INCLUSION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS IN THE KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

by

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Abstract

The inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms has a significant impact on children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. Generating an inclusive classroom climate can help children with special needs to improve their skills, overcome the challenges associated with disabilities, and develop a sense of belonging to their schools and communities. In the KSA, inclusion programs are still underdeveloped and need additional improvement. There is a clear absence of genuine inclusion programs that welcome children with special needs and enable them to go beyond their disabilities. In this project I draw on sociocultural theory and cognitive social theory to support the implementation of authentic inclusion programs in the KSA. I also examine the need for genuine inclusion programs in the KSA and suggest a model that can support the implementation of genuine inclusion programs.
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Chapter One: Introduction

The movement towards inclusion has increased internationally in the last several years. Some countries, such as the United States and Canada, have gone beyond the question of why inclusion is needed to the question of how it can be effectively implemented (Loreman, 2007). Other countries, for example, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), are still developing an understanding of inclusion and its philosophy and practices. Despite the recognition of Special Education in the KSA in 1964 (Alodail, 2011) and the efforts of the Ministry of Education to provide appropriate educational opportunities for children and youth with special needs, the field is still underdeveloped (AlAjmi, 2006). The development of special education is slow, especially in comparison to other countries, such as Canada and the United States. For instance, in Canada, the integration of students with special needs in regular classrooms was introduced in the 1970s, and full inclusion occurred in the 1980s (Smith et al., 2012). The KSA is approximately 17 years behind Canada in the inclusion of children with exceptionalities. Thus, there are many gaps and issues in the system that prevent children with special needs from reaching their potential. According to Almasoud (2010), Special Education in the KSA still requires many improvements, particularly in relation to inclusion and its practices.

The Development of Special Education in the KSA

In 1996, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the importance of including students with special needs in regular classrooms. In 2001, the Ministry of Education in the KSA released new legislation that requires all public elementary and high schools to include students with special needs. However, this excludes early childhood classrooms (Almousa, 2006). Based on a review of several Saudi studies (Alahamdi, 2009; AlAjmi, 2006; Alodail, 2011; Alquraini, 2010), inclusion practices and programs are rarely practiced in the real world and children with
special needs are still not provided with the support they need. According to the Ministry of Education, “In 2007-2008 96% of students with multiple and severe disabilities received their education in separate institutes” (Alquraini, 2010, p. 141). Although the Ministry of Education in the KSA acknowledges the significance of full inclusion and its possible benefits, Alquraini (2011) found that in reality there is no implementation of inclusion practices in public schools. Additionally, Alfaiz (2006) confirmed that “most public and private Saudi schools are inaccessible to students with disabilities” (p. 4), and Alodail (2011) declared that students with hearing impairments encounter many difficulties with being fully included in the Saudi public school system.

Several potential factors have impacted the implementation of effective inclusion programs in the KSA’s public schools. First, is the absence of well-trained teachers in the area of Special Education. Teachers in the KSA are considered “highly qualified by obtaining a bachelor’s degree or higher” (Alahmadi, 2009, p.24) in Education. They are not required to obtain a diploma in Special Education, as is often the case in other countries. Specialized courses or training programs in Special Education are also not provided to pre and in-service teachers. A second factor is society’s values and perceptions of children with special needs. For instance, some people in the KSA perceive having a child with a disability as a punishment from Allah due to their disrespectful behaviors towards others or Allah. Also, for some people disabilities are seen as a test of patience and heaven is the reward (Alahamdi, 2009; Alquraini, 2010). Due to these misbeliefs and perceptions, children with special needs are often invisible and inactive members in society.
Lack of awareness about children with disabilities, including their needs and their strengths has therefore hindered the enactment of inclusion practices in the KSA. In addition, there is the lack of awareness about disabilities, their characteristics, and their causation. For example, Alqahtani (2012) did a qualitative study that examined the Saudi cultural understanding of autism and its causation. He found that *Evil Eye* was considered by parents to be the main cause of autism in their children. *Evil Eye* is defined as “a look or glance superstitiously supposed to have the power of inflicting harm or injury” (Collins, 2013, para. 1). It is the belief that by being envious or by strongly wishing to have what others have, a person can cause harm to others. For instance, Alqahtani (2012) mentioned that one of the parents believed that their daughter became autistic after attending a party. The parent believe that there was an envious person at the party who strongly wished to have the qualities that their daughter had and, as a result, harmed her and caused autism. Another issue that has impacted the implementation of inclusion practices in the KSA is insufficient research in the area of Special Education. Therefore, the effects and issues of inclusion, and the needed areas of development are ambiguous and unknown (Alahamdi, 2009).

**Inclusion**

Inclusion means that all children, regardless of their level of abilities, are included and welcome in regular classrooms (Allen & Schwartz, 2001; Horne & Timmons, 2009). “It is about belonging, having worth, and having choices; an inclusive classroom is about accepting and valuing human diversity and providing support” (Allen & Cowdery, as cited in Gordon & Browne, 2011, p. 94). Inclusion means creating the *least restrictive environment* where “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with the children who are non-disabled” (Alahamdi, 2009, p.41). It is about generating a climate in schools that encourages
the participation of children with special needs in school and community activities to the “fullest extent possible” (Allen & Schwartz, 2001, p.3).

**Inclusion in Early Childhood Classrooms**

Because inclusion focuses on providing children with special needs with the best developmental and learning opportunities, early childhood classrooms seem to be the optimal first step towards implementing a successful and effective inclusion program (Gordon & Browne, 2011; Lipsky & Gartner, 2001). Childhood is considered an important phase of a person's life due to its role in laying the groundwork for the future. According to Freud’s *psychodynamic theory*, “Experiences of early childhood shape the development of adult personality” (Parke, Gauvain, & Schmuckler, 2010, p. 10). Thus, the first six years of a person’s life have a profound influence on his/her future and personality development. According to Freud’s theory, the child is perceived “as a clean slate on which the experiences of parents, society, education, and the world are written” (Gordon & Browne, 2011, p.11). This theory also highlights the significance of considering inclusion in early childhood classrooms as it emphasizes the importance of the early developmental stages that children go through in the development of their personalities. Gordon and Browne (2011) posited that the pivotal point for healthy development is the type of interaction that children have with people and the environments surrounding them, as well as the interactions between children’s needs and desires.

Further, childhood is the period where children’s intellectual, physical, social, and emotional abilities develop rapidly. According to Allen and Schwartz (2001), childhood is the period where children are highly sensitive and receptive to the stimulus that the world around them offers. It is the period in which doors of learning opportunities are opened (BC Early Learning Framework, 2008). Additionally, “early childhood classrooms are less demanding
academically” (Gilmore, Campbell, & Cuskelly, 2003, p. 75) and there is less emphasis on differences among children’s levels of abilities. The cornerstone of early childhood education is to provide young children with the best learning opportunities that are developmentally appropriate (BC Early Learning Framework, 2008). As a result, the culture of most early childhood classrooms focuses on the individual developmental needs of each child and early childhood teachers are trained to meet these needs. The inclusion of children with special needs in early childhood classrooms seems to be appropriate since the philosophy and practices of early childhood education resemble the philosophy and practices of inclusion. Therefore, in my opinion, the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms would allow them to actively participate and interact with others so that their developmental and learning needs could be met.

**Purpose**

From my perspective, in order to implement a successful and effective inclusion program, people in the KSA need to understand the meaning of inclusion. They need to recognize the importance of including students with special needs in regular classrooms. The purpose of this graduating project is to highlight the importance of inclusion in early childhood classrooms as the first initiative towards implementing a genuine understanding of inclusion. According to Swedeen (2009), a genuine understanding of inclusion means an understanding of children’s need to be welcomed in classrooms and to have “inclusive experiences” (p. 3), rather than just sharing the physical space with other students. This type of understanding would result in the creation of classrooms that provide “access to and full participation in rich learning for all students without prejudice” (McPhail & Freeman, 2005, p. 264). Consequently, authentic inclusion that requires “communication, interaction, and relationship-building” (Swedeen, 2009,
p. 3) would be created. Authentic inclusion is defined as an inclusion that promotes and provides various kinds of opportunities for students with and without special needs to “participate together, interact, and contribute across school environments” (Swedeen, 2009, p. 4). Authentic inclusion also contributes to establishing social acceptance where the needs of students with special needs to belong, relate, and accepted are met. Connell and Wellborn (as cited in Wentzel, 2002) posited that individuals need to feel related to their social surroundings in order to have a positive sense of self. They defined relatedness as “the need to feel securely connected to the social surround and the need to experience oneself as worthy and capable of love and respect” (p. 229). According to Kunc (1992), Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs organizes human needs in a way that reveals belonging as “an essential and prerequisite human need that had to be met before one could ever achieve a sense of self worth” (para. 10; see Figure 1.1).

*Figure 1.1 Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.*

Moreover, Kunc (1992) hypothesized that children only develop self-esteem and respect that encourages them to seek their talents and abilities when they feel secure and loved, and when they have a sense of belonging to the people in their world and their local community. Maslow claimed that these essential needs enable individuals to reach their potential and fulfill their dreams. Once individuals’ needs are met, they will be motivated to learn and acquire new skills (Kunc, 1992). It is through meeting these needs that children with special needs will move beyond their disabilities and learn new and higher level skills. Consequently, the Saudi education system must implement genuine inclusion programs and practices where children “do have a presence” (Swedeen, 2009, p.3) and where they “truly belong, have community, and are equal participants in that community” (Frazee, as cited in Hanvey, 2002, p.7). In order for inclusion to be implemented, it has to be grounded in an understanding of its genuine meaning and purpose, which I will explore in this graduating project.

**Rationale**

The rationale for this project emerged from several of my personal and professional experiences that revealed the absence of social awareness and educational support for students with special needs in the KSA. One of these experiences involves my niece Haya. Haya is a nine-year-old girl who, since birth, has suffered from Ehlers-Danlos syndrome which is “a group of disorders that affect connective tissues that support the skin, bones, blood vessels, and other organs” (Genetics Home Reference, 2006, para. 1). This disease causes a delay in motor skills development, such as sitting, standing, and walking (Genetics Home Reference, 2006, para. 3). However, according to the Arthritis Foundation website (2012), the disease does not impact cognitive development. Despite the fact that it is a physical disorder, my niece was not allowed to enroll in a regular early childhood classroom. Her mother applied to five preschools and
although Haya passed all of the required academic tests that measured her level of readiness and cognitive ability, she was not accepted. At the age of six, Haya was finally accepted, but in an international school where the curriculum and classroom environment are adapted from the American education system which differs in many aspects from the Saudi education system. For example, English is the primary language used in teaching, and the curricula differs in content and goals in comparison to the curricula offered in schools that operate under the Saudi Education system. In that context, she studies in co-ed classrooms, which is prohibited in private and public Saudi schools, and learns in both Arabic and English. Although her parents are happy that she was accepted in a school that provides inclusion and recognizes their daughter’s strengths, they still feel that she is isolated from the community and its members. They feel that their daughter is living in another culture and not in the Saudi culture. Haya’s mother has briefly described her experience with her daughter’s condition as:

… a most conflicted experience. I am happy that my daughter is academically progressing and achieving, but I am sad because outside of school, she is socially isolated. There is no awareness about her syndrome. When walking in public places, people stare at her and that hurts both of us. (personal communication, August 8, 2012)

At the professional level, there were several incidents that I encountered which revealed the lack of support and services for young children with special needs in the KSA. During the time I worked at the Disabled Children’s Association at Jeddah, I met a talented nine-year-old boy named Abdulkhaleg. He had been diagnosed with Congenital Hypothyroidism (Cretinism) which is a disease that affects the function of the thyroid gland and causes abnormal development (Virtual Medical Centre, 2003, para. 1). Due to his condition, he cannot walk and run; however, he actively and enthusiastically interacts with many people. He also has high academic abilities and can recall information and successfully participate in all class activities. He also participated in several Quran contests and won first place several times. In addition, he
was also able to memorize two chapters of the Holy book and recite these chapters in front of a large audience and the president of the association, Prince Sultan bin Salman. After listening to him, the prince said, “Abdulkhaleg has proven that he is not disabled; we are the ones who are disabled” (personal communication, April, 2009). However, in spite of the recognition Abdulkhaleg received and the appreciation of his abilities, he was not provided with opportunities to continue his education. Inclusion was not offered to him and he can only be at the association until the age of twelve. At that time, he will have the choice to either stay at home or attend a vocational institute for children with special needs. The potential Abdulkhaleg has displayed makes me believe even more in the significance of inclusion and its possible productive outcomes for children with special needs. I strongly believe that inclusion, where its main focus is on empowering students socially, emotionally, and cognitively (Smith, 2012), must be recognized and implemented in the KSA education system.

**Significance**

The Ministry of Education acknowledged the importance of inclusion programs and practices in 1996; however, it was not mandated and required until 2001. Inclusion programs in the KSA still have significant gaps that need to be addressed. Since including individuals with special needs reflects society’s beliefs and perceptions (Lipsky & Gartner, as cited in Guralnick, 2001), the implementation of genuine inclusion programs is critical for both society’s and its individuals’ future. Therefore, by clarifying these gaps and highlighting the importance of inclusion in children’s development and the broader society, I believe that my graduating project can contribute to the enhancement of inclusion programs and to the development of Special Education in the KSA. It is my hope that through this project where I highlighted the significance of inclusion programs and their effectiveness, they will be truly welcomed and
implemented in the education system of the KSA.

**Theoretical Framework**

This project is grounded in two theoretical perspectives. The first perspective is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) *sociocultural theory*. This theory has significantly contributed to the development of special education programs, particularly inclusion. According to Dixon and Verenikina (2007), Vygotsky’s theory emphasized the importance of embracing children with special needs in society to prevent the development of a *secondary disability*. The primary disability is the biological impairment that results from absent or abnormal development and the secondary disability “refers to distortions of higher psychological functions due to social factors” (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003, p. 203). According to Dixon and Verenikina (2007), in order to prevent the development of secondary disability an educational approach that acknowledges the strengths of children with special needs rather than just focusing on their weaknesses is important. Sociocultural theory provides the foundation of best inclusion practices that stem from understanding children’s learning processes in accordance with their interactions with the social context in which they live (Walker & Berthelsen, 2008).

The second theoretical perspective that informs this project is Bandura’s (1977) *cognitive social learning theory*. This theory emphasizes learning through observation and imitation. It is believed that “children learn not only through classical and operant conditioning” (Parke, Gauvain, & Schmuckler, 2010, p. 13), but also by interacting with their social environments (Parke et al., 2010). Children acquire skills and learn certain behaviors from observing others. The theory supports inclusion as it indicates that children need role models to learn age appropriate behaviors and acquire higher skills (Gordon & Browne, 2011). This theory acknowledges that the social environment is viewed as a focal learning resource where children
can learn and acquire knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes from observing others (Schunk, 2000). In his theory, Bandura, (as cited in Schunk, 2000) also postulated “how modeling greatly expands the range and rate of learning” (p. 118). Therefore, through observing typically developing peers, children with special needs are offered rich learning opportunities that can promote the development of cognitive, social, and physical skills.

**Project Outline**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the current status of inclusion programs in the KSA and introduced the factors that hindered the development and full implementation of these programs. I also discussed the importance of inclusion in early childhood classrooms as the first initiative towards implementing a genuine understanding of inclusion. Additionally, this chapter outlined my purpose, rationale, and the theoretical perspectives that will frame this project. The following chapter will explore the development of Special Education and inclusion programs in the KSA and will include a number of studies that examine effects of, and attitudes towards inclusion. In Chapter Two, I will also provide insights into the theoretical perspectives that frame this project. In Chapter Three, I will draw on the research findings to provide a connection to practice, and address implications for inclusion programs in the KSA. In Chapter Four, I will provide suggestions for inclusion programs in the KSA and recommendations will be presented.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Special Education in the KSA

**History.** The education of people with special needs was introduced in 1958 by Sheikh AlGhanem, a Saudi man who had a visual impairment (AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Alotaibi, n.d.; Alquraini, 2010). He studied the Braille system of reading and writing from an Iraqi teacher (Alotaibi, n.d.) and he then organized private lessons to teach the language system to other individuals with visual impairments. Two years later, the Ministry of Education recognized the importance of educating individuals with visual impairments and provided support for AlGhanem’s initiative by providing him with the space and materials that he needed to instruct the Braille system. Public schools were also opened in the evenings so that Braille lessons could be conducted for interested individuals. In 1960, the Ministry of Education in the KSA opened the first training institute for males with visual impairment in Riyadh, the AlNoor Institute (AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Alotaibi, n.d.). In 1964, the Ministry of Education opened the first institute to teach and train females with visual impairments. Concurrently, the AlAmal Institute was opened in Riyadh to educate, train, and care for children with hearing impairment. In 1971, the Ministry of Education established the first institution in the KSA that focused on educating people with mental disabilities (AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Alotaibi, n.d.). However, although these institutions formed the foundation of Special Education programs in the KSA, “each of these institutions was established prior to Saudi governmental actions or mandates” (AlAjmi, 2006, p. 12).

In 1974, a General Directorate of Special Education was established to provide and improve services for individuals with special needs in the KSA (AlAjmi, 2006; Alotaibi, n.d). It is responsible for designing vocational and preparation programs, and monitoring these programs
by focusing on three types of disabilities: visual impairment, hearing impairment, and mental disabilities. Additionally, the directorate is accountable for establishing the policies and legislation that ensure the rights of individuals with special needs are met (AlAjmi, 2006; Alotaibi, n.d.; Alquraini, 2010).

The objectives of the General Directorate of Special Education in the KSA can be summarized into the following: i) provide students with special needs in the KSA with every possible learning opportunity that is appropriate to their level of abilities; ii) promote equity between the KSA’s citizens; iii) empower students with special needs by providing the education and knowledge that would enable them to be full participants in society and to be productive citizens; iv) transform students with special needs from dependent individuals into independent and productive individuals by providing education and training opportunities (Alahamdi, 2009).

In 1996, the Ministry of Education acknowledged the importance of including students with special needs in regular classrooms; however, it was not until 2001 that the Ministry of Education in the KSA released regulations regarding inclusion (AlAjmi, 2006; Almousa, 2006). These regulations stipulate that students with mild mental disabilities, visual impairment, and hearing impairment are entitled to be accepted into public schools in three major cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam (AlAjmi, 2006). Students with severe mental disabilities, autism, social and emotional disorders, and other types of disabilities are served in special education institutes (AlAjmi, 2006; Alquraini, 2010) where they receive several types of services. An example of these institutes is the Special Institute for Students with Severe Mental Disabilities where students receive service, such as education, “residence, food, and financial aid” (Alquraini, 2010, p. 141).
**Goals.** Alahmadi (2009) posited that the goals of Special Education in the KSA focus on developing acceptable social behaviors in children with disabilities, and preparing them for a stable life, as well as preparing children with disabilities for public life so that they become productive members of society, able to support themselves, and productively participate with others. (p. 53)

The KSA Ministry of Education has outlined several primary goals of Special Education:

i) identify children’s strengths and weaknesses and develop appropriate educational programs; ii) provide children with educational opportunities and encourage them to fulfill their potentials; iii) teach children the Islamic principles and manners, and cultivate them with Islamic attitudes; iv) “develop acceptable social behavior and prepare children for a stable life” (p. 12); v) provide children with the services they need to grow independently, such as medical, social and psychological services; vi) train children and prepare them to be “productive and self-supporting members of society” (p. 12); and vii) educate the public and increase awareness of individuals with special needs and disabilities (AlAjmi, 2006).

Regarding the goals of inclusion programs, the Ministry of Education in the KSA divided them into two categories: short-term and long-term goals. The short-term goal is to provide students with special needs with opportunities to interact with and learn from their typically developing peers. The long-term goal is to gradually integrate individuals with special needs as active members in society (AlAjmi, 2006).

**The KSA’s laws regarding individuals with special needs.** The government of the KSA recognizes that the services provided for individuals with special needs are their rights, not privileges. The KSA offers a wide range of free services such as medical, social, psychological, and educational services to all individuals with special needs regardless of the severity of their disabilities (Alahmadi, 2009). In 1987, the Ministry of Education in the KSA passed the first legislation for individuals with special needs that constitutes their rights to educational and
training programs, and rehabilitation services (Alquraini, 2010). This legislation requires all public agencies, such as the Ministry of Health Care, the Ministry of Social Affairs, and the Ministry of Education in the KSA to provide individuals with special needs with opportunities that would help them live independently (Alquraini, 2010).

In 2000, the government of the KSA passed a second legislation that underscores the responsibility of all public agencies to provide individuals with special needs with the full services that they need, such as educational, medical, and training services. In addition, the legislation demanded that all agencies “assist eligible people in areas including welfare, habilitation, health, education, training and rehabilitation, employment, complementary services, and other areas” (Prince Salman Center for Disability Research, as cited in Alquraini, 2010, p. 140).

**Special Education in the KSA at the present time.** The field of Special Education as described by Alahamdi (2009) went through a very slow era of development as its goals have remained the same since the 1950s. Even for those children who have been identified as eligible for inclusion services, AlAjmi (2006) posited that they are not genuinely included, and the majority of them are educated in special education institutes or segregated classrooms in public schools with minimal interaction with typical peers (Alquraini, 2010). He also maintained that children with special needs are also taught special curricula that differ in content and goals from the curricula studied by their typically developing peers. In a recent study conducted by the KSA Ministry of Education, it was revealed that 96% of students with special needs in 2007 and 2008 were served and educated in special education institutes rather than in public schools (Alquraini, 2010). Alfaiz (2006) asserted that the education students with special needs receive is limited because they are generally “not allowed to attend public schools” (Husen & Postlethwaite, as
cited in Alfaiz, 2006, p. 4). Despite the fact that it has now been more than one decade since the
Ministry of Education announced that public schools are required to accept students with special
needs in regular classrooms, inclusion practices and programs are not implemented in the public
school system in the KSA. At the same time, the number of special education institutes and
vocational training centers for children with special needs has increased dramatically over the
last 17 years from 66 special institutes in 1995 to 1,554 in 2004 (Almousa, 2006).

Several factors have hindered the development of inclusion practices in the KSA’s
education system. For example, AlAjmi (2006) stated that the lack of expertise in Special
Education among public school teachers has hindered the development of inclusion programs.
Teachers are not provided with training courses in Special Education or required to have a
teaching license in that area; they just have to present a bachelor degree in Education. Besides
that, AlAjmi mentioned that transition plans for students with special needs do not occur as they
progress in school and there is an absence of multidisciplinary collaboration as services such as
medical, social, and educational services are provided separately. Furthermore, Alfaiz (2006)
regarded the absence of genuine inclusion practices in the KSA’s public schools as due to the
unavailability of support equipment and qualified school personnel, and to the fear that including
students with special needs would negatively affect typical students. Another issue focuses on
the values of Saudi culture and their influences on people’s perceptions of individuals with
special needs (Alahamdi, 2009; Alqahtani, 2012; Alquraini, 2010). As discussed in Chapter One,
Saudi beliefs about individuals with special needs are influenced by the idea that disability is a
form of punishment from Allah due to parents’ misbehaviors towards Allah or others. Also, in
the KSA beliefs such as the evil eye is considered as the main cause of diseases and disabilities.
Inclusion

**Definition.** Inclusion is a very broad term that, for several years, has been discussed from different points of view such as equity, social justice, and educational reform and has been interpreted differently (Timmons, 2006; Zollers, Ramanathan, & Yu, 1999). Therefore, when attempting to define inclusion, it is important to distinguish between inclusion, integration, and mainstreaming. For example, integration means that children with special needs are educated in special education classrooms, but have the chance to meet with their typical peers during recess and extracurricular activities (Murphy, 1996; Smith et al., 2012). Inclusion means full integration of children with special needs in regular classrooms, while mainstreaming “selectively integrates exceptional students into such classrooms on a case-by-case basis, depending on the needs of each student and the demands of the regular education classes” (Murphy, 1996, p. 472).

Mainstreaming depends on the needs and progress of each child. “Mainstreaming is like visiting. Inclusion is belonging” (Wilkins, as cited in Swedeen, 2009, p. 8).

Inclusion is defined as a program that offers students with special needs, regardless of the severity and nature of their disabilities, the same learning and social opportunities that are offered to their typically developing peers (Alotaibi, n.d.; Smith & Smith, 2000; Zollers et al., 1999). It is an educational program that allows schools to “create access to and full participation in rich learning for all students without prejudice” (McPhail & Freeman, 2005, p. 264). In inclusion programs, every student has full membership in the classroom and everyone is engaged and involved in class activities. Gordon and Browne (2011) defined inclusion as an environment where “a child with special needs is a full-time member of a regular classroom, a more natural environment, with children who do, as well as those who do not, have special needs” (p. 94). It is an environment that allows children with special needs to fully participate in their learning.
environment (Guralnick, 2001) and their school community. It is about schools readiness not only to accept children with special needs, but also to welcome them (Loreman, 2007) and to value their roles (Swedeen, 2009). Loreman (2007) stated that

In the inclusive classroom the student with a significant disability, regardless of the degree or nature of that disability, is a welcomed and valued member. The student is: taught by the regular classroom teacher (who is supported as needed); follows the regular curriculum (with modification and adaptation); makes friends; and contributes to the learning of the entire class [and]...participates in all aspects of school life according to her interests and moves year to year with her peers from kindergarten through high school. (p. 23)

**Why inclusion?** According to supporters of inclusion (Gordon & Browne, 2011; Guralnick, 2001; Murphy, 1996; Swedeen, 2009), there are several reasons why inclusion is the best educational program for children with special needs. Supporters believe that inclusion works against the stigma and isolation typically associated with disabilities (Guralnick, 2001). Effective inclusion allows children with special needs to interact with their typically developing peers and develop friendships that could consequently enhance the image of children with disabilities; whereas segregated learning environments lessen children’s chances to interact with others and to develop social skills. Further, Swedeen (2009) extrapolated that genuine inclusion programs may result in shifting communities’ expectations of children with special needs. Inclusion could raise awareness of the potential and the abilities of children with special needs rather than mainly focusing on their disabilities.

According to Murphy (1996), while opponents of inclusion believe that inclusive classrooms do not meet the basic needs of children with exceptionalities, supporters of inclusion argue that the needs of children with special needs are best met in inclusive classrooms. Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Richmond (2009) asserted “that students with special education needs included in the general education classroom consistently benefit from such settings compared to students in segregated and withdrawal settings” (p. 535). Studies in that area indicated that the
performance of students with special needs was enhanced and they were able to increase their achievement academically and socially (Jordan et al., 2009; Murphy, 1996; Ryan, 2009).

This increase in achievement is because in inclusive classrooms students with special needs are offered numerous learning opportunities that challenge them and encourage them to learn more. It is through the high expectations that inclusive classrooms have for their students that students with special needs become motivated and stimulated to learn. Claxton and Meadows (2009) mentioned that the most influential factors that lead individuals to be where they are in life are their environment and their learning. According to self-efficacy theory (Schunk & Pajares, 2009), individuals develop their self-efficacy through their interaction with their social environment. Children feel more self-efficacious and motivated to learn more when others, such as parents and teachers, have high expectations of them and when they are surrounded with successful peers (Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Moreover, Resnick (as cited in Claxton & Meadows, 2009) postulated that

Students who, over an extended period of time are treated as if they are intelligent, actually become more so. If they are taught demanding content, and are expected to explain and find connections… they learn more quickly. They (come to) think of themselves as learners. They are (better) able to bounce back in the face of short-term failures. (p. 7)

Since all children with or without exceptionalities share the same educational and social needs and the “learning process is the same for all” (Sosniak & Gabelko, 2008, p. 77), inclusion is an imperative model for all children (Gordon & Browne, 2011). In their review of research, Katz and Mirenda (2002) posited that in regards to children with special needs, inclusion practices provide several academic and social opportunities. Regarding the educational benefit, they concluded that students with special needs increased their academic achievement through their interaction with their typically developing peers. In one study that followed three students with autism who were transmitted from special education classrooms to inclusive classrooms,
researchers found that all three children enhanced their academic skills such as writing, reading, and counting (Downing, Morrison, & Berecin-Rascon, as cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002b). Another study that examined the academic achievement of three students with severe disabilities in inclusive classrooms found that students gained “basic communication and motor skills through interactions with peers without disabilities who provided them with cues, prompts, and consequences” (Hunt, Staub, Alwell, & Goetz, as cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002b). It is through interaction with typical children that children with exceptionalities were motivated to learn and acquire new skills.

Regarding the social benefits, researchers found that children with special needs learn age appropriate behaviors from observing and interacting with their typical peers who act as role models for children with special needs (Gordon & Browne, 2011; Guralnick, 2001). Katz and Mirenda (2002a) asserted that inclusive settings offer students with special needs opportunities to imitate socially accepted behaviors; thus, it is through modeling that children with special needs learn the necessary social skills that enable them to integrate and become part of their communities. In a study that investigated the social interaction of six students with autism aged between eight to twelve years in inclusive classrooms, researchers discovered that students interacted positively with their typical peers and stereotypical behaviors of children with autism were decreased (Lord & Hopkins, as cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002a). Other studies in Katz and Mirenda’s (2002) review concluded that “the students with developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms demonstrated higher levels of engaged behavior than did those in self-contained classrooms” (p. 17).
Children without special needs also benefit from inclusion. Gordon and Browne (2011) claimed that in inclusive classrooms typical children are provided with opportunities to learn tolerance and acceptance regarding differences. They come to understand that students with special needs do belong and do have a presence in their schools, classes, and communities (Lipsky & Gartner, as cited in Guralnick, 2001). Inclusion also helps typically developing children to learn about diversity and realize that in “a diverse population there are a multimedia of strengths and capacities” (Lipsky & Gartner, as cited in Guralnick, 2001, p. 41). Therefore, according to Katz and Mirenda (2002a), “The concept that all people have strengths and weaknesses, can both teach and learn, and have value may increase students’ acceptance of their own abilities and difficulties, and increase their tolerance of diversity” (p. 34). Subsequently, this type of learning is a lifelong learning that can result in the creation of social acceptance and tolerance.

In a qualitative study that investigated the academic outcomes of elementary students in an inclusive school, researchers found that typically developing students were motivated to learn new concepts and acquire conceptual knowledge when they had friendships with students with special needs (Staub, Schwartz, Galluci, & Peck, as cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002a). A review of research that examined the academic achievement of typical students concluded that students learned the content in greater depth when they were assigned as tutor peers to children with special needs (Fisher, Schumaker, & Deshler, as cited in Katz & Mirenda, 2002b).

Although benefits of inclusion for students with developmental disabilities “include the development of improved social and communication skills, friendship networks, and parent and community attitudes” (Katz & Mirenda, 2002a, p. 35), it is important to acknowledge that for some children this may not be effective. Some children, as stated by Murphy (1996), benefit
more from special education classrooms where they receive individualized instruction. Also, in inclusive classrooms, some children with exceptionalities are not provided with the same special services and intensity that they receive in separated classrooms (Murphy, 1996). However, to make inclusion work for every child, there is a need for intensive training in the area of Special Education for teachers (Horne & Timmons, 2009). It is “through systematic and thoughtful instructions, teachers can assist all children in developing a variety of … skills” (Taylor, Peterson, McMurray-Schwarz & Guillou, 2002). Additionally, understanding different attitudes towards inclusion helps researchers and educators to recognize the factors that could hinder or reinforce inclusion and, thus, provide inclusion that works for every child.

**Attitudes towards Inclusion**

**Definition of attitude.** According to Alahamdi (2009), the term “attitude” is a complex term that includes several psychological concepts; thus, it is not easy to define. In one definition, it is defined as “the mental position with regard to fact or state, a feeling or emotion toward a fact or state” (Webster's New Collection Dictionary, as cited in Alahamdi, 2009, p. 39). In another definition, attitude is defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken, as cited in Eagly & Chaiken, 2007, p. 582).

**Children’s attitudes towards inclusion.** Nikolaraizi, Kumarb, Favazzac, Sideridisb, Koulousioue, and Riallf (2005) conducted a study that investigated children’s attitudes regarding children with special needs in two countries: Greece and the United States. The participants were 196 kindergarteners; 99 of them attended inclusive kindergartens and 97 were in non-inclusive kindergartens. The researchers found that there were no significant differences among the responses of Greek and American children. All of the children in both countries and of both
genders were found to be accepting of children with special needs. However, they found significant differences in the acceptance level among children who attend and children who do not attend inclusive kindergartens. Children who attend inclusive kindergartens expressed more willingness to play and to offer help to children with special needs than those who did not. Overall, the research indicated that the kindergarten children involved in the study are accepting and willing to make friendships with and offer help to children with special needs.

A qualitative study by Diamond and Hong (2010) explored the factors that influence children’s decisions regarding including children with special needs in their play activities. Diamond and Hong (2010) interviewed 72 children who attend inclusive preschool programs to examine their perceptions of inclusion. The researchers used wooden dolls that were divided into dolls that represented children with special needs and dolls that represented typically developing peers. They found that children’s decisions were influenced by several factors, such as the severity of the disability and the nature of the activity. The study reported that in activities that required motor skills, children chose the doll that epitomized a non-disabled playmate more than the doll that represented a child with special needs. The study implied that young children are sensitive to the differences and their implications for their play activities. Generally, the study found that young children were accepting of children with special needs and indicated that educating children in inclusive classrooms led to an increase in the level of acceptance and tolerance.

Researchers in all of the aforementioned studies asserted that children developed acceptance and enhanced their attitudes towards children with special needs when they were educated together in inclusive classrooms. Nikolaraizi et al. (2005) affirmed that “children’s attitudes are learned and acquired under the influence of several factors” (p. 102). These factors
generally stem from the broader cultural and social contexts in which children live and grow.

**Parents’ attitudes towards inclusion.** Stoneman (2001) claimed that parents’ attitudes have a significant impact on inclusion in early childhood classrooms. According to Porfeli, Algozzine, Nutting, and Queen (2006), the attitudes and perceptions of parents impact “the process and the product of change in education” (p. 8). Therefore, it is important to take into account parents’ voices when implementing an inclusion program. Elkins, Kraayenoord and Jobling (2003) conducted a study to explore parents’ attitude towards inclusion in Queensland, Australia. The participants included 354 parents of children with special needs who were educated in both types of schools, special education and inclusive schools. The researchers found that the majority of parents preferred inclusive classrooms for their children because of reciprocal benefits for all children. Some of the benefits that parents in the study mentioned were greater opportunities for children to socially interact with other peers, more chances to be interdependent, a deeper level of understanding and tolerance, and lastly, opportunities for imitating age appropriate behaviors.

Nevertheless, there were a small number of parents who preferred special education classrooms for their children. The main reason for their preference was that their children need teachers who have knowledge of their children’s needs and the type of special services they require. Parents feared that inclusion would negatively impact their children’s social and emotional development due to the lack of well-trained general teachers in the area of Special Education. However, for those parents, inclusion would be their first choice if ongoing training opportunities and additional resources were provided to regular classrooms teachers.
Porfeli et al. (2006) investigated parents’ attitudes towards inclusion and addressed the influence their opinions had on inclusion practices. The study took place in a school district in North Carolina. Surveys were sent to 664 parents whose children attended general education classrooms and to 451 parents whose children attended special education classrooms. Out of the 1,115 surveys, 398 surveys were completed and returned. The study found that the majority of parents were against inclusion. According to the researchers, parents believed that inclusion would not significantly enhance the academic performances of their children and that, at the same time, it would negatively impact the academic performance of other children in the classrooms. Porfeli et al. (2006) regarded the negative attitudes that parents held towards inclusion to a lack of information and knowledge about Special Education, especially inclusion and its effects. They concluded their study by advocating for educational programs that educate and increase parental and public awareness regarding Special Education and its programs.

**Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion.** "Successful implementation of inclusion reforms depends largely on the goodwill of educators” (Sharma, Forlin & Loreman, 2008, p. 773). Teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion are the most influential factors that could enhance or hinder the development of inclusion programs (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000; Batsiou, Bebetsos, Panteli, & Antoniou, 2008; Romia & Leyser, 2006; Sharma et al., 2008). It is their attitudes, willingness, and perceptions that are critical to the implementation of effective inclusion programs. They have influence on both children’s attitudes towards their peers with special needs and on the educational outcomes of such a program. Therefore, researchers over the past few years have conducted several studies to explore teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion and the influence they have on its implementation. For example, Batsiou et al. (2008) examined Greek and Cypriot primary education teachers’ attitudes towards educating children with special
educational needs in mainstream schools. They found that all teachers held positive attitudes towards having children with special needs in their classrooms. Cornoldi et al. (1998) analyzed Italian teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion after twenty years of its implementation in Italy. Surveys were sent to ten schools that represented the different regions of Italy. Five hundred and twenty-three teachers of both genders filled out the surveys. The findings of the study demonstrated that 95% of the teachers accepted and welcomed inclusion practices and believed in the benefits they offer children with special needs and their communities. However, teachers expressed disappointment regarding the level of support they receive from their schools’ administration to meet the needs of the special needs children in their classrooms. Teachers mentioned that they need support that includes sufficient time, training opportunities, sufficient resources, and assistance to ensure the success of inclusion programs.

Smith and Smith (2000) reviewed early childhood teachers’ opinions on the perceived factors that reinforced or weakened their abilities to implement successful inclusion in their classrooms. Surveys were sent to 75 teachers in a small urban school district in Nebraska. Forty-seven of the surveys were completed and returned. The data revealed that “34 teachers rated themselves as successful with inclusion and 13 rated themselves as unsuccessful” (p. 163). From these two categories, researchers randomly interviewed six teachers. They found that all of the teachers from both categories strongly believed in the importance of inclusion for both the children who were identified to have special needs, and also for typically developing children who are at risk. They acknowledged the influence of inclusion on the development of a sense of community and a sense of belonging among students with special needs. Nonetheless, teachers identified several obstacles (e.g., lack of personnel support, inadequate resources, absence of in-service training, heavy workload, and insufficient time) that they encountered in the face of
implementing successful inclusion.

Avramidis et al. (2000) explored the attitudes of 135 student teachers towards inclusion. Generally, all of the participants held positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms. However, they expressed several concerns and fears regarding the inclusion of children with social, emotional, and behavioral disorders in their classrooms. Student teachers also believed that they would be able to overcome the difficulties that may accompany inclusion if they have supportive school personnel, efficient resources, and a clear policy regarding inclusion.

The aforementioned studies revealed that inclusion, its effects, and people’s attitudes towards it are difficult to be determined. However, it can be asserted that the attitudes of children, parents, and teachers towards inclusion were affected by several factors. First, they differed based on the nature and the severity of disabilities; second, they are affected by the level of knowledge and training that individuals hold. Third, they are shaped and influenced by the individuals’ previous experiences. Finally, support and collaboration are two of the crucial and often repeated factors that had an influence on attitudes towards inclusion programs.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Recently, theories such as sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) have received recognition in the field of Special Education due to their emphasis on social interaction as a source of learning and development. Both theories focus on the importance of the social contexts and cultures in which individuals live (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007; Schunk, 2000). It is through interaction with family, peers, teachers, and society’s members that children with disabilities develop and acquire new skills (Gordon & Browne, 2011; Walker & Berthelsen, 2008).
**Vygotsky’s perspective on inclusion.** In Vygotsky’s theory, learning is viewed as “a shared-joint process in a responsive social context” (Gindis, 1999, p.334). Learning occurs in a perceptive and supportive environment that perceives each individual as a unique learner with unique needs. From a sociocultural perspective, children with disabilities are capable individuals who are just different than their typically developing peers. “A child whose development is impeded by a defect is not simply a child less developed than his peers but is a child who has developed differently” (Vygotsky, as cited in Gindis, 2003, p. 206). Vygodskaya (1999) stated that

> Any child with disability is first of all a child and only afterwards an impaired child… One must not perceive in the child with a disability only the defects, “the grams” of the illness and not notice the “kilograms” of health which children possess. From the psychological and pedagogical points of view, one must treat the child with disability in the same way as a normal one. (p.331)

The educational approach advocated by Vygotsky is grounded in the concept of *a positive differentiation* (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007; Gindis, 1999) that views children with disabilities from the perspective of their strengths, as opposed to their weaknesses. Education, from his point of view, must focus on what a child can do and accomplish (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007). According to Gindis (1999), Vygotsky asserted the importance of seeking the positive capabilities and “qualitative characteristics” (p. 335) of children with special needs rather than focusing on the “quantitative differences” (p. 336). From this perspective, instead of focusing on the impairments and the developmental differences between children with disabilities and their typical peers, attention is on the qualitative differences and the uniqueness of children with special needs (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007; Gindis, 1999). It is from this point of view that education can prevent the development of a secondary disability.
From a sociocultural perspective, the major problem that accompanies disability is not the biological or sensory deficiency, but social complications. “Any physical handicap . . . not only alters the child’s relationship with the world, but above all affects his interaction with people” (Vygotsky, as cited in Gindis, 2003, p. 202). Vygotsky believed that the biological disability is what affects children’s abilities to slowly acquire skills and knowledge, whereas the social environment in which children with disabilities live is what may produce serious delays. Behaviors “such as passivity, dependence, and lack of social skills that are thought to characterize people with intellectual disabilities are in fact the product of poor access to socio-cultural knowledge, lack of social interaction and opportunity to acquire psychological tools” (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007, p. 199).

According to Gindis, (2003), Vygotsky affirmed that “change in the structure and content of a disability takes place during development and under the influence of education and remediation” (p. 204). Therefore, it is the role of education to prevent the development of secondary disability and equip children with disabilities with the psychological tools that they need to “transform their abilities into higher mental abilities” (Gindis, 2003, p. 209). It is only through creating an educational environment that focuses on the individual needs of children with disabilities and provides positive experiences that children with disabilities are able to overcome their disabilities.

**Social cognitive theory.** In social cognitive theory, Bandura proposed that learning occurs through individuals’ interaction with their social environments (Schunk, 2000). Parke et al. (2010) stated that children learn through observation and imitation. Children, according to Gordon and Browne (2011), “acquire most of their social concepts- the rules by which they live- from models whom they observe in the course of daily life, particularly parents, caregivers,
teachers, and peers” (p. 113). This theory emphasized the significance of social environment as a source of learning and knowledge acquisition. It is through one’s social environment that humans obtain “knowledge, rules, skills, strategies, beliefs, and attitudes” (Schunk, 2000, p. 78). Bandura (as cited in Cherry, n.d.), affirmed that “most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling” (para. 1).

The theory has three main concepts. The first one is observational learning which means individuals learn from observing others’ actions and performances (Gordon & Browne, 2011; Schunk, 2000). The second concept is that, in addition to the external factors, such as environment, there are internal factors that influence the process of learning and knowledge acquisition, such as motivation, cognitive skills, and developmental status (Parke et al., 2010; Schunk, 2000). The theory claimed that those factors have an impact on “individuals’ attention and information processing” (Schunk, 2000, p. 94). The last concept is that observing models does not ensure that learning has happened nor that behavior has changed.

In social cognitive theory, it is believed that social and cognitive learning occurs through the interaction of behaviors, cognitive and personal factors, and environment (Boyce, 2011; Schunk, 2000). These three components work interactively and influence each other in many ways. For example, social environments have an impact on children’s behaviors and, thus, their outcomes, and vice versa. In addition, according to Schunk (2000), social cognitive theory suggests that learning ensues either from the consequences of an individual’s actions or from watching others perform. There are several factors that could affect the success of social learning (Cherry, n.d.; Schunk, 2000). However, despite the fact that observing a role model does not assure learning or change in behaviors, it does provide information about the possible outcomes of acting in certain ways and, thus, motivate individuals to act or enact the observed behavior.
Taylor and DeQuinzio (2012) conducted a review of studies that examined the effectiveness of observational learning for children with autism. Taylor and DeQuinzio (2012) believed that observational learning would socially benefit children with autism as “many social norms that ‘people’ adhere to and follow are based on the observed responses of others” (p. 344). Individuals observe and then imitate other as a way to “fit in” (p. 344). From the studies they reviewed, they found that children with disabilities learned a range of skills such as “reading of sight words, completing long response chains, seeking assistance following injury, preparing food, and completing language tasks” (p. 349). Therefore, they concluded that generally all studies indicated that “some children with autism will learn new responses as a result of observing proficient models perform those responses” (p. 351). They postulated that there are several strategies that teachers can utilize to increase observational learning in their inclusive classrooms.

Woodrow (2001) conducted a case study of a three-year-old boy who had several developmental issues, such as serious delays in his speech and language development, fine motor skills, and social skills. The case study was grounded in the perspective of social learning theory. After reviewing the child’s background that, according to the author, could have a serious impact on his condition, Woodrow concluded that changes in the environment in which the boy lives that utilize the principles of social learning theory, such as reinforcement, would probably result in a “good developmental outcome, with lessening of the boy’s behavioral difficulties” (p. 138).

Based on the theoretical perspectives that frame this project, inclusion programs clearly seem to be the optimal choice for children with special needs. In sociocultural theory, children are seen as active members in their communities; however, their participation is reliant on the
way their communities perceive them (Gindis, 2003). Basically, if they are viewed and treated as disabled, they will not have the opportunity to function to their greatest potential; but if they are treated as active and able members in society, they will have the opportunity to reach their potential more easily and contribute to their communities as any other healthy member in society does (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007; Gindis, 1999). Briefly, the status of children with special needs is in the eye of the beholder. Views and perspectives towards individuals with special needs have to change. A new lens that looks beyond their disabilities, as Vygotsky called for, and inclusive social environments, as Bandura believed in, is what the KSA needs to reach the desired goals it has of individuals with special needs. If the principles of sociocultural theory are combined with the philosophy of social cognitive theory, which emphasizes the importance of social environment in learning and the acquisition of high level skills (Schunk, 2000), inclusion programs in the KSA can head towards success.

Summary

In the literature review, I provided background on the history and the current status of Special Education in the KSA. Based on the research, it appears that inclusion programs are still not effectively implemented in the education system of the KSA and not completely implemented in early childhood classrooms. In order to reach the goals of the Ministry of Education in the KSA, which stress the importance of transforming individuals with special needs into active and productive members in the society, genuine implementation of inclusion programs has to be initiated. Inclusion has to begin from early childhood classrooms since the positive and negative experiences in childhood form later success in school and life generally (Smith & Smith, 2000). The aforementioned studies (e.g., Guralnick, 2001; Murphy, 1996; Swedeen, 2009) revealed the significance of inclusion programs and their social and academic
benefits for children with special needs. Therefore, there is an urgent need in the KSA’s education system for inclusion programs that “bring students, families, educators, and community members together to create schools based on acceptance, belonging, and community” (Salend, as cited in Ryan, 2009, p. 180). Schools, starting from early childhood classrooms, must be the first places where children with special needs are welcomed, recognized, encouraged, supported, and valued (Ryan, 2009).

In the next chapter, I will connect the research findings and theories to practice. Solutions to overcome some of the obstacles that could hinder the development of genuine inclusion will be suggested. I will also offer some suggestions and recommendations that would help to increase awareness of children with special needs in the KSA and implement authentic inclusion programs.
Chapter Three: Connection to Practice

In the previous chapter, I provided a review of the literature that explored the development of Special Education in the KSA, including the status of inclusion programs. I also reviewed several studies that examined inclusion and the different attitudes towards this approach. In this chapter, I connect research to practice by providing implications and suggestions based on the ideas that emerged from the literature review and the theoretical perspectives that frame this project.

Due to the increasing number of children with special needs in the KSA (Almasoud, 2010; Alodail, 2011), there is a serious need to examine the status of inclusion programs. This is particularly relevant, as numerous researchers (e.g., Alahmadi, 2009; AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Almasoud, 2010; Alotaibi, n.d.; Alquraini, 2010) have acknowledged that inclusion programs in the KSA are not genuinely implemented. Instead, an increasing number of students with special needs are served in segregated classrooms or special education institutes (Almasoud, 2010; Alquraini, 2010). Although legislation and laws were mandated by the Ministry of Education in the KSA more than one decade ago, authentic inclusion programs are still absent in the KSA’s education system (AlAjmi, 2006; Almousa, 2006; Alquraini, 2010). As stated in the previous chapters, there are several potential factors that may contribute to the absence of effective inclusion programs in the KSA. From my perspective, these factors can be overcome if the KSA Ministry of Education designs a plan that addresses these potential factors and includes possible solutions. Research on inclusion would also help support the implementation of inclusion programs, and assist in meeting the goals of the Ministry of Education and serve the needs of children with disabilities in the KSA.
The government of the KSA is dedicated to enhancing the education system and improving its status. According to Rugh (2002), education is a top funding priority of the government of the KSA. For 2013, the government has devoted 118,425,000,000 Saudi Riyal (SR) of its annual budget for education (KSA Ministry of Education, 2013), which is equivalent to 453,815,000 Canadian Dollars. According to the Ministry of Education in the KSA (2013), the allocations for education have increased 14.22% since last year meaning that education has additional millions to spend on developing and improving its current status. Therefore, I strongly believe that since we, in the KSA, have the financial capacity and the resources to enhance our education system, we should work collaboratively to improve inclusion programs and enhance their quality to better serve children with special needs. From my perspective, the first steps towards implementing genuine inclusion programs and enhancing the status of individuals with special needs must be taken by the Ministry of Education in the KSA.

According to Loreman (2007), successful inclusion programs are based on seven crucial pillars. His pillars of inclusive education include: positive attitudes; policy and leadership; school and classroom processes; curriculum and pedagogy; the community; meaningful reflection; and training and resources. These pillars support inclusion, making it stronger, more prosperous, and thus, better established. This model inspired me to reflect on the need for inclusion programs in the KSA and provided me with an insight into these specific needs. Therefore, I have used the concept of pillars, making some adaptations that are specific to the needs of the Saudi cultural context. The following section outlines five pillars that together can support and provide a strong structure for inclusion programs in the KSA.
Pillars of Successful Inclusion Programs in the KSA

First Pillar: Clear and Affirmative Policies

Studies that were reviewed in the previous chapter acknowledged that laws regarding inclusion programs had been mandated over a decade ago. However, several researchers (e.g., AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Almasoud, 2010; Alquraini, 2010) revealed that in educational contexts there is a clear absence of inclusion programs. Mainstreaming, where children with special needs are educated and served in special education classrooms in public schools, is what is offered to children with special needs in the KSA public school system (Alquraini, 2010). This reality raises the question of why inclusion programs are not yet implemented. If laws and legislation that acknowledge inclusion programs and recognize their benefits for children with special needs and the broader society do exist, then why are they not yet genuinely implemented? Does the absence of inclusion programs imply that laws are ambiguous or that there is a disconnection “between the intent of the policy, and the willingness of local educators” (Loreman, 2007, p. 25)? Whatever the reason, there is an urgent need to rewrite that legislation in a clear way that addresses the role of each party that is involved in the process of implementing inclusion programs.

Second Pillar: Increase Awareness

The first step towards positive change regarding children with special needs is awareness. Awareness is empowering. Gilmore et al. (2003) stated that the reason some people feel uncomfortable interacting with individuals with special needs is due to a lack of awareness and knowledge of disabilities. Therefore, in my opinion, the Ministry of Education in the KSA is obligated to increase awareness about disabilities, their characteristics, and the weaknesses and strengths that accompany them by educating the public and educating the educators.
**Educating parents.** Porfeli et al. (2006) postulated that the most influential factor in the process of producing change in education is parents’ perceptions and attitudes. He claimed that the main reasons behind unsuccessful inclusion programs might be due to parental misunderstandings, misbeliefs, and lack of accurate information. Therefore, I think that the first step to increase awareness is by educating parents and enhancing their knowledge about Special Education and its related services. They should be aware of their children’s rights to be educated and treated as any other member of society. Also, they should be aware of the medical causes of disabilities and possible and available treatments, instead of being ashamed because of the belief that disabilities are a punishment from Allah.

From my perspective, I think that there are two methods that the KSA Ministry of Education can implement to increase awareness among parents of children with special needs. The first method is organizing free and well-planned workshops that are designed to provide parents with deeper insights into disabilities, their causes, their characteristics, and strategies to overcome some of the challenges associated with disabilities. These workshops must be facilitated by Special Education professionals and organized in a way that builds knowledge cumulatively to ensure that all of the necessary information has been presented. Additionally, these workshops should occur throughout the year and be offered in different parts of the KSA.

The second method to increase awareness among parents is to require that educators of children with special needs contact parents and invite them to participate in their children’s education. Having regular meetings and discussions between educators and parents about their children’s experiences and progress helps parents understand their children’s potential, and hence, has the potential to alter the misunderstandings held by some parents. These educators must also encourage parents to monitor and evaluate their children’s progress as a way to yield
their attention to their children’s strengths. Parents’ participation and feedback would help both educators and parents to better understand and, thus, serve the needs of children with special needs (Alquraini, 2010).

**Educating the public.** A factor that was revealed across most of the studies in the Saudi context outlined the lack of awareness among Saudi citizens regarding disabilities. For example, several researchers (e.g., Alahamdi, 2009; Alqahtani, 2012; Alquraini, 2010) addressed the misbeliefs and misperceptions held by the public regarding individuals with special needs, which was revealed to be a profound factor that impeded the development of inclusion programs. Thus, in order to implement genuine inclusion programs, there is a serious need to educate and increase awareness among the public in the KSA. There are several ways that the Ministry of Education can increase society’s awareness. One of these ways is to educate the public and promote knowledge by organizing free educational workshops about Special Education and disabilities. To make it even more effective, the Ministry of Education should invite individuals with special needs to attend these workshops and encourage them to share their experiences and hopes for a better future. As mentioned earlier, these workshops should be offered in several places and at different times in order to educate as much of the public as possible. Additionally, free seats in conferences about Special Education and disabilities should be offered to those who are interested in attending and learning more about Special Education. To ensure that these suggestions work and reach their goals, the Ministry of Education should hire people to advertise and broadcast these workshops and conferences.

An additional way to increase awareness among the public is to incorporate the media in the process of educating the public. During my stay in Canada I have seen several TV commercials that advocate for individuals with special needs and address the strengths of these
individuals. An agreement between the KSA Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Information to incorporate the local media would potentially increase the awareness of individuals with special needs among the public. From my perspective, the role of the media should consist of three components: advocacy, education, and acknowledgment. It should advocate for individuals with special needs and highlight their rights to belong and participate in society. Also, the media should spread the word about disabilities and special education programs, and educate and promote knowledge among the public. Lastly, it should encourage the participation of individuals with special needs in public celebrations, acknowledge their roles in society, and celebrate their achievements. For instance, what Abdulkhaleg had accomplished, memorizing two chapters of the Holy book and reciting them in front of a large audience, should be shared and celebrated beyond the Disabled Children’s Association. For example, his accomplishment should be shared with the community and country, and local newspapers should write about his achievement.

Educating the educators. AlAjmi (2006) and Alfaiz (2006) stated that the lack of awareness and expertise among Saudi teachers relates to the lack of development of inclusion programs in the KSA. They mentioned that public school teachers in the KSA do not have sufficient knowledge to enable them to meet the needs of children with special needs in their regular classrooms. As a result, most children with special needs are served in special education classrooms where they are taught by special education teachers (AlAjmi, 2006; Alquraini, 2010). To promote awareness among public school teachers, I believe that the Ministry of Education should organize educational workshops at each school that aim to provide teachers with knowledge about effectively educating children with special needs. In addition, the Ministry of Education should prepare and design booklets for teachers that include all of the services that are
available to children with special needs, and resources that can assist teachers. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should assure the availability of seats for teachers in Special Education conferences and offer them credits for attending these conferences.

**Third Pillar: Multidisciplinary Collaboration**

In the previous chapter, the absence of multidisciplinary collaboration was considered to be one of the factors that hindered the development of inclusion programs in the KSA (AlAjmi, 2006). For example, in the KSA, the Ministries of Education, Health Care, and Social Affairs function independently. Thus, it is my understanding that there are no meetings or discussions about the condition and the progress of children with special needs from differing perspectives; instead, each ministry is focused on the services that ministry provides (AlAjmi, 2006; Alquraini, 2010). Additionally, parents, who are supposed to be policymakers, teachers, and advocates (Loreman, 2007) for their children are generally not welcomed to participate in their children’s education. For instance, when I worked at the Disabled Children’s Association in the KSA, I was not allowed to inform parents about the meetings that we had about their children. Instead, they were informed when a final decision had already been made about their children’s educational plans.

Several researchers (e.g., AlAjmi, 2006; Alodail, 2011; Alquarini, 2010) have called for a collaborative approach between the ministries of the KSA, and between the teachers and parents of children with special needs to ensure the success of inclusion programs. Horne and Timmons (2009) stated that the key factor of successful inclusion programs is collaboration that is based on “mutual understanding and respect” (Porter & Smith, 2011, p. 141). Therefore, since I believe that children with special needs will benefit the most when they are provided with integrated services that are well planned and designed specifically to meet their different needs, I
am of the opinion that each Saudi public school must have a multidisciplinary team. Schools must include psychological counselors, physical and speech therapists, and special education professionals who assist regular classroom teachers in the design of appropriate individualized education programs (IEPs). Alquraini (2010) remarked that the “lack of efficient multidisciplinary teams” (p. 145) is a barrier that hinders the provision of IEPs in public schools in the KSA. Reinforcing collaboration between professionals from different fields, special and regular classroom teachers, and parents of children with special needs will enhance the quality of inclusion programs in the KSA and, has the potential to meet the needs of children with special needs.

Fourth Pillar: Ongoing Training and Professional Development Opportunities

“Teachers can and do make a difference” (Cropley & McLeod, 1986, p. 126). From my perspective, it is apparent that teachers play an important role in the implementation of genuine inclusion programs. Studies that examined teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion revealed that the lack of training for pre and in-service teachers impacted their attitudes towards inclusion programs (Avramidis et al., 2000; Smith & Smith, 2000). Most teachers expressed their fear of including students with special needs in their classrooms because they did not feel that they were well prepared and adequately trained to meet the needs of those children in their classrooms (Loreman, 2007). In the Saudi context, AlAjmi (2006) and Alfaiz (2006) claimed that the scarcity of qualified teachers in the field of Special Education is impeding the implementation of authentic inclusion programs in the KSA. Additionally, Alahmadi (2009) mentioned that teachers in the KSA are not offered specialized training courses in the area of Special Education to enhance their practices and increase their knowledge.
To increase teachers’ knowledge and enhance their skills, pre and in-service teachers need more than superficial discussions about Special Education. They need a combination of “classroom discussions and field experiences” (Chamberlin & Chamberlin, 2010, p. 381). Thus, the Ministry of Education in the KSA should consider offering ongoing training courses and opportunities for professional development for teachers. Training courses and professional development opportunities would potentially expand teachers’ knowledge and enhance their practices.

**Fifth Pillar: Accessible and Inclusive Society**

One of the points that both the Ministry of Education and the General Directorate of Special Education in the KSA identified was the importance of providing opportunities for individuals with special needs to transition from dependent to independent individuals. Both agencies emphasized the importance of enabling individuals with special needs to be productive and active members of society. From my perspective, it is not enough to provide goals that support inclusion without providing plans and resources to make those goals visible and real. According to Alfaiz (2006), the majority of private and public schools in the KSA are not accessible to students with special needs. In addition, she maintained that the lack of accessible schools and adequate resources has contributed to the absence of inclusion programs.

To achieve the goals that support inclusion, changes in society must be made to create full access for individuals with special needs that enables them to participate in their local communities. Schools and community resources must be well planned to provide access to individuals with special needs. For instance, one of the obstacles that my niece encounters in her school is stairs. She has to use the stairs to get in and out of her classroom, a task made even more difficult when she has to carry her bag. To make it easier for my niece, my sister goes
twice a day to her daughter’s school to carry her school bag. Simple things such as stairs, narrow
aisles, parking areas, and doors can and do challenge individuals with special needs. Therefore,
the Ministries of Education and Health Care in the KSA should collaborate with the Ministry of
Municipal and Rural Affairs to produce changes in schools and society.

Summary

In this chapter, I connected research findings on inclusion and its benefits to children
with special needs with pillars of successful inclusion programs. I discussed five pillars that
would help to implement inclusion programs in the KSA. For each pillar, I provided examples
and suggestions that illustrate how successful inclusion programs may be implemented in the
KSA context. In the following chapter, I provide several suggestions and recommendations for
further research within this field of study.
Chapter Four: Conclusion

The literature review on inclusion programs and practices in the KSA has provided insightful understanding of their current status. This review also identified the obstacles that are impacting the development of genuine inclusion programs in the KSA and the potential solutions to overcome these obstacles. In addition, it also indicates that there is a clear absence of sufficient research in the area of Special Education and its related services in the KSA, and that there is inconsistency between theory and practice.

Areas for Further Research

Research on Genuine Implementation of Inclusion Programs

In the studies that were conducted by Saudi researchers (e.g., AlAjmi, 2006; Alfaiz, 2006; Almasoud, 2010; Alodail, 2011; Alquraini, 2010) to address the subject of inclusion programs in the KSA and the attitudes towards them, the researchers acknowledged that there is a lack of data and a scarcity of research on inclusion programs. Even though the Ministry of Education declares that there are inclusion programs and practices in the public school system, the existing research indicates that mainstream practices are, in fact, what public schools offer to children with special needs. Therefore, research that provides accurate and precise information and statistics about the status of inclusion programs in the KSA is needed to enhance and improve the educational services that are provided to children with special needs.

From my perspective, the KSA Ministry of Education should encourage further research that examines the practice and implementation of inclusion programs. Future research should first focus on examining the status of inclusion programs, particularly in regards to whether these programs genuinely exist. If these programs do exist, then what percentage of schools provide inclusive education, and how are inclusive practices and programs presented? Another area for
future research is examining policymakers’, principals’, teachers’, and parents’ understandings of inclusive education. For example, how do they define inclusion and what are their expectations and fears concerning inclusion programs? Understanding these different perspectives would help researchers develop insight into the status of inclusion programs and, thus, would help to move inclusion programs into a new phase.

Leonardo da Vinci stated, “He who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards a ship without a rudder and compass, and never knows where he may land” (Renzulli, 2012, p. 150). The literature review provided evidence that there are inconsistencies between theory and practice in the KSA’s education system. Most of the reviewed studies indicated positive beliefs about inclusion programs and their potential benefits for children with special needs and the broader society. In addition, the legislation and objectives of both the KSA Ministry of Education and the General Directorate of Special Education acknowledge the significance of inclusion programs; however, the reviewed studies revealed that there is a discrepancy between what is said and what is done. The reality of inclusion programs and practices in the KSA does not reflect the stated objectives. A serious examination of the factors that contribute to the discrepancies and inconsistencies between theory and practice is therefore important to ensure that the KSA’s educational “ship” is heading in the right direction.

**Research on Obstacles to Genuine Inclusion Programs**

An additional area for future research is to examine the reasons why genuine inclusion programs have not been implemented. In order to produce change and make progress in this area, I believe researchers should investigate the barriers that hinder the implementation of inclusion programs. For example, what are they, and how can they be overcome to achieve the desired outcomes? Obstacles such as lack of expertise in the area of Special Education, inadequate
resources, society’s misbeliefs and misunderstandings, and negative attitudes can impact the implementation of inclusion programs. Therefore, accurate and insightful information about these obstacles would help in finding appropriate ways to deal with these obstacles and overcome them to implement authentic inclusion programs.

There are several methods that researchers can follow to collect data about these obstacles, especially the ones related to society’s perceptions. For instance, Porfeli et al. (2006) postulated that surveys are a good source of information. Since Saudi society is a very conservative society, I believe that conducting anonymous surveys is the most effective way to collect data. Another method is conducting interviews with parents of children with special needs, parents of typically developing children, and school personnel. Interviews would also help to provide reflections of true experiences.

**Research on Solutions for Genuine Inclusion Programs**

Alquraini (2010) postulated that in order to enhance the quality of services that are provided to children with special needs and ensure that they are provided with the best opportunities, early intervention programs must be improved. Unfortunately, in the KSA early intervention programs have serious limitations, such as late assessment procedures that begin when a child enters school. Also, special education institutes and public schools operate without multidisciplinary teams; scales that measure academic, emotional, social, and behavioral development; and IQ tests that are appropriate to the Saudi culture (AlAjmi, 2006; Alquraini, 2010).

Due to the significance of early experiences and malleability in early development (Guralnick, 2011), research on early intervention programs is needed. Future research should examine the current status of early intervention programs and services in the KSA. Questions
regarding what services are provided, how they are organized, and what methods are used to reach children with special needs and their parents would help to recognize the weaknesses and strengths of such programs, and, thus, enhance their quality. In addition, researchers, in my opinion, would greatly benefit from investigating international research that examines early intervention programs and factors that contribute to their success or failure. Such knowledge would provide greater insights into what to look for when researching early intervention programs.

Additionally, research on academic, social, emotional, and behavioral assessment scales that have been used in other countries would help to enhance the quality of intervention programs in the KSA. Investigating the appropriateness of these scales to the Saudi culture would help in deciding what adjustments and changes need to be made in order to make them appropriate to the Saudi context. Enhancing early intervention programs and services would have a positive influence on the quality of inclusion programs (AlAjmi, 2006; Alquarini, 2010). For instance, they would help determine what kind of disabilities or delays a child has and, consequently, determine the needed services and educational plans that would help to improve the child’s condition and provide greater opportunities. Therefore, I am convinced that working towards upgrading early intervention programs and enriching them with local and international resources is the remediation that is needed for genuine inclusion programs in the KSA.

**Conclusion**

From the point of view that “how a society treats its youngest children, including those with disabilities, is critical both for its future and as a measure of the society’s values” (Lipsky & Gartner, as cited in Guralnick, 2001, p. 46), I conclude that the implementation of genuine inclusion programs is crucial for a better future for children with special needs in the KSA.
Changing society’s perceptions begins with educating its young children in ways that allow the creation of a tolerant, accepting, and understanding generation who respect and value children with special needs. From my perspective, the KSA needs to change the understanding of the word “special” and consider a new lens that views the word “special” differently.

When reviewing history, there are numerous examples of individuals who had special needs and left their imprint on our world. To illustrate, both the German philosopher Nietzsche and the Russian writer Dostoyevsky suffered from epilepsy; however, that did not negatively impact their influential contributions to the world. Another example is the German composer Beethoven who had hearing impairment; however, that did not restrict his ability to compose music (Alahmadi, 2013). In the present time, the physicist Stephen Hawking who suffers from “motor neuron disorder (MND), a serious and incurable form of progressive neurodegeneration” (Medical News Today, 2009, para. 1), is an amazing example of what an individual with special needs can achieve when given the opportunity.

There are abundant stories of successful individuals with special needs who were given the respect, appreciation, and recognition by society for their abilities and knowledge. When educating children with special needs, an approach that recognizes and nurtures their strengths is needed. Education is about enabling children with or without special needs to reach their potential. Therefore, authentic inclusion programs that allow children to have a sense of belonging are needed in the KSA education system. In my opinion, in order to create an accepting society that values differences and diversity among its citizens, genuine inclusion programs must be truly implemented.
References


