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Teachers' Perspective about Applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region: Needs and Challenges

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Abstract

Education system development has been the world's concern in the last decades, especially about including children with special needs in regular schools "Inclusion". Iraq and Kurdistan Region have been subjected to wars, crises and conflicts for decades; the more recent was the ISIS invasion to Iraq and Kurdistan Region in 2014. After since, education system has gone under a lot of pressure; children are being affected by the conflicts and have limited access to education. The current study aims to assess the needs and challenges of applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region from teachers' perspectives whom have participated in a conference about (Inclusive Education) in Germany in summer 2019. A qualitative purposeful study design has been used; the data were collected by using Google Form online, a purposive sampling was used and it composed of fifteen participants out of thirty. Descriptive statistics and inductive analysis method has been used for data analysis. The participants have listed many challenges: lack of awareness, unqualified teachers, inappropriate school buildings, and difficulty obtaining teaching materials. In addition, many solutions such as providing training courses, orientation program, structuring new curriculum for special needs, and convincing decision makers to support the project. The study recommends future studies and researches on different groups to get better understanding of the needs and the challenges, excessive training courses for teachers and starting Inclusive Education as soon as possible to include children with special needs and disabilities in Iraq and Kurdistan Region.

Introduction:

Education system development has been the world's concern in the last decades, especially about including children with special needs in regular schools "Inclusion" (De Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2011). Within the last two decades, notion of inclusion has getting more attention and importance by many of countries in the world. In 1994, under the guidance of UNESCO, Salamanca statement, called countries to provide education to all students in inclusive settings, this was accepted by 92 countries and 25 organizations (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Statistics has shown the number of children without education worldwide; nine out of ten children with disabilities are deprived from school, and 80 percent of all children with disabilities are from developing countries. They are often excluded from education and society due to physical, ideological, systemic, or communication barriers; more than 32 million children with disabilities in developing countries are out of school (Light of the World, 2019).

Iraq and Kurdistan Region have been subjected to wars, crises and conflicts for decades; the more recent was the ISIS invasion to Iraq and Kurdistan Region in 2014. After since, education system has gone under a lot of pressure; children are being affected by the conflicts and have limited access to education, especially in conflict areas such as Ninewah, Anbar, Salah al Din, Kirkuk, Diyala, Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Duhok, and particularly whom are still living in camps as well as the returnees (Humanitarian Needs overview-Iraq, 2019).

According to article 24 of UNCRPD all people must be given of equal chance for education and to have a right to access the full range of opportunities afforded to citizens of nation states (United Nations 2006, 17) This right also is enshrined in Article 34 of the Iraq

Constitution: "the right to access education, for all children at all levels". This right in Iraq sounds very challenging even for normal children without disabilities, over half a million of Iraqi children have no access to primary education. Children with special needs and disabilities are unseen victims who have been detrimentally affected by war, conflict and violence for decades. They have been neglected and deprived from education (Al-Obaidi & Budosan, 2011) After the Kurdish independence in 1991s; the Kurdish government has taken serious steps in applying inclusive education, while the process still in its early stages and it has a lot of challenges (Alborz, Slee & Miles, 2013).

Inclusive education demonstrates a process that attempts to involve all diversities; girls, boys, high and low IQs, children with special needs and those with disabilities and difficulties in learning in the same school (UNESCO, 1994). It also includes all children regardless to the challenges they have, in age appropriate educational class in which they receive a high quality education, support, and attention. Inclusive Education is supporting children and parents as well, the principle of Inclusive Education is to make all children feel welcomed, equal, and appropriately challenged, and the most important is the adults play an important role in supporting and enhancing those children (McManis, 2017) Inclusive Education provides education for all children including children with special needs, Special needs or (additional need) is a term used in clinical diagnostic and functional development to describe individuals who require assistance for disabilities that may be medical, mental, or psychological (Tu & Cunningham, 2005).

The key elements of successful implementation of inclusive education include: a clear concept and definition of inclusive education,

determining inclusive education targets, indicators, requirements, needs, and outcomes, studying and understanding educational, and cultural challenges, a well-prepared strategy, providing inclusive education training courses, and convincing national leadership on inclusive education systems, curricular-reform (Schuelka, 2018) Teachers have major responsibility in the success or failure of Inclusive Education, teachers' beliefs and attitudes are the key element for its success (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011) Believes about that teachers are not qualified and the need for training courses has been studied very broadly, A study about teachers' perception of inclusion in (Sri Lanka) have argued about the need of training courses for better preparation and that the teachers are not competent enough without previous preparation (Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014), Training courses prior to the application of Inclusive education is considered necessary for decreasing teachers' concern of the process and provides them with strategies to deal with challenges (Sharma & Sokal, 2015), Training teachers plays an important role in changing teachers' attitudes about children with special needs and learning disabilities and this will lead to better treatment, showing empathy and the willingness to educate them; in another words, it will be the key to the success of this project in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, this approach goes with what philosophies about inclusive education have been discussed in the past decades (De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011) In India, teachers have suggested training courses as a vital element for the success and defeating the challenges of Inclusive Education settings (Tiwari, Das & Sharma, 2015) The training courses include teachers and parents, in order to provide better understanding about disabilities (Watson, 2009).

After studying the difficulties and challenges that the education system in Kurdistan Region and Iraq have been through, the old fashion education system that are applying and the need for renewing this system to include all children in the education system, it is a necessity for Iraq to start applying Inclusive education and for Kurdistan Region to step forward in the Inclusive education. In Kurdistan Region, despite the applications of Inclusive Education, but there are hundreds of children with disabilities and special needs still out of schools. In Kalar city for instance, parents of children with disabilities have established a new school for children with special needs and disabilities, but inside a regular school building. Parents are teaching those children, they are not teachers and/or not qualified, but they are only willing to have a place for their children inside this school. As teachers have the fundamental role in education system, especially in inclusive settings because there are no previous studies regarding this topic in Iraq and/or in Kurdistan region; it is substantial to assess teachers' perspective about the needs and challenges for applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region. The current study aims to assess the needs and challenges of applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region from teachers perspectives whom have participate in a conference about Inclusive Education in Germany in summer 2019.

Methodology:

In this study, a qualitative purposeful study design has been used; the data were collected by using Google Form online, the link of the study questions were sent to the participants individually and the researcher clarified that participation in the study is optional for participants. The shared link was active for two weeks, during those two weeks;

only 15 participants out of 30 have answered the study questions. The study questionnaire was designed by researchers according to the objectives of the study which composed of two group of questions; the first group of questions were close ended questions about some demographical data and some primary information about inclusive education, the second group of questions were open ended questions about the needs and challenges of applying inclusive education in Kurdistan Region and Iraq.

A purposive sampling was used and it composed of fifteen participants out of thirty, from participants of the Summer Conference about Inclusive Education (six females, nine males) from five different universities in Iraq and Kurdistan Region (Universities of Duhok, Zakho, Mosul, Kufa and Garmian), between September 10th to 22th 2019. We chose this group purposively because they have more eligibility to our study objective; they have enough knowledge and information about inclusive education during their participation in the conference, they also have attended to inclusive schools and classrooms in Germany therefore, they are qualified to assess the needs and challenges of applying such educational program in Iraq and Kurdistan Region from their perspective.

The summer conference of the project "Qualification for Inclusive Education Iraq" was in Germany from 20th August to 30th August 2019, issued through the promotional program of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the cooperation of scientists from Iraq and Germany. This conference was held in Oldenburg and Vechta, Germany for five universities of Iraq and Kurdistan Region (Universities of Duhok, Zakho, Mosul, Kufa and Garmian) and it included six participants (university lecturers) from each university. The

conference program included a number of lectures, workshops and schools visits. The participants have got plethora of information about inclusive education and children with learning disabilities.

Descriptive statistics have been used for the close ended questions and inductive analysis method has been used to analyze the obtained data from the interview questions, the data have been classified according to their frequency and themes have been defined accordingly.

Reflexivity and Positionality:

As we lecturers in Department of Education and Psychology, College of Education since 2005; we have been teaching Education and Psychology materials since then, but the curriculum is not well designed to provide sufficient knowledge about special needs and/or how to support them as psychologists. Since education right is for every child and there are a lot of children in our region have been neglect and deprived from their education right, it is worthy to step up as to study teachers' perspective about Inclusive Education.

As a mental health specialist since 2010, working in the field of education in College of Education, Education and Psychology department and living in a place where we meet and hear a lot about children with special needs (children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities) whom have no place for them in our schools. This subject has been always our concern, but we have never been able to help those children and their parents or teachers when they were asking for help and support from our department because we are not enough qualified, and we had no idea how and where shall we start. After participating in the Summer Conference about Special and Inclusive Education in Oldenburg and Vechta, Germany; we have learned a lot about this field of

education, the requirements, the challenges, and the first step toward helping those children and parents.

Findings:

Table 1: rate of participation according of gender and university

| Items | | F | % |
|--------------|---------|----|-------|
| Gender | Male | 9 | 60.0 |
| | Female | 6 | 40.0 |
| Universities | Zakho | 5 | 33.3 |
| | Duhok | 4 | 26.7 |
| | Garmian | 3 | 20.0 |
| | Kufa | 2 | 13.3 |
| | Mosul | 1 | 6.7 |
| Total | | 15 | 100.0 |

Table one demonstrates the rate of participation according to gender and universities; 60% of participants were males and 40% females. University of Zakho have higher participation rate 33.3%, the second high is University of Duhok 26.7%, and lowest is University of Mosul 6.7%.

Table 2: some perceptions about applying Inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region

| No. | Items | Yes | | No | | Not Sure | |
|-----|--|------------|-----------|----------|-------|----------|--|
| | | F (%) | F (%) | F (%) | F (%) | | |
| 1 | Previous background about Inclusive Education before the Summer Conference in Germany | 10 (66.7) | 5 (33.3) | | | | |
| 2 | agreeing about applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan | 14 (93.3) | | | | 1 (6.7) | |
| 3 | Working on applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and/or Kurdistan | 15 (100.0) | | | | | |
| 4 | Availability of sufficient materials and requirements for applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and/or Kurdistan | 3 (20.0) | 10 (66.7) | 2 (13.3) | | | |
| 5 | Availability of sufficient university curriculum for preparing teachers to work on Inclusive Education in Iraq and/or Kurdistan | 3 (20.0) | 9 (60.0) | 3 (20.0) | | | |
| 6 | The need of previous preparation (training courses, providing materials, etc.) before applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and/or Kurdistan. | 15 (100.0) | | | | | |

In Table two, we can realize that (66.7%) of participants have had previous experiences about inclusive education before attending the Summer Conference in Germany. There are similar responses by the majority of the participants; in items 3 and 5, all participants (100%) have responded that they will work on applying inclusive education in Iraq and

Kurdistan Region, and they need previous preparation before applying this program. Furthermore, in item 2, (93.3%) of participants agree with applying inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region. While in item 4, most of them (66.7%) have admitted that currently there are no sufficient materials and requirements for applying inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, and (60.0%) have ensured the absence of sufficient curriculum for preparing teachers to work on inclusive education program.

The participants were asked to write about the possible challenges that could be raised with applying inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, they have listed many challenges such us: lack of awareness, unqualified teachers, inappropriate school buildings, and difficulty obtained teaching materials. The majority of them have mentioned that lack of awareness by teachers, parents, and society about children with special needs, could be the main challenge. Teachers are not qualified or well prepared to teach children with special needs, parents also are unaware about the needs and treating ways such children, and other children at schools, could become obstacles for children with special needs. The schools in Kurdistan Region and Iraq are not well prepared to include children with special needs, insufficient teaching materials to meet the needs in teaching children with special needs, and the school curriculums are classical and do not include a special curriculum for children with special needs. Beside the mentioned challenges, the neglect of decision makers thought to be one of the difficult challenges for this project. The suggest solutions for the expected challenges were demonstrated by participants as follows: providing training courses, orientation program, structuring new

curriculum for special needs, and convincing decision makers to support the project. The fifteen participants have mentioned the necessity of training courses for teachers and parents as a crucial step toward applying inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, also to expand the training to be included university and school teaching staff, parents and volunteers who determinate to help children with special needs. The majority of participants have pointed out series of orientation programs for spreading awareness about special needs and learning disabilities for all the groups in the community. Building up new curriculums for schools to educate children with special needs, and learning disabilities have been suggested by five of the participants as a good step for starting inclusive education; mentioning that a group of specialized experts have to start working on it by designing various curriculums for different needs and disabilities, and to depend on other countries curriculums that are being used currently. Another solution that have been suggested by most of the participants is, writing proposals about the importance of applying inclusive education and asking the Government and the policy makers to support this field financially, build schools, provide materials, and provide qualified trainers for this project.

The participants were also asked to add further information regarding inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region; in this regard, participant (P3) has quoted “we need to be careful in choosing what kind and degree of disabilities to be included in school” meaning that we cannot include all types of disabilities and special needs at the beginning of this project, since we do not have previous experience about inclusion. Participant (P7) suggested a future plan that could support this project in whole universities in Iraq and

Kurdistan Region to collaborate together on stepping up toward achieving it because only five universities are planning to work on this project now (the participated universities of the Summer Conference in Germany).

In general, participants have shown strong willingness to support applying inclusive education; they proposed different plans, strategies and methods that would brace this project. Participant (P8) has showed hope for the future of this project in Iraq and Kurdistan Region stating: “I hope we can be like Germany in inclusive education”, this means a great hope for Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region.

Discussion

This study aims to assess the needs and challenges of applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region from teachers perspectives whom have participate in a conference about Inclusive Education in Germany in summer 2019. Participants’ attitudes about applying Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region were very positive; (93.3%) have agreed with applying it and (100.0%) have showed supporting it. These results are similar to (Avramidis and Norwich 2002); they have found positive attitudes, but no evidence of total acceptance or total rejection (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The positive attitudes by participated teachers reveals the willingness of help and support that these teachers have for helping children in need and they know the number of children in need for this educational program in Iraq and Kurdistan Region.

The awareness of teachers, parents, and the community have been mentioned as a challenge toward applying Inclusive Education, children may be subjected to harassment in schools, street and public places. Different orientation programs were suggested by

participants to be applied to raise awareness; these orientation programs include seminars, workshops, training courses, TV shows, education programs, posters, conferences, and documentaries.

The participants have confirmed the need of training courses and previous preparation of teachers before starting Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region. This results agrees with many other researchers whom assured the necessity of training courses that plays an important role in the success of Inclusive Education ((De Boer, Pijl & Minnaert, 2011); (Watson, 2009) & (DeSimone and Parmar 2006). There is no doubt that training courses help teachers to know how to teach children with special needs and disabilities, since these children require different programs and attention according to the level of their disabilities and needs. Especially in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, teachers are not familiar with Inclusive Education, therefore, they need to be well prepared and qualified to show a high quality of education to those children.

The availability of teaching material has been mentioned as a necessity for inclusive classrooms in Iraq and Kurdistan Region from teachers' perspectives. This perception agrees with (Waston 2009), who has shown that failure to provide adequate environmental adjustments resulted in restricted participation or exclusion from some of the activities in class (Hemmingson & Borell, 2002). Inclusive settings require special materials that fit with the needs of children with disabilities; this makes teachers to be concerned about how to teach those children without these materials. Beside teaching materials, school buildings have been discussed to be required and designed according to the needs of children with disabilities. Current schools have no facilities for children with special needs and/or disabilities.

Despite of what have been mentioned by participants as solutions for expected challenges with applying Inclusion in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, but attracting the attention of stakeholders are considered the most important step for applying this project. This could be more challenging than the expectations; there are limited awareness of disability issues and needs among stakeholders in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, the whole subject seems to be unclear for them, and they are not aware about the field, severity or complexity of disabilities (Alborz, A., Slee, R., & Miles, S. (2013). Stakeholders and decision makers can decide about applying such project, supporting it financially and incorporeally, without decision makers' a serious step could not be approved toward applying Inclusive Education, even if the teachers are ready to apply this project.

Current curriculums have to be changed and designing a new curriculum for children with special needs and disabilities seems to be an important requirement for starting Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region, teachers have clarified that it is impossible to teach without previously prepared and having a curriculum about each type of disability. For instance, in Hong Kong teachers have perceived that there are five influential factors including teamwork, curriculum, school support, government support, and stakeholders' attitudes, are essential for the success of Inclusive Education (Lee, et al, 2015; Schuelka, 2018). The curriculum also facilitated teacher role, as a result, teachers will be aware of the plan for each disability.

A participant has mentioned that we need to be aware about the types and severities of disabilities that we might be including in our Inclusive Education in the future because in very severe cases the challenges are going to be more difficult. This evidence agrees with

(Avramidis and Norwich 2002); the teachers' attitudes influenced by: 1- nature and severity of disability, 2- environmental conditions, and 3- physical and human support (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Participants are from Iraq and Kurdistan Region, in other words they are aware of the needs and challenges, thus they agree with selecting specific types and severities of disabilities to be included in this program. Especially, there is no previous experience with Inclusive Education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region; it will be extremely challenging to include all disabilities in a typical classroom.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The current study has shown that participants of summer conference in Germany about Inclusive Education, have a positive view about applying this project, they are willing to work on it, but they have determined some challenges and suggested some solutions for these challenges. The challenges are lack of awareness, unqualified teachers, inappropriate school buildings, and difficulty obtained teaching materials. While the suggested solutions are providing training courses, orientation program, structuring a new curriculum for special needs, and convincing decision makers to support the project. It is been concluded that with support of decision makers in providing well designed schools, providing required materials for children with special needs, building up a professional curriculum for educating children with special needs, and training teachers and care providers, the process of applying Inclusive education in Iraq and Kurdistan Region will be successful to provide sufficient education for hundreds of children with special needs and learning difficulties. We recommend future studies and researches on different groups of teachers and stakeholders in this regard to get better

understanding of the needs and the challenges. We also suggest providing excessive training courses for teachers and starting Inclusive Education as soon as possible to include children with special needs and disabilities that have been deprived from education.

Limitation of the Study

There have been some limitation in our study, firstly the number of participants; only fifteen out of thirty participants have answered the study questions. Using online form of questions is considered challenging because usually teachers are busy and may not check their mails periodically. Secondly, is having limited resources and very limited previous about such topic in Iraq and Kurdistan Region.

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