

## SEVERE DISABILITIES IN SAUDI ARABIA: CURRENT STATUS AND IMPROVEMENTS FOR THE FUTURE

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### Abstract

This paper present a brief historical background of the general and the special education systems in Saudi Arabia and the limitations of education for those students with severe disabilities who face a lack of special education services after they finish elementary school. These students need special education and related services in their schools and communities. There are no laws regulating the rights of these students in schools such as accommodation, inclusion, and universal design. These students need to be able to interact with non-disabled peers in schools and communities. Based on evidence-based practices in the United States, this paper propose recommendations and suggestions for educators, parents, policymakers, and other professionals to improve the special education services for students with severe disabilities in Saudi Arabia. One of these recommendations is establishing various facilities and agencies to serve persons with severe disabilities. Providing assistive technology is an approach that helps these students communicate and interact effectively in and out of schools. Finally, certification and training needs to be provided to those who work with these students.

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## Historical Backgrounds

### Historical background of the development of the educational system in Saudi Arabia

The educational system in Saudi Arabia has been available for the last 78 years. The educational framework was formed from the Shariah as the holy book, Qur'an, and Prophet Mohammed's sayings found in the Sunnah (Al-Abdulkareem, 2011). Providing educational services was based on separation of the males from the females. The males had their own places and the same for females, and in educational practices, this resulted in separate schools. Based on Al-Abdulkareem, in the initial era, the educational system had restrictions and limitations. For example, the education services were provided for elite and wealthy people because it was available only in private schools. Also it was available for males more than women, particularly in the elementary level because educating females was dependent on the families' opinion. Al-Abdulkareem stated that the education processes were established in the mosques first as a study circle which was called Halaqah in Arabic. The study circle started from the beginning of the educational journey and had continued to this day. It was a traditional and cultural component in Saudi Arabia. Only the males were allowed to attend this study group because it was provided in mosques by the teacher who was a male. Although originally the Halaqah taught subjects such as math and literacy in addition to religion and the Qur'an, now the non-religious subjects are taught in public schools. Besides the Halaqah, there is a Kuttab system. Al-Abdulkareem mentioned that the Kuttab system was offered in the teacher's house. This teacher was eligible to teach people the basic educational concepts as religion, reading, writing, and math, or some of the handcrafts. Mostly, the Kuttab system was provided to females more than males since the males went to the circle study at the mosque. These two systems have served the local communities of each neighborhood area; therefore, the teachers provided the educational services free for people throughout Saudi society. However, some of parents rewarded these teachers with money or food (Al-Abdulkareem, 2011).

In 1925, King Abdulaziz established a first authority of education called the Directorate of Education. This authority was under the Ministry of Interior (Al-Quraini, 2011). King Abdulaziz brought Egyptian educators as assistants to develop the educational system in Saudi Arabia. These educators worked in organizing the education framework, developing curricula, and teaching people in schools. At this time, the first elementary

government school was established in Saudi Arabia (Alromi, 2000). From 1939 to 1949, the number of schools increased to 182 schools with 21,409 students enrolled in these schools, but still there were a high number of illiterate people in Saudi Arabia. In this era of time, the Saudi government did not have a particular style in developing the education framework. It eagerly applied other Arab countries' educational styles such as Egyptian, Syrian, and Lebanon educational style in creating the foundation of the educational system in Saudi Arabia based on Shariah principles (Al-Abdulkareem, 2011). In 1953, the Saudi government established the Ministry of Education, and King Fahad was the first minister. Initially, the responsibility of the Education Ministry was the supervision of the educational system at all educational levels, but for males only (Al-Sunbol, Al-Khateeb, Motuali, & Abduljwad, 1998).

In 1955, King Faisal's wife, Princess Effat Al-Thenian, established the first girls' elementary school in Jeddah. This school was for orphan and poor girls. Then schooling was extended to provide education throughout high school and was open to the public but for a fee. This school also provided educational services and sport activities (Yzeed Net, 2012). In 1960, the General Authority for Educated Girls was established to regulate the education system for females for all education levels in all areas of Saudi Arabia (Yzeed Net, 2012).

Currently, the education system has become a thriving entity with continual improvements in serving all classifications of people such as males and females, wealthy and poor people, and disabled and non-disabled people. The educational system today, based on new legislation, continues practices of the previous educational systems with instruction for education formed from the Shariah, Qur'an, and Sunnah (Al-Abdulkareem, 2011). This foundation guarantees all the needs and wants for all people; thus, it is a core principle of the educational system. The Ministry of Education had imposed the separation of males and females in public schools, because in the past, there were instances in private schools where male teachers educated female students (Al-Abdulkareem).

In these last 50 years, the educational system has made many improvements in a short amount of time (Al-Enazee, 2008). Education has developed in every area and town in Saudi Arabia. Now all levels of schools (elementary, middle, high, and universities) exist with a restricted number of special education services primarily in the big cities. These special education services still have some limitations and deficits in serving students with special needs, especially those students who have severe disabilities and those that finish elementary school (Al-Wzeer, 2008). These students just sit in their home, and their parents try to find somewhere that would accept their children. The development of the special education system

and its services has been slow, and there is a critical need for human resources to work with students with special needs, particularly those with moderate, severe, and multiple disabilities (Al-Muntdda Al-Saudi, 2004).

### **Historical background of Saudi Arabian special educational practices for students with disabilities, and in particular, those with severe disabilities**

The historical practices of special education in Saudi Arabia began with individualization practices for students who had a blind disability in 1957. The students with blind disabilities were willing to study and learn by using Braille in private classrooms in some of the people's houses (Al-Quraini, 2011). In 1958, the Ministry of Education opened evening classes to teach Braille at the Jabra School in Riyadh. In 1960, the Al-Noor Institute was established with five elementary classes and three vocational classes to educate students with blind disabilities (Al-Quraini, 2011).

In 1962, the Ministry of Education created a separate authority in the capital city of Riyadh to lead special education services for three categories of disabilities. This authority was called the Special Education Directory to serve blind, deaf, and mental retardation disabilities (Afeafe, 2000). In 1968, the Special Education Directory extended their services for these categories in different cities and provided education at all three educational levels (elementary, middle, and high). These services were also extended to females. In 1974, the Ministry of Education created three directories to serve the three categories of disabilities (blind, deaf, and mental retardation) in the main cities. Experts from Arab countries were requested to help Saudi Arabia develop and plan the special education curricula and programs for each school (Al-Wzeer, 2008).

### **Summary of law/policies for special education**

In 1987, the legislation of disabilities (LD) was passed as first legislation to serve people with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. A major objective of LD was an emphasis on the provision of equal rights for all people with disabilities comparable to others in communities. LD included major points in identifying and describing programs, interventions, and assessment to determine eligibility for educational services for students with disabilities (Al-Quraini, 2011).

According to Al-Kheragi (1989), special education did not have explicit laws relating to students with disabilities. Even now, special education services do not have specific

policies and procedures to serve students with disabilities, especially those with severe disabilities. I reviewed a book written by the Education Ministry in 2002, which could be translated into English as Organized Rules for Special Education Programs and Institutions (ORSEPI), and found a strong statement advocating rights for people with each disability. This book separated special education services into 10 categories: deaf disabilities, blind disabilities, mental retardation, learning disabilities, gifted and talented, autism disorders, emotional and behavioral disorders, multiple disabilities, health disorders, and communication disabilities. The ORSEPI defined, in general, all professionals' roles and their tasks in working with special needs. The ORSEPI explained the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and all elements related in conducting the IEP. Also the ORSEPI mentioned the importance of applying measurements and assessment to determine the students' progress. However, there are still many elements missing, such as those that could be found in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislations in the U.S. For example, there are specific procedures to follow when there are disagreements between parents and educators. Also, a specific sequence of steps are delineated in these U.S. pieces of legislation. It is this kind of detailed instructions for delivering special education services and steps for resolving differences that is still missing in Saudi Arabia.

### **Statement of the Current Problems**

#### **Development of the range of special educational practices in Saudi Arabia**

The special education field has been considered as a developmental and evolving process in Saudi Arabia. It has deficits and gaps in existing legislation to provide services for students with disabilities, especially those who have been identified as having severe disabilities. The legislation book of special education rules did not include specific explanations of the rights of students with each disability, especially for students with severe disabilities. For example, completely missing was any naming of and clarification of assessments that intended to measure the students' abilities and progresses or the provision of materials and instruments based on the students' needs to serve these students appropriately.

This book was also lacking in delineating and illustrating the kinds of educational settings available or possible. For example, there was no description as to whether students with severe disabilities received special education services in general educational settings or in segregated educational settings. The legislation book also lacked any explication of appropriate places and settings at each school level of these students. Some students with

severe disabilities obtained services in the elementary school level, but after they finished elementary school, they did not have any available place to go. The majority of these students ended up staying at home and then gradually losing those skills that they learned in elementary school. The lack of facilities and agencies to serve these students has impacted negatively on their functional performances, as their mothers descry. The students with severe disabilities do not gain educational or health services except if their families take them to medical facilities to obtain health services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or physical therapy. These students do not have an opportunity to be engaged in general education settings or in separate classrooms.

### **Raising the mastery level and training for professionals who work with children/youth with severe disabilities**

The legislation book of the special education rules only stated minimal roles of people who work with students with severe disabilities, which discourages these people from becoming more knowledgeable and skillful in working with students with severe needs. The majority of the professionals who have been working with students with disabilities do not specialize in special education. They may hold a degree related to special education such as early childhood, psychology, or any other education degree in literacy or religion. Most of these professional have misunderstood the students' needs and their behavior, which often has led to unprofessional or unethical practices in educational settings. Particularly, those who have been working with the severe cases, have little skills to serve these students as in feeding them or staying physically close to the students to prevent mishaps. They think these students were not able to learn any kind of skills, or they thought there was no educational benefit for these students because of their severe disabilities. Even though the ORSEPI has recommended employing people who were qualified and held an official degree or certificate specializing in the same diagnosis for the students, this was actually rarely the case in reality.

#### **Review of the Literature**

### **The uU.S. studies about the availability of services, how they can help saudi arabia, and limitations of their use**

According to Gillespie (2005), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) stressed improving the educational outcomes for students with disabilities which contributed to raising the expectations for them and increasing the opportunities for these students. As a

federal legislation, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required all students with disabilities to be expected to be included in regular education settings and in statewide testing. As a result of Obrusnikova, Block, and Valkova's (2003) study, most students with severe disabilities could participate safely, successfully, and meaningfully in education settings in all school levels with appropriate planning and careful support. Determining safe activities for students with severe disabilities have helped them to participate fully or partially in the education programs by including modifications. In this way, these students could interact with their peers in talking, in playing, and receiving assistance from their peers (Block, Klavina, & Flint, (2007).

Scott, McGuire, and Shaw (2001) developed the Universal Design Model to make educational settings accessible and flexible for all students, especially those with disabilities. The Universal Design Model is a methodology which helps to make physical education environments such as classrooms functional for all people, and especially people with disabilities (Scott et al., 2001). The Universal Design has the following nine principles to help in making the education setting usable:

1) Equitable use

Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities.

Provide the same means of use for all students; identical whenever possible, equivalent when not.

2) Flexibility in use

Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. Provide choice in methods of use.

3) Simple and intuitive

Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Eliminate unnecessary complexity.

4) Perceptible information

Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively to the student, regardless of ambient conditions or the student's sensory abilities.

5) Tolerance for error

Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and prerequisite skills.

- 6) Low physical effort  
Instruction is designed to minimize nonessential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning. Note: This principle does not apply when physical effort is integral to essential requirements of a course.
- 7) Size and space for approach and use  
Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulations, and use regardless of a student's body size, posture, mobility, and communication needs.
- 8) A community of learners  
The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty.
- 9) Instructional climate  
Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students. (Scott et al., 2001, p. 2)

The Universal Design recommends that administrators and professionals make the instruction of education settings multi-modal and completely accessible from the start and continue through the last assessment. Using the Universal Design model would assist all students to access information regardless of their diagnosis.

Also, NCLB required all states and districts to provide assessments to all students with disabilities and then provide a progress reports in reading and writing performances (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Block (2000) explicated that assessments contributed in determining various aspects of students such as (a) the present level of the student (strengths and weakness), (b) the appropriate curricular content and particular activities for the student, (c) the instructions and methods to produce the content for student, and (d) the places and settings that the student should obtain services. Block realized that, for children with more severe disabilities, assessment could provide additional information about the student's abilities and how best to work with the student. This information included functional motor and functional sensory abilities, best position for various physical activities, and the student's likes and dislikes.

The United States has been successful in using assistive technology for students with disabilities, especially students with severe disabilities. The implementation of technology with students with disabilities has been reported as resulting in positive educational outcomes



(Anderson & Petch-Hogan, 2001; Ehlers, & Clark, 2000; Ertmer, Addison, et al., 1999; Michaels & McDermott, 2003). Assistive technology has been an effective tool to help with understanding conversations between children with disabilities and others in the community (Downing, 2002; Turnbull, Turnbull, & Wehmeyer, 2007). Using assistive technology to aid in communication for students with severe disabilities has compensated for a sensory or physical disability (Janney & Snell, 2004). Temple (2006) emphasized the importance of selecting, designing, and implementing appropriate assistive technology with students with disabilities based on their needs and daily activities.

Assistive technology has been referred to as communication options for users; these objects take forms like pictures, line drawing, sounds, symbols, and other delivery system such as switches, keyboard, detected devices, etc. (Ogletree & Pierce, 2010). Carpenter et al. (1999) indicated that providing services for students with severe disabilities has improved success in four different areas for these students: self-esteem, self-determination, achievements, and enjoyable participation. Assistive technology improved performances for students with disabilities in reading and writing tasks (Forgrave, 2010).

The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NDCCD, 2006) recommended providing related services for students with severe disabilities as very important services. The personnel in related services such as speech therapist, physical therapist, occupational therapist, and medical specialist should work closely with the teachers and parents. In this way, the problem of segregation of students with severe disabilities had been resolved and allowed them to be engaged in the same education settings as others.

### **Recommendations for Saudi Arabia**

Based on evidence-based practices in the United States, this paper proposes some recommendations and suggestions to improve the special education services for students with severe disabilities in Saudi Arabia. One of these recommendations is establishing various facilities and agencies to serve persons with severe disabilities in all school levels. Including these students in general education settings to engage and interact with their peers and clarifying partial or full inclusion is also recommended. Also, there is a need for non-educational settings such as specialized agencies to be established to assist these students in free time. There is also a need to obtain extra helps and supports.

The second suggestion is using formative assessments to measure the students' abilities in four major areas: domestic, leisure/recreational, community, and vocational. These assessments should provide guidance to identify the functional objectives of each student such

as learning skills and independence skills. Using these assessments would facilitate in engaging the students in appropriate settings and help professionals in determining a functional curricula, IEP goals, strategies, and instruction to work successfully.

The third recommendation is certification and training needs to be provided to those who work with these students such as administrators, teachers, assistance teachers, and para-professionals. All these people should hold a degree in special education or at least a certificate, which would help them understand the students' special needs and how they could provide appropriate services.

The fourth recommendation is providing assistive technology for students with severe disabilities. Assistive technology is an approach that would help these students communicate and interact effectively in and out of schools. Also, this would help these students to move and engage with others easily and accessibly.

The fifth recommendation is offering related services for students with severe disabilities during the educational sessions such as speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapist, and medical specialist is suggested. Offering all these services during the school day would help the teachers to be more knowledgeable and familiar about their students.

Finally, Lilliworks Active Learning Foundation is a promising resource for parents, teachers, therapists, and others who work with children with severe disabilities. This organization has developed specialized equipment and practical adaptive services, along with outreach and research on specific practices, to use with those with severe disabilities. It was based on the guiding principle that everyone can learn and has particular potential to improve educational settings and programs. Incorporating the ideas and supportive adaptive equipment from this organization could be a real asset to Saudi Arabia, as it has been in many other countries, in developing a better special education program throughout the country.

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