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# Research in Developmental Disabilities



## Review article

# Inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in Arab countries: A review of the research literature from 1990 to 2014



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In this study, a literature review was conducted to analyze studies published from 1990 to 2014 in English-written literature on inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in Arab countries.

**Aims:** This study sought to review and analyze research conducted on Inclusive Education (IE) in Arab countries.

**Methods and procedures:** The following electronic databases were used in searching the relevant literature: ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, PsychINFO, EBSCOhost Databases, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database, ERIC, and Google Scholar. After the publications to be included in this study were retrieved, each study was reviewed and analyzed. Each study was examined for details such as authors, title of research, publication year, country, purpose, methods, and key findings.

**Outcomes and results:** The results showed that a total of 42 empirical studies related to inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in Arab countries have been published. More than two-thirds of these studies came from United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The majority of the studies were published in the last 6 years. The main parameters in these studies were: attitudes toward inclusion, barriers to inclusion, and evaluating inclusion.

**Conclusions and implications:** The results of the current study revealed that relatively little IE research has been conducted in Arab countries. More research is warranted to test the generalizability of the results of the current study. Further research is also needed to analyze IE practices and demonstrate strategies for the effective implementation of IE in these countries.

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Inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in mainstream educational settings has been endorsed internationally through legislation and encouraged by research over the past two decades (Lindsay, 2007; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Odom & Diamond, 1998; Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008). After decades of exclusion of children with developmental disabilities from mainstream regular schools, Arab countries, like many developing countries, have recently joined the global movement toward more inclusive education (IE) for these children (Gaad, 2010). Yet, despite policies encouraging IE and the proliferation of full inclusion rhetoric in these countries, the practical translation of this policy and rhetoric into real inclusive practice at the classroom level remains a formidable challenge. In some Arab countries, IE was introduced more than two decades ago as pilot projects involving a small number of schools in countries like Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. The majority of those projects focused on providing remedial and special education services in resource rooms in regular schools.

Since the late nineties, a broader view of IE began to find its way to more countries in the region (Gaad, 2010; Weber, 2012). Recently, ministries of education in most Arab countries began adopting policies and guidelines for implementing IE. The four most influential forces behind the movement of Arab countries toward more inclusive schools were: the UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) in 1990, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education in 1994, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities that was adopted in 2006, and international literature on IE particularly Western journals and other publications. However, Arab education policy makers, special education professionals, researchers, and parents have not yet reached consensus on the definition, nature, and extent of IE (Anati, 2012; Weber, 2012). IE, as perceived and practiced in Arab countries, may not necessarily have the same meanings and contexts as IE described in the international literature (Aldaihani, 2011; Almuhareb, 2007). The terms “normalization”, “integration”, “mainstreaming”, “least restrictive environment”, and “inclusion” are still used interchangeably in the Arab region. There is no uniform or clear definition of IE that is commonly used across Arab countries; definitions used are rather general or inconsistent. While some Arab policy makers and educators define IE as a strategy to ensure education for all, others perceive it as teaching all children with disabilities in regular classrooms, or more commonly as educating only children with certain types of disabilities in ordinary school settings (Alghazo & Gaad, 2004; Gaad, 2001; Weber, 2012). Thus, although Arab special educators tend to use the term *inclusion* and the educational jargon associated with it, the current researchers assert that Arab countries are struggling to educate a progressively increasing number of children with mild disabilities in a “less restrictive” rather than a “least restrictive” learning environment.

Despite progress made in educating children with developmental disabilities in recent years in Arab countries (Gaad, 2010), these countries, like most developing countries, are still facing challenges in reforming their educational systems and transforming them into inclusive systems (World Health Organization, 2011). Even today, the vast majority of children with developmental disabilities in these countries are not receiving an education appropriate to their needs or are receiving no education at all. Very large numbers of children continue to be excluded from education, whether it is inclusive or segregated. Reasons for exclusion are complex and varied but are generally based on disability stigma; widespread negative perception and beliefs; poverty; and lack of access to education, particularly in rural regions (Peters, 2009). The majority of public schools in Arab countries remain unwilling and poorly prepared to provide educational services to children with disabilities.

Attempting to explore and survey the literature on inclusion of children with developmental disabilities in Arab countries is a daunting task. For one thing, there are 22 Arab countries with a combined population of around 370 million people (World Bank, 2014). Although these countries have many similar features, they still vary tremendously in terms of their political, ethnic, economic, social, and religious characteristics. In addition, there are substantial variations in the educational systems in these countries (El-Berr & El-Mikawy, 2004). Moreover, a lack of accurate and updated data on disability and special education and related services remains one of the most critical challenges facing the region (Al Thani, 2006; Gharaibeh, 2009). Similarly, there is an absence of reliable data and accurate statistics in the region on IE (Weber, 2012). Finally, researchers meet tremendous challenges in surveying the literature written in the Arabic language due to the scarcity of accurate databases providing online access. Many research reports in the region are paper-based with no online versions.

Like many other developing countries, there is lack of information and research-based data on inclusion in Arab countries (Crabtree & Williams, 2013). Accordingly, this study sought to review and analyze research conducted on IE in Arab countries. The methodology used in this study is described below followed by the main findings. The study concludes with a discussion and the implications of the findings.

## 1. Methods

For this study, *developmental disabilities* were defined as physical, intellectual, learning, behavioral, or language impairments that occur before a person is 22 years of age and include conditions such as intellectual disabilities, autism

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