

## **Exploring the Attitude of Mothers Toward Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia**

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores the attitude and views of mothers in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, towards inclusive education. An analysis of this theme is based upon qualitative data collected from ten semi-structured interviews: eight with mothers of children with and without SEN, and two with governmental and private sector officials. The findings suggest that many mothers are unaware of the concept of inclusive education and its practical implications for their children. While they were familiar with integration, they were found to lack motivation in ensuring integration with their children, fearing stigma or unsuitability due to mental and severe physical disability.

This study shows the need of raising mothers' awareness in inclusive education, which is mainly the government's responsibility along with private sectors.

### **Keywords:**

Children with SEN, children without SEN, inclusive education, integration, mainstreaming, mothers' attitude, mothers of children with SEN, mothers of children without SEN, kindergarten, elementary school, qualitative study, semi-structure interview.

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### 1: Introduction

In examining the history of inclusive education, the Salamanca statement (1994) is widely held to be the first case of official recognition of the concept of inclusive education. This statement endorsed the notion and called for all UNESCO members to state moving towards the creation of inclusive education systems:

Regular schools with inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all.

(Salamaca, 1994: ix)

However, due to the fact that the education system of each country member were at different stages in their development; inclusive education was not achieved at the same rate.

The official education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is considered to be relatively new, having started in 1925 as a system for the education of boys, and only expanding to include the education of girls in 1960 (Rugh, 2002). The result of this is that the process of establishing the pillars of the education system is still a work in progress. In recent years, the Saudi government has become increasingly aware of the importance of catering to students with Special Education Needs 'SEN'. To this end, the Ministry of Education has a department that is responsible for the policy and the regulation of special education. In 1996, the Ministry of Education established integration programmes, with the first being attached to an elementary mainstream classroom in the capital city of Riyadh in 1998 (Almosa, 2007).

Inclusive education is not only concerned with policies and regulations, as social acceptance of inclusion is an essential part for the effective implementation of inclusive education. Societal attitudes

extend to school, since the individuals who work and study there are also members of the society (Mittler, 2000). The effect is both ways, however, as even implementing inclusive education programmes has the power to change the overall attitude of the community towards inclusion, contributing to the battle against injustice and racism (Dickins and Denziloe, 2003).

### **1.1 Rational for the Investigation of Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia:**

As a developing country, Saudi Arabia is attempting to develop in many areas, from the size of the population to reforms in tourism sectors. Recognition of the importance that education can play in the development of many sectors has resulted in massive government investments in the improvement of the Saudi educational provision (MEP, 2005). The budget allocated to education was 94 billion Riyals in 2007 ‘approximately £15.46 billion’ (MOE, 2008), rising upto 150 billion Riyals ‘£24.67 billion’ in 2011; from the national annual budget of 580 billion Riyals ‘£95.39 billion’ (MOF, 2010). This has led to a significant increase in enrolment and the opening of new schools in recent years (MEP, 2005).

While Special Education provision has been a major focus of this development, comparatively few special schools and institutes are available and almost exclusive in major cities. Given transportation issues, such as women in Saudi Arabia not being able to drive, the lack of a local school may result in a child being unable to attend any. This problem is particularly pronounced in remote towns and villages. Furthermore, not all types of disability are accepted in the special schools and institutes. For these reasons, as well as the need to keep pace with the global trend towards inclusive education and the recognition of human values and ethics; there is a great need for inclusive education in the Saudi Arabia. However, the effective implementation of Inclusive Education systems demands a thorough and well planned policy that protects “the most vulnerable learners” (O'Brien, 2002). The role of other stakeholders must also be explored. The parents, and particularly mothers, of children with SEN are crucial to the successful implementation of educational programmes.

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By using semi-structured interviews to generate qualitative data, this study aims to explore not only the understanding and acceptance of educational inclusion in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of mothers, but to gain better understanding to mothers' role. The study also investigates the view of the authorities and their impact on the understanding of the public including mothers of children with SEN and without SEN. An understanding of these views will be essential to ensure the successful adoption of inclusion principles and thereby ensure strong educational provision for children with and without SEN.

### 1.2 Study's Aims and Questions:

This study aims to explore attitudes and views of the concept of inclusive education from the perspective of mothers of children in kindergarten and elementary schools in Saudi Arabia, both those with special educational needs and those without.

Meeting this aim will require the consideration of two key study questions:

- How do mothers understand inclusive education?
- To what extent do mothers accept inclusive education?

“There is a link between accepting inclusive education and the level of awareness regarding it” is the hypothesis for this study.

In the context of this study, the acronym SEN will be used to refer to special educational needs, in this study it refers to children with disability according to its small scope.

### 1.3 Study Structure:

The next part which is the second part of this study presents a critical review of literature review and seeks to provide coherent definitions of inclusive education and the concept of integration. Substantial information will be provided of studies conducted in the attitude towards integration from parents in four different countries.

The third part explains the methods adopted in this study. Qualitative data will be gathered through the interview of a small sample, eight mothers and two officials, from Jeddah, the second biggest city in Saudi Arabia.

The fourth part outlines the findings of the data collection stage and discusses these findings within the context of the study aims.

The final part offers a conclusion to the study, attempting to provide succinct and well considered answers to the study questions.

## **2: Literature review**

Inclusive education has become an increasingly important part of the education systems of countries around the world. Differences exist between the understanding of inclusive education and in its implementation, in different countries, leading to differences in attitudes toward this subject.

This part provides a discussion of the way in which inclusive education and integration have been defined in the literature, after which it examines ten studies drawn from Australia, the United States, Greece and Italy. These studies describe the attitude of parents towards inclusive education, which is hoped with provide a sound basis of comparison for the investigation of these issues in Saudi Arabia.

### **2.1 Definitions of inclusive education:**

Special education is a crucial part of national education systems. The origin of inclusion can be traced to the early 1900s, where it arose in the context of non-segregated schooling systems (O'Brien, 2002). The belief of inclusion is therefore not a new phenomenon, however intensive debate did not really begin until the 1960s, which has led to the current views held of inclusion in education (Hodkinson, 2010).

The beginning of a universal approach to inclusive education took place in 1994 as a result of “The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education” sponsored by UNESCO. This statement called for the widespread adoption of an inclusive approach in schools based upon the idea that this leads to a more inclusive society, reducing discrimination in the community and ensuring education as a right for all (Salamaca, 1994). However, in practice the provision of inclusion is not simple.

The definition of inclusion is recognised as being controversial due to its multiplicity of dimensions, which have resulted in different interpretations of the term depending on the perspective of the commentator.

Inclusive Education is a contestable term that has come to mean different things to

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politicians, bureaucrats and academics. Inclusion is not a single movement; it is made up of many strong currents of belief, many different local struggles and myriad forms of practice.

(Clough and Corbett, 2000: 6)

UNESCO defines inclusive education in terms of the potential or diversity of schools, this definition is based on the Salamanca Statement which states that:

Inclusive education means that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include disabled and gifted children, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups.

(UNESCO, 2003: 4)

Furthermore, inclusive education was given a wider concept in the 48th Session of the UNESCO International Conference on Education in 2008, where it was defined in the context of a continuity of relationships:

An ongoing process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination.

(UNESCO et al., 2009: 126)

For the purposes of this study, inclusive education will be understood in terms of the UNESCO definitions (2003; 2009), as these are holistic ideals upon which all United Nation countries have agreed. Therefore, these definitions will be utilised to explain the notion of inclusive education to the interviewees in this study.

The concept of inclusive education arose from the concept of integration. Dickins and Denziloe (2003) describe “integration” as inserting a child into a mainstream class and expecting them to fit into it based upon their natural aptitudes; while “inclusion” means inserting a child into a mainstream class and establishing both institutional and individual modification, thereby offering the child a better opportunity to maximise their involvement. Although both definitions start with the child being inserted into a mainstream class as the first action, integration focuses on the ability of the child, whereas inclusion focuses on the capacity of the educational process to facilitate their settling.

### **2.2 Definitions of integration:**

Some definitions of inclusive education are based on the point of locational inclusion; which means that all children having their education together in the same school is more important than the curriculum or attitude. Hodkinson (2010) states that recent educational policies in the United Kingdom have promoted inclusive education as teaching children with SEN in local mainstream schools alongside children who do not have SEN.

This has led to a discussion of forms of integration, which are broadly divided into locational, social and functional (Warnock, 1978). Locational integration describes the closure of independent special education centres and the integration children with SEN into mainstream schools at a location level. In this form of integration, children with SEN may have their own class and a specialist teacher within the school, and may even they have their own entrance. Social integration means that children who belong to the same school, with or without SEN, interact in selected social activities, such as playing together in the playground or sharing lunchtime. Functional integration is a step further towards inclusive education. In this type of integration, children with and without SEN share certain functional activities such as sport, art or cooking, in addition to sharing the location and certain social activities.

There is sometimes confusion between the use of these two terms, integration and inclusion. In some French-speaking countries, they use “inclusion” to refer to inserting children with SEN in mainstream

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schools which could be described as an integration setting more than inclusion (Thomazet, 2009). Others have argued that the broad concept of integration can meet the concept of inclusion because both share similar procedures and outcomes, meaning that they can be used inter-changeably depending on the preferences of the author (Pijl et al., 1997).

However, Coles and Hancock (2002) argue that an understanding of the main principles of inclusion is more important than defining the inclusion as a need for the education community. Hornby (2002: 4) adds that the “goal of full inclusion” should be deeply interlinked with the definition of inclusion. Essentially, this means that the segregation of schools should be forbidden and all children should have the opportunity to be educated together irrespective of their needs, location and curriculum at the same. This supports the idea that while “inclusion is not a summative measurable entity” and as it can be difficult to agree on its precise definition, it is more important to achieve an understanding of the “core values of inclusion” (Hodkinson, 2010: 62) than achieving a universally accepted definition.

### 2.3 Inclusive education in Saudi Arabia:

It can be argued that the phrase ‘inclusive education’ barely exists in Saudi literature or in education policies. For example, the term did not appear in the national report on education (MOE, 2008) nor the national report on the experience of the kingdom in integrating children with SEN in mainstream schools (Almosa, 2007). Additionally, the researcher worked as a practitioner for several years in the field of SEN in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia KSA and had many discussions with scholars in this field.

Almosa (2007) uses the term “mainstreaming” when referring to the general idea of inclusive education and uses the term “full integration” to describe the optimal situation of inserting children with SEN into mainstream schools. According to Almosa (2007) the concepts of “mainstreaming” can be explained as educating non-ordinary children in ordinary schools, thereby providing them with special education services. In contrast, he uses “full integration” to mean that special



programs are designed to integrate children with SEN into the mainstream school system.

In Saudi Arabia, the most widely used methods in Full Integration Programs are Resource Rooms, where students take extra lessons outside the classroom. The primary beneficiaries of this approach are mainstream students who are experiencing some difficulties. The second method, which is used in Partial Integration Programs, is Specialized Classrooms. This means opening special classes with specialist teachers inside mainstream schools for children with SEN, the majority of beneficiaries of which are students in special schools (Almosa, 2007).

In examining the situation in Saudi Arabia, the theory that integration and inclusion are interchangeable Pijl's et al., (1997) does not seem to hold true, even when it is called 'full integration'. This is because the aim of these programs is the provision of support for all the needs of children with SEN in order to enable them to integrate, meaning that the focus is on the ability of the child, rather than the curriculum, or the capacity of the school capacity and system in order to provide a perfect education environment for all students Almosa (2007) states that 'non-ordinary' children are children with disabilities or gifted children, however it does not include all the children with SEN as non-Arabic speakers or children from different ethnic backgrounds and religions. Therefore, the meaning of 'full integration' in Saudi Arabia is arguably not 'inclusive education'.

In the 1990s, many countries worked against segregation by improving access to mainstream schools for all children, including those with SEN (Florian, 2010). Parents in Saudi Arabia needed to fight to win places in special education schools or institutes, the majority of which had long waiting lists, particularly for children with severe disability. So there is no schools for severe mental or physical disability nor for children with complex disability (MOE, 2001). Between 1999 and 2003, the number of special education schools and institutes for young people with special needs increased from 143 to 576, with the number of students enrolled in these educational institutes increasing from 10,774 to 17,413 during the same period (MEP, 2005). The current 'Executive Summary of The Ministry of

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Education Ten - Year Plan 2004 – 2014', has seven objectives: developing the educational system for students with special needs, developing programs for the gifted; developing special education systems to meet international expectations; developing special education programs; providing an appropriate environment for students with special needs; improving teachers' abilities; working with the private sector to develop special categories of education; and finally extending community participation to protect the rights of those with disabilities (MOE, 2005). There is no explicit mention of inclusive education in this ten-year plan; however it is possible to interpret the second objective relating to international expectations as a movement towards more inclusive education.

The attitude and understanding of parents towards inclusion can be influenced by a variety of factors, such as the views of officials and decision-makers. Specific examples will be examined in the following section, to help understand the situation in KSA.

There are two main existing integration strategies are used in Jeddah. The first is from the Ministry of Education, which follows a policy of locational integration in mainstream schools for some disabilities under fixed structures. These are special classrooms run by special teachers inside the confines of mainstream schools (MOE, 2001). The second strategy is used within the private sector. The organization of the private sector official is the only one in Jeddah that adopts a policy of integration inside classrooms in mainstream and private schools for some disabilities, in addition to integration under fixed structures (DCA, 2009).

### **2.4 Studies addressing the attitude of parents to inclusive education:**

Studies into parental attitude three categories: studies addressing the attitude of parents of children with SEN; studies addressing the attitude of parents of children without SEN; and studies comparing the opinions of both types of parents.

#### **2.4.1 Attitude of parents of children with SEN:**

In Australia, Elkins et al. (2003) surveyed parents of children with SEN in mainstream schools in order to determine their attitudes toward inclusive education and their views about school organizations

that help inclusion. The study was conducted with 354 respondents, whose children were between 1-19 years old. Of the parents who participated, 332 (93.78%) were women, strongly suggesting that mothers consider this subject to be extremely important, as they were willing to contribute for the betterment of the education environment for their children. Elkins et al. (2003) found that the majority (53.2%) had a positive attitude about inclusion and believed in its mutual benefits, although a significant number (30.7%) were negative towards the concept. Half of the parents surveyed preferred the idea of sending their child to special schools instead of regular schools, with 70% of these attributing this choice to a feeling that their child would benefit from a more patient teacher. In this study, most parents placed great importance on smaller class sizes, consultation, teacher aids, specialist assistance and the availability of therapeutic services. However the most important factors in successful inclusion were considered to be the positive attitudes of the head teacher and the class teacher, in conjunction with their cooperation of experts.

A study by Leyser and Kirk (2004) used a questionnaire to examine issues related to inclusive education from the perspective of parents. This study was conducted with 437 respondents in the United States. The parents who took part had children with mild to severe disabilities, who were aged between 2-18 years old and enrolled in mainstream primary and kindergarten schools. As with Elkins et al. (2003) study, most of the respondents were mothers, with 343 mothers compared to just 34 fathers and the rest were family members. The majority of the questionnaire was based on the "Opinions Relative to Mainstreaming Scale" (ORM), designed by Antonak and Larrivee (1995). In relation to the general concept of inclusion as special needs students should be given every opportunity to function in the regular classroom setting where possible, more than 85% of parents strongly supported this statement. However, 53.6% of parents thought that inclusion could potentially harm the emotional development of their children. Some concerns were also raised about the readiness of mainstream schools for children with SEN. This study presented some factors that impacted on the attitudes of parents. Those parents that were educated to college level also showed more positivity towards

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the concept of inclusion than parents who had left education after high school. A comparison of parental attitudes showed that those with children who had mild disabilities tended to have more positive views than parents of children with moderate or severe disabilities, especially regarding the potential benefits of inclusion and the importance of the ability of teachers. However, 70% of the parents who participated thought the teachers in special schools were generally better prepared to deal with children who have SEN.

An early United States study into parental attitudes towards inclusion by Palmer et al. (1998) focused on two angles: whether they agreed with inclusive education in general and whether they believed that inclusion would be a good choice for their children. The study was based on data collected from 408 participants, who were parents and carers of children with SEN aged between 3 to 22 years old, in both mainstream and special schools. Most of the participants 70.3% were mothers, fathers were 18.7% and other relatives were 11%. The results showed that only 46.6% of the participants agreed with the idea of inclusive education, although 54.1% of them responded negatively to the idea of their own children in this type of education. Two key factors were found to have an impact on the attitudes of parents: their education level and their experience with inclusion (Palmer et al., 1998). The more educated parents were found to be more positive towards the idea of inclusive education, which supports the findings of Leyser and Kirk (2004). In terms of their experience with inclusion, the more time children spent in special school, the more negative parents tended to be towards inclusive education; while the more experience parents that parents had with inclusive education, the greater their acceptance of it.

Hanline and Halvorsen (1989) completed a study in the United States based on interviews with 14 parents of children with a wide range of disabilities and were aged between 4-22 years old who moved from segregation to inclusion. The interviews were with 10 mothers, 2 fathers and two couples. The parents identified six areas of particular concern in transition between educational styles: the safety of their children, the attitudes of their child's peers, staff

qualifications and program quality, suitable transportation, district commitment and the possibility of failure.

The afore-mentioned studies seem to suggest that mothers are more interested than fathers in cooperating with officials and researchers in the pursuit of the ideal educational environment for their children. This supports the assumption of this paper that mothers are more focused on the education of their children. The majority stated that children with SEN should be given the best opportunity to progress their education, like any other children in their age. These studies recognised certain aspects affecting the attitude of parents towards inclusive education, such as:

- Time children spent in special schooling;
- Parents' level of education;
- Degree and type of disability.

Parents of children with SEN are concerned about all aspect of their children's education, with particular attention being paid to the following areas of concern:

- The patience of teachers;
- Provision of specialist assistance, therapy services and aid from teachers;
- The size and facilities of classrooms;
- The emotional development of their children

#### **2.4.2 Attitude of parents of children without SEN:**

While Leyser and Kirk (2004) were investigating the attitudes of parents who had children with SEN toward inclusion, Peck et al. (2004) were examining the attitudes of parents of those children without SEN. To this end, they distributed a questionnaire among 389 respondents, which focused on three points: the general attitude toward inclusion before parents enrolled their child in an inclusive sitting, their attitude after the enrolment and whether they intended to repeat the experience. Before enrolling their children in an inclusive classroom, 47% of their parents had a positive attitude and 46% were neutral. This positive impression increased from 47% to 64% after enrolment, with a corresponding fall in those who were neutral, from 46% to 26%, although those who felt negatively towards this style of education increased from 7% to 10%. Regarding the last question,

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73% of parents responded that they would re-enrol their children in an inclusive classroom, although nearly 1 in 10 (9%) said they would not. This study shows that real exposure to inclusive settings tends to correlate with an improved positive attitude towards the idea of inclusion.

Some studies found discrepancies in attitudes towards certain key statements. Kalyva et al. (2007) found that while 72% of parents of children without SEN had a positive attitude towards inclusive education in general, when they were asked about inviting a child with special needs to spend the night in their home, almost the same number (68.3%) were not willing. A sizeable proportion (38.3%) would not invite a child with special needs to their home at all. This study revealed a fall in positive attitude when respondents were asked about inviting child with SEN to their home, potentially reflecting an unwillingness to take responsibility for a child with SEN more than it shows a negative attitude toward inclusion. This study was conducted in Greece, based upon a questionnaire answered by 338 parents (182 fathers and 156 mothers) of children without SEN, in the age range of 4-12 years old. In contrast to previous studies (Palmer et al., 1998; Leyser and Kirk, 2004; Kalyva et al., 2007) did not find a relationship between the education level of parents and their attitude towards inclusion. The age of parents also had little effect on attitude, although gender was found to play a role: fathers were found to hold a more positive general attitude than mothers and were more accepting of friendship with families who had children with SEN. Mothers were more willing to involve themselves and their children in activities with children with SEN, like allowing their children to play or inviting the children with SEN to their home. This study explained that while fathers were theoretically optimistic about the inclusion, the mothers were more aware of their children's needs and more worried about the impact of inclusion.

Another Greek study found that parents have a range attitudes toward the inclusion of students with SEN in the kindergarten schools Tafa and Manolitsis' (2003). The study was conducted of parents of children aged 4-6 years old, without SEN in kindergartens. The sample was 290 parents, most of whom were mothers (208). The

researchers noted two primary issues impacting upon the attitudes of parents: experience with inclusion and the type of disability in question. Those parents who had previous experience with inclusive education typically showed a more positive attitude towards the concept. Parents of children without SEN had more concerns about inclusion if the children had behavioural problems or severe cognitive disabilities, and were generally more willing to accept the inclusion of children who had mild cognitive disabilities or physical disabilities.

A study in Italy showed that overall the parents of children without SEN held a neutral attitude towards inclusion. Balboni and Pedrabissi (2000) carried out a questionnaire to record the receptivity of parents towards the concept of inclusive education, especially regarding the acceptance of children with severe learning disabilities being with their children and the factors affecting this trend. Data was collected from 647 respondents, who were parents of children without SEN, aged between 2-16 years old. While the average attitude of parents was neutral, certain factors were found to influence these opinions. Italian mothers held a more positive attitude toward inclusion than fathers. Parents with high and medium social-economic status were also more favourable towards the idea of inclusion than those of low social-economic status. Finally, the study showed a direct correlation between experience with inclusion and a positive attitude towards the adoption of this approach.

These studies focused on aspects affecting the attitude of parents of children without SEN toward inclusion. Areas of particular concern in the studies were:

- Experience with inclusive education;
- Parental level of education, gender and social-economic status;
- Degree and type of disability.

#### **2.4.3 A comparison of the attitude of parents of children with and without SEN:**

A smaller number of studies have compared the attitudes of parents of children with SEN against the attitude of parents of children without SEN. Rafferty and Griffin (2005) sampled 237 parents of children 0-5 years old in kindergarten in the US; 161 parents of children with SEN and 76 parents of children without SEN. Their research focused on



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parental attitudes and their views on the potential risks or advantages of inclusive education. The results of the research indicated that both groups of parents had a positive attitude, with no significant statistical difference between the two groups. The majority of the participants agreed that inclusive education has more benefits for children without SEN than for children with SEN. Additionally, suggested potential risks of inclusive education were that unusual behaviours could be frightening for other children or that teachers would not be sufficiently qualified to deal with all of the children. However, both groups of parents were least accepting of the inclusion of children with emotional difficulties, cognitive limitations or autism. Overall, parents of children with mild disabilities showed a slightly more positive attitude towards the idea of inclusion than parents of children without SEN. These findings were supported by another research into the comparison between parental attitudes was conducted by Kelly (2001) in the US. This research found that parents of children with and without SEN were positive towards the idea of inclusive education, although parents of children with SEN were slightly more positive.

Those comparison studies suggest that there are no significant differences between the attitudes of parents, irrespective of whether or not their children had SEN. Some concerns raised about potential risks to inclusive education included:

- Frightening unusual behaviours;
- Insufficient teacher qualifications.

### **3: Methodological Framework**

The selection of an appropriate research methodology plays a crucial role in managing the study and in determining how data will be collecting, as well as ensuring that this data addresses the aims of the study (Salehi and Golafshani, 2010). For this reason, due consideration of the nature and aims of the study is essential in the selection of a research method.

This study seeks to explore the roles, thoughts, opinions and behaviour of mothers towards inclusive education in Saudi Arabia. Given that this is a relatively new topic within the context of Saudi Arabia, an empirical investigation will be conducted through



interviews with mothers and officials to produce qualitative data. This study is based in the city of Jeddah, the second biggest urban area in Saudi Arabia, with a population of approximately 3.5 million (MEP, 2010).

### **3.1 Data collection paradigms:**

Also known as numerical and narrative research (Plowright, 2011) quantitative and qualitative data can be used separately or in conjunction with one another. Quantitative research is "...supported by the positivist or scientific paradigm, leads us to regard the world as made up of observable, measurable facts" (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992: 6), while qualitative research examines phenomena within specific settings, in order to understand them naturally. Patton (2002) claims that qualitative research describes a "real world setting [where] the researcher does not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest".

As well as differing in terms of the involvement of the participants, quantitative and qualitative data collection also differs in terms of the type of information that is collected. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2004) state that the qualitative approaches rely on constructivism, depiction and the contribution on behalf of the participants, while quantitative research necessitates the importance of neutrality on the part of the researcher.

### **3.2 Data Collection Methods:**

Two primary methods are used when exploring the attitudes of adults: questionnaires; or interviews, both of which are ways of 'asking questions' (Plowright, 2011). As this study is concerned with "exploring the attitude of mothers toward inclusive education in Saudi Arabia" the use of questionnaires has been dismissed because of the newness of the subject matter in the Saudi context. As "inclusive education" is relatively unknown as a term, concept and practice in Saudi Arabia. it was felt that a written description of the term would be insufficient to guarantee its understanding or the engagement of the target sample. Moreover, it has been argued that if "a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little research has been done on it, then it merits a qualitative approach" (Creswell, 2003: 22). Given that no previous research has examined the role of mothers in

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inclusive education in Saudi Arabia, this suggests that qualitative research is the appropriate means with which to explore the new topic (Creswell, 2003). The qualitative research method chosen for this project is interviewing.

### 3.3 Types of Interview:

There are three main types of interviews used in academic research: structured interviews; semi-structured interview; and unstructured or in-depth interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). Structured interviews are based on predetermined or identical sets of questions, with the researcher asking each question and then recording the answer according to a standardized schedule that often uses pre-coded answers. Semi-structured interviews can also be described as themed conversations driven by pre-prepared open-ended questions. This increases the need for audio-recording to ensure the smoothness of the interview and to react to the new questions that may arise as the context of the interview progresses. In this type of interview, preserving fluency and covering all the themes is more important than maintaining the sequence of questions. The third type is unstructured interviews. Essentially, these are conversations conducted within an overall theme, giving the interviewee the freedom to speak openly about feelings, events, behaviour and beliefs related to the theme (Saunders et al., 2009).

This study used the semi-structured interview strategy to generate qualitative data, based upon several closed questions followed by open-ended questions, with the opportunity for spontaneous new questions arising during the course of the interview. with mothers of children with SEN and without SEN, along with officials from governmental and private sectors.

## 4: Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Overview of Data and an explanation of terms

As mentioned in the first part, the aim of this study is to explore the attitudes and views toward the concept of inclusive education from the perspective of mothers of children with and without SEN, who are currently in kindergarten and elementary schools in Saudi Arabia.

This part examines the findings of the data collection, within the context of the studys' objectives. Key responses from the interviews

will be supported by extracts from the literature in order to investigate the issues around the central questions of this study. The aims outlined at the beginning of this paper are as follows:

- How do mothers understand inclusive education?
- To what extent do mothers accept inclusive education?

This part will attempt to address these questions, and any attendant topics, through the use of the data collected from the literature and the empirical investigation.

In the coding of the four response groups from the interviews, “MA” was used to refer to the first group of mothers, whose children have SEN; “MB” refers to the mothers of children without SEN; “OG” refers to the official from the government sectors; and “OP” refers to the official from the private sector. These acronyms will occasionally be used in this chapter.

#### **4.2 The Understanding of Inclusive Education**

This study found that the term “inclusive education” was not familiar among the participants, in contrast, all of the interviewees were familiar with the term “integration” and they gave an acceptable explanation for integration.

##### **4.2.1 The term ‘Inclusive Education’:**

Of the interviewees, only the government official was familiar with the phrase “inclusive education”. However, she did not give an accurate explanation, instead she stated that “Inclusive education is one school in each area containing all kinds of disabilities”. The participants from MA group were unable to guess a likely meaning for the phrase, while MB group gave some guesses like “Maybe it is education for all subjects together”, “It develops all skills and hobbies not only teaching subjects” and “It could be the continuity of education so it takes place at home also”.

##### **4.2.1 The term ‘Integration’:**

The interviewees were familiar with the term ‘integration’, being able to define it as “putting disabled children with normal children in the same school”. However, they have a number of different perceptions about integration, such as considering it to be the next step after special schools. This means that they believe that when children with SEN finish attending special schools they can start going to

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mainstream schools, some of the mothers had learned about the idea of integration from other mothers of children who attended the same special schools as theirs. The private sector official added knowledge of the social aspect alongside to the meaning of integration beside the educational aspect. However, neither officials knew about the Salamanca Statement.

The responses above illustrates that the gap in understanding between the mothers from the two groups and the officials was relatively small in terms of the idea of inclusion and integration. It was noted in the interviews, that the mothers of children with SEN avoided the use of terms like disabled or disabilities and they referred to their children as “sick” children. This reflects the medical model, which labels the child according to their disability or weakness. The medical model emphasises the deficits of children with more details about test scores and diagnostic labels are more important than the child’s right to be fit in the society and accepted (Llewellyn and Hogan, 2000).

When using medical terms, the mothers did not describe the conditions of their children accurately; however two mothers later explained that they knew the phrase ‘cerebral palsy’ but did not like the expression and preferred not to use it. In contrast, the mothers of children without SEN and both officials seemed to attach no stigma to the words ‘disabled’ or ‘special needs’ and used them freely.

### 4.3 The Extent of the Acceptance of Inclusive Education

#### 4.3.1 The concept of inclusive education

There are limits in accepting the inclusive education concept in general. Most people are sceptical about the logic of the idea and have some concerns, which will be stated later in the advantages and disadvantages, and the obstacles categories.

Based on the concept of inclusive in UNESCO (2003; 2009), there was an uncertainty about the possibility of applying the idea of inclusion. The MA group gave responses like, “Does the school accept that?”, “What do they do with the children who laugh and make comments about the children with the disability?” and “Do they offer physical and occupational therapy?” The responses of the MB group included a wider range of negative statements like, “I do not think that would work”, “The idea is not logical”, and “It is possible if

they reformat everything in the education system”. Finally, neither official provided clear answers, taking a neutral stance on the concept of inclusion.

These responses can be considered to be further evidence that the concept of inclusive education is not prevalent in Saudi Arabia.

#### **4.3.2 Inclusive Education in Saudi Arabia**

There seems to be little optimism regarding the potential of application of inclusive education in Saudi Arabia, suggesting that they feel it will not be implemented at the present time. There is no trust in the educational institutions in Saudi Arabia, and mothers seemed to be more optimistic towards integration if it is in private schools or in villages schools.

The interviewees were pessimistic about inclusive education’s chances at the current time. There were no difference between the answers from the mothers and officials, with both sides perceiving that implementation is currently impossible due to the lack of qualified teachers and school. Mothers from both groups believe that families would be able to accept the idea of inclusion but that teachers would not. A mother from the MB group said, “In Saudi Arabia, a lack of awareness and the system does not give education priority”. Mother from the MA group added that, “In the future, if there is a proper study of inclusion, then why not?”. The private sector official thinks that given the current state of education in Saudi Arabia, it would currently be impossible to implement inclusive education. She felt that this situation would not be expected to change over the coming decades, because of the shortages at all levels. On the other hand, the government official sees inclusive education is not a priority concern, she added “We have to consider that there are no schools for some children, like those with severe and / or multiple disabilities”. This indicates an agreement on the perceived level of educational potential in Saudi Arabia from the perspective of officials and mothers. This may reflect a lack of confidence in education institutions in managing the implementation of inclusive education.

When the mothers of children with SEN talked about the possibility of enrolling their children in private schools in Jeddah, they were more positive. Comments included praise of the small size classrooms and

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the new buildings. Moreover, mothers expected that their children would be better accepted and receive superior treatment in private schools because they will have paid the fees for it. The experience of other mothers may have affected the attitude of mothers of children with SEN: “From what I heard from mothers who integrate their children, private schools are better than mainstream schools”. One mother mentioned that mainstream schools in her village had had some successful cases of integration. However, this comment should be considered in light of the fact that the residents of a Saudi village may all be from one family, so they know each other very well and support each other. Additionally, some village classes are as small as five children.

### 4.3.3 Types of disabilities

The type of disability plays a crucial role in the acceptance of inclusion, as children with mental and severe physical disability are not an appropriate candidates for integration.

Both groups of mothers agreed that children with mental disabilities or severe physical disability are unsuitable for integration into mainstream schools. The MA group made comments like, “They have special schools suitable for their mentality”, the MB commented such as “Integration does not work at all for mental disability, it can be for children with minor motor disabilities”. Mothers consider the ability to talk, write and move independently essential to integrate the child. They seem to believe that if a child cannot get any educational benefit from the school because of their mental disability, then there is no need to integrate them.

The officials’ views support this idea, they reflected the policies of their organizations. For example, the OG said, “In Jeddah we only have locational integration for some disabilities in a few schools”, for example the Ministry of Education has programmes that offer “Supplementary classrooms in mainstream schools” for hearing impaired and visually impaired children on condition that they achieve at least 73 in the Stanford–Binet Intelligence Scales (MOE, 2001). According to the government official, children who have motor disabilities in their lower limbs and without any other difficulties cannot be enrolled in any programs but the Ministry of Education

forces the school to accept them. On the other hand, the OP's organization adopts integration inside the mainstream classrooms, although this is also on the condition that they achieve at least 70 in the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales and have a motor impairment that does not prevent them from participating in the mainstream schools. The OP added "We cannot force schools to accept our children, but we are trying to persuade them, and private schools are more responsive than mainstream schools."

These responses show an absence of the core principle of inclusive education, namely that education should not exclude any child for any reason, in the views of any of the interviewees. The majority of the interviewees seem to believe that integration is unsuitable for children with mental or severe disabilities because their disabilities obstruct the learning process. The private sector has a more positive approach to integration, but has less power than the government sector. However many studies show a less positive attitude towards inclusive education with the severe cognitive disability (Tafa and Manolitsis, 2003; Leyser and Kirk, 2004; Rafferty and Griffin, 2005).

#### 4.3.4 Year of study

Mothers of children with SEN and officials from both sectors were more motivated regarding the integration of children into compulsory education, especially in elementary, based on the perception that kindergarten is less important and that there is therefore no need for integration at this stage.

Mothers in the MA group showed a more positive attitude towards integration when their children were in elementary school, while mothers of children in kindergarten believed that this level of schooling is too early to consider integration. Some of their comments were, "Not now, he is still in the kindergarten" and "my daughter now is seven years old and I have been looking for normal school. I do not want her to lose this year". Palmer et al.(1998) found that the more children with SEN spend time in special schools, the less positive attitude their mothers usually have towards the idea of integration. The MB group did not differ in their acceptance of the idea of integration for children in kindergarten or elementary school. However, the perspective of the officials was similar to the mothers

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from MA. OP stated that “We rarely integrate children in kindergarten, the child needs time to prepare for integration, which often means that the child spends kindergarten with us”, while the ministry of education does not have any integration programs in kindergartens, and the OG thought that, no real need to integrate in kindergarten.

These responses seem to indicate that the trend in integration in the private and government sectors impacts on the mothers of children with SEN, resulting in their adoption of the official views. It also demonstrates that mothers of children with SEN and officials are more interested in integration in elementary schools, which is the first stage of compulsory education. This shows a link between the importance of integration and the educational benefit in compulsory education, because the certificates that are given to children with SEN from special schools are not accepted in the Ministry of Education.

### 4.3.5 Gender

It is believed that integrating girls would be easier than integrating boys, with the result that mothers tend to integrate girls more than boys. The mothers confirmed that the main reason for this is because in the case of their daughters they would be able to visit the schools themselves, talk to the teacher face-to-face and see the classroom from the inside. As Saudi Arabian mothers are not allowed to attend boys’ schools, the cooperation of fathers would be required for integration. It is common in a typical Saudi society that mothers are the primary caregiver for the children while fathers are less involved in their needs and education. A mother said, “I would not be comfortable with putting my son in a boys’ school. If this really happened I think I would stand at the school’s gate throughout the day”.

The governmental entities, does not support any integration programmes in the boys’ schools because that is the prerogative of the Ministry of Education Department for Boys. In the private organization involved in this study, the Department of Education is ran by females, so the OP reports finding integrating girls easier than integrating boys for the same reasons mentioned by the mothers of children with SEN. She added that “To integrate boys we have to find



a male mediator, who are sometimes the fathers but are usually volunteers”.

It is possible that the policy of segregation between boys and girls in general education in Saudi Arabia has a negative impact on the integration of children with SEN, because mothers have the primary responsibility for monitoring their child's education. Since most private special schools are ran by females and accept both genders, therefore, offers an advantage, however boys of 12 years or older have to change to special schools run by men. It is also possible that these schools are run by females in the first place to cope with the cultural idea that it is mothers' role to be 100% involved in the child's education. With this stereotype spreading, fathers may be less encouraged to involve themselves in their child's education.

#### **4.3.6 Mothers' Educational Preferences**

The exact preferences of the mothers are not clear, ranging from unconditional support of inclusive classes to being strongly opposed to the idea.

The MA seem to be torn between the desire to integrate their children in private schools with fees that most of them cannot afford and keeping their children in their special schools to harness the support services that are provided such as physical, occupational and speech therapy. They did voice some reservations on the name of the school for the presence of the word 'disabled'. The MA's responses reflect the confusion that they have, for example a mother said "I do not know what is best for my daughter, I may go to private school, but if they remove the word 'disabled' from the name of this special school and the Ministry of Education accepted their certificate, I would keep my daughter here because I am worried about her feelings if I integrate her". One mother has a clear opinion, stating, "I am happy to keep my son in this special school because they know his condition well". However, it should be noted that her son has severe physical disabilities and a moderate mental disability; he cannot speak or write and he is totally dependent on others. Parents of children with mild disability generally have a more positive attitude towards integration than parents of children with moderate and severe disabilities (Leyser and Kirk, 2004).

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When asked about preferences over integrated classes and non-inclusive classes, the responses of MB varied. There was an unconditional agreement with inclusive classes, a guarded endorsement provided there was only one child with a disability and that the disability was a motor disability, accepting an inclusive class but preferring a non-inclusive one. There was one particularly strong response against the idea of inclusion, with the mother stating that she may change the school if all classes were inclusive. Many studies (Balboni and Pedrabissi, 2000; Tafa and Manolitsis, 2003; Peck et al., 2004) have linked the positive attitudes of parents of children without SEN relating to them having an experience with inclusive settings, and none of the MB reported any prior experience with integration. However when the MB group were asked about the best situation in which to educate children with SEN, all answered that they preferred special schools. Three suggested that simple disabilities can be integrated, while the fourth mother said, "Children with simple disabilities can be in a separate class but within a mainstream school". Even when mothers understood the meaning of integration, they did not seem to be ready for the concept in practice. The MA group showed a more positive attitude toward integration and inclusion but they did not trust the government institutions to implement it. The MB group had a more negative attitude toward integration and inclusive even though they had no experience of it.

### 5: Conclusion:

This study has used interviews and a comprehensive review of literature in order to conduct a detailed investigation of the attitudes, views and expectations on inclusive education in Jeddah, the second biggest city in Saudi Arabia. The qualitative data collected shows that the level of awareness about this concept are relatively similar between the two sampled groups: education officials and the mothers of young children. The lack of awareness regarding the different levels of inclusion in the education system was clearly noted among all groups interviewed, indicating that exclusion continues to exist not only in the practices, but also in terms of beliefs. This was highlighted by the entire sample agreeing that some students, such as those with severe or mental disabilities, should be excluded from integration.

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The mothers were lacking motivation in integrating their children, because of their fear of potential mishaps regarding integration and a deep-seated belief in the importance of special schools as specialist providers. Given the current state of mainstream education in terms of building accessibility, attitude and ability of staff, the mothers who participated in this study appeared to be more accepting of the possibility of integration in private schools. However, given the expense of privately educating a child, this option is not available to all families.

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