Special Education Programs for Students with Intellectual Disability in Saudi Arabia: Issues and Recommendations

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Abstract

Special education services in Saudi Arabia have received much attention over the past 15 years. This increased attention has been reflected in the increasing amount of such services offered, including services aimed at students with intellectual disability. However, the enormous expansion of special education services was not followed by development of the necessary related services to implement these programs effectively or by provision of a range of appropriate educational placements. The main purpose of this study was to explore the current situation of special education services for students with intellectual disability in Saudi Arabia in order to identify weaknesses and ways to improve upon the services. A descriptive non-experimental mixed method research design was used. Findings of this study concluded that four main issues must be addressed to advance the inclusion of students with intellectual disability and these are: programs that promote the segregation of students with intellectual disability and their teachers should be countered with more inclusive programs; individualized educational plan practices must be properly implemented; proper assessments and diagnoses must be made; and a proper official curriculum for special education programs must be designed. Future implications of this study are discussed.

Saudi Arabia is the largest Arabian country in Asia in terms of geographic land area and has a population of approximately 29 million people. Economically, Saudi Arabia relies heavily on oil production. The rise in oil prices in recent years has helped the government find revenue to finance new projects in various fields, including investment in education. The increased revenue has had a positive effect on the development of special education programs in the country.

The provision of special education services in Saudi Arabia has changed significantly over the past 15 years (Alnahdi, 2013); this development is evident in the enormous change in the amount of special education services offered and the accessibility of such services for students with disabilities. Five types of disabilities have been covered in the recent expansion of the provision of services and they are: visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities. There are two educational placements for students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. First, there are special education institutes for students with moderate to severe disabilities and these schools focus on specific types of disabilities, such as schools for students with visual impairment, schools for students with hearing impairment, and schools for students with intellectual disability (Al-Mousa, 2010). Secondly, there are special education programs for students with mild disabilities that are included in regular schools, including self-contained classroom programs, resource room programs, itinerant teacher programs, teacher-consultant programs, and follow-up programs (Al-Mousa, 2010). Notably, self-contained classrooms and resource rooms are the only placement options available in this area.

In Saudi Arabia, the term ‘special education teachers’ is used to refer to teachers who work in special education programs or institutes. Most special education teachers hold a bachelor’s degree in special education. The terms ‘general teachers’ or ‘general education teachers' are used with respect to teachers who majored in subjects other than special education and work in schools that have special education programs but who are not involved with these programs.

Special Education: A Historical Perspective

The first special education initiatives in Saudi Arabia were implemented at the end of the 1950s. These initiatives began with individual efforts in which a number of people with visual impairment established evening classes to teach the Braille system.
for reading and writing (Althabet, 2002). Officially, special education in Saudi Arabia began in the 1960s when the Ministry of Education opened the first school for students with visual impairment in Riyadh (Althabet, 2002). Since then, special education has received increased attention from the government. As a result, the Ministry of Education established a General Directorate for Special Education (DGSE) in 1974, which was responsible for planning and improving special education programs in the country (Al-Ajmi, 2006).

One of the turning points in the history of special education in Saudi Arabia occurred in the late 1990s, when the Ministry of Education began integrating students with disabilities into regular schools by designating certain classes in a number of schools to be used for students with disabilities. Since then, the number of schools with special education classes has increased rapidly. For instance, the number of special education programs for male students increased from 38 programs and institutes serving 5,208 students in 1994-1995 to 2,047 programs and institutes serving 46,514 students in 2004-2005 (Al-Mousa, 2007). This growth indicates that the number of programs and institutes serving male students with disabilities increased almost 53 times, and the number of male students with disabilities who received special educational services increased almost nine times over 11 years. In addition, the number of special education programs for female students increased from 18 programs and institutes serving 2,517 students in 1994-1995 to 530 programs and institutes serving 10,651 students in 2004-2005 (Al-Mousa, 2007), which indicates that the number of programs and institutes for female students with disabilities increased almost 29 times, and the number of female

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**Table 1.**

**Numbers of Special Education Programs and Institutes by Type of Disability**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Visual Impairment</th>
<th>Hearing Impairment</th>
<th>Intellectual Disability</th>
<th>Autism</th>
<th>Multiple Disabilities</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutes</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes (in regular schools)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>963</td>
<td>2,311</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
students who received special educational services increased four times over a period of 11 years (see Figure 1).

The most recent statistics announced by the Ministry of Education (2011) demonstrate that there are almost twice as many programs and institutes for male students than for female students (see Table 1). There are no explanations by the Ministry of Education regarding the substantial difference between these two figures. These results might be due to the presumption that the Ministry of Education, like other ministries in Saudi Arabia, typically offers new services (or services whose effectiveness is being tested) to males first. These programs and institutes cover five types of disabilities including visual impairment, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, autism, and multiple disabilities.

In addition, statistics from the Ministry of Education (2011) also indicate that more than 18,000 students with intellectual disability received special education services from approximately 4,500 special education teachers across the country. Thus, the teacher-student ratio is one to four. However, in many cases, class sizes can reach 13 students to one teacher. Some special education teachers believe that this one to four ratio might change if administrative positions were accounted for, which are not included as part of this ratio.

Of all special education programs, 62% are for students with intellectual disability in regular schools. Institutes for students with intellectual disability represent 58% of all special education institutes for all types of disabilities. Thus, special education services for students with intellectual disability comprise between 50% and 60% of all special education services in Saudi Arabia (this statistic excludes services for students with learning disabilities because these types of disabilities were not reported in the Ministry of Education statistics).

Al-Mousa (2007) affirms that Saudi Arabia plays a leading role in the Arab world in integrating students with disabilities into regular schools; more than 90% of male students and 65% of female students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia have been integrated into regular schools (Al-Mousa, 2007). However, despite the remarkable increase in services provided for students with disabilities in recent years, others believe that a high percentage still lack educational services (Althabet, 2002) and that "special education is still in its early stages, in general, and the practice of the education of students with mental retardation is also in its early stages, in particular" (Al-Ajmi, 2006, p. 4). Although the availability of special education services has increased dramatically in the last 15 years, it remains clear that the quality of these services has not improved significantly and the outcomes associated with these services have not changed.

**Education of Children with Intellectual Disability in Saudi Arabia**

The first institute for students with intellectual disability in Saudi Arabia was opened in the early 1970s, approximately ten years after special education services were launched in the country (Althabet, 2002). In the late 1990s, when the Ministry of Education began integrating students with disabilities into regular schools, students with intellectual disability comprised the majority of students who benefited from this change compared to students with other types of disabilities (Al-Ajmi, 2006). After special education services for students with intellectual disability were introduced in the early 1970s, 100 students enrolled in the institutes that offered such services. Fifteen years later, by the mid-1980s, there were 827 students in the entire country enrolled in institutes for students with intellectual disability (Directorate General of Special Education [DGSE], 1981, as cited in Althabet, 2002). By 2008, there were 11 institutes and 718 programs for students with intellectual disability throughout the country, with 1,244 students studying in 170 classes in different institutes; by contrast, 11,805 students with intellectual disability were studying in 2,307 classes in regular schools during the same period (Directorate General of Special Education in Saudi Arabia [DGSE], 2008). At the same time, 2,272 teachers worked in programs or institutes for students with intellectual disability (DGSE, 2008).

**Educational Placements for Students with Intellectual Disability in Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia offers two types of educational placements for students with intellectual disability, which are institutions and mainstreamed schooling (Al-Mousa, 2010). In institutional schools, students with intellectual disability study in specialized institutes based on their disabilities. Students in this type of placement are separated from students who have no intellectual disability. Currently, this option is the last choice for students with intellectual disability and is primarily for students with severe disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism. The other schooling option is ‘mainstreaming programs’, which is a term that Al-Mousa (2010) uses to refer to special education programs in regular education schools in Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Mousa, these programs include self-
contained classroom programs, resource room programs, itinerant teacher programs, teacher-consultant programs, and follow-up programs. For students with intellectual disability, only self-contained classroom programs are available in mainstreaming programs, which are referred to as ‘special education programs’.

The main purpose of this study was to explore the current situation of special education services for students with intellectual disability in Saudi Arabia in order to identify weaknesses and ways to improve upon the services. It is anticipated that findings of this study will facilitate improvement of the quality of special education services in the country.

Method

Based on the research objectives, a descriptive non-experimental mixed methods research design was used to collect data. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from several sources. Statistics from the Ministry of Education were accessed for information regarding the number of special education programs and institutes. In addition, the curriculum on special-education programs was obtained from the Ministry of Education’s official letters to schools. It is the only document that organizes the number of required classes for each skill in the weekly plan for special education programs. Observations were made at approximately 25 programs for students with intellectual disability and the observational data collected were subsequently verified by interviews with teachers working in special education programs for students with intellectual disability. Finally, the Regulations of Special Education Institutes and Programs (RSEIP) (2001) was also used as one of the main sources in this study.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

For the interviews, a convenience sample of eight special education teachers were interviewed to discuss the main issues that emerged from the different sources in this study. These teachers worked in three special education programs for students with intellectual disability in Riyadh. Four of them were in their first year of teaching. The rest had more than ten years of teaching experience. All participants held a bachelor’s degree in special education.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were descriptively analyzed (percentages and ratios). Data related to the number of required classes for each skill in the weekly plan were grouped into five categories by identifying classes where a certain skill was taught and calculating how much of the overall time was devoted to teaching the skill. The five main categories were: (a) academic skills, (b) vocational skills, (c) social skills, (d) sport and art, and (e) others.

Because observations can lead to deeper understanding than interviews alone, the researcher used data collected from observations during his visits to many special education programs and in supervising pre-service special education teachers who were conducting their internship in these programs. Thus, collecting data from different sources to identify the emergence of similar themes allowed for triangulation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; O’Donoghue & Punch, 2004).

Results

Issues and Concerns

Although special education programs represent a quantitative development in the field of special education services for students with intellectual disability, there are certain issues that must be addressed. Several themes emerged from the collected data. Four of these themes summarize the main issues and are discussed in this paper because of their direct relationship to the inclusion of students with intellectual disability in regular schools. The four themes are assessment and diagnosis, partially included, individualized education plan (IEP) practices, and curricular issues.

Assessment and Diagnosis. The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has adopted the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) definition of intellectual disability, that is "a disability characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18" (American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities [AAIDD], 2010, p. 1). Although the AAIDD definition emphasizes the existence of significant limitations in adaptive behavior, 73% of special education programs and institutes rely solely on intelligence tests for the diagnosis of intellectual disability (Alnahdi, 2007). Alnahdi (2007) found that the intelligence tests in use were not suitable for the Saudi Arabian context. Two intelligence tests were available in special education programs, the Wechsler Intelligence test and the Stanford-Binet Intelligence test. The adopted Arabic
versions of both tests have been questioned by many educators with respect to their suitability for Saudi Arabian students because some of the scales that were used in Saudi Arabia had been adapted for Egyptian and/or Jordanian students (Alnahdi, 2007). Therefore, the fact that these scales are available in Arabic format is not sufficient to ensure their validity for Saudi Arabian students.

Although the RSEIP stress that a multidisciplinary team must complete the process of assessment and diagnosis, this procedure is not generally undertaken in practice (Alnahdi, 2007). Instead, a psychologist typically completes the procedure and the interpretation of the results in order to determine eligibility for special education services. For this reason, Alwabli (2006) concluded that special education programs in general—and those for students with intellectual disability in particular—must follow more scientific procedures to determine students’ eligibility for special education services.

There are approximately 1,000 programs and institutes throughout the country for students with intellectual disability, which makes it difficult for the Ministry of Education to ensure the validity and supervision of the diagnostic process, particularly with the shortage of specialists in many important areas. To change the practice of relying on one specialist to conduct assessments and make eligibility decisions, Alnahdi (2007) recommended that the Ministry of Education establish centers to make diagnoses and assessments of eligibility for special education services. Thus, the Ministry of Education might be able to ensure the presence of a multidisciplinary team for determinations of eligibility.

**Partially Included.** Based on current procedures in which students with intellectual disability are included in special education programs, these students are included in public schools but are not integrated into activities with other students. All students with intellectual disability in these programs spend the school day in separate classes (self-contained classrooms). One special education teacher said:

What is happening in these schools is not inclusion.

Another special education teacher noted:

Even in the breaks [when students have their breakfast]…. Our students [students with intellectual disability] stay together without any interaction with others.

From the researcher’s experience as a special education teacher in Saudi Arabia for nine years, one of the main difficulties of integrating and including students with intellectual disability into groups of students without disabilities is that general teachers frequently do not welcome initiatives that mix students with intellectual disability with other students. General education teachers usually emphasize that special education teachers are paid 30% more than other teachers and therefore, claim that students with disabilities are the responsibility of special education teachers only.

Article 39 of the RSEIP states that one of the tasks of general education teachers is “to accept the exceptional student in the class and take care of him as the normal students” (p. 28). However, one special education teacher working in special education programs in elementary school stated:

Most of the teachers in my school [general teachers] would not allow my students to be included in their classes, even for a short time.

Another teacher said:

General education teachers need to be forced to stay with our students for a couple of school periods to know how demanding it is to be a special education teacher and how justifiable it is to get paid more.

In addition, a special education teacher said:

Since I started teaching in the special education program, the school is full of negative attitudes towards us from other teachers.

Another teacher stated:

There are four advantages that we have that generate this unhealthy relationship with other teachers from their side: extra payment, fewer periods of teaching, smaller class sizes, and shorter schooldays compared with other teachers.

In sum, special education teachers often express that there are barriers to beginning a collaborative relationship with other teachers. They also realize and confirm the importance of building a strong and collaborative relationship with other teachers for the success of inclusion.

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP) Practices.** Article 84 of the RSEIP indicates that one of the IEP goals is to “determine the quality and quantity of educational services required to support the needs of each individual student” (p. 42). However, IEP
practices for special education programs are completely different than those for other programs. Self-contained classrooms typically contain eight to 15 students. Due to complaints that teachers face difficulties in creating approximately ten IEPs for a classroom of students, students are divided into two levels based on their abilities, and two IEPs are made for the entire class, of which one is assigned to each student. This practice shows that there are misconceptions regarding the concept behind the IEP because when copies of one IEP are made for other students, it is no longer an IEP. The teachers who were interviewed indicated that this method was the only way that IEPs could be completed and that teachers should not be blamed for this practice. However, teachers in special education programs for students with intellectual disability must develop an IEP for each student.

The teachers in this study believed that the Ministry of Education should address this problem by reducing the number of students in each class or providing assistant teachers to work with special education teachers. One teacher said:

I have 12 students...how can I work with them individually on their IEP?

Assistant teacher professionals can be helpful to address some of these special education teachers' complaints. Article 6 of the RSEIP defines the requirements for assistant teachers and stipulates that they must have finished high school with a diploma or a training course for no less than a full semester in special education with a focus on intellectual disability. However, there were no assistant teacher jobs announced by the Ministry of Education at the time this study was conducted.

Although there is growing attention in the literature focused on the importance of including transition plans as a critical part of the IEP (Knott & Asselin, 1999), there is no legal obligation for special education teachers to have transition plans for students of a certain age. Al-Ajmai (2006) stated that the current special education system should require the inclusion of transition plans for students 14 years and older in their IEP. Moreover, such transition plans should be required for students in high schools first and then gradually expanded to students in middle schools. In addition, special education teachers should be trained to plan and conduct transition plan (Alnahdi, in press).

Special Education Teachers and General Education Teachers. A majority of teachers in special education programs hold a bachelor’s degree in special education. Teachers who majored in other areas, particularly teachers with physical education and art specialties, can also work in special education programs. Teachers with no special education major are divided into two groups; the first group continues to study for an additional year while working toward a special education certificate (SPC), whereas the rest continue without certification in addition to their educational degree (see Figure 2).

Schools consist of teachers in different fields who work, interact, and cooperate with others from different educational backgrounds. The nature of teachers’ relationships is important in creating an ideal educational environment. However, there is an issue with regard to special education teachers’ relationships.
with general education teachers. In all the programs visited, special education teachers' offices were located separately from those of other teachers, and special education teachers did not share rest areas with other teachers. This type of practice, which creates a distinct sub-group of special education teachers, emphasizes segregation more than inclusion.

**Curricular Issues.** Although IEPs are required by RSEIP for all students in special education programs, there are also formal curriculum textbooks that must be followed by teachers in these programs. In addition, a fixed plan that dictates courses throughout the week must be followed; this plan lists the number of weekly courses that must be given in every topic. In this type of plan for elementary schools, 64% of the time is dedicated to academic skills for students with intellectual disability. Academic skill courses constitute more than 35% of the time in middle and high schools. Conversely, only approximately 6% of school time for high-school students with intellectual disability is dedicated to sports and art (See Figure 3).

Academic skills include reading, writing, Islamic studies, math, and science. One of the positive aspects of this curriculum is that it provides vocational skills, which constitute 44% of the total time in high school. However, the teachers interviewed reported that no vocational training has yet occurred in the schools.

The curriculum for middle and high school programs for students with intellectual disability lacks transitional services (Almaqael, 2008; Alnahdi, 2013); this is one of the main challenges in middle and high school programs. Middle and high schools continue the practice, started in elementary schools, of segregating students with disabilities into special classes, which prevents them from communicating and interacting with other students. Almaqael (2008) contended that these programs should focus more on the life skills that are necessary for adulthood rather than spending 60% of school time on academic skills. In sum, independence and adulthood skills are not addressed sufficiently in special education programs for students with intellectual disability (Almaqael, 2008).

**Recommendations and Conclusion**

Special education services have received a great deal of attention in Saudi Arabia over the past 15 years. This attention is reflected in the increasing number of special education services offered in the country in recent years, including services provided to students with intellectual disability as part of special education services. However, this expansion in special education services has not been evaluated in terms of its applications, output quality, and continued development. Thus, special education programs lack necessary related services and have limited educational placements. Self-contained classrooms are the only option for students with mild to moderate intellectual disability. This study concluded that four main issues must be considered to move closer to the inclusion of students with intellectual disability: (a) programs that promote the segregation of students and teachers, (b) IEP practices, (c) assessment and diagnosis, and (d) the official curriculum in special education programs.

*Programs that Promote the Segregation of Students and Teachers.* Special education programs for students
with intellectual disability that were developed in the late 1990s promote and encourage segregation instead of integrating students with intellectual disability with their peers without disabilities. This segregation also applies to special education teachers and their peers who are general education teachers. This unhealthy environment requires the Ministry of Education to take clear actions (Alnahdi, 2014) that clarify the relationship between teachers in general education and students with disabilities in regular schools with children without disabilities. In addition, the Ministry of Education must reform the relationships between special education teachers and other teachers, such as by requiring shared activities that integrate teachers from different fields. In addition, more inclusive educational placement could be offered in addition to self-contained classrooms in order to integrate students and teachers.

One of the main changes that must occur is to link the 30% additional payment in salary with the specialty (special education degree) instead of considering it as a reward for working with students with disabilities. For instance, if a special education teacher works in any other administrative position, they should continue to receive the 30% increase as a special education specialist. This change might encourage general education teachers to assist students with intellectual disability when they are required to because they understand that the extra payment is due to the specialization and not merely related to working with students with disabilities. Otherwise, general education teachers might be more reluctant to assist students with disabilities. Administrators will find difficulties assigning tasks to general education teachers who are not getting the extra payment related to students with disabilities.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education must make it clear that students with intellectual disability are the responsibility of all teachers in the school and that general education teachers must help make the school environment a supportive place for inclusion. This objective can be accomplished through clear regulations that insist on the role of general education teachers in special education programs. In addition, the new regulations must clearly state that one objective of the regulations is to promote collaboration across regular schools and special education programs. Otherwise, general education teachers will see themselves as exempt from any regulation that applies to special education programs. This type of regulation will help move special education programs to the next level, in which students with intellectual disability might have the opportunity to be in a general education classroom, especially if the general education classroom is their best educational placement option.

IEP Practices. Two main issues were identified regarding IEP practices. The first issue is the use of one IEP for a number of students. Officials of the Ministry of Education must be aware of the main concept behind IEP, which is negated by the practice of one IEP for multiple students. An IEP is intended to address the unique needs of an individual student and to plan specific goals for that student. Therefore, after Ministry of Education officials acknowledge the idea behind the IEP, assistant teachers should be provided to reduce the pressure on special education teachers and to help create and develop IEPs in a more effective manner. The second issue is that there are no transition plans from the IEP. The Ministry of Education must establish regulations that set a certain age for required transition plans in special education programs, such as in the United States, where schools are required to have transition plans for all students with disabilities who are 16 years old (Johnson, 2005). This practice will help to develop a clear picture regarding the future destination for students after school, in which efforts might be directed toward the next stage of this plan.

Assessment and Diagnostic Issues. Special education programs for students with intellectual disability rely on psychologists alone to implement the assessment and diagnostic process and to make eligibility decisions for special education services. To more properly address this process, the Ministry of Education should establish centers for the diagnosis and assessment of eligibility for special education services. In this way, the availability of multidisciplinary teams will be assured, and all necessary procedures for eligibility decisions will be followed. These centers should begin to raise awareness about the important standards for assessment and diagnosis procedures. These centers should be expanded throughout the country, and large schools in various regions should be equipped to support the centers after the Ministry of Education establishes the model to be followed.

Curriculum in Special Education Programs. There are three points regarding the current curriculum in special education programs for students with intellectual disability. First, there is a fixed set of courses that must be followed for all students. Second, a large portion of school time is spent on academic skills. Third, there is a noticeable absence of vocational training in middle and high school programs. To address these issues, the Ministry of Education must give special education teachers more freedom in allocating school time based on their students’ needs. Functional skills should be an essential component of special education programs for
students with intellectual disability, particularly in middle and high schools, in which vocational training centers might be established.

In conclusion, the Ministry of Education must redefine the relationship between special education teachers and other teachers. Schools should include special education teachers before attempting to achieve the ultimate goal of integrating students with disabilities into classes with their peers without learning disabilities. After completing this first and most important step to achieve a healthy educational environment, the next step is to ensure that the RSEIP and the applicable standards are followed, particularly regarding the assessment and diagnosis of students with intellectual disability and eligibility decisions. In addition, IEP practices must be reformed to adhere to RSEIP’s articles related to IEP. Transition plans for students are an essential part of IEPs that must be insured. Finally, flexibility must be provided for special education teachers to plan and distribute courses throughout the week according to their students’ abilities and needs.

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