

***Teachers' Attitudes Toward Including Children With Special Educational Needs  
in Private Schools in Egypt***

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to explore the attitudes of general education teachers toward educating special needs students in inclusive classrooms in Egyptian private schools. It seeks to investigate the factors that might affect their views and attitudes towards inclusive education. In addition, it suggests some recommendations for having a successful inclusive system in Egypt. The study was conducted in three private schools in Cairo. The participants were ten general education teachers who were chosen based on their involvement in inclusive practices or teaching special needs students in their classrooms. The methodology utilized was the qualitative approach through conducting one to one semi structured interviews with the teachers. The findings of this study showed that most of the teachers demonstrated positive attitudes toward including special needs students in their classrooms. While two teachers out of ten held negative attitudes toward inclusion. Furthermore, teachers were found to hold more positive attitudes when there are a small number of students with special needs in each class and when their cases are not severe. In addition, the results indicated that school administration support, professional development and knowledge, severity of the disabilities, and teacher parent collaboration were common themes developed among the teachers to indicate the factors that affected their attitudes toward inclusion. The results of this study could raise awareness among policymakers of the importance of implementing inclusive education that suits all students in Egypt.

Keywords: Inclusive education, teachers' attitudes, special needs children, private schools, Egypt

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## **Introduction**

Education should serve all students regardless of their differences in gender, race and disability. By placing them in the same classrooms, all students will learn from each other's diversities and they will be exposed to new experiences (United Nations Development of Economic and Social Affairs., 2016). Within a group of students, one can find that a few of them suffer from mental or physical disabilities known as "special needs". The Egyptian Ministry of Education defines students with special educational needs (SEN) as those who need special education for their development and progress which, in turn, goes beyond the common schools' resources (Hassanein, 2015). However, from an international perspective, children with special needs are those who experience greater learning difficulties than other children from the same age group. Additionally, special needs children are those who have a certain disability that prevents them from learning and from using the available educational facilities in the same way as their peers can (Education Act, 1996 as cited in Fredrickson & Cline, 2009).

Numerous legislations have called for the right to educate special needs students alongside their peers in public schools. The first initiative started in the United States in 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. This law stated the right for all handicapped students to receive "free appropriate education" in public schools (EHA, 1975). Then, in 1990, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stated that schools should provide free education to all students in the "least restrictive environment" (IDEA, 1990). Moreover, in 2004, the previous law was reviewed to add that only children with severe disabilities will be educated in special education classes or separate schools. However, in this case, regular schooling will not be able to fulfill the satisfying outcomes (IDEA, 2004 as cited in Cagney, 2009). Accordingly, education for special needs students has been transformed from segregation to what has become known as inclusive education.

The last two decades have witnessed the appearance and evolution of the term "inclusion" which calls for the integration of children with special needs in mainstream schools. There is no clear universal definition of the concept of inclusion in Arab countries, including Egypt. However, Blecker and Boakes (2010) defined inclusive education as "educating students with disabilities in general education programs with their non-disabled peers" (p. 435). According to Laluevein (2008), the term "inclusion" not only refers to relocating special needs students coming from special education contexts into regular classes but also it "implies a whole school approach to social relations and production of meaning reached through processes of negotiation between parents, teachers and children" (p. 35).

Many research studies have suggested that inclusive classrooms benefit both the students with special needs and their peers as the experience of sharing enhances students' learning process (Ross-Hill, 2009). However, the inclusion of special needs students in general classrooms is a very complex and controversial topic that has been much debated by teachers, parents and even school administrators. Each has different views and perceptions about inclusion and what is best for the students. Concerning the teachers' attitudes, a great number of research studies have emphasized that teachers' attitudes are one of the significant indicators in measuring to which extent inclusive education is successful (Al-Zyouidi, 2006; El-Ashry, 2009; Parnell, n.d.).

Despite the availability of previous literature which examines teachers' attitudes towards inclusion practices worldwide, still there are minimal studies on the attitudes of Egyptian teachers toward inclusive education in private schools. Thus, the aim of this study is to shed light on this area as teachers are considered the backbone of inclusive education. The study sought to answer the following research questions;

1. What are teachers' attitudes toward teaching special needs students in inclusive classrooms in private schools?
2. What are the perceived factors that inflected their attitudes towards inclusive education?

### **Current State of Inclusion in Egypt**

The topic of including children with special needs in general classrooms is relatively new to the Egyptian educational context (El-Ashry, 2009). Issues facing the educational system in Egypt have created a vision that inclusive education is hardly a topic to be recognized and achieved (Emam & Mohamed, 2011). These issues are represented in the absence of qualified teachers, and the lack of facilities and differentiated curricula that can be adjusted to suit all types of students, all of which allow the presence of special needs students in different special education units (Emam & Mohamed, 2011). Hassanein (2015) reported that if teachers are not accepting of the idea of dealing with special needs students in their classrooms, it would be impossible to have successful inclusive schools in Egypt. Awad (2016) added that Egyptian teachers who lack training and experience in special education would burden rather than facilitate the inclusion process.

Despite of these issues, the Egyptian Ministry of Education (MOE) has shown great interest in inclusive education by developing inclusive initiatives for special needs students (Parnell, n.d.). According to Hassanein (2015), the process of integrating special needs students in mainstream schools started in Egypt during the late 1990s. These initiatives were applied in three ways; "partial inclusion", "full inclusion", and in non-governmental institution projects and private schools. In partial inclusion, students with special needs are integrated in special education classes in general schools. However, Gaad (2011) claimed that advocates of inclusion have some reservations over the terminology of "partial inclusion". They believe that the terms 'partial' and "inclusion" shouldn't be combined together as, linguistically, inclusion supports the idea of fully including all individuals in the same setting. By adding 'partial' term, the core meaning of inclusion is negated, thus "continuing practice of exclusion" (p.11). In the case of full inclusion, children are included in general classes where teachers are following inclusive programs to address all students. However, there are a limited number of students who can be fully included in general classrooms as this depends entirely on the severity of their disabilities (Hassanein, 2015). Finally, some private schools and non-governmental institutions follow inclusive practices under the supervision of the MOE. Despite all these efforts to enroll children with disabilities in general education schools, Hassanein (2015) mentioned that most students with special educational needs are still not fully included in general classrooms, and mainly receive education in special classrooms.

The MOE in Egypt implemented several pilot projects during the academic year of 2004 -2005 in order to include children with intellectual disabilities in some general

education classrooms. The term “intellectual disabilities” is commonly used in Egyptian policy and it is synonymous with learning disabilities and mentally retarded (Hassanein, 2015; MOE, 2014). The number of general education schools that offer inclusive education is increasing compared to the relatively small percentage of children with special needs that were included in the Egyptian schools (Ministry of Education, 2012 as cited in Abdelhameed, 2015). This is due to the fact that the best setting in which to teach special needs students is at special education schools (UNDESA, 2016).

More efforts by the Egyptian MOE to promote inclusive education included developing the national strategic plan for pre-university education in 2014-2030 (MOE, 2014). One of the aims of this plan is both to include children with mild disabilities in well-equipped public education schools, and to develop more special education schools to that can accommodate students with more severe disabilities (MOE, 2014). Children with mild disabilities, as proposed by Parnell (n.d.), are those who have hearing and visual disabilities, or minor intellectual and physical disabilities. Until today, these plans are not supported with an actual vision or policy to aid in implementing inclusive education in Egypt (Abdelhameed, 2015; Hassanein, 2015).

### **Private and public schools**

In March 2002, the Egyptian Minister of Education declared that the ministry is taking the lead to implement inclusive systems in more than 270 schools across the country in collaboration with “the World Bank, UNESCO, Save the Children Agency (UK), the City Center and Caritas Egypt” (Ghoneim, 2014, p. 194). Also, he pointed that Egypt would be one of the leading countries in the area of inclusion if all schools fully include special needs students.

Following the ministerial declaration in 2002, the MOE announced a Ministerial Act in 2009 stating the right for students with mild disabilities to enroll in public and private schools (MoE, 2014). This decree announced the objectives of getting 5,040 schools ready to include 152,000 special needs students by the year of 2012 (MoE, 2008; MoE, 2014). However, in 2013, the ministry estimated that about 36,808 children with special needs receive educational serves in special education schools , while only 2,776 SEN students were registered in 452 general education schools across the country (Alkhateeb, Hadidi, & Al Khateeb, 2016; Hassanein, 2015). Therefore, according to Hassanein (2015), the overall special needs students enrolled in general schools across Egypt remain semi integrated in regular classes and primarily educated in special education settings.

Recently in Egypt, a new law had passed to ensure the rights of people with disabilities in February 2018. The Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the first act that requires all educational organizations to embrace policies, which ensure similar opportunities for students with disabilities (Shalabi, 2018). The law provides many amendments to protect the rights of all students with special needs in receiving the same quality of education inside classroom. In addition, the government sets a “criminal liability” on policy makers who break this law with a charge varying from 500 to 2000 Egyptian pounds (Shalabi, 2018).

Despite the fact that studies exploring the status of inclusion in private schools in Egypt have not been presented yet, some implications were found in a study conducted by Awad (2016) on evaluating the actual presence of inclusive system in some private schools. Findings of the study showed that not all students with SEN are included; in addition they receive low quality of inclusive practices.

### **Policies regarding teachers' statuses in inclusive environments**

The movement towards inclusion depends on implementing some principals and sharing a common vision among all parties relevant to the inclusive process. Teachers are one of the essential parties who work as keys to create a successful inclusive education. Therefore, it is important to help teachers to understand their role in the inclusive education and that including students with different needs is considered an opportunity more than a problem.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in collaboration with UNCRC calls for providing educational equity among all children (UNCRC, 1989). They provide goals to educate and train teachers to support students with special needs. The framework ensured that there is a need to provide continues training for teachers to raise the value of teaching worldwide.

In developing teachers' education towards more inclusive education, Promoting Inclusive Teacher Education Advocacy Guides was developed to support the importance of pre-service teacher education for inclusion (UNESCO, 2013). It was hoped to improve the status of teacher education to help in developing more inclusive systems. Pre-service education is essential for teachers to accept diversities, provide the highest quality education for all students and face numerous social difficulties that may exist inside classrooms (UNESCO, 2013). It suggested that when teachers acquire inclusive education primarily in their teacher education, they are more likely not to view teaching inclusive classroom as a burden.

In Egypt, the National strategic Plan for the Pre-university Education aimed to offer training programs for 408 teachers at schools undergoing inclusive practices in order to include all grade levels by the academic year of 2013-2014 (MOE, 2014). The plan aimed to provide the targeted teachers with professional development programs, new educational strategies and instructional methods to enhance their educational statuses to meet the inclusive requirements.

### **Teachers' Attitudes about Inclusive Education**

According to Hammond and Ingalls (2003), it is crucial to examine teachers' attitudes towards educating students with disabilities in general classroom settings as their views could negatively affect the idea of inclusive education (Newton, Carbridg, & Hunter-Johnson, 2014). Previous studies have suggested some common factors that could be influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education. These factors include; the teacher's personal experience and previous knowledge in dealing with special needs, the severity of the student's disabilities, teacher's gender, the school environment and level of support available, and the grade level taught (Adams, Harris, & Jones, 2016; Al-Zyoudi, 2006; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Hassanein, 2015).

### **Teacher's gender**

The findings of Al-Zyouidi's (2006) study suggested that there is a slight difference between the attitudes of male and female teachers. Females were more positive than males towards educating children with special needs in inclusive classrooms. However, another study conducted in Egypt showed the opposite, as male teachers held more positive attitudes towards inclusion than female teachers (Hassanein, 2015). It indicates that teachers' attitude toward educating children with special needs may be influenced by their gender but it is not necessarily that female teachers would have more positive attitudes than their male counterparts but clearly males and females differ in their responses.

### **Teachers' experience and knowledge about inclusion**

It has been acknowledged that teachers who know how to interact with students with special needs are usually those who have previously received training programs or had previous experience in this area (Awad, 2016). For example, a study that researched special and general teachers stated that both types of teachers had negative attitudes towards inclusion because they lacked experience and knowledge of teaching students with SEN (Abdelhameed, 2015).

### **The severity of students' disabilities**

It has been suggested that the different types of students' disability could be one of the most important factors that could influence the attitude of Egyptian teachers toward inclusion (Al-Zyouidi, 2006). The findings showed that teachers are nearly positive about the idea of including children with physical disabilities in regular education, rather than those with other types of disabilities. They also concluded that not all special needs children could be included in regular classrooms.

### **Grade level taught**

According to Murfy's (2014) findings, teachers at primary schools are more likely to teach special needs students compared to teachers at secondary schools. A study by Idol (2006) provided evidence that grade level could be a factor that affected teachers' attitude towards educating special needs students. Echoing Murfy's (2014) findings, primary teachers in Idol's (2006) study were more likely to favor inclusive education than some of the secondary teachers studied who were not supportive of having inclusion classrooms.

### **School environment and administration support**

Teachers claimed that the idea of including special needs students in regular classrooms could be more achievable if the school buildings were well equipped to receive students with disabilities (Al-Zyouidi, 2006). In addition, teachers held positive attitudes towards educating special need students if those teachers were able to receive the required support from the school administration.

## Teacher - parent collaboration

Most of the time teachers and parents demonstrate a wide range of thoughts and attitudes that sometimes results in miscommunication. As suggested by Staples and Diliberto (2010), the tension between teachers and parents might affect the educational progress of special needs students. The research has shown that cooperative parents might have a direct impact on teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs (Ahmed, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012).

## Theory of Planned Behavior

This study is guided by the theory of "Planned Behavior" which was firstly proposed by Icek Ajzen in 1985 and developed from the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1991). The theory of planned behavior suggests that an individual's behavior is both predicted and influenced by intentions driven from three basic components; attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 2005) (see Figure1). In other words, it shows that person's willingness to perform certain actions is related to his/her positive attitudes, taking into consideration the presence of normative beliefs and perceived variables related to his/her prior favorable experiences and beliefs towards this behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977).

As per the theory, teachers intended to accept the idea of inclusion when they demonstrate positive attitudes towards it and when they believe that they have the needed resources and support to do so.

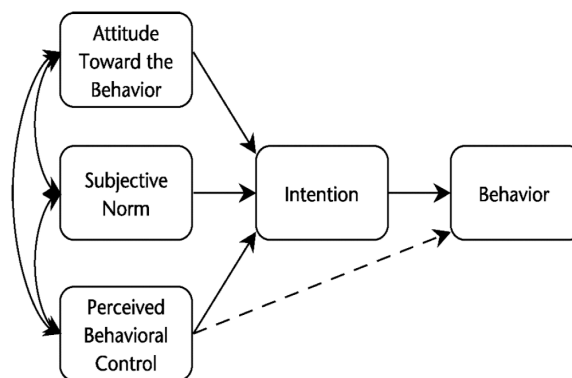


Figure 1: The Theory of Planned Behavior. Source: (Ajzen, 2005, p. 118)

## Methodology

The use of qualitative methodology was most appropriate to investigate the main questions of this study. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is designed to explore participants' views, feelings and experiences about a certain problem or phenomena. It is also designed to obtain data from a small group of participants which is relevant to the number of participants in this study. The study was conducted at three different private schools. All three schools were located in Cairo and offer the American curricula to its students. Also, the schools have a special needs policy that indicates the number of students with SEN enrolled in each school.

The participants for this study were teachers from different disciplines, genders, and teaching stages and had different years of teaching experiences. The criteria of including specific participants in the study was based on their involvement in inclusive practices or teaching special needs students in their classrooms as the study focused on the topic of inclusion. The anticipated number of informants was from 10 to 15 depending on their willingness to participate and their availability. The researcher contacted five private schools and only three school administrators replied stating their willingness to allow the teachers to participate in the study. Across the three schools, the researcher found that female teachers who teach inclusive classrooms are more than male teachers. Therefore, it was difficult to examine teachers' gender as a factor affecting teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

The overall number of participants was ten teachers; nine female teachers and one male teacher (see Table 1). To maintain confidentiality, the researcher coded the participated teachers as T1, T2, T3...etc. (see Table 2) and schools A, B, C.

Table 1  
*Number of the Interviewed Teachers in each School*

Number of teachers	School
5	A
3	B
2	C

Table 2  
*Teachers' coded by School*

T1, T2, T3, T4, T5	School A
T6, T7, T8	School B
T9, T10	School C

The process of gathering data was through conducting one to one semi structured interviews using open-ended questions. The reason behind choosing interviews is that it would enable the participants to express their opinions and views about the topic (Creswell, 2012). For the purpose of the study, semi structured interview questions gave flexibility for the researcher and the teachers to go into deeper discussions about various topic dimensions, something that couldn't be done through surveys or questionnaires. Using interviews also allowed the researcher to manage the interview process by asking further questions for clarification and to receive the needed types of information (Patton, 2002).

Before collecting the data, the researcher obtained the approval of the International Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix A) and the Center Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS) to conduct the study After receiving the permission of the school administrators, all of the teachers were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to conducting the research (see Appendix B). The researcher explained orally the rights of the teachers to withdrawal anytime and that their responses will be confidential.

After receiving approval from the participants, all interviews were held in English language upon the teachers' request. Teachers approved having the interview recorded. The Thematic Analysis Model was used to analyze the collected data



(Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviewed teachers were given codes based on their total number, while schools were given letters. Five major themes and one minor theme were developed. The generated themes were used to answer the three research questions of the study.

## **Findings**

### **Teachers' attitudes towards inclusion**

During the interviews, the attitude of teachers toward inclusion was a common theme discussed by the participants. Their attitudes toward the idea of inclusion varied between acceptance and refusal. Sometimes their views were mixed and this revealed the reasons behind their behavior. Firstly, three teachers, T6, T7, and T8, exhibited positive attitudes regarding inclusion and were convinced of the importance of implementing inclusive education. They emphasized the positive contributions of inclusive education regarding social interactions and the academic progress of special needs children. One of the teachers (T6) stated that it is biased to shelter special education children from the outside world by putting them in separate classes and banning them from mingling with their peers. She concluded her comments by saying that "special needs children need to know that they have things that make them special rather than things that need to be treated in a special way".

Secondly, findings showed that two teachers held negative attitudes towards inclusion. Both T9 and T5 did not prefer teaching special needs students in their classrooms. They were devoted to the idea that special needs students need to be separately educated. The reason for this is that they will not receive what they should gain from adequate education in general classrooms. T5 mentioned that "Special needs students are not functioning properly and that's why we call them special needs and that's why they need specialists".

Finally, among the teachers who participated in the study, five of them, T1, T2, T3, T4 and T10, stated that they believe in the inclusion of special needs students in the general classrooms and they support the advantages of inclusive education. Despite their positive attitudes, there were certain aspects that prevented the five teachers from entirely agreeing upon teaching special needs students in an inclusive setting. They highly recommended that not all types of SEN students could be included and that special education schools are the best educational placement for those students with critical disabilities. They also stated that it is problematic to have too many special needs students in one class as it is too over powering for the educational system and transforms the whole school into a special education school.

### **Teachers' professional development and experience**

The majority of the interviewed teachers stated their desire to obtain further professional development training to aid them in dealing with SEN students in an inclusive setting. As T4 reported; "acquiring more workshops and trainings related to special education will enrich our knowledge as teachers to teach different types of SEN students". Conversely, some teachers suggested that their overall qualifications do not equip them to teach all special needs students. As T10 mentioned: "I feel that I'm not qualified enough to teach children with SEN and this sometimes hinders me to deal with them". Thus, it can be assumed from the teachers' responses that there is

a relation between their positive or negative attitudes towards inclusion and their prior knowledge and experience regarding special education.

### **Severity of need**

The severity of disability was determined as a challenge facing teachers in an inclusive setting. According to the findings, some teachers displayed limited understanding of all types of special needs, although they were more familiar with certain behavioral and mental disorders like ADHD, ODD, Epilepsy, Dyslexia, Autism and Down syndrome. Thus, it was quite difficult to accurately examine the impact of the severity of the disabilities on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion.

### **School administration support and facilities**

The findings indicated that there is a strong relationship between teachers' attitudes towards inclusion and the level of administrative support they receive from their school. This implied that the support and guidance offered to teachers by the school administration could be one of the factors affecting their attitudes towards inclusion (Awad, 2016). Moreover, teachers who feel the support by their school administration demonstrated positive attitudes towards including students with special needs.

### **Teacher parent collaboration**

The findings revealed that parental collaboration is another factor that had an impact on the attitude of teachers toward dealing with special needs students. All of the teachers who displayed positive attitudes responded that lack of parental cooperation could be a barrier to help the students with special needs. However, it wasn't proven that the lack of parental support might generally affect their overall positive attitude about the importance of inclusion. The teachers elaborated that they would be more inclined to help children with SEN if they received help and support at home. T7 commented "if it is one sided support from me and there is a block, then it is like I'm hitting a wall and bouncing back".

### **Number of SEN students**

The number of special needs students in each class was one of the biggest challenges facing some of the teachers in the study. As expressed by T6: "I believe that only 20% max should be included in each classroom. If you have lots of disabled students, you won't give them the attention they do need and deserve". Analysis of the data showed that only four teachers reported that their attitude may differ according to the number of SEN students in the classroom. These teachers demonstrated earlier that they accept the idea of inclusion as long as the number of SEN students is limited compared to the number of other students in the same classroom.

### **Conclusions**

The main findings of the study indicated that three out of ten teachers accepted the idea of full inclusion of children with special needs in the general education classrooms. Five participants showed positive attitudes toward including SEN students with certain reservations, mostly dependent on the severity of the disability

and the number of SEN students inside the classroom. However, two teachers did not support the inclusion of special needs students in the general classrooms. Despite the fact that no studies were found that tackled the attitudes of teachers in Egyptian private schools, similar findings were echoed in the previous literature. Teachers who are likely to demonstrate positive attitudes toward inclusion are those who had many years of teaching experiences, and had acquired appropriate professional development programs to assist them to teach students with different abilities (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Awad, 2016; Blecker & Boakes, 2010; Emam & Mohamed, 2011). Similarity, in this study, findings indicated that the eight participants who held positive attitudes toward inclusion had a minimum of four to thirteen years of experience in teaching students with special needs. Also, about six of those teachers had acquired professional development or had attended some workshops relevant to special needs education.

Moreover, few teachers agreed that inclusion is not the correct choice for special needs students. They believed that general education schools cannot meet their needs due to the lack of real inclusive schools in Egypt. Instead, they see that separate special education classes are the most appropriate to meet the needs and to enhance the academic performance of the students with SEN. Additionally, parental collaboration and administrative support is required to guarantee the success of inclusive practices. Despite the study limitations, these findings might be utilized in further research regarding inclusive education in Egyptian schools.

### **Recommendations and limitations**

Based on the study findings, it is recommended to improve the educational status of teachers in Egypt. It is imperative to offer courses, workshops and continuing professional development programs about special education to pre and in-service teachers, yearly by the Egyptian MOE in general and school administrators in particular.

In addition, parents should be better educated about the symptoms and diagnosis of different types of disabilities. Also, it is strongly suggested that stakeholders should raise awareness about the concept of inclusion among educators, policy makers and the whole educational community. Since the movement towards inclusive education in Egypt is still vague and is not supported by the efforts of the Ministry of Education, inclusive education should be considered in the agenda. Finally, private schools should be well supervised by the Ministry of Education to ensure that the students are “fully” and not “partially” included in general education classrooms.

### **Research Limitations**

In the presented study, the number of female teachers significantly outnumbered the male teachers. It was, therefore, difficult to examine gender as a factor that could affect teachers' attitudes. Additionally, a significant limitation of the study was the tool used for data collection. It was difficult to enter some private schools, thus, prevented the researcher from observing the interactions between the teachers and their students. However, the tool utilized in the study managed to assess the attitudes of the teachers towards inclusion in an adequate way.

Another limitation of the study was the minimal presence of real inclusive schools in Egypt. It took the researcher a lot of time to identify schools that follow the inclusive system. As a final limitation, the teachers interviewed for this study only work in private schools. Accordingly, it is important to note that they all were drawn from the same backgrounds and socio-economic level. Therefore, the sampling method failed to generalize the results among all teachers across different schools in Egypt.

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