Special Education Policy in the United Arab Emirates: Knowledge and Implementation in Ras Al Khaimah

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Executive Summary

The United Arab Emirates has a bold and progressive special education policy that supports the inclusion of special education students, referred to in this paper as *the determined ones and students of determination. The General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services,* an important policy document for educating students of determination, advocates that the "determined ones" remain in the regular classroom setting whenever possible.

This policy paper examines teachers' knowledge of this inclusion policy as well as their perceptions of other school-level inclusion policies. The research undertaken found no significant differences in knowledge or perceptions between and among Ras Al Khaimah teachers placed at government, international, and private schools. However, knowledge about the inclusion policy was low. Additionally, teachers expressed limited confidence that their schools could meet the needs of the "determined ones" in inclusive classrooms.

To bridge this gap, the authors discuss recommendations centered on teacher training and how such programs could impact field experiences in inclusive classrooms. Furthermore, suggestions are offered for school-based inclusion policies that can be developed by teams of teachers and school leaders to build teacher knowledge, the national policy, and teacher capacity to meet the educational needs of the "determined ones".

Introduction

"Worldwide, primary and secondary classrooms include students who are unique in their abilities and needs" (Ammar, 2021). In response to these unique needs, inclusive education, defined as the process that reinforces the capacity of education systems to welcome and reach all learners (UNESCO, 2017), has been developed to ensure that all students, regardless of their unique needs, can learn alongside their peers. Practices associated with inclusive education benefit not only students identified as the "determined ones"[1] but also all students in the classroom (Alborno, 2022; Barton & Smith, 2015; Cole et al., 2020, Hehir et al., 2016).

The global movement towards inclusive education has been in existence for decades and is supported by many international declarations and laws.[2] In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, students of

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[1] The term "determined ones" is used throughout this article to describe people with special needs or disabilities. The term is adopted from the UAE's National Policy for Empowering People of Determination which aims to create an inclusive society for people of determination, and their families, through services and facilities that accommodate their needs.

[2] UNESCO Salamanca Statement (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 1994), the UNESCO Incheon Declaration (2015), the UNESCO Cali Commitment (2019), the UN's Disability Inclusion Strategy (2022), and the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2022).

determination are either educated in special education schools, developed specifically for students with special needs, or in mainstream schools with separate units (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Gaad (2019) notes that inclusive education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has seen improvements and the education system is beginning to address the professional development needs of teachers who teach the determined ones. However, Alborno (2022) finds that teachers in the UAE continue to report feeling unprepared when it comes to inclusive classrooms and admit to holding negative perceptions about students of determination in classroom spaces.

This policy paper explores the knowledge base of teachers in government, international, and private schools in Ras Al Khaimah around policies that relate to special education and inclusion. This research identifies teachers' specific knowledge, gaps, and perceptions about special education policies and inclusive education. It includes educators from government schools, international schools, and private schools.

Background

There is a diverse array of educational institutions accessible to students within the UAE. The educational landscape comprises public institutions, commonly referred to as government schools, which are provided free of charge to UAE citizens. These schools are designed to align with the developmental objectives established by the UAE and are governed by the Cultural Division of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates (2011).

In addition to public schools, private educational establishments form an integral part of the educational milieu, with a distinction existing between those seeking international accreditation and those not pursuing such recognition. International schools, falling within the category of private education, are categorized based on their adherence to international standards of accreditation. These schools embrace curricula that align with the accrediting country, utilize the accrediting country's language as the medium of instruction, and predominantly adhere to a Western academic calendar (InterNations, n.d.; Talk Education, 2022). Conversely, other private schools,

which primarily employ Arabic as the language of instruction, operate without direct oversight from the government (Talk Education, 2022). These institutions frequently implement gender-segregated educational settings (Marie, 2023). It is noteworthy that all three categories of schools accommodate students with disabilities, referred to as people of determination within the UAE context.

Like many societies worldwide, people of determination in the UAE often encounter challenging obstacles, particularly primary and secondary students in educational settings (Alkhateeb et al., 2016; Dukmak, 2013; Morgan, 2021; Sharma et al., 2017; World Health Organization, 2011). In response to these challenges, inclusive practices have been introduced to enable students of determination to actively engage in mainstream classrooms and community and social events, providing typically developing students the opportunity to recognize the strengths of their determined peers (Ashman; 2018, Alzyoudi et al., 2021). Studies suggest that inclusivity has positive effects on mainstream students and society at large as it provides an opportunity to increase empathy and promote a higher acceptance in society (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

For inclusive education to be effective in the UAE, it is essential that teachers feel confident in their ability to meet the needs of students of determination. Research has shown that teachers often feel they lack knowledge, facilities, skills, and training needed to teach in inclusive settings (Hehir et al., 2016). When students are included in mainstream classrooms, often teachers do not adjust their instruction and instead continue to use whole group, teacher-centered methods that may not meet the needs of the determined ones in their classes (Khochen-Bagshaw, 2020). Alborno (2017) notes that teachers' preconceived ideas about which determined ones may be deserving of inclusion and which are not can have a negative impact on the implementation of inclusive practices for all. Educators who are not certified as special education teachers tend to have neutral or negative attitudes towards inclusive education, though there is evidence that training in inclusive education strategies can improve those attitudes (Pit-ten et al., 2018).

"The people of the United Arab Emirates have an enormous amount of concern for the needs of individuals with special needs which stems from our traditional cultural beliefs that emphasize a philosophy of social responsibility for the needs of all members of society."
Hameed Mohammed Al Qatamy, Minister of Education
(MoE Special Education Department, n.d., p. 7)

Methods

Design

This study employed an explanatory sequential design, combining survey data and interviews (see Figure 1). First, data were collected via a survey and then participants were interviewed about their insights into the results of the survey. The interview data are informed by the survey findings (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

The Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research distributed the online survey, administered in both English and Arabic, targeting teachers in public, international, and private schools located in Ras Al Khaimah. Participants self-identified the type of school in which they were employed. The survey aimed to gather data on teachers' knowledge and perceptions regarding the UAE *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public and Private Schools)*, as outlined in Appendix A.

The survey consisted of 14 true/false questions, followed by two Likert scale questions with six response options. These Likert scale questions explored teachers' knowledge and perceptions regarding their own school's policy on inclusive education. The survey remained open for eight weeks, during which 50 respondents participated. After filtering incomplete surveys, 27 fully completed surveys were included in the data analysis. Survey data were analyzed descriptively and inferentially (e.g., t-tests, chi-squares, ANOVAs, correlations) using quantitative software (Excel and SPSS).

In addition to the survey, the study incorporated interviews to explain and contextualize the survey's findings (Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). The three interviews were conducted by two researchers (see Table 1), one of whom was based in the UAE and the other, originally from Egypt, based in the United States. Interviews were facilitated over Zoom video conferencing software, enabling remote communication with participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were coded using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

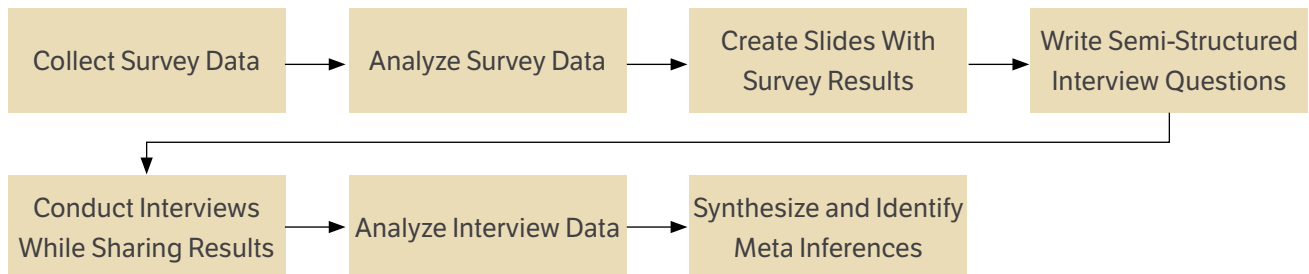**Figure 1.** Sequential Explanatory Design with Data Analysis

Table 1. Demographic of Qualitative Interviews

Participant	Role	Gender
Participant 1 (P1)	Ministry of Education Special Education Teacher	M
Participant 2 (P2)	Private School Special Education Coordinator	F
Participant 3 (P3)	Government School Leader	M

Limitations

The research process was significantly impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Due to travel restrictions and safety concerns, the research team was unable to conduct the study in the UAE during the initial timeframe of Fall 2020 or 2021. Instead, data collection was carried out remotely during the winter, spring, and summer months of 2022. The adjustment to remote research was necessitated by the circumstances imposed by the pandemic.

To facilitate data collection, an online survey was utilized. However, the researchers were fully aware that electronic surveys often yield lower response rates compared to traditional paper surveys (Hathaway et al., 2021). Consequently, the response rate for the study was notably low, with only 50 participants engaging with the data collection tool and only 27 completing it. This low response rate aligns with the challenges experienced by researchers across various fields during the pandemic, which included survey fatigue, reduced response rates, and lower data collection quality (de Koning et al., 2021; Grandstaff & Webber, 2021; Rothbaum, 2021; Gnanapragasam et al., 2022). It is also important to note that data collection was limited to one emirate and cannot be considered as a representative of the entire UAE.
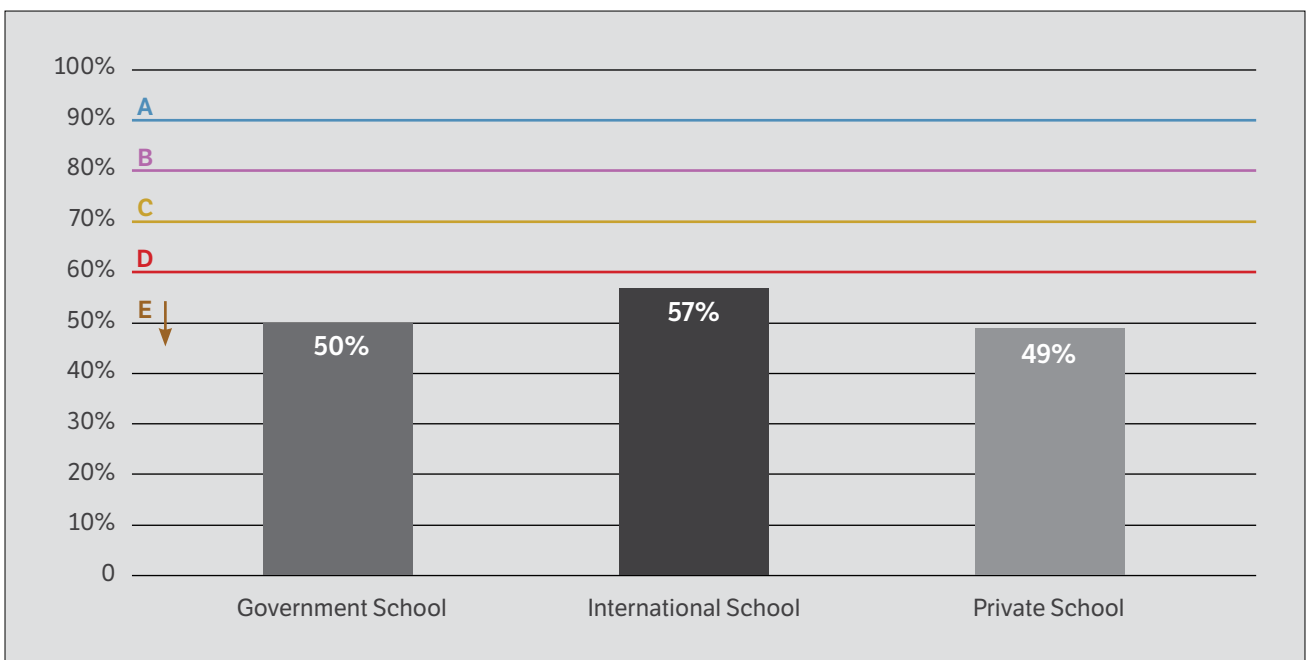
Findings

Knowledge of Government Policy About Inclusion

Overall, survey respondents did not possess much knowledge about the UAE's *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination* or the provisional rules for special education programs and services. As previously noted, the survey design included 14 true/false statements regarding the national policy and programs. 50% of the listed statements were true and the remaining 50% were false, providing survey respondents with a 50% chance of answering each question correctly.

The findings presented in Figure 2 indicate that educators in government schools correctly answered 50% of the questions, while educators in private schools correctly answered 49% of the questions. Survey respondents from international schools had a higher percentage of correct answers, with 57% of questions answered accurately. However, statistical analysis did not reveal a significant difference in knowledge of the policy between educators in international schools compared to those in government or private schools.

The survey results indicate that respondents from all three types of schools demonstrated greater knowledge

Figure 2. Government Policy Knowledge Average Score by School Type

of certain provisions noted in the policy. Specifically, respondents showed an understanding that the policy emphasizes the inclusion of students with determination in both educational and community settings, as reflected in their responses to questions 1, 10, 11, and 12 in Appendix A. Additionally, respondents displayed a good grasp of how the needs of gifted students are to be addressed (see questions 8 and 9 in Appendix A).

However, there were areas where survey respondents exhibited less knowledge. For example, respondents did not know that the aim of the current policy is to ensure that students are provided with highly qualified teachers in schools (see question 4 in Appendix A). Additionally, respondents lacked an understanding of the role of the Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team in the implementation of specialized instruction of students of determination and gifted students (see question 14 in Appendix A).

In the interview portion of the study, P3 stated that these scores indicate low knowledge about special education policies and thought they may "reflect the deficiency in a clear definition of what special education entails. Hence, they are all within the same average range." P1 and P2 expressed surprise that government school participants had such little knowledge of the government's inclusion policies. P2 explained, "there are no exceptions, even no rules for not accepting

them [the determined ones] in schools, meaning that the policy is clear, meaning and belief in inclusion. Hundred percent." Participants expected educators from international schools to have the highest overall knowledge of policies regarding the determined ones. P3 shared, "international schools have what I would define as a broader outlook or broader approach to the education of students." He went on to suggest, "and knowing that international schools want to attract as wide a population, a wide diversity of students, I believe they take into consideration the need for special education provision."

Perception of Government Policy About Inclusion

As displayed in Figure 3, teachers across the three types of schools reported positive perceptions of the government special education policies. On average, they perceived the UAE's *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public and Private Schools)* as effective, useful, and up to date.

There was no statistically significant difference between and among educators from the different types of schools in their perceptions of the main government policy on educating the "determined ones". Interview

Figure 3. Perception of Government Policy Average Scores by School Type
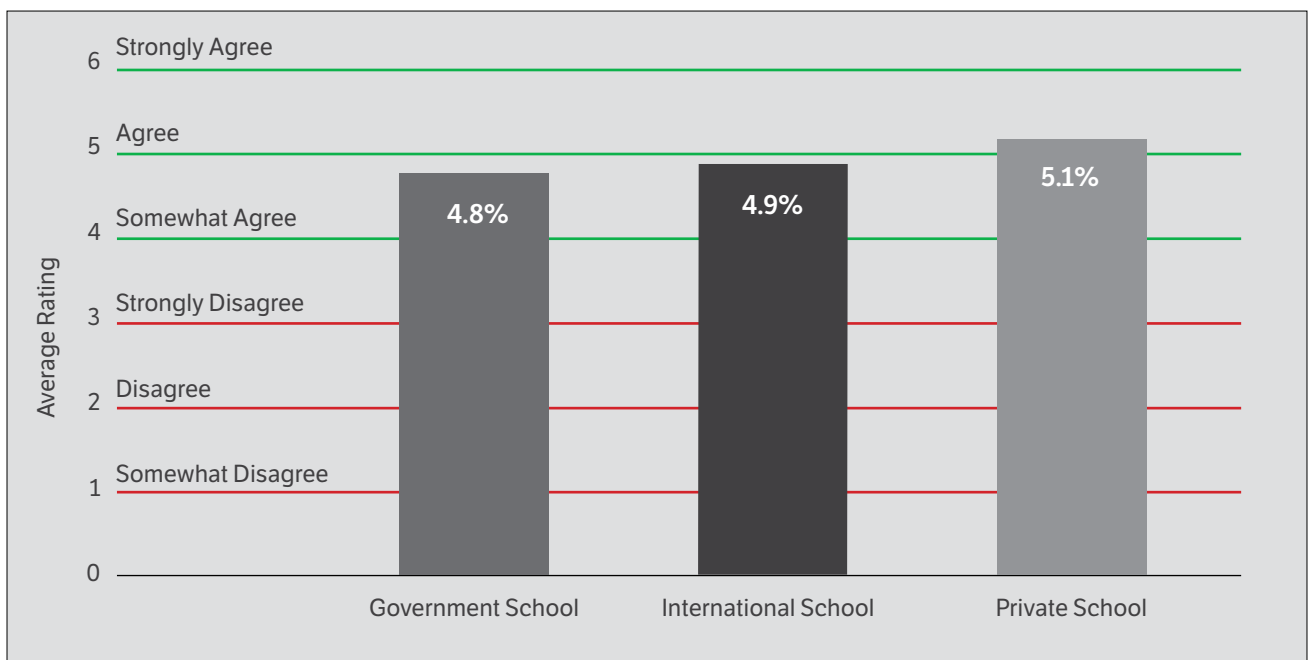
participants felt overall that there was not a strong awareness of the government's special education policy regardless of school type and, therefore, there would be little difference in the perceptions about this policy.

Perception of Individual School Policies About Inclusion

The survey data showed that most respondents had a more positive perception of the government policies and a less positive perception of their own schools' special education policies (Figure 4). On average, teachers across the three school types reported in the "somewhat agree" range for these items. There was no significant difference in the ways respondents from different school types perceived their own schools' policies.

P1 noted that respondents from government schools had similar perceptions of government policies and their own school policies. He suggested that the results were "the same because it [the school] is part of the government and the same thing that the government requires, it applies to them in school." P3 offered a different explanation for the government school results, admitting, "even though I am within a certain sector of this government school, the mainstream, I am not aware of much information being shared by the school about special education provision within the school. Possibly it's the same problem in international and private schools."

Perception of Own School's Ability to Meet the Needs of The Determined Ones

Finally, respondents were asked about whether they agreed that their own school had the ability to meet the needs of "determined ones" (Figure 5). Educators in government and private schools reported their lowest rates of agreement with these items. On average, teachers across the three school types reported in the "somewhat agree" range for these items, though there was no significant difference in the perceptions of the ability of the different school types to meet the needs of the "determined ones."

P3 wondered if respondents likely felt that the definition of special education was so ill-defined that they could not be confident that they could meet the needs of students of determination. He stated, "I think it's a question of qualifying what are special educational needs and then being able to make provision for the different types of special educational needs, visual, hearing, intellectual autism...." P2 suggested that teachers and school leaders may have answered these questions while reflecting on their own experiences with the determined ones, especially those with challenging behaviors. She explained:

When I say any student [can have their needs met], this means that I will include all, from the first with low ability

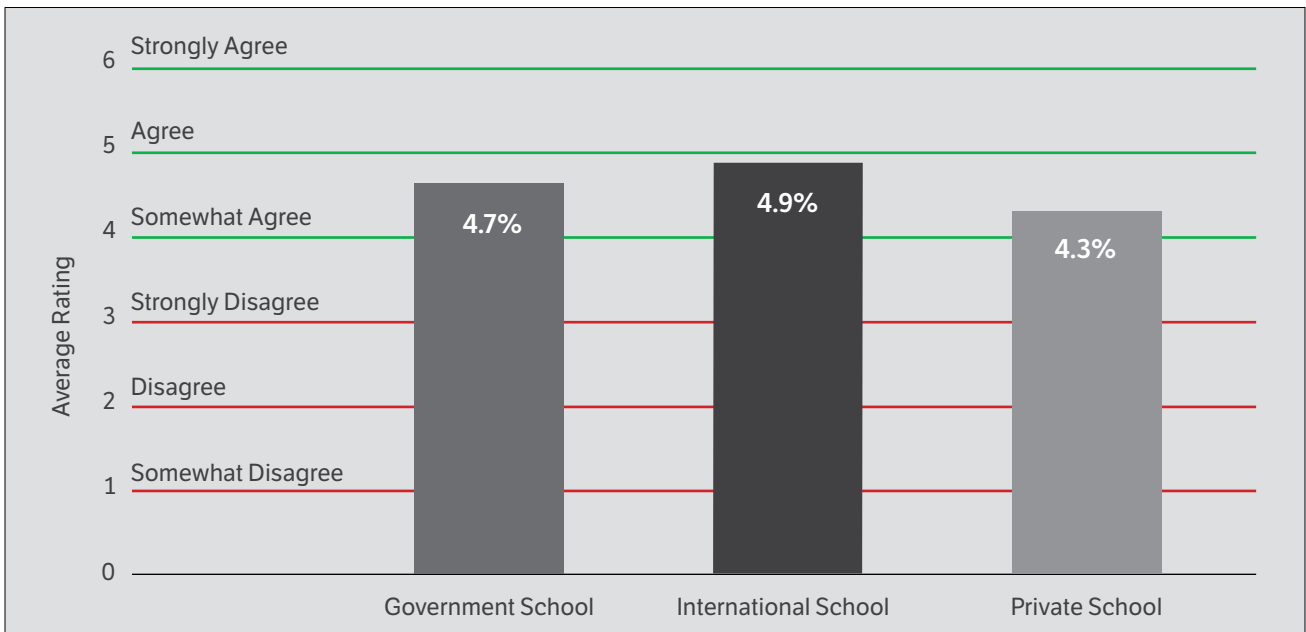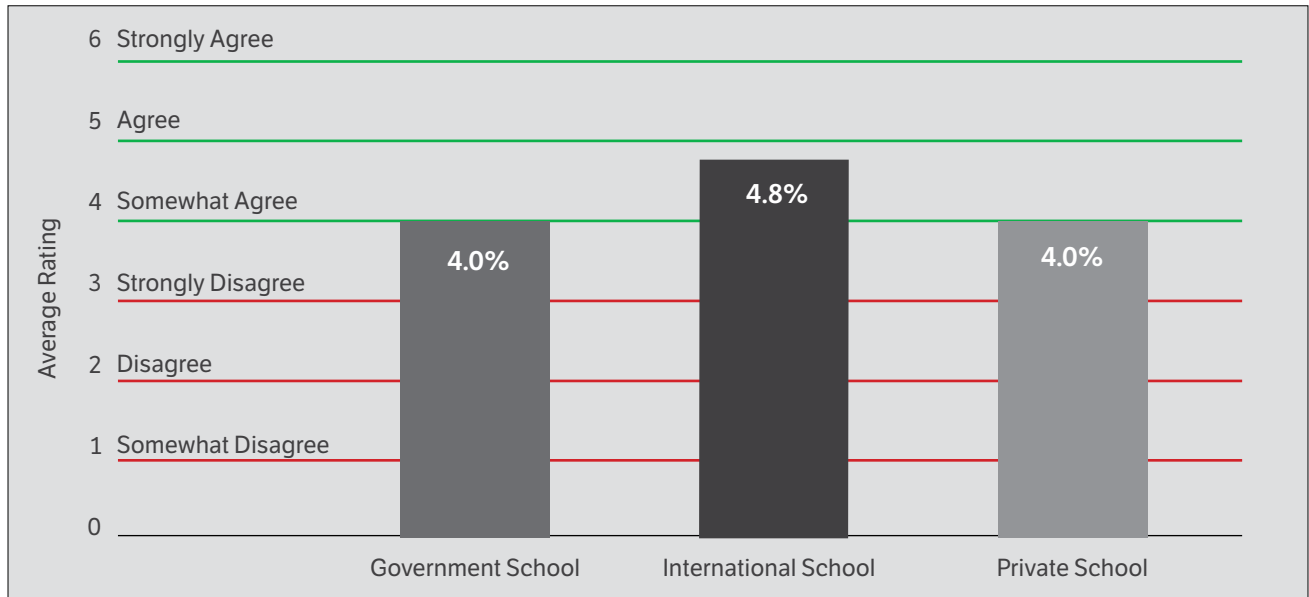**Figure 4.** Perception of School Policy Average Scores by School Type

Figure 5. School Faculty Perceptions of Own School's Ability to Meet the Needs of The Determined Ones by School Type.

and behavior and upwards, which is why [a teacher] is afraid. I am also afraid. I mean I am afraid to take a student, forbid he has violent behavior, a student hits me, breaks my screen....

P1 also talked about the behavioral challenges of working with the determined ones who have autism or ADHD diagnoses as one reason why teachers may not have felt that their school could meet the needs of students of determination. He explained, "The safety is a red line. ...whether the student makes a problem." Since teachers are unsure how to address these behaviors, they may be unsure if their school could actually meet the needs of these types of students.

Discussion

The research findings reveal that teachers, regardless of the type of school they teach at, have a limited understanding of national policies related to the education of students of determination. While they acknowledged that the policy promotes inclusion to address the educational needs of determined students, their knowledge was weaker when it came to understanding the specific requirements for implementing inclusion at the school level. For instance, teachers scored lower on questions regarding teacher qualifications and the retention of determined students compared to a question about the UAE's goal of creating

an integrated community without barriers.

These findings suggest that while teachers may hold positive views of the national policy, they lack confidence in their schools' ability to effectively meet the needs of determined students. Notably, the survey responses regarding whether "my school" could adequately address the needs of determined students received the least positive ratings, with an average score of 4.3%. These findings indicate the presence of barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive education policies across different types of schools.

During the interviews, participants highlighted various barriers to achieving full inclusion and emphasized the need for teacher training in effective instructional and behavioral practices for students of determination. These limiting beliefs among teachers are concerning, as research demonstrates that teacher beliefs can significantly impact their attitudes and instructional decisions (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017).

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of addressing barriers and providing comprehensive training to teachers to ensure effective implementation of inclusive education policies. By addressing teachers' knowledge gaps, promoting positive attitudes, and equipping them with appropriate instructional strategies, schools can better meet the diverse needs of determined students and create inclusive learning environments.

Recommendations

Preservice Teachers

Provide effective and explicit instruction about the *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools)* to preservice teachers. Since these policies underpin how students of determination access instruction in schools it is important that all teachers in training have strong content knowledge of the rights and provisions outlined in the documents.

Require fieldwork in inclusive classrooms as part of every preservice teacher's plan of study. Planned field work in inclusive classrooms has been shown to have a positive impact on preservice teachers' feelings of self-efficacy regarding inclusive education (see Coates et al., 2020; Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). For example, preservice students could be required to spend 10 hours in an academic term shadowing a student of determination or a teacher who has determined ones in their mainstream classrooms.

School-Based Policies and Implementation Guidelines

Encourage the creation of school-based policies that focus on inclusive practices in alignment with the *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools)*. School-based policies can be less ambiguous and more context-specific, which research has shown can improve implementation (Russell & Bray, 2013).

Include in-service teachers at the school level on the teams that write these school-based policies and guidelines. This will bridge the gap between policy writers and practitioners which Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2007) saw as a weakness in loosely coupled systems.

Teacher Recruitment

When hiring new teachers, education leaders should ask specific questions about determined ones and the inclusion of students of determination in classrooms. Since teacher knowledge and beliefs about special education and inclusion are essential aspects of successful implementation of education policies (Viennet & Pont, 2017), school leaders should add specific questions to their interview protocols that cover main provisions of the *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools)* and questions about how potential teachers would address the needs of the determined ones.

Once teachers are hired, the onboarding process should include professional development around the school's inclusion policy and how it is implemented in this school setting.

In-service Training

Offer training on the *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools)* at government, international, and private schools. This research was conducted with in-service teachers and showed a serious lack of knowledge about this important education policy. Asynchronous online training could be created by the Ministry of Education's Special Education Department and offered to teachers at all three types of schools. This model may be especially helpful for schools that experience higher staff turnover, such as international schools, since new teachers could be assigned existing modules as part of their onboarding process.

Conclusion

This study finds that inclusive education in Ras Al Khaimah's government, international, and private schools is still a "work in progress." Many of the current challenges fall within the gap between existing policy guidelines and stakeholders' knowledge and perceptions about implemented practices.

Stakeholders include vested parties within education such as teacher trainers, school administrators, teachers, students, and parents.

As this research study focuses on policy recommendations, the authors highly recommend that education leaders and policymakers focus on making changes within preservice and in-service teacher training. School leaders need to develop concrete and actionable inclusive education policies, including plans to ensure that educators feel more positive and confident about their abilities to work with students of determination in inclusive classroom settings. They also need to recruit teachers with a knowledge of inclusive education policies and a positive perception of inclusive education.

Developing effective practices, training preservice teachers in inclusive education practices, and creating new procedures that impact how new teachers are onboarded at schools have the potential to help school leaders enact the intended impact of the *National Policy for Empowering People of Determination and the General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (Public & Private Schools).*

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Appendix A

Quantitative Item Level Knowledge. A series of 2x3 chi-square tests of proportions were conducted to examine if there were differences in percentage correct (correct/incorrect) at the item level by school type. Table 1 shows the breakdown of percent correct by question and school type with their corresponding chi-square statistic and p-values. For example, in item 1, International Schools scored significantly higher than Government Schools and Private Schools, while Government Schools scored significantly higher than Private Schools. On average, International Schools' average percent scores suggest that faculty at international schools have the most knowledge regarding government policies while teachers at Private Schools have the least.

Table A1

Chi-Square Tests of Proportion Average Percent Score for Knowledge of Government Policy by School

Item	Answer Key	% Correct			Chi-Square Stat	p-value
		Govt. Schools	Int'l Schools	Private Schools		
1. Existing government policies address the importance of an integrated community, free from barriers to promote a dignified life.	True	88%	100%	83%	17.48	.00016*
2. Existing government policies empower leaders to determine a high quality of life for the determined ones.	False	13%	0%	8%	13.21	.001353*
3. Existing government goals promote specialized schools for the determined ones.	False	25%	33%	8%	16.34	.000283*
4. Existing government goals require schools to provide students with highly qualified teachers and educators.	False	0%	0%	8%	16.44	.000269*
5. Existing government goals mandate that vocational training be adapted to meet the needs of the determined ones.	True	50%	100%	75%	66.67	< .00001*
6. Existing government policies state the right of students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible.	True	88%	67%	83%	14.68	.000649*
7. Existing government policies do not require pre-referral services before special education assessment.	False	25%	33%	17%	6.83	.032931*
8. Existing government policies do not require gifted and talented students to receive special education services.	False	63%	33%	58%	20.68	.000032*
9. Existing government policies require gifted and talented students to have an Advanced Learning Plan (ALP).	True	100%	100%	92%	16.44	.000269*
10. Existing government policies identify multiple forms of inclusive practices.	True	88%	100%	67%	43.7647	< .00001*
11. Existing government policies allow special education practitioners to provide support services in the regular classroom.	True	75%	100%	83%	27.08	< .00001*

Item	Answer Key	% Correct			Chi-Square Stat	p-value
		Govt. Schools	Int'l Schools	Private Schools		
13. Existing government policy prohibits the retention of students with disabilities.	True	25%	13%	25%	2.13	.344
14. Existing government policy states that the Multidisciplinary Evaluation Team (MET) is responsible for the implementation of individualized education plans and ALPs.	False	13%	0%	8%	13.21	.001353*

Note. *p<.05

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