the suggestions and recommendations proposed in the reviewed research works.

**Keywords:** inclusion, difficulties, autism.

### Introduction:

Autism is considered one of the pervasive developmental disorders also referred to as global developmental disorders that affect infants, children in early childhood, or even adolescents. It is characterized by distortion or functional impairment in the development of basic psychological functions, such as language, social skills related to interaction and communication, attention, and perception. The most widespread form of pervasive developmental disorders is what is known as traditional or classical autism. Parents may notice symptoms of developmental disorders in children as early as infancy, as these symptoms often begin to appear during the first three years of life.

Autism is one of the most ambiguous and complex disorders, both in terms of diagnosis and treatment. As the child grows older, the severity of symptoms tends to increase, which has led to differing perspectives among researchers and practitioners regarding how to deal with it. Its characteristics include weak social interaction, severe emotional coldness, poor use of language and communication with others, loss of a sense of personal identity, pathological preoccupation with specific topics, intense anxiety, deficits in performing certain independent and life skills, in addition to a low level of cognitive functioning.

As a result, many prevailing misconceptions suggest that children with autism are not accepted in schools and are not capable of training or education. This perception stems from the difficulty of dealing with them and the fact that any disturbance may negatively affect them. Therefore, qualified specialists must supervise them, whether in specialized centers or in mainstream schools. This paper sheds light on studies that have addressed the difficulties faced by children with autism during their inclusion in regular schools.

### Research Problem:

The inclusion of children with disabilities is considered an approach that guarantees the right to equality between them and their non-disabled peers. However, for inclusion to succeed, all its conditions must be fulfilled, as it requires considerable effort and essential prerequisites. Inclusion does not merely mean placing children with disabilities and typical children in the same environment; rather, inclusion without proper planning may lead to various problems and difficulties. Moreover, developmental age is more important than chronological age; accordingly, children with disabilities

should be integrated with younger typical children, as this helps reduce disparity and minimize individual differences.

Autism spectrum disorder is not, in itself, a disability that prevents the child from inclusion and from exercising the right to general education alongside typical peers. Rather, there are other obstacles that create barriers, such as educational programs that do not meet the needs of this group, teaching methods that rely solely on rote instruction, the absence of a specialist within the school to support the general education teacher, overcrowded classrooms, and negative attitudes held by typical students (Fathi Jarwan, 2013, p. 251).

Mustafa argues that teachers are not required to be specialists in special education; rather, they can be general education teachers, provided they receive adequate training and qualification (Osama Farouk Mustafa, 2011, p. 243).

Alia Al-Rifai believes that the requirements for successful academic inclusion include the participation and cooperation of general education teachers, special education teachers, school principals, and parents in planning and implementing educational programs for students with disabilities. This also entails proper preparation of the teaching staff, as well as preparing both typical students and students with disabilities for inclusion programs, adjusting class size, daily lesson schedules, and adapting curricula to ensure the success of inclusion systems (Alia Al-Rifai, 2018, p. 123).

Furthermore, the inclusion of children with autism spectrum disorder in mainstream schools may deprive them of individualized instruction and may even lead to increased social isolation within the school. This is due to the specific characteristics of autistic children, who often struggle to adapt to the educational environment because of stereotypical and aggressive behaviors, hyperactivity, and limited verbal and non-verbal communication. From the teacher's perspective, this constitutes a major obstacle. In the absence of an individualized educational program or a specialized teacher, the situation becomes even more complex. The lack of trained and qualified teachers in the field of special education may lead to the failure of inclusion programs, regardless of the resources provided. Mainstream schools often rely on academic achievement and grades as the primary criteria for evaluating students.

From this standpoint, the problem of the present study lies in its examination of various research works that have addressed the difficulties and obstacles associated with the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream primary schools

### **Objectives of the Study:**

This study seeks to identify the following:

Presenting a set of studies that have addressed the difficulties of integrating children with autism into mainstream schools.

Identifying the methodological procedures adopted in these studies.

Identifying the results reached by these studies with regard to the difficulties of integrating children with autism into mainstream primary schools.

### **Research Questions:**

What research methodologies were used in studying the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream primary schools?

What samples were examined in studies on the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream primary schools?

What types of data collection tools were used?

What questions and hypotheses were proposed in these studies?

What statistical methods were used to process the data?

What results were reached?

What recommendations and suggestions were proposed in these studies?

### **Significance of the Study:**

The scarcity of studies addressing the inclusion of children with autism, as well as the difficulties and solutions they face.

Shedding light on the concepts of inclusion for children with autism in order to advance inclusive practices and develop appropriate programs for them.

Enriching the psychological literature related to the inclusion of children with autism.

The importance of the age group addressed by the study childhood which is considered a crucial stage for early intervention and support for children with autism.

#### **Study Procedures:**

##### **Methodology:**

A post-analytical approach applied to a set of studies that addressed the difficulties of integrating children with autism into mainstream primary schools.

##### **Elements of Analysis:**

The post-analytical elements of the reviewed studies included the following:

methodology, 2) sample, 3) data collection tools, 4) statistical methods, 5) results, 6) suggestions and recommendations.

##### **Sample:**

A set of 14 studies, all of which were field studies, including 12 Arab studies and two foreign studies. These studies span the period from 2008 to 2023, with the majority being recent.

The studies were conducted in the following contexts:

Algeria (6 studies), Palestine (2 studies), Saudi Arabia (3 studies), the United Kingdom (2 studies), the United Arab Emirates (1 study), and Syria (1 study).

#### **Some Theoretical Concepts Related to the Study:**

##### **1.Inclusion:**

Inclusion refers to integrating individuals with special needs into the general educational process. Students are considered included when they spend part of the school day with their peers in a regular classroom. A model inclusion program is characterized by the participation of children with special needs in regular classrooms, where they engage in social activities alongside typical students (Ali, 2010, p. 785).

Operationally, the researchers define inclusion as a process of shared participation between typical students and students with special needs within a single educational institution, aimed at meeting their educational, instructional, and social needs in accordance with their abilities and capacities.

##### **Definition of the Inclusion Teacher:**

Al-Khatib considers the teacher a fundamental element in the educational process. Other participants in comprehensive inclusion programs include factors such as:

The teacher's experience and level of comfort in teaching students with special needs.

The teacher's academic qualification.

The issues that concern the teacher with regard to inclusion.

(Jamal Al-Khatib, 2008, p. 20).

##### **Characteristics of the Inclusion Teacher:**

(Often referred to as the "teacher of the future")

Belief in the importance of education and in children with special needs, along with a sound understanding of their psychology.

Mastery of the subject matter being taught and professional specialization.

Proficiency in teaching methods appropriate for children with special needs.

Continuous communication with all parties involved with the students, such as parents, social specialists, and fellow teachers.

(Abdul Rahman Sayyed Suleiman, p. 56).

Among the characteristics required of an inclusion teacher for children with autism are:

The need for personal and professional traits suited to working with children with autism.

A primary focus on developing communicative and social skills when teaching children with autism.

The necessity of individualized instruction and an individualized educational plan for each child.

The need for a special education teacher to accompany the child with autism throughout their time in mainstream schools.

The teacher of children with autism generally does not need sign language skills, except in rare cases.

(Qahtan Ahmed Al-Zaher, 2009, p. 277).

## **2. Autism:**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is one of the neurodevelopmental disorders that has recently gained increased attention and has been classified as an independent category of disability. It affects the individual in specific aspects of development and behavior. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) defines autism as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by severe impairments in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction, restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities. Within this manual, the disorder is classified as one of the neurodevelopmental disorders (APA, 2013).

It is also defined as a developmental disorder resulting from a neurological (functional) dysfunction of the brain, of unknown causes, that appears during the first three years of a child's life. Children with autism are characterized by failure to communicate with others, marked deficits in social interaction, inadequate language development, the emergence of abnormal behavioral patterns, and weak imaginative play (Childhood and Motherhood Research Center, 2017, p. 60).

### **Research Methodologies:**

Four studies reported adopting the descriptive-analytical approach.

Eight studies reported adopting the descriptive approach.

One study adopted the descriptive survey approach.

One study adopted the descriptive evaluative approach.

One study adopted the case study approach

### **Samples:**

Ten studies were conducted on teachers working in inclusive schools.

Two studies were conducted on parents and teachers involved in inclusive schools.

One study was conducted on students with Autism Spectrum Disorder integrated into mainstream schools.

One study was conducted on members of the specialized provincial committee, including: the Director of Social Activity and Solidarity, the Director of National Education, a clinical psychologist, an educational psychologist, a school guidance and counseling advisor, a special education teacher, a social worker, and a specialized educator.

One study was conducted on the administrative and teaching staff of schools hosting inclusion programs.

### **Measurement and Data Collection Tools:**

Seven studies used questionnaires to investigate the barriers and difficulties of integrating children with autism into inclusive schools (three of which combined questionnaires and interviews).

Four studies used standardized scales to assess the difficulties of integrating children with autism into inclusive schools.

One study used a questionnaire combined with an analysis of official documents.

One study used interviews combined with observation.

Two studies relied exclusively on interviews.

### **Statistical Methods:**

Most studies employed research questions and hypotheses.

Most studies used frequencies, arithmetic means, standard deviations, and percentages.

In addition, t-tests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), the Wilcoxon test, and Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient were used.

### **Results:**

Among the findings reached by the reviewed studies regarding the difficulties facing the inclusion of children with autism in inclusive schools are the following:

The number of students in special classes exceeds the maximum limit stipulated in Article 05.

Some teachers assigned to provide supervision lack the required specialization, which contradicts the provisions of Article 12.

The instability of special class teachers largely due to their appointment on a contractual basis negatively affects the performance of students in special classes.

A lack of adequate preparation and training of teachers to develop their competencies and skills in responding to and assessing the needs of integrated students, adapting curriculum content, using assistive technology, providing appropriate teaching methods, and planning and implementing individualized programs, in addition to developing positive attitudes toward inclusion. Furthermore, many teachers do not benefit from professional training programs, which contradicts the provisions of Article 14.

Insufficient preparation of teachers and school staff, as well as a lack of awareness-raising about the integrated group within the institution, its characteristics, and appropriate ways of dealing with its members. This is compounded by the inadequate preparation of typical students for inclusion programs, which limits the development of positive social interaction with peers with special needs (Beyoud & Bouazza, 2017, p. 19).

A low level of awareness among general education teachers regarding the importance and objectives of special education programs.

A shortage of special education teachers within schools.

Limited availability of appropriate instructional materials.

The absence of resource rooms within educational institutions.

Differences in the perspectives of study participants according to study variables (functional specialization and academic qualification) among teachers working in inclusion programs (Abeer Suleiman Al-Asqa, 2019, p. 138).

Teachers acknowledge the existence of problems related to training, motivation, and financial support.

Teachers agree that current curricula do not contribute to activating or enhancing the inclusion process.

A lack of awareness regarding the importance of inclusion processes, with an urgent need to work with parents, as they are the primary actors influencing the success of inclusion (Naemati Adnan et al., 2019, p. 131).

Ministerial decisions are largely symbolic and ineffective in practice, as most children with autism enrolled in mainstream classrooms are not included through formal inclusion programs but rather admitted as typical students, with their condition later identified by visiting school psychiatrists (Nour Al-Huda Ben Omar et al., 2021, p. 310).

### **Suggestions and Recommendations as Presented in the Reviewed Studies:**

Providing teachers with training on strategies for dealing with inclusion-related problems and methods for addressing them.

Developing curricula and extracurricular activities to accommodate students with special needs.

Ensuring the availability of qualified personnel to supervise teachers and students with special needs.

Rehabilitating and adapting primary school buildings to meet the needs of students with different types of disabilities.

Activating the role of guidance and counseling services to support students with special needs.

Increasing the attention of academic and scientific institutions to research and field studies in order to support the development of inclusive education practices.

Strengthening the role of school health services or screening and follow-up units to contribute to inclusion programs, and supplying schools with special education specialists and psychological counselors.

Establishing centers for diagnosis and early detection, equipping them with appropriate diagnostic and assessment tools, or officially designating referral centers in each district and raising public awareness about the importance of utilizing such services.

Developing in-service training programs for specialists and teachers involved in the educational process.

Establishing procedures, mechanisms, and tools for monitoring and evaluating the cases of students with special needs and their progress, and training specialists and teachers in measurement tools and assessment methods.

Raising community awareness through intensive media campaigns about educational inclusion, its importance, objectives, and the expected long-term benefits.

Identifying the problems faced by teachers in schools.

Adopting a teacher incentive policy by the Ministry to reward outstanding teachers in working with students with special needs.

Enhancing the Ministry's focus on teachers' competency levels in working with students with disabilities and granting professional teaching certification accordingly (Souhair Al-Sabah, 2008, p. 60).

Conducting further studies addressing the inclusion of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, its success factors, and the difficulties encountered.

Preparing students with autism prior to their enrollment in mainstream schools, with particular emphasis on pre-academic skills and personal independence.

Using inclusion assessment scales to design individualized educational programs for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder before their integration into mainstream schools, and developing individualized programs for those to be included based on strengths and weaknesses identified through assessment results (Raed & Muheidat, 2013, p. 1303).

Working to change teachers' negative attitudes toward inclusion through awareness courses, lectures, and seminars held within schools, and by presenting international and Arab experiences in this field.

Allocating financial incentives to encourage teachers to compete in ensuring the success of inclusion programs.

Establishing a support team in each inclusive school, composed of parents, teachers, psychological and social specialists, and special education teachers, who meet to exchange expertise and address challenges related to the implementation of inclusion.

Promoting cooperation among ministries such as the Ministries of Education, Health, Social Affairs, and Labor to secure the requirements of children with special needs in schools.

Training large numbers of teachers, social workers, psychologists, administrators, and staff in inclusive schools to expand their knowledge of disability categories, their characteristics, and the importance, objectives, and methods of inclusion (Alia Al-Rifai, 2018, p. 149).

Emphasizing the need for the Ministry of Social Solidarity to provide accurate statistics on Autism Spectrum Disorder by identifying the number of children with autism, in order to determine its prevalence and growth rate, and to support researchers with reliable data.

Implementing the national policy on the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools according to the severity of the disorder: children with mild autism may be integrated into regular classrooms; those with moderate autism may be integrated into special classes within mainstream schools or included socially; whereas children with severe cases should remain in specialized centers (Nour Al-Huda Ben Omar et al., previously cited, p. 312).

## Conclusion:

Previous studies indicate that the inclusion of children with autism in mainstream schools represents a multidimensional challenge encompassing individual, environmental, educational, and social difficulties. Nevertheless, these studies emphasize the importance of providing a supportive school environment through teacher training, the design of individualized educational plans, and the strengthening of cooperation between families and schools. Research findings also demonstrate that the use of technology and the enhancement of community awareness can significantly contribute to improving the inclusion experience and its outcomes.

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