

## Professionalism and the challenges of inclusion: An evaluation of special education teachers' practice



Hatim Hamdi Algraigay\*

Department of Special Educational Needs, College of Education, University of Ha'il, Ha'il, Saudi Arabia

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### ABSTRACT

This research paper critically examines the role of professionalism in shaping the practice of special education (SE) teachers. Working with students with diverse needs, SE teachers face complexities and contradictions in their profession. Despite the initiation of inclusive education in 1994 as a promising concept to support students with disabilities, its effective implementation remains elusive. Therefore, this study delves into the educational system and regulatory frameworks that govern teacher work to identify areas of improvement. Qualitative methods were employed to explore the impact of accountability activities, particularly standards-based tests, on SE teachers' professionalism. The findings reveal a negative influence of such activities on their professional autonomy and well-being. The prevailing nature of educational systems that restrict teachers' authority and collaborative opportunities appears to contribute to stress and ethical dilemmas. Interestingly, the study contradicts prior research by indicating that SE teachers' professionalism is not necessarily linked to the successful implementation of inclusion. The research underscores the significance of autonomy and flexibility for SE teachers, allowing them to tailor their approaches to meet the needs of students with disabilities effectively. This autonomy contributes significantly to the successful integration of inclusion practices. Moreover, the study emphasizes the crucial role of autonomous education systems in fostering teacher practices in inclusive classrooms and facilitating the development of knowledge and skills among students with disabilities. Overall, this research enhances our understanding of how empowering education systems can foster a conducive environment for SE teachers, consequently benefiting students with disabilities in inclusive settings.

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### 1. Introduction

Educating students with disabilities, particularly those considered to have low academic achievement, is of paramount importance, demanding a high level of teacher professionalism. Numerous studies have been conducted to explore the interplay between work satisfaction, empowerment, autonomy, and their connection to professionalism. A common thread among these investigations is the significant emphasis on granting teachers substantial autonomy in their roles (Fan and Liang, 2020; Cheon et al., 2020). In essence, bestowing autonomy and

empowerment upon teachers holds substantial significance in resolving prevailing issues within contemporary educational institutions. Nevertheless, a counterargument posits that the approach of accountability and hierarchical assessments, which underscores the importance of tightly controlled organizations or schools, has been deeply ingrained as the prevailing characteristic of managerial professionalism (Verger et al., 2019; Skedsmo and Huber, 2019). As posited by Donitsa-Schmidt and Topaz (2018), the field of education has witnessed significant social, knowledge-related, and economic changes, leading to a departure from the traditional model of autonomous professionals. In the past, teachers held the authority and responsibility to make decisions regarding curriculum design, learning environments, and assessments. However, in the present scenario, what students learn, their achievements, and the learning standards are no longer solely within the purview of teachers. Consequently, there is a widespread agreement that

\* Corresponding Author.

Email Address: [h.algraigay@uoh.edu.sa](mailto:h.algraigay@uoh.edu.sa)

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Corresponding author's ORCID profile:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4200-6868>

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modern professional identities are under threat due to increased auditing and accountability activities, thereby shifting the focus from ethical considerations to a more efficiency-driven approach (Weiner, 2020).

In the realm of disability education, teachers must possess autonomy and authoritative decision-making capabilities, as educational interventions are tailored to meet the diverse needs of pupils. Autonomy stands as a crucial remedy that Special Education (SE) teachers require to effectively fulfill their professional responsibilities. The inherent nature of SE teachers' work involves extensive hours devoted to addressing various categories of disabilities, encompassing physical or sensory challenges, social and emotional behaviors, and learning difficulties. Concurrently, SE teachers face a climate of increased accountability, subject to numerous auditing activities such as OFSTED inspections in the context of England's educational system (Smith, 2020) and extensive observation sessions in the Saudi system.

The perpetuation of such practices puts SE teachers at risk of heightened stress levels, burnout, and overwhelming workloads. Hence, it becomes imperative to explore alternative approaches like autonomy and empowerment, which could potentially mitigate the adverse consequences of the existing system. This research paper aims to examine the professional experiences of teachers engaged with students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, it seeks to investigate the concepts of accountability and competition, analyzing their potential impact on teachers, including burnout, stress, workload, and ethical dilemmas. By shedding light on these aspects, the study aspires to offer insights into effective strategies that can support SE teachers in their crucial work.

## 2. Origins of managerialism in education accountability

Managerial professionalism has emerged as the prevailing form of professionalism, exerting pressure on teachers and educational institutions to uphold accountability, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness in their endeavors (Day and Sachs, 2005). Saudi Arabia serves as an example of a centralized and radical education system, government-controlled, wherein teachers contend with top-down policies, constant inspections, and supervision, potentially exerting adverse effects on their professionalism (Alsalahi, 2015). These activities are manifested through national curricula, standardized testing, and prescribed criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching in schools (Day and Smethem, 2009). In essence, teachers are compelled to be increasingly accountable, efficient, and adept at delivering high-quality education. The enforcement of accountability and auditing practices

on teachers and schools epitomizes the managerial model of professionalism.

Consequently, the educational reforms introduced by governments over the past two decades, aimed at enhancing educational achievements and enforcing teacher accountability, have significantly impacted teachers' sense of professionalism in a negative manner (Fullan, 2015). It is evident that the concept of accountability in education has become intricately intertwined with the managerial professionalism model during the recent decades of reform. The subsequent section sheds light on the domain of disability education in Saudi Arabia.

## 3. Profession of the field of disability in Saudi Arabia

It might be important to highlight the efforts being made in the field of disability in Saudi Arabia. The discipline of disability has received unprecedented attention from the Ministry of Education in several aspects, such as diagnosis and intervention in teachers' preparation and training. As inclusion is one of the most significant issues in this field, Saudi mainstream schools require knowledge, care, and quality of education that are appropriate to students with disability (Binammar, 2020). Thus, to best ensure the quality of education, teachers' preparation needs to be maintained before and during their services. According to the latest data from the Ministry of Education, 23 universities have departments of special needs where teachers can be trained as qualified teachers by earning a bachelor's degree. This is considered essential pre-service training for SE teachers. However, these programs are still questionable as to how well they can prepare teachers. Teachers have always been dissatisfied with pre-service programs as they focus more on theoretical aspects rather than practical issues that teachers face in reality (Gajendran, 2020). Most of the pre-service preparation programs provided to SE teachers consider the issues of inclusive education (Alquraini and Rao, 2018). However, professional training of enhancing teachers' professional development was overlooked in these programs. For example, Aldabas (2020) indicated that SE teachers' practices might be marked by an obvious gap and flaws due to the paucity of in-service training. This is considered a negative aspect of teachers' professionalism in Saudi Arabia.

One of the key dimensions to consider in assessing the enhancement of teachers' professionalism is the current framework of education rules and guidance applicable to SE teachers and students with disabilities. A widely observed practice in many countries, including Saudi Arabia, is the implementation of standards-based accountability in both public and special education. This accountability approach involves various activities, such as national testing and international assessments like the Programme for International

Student Assessment (PISA). In the context of Saudi Arabia, the Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) administers a standardized test called Qiyas, which evaluates the knowledge and skills of all students in Saudi schools. The introduction of Qiyas was an attempt to address the issue of inconsistent grading in schools, ensuring a more reliable assessment of students' abilities before their admission to Saudi universities.

Despite the use of Qiyas, concerns have been raised regarding its accuracy in reflecting students' overall academic performance in high schools (Mahmoud and Alaraj, 2018). Nevertheless, it remains a pivotal criterion for university admission in the country. Furthermore, students with disabilities, including those with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and other physical disabilities, are also subject to assessment through Qiyas. The fundamental question arising from this approach is whether standards-based accountability genuinely leads to improved student performance, and if so, do SE teachers and students with disabilities equally benefit?

Arguably, a group of children diagnosed with various learning disabilities, who are often perceived as the least academically achieving in schools, may struggle to effectively cope and participate within the confines of these accountability activities. According to Figlio and Loeb (2011), the main aim of testing or standards-based accountability is to recognize a set of standards that measure students' performance across some of the major subjects to position the curriculum to these standards and to evaluate and scrutinize students' achievement. While accountability tests in some countries such as the USA have had some success (Hanushek and Raymond, 2005), evidence indicates that not all groups of children utilize accountability forms (Figlio and Loeb, 2011). Including children with SE in accountability assessments and tests might be a more complex issue. For example, one of the accountability tests is the PISA, which includes 2.5% of students with disabilities (Smith and Douglas, 2014). One possible issue with the accountability assessment approach is whether the assessments are relevant to students with disability and whether they are comprehensive and inclusive to match SE students' diverse needs. A recent study by Baidoo-Anu and Ennu Baidoo (2022) found that standards-based testing results force teachers to work with students on the tests, which might lead students to feel fail in life. Arguably, if children with diverse SE are not taken into account in these tests, they might be educationally harmed and not supported, then their teachers might be harmed too (Grupe and Nitschke, 2013). SE teachers might be frustrated, and their sense of professionalism might be lost since they view their efforts and work as not beneficial for students with disability. This might be exacerbated when the future studies of those students might be threatened as university studies are conditional to the Qiyas test. Many concerns stem from the negative consequences of increased attention being

placed on assessing and inspecting the education of students with disability. Chong (2018) demonstrated several examples of unexpected results of the accountability standards that measure students with disability performance. First, students with disability may be seen as scapegoats, particularly when schools' failure in meeting accountability targets is usually referred to as the lower capacity of students with disability. Second, there is a potential negative effect on inclusion because if students with disability are seen as the main reason for not achieving high scores on those tests, then this may reduce their opportunities for inclusion. In addition, the accountability standards system encourages schools to segregate lower progressing children from their schools or help to increase the rates of dropout and poor retention among children (Smith and Douglas, 2014).

In the Saudi context, there is a paucity of research that investigates SE teachers' professionalism. Most studies have examined some aspects of professionalism, such as training programs, necessary competencies for teachers, skills, and knowledge required in the profession of learning (Alquraini, 2011; Aldabas, 2020; 2015). Recently, only one study conducted by Binammar (2020) discussed the absence of standards and codes that organize the nature of special education teachers' profession. However, Binammar (2020) concentrated on one side of professionalism, which is the standards of teaching; other significant aspects, such as examining the current nature of the SE teachers' profession, and teachers' voices and reflections on their practices were overlooked. Thus, this paper might be significant as it aims to examine special education teachers' perceptions regarding their profession. It aims also to examine how special education teachers perceive the challenges of their practices. While teachers' professional development has been studied carefully in international contexts, very fewer studies have been conducted in the Saudi education system. Hence, examining the current practices of special education teachers' professions is required to fill the existing scholarly gap. Some initiatives in the field of disability such as inclusive education required a high sense of teachers' professionalism to be effectively implemented. Thus, this study aims to answer the main following research question, how do Saudi special education teachers perceive their current profession?

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Tool

This study aims to evaluate the current nature of SE teachers' profession and how their sense of professionalism is conceptualized. To best serve these research agendas, qualitative methods were found appropriate to gain an in-depth understanding of perceptions and experiences, since this topic is surrounded by complexity (Green and Thorogood, 2014). Thus, semi-structured interviews were

conducted to answer the research questions. This type of interview helps to answer the research questions sufficiently, as it allows us to prompt interviewees and probe the current situation in more depth (Alshenqeeti, 2014). One pilot interview was conducted to ensure credibility, which is an essential element of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The participants in this study were subjected to a series of inquiries encompassing various aspects of their current practices and professional engagements. These inquiries sought to explore their perceptions of professionalism, their utilization of professional manual handbooks, their interactions with other professionals in the disability field, the inherent nature of their present work, and the alignment of their work with their preparedness. Additional follow-up questions were posed based on the participant's responses to the primary inquiries.

#### 4.2. Participants

The participants in this research were enlisted through the convenience sampling technique. As depicted in Table 1, the sample consisted of five SE teachers, each specializing in the instruction of students with diverse categories of disabilities, including intellectual disability, hearing impairment, autism, and speech therapy. The selection of teachers representing different disability categories aimed to enrich the understanding of the phenomena being investigated. Notably, all chosen SE teachers were employed in mainstream primary school settings.

To uphold confidentiality concerning their identities, schools, and other sensitive information, all participants were requested to provide informed consent by signing consent forms. Further demographic details, such as age and years of professional experience, can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic data of participants

Name	Years of experience	Qualification	Specialty	Age
Interviewee 1	11 years and more	Bachelor	Intellectual disability	41-50
Interviewee 2	6-10 years	Bachelor	Intellectual disability	31-40
Interviewee 3	6-10 years	Bachelor	Hearing impairment	31-40
Interviewee 4	11 years and more	Bachelor	Autism	31-40
Interviewee 5	6-10 years	Bachelor	Speech therapy	31-40

#### 4.3. Procedure and analysis

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, as it was the native language of all participants. This approach was chosen to ensure clarity and facilitate a profound understanding of teachers' sentiments and perceptions regarding professionalism. Data translation into English was deferred until the analysis stage, allowing for an immersive engagement with the original data and a comprehensive comprehension of the interviews' nuances. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis method was employed for data analysis. These steps encompassed familiarizing with the data, creating codes, identifying themes, revising and refining themes, assigning names to the themes, and compiling reports.

To ensure accuracy and rigor in data analysis, the MAXQDA software was utilized, offering a precise and comprehensive view of the data. Thematic analysis proved valuable as it facilitated the extraction of key elements from extensive data, leading to an integrated explanation and description of the data. Through repeated readings of the emerging themes, a deep comprehension of the core concepts within the data was achieved, along with their relevance to addressing the research question. The identification of themes occurred after completing all six steps, and the forthcoming section will present and discuss these themes, which include standards-based testing, stress, workload, and ethical dilemmas.

Maintaining trustworthiness in this study was of utmost importance, and the confirmability technique was employed as a means to address biases. The

summarized analysis of the interviews was sent to the participants, and they all concurred with the provided summary, contributing to the assurance of the study's trustworthiness.

### 5. Results and discussion

#### 5.1. Standards-based tests

The data of this study show that standards-based tests have a negative impact on students with disabilities and their parents. As shown in quote 1 in Appendix A, interviewee 1 indicated that standards-based tests are designed for general students, without any consideration for students with disabilities. It might be obvious that the standards-based tests can enhance the spread of negative awareness about students with disability and eventually towards their inclusion. The lower performance of students with a disability might reduce the level of positive awareness among other students, general teachers, and potentially students' parents, and this might lead to more negative social impacts, such as discrimination and stigma (Algraigay and Boyle, 2017). Whether students with disability choose to be educated in public or special schools or others determines their placement in such schools. The level of positive attitudes about them is determined by their performance in such accountability tests. Accordingly, some accountability activities might exacerbate their condition, status, and academic progress. As shown in quote 2 in Appendix A, interviewee 2 indicates that students with disabilities are susceptible to being affected negatively by their lower academic

achievement. Standards-based accountability is designed to enhance the quality of learning. The drawbacks of these standards concerning students with a disability might indicate that they are neglected and overlooked while designing these standards. Moreover, the sense of competition, accountability, and audit are not likely to be beneficial in educating students with disability in mainstream settings. Thus, these activities tend to show more segregation and exclusionary activities toward students with disability. In addition, students' low academic performance might lead their teachers to perceive that their work and efforts are problematic (Toropova et al., 2021). Arguably, involving students with disability, who are likely to be the most disadvantaged group, in demanding and stressful tests might exacerbate their condition and create additional stress for their teachers rather than enhancing their learning outcomes. Moreover, the negative effects of accountability tests on students with a disability as well as the rigorous and stringent accountability activities impact their teachers' sense of professionalism.

## **5.2. Stress and workload**

Data from this study revealed that SE teachers experience high levels of stress and workload, which are associated with their sense of professionalism. The above section on standards-based tests' effects on students with disability illustrates the possibility of how they can function in schools that require them to be included in stringent accountable tests. SE teachers attempt to support their students to achieve and progress according to these tests' criteria. Students with disability cannot appropriately meet the proposed standards of these tests. As stated in quote 3 in Appendix A, two participants believed that students with disabilities are likely to get fail if they perform on tests that are not designed for them. Several studies have indicated that one cause of stress is children's failure to behave well, progress, or work (Harmsen et al., 2018). Smith and Douglas (2014) asked schools to acknowledge that 'most students with disability will never achieve the "average" levels demanded by most high-stakes tests.' Thus, forcing students with disability to be tested or measured by accountability tests will not support them to progress or work harder, as intended by these tests. Rather, it will make SE professionals experience more constant stress. This seems to be a dilemma that SE teachers are facing as they are torn between accepting Smith and Douglas's (2014) claim and demonstrating greater efforts to support students with disability to overcome the proposed criteria of some accountability tests. Finally, teachers showing greater efforts or not would find that students with disability cannot attain the average levels of these tests. Having this sense of student failure alongside working under a highly accountable education system might increase the level of SE teachers' stress and, subsequently, their professionalism.

SE professionals operate within the current educational system while facing increased demands concerning their workload, competence, and accomplishments. As evident from quote 4 in Appendix A, the participants in this study reported having up to 18 lessons per week, highlighting the considerable responsibilities that place significant stress on their work hours. This finding aligns with previous research (Samaden et al., 2021) that underscores the importance of time management and workload in influencing SE teachers' productivity.

The study participants expressed their belief that their responsibilities and workload differ from those of general teachers, as each student with a disability necessitates individualized educational planning (quote 5 in Appendix A). This fundamental difference in the workload between regular and SE teachers may imply that SE teachers are required to invest more effort to compensate for feelings of helplessness and inadequacy induced by the prevailing educational system. Arguably, the heightened workload of SE professionals is an expected outcome given the diverse disabilities, impairments, and unique needs of their students. Moreover, the current system, which curtails the authority and influence of SE teachers in curricular and learning processes, further exacerbates their workload.

Concerningly, the substantial workload in an environment that restricts autonomy may potentially impact SE teachers' job satisfaction and professionalism (Ismail et al., 2021; Norazmi, 2020).

As indicated in quote 6 in Appendix A, one possible interpretation of SE teachers' overload might be best explained by the fact that most Saudi schools do not have multidisciplinary teams. This result was similar to Al-Ahmadi (2009), who indicated that general Saudi teachers believed that SE teachers specialized in dealing with students diagnosed with a disability; thus, working with their students was not their responsibility. SE teachers experience a paucity of collaborative work with general teachers, which might increase their workload and avoidance of working in alliance to address the sustained challenges and difficulties. The lack of collaborative work could affect SE teachers' professionalism as it relies on working with colleagues in collaborative and reflective cultures of conversation about classroom situations (Tatto, 2021). Other studies suggested that there is a need for teachers to work in an environment with more autonomy and resources (Ismail et al., 2021).

## **5.3. Ethical dilemmas**

The results of this study show that SE teachers suffer from a paucity of obvious guidance, and rules state their nature of profession. There are many complex issues surrounding disability that require an accurate code of practice teachers can use (quote 7 in Appendix A). Thus, insufficient guidance for professionals has emerged as an issue in many

countries to help and support students to progress and succeed appropriately according to their needs and abilities. For example, the recent special educational needs and disability (SEND) code of practice in the UK does not consider ethical issues (Hellawell, 2015). Lack of provision of guidance on ethical and moral issues for SE professionals can exacerbate the complicated duties and relationships of SE professionals (Owens et al, 2019). The ethical issues of SE professionals were not explained equally or more than the 'bureaucratic burdens acknowledged' in this guidance (Hellawell, 2015). Thus, these guidelines neglect the ethical issues of SE professionals and concentrate more on explaining their roles and obligations. This is an example of how a traditional and accountable education system minimizes teachers' authority to decide or choose when they can teach students with diverse needs.

While some issues might be unnoticeable, other fundamentally ethical dilemmas might put SE professionals against each other. A better understanding of the conflict between professional instructions and professionals' personal ethics might be best explained by codes of ethics adopted by SE professionals, such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2015) code of ethics. One CEC principal stated, 'Practicing within the professional ethics, standards, and policies of CEC; upholding laws, regulations, and policies that influence professional practice; and advocating improvements in the laws, regulations, and policies.' However, this principle might be difficult to implement in Saudi schools, as teachers are not authorized to change or modify some educational strategies in their resource rooms (quote 8 in Appendix A). It has been argued that potential conflict might ensue when SE professionals adhere to these codes of different principles. For example, Hellawell (2015) described the teachers' case when they are inclined towards the parents' stand rather than with school or system instructions. This conflict of having to balance between schools' commitments and principles of empathy and beneficence is one of the ethical dilemmas SE teachers face on a daily basis. Another ethical conflict SE teachers face in the above example might be that SE teachers may contradict adhering to the best interests of students or sticking to the schools' commitment. The powerlessness of introducing appropriate solutions that satisfy parents and schools not only makes the task difficult but might also lead to more moral stress. It might be argued that one possible reason for this situation is that SE professionals work under such a system that requires them to demonstrate sufficient efficiency alongside restricting and minimizing their authority and power. This claim might be supported by Morley et al. (2019) who indicated several causes for moral stress and ethical dilemmas among professionals, such as being obligated to choose between an activity that mismatches the school's role and students' needs.

SE teachers can encounter ethical dilemmas stemming from the discrepancy between their

preparedness and the realities of their school environments, as illustrated in quote 9 in Appendix A. During their comprehensive four or more years of teaching preparation at universities, SE teachers receive training in the most contemporary knowledge, methods, and learning styles, often engaging in collaborative efforts with "ordinary" teachers, head teachers, and stakeholders. However, the stark contrast arises when they find their actual workplaces governed by regulations that impose rigid teaching procedures, lacking the supportive collaboration they experienced during their bachelor's degree preparation.

The crux of this issue lies in the absence of a personal sense of professionalism among SE professionals, as they realize they are practicing something different from what they learned during their initial teacher training. This incongruity may leave them feeling disempowered and lacking authority in their roles. Moreover, SE teachers may become disheartened, believing that their efforts and work fail to make a significant impact on their student's academic performance. Consequently, their sense of professionalism may be adversely affected, resulting in students not receiving the necessary support to overcome their barriers and disabilities effectively. This situation poses a potential drawback for both SE teachers and their students.

## 6. Recommendations for enhancing SE professionalism

Scholarly assertions suggest that SE teachers wield a direct and immediate impact on the quality of learning experienced by students with disabilities (Fiedler and Van Haren, 2009; Lusk and Bullock, 2013). Enhancing the performance and skills of SE teachers within school settings has a positive correlation with improved learning progress and outcomes for students with disabilities. In light of the drawbacks associated with accountable, competitive, and market-driven forms of professionalism affecting both children with disabilities and their teachers, this paper briefly proposes an alternative approach –democratic professionalism– as a potential solution to enhance the professionalism of SE teachers.

Democratic professionalism places great importance on collaborative and cooperative action, involving active engagement between teachers and various educational stakeholders. It underscores that the role of teachers extends beyond the confines of a single classroom, encompassing contributions to the school, the educational system, other students, the broader community, and collective responsibilities among teachers themselves as a cohesive group, as well as within the wider profession (Day and Sachs, 2005). Adopting this approach to professionalism would empower SE professionals, freeing them from external regulations and granting them autonomy to design suitable methods, strategies, and curricula tailored to address the diverse needs of their students.

The active involvement of SE professionals in the teaching and learning process within classrooms or resource rooms, where they can make informed decisions on strategies and curricula based on the specific needs of the children, serves as a significant indicator of their restored sense of professional autonomy. Such autonomy is perceived as a fundamental motivating factor, contributing to their sense of empowerment and job satisfaction (Passanisi et al., 2022). The standards-based activities that demonstrate a higher degree of segregation and exclusion towards students with disabilities appear to be counterproductive in promoting the concept of inclusion. It is imperative to acknowledge that inclusion is a multifaceted concept that cannot be contingent upon a singular dimension. Rather, it entails various interconnected dimensions, including the physical presence of students with disabilities in mainstream schools, their active engagement in academic pursuits, and their meaningful participation in social interactions within the school environment (Liu et al., 2020). The implementation of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been advocated, and SE teachers, equipped with resources and autonomy, can play a pivotal role in effectively adopting this approach. UDL is a teaching methodology designed to cater to all students, encompassing a wide spectrum of needs, and endeavors to eliminate barriers in their learning process. To successfully implement UDL, teachers are required to cultivate a flexible learning environment that encourages active student engagement, ultimately leading to meaningful learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

In this context, the UDL necessitates SE teachers to assume an active and influential role in the teaching and learning process. They are granted the authority to select and design methods, strategies, and curricula based on the diverse needs of their students with disabilities. This approach advocates for a system where SE professionals have more autonomy compared to the current approach, which enforces accountability and rigorous auditing.

There are several reasons why this paper advocates for granting autonomy to SE teachers. Firstly, the pressing demand for autonomy emerges as a common thread when examining the relationship between constructs that potentially result from the prevailing education system (Harmsen et al., 2018). As mentioned earlier, the issues of stress, burnout, excessive workload, job dissatisfaction, and significant ethical concerns faced by SE teachers within top-down educational policies, such as those observed in the Saudi system, could potentially be addressed through the provision of autonomy, authority, and fostering a collaborative culture. Empowering teachers with autonomy and authority and encouraging a collaborative approach to work with colleagues and staff members may help mitigate stress and burnout levels (Kelchtermans, 2017). Empowering SE teachers by granting them opportunities to collaborate with school administrators and colleagues in decision-making

processes related to curricula and addressing the various challenges in the field, which are often fraught with ethical dilemmas, holds the potential to mitigate or minimize these negative consequences.

The second rationale behind advocating for teacher autonomy stems from the fact that SE professionals work with students with diverse needs, necessitating a wide array of programs and educational options to cater to their individual requirements. This approach promotes effective learning for students with diverse needs by fostering a collaborative culture that encourages cooperation among classroom teachers, general teachers, administrators, and parents. Importantly, such a collaborative learning environment may facilitate the successful integration of students with disabilities into inclusive classrooms, an issue that has sparked considerable debate within the field. Providing teachers with autonomy can also enhance the quality of their classroom dynamics, including their motivational styles (Reeve and Cheon, 2021). A common responsibility of SE teachers is to adapt and modify the classroom climate to create an inclusive and suitable environment for teaching students with disabilities. Consequently, SE teachers who possess autonomy can effectively shape the classroom setting in terms of expectations, group dynamics, and modes of interactions and communication, thereby reinforcing the principles and significance of inclusion (Hodge and Gucciardi, 2015). In other words, including students with disability in mainstream classes can be improved through processes of collaboration and participation among SE professionals (Eyles et al., 2016). Arguably, the classroom interactions that occurred and facilitated by teachers' empowerment and collaboration upon curricula not only lead to more explicit and accessible learning but can also provide an opportunity for teachers for digging into surface details and increasing critical inquiry (Reeve and Cheon, 2021). Suggesting the approach of autonomy for SE teachers can allow them to gain greater capacity to improve their students' performances, and promote teaching efficacy and job satisfaction (Cheon et al., 2020). According to the existing literature, the results of this study are expected as a result of the lack of autonomy provided to teachers and the educational system, particularly for SE teachers whose duties and responsibilities require a higher level of autonomy. According to Binammar (2020), professionalism plays a crucial role in empowering SE teachers, granting them the agency to make decisions that are beneficial for their profession as well as their students with disabilities. Prior to this research, there was limited insight into how SE teachers' professionalism could positively impact their inclusive practices aimed at meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities. Consequently, the professional development of SE teachers is not only advantageous for their own growth but also holds broader significance in promoting inclusive educational practices and fostering the development of student's skills and knowledge.

## 7. Conclusion

The primary objective of this paper was to assess the impact of accountability on SE teachers and its adverse effects as perceived by them. Accountability, a prominent characteristic of managerial professionalism, encompasses various activities such as standards-based tests and centralized testing, which are imposed on students with disabilities. Findings revealed that these intrusive activities, when directed at students with disabilities, tend to reinforce negative attitudes, creating tensions leading to further exclusion and exacerbation of their challenges. SE teachers, witnessing their students' struggles to meet the criteria of these assessments, experience successive repercussions.

In addition to the nature of their work, the top-down educational policy, which curtails teachers' authority and limits their flexibility to engage in a collaborative culture of learning, contributes to an increased workload, heightened stress levels, and the emergence of several ethical dilemmas among SE teachers. To mitigate these issues, empowering SE teachers with opportunities for reflection, change, and the adoption of different professional standards could enhance their sense of autonomy and reflexivity, ultimately elevating their professionalism (Chung and Kim, 2010).

This paper proposes a shift towards democratic professionalism as a potential solution to enhance the professionalism of SE teachers. It advocates for SE teachers to assume a more authoritative and collaborative role by actively participating in the development of curricula, resources, and materials, leveraging their expertise and knowledge. In essence, this approach entails modifying curricula, designing educational strategies, and utilizing resources in a manner that addresses the diverse needs of students, necessitating greater autonomy, collaboration, and flexibility—A stark contrast to the current limitations within the education system.

These dimensions of democratic professionalism are instrumental in enabling SE teachers to deliver improved educational services to a group of students who are typically considered the lowest academic achievers in schools. Purposeful leadership and a high degree of collegiality among SE teachers are likely to be more effective in enhancing the quality of learning compared to mere obedience and compliance. This proposed approach offers new avenues of practice within the field of disability and holds the potential to elevate the profession of teachers in Saudi Arabia.

### Appendix A. Interview quotes

Quote 1 interviewee 1: 'Those tests are designed mostly for general students, not those with a disability, so the results always that students with disability repeating the academic year, or even being held back one year, as they are subjected to hard tests. These tests often underestimate their potential

and increase the opportunity of denied entry into public schools.'

Quote 2 interviewee 2: 'I believe that students with disability are susceptible to be influenced negatively by their lower academic achievement compared to their classmates.'

Quote 3 interviewee 3 and 5: 'It's a lot of work needed to help students to perform well in such tests [which] are not designed for their needs, and I think some students with disability will fail surely.'

Quote 4 interviewee 4: 'My load is 18 students, but I feel it very high load as I am responsible to teach students with diverse disabilities who require more preparation, skills, and learning strategies. In the meantime, general teachers are not helpful to me.'

Quote 5 interviewee 3: 'Every student needs an individual educational plan that has its own strategy, tool, and preparation; imagine I have to do a similar job with other 18 students, while main class teachers do it for one time for all students.'

Quote 6 interviewee 2: 'I do all the diagnosis, intervention, and teaching work. This work should be divided among multi specialists including general teachers.'

Quote 7 interviewee 1: 'There are no clear rules I refer to when I seek help to solve my students' issues, everyone can argue with me, I don't have regulation to stand on.'

Quote 8 interviewee 3: 'The approaches and means I use with my students are observed and monitored by the academic supervisors, if they don't approve, I cannot use them.'

Quote 9 interviewee 2: 'I found that the reality in working in a 'mainstream primary school' differs from what I have learned in my teaching preparation. I felt that I was at times working independently with disabled children, without helpful collaboration with other teachers, head teachers, and parents. I was not given the power to choose an appropriate curriculum according to children's diverse needs.'

### Compliance with ethical standards

### Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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