

# Towards the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian kindergartens

Rabiha M. I. Elyan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Early Childhood Education and Development, Bethlehem University, Palestine

## HOW TO CITE:

Elyan, R. M. I. (2023).

Towards the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian kindergartens.

*International Journal of Special Education*, 38(1), 69-81.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Rabiha M. I. Elyan;  
relyan@bethlehem.edu

## DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.52291/ijse.2023.38.7>

## COPYRIGHT STATEMENT:

Copyright: © 2022 Authors.

Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY)

license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## ABSTRACT:

Despite the importance of inclusive education as a human right for people with special needs, clear foundations and criteria are absent for integrating children with special needs into kindergartens in Palestine. This has led to their exclusion from Palestinian kindergartens, whether directly or indirectly. This study identifies the foundations needed for the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian kindergartens (KG), and the requirements for implementing these foundations. The study utilized qualitative data collection and analysis methods and conducted semi-structured interviews with specialists in inclusion, educational policymakers, kindergartens principals and teachers, and parents. In addition, the content of the national documents that deal with inclusive education was analyzed, with special reference to the issue of inclusion in kindergartens. Grounded theory techniques were used to conduct an inductive analysis of qualitative data (thematic analysis). The results showed that four themes and thirteen sub-themes denote the essential foundations that must be integrated towards the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian kindergartens. These essential foundations are: activating the right base, formulating policies, developing practices, and creating trends. Accordingly, several sub-elements were identified from each of the essential foundations. The study proposes specific recommendations that might help overcome the challenges ahead in the process of institutionalizing inclusive kindergartens in the Palestinian context.

**Keywords:** inclusive education, disabled children, kindergartens, foundations.

## INTRODUCTION

Education is an important issue for society, the economy, and even the country. Kids' education will shape the future of the country (Ugur-Erdogmus, 2021). Early childhood education within the first five years of life is critical to children's health, psychological development, well-being, and the overall trajectory of their lives in a variety of ways (Liliana, 2015). Providing early childhood education early enough to students that present developmental delays is important for children's cognitive and other skills (Acar & Akamoğlu, 2014). Kindergarten is the second most important environment in a child's life after the family. It is the foundational stage in which each child's personality is formed with all its dimensions and features. It is also the appropriate phase for children to start acquiring social skills, where it is possible to accustom children to experience life with peers within the framework of a community (Maich et al., 2018).

It is reported that 240 million children worldwide live with some sort of disability. Like all children, disabled children carry dreams and ambitious thoughts for future life. Therefore, they need quality education to develop their skills and realize their full potential. So far, disabled children are often neglected in plans and policies, which accordingly limits their access to education and socio-economic development opportunities and engagement in political life. It is generalizable that disabled children worldwide are most likely outside of the educational system, and frequently educational policy fails in the inclusion of children with disabilities in the education system. Given the above, inclusive education is known as the most competent method to open decent school enrollment opportunities for all children, and to receive and evolve the competencies that they need to grow within their societies. Inclusive school systems entail that all children are registered in the same school and set in equivalent classrooms. In other words, it must reflect actual schooling for children with disabilities, who are usually neglected (UNESCO, 2015a).

### **Importance of inclusion in early childhood:**

Inclusion is in the best interest of all children, and it is most effective when it happens as early as possible (Zabeli & Gjela, 2020). Inclusion in early childhood has a positive impact on the interactions of children with and without special needs, as well as in different aspects of child development (Chen et al., 2019). Because inclusive education from the start means inclusion for the future, the road is chosen early. By beginning to include kids

with disabilities from KG, we ensure that our children who "get to go" to inclusive schools will, after graduation, get to participate in real life. Inclusive Education from the start means holding great expectations, having these high expectations for children affords them dignity, challenges our perceptions, and gives us new problems to solve. It also means learning collaboration and modeling, it gives students with disabilities the opportunity to share with learning peers and engage with them and many potential opportunities to see and hear those peers engaging, with various degrees of success in social or academic learning (Galagan, 2008). Children with disabilities benefit from being included in general education classrooms both short and long-term (Gupta & Henninger, 2014). Inclusive education at any stage of the child's development is crucial, especially in the period of early childhood (Zabeli and Gjela, 2020).

The engagement of children with disabilities is better in inclusive classes than in separated classes. Engagement of children with disabilities is better in classrooms that include activities, such as child-initiated activities like free play, because such activities allow them to select their choices as learner-centered options, as indicated by Reszka with coauthors (2012).

### **Inclusion in the Palestinian educational system:**

Starting from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, international conventions and treaties stipulate that "everyone has the right to education". The Universal Declaration of Education for All emphasized the need for basic education to be accessible to all children, youth, and adults (UNESCO, 1994).

Calls to provide education for people with disabilities in KGs alongside their colleagues increased. Several international conferences were held in this context, such as the Salamanca Conference in 1994 under the auspices of UNESCO, which is considered a cornerstone for children's education and focused on the need for all children to obtain quality and child-centered education that meets their individual needs in the regular KG environment.

It was followed by the Dakar Conference in 2000 which was supportive of the accomplishment of all educational commitments assumed by countries in previous agreements and conferences. It aimed at enabling all children to have access to quality, free and compulsory education by 2015 (UNESCO, 2000).

The "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" held in 2006 was a clear and explicit commitment to inclusive education. It called for states to guarantee an inclusive education system at all levels, to access

to education and participation (United Nations, 2006).

In 2000, the Millennium Development Goals were declared and called to universalize basic education for all by the year 2015. The Sustainable Development Goals 2030, in their fourth goal, seem clearer. In their intent to achieve quality, inclusive and equitable education for all, including the most marginalized children and children with disabilities (UNESCO, 2015b).

In the Palestinian context, the executive regulations of the law for persons with disabilities constituted an important shift in the implementation of the law and stressed that disability must not deprive anyone of access to educational institutions. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MoE) must adapt its educational institutions to suit the needs of these people. Article 10 of the law calls for ensuring the right of persons with disabilities to have equal opportunities to attend educational facilities. Such opportunities best start with educational diagnoses that determine the nature and degree of disability of each student. After the diagnosis, customized curricula, educational means, appropriate facilities, qualified teachers, and evaluation systems should be integrated and provided (Ministry of Education, 2020a).

The Palestinian Children Law 2004 stipulates the need for the state to ensure the access of children with disabilities to public education, and the necessity of the state's commitment to appropriate procedures and measures to ensure that children with special needs are given the necessary care in all fields, especially education, health, and rehabilitation to enhance their self-reliance and their active participation in society. Furthermore, the Education Law of 2017, Article 1, calls for the provision of educational opportunities for students with different tendencies and levels of performance, including people with disabilities, abused children, and dropout students. Article 35, in the same tenor, focused on the need for curricula to respond to the individual needs of students with special needs (Palestinian Legislative Council, 2003).

The MoE sought to adopt inclusion in schools, and the first steps were to develop an inclusive education policy (Ministry of Education, 2015) and then develop the strategic plan for the development of education 2017-2022 aiming to set a new agenda for education that is more comprehensive (Ministry of Education, 2017). The policy and the plan were considered as the national framework that defines the sectors in which children with disabilities are integrated. It included a text related to the KG stage without specifics on the inclusion criteria at that stage.

### **Status of inclusion in Palestinian KGs**

The first step of change in a child's life starts from the KG, as it is the first entity to embrace the child after his parents. Providing high-quality early intervention for children with disabilities, developmental delays, or even at-risk helps to improve and develop long-term educational and social opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to the need to consider all aspects of the child. The existence of a safe, comfortable, and adapted KG education for people with special needs pushes children to work and cooperate and makes them interact and engage in the process of education and exploration (Morgan et al., 2012).

In general, preschool education in Palestine is still provided by the private sector and civil society. Access to this education depends on the economic capacity of the citizen, which may prevent citizens in some cases from securing KG enrolment for their children. The role of the MoE is limited to setting specifications and standards and to granting licenses to these KGs. It should be noted that the MoE began in the year 2012/2013 to open KG classes in public schools and established remote and marginalized areas as a priority (Ministry of Education, 2018).

According to educational statistics, 97% of Palestinian KGs belong to the private sector, compared to 3% belonging to the governmental sector. Government services directed to KGs expanded to include educational supervision, training of educators, developing the general framework of curricula, and developing educator's manuals (Ministry of Education, 2020b).

Educational indicators of the Palestinian system indicate that the gross enrollment rate (GER) in pre-KG (KG1) is 76.5%, according to 2019/2020 statistics. On the other hand, enrollment in KG1 and KG2 declined to 62.3% (Ministry of Education, 2020c). The MoE, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Ministry of Health have developed the National Strategy for Development and Intervention in Early Childhood 2017-2020. This strategy aimed to provide a better opportunity for survival and development for all children, including children with disabilities, to detect early developmental delays and disabilities and monitor healthy growth and development in all areas, such as the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive field (UNICEF, 2017).

Despite the efforts made and the importance of inclusive education as a human right for individuals with disabilities, and despite the existence of laws, mandatory legislation, policies, and strategies at the national level for inclusion; the success of inclusion and access has not been guaranteed, neither has a broader concept of inclu-

sive education as called for by international convention, been established.

### The present study:

This study identifies the foundations needed for the institutionalization of inclusive education in KG in the Palestinian context, and the requirements for implementing these foundations. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Develop and propose foundations for the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian KGs.
2. Describe the requirements for the implementation of each of the foundations.
3. Describe the challenges that may hinder the implementation of the proposed foundations.

## RESEARCH METHODS

**Design:** This study falls within the qualitative research methodology using a grounded-theory constructive design, to come up with themes that denote the foundations needed to institutionalize inclusive education in the Palestinian KG system. In this design, more attention is drawn to individuals' opinions, beliefs, sensations, expectations, and philosophies rather than explanations (Creswell, 2018).

As stated by Charmaz (2006), the research results (themes) within the grounded theory are considered a proposal, incomplete and inconclusive.

**Participants:** Participants (N=15) were persons active in the field of early childhood and inclusive education, including policymakers in the education sector, advisors in inclusive education, KG teachers, KG principals, and parents (see table 1). The sample is purposive, where participants are chosen according to their expertise and ability to inform on a specific topic or concept (Robinson, 2014). It involves gathering information from specific active persons in the field of early childhood education (Creswell, 2012).

### Data Collection

Two triangulations were set: 1) methodological triangulation through semi-structured interviews and documents analysis, and 2) data source triangulation through policymakers, advisors, teachers, principals, and parents:

**Semi-structured interviews:** in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as one of the instruments in this research. Open-ended questions provided opportunities for participants to express their views (Zhang, 2014).

Table 1: Overview of persons active in early childhood and inclusive education

No.	Title/position	Professional Degree	Experience
P1	Policy maker-Director General of Special Education and Counseling, MoE.	MSc in inclusive education.	6 years
P2	Policy maker	MSc in inclusive education.	24 years
P3	Policy maker-Director of the Counseling Department at the MoE	MSc in psychological counseling.	22 years
P4	Director of a preschool unit	MSc in elementary education.	26 years
P5	Senior inclusive education advisor	MSc in inclusive education.	30 years
P6	Head of a Special Education Department at a College	Ph.D. in special education.	28 years
P7	Inspector of special education	MSc in education.	27 years
P8	National advisor on inclusive education.	Ph.D. in inclusive education.	12 years
P9	KG principal	MSc in sociology.	18 years
P10	KG principal	Training courses in early childhood education.	30 years
P11	KG teacher	BA in social studies.	18 years
P12	KG teacher	Diploma in preschool education.	9 years
P13	Parent, mother of 3 children with no disabilities.	Completed high school.	Not working
P14	Parent, mother of 5 children, three with disabilities.	MSC in education, the supervisor in inclusion.	13 years
P15	Parent, mother of 2 children, with no disabilities.	Finished high school.	Not working

Table 2: National documents analyzed

Document	Publish date
Palestinian Children Law	2004
Education Law	2017
Inclusive Education General Policy	2015
Strategic Plan for Inclusive Education in Palestine	2017
Strategic Plan for Educational Development 2017-2022	2017
National Strategy for Early Childhood Development and Intervention 2017-2020	2017

The interviews consisted of four main questions with 4-5 sub-questions related to the research objectives. The first two questions, and their sub-questions, are intended to help interviewees to get engaged in the context and to help the researcher understand the situation from the interviewees' point of view, including their reasons for the lack of inclusive KGs. The third question intended to address the first and second objectives of the study (the foundations and requirements to access them). The third question included several sub-questions, and the number of sub-questions differed from one participant to another based on their qualifications and experience. The fourth question was intended to inform the third objective (challenges). The duration of each interview ranged from 40 minutes to 2 hours. Twelve interviews were audio-recorded and three were transcribed.

**Document analysis:** national documents related to inclusive education issued by the government and partner institutions were collected and analyzed considering their relevance regarding the adoption of inclusive education in KG (see table 2).

All these documents provided pieces of information about policies and criteria for the provision of inclusive education in KGs.

**Data analysis:** Thematic analysis of qualitative data was used (Braun & Clarke, 2006), on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis tackled what participants said, and the reasons behind their statements about specific research issues.

After transcribing the recorded and written interviews, several steps were undertaken, namely: 1) familiarization: reading through the text several times and taking initial notes, and generally looking through the data to get familiar with it; 2) coding: highlighting sections of the interview transcripts' sentences and phrases, and assigning them codes describing their contents with codes to describe the content of the sentence or phrase; 3) gen-

erating themes and subthemes: patterning the codes and identifying themes and sub-themes, and 4) reviewing themes and naming: themes were checked to be accurate representations of the data, and each theme was given a meaningful title (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

## RESULTS

This study aims to identify the foundations needed for the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian KG and the requirements for implementing these foundations.

Themes and subthemes were determined through the research questions using semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These themes denote the foundations needed to achieve the aims of the study. Table 3 presents the main research questions which fit under four categories and the themes and subthemes of the research questions.

**Results of questions related to the first category “the issue of the controversy over the inclusion of children with disabilities in KGs (support vs opposition)”. And the questions related to the second category, “the reasons behind the lack of institutionalization of inclusive KGs in the Palestinian context”**

These questions aimed to prepare the participants (interviewees) to address the issue of inclusion and the obstacles to institutionalizing it in the Palestinian context. It was clear, from the analysis of the interviews that the reasons behind the different views on the inclusion or not-inclusion of children are due to cultural factors associated with a lack of understanding of differences in abilities, even though the interviewees believed and felt convinced that the KG or school is the place in which every child should be.

As for the answers to the question about readiness and the reasons for the lack of institutionalization, they reflect the following reasons: 1) the absence of awareness of the

Table 3. Summary of the main research questions under four categories, major themes, and sub-themes of the third category

**Main research questions under the first category: The controversy about the inclusion of disabled children in KGs (supportive vs opposing opinions)**

According to your opinion and experience, what is the reason behind the differences in opinions regarding the inclusion of children with disabilities in KGs?

**Main research questions under the second category: Reasons behind the lack of implementation of inclusive education in Palestinian KGs.**

What do you think about the statement: "we are not ready; we do not have the capabilities?"

Do you think that this statement is an appropriate answer to the rights of children with disabilities?

How long shall we wait?

**Main research questions under the third category**

Category	Themes	Sub-themes
<b>Foundations towards introducing inclusive KGs in the Palestinian context:</b> What is your perception about the requirements needed for introducing inclusive education in Palestinian KGs? What are the specific steps that must be achieved? How would you describe the requirements for each step?	Legal ground	Inclusion is a human right. Inclusion is built on the ground of differences and diversity. Inclusion reflects a value aspect.
	Policies	Clear policies at the national level. Detailed policies at the KG level.
	Practices	<b>Educational Availability:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Teacher Qualification</li> <li>- A child-centered curriculum and educational adaptations for its implementation.</li> <li>- Collaborative multidisciplinary inclusion committee.</li> <li>- Individual plan.</li> <li>- Peer support.</li> <li>- Community participation.</li> </ul>
		<b>Environmental availability-physical requirements.</b>
	Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness program: psychological-social-therapeutic-developmental-preventive.</li> </ul>

**Main research questions under the fourth category: Challenges that can hinder access to inclusive KG**

What are the challenges that could hinder implementation on the ground?

rights of this group of children, 2) the absence of policies and standards necessary for inclusion, and 3) the weakness of specialized materials and educational capabilities.

Despite all this, the study participants seemed to understand the importance of going beyond the discussion of reasons and onto the work to find answers about the reasons and alternatively to work to find an answer to the question "How do we get prepared?". This leads us to the answer to the third category question.

**Results of questions under the third category "foundations towards introducing inclusive KGs in the Palestinian context"**

Analysis of data under the third category, listed in table 3 showed that there is no equation to reach to inclusive KGs, and there are no specific steps, as the results of the interview analysis showed that there are four basic themes and 13 sub-themes that must be worked on in an integrated manner to ensure the success of reaching inclusive KG, which is:

**Theme 1: The legal ground:** the analysis of the interviews showed that the participants affirmed this foundation and included within it three sub-themes expressed as it is a human right, it is based on the ground of differences and diversity; and inclusion as a reflection of social axiology (or social values).

**Sub-theme 1.1: Inclusion is a human right:** KG and school are a place for all children of all classes to learn, a place that embodies the right of the disabled child to get out of the isolation imposed on him by staying at home or placing him in institutions for treatment, which often results in further psychological barriers between the disabled children and their non-disabled peers. Such barriers have led to an acceptance difficulty by each of the two parties towards the other, especially when they are in non-educational social contexts.

*P1: "From my point of view, to institutionalize inclusive KGs, we must start from a basic point, which is the legal*

ground. Because inclusion is a basic and binding right and not a luxury.”

**Sub-theme 1.2: Inclusion is built on the ground of differences and diversity:** Difference of any kind and nature is a features and the essence of life, and we must accept that we are different people, different in beliefs in religion and ideology as well as in many other aspects.

P7: *“All creeds and religions emphasized that differences exist in all societies. Trees have short and long roses, different colors, differences are wisdom from the rules of life.”*

**Sub-theme 1.3: Inclusion reflects social values:** Inclusion is a real opportunity for non-disabled children to acquire values from a young age, such as taking responsibility, accepting others, and tolerance. This contributes to the formation of a person that is conscious, responsible, and caring for others in society.

P5: *“From my experience, the presence of disabled children with non-disabled children gives them an opportunity to practice values like empathy, tolerance, respect, and equality.”*

**Theme 2: Policies:** the results of data analysis showed that one of the basic institutionalization foundations of inclusive KGs is the existence of clear policies at two separate areas, the national and KG levels.

**Sub-theme 2.1: Policies at the national level:** The decision-makers and inclusive education advisors who were interviewed confirmed that, despite the existence of inclusive education policies at the national level, issued by the MoE in 2015, in which its second goal indirectly addressed the KG stage, it is required to amend the policies so that they include a specific and singular goal for inclusion in preschool education (early childhood), and the characteristics of this inclusion, the development of a national agreement on special education including specific terms and descriptions of its constitutive categories.

P1: *“The success in realizing inclusive KGs requires policies at different levels, especially the policies that should be formulated to activate a binding law for the protection of disabled children.”*

**Subtheme 2.2: Detailed policies at the KG level:** The KG principals who were interviewed emphasized the need for written policies concerning the inclusive KG context. These policies should support children’s rights whether disabled or not and should ensure the child’s right to interact with his environment and should provide him with all services that promote his development.

P2: *“As a decision maker, I see that the inclusive KG needs detailed policies related to 1) instructions for admission, entry, and exit of children, 2) licensing conditions that include environmental adaptations, and 3) policies related to roles, responsibilities and staff”.*

**Theme 3: Practices:** analysis of the interviews showed that practices require two types of availability (two sub-themes):

**Sub-theme 3.1: environmental availability:** while the participants emphasized that environmental availability, represented by equipment and materials, is required for the institutionalization of inclusive KGs, they considered that environmental availability seems simplest.

P8: *“children with physical difficulties and disabilities need wheelchairs, movement facilities, door sensors, parking lights, and adapted bathrooms. Hence, besides environmental and equipment support, financial support is needed”.*

**Sub-theme 3.2: educational availability:** talking about the components of inclusive KGs, the participants focused on the need for six educational requirements that represent the backbone to realize inclusive KGs:

**Qualified teachers receiving professional support:** this point calls for the presence of teachers holding specialties in KG and supported by continuous supervision and guidance. Supporting KG teachers and developing their learning styles, curricular flexibility and professional activities are basic requirements for realizing inclusive KGs.

P5: *“From my experience, the basis of success in realizing inclusive KGs is the teacher’s understanding of the developmental stages of children, their needs, individual differences, and understanding that disabled children are special groups that are part of inclusive education”.*

**A child-centered curriculum:** data analysis showed that flexible curricula supported with activities customized to children’s needs are an important success factor to inclusive KG:

P8: *“I believe that adopting a child-centered approach, and adopting a child-centered curriculum, is the best option, supported by a variety of activities that suit different children’s groups, including disabled children”.*

**Multidisciplinary inclusion committee:** data analysis showed that for the inclusion process to go right, there must be a multidisciplinary committee to assess each child individually. This committee provides an opportu-

nity to consider all factors: cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of the children. In addition, this committee dialogues with the children's parents, and makes recommendations to the KG to develop individual plans, and to strive to provide the necessary support for each child admitted in the KG".

*P6: "Through my knowledge of successful experiences in inclusive education, I concluded that an important requirement is the presence of a multi-person committee, from different disciplines, that assesses the case of each child and determines his specific needs and programs suit him, and thus provide guiding recommendations to KG's teacher and parents."*

#### **Individual educational plan:**

Data analysis showed that an individual educational plan, based on a specialist's diagnosis, would undoubtedly contribute to a successful inclusion in the KG. To do so, an individualized educational program emerges from the plan for a child. The plan should include objectives according to the different areas of the child's performance, with specific recommendations submitted to the inclusion committee.

*P10: "Individual plans are needed, and should be designed based on the child's interests, strengths, and special needs if any. A regular review of the plan should be done considering observational follow-up, monitoring, and evaluation processes while documenting it in the student's file."*

#### **Peer support:**

The results showed that preparing non-disabled children for the presence of disabled children with them in the same KG is a foundation for realizing inclusive and effective KG's education. Disabled children may feel isolated if they don't get the opportunity to interact appropriately with their non-disabled peers, which may affect the development of their social skills.

*P5: "Peer support is needed; it gives disabled children greater opportunities to spend more time with non-disabled peers. This opportunity gives the disabled an opportunity to improve their social behavior and language skills. The failure to teach the non-disabled group about the presence of a different child (disabled) may completely hinder the inclusion process."*

**Community participation:** the results showed the importance of cooperation between all parties, and the fact that KG is an important educational institution in the community. It also showed an urgent need for community participation to develop a quality of life for dis-

abled children. This could be done through cooperation between different societal actors on the one hand, and families on the other hand. Cooperation should take place at all possible levels: KGs with all staff, community institutions, governmental and non-governmental organizations, media, the private sector, universities, and volunteers.

*P9: "I believe that supporting community engagement is a basic requirement, and each KG must have a database of institutions, and people in a supportive community so that it can communicate with them when needed."*

**Theme 4: Trends:** influencing community culture and response is required to institutionalize inclusive education in Palestinian KGs, this needs awareness programs.

**Sub-theme 4.1 Awareness Program:** the analysis of the interviews showed the importance of enhancing awareness of the rights of disabled children through an awareness program that includes psycho-social, therapeutic, developmental, and preventive dimensions. This comes through group and individual counseling and workshops with parents, meetings, open days, publishing success stories, and field visits. In addition to the use of the media to produce various educational materials such as television talk shows, television flashes, and radio flashes, the use of various social media and platforms to broadcast and disseminate the awareness materials that are produced, publishing success stories to integrate children, and carrying out visits to conduct observations to inclusive KG.

*P6: "I see that publishing success stories and holding meetings with parents will contribute to raising parent's awareness, indicating that awareness is a key pillar for inclusive education in KGs"*

#### **Results to questions under the fourth category: challenges that hinder access to inclusive KGs**

The results related to the fourth category showed the challenges that could hinder access to inclusive KGs are due to many different factors. Having a successful inclusion does not just involve students with disabilities; it requires that teachers, curricula, schools' environment, parents, and non-disabled students are involved in the process to make sure no one is left behind.

The most notable challenge in the Palestinian context is the refusal of the parents of non-disabled students to have their children integrated with children with disabilities, and this is what the KGs' principals, teachers, and advisers of inclusive education agreed on, especially since education in KGs is not mandatory but rather most of it is run by the private sector, and parents must pay enrollment tuition. Therefore, it appears here that parents



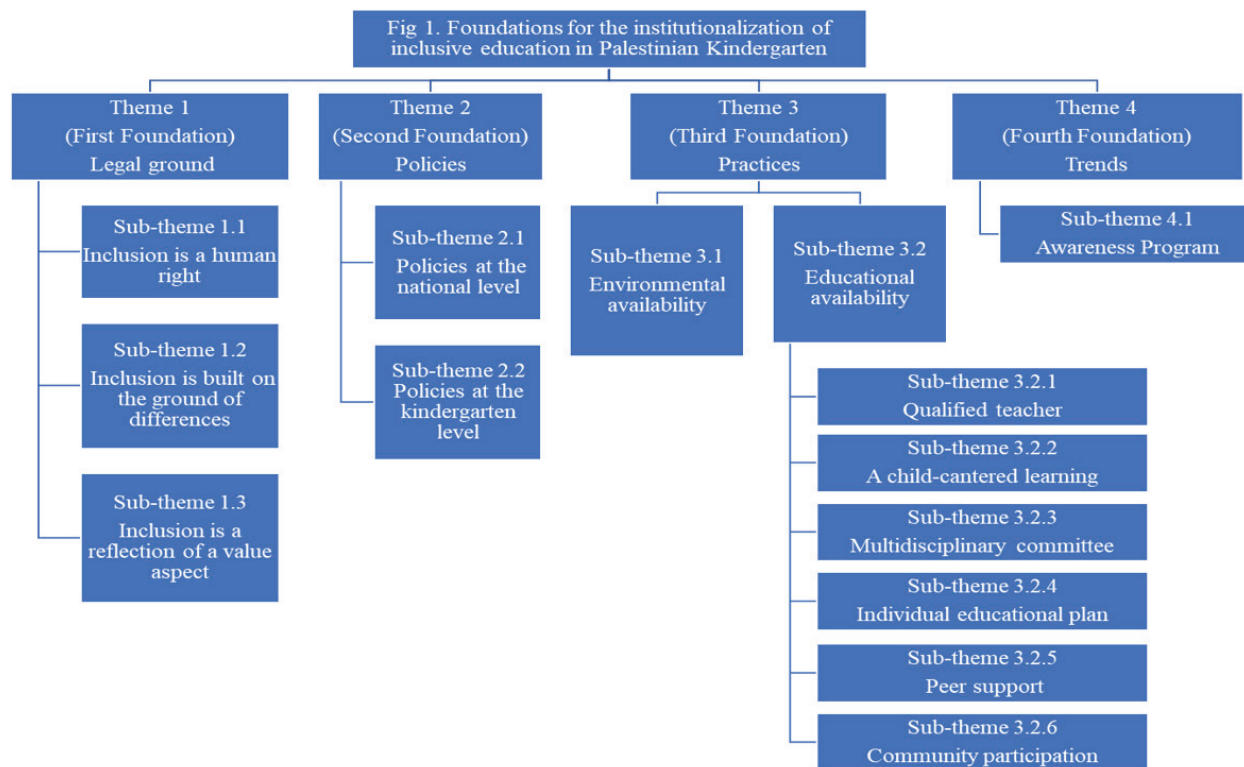


Fig. 1. Foundations for the institutionalization of inclusive education in Palestinian KG

prefer to enroll their children with non-disabled students out of fear of seeing the behavior of children with disabilities affect that of their children through imitation.

P 15: *“I was in a KG and accidentally met an angry mother because she discovered that there was a down-syndrome child in her son’s class, and immediately the mother withdrew her child from the KG to keep him away”.*

P13: *“I support the inclusion of disabled children on the condition that they do not harm my son.”*

The mentioned four themes and the thirteen sub-themes denoting the foundations for the institutionalization of inclusive KG are summarized in figure 1.

**Results of content analysis for documents listed in table 2:** this content analysis showed the following findings, which are coherent with Nazzal (2018): the absence of clear foundations and criteria for the inclusion of children with disabilities in KGs, has led to the exclusion of children from KGs, directly or indirectly. The absence of accurate data, data collection tools, and assessment and diagnosis tools regarding the number of children with disabilities resulted in further exclusion as well. The results further showed insufficient awareness of the rights of children with disabilities. In addition, the analysis indicated that there are cases of automatic inclusion of children because there is no place for children to go.

**DISCUSSION**

The focus of this study was to identify the foundations needed for the institutionalization of inclusive education in the Palestinian KG and the requirements for implementing these foundations. In addition, it described the challenges that may hinder its implementation.

When examining the findings of the study in relation to the literature on inclusive education in early childhood, part of the foundations came in line with the findings of the study by Booth and Ainscow (2002), which indicated three dimensions necessary for the development of inclusion within a school: producing inclusive policies, evolving inclusive practices, and creating inclusive cultures.

This study showed that the transition towards having inclusive KG should be gradual, and should also be an ongoing process, which was confirmed by the study of Hind (2022), this reference addressed that beginning on the path towards more effective inclusion, it is important to take small steps, assessing successes as you go and make amendments when something doesn’t go smoothly.

The themes that resulted from this study matched the findings of Follari and coauthors (2019), which highlighted the practices for inclusive education. These practices include high-engagement strategies and differentiating instructions. The other practice, collaboration,

and co-teaching meets theme 2 (second foundation) in this study.

Theme 1, sub-theme 1.3 (humanitarian dimension), agrees with the study by McLeod (2022) which stated that the humanitarian issue was highlighted by the families as a major concern. In specific, families indicated that service providers must possess a complete humanitarian sense and culture in providing the service.

Theme 2 (policies) meets the findings of Lydia Foong and coauthors (2021) which assured the importance of having national policies and systematic reviews on accessibility to quality early childhood and education. It also meets Blackmore and coauthors' (2016) study which recommended increasing support at the policy level for inclusive early childhood education. This stands in line with important findings by UNESCO (2015a), which reported that disabled children are usually neglected in plans and policies, which accordingly limits their access to education. Additionally, there is an increasing call from policymakers to expand public early childhood education to have positive impacts on inclusive education (Isaacs & Roessel, 2008).

Theme 3 (Practices) of educational availability, Sub-theme 3.2.4 (peer support), came in line with Galagan (2008) and Hulya & Zarife (2012) both indicated that inclusive education has a positive effect on peer relations and social skills. Syrjamaki with other researchers (2019) indicated that increasing social skills and peer acceptance in early childhood classrooms helps all children to develop shared activity and imagination in play promoting cognitive well as social development. By playing with peers, children share their routines and their values, and experiences. In addition, Sevgi (2014) insisted that peer acceptance is considered crucial to gain positive outcomes for young children with disabilities in inclusive early childhood education UCEDD (2009) came up with five quality requirements for parents to decide on a quality early childhood program for their children enrollment, They are, though not exclusively: (A) program's mission, which meets theme 2, sub-themes 2.1 and 2.2; (B) staff qualification and attitude towards inclusive education, which meets theme 3 and sub-theme 3.2.1; (C) system for family involvement, which meets theme 4 (trends), (D) collaboration with agencies and community partners, which meets theme 3 and sub-theme 3.2.6 and; (E) ongoing system for staff development which meets theme 3 and subtheme 3.2.1.

Qualified teachers (Sub-theme 3.2.1) appeared compliant with Bariffe and Pitta's study (2021) which indicates that a key theme for success inclusion is that in-ser-

vice training and teaching experience positively influence practices and beliefs as well as differentiated instruction.

The foundation related to trends (theme 4), affects the parents' decision towards enrolment of their children in inclusive education. This finding agrees with Hu and coauthors (2018) who indicated that parents are highly supportive of the philosophy of inclusion, indicating that respondents of this point include parents of children with and without disabilities. This goes in line with Chen and coauthors (2019) who highlighted that child development is positively influenced by the interaction of children with and without special needs. More specifically, psychosocial dimensions included in awareness programs (sub-theme 4.1) came in line with Ugur-Erdogmus, (2021), Liliana (2015), and Acar & Akamoğlu (2014); who highlighted that early childhood education within the first five years of life is critical to children's health, psychological development, wellbeing.

Aguiar and coauthors (2010), Guralnick with other researchers (2008), and Tamakloe & Agbenyega (2017) mentioned many aspects that may positively affect the quality of inclusion, such as the quality of the curriculum and teaching practices, which meet with the theme 3 sub-them 3.2.3, the qualifications of the and the teachers, which came compliant with theme 3 sub-theme 3.2.1; the physical environment, which fit theme 3 sub-theme 3.1.

Zabeli and Gjela (2020) stated that flexible education programs and implementation of the individual education plan are key issues toward inclusive early childhood education, which fit theme 3 (in specific sub-theme 3.2.4).

Awareness of inclusion in early childhood education from all partners (families, parents, teachers, children, and community) is a fundamental foundation (theme 4) vindicated by many studies such as Bhargava & Narumanchi (2011) and Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice (2020).

Most of the studies (Claire et al., 2021; Al Shouram & Aznan 2014; Zabeli & Gjela, 2020) highlighted the following challenges ahead of inclusion in KGs: negative attitudes, insufficient teachers' training and development, lack of support services, lack of inclusion policies, low parental involvement, and lack of physical appropriate accessibility.

However, the most difficult challenge facing the institutionalization of inclusive KGs is the rejection of parents of children without disabilities, and their failure to accept the presence of their children next to children with disabilities. In addition, parents who have children with disabilities usually feel ashamed, and conceal that

they have disabilities in their families, which was confirmed by the study by Hu and coauthors (2018).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the results of the study have theoretical and practical educational implications at the early childhood level. Theoretically, the study has helped to fill major gaps in the literature related to inclusive education in preschool education in Palestine.

Practically, this study sets the direct steps for the institutionalization of inclusive KGs. In addition, the study constitutes a road map for decision-makers, planners, educational institutions, KG owners, and institutions interested in inclusion to achieve such a child's basic rights. It also falls in line with SDG4, and contributes to the realization of the slogan "no one left behind". What distinguishes these foundations is their comprehensiveness, indicating that institutionalization is a continuous

process that enables the education partners to work in parallel on the foundations so that the transition to the inclusive education approach is carried out gradually. All of the above requires a serious rethinking of educational practices.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like hereby to record my sincere thanks and gratitude to bro. Alejandro González Cerna, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Bethlehem University, for editing the language of this article. Also, I would like to record my deep thanks to Ms. Salma Al-Khaldi, senior inclusive education advisor for her advices and recommendations.

## DECLARATION OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## FUNDING

None

## REFERENCES:

- Acar, S., & Akamoğlu, Y. (2014). Practices for parent participation in early intervention/early childhood special education. *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education*, 6(1), 80-101. <http://doi.org/10.20489/intjecse.93010>
- Aguiar, C., Moiteiro, A. R., & Pimentel, J. S. (2010). Classroom quality and social acceptance of preschoolers with disabilities. *Infants & Young Children*, 23(1), 34-41. <http://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0b013e3181c9766e>
- Al Shouram, M.,g & Aznan, Ch. (2014). Review of Special Education Programs in Jordan: Current Practices, Challenges and Prospects. *Journal of Special Education & Rehabilitation*, 15(3\4), 24-42. <http://doi.org/10.2478/jsr-2014-0009>
- Bariffe C., & Pittas, E. (2021). Early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about the inclusion of children with Autism in Jamaica: An exploration study. *International Journal of Special Education*, 36(2), 66-77. <https://doi.org/10.52291/ijse.2021.36.19>
- Bhargava, S., & Narumanchi, A. (2011). Perceptions of parents of typical children towards inclusive education. *Disability, CBR & Inclusive Development*, 22(1), 120-129. <https://doi.org/10.5463/dcid.v22i1.10>
- Blackmore, R., Aylward, E., & Grace, R. (2016). 'One of the kids': parent perceptions of the developmental advantages arising from inclusion in mainstream early childhood education services. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 41(2), 13-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/183693911604100203>
- Booth, T., & Ainscow, M. (2002). *The Index for Inclusion: developing learning and participation in schools* (2nd ed.). Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education. United Kingdom
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Chen, J., Lin, T., Justice, L., & Sawyer, B. (2019). The Social Networks of Children with and Without Disabilities in Early Childhood Special Education Classrooms. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorder*, 46(7), 2779-2794. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3272-4>

- Claire, B., Amanda, O., Tamara, M., Heather, M., Aya, M., Kylie, J. Helen, B., & Helen, S. (2021). Strengthening the social and emotional skills of preschoolers with mental health and developmental challenges in inclusive early childhood education and care settings: a narrative review of educator-led interventions. *Early Child Development & Care*, 191(15), 2311-2332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2019.1704283>
- Creswell, J.W. (2012). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). London: SAGE.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, Ch. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: SAGE Publications
- Follari, L., Pearson, L., & Navaratne, M. (2019). Effective Inclusion in Preschool and Early Grades: Setting the Stage. *Dimensions*, 47(3), 16-22.
- Galagan, Ch. (2008). *Why inclusion begins in KG... or doesn't*. Retrieved from: <http://ie2pspring2010.pbworks.com/f/WhyIncl-BeginsKinder.pdf> (access: 2022\08\02)
- Gupta, S., & Henninger, W. (2014). *First step to pre-school inclusion*. London: Brookes Publishing.
- Guralnick, J., Neville, B., Hammond, A., & Connor, T. (2008). Continuity and change from full-inclusion early childhood programs through the early elementary period. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 30(3), 237-250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815108317962>
- Hind A. (2022). Practical steps towards developing successful inclusive education supports in the Middle East. *International Journal of Whole Schooling*, 18(1), 95-126.
- Hu, B., Mak, M., Zhang, Ch., Fan, X., & Zhu, J. (2018). Chinese Parents' Beliefs about the Importance and Feasibility of Quality Early Childhood Inclusion. *International Journal of Disability Development and Education*, 65(2), 163-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1034912X.2017.1358809>
- Hulya Giuay, O., & Zarife, S. (2012). The Effective Education Practice During Preschool Has on the Peer Relations and Social Skills of 5-6-year-olds with Typical Development. *International Journal of Special Education*, 27(3), 169-175.
- Isaacs, J.m & Roessel, E.(2008). Impact of early childhood programs. Washinton. [https://ectacenter.org/eco/assets/pdfs/09\\_early\\_programs\\_isaacs.pdf](https://ectacenter.org/eco/assets/pdfs/09_early_programs_isaacs.pdf)
- Kiger, M., & Varpio, L. (2020). Thematic analysis of qualitative data: AMEE No. 131. *Medical Teacher*, 42(8), 846-854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2020.1755030>
- Liliana, S. (2015). Development in the first years of a child's life. Analysis of the Romanian Regulatory Framework of early education. *Scientific Annals of the 'Alexandru Ioan Cuza' Inclusive of Iasi: Educational Sciences Series*, 19, 81-92.
- Lydia Foong, Y., Wong, N., Carynne Loh, H., Nurul Salwana, M., Swrajulm H., Mogana, D., & Mazlinam C. (2021). The Impact of National Policies on Accessibility to Quality Early Childhood Care and Education in Malaysia: Policymakers; Perspectives. *Southeast Asia Early Childhood*, 10, 63-76. <https://doi.org/10.37134/saecj.vol10.sp.6.2021>
- Maich, K., Hall, K., Rhijn, T., & Squires, K. (2018). Investigating Stay, & Talk: Peer-Mediated Social Skills Intervention for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Challenges. *Exceptionality Education International*, 28(2), 82-104. <https://doi.org/10.5206/eei.v28i2.7766>
- McLeod, T. (2022). Parent-Educator Partnerships in Social Education Services Provision: A Thematic Exploration of Challenges Faced by Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Families. *International Journal of Special Education*, 37(1), 24-39. <https://doi.org/10.52291/ijse.2022.37.24>
- Ministry of Education (2020a). *Inclusive education in the Palestinian Schools*. Palestine.
- Ministry of Education (2020b). *Monitoring & Evaluation Report 2019*. Palestine.
- Ministry of Education (2020c). *Educational Statistical Yearbook*. Palestine.
- Ministry of Education (2018). *Monitoring & Evaluation Report 2017*. Palestine.
- Ministry of Education (2017). *Educational Development Strategic Plan*. Palestine.
- Ministry of Education (2015). *Inclusive Education Policy*. Palestine
- Morgan, L., Farkas, G., Hillemeier, M., & Maczuga, S. (2012). Are minorities disproportionately represented in early intervention and early childhood special education? *Educational Researcher*, 41(9), 339-351. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12459678>
- Nazzal, B. (2018). Suggested model for inclusive education in the early childhood in Palestine. *Arabic Early Childhood Magazine*, 88, 1-6. <https://doi.org/0.29343/1-88-1>
- Palestinian Legislative Council (2003). *Palestinian Child Law*. Palestine.
- Reszka, S., Odom, L., & Hume, A. (2012). Ecological features of preschools and social engagement of children with Autism. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 34(1) 40-56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815112452596>
- Rhoad-Drogalis, A. & Justice, L. M. (2020). Is the proportion of children with disabilities in inclusive preschool programs associated with children's achievement? *Journal of Early Intervention*, 42(1), 83-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815119873100>

- Robinson, R.S. (2014). Sampling in interview-Based qualitative research: A theoretical and practice guide. *Journal Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Sevgi, K., Nesrin, E., & Cigdem, C. (2014). Peer Acceptance of Children with Disabilities in Inclusive Kindergarten Classrooms. *Pamukkale Inclusive Journal of Education*, 36, 163-177. <https://doi.org/10.9779/PUJE679>
- Syrjamaki, M., Pihlaja, P., & Sajaniemi, K. (2019). Enhancing peer interaction in early childhood special education: chains of children's initiatives, adults' responses, and their consequences in play. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(5), 559-570. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00952-6>
- Tamakloe, D., & Agbenyega, S. (2017). Exploring preschool teachers' and support staff's use and experiences of assistive technology with children with disabilities. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(2), 29-36. <https://doi.org/10.23965/AJEC.42.2.04>
- Ugur-Erdogmus, F. (2021). How do elementary childhood education teachers perceive robotic education in KG? A Qualitative Study. *Participatory Educational Research (PER)*, 8(2), 421-434. <https://doi.org/0.17275/per.21.47.8.2>
- UNICEF (2017). *National Strategy for Development and Early Childhood Intervention 2017-2022*. Palestine.
- UCEDD (2009). *Impact: Future Issue on Early Childhood Education and Children with Disabilities*. 22(1), 1-35.
- UNESCO (2015a). *Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children*. Montreal: UIS. <http://dx.doi.org/10.15220/978-92-9189-161-0-en>
- UNESCO (2015b). *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action Towards Inclusive and Equitable Quality Education and Lifelong Learning for All*. Paris.
- UNESCO (2000). *Dakar Framework for Action*. Senegal.
- UNESCO (1994). *Salamanca Statement & Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*. Spain.
- United Nations (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. New York. <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/crpd/crpd.html>
- Zabeli, N., & Gjelij, M. (2020). Preschool teacher's awareness, attitudes, and challenges towards inclusive early childhood education: a qualitative study. *Cogent Education*, 7: 1791560. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2020.1791560>
- Zhang, K.C. (2014). Through a spiritual lens: early childhood inclusive education in Hong Kong. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 53(6), 1728-1740. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-013-9771-5>