

## PARENTS' AND PROFESSIONALS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH COMMUNICATION DISORDERS IN PRESCHOOL SETTINGS IN THE NORTH WEST BANK IN PALESTINE: PRELIMINARY DATA FROM THE PILOT STUDY

### Vnímanie podpory detí s poruchami komunikácie rodičmi a odborníkmi v predškolských zariadeniach v severozápadnej časti Palestíny: predbežné výsledky pilotnej štúdie

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**Abstrakt:** Na základe zistení Štatistického centra v Palestíne (2013) deti s poruchami komunikácie tvoria percentuálne najväčšiu skupinu detí so špeciálnymi výchovno-vzdelávacími potrebami v Palestíne, ale napriek tomu konštatujeme nedostatok služieb na ich podporu. Cieľom prezentovanej kvantitatívnej štúdie je analýza toho, ako predškolské zariadenia (štátne aj súkromné) v severozápadnej časti Palestíny a v jej regiónoch, akými sú Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatiya, Tulkarem, Salfeeta Tubas, podporujú deti s poruchami komunikácie. Štúdia sa zaoberá pohľadom rodičov a odborníkov (učiteľov v predškolských zariadeniach, ale aj fyzioterapeutov, logopédov, psychológov a pod.). Pre zber dát boli vytvorené dva dotazníky, jeden pre rodičov a druhý pre odborníkov. Do výskumného súboru bolo zaradených 40 rodičov a 44 odborníkov z uvedených regiónov. Zámerom výskumu bolo opísať druhy podpory poskytovanej deťom s poruchami komunikácie v kontexte predškolských zariadení v Palestíne a porovnať vzťah medzi vybranými premennými (pohlavie, vek, dĺžka praxe a pod.) a vnímaním poskytovanej podpory rodičmi a odborníkmi. V štúdiu sú prezentované predbežné výsledky analýz.

**KLúčové slová:** Vnímanie rodiča. Vnímanie odborníka. Predškolské zariadenie. Poruchy komunikácie.

**Abstract:** According to Palestinian Centre for Statistics (2013), children with communication disorders constitute the highest percentage of special educational needs in Palestine; however, there is a lack of services to support these children. The purpose of this quantitative study is to analyze how the preschool settings (private and public) in the North West Bank in Palestine regions such as, Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatiya, Tulkarem, Salfeet, and Tubas, support children with communication disorders from the parents' and professionals' perceptions (preschool teachers and specialists such as physiotherapist, speech and language therapist, psychologist, etc.). To collect data, two questionnaires were developed, one for parents, and the other for professionals. The participants in this study were 40 parents and 44 professionals from all these regions. The researcher aimed to clarify the type of support provided for children with communication disorders in preschool contexts in Palestine, and if there is a relationship between the variables of the study (gender, age, professional experience, etc.) and the perceptions of parents and professionals towards the support provided in preschool settings. Preliminary data from this study will be provided.

**Keywords:** Parents' perceptions. Professionals' perceptions. Preschool settings. Communication disorder.

### Theoretical background

*Relevance of the Study:* This study comes at a time when important changes in the way of dealing with the issues of persons with disabilities witnesses a shift from dealing with their

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needs and services to dealing with their rights. We will highlight the nature of the support provided in preschools in the North West Bank in Palestine, for children who have communication disorders.

### *Problem and Objectives*

Children with special education needs should have all the resources they need as a matter of right, not as special pleading. The recent trends in education call for highlighting the importance of preschool programs and their role in the development of the child in the different stages of growth in order to help them succeed, not just in schools but also outside it (Beeckman, 2004). Palestine seeks, just like many countries, to improve the situation and its requirements. To achieve this, we must take into account the diversity among students and the individual differences between them, and to enable the child to take advantage of these programs within the maximum limits. Specially that this category constitutes the highest percentage of disability in Palestine, and suffers from a severe lack of services provided in this aspect, based on the results of Palestinian Center for Statistics (2013).

*Therefore, the objectives of this study are:*

- Study parents' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North west bank in Palestine according to variables of study such as: (a) parents' age and gender; (b) child's age and gender; (c) income level; (d) level of education; (e) presence of children with communication disorders in the family; (f) place of residence.
- Study professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North West Bank in Palestine according to variables of the study such as: (a) age; (b) gender; (c) level of educational; (d) years of teaching experience; (e) type of preschool (public or private); (f) type of occupation; (g) teaching students with CD; (h) taking a course/courses which relate to communication disorders; (i) number of training hours.
- Compare differences between the parents' and professionals' perceptions in order to understand this community members' perception (parents, and professionals) on various aspects of preschool programs in Palestine, and how they support children with communication disorders.

- Provide data indicators among the community members and organize this information to reach conclusions.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design:*

The purpose of this quantitative study is to analyze how the preschools settings (private and public) in the North West Bank in Palestine regions such as, Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatia, Tulkarem, Salfeet, and Tubas, support children with communication disorders according to the parents' and professionals' perceptions (preschool teachers and specialists such as physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, psychologists, etc.).

### *Characteristics of Participants:*

The population of this study are all the children's parents (mothers, fathers or the one who takes care of the child), whether they have language disorders or not, who send their children to these preschools and all the preschool professionals that support their children.

Two simple random samples were selected according to the number of professionals and parents in the preschools in the regions (Nablus, Jenin, Qalqilya, Qabatiya, Tulkarem, Salfit, and Tubas) and areas (urban, rural). The sizes of the two samples for professionals and parents were 44 and 40 respondents respectively. The characteristics of the two samples are displayed as following:

According to results, most of professionals were females (about 98%). Approximately 56% of them were between 32-41 years old, and 61% of the respondents hold a bachelor degree. Furthermore, 61.4% of the professionals were teachers and half of the respondents had 5-9 experience years in teaching. About 75% of the respondents have never taught students with communication disorders. Moreover, approximately 55% have never met students with communication disorders and 75% of the professionals have never taken a course/courses related to communication development/communication disorders. In addition 88.6% of the respondents were not involved in training about teaching students with special education needs. However, in professionals' classrooms; about 11.4% had students with special education needs. Approximately, 88% of the professionals are working in private kindergartens and about 84% of the classrooms capacities ranged between (10- 30). In addition, about 77% of professionals highly and moderately expected to work with communication disorders students. In the same time, about 23% of them have never heard of any information about special education needs before the current study. However, about 30% of the respondents have parents/siblings/relatives with special education needs.

According to the results, about 58% were males (fathers) and 42% were females (mothers). Approximately 68% of them were between 37-46 years old and 58% of the parents hold a bachelor degree. Furthermore, half of the parents don't have children in preschool age diagnosed with special education needs, while about 23% of children in preschool age were diagnosed with delay or learning impaired. On the other hand, a quarter of parents have at least one child (who is not in preschool age) with special education needs. About 38% of the families reported that there are special education needs students in their children's classes. Three quarters of the parents preferred to know about educational services and supports that are provided to them by being informed in their workplaces.

### *Instruments for Data Collection*

In this study, two questionnaires were developed; one for parents "*Parents' Perceptions towards Support for Children with Communication Disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine*", and a second one for professionals "*Professionals' Perceptions towards Support for Children with Communication Disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine*"

The professionals' questionnaires included three parts with a total of 50 items: part I included the informed consent; part II was made up of close-ended questions regarding *Socio - demographic information*, that consisted of 16 items; Part III about *professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders* that consisted of 34 items which included questions about assessment (12 items), intervention (12 items), curriculum (10 items); and policies and setting practice (13 items).

The parents' questionnaires consisted of three parts with a total of 45 items: part I included the informed consent. Part II was made up of close-ended questions regarding *Socio - demographic information* about the child and the parents that consisted of 14 items. Part III for *parents' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders*, consisted of 32 items which included questions about intervention (14 items), curriculum (10 items), assessment (9 items); and policies and setting practice (12 items).

### **Results and Discussion**

This research study yielded three major findings.

*First result: The findings that are related to the main question of the study: "What are the parents' and professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North West Bank in Palestine?"*

The results show that professionals' perceptions towards the supports provided to the children with language and communication disorders is intermediate. It should be noted that the professionals assessed each of the fields of assessment, intervention and curriculum moderately, whereas it was noted that the policy and setting practice were low.

The present findings about the negative estimates of the professionals to the policy and setting practice could be attributed to the inclusion settings at the preschools which do not take into consideration adequately the individual needs' students when selecting the teaching strategies. Therefore, we need to develop training programs for the workers in order to develop their capabilities and skills in taking into consideration the individual differences and how to deal with them during the process of designing teaching activities. In addition, we need to upgrade the attitudes of teachers towards the education of students with special educational needs and adjust the classroom environment to keep up with such needs.

The results of the present study agree with the one that was administered by Lewis and Doorlag (1987), which reached the findings that the teachers who had not received any training or without experience in dealing with students with special educational needs felt that they were not prepared to deal with them. Consequently, they had a negative attitude towards the practices, the preparations and the specific policy of special education.

With regards to the perceptions of the Palestinian parents, it should be noted that the parents assessed each of the fields of assessment; curriculum; and the Policy and setting practice moderately while it was noted that the intervention was low.

The researcher interprets that these items received low assessments is an indicator that must be taken in consideration since it indicates the lack of opportunities for parents to participate in supporting their children. These findings agree with the ones of McCormick and Schiefelbusch (1997) study that emphasized the importance of involving and encouraging families to continually participate and inquire about their children so that they can have efficient roles in making decisions concerning the children, in addition they emphasized the dimensions of identifying parents' interests, parents' attitudes to the school, their impressions about the school qualities for obtaining successful outputs, parents' satisfaction with their participation, and the time that the parents spend in school activities. In comparison with parents of normal children, the findings showed that the parents of special educational needs

children perceive that their children did not have equal opportunities in the classroom. Parents believed that their input was not valued or welcomed by most professionals. Instead of being kept out of the decision making process, parents desired to be treated as equal contributors towards their children. Parents felt that they desired to take more participation in the objectives and teaching; to spend more time in meetings to satisfy the individual needs, and to spend more time in defending the needs of their children. The analysis also shows that there are low to intermediate relationships between parents conviction and participation in the context of teachers assessment for their participation, and the extent which the teacher demand for their participation and impact on the curriculum contents of the educational program of their children (McCormick, Schiefelbusch, 1997).

*Second result: The findings related to the study hypotheses of the professionals at preschools*

The results show that the study variables did not influence the professionals' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine. The researcher attributes these results to the fact that the special education services, support, interventions, and rehabilitation provided to the children who suffer from language and communication disorders in the Palestinian schools in general and in the preschools in particular are low. Nevertheless, we noticed that there were no differences in the professionals' perceptions that were attributed to the independent variables of the study.

Given this, it is essential to Organize training courses for all professionals at the preschool stages in order to identify the students with special educational needs at all aspects due to its significance in providing a good approach to each case. It is necessary to identify the teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of special needs children with typical students according to the teacher's specialization and providing teaching environment that facilitates the task of both the children with special needs and teachers to reach the best state of inclusion.

In addition, educational planners and policy makers should incorporate practical and effective instructional techniques that would be useful in the inclusive classroom, into teacher preparation programs and professional development programs.

*Third result: The findings that are related to the study hypotheses of the parents of children in preschools.*

The results show that the study variables did not influence the parents' perceptions towards support for children with communication disorders in preschool settings in the North

West Bank in Palestine. The researcher attributes this finding to the fact that the special education services, support, intervention, and rehabilitation that are provided to the children who suffer from language and communication disorders in the Palestinian schools in general and in preschools in particular are low. Nevertheless, we noticed that there were no differences in the parents' perceptions that were attributed to the independent variables of the study.

This study is consistent with other studies that suggest the need for families to have a variety of supports to help them deal with the complexities related to developing and implementing effective educational services for their children with special educational needs in inclusive general education settings (Kluth, et al., 2007; Soodak, Erwin 2000). Parents may need to have an extended network of support such as: (a) external supports, such as professionals to assist with the negotiation of the educational system; (b) emotional supports, such as other families, and (c) information and advocacy agencies, such as sibling support project, and council and parent network.

Given this, it is essential to understand parents' perceptions of their own experiences with schools and school districts as they pursue services in inclusive general education contexts for their children who have special educational needs.

## **Conclusions**

In sum, there is a practice gap in the area of support provided for children with communication disorders in Preschool Settings in the North West Bank in Palestine: Understanding the professionals and parents perceptions can provide important information about contextual influences that can be used to bridge the research to practice gap in preschool and to examine their knowledge, skills, training experiences and training needs; their roles for supporting children's with communication disorders; and barriers to supporting communication needs in their school settings.

In addition the process of partnering between professionals and parents is a complex process driven by communications. Repeated communications between parents and teachers seems to support the development of a shared perception of individual roles. These shared roles are often complementary and can be observed in daily interactions between parents and teachers. Despite professionals and parents perceptions and the relationships between them continue to be a goal that is yet to be reached. Professionally-driven practices and parent involvement style partnerships are still revealed in preschool classrooms. As early childhood



teachers struggle to establish more collaborative relationships with families the need for more pre-service and in-service programs that promote these partnerships are needed. More specifically, programs targeted at supporting the development of teacher self-efficacy in this area and sensitivity to differing family perspectives is essential and to be able to create effective programs that tailor specifically toward the needs of special educational students.

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