

Challenges and Experiences of High School Teachers with Students Having Intellectual Disabilities in Inclusive Classrooms in Saudi Arabia

Khalid Habib Alshamri

Department of Special Education, Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

Received January 10, 2020; Revised March 20, 2020; Accepted March 28, 2020

Copyright©2020 by authors, all rights reserved. Authors agree that this article remains permanently open access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License

Abstract *Introduction:* The paper's motivating concern is whether teachers are adequately trained, prepared and resourced for the integration of students with intellectual disabilities into "inclusion" classrooms. A brief history of the emergence of the inclusive classroom model in Saudi Arabia is provided. *Methods:* This study utilizes a phenomenological approach. Three purposively selected teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview method that focused on the themes of training, classroom experiences, pedagogical challenges, and evaluations of personal preparedness and effectiveness. Analysis of data was conducted by descriptive categorization. *Results:* The interviews revealed that the teachers received limited professional preparation for teaching in inclusive classrooms; that before classroom integration, they had little general experience of students with intellectual disability; that their experiences with students in inclusive classrooms are proved challenging, but could spur creative adaptation with the assistance of specialised "resource rooms"; nonetheless, teacher training for inclusive classrooms was insufficient. *Conclusion:* Despite good policy intentions, greater attention needs to be paid to resourcing of teachers, both in training and in classrooms, if the inclusive classroom model is to reach its potential in Saudi Arabian schools.

Keywords Intellectual Disability, Inclusive Classroom, Integration, High School Teachers

1. Introduction

Research on facilitating the learning of students with intellectual disabilities has increased considerably in the past few decades. Intellectual disability is defined as the

disability which is characterized by limitation in learning as well as problem solving. The disability covers a wide range of behaviours and starts before the age of 18. It includes wide range of disabilities like poor problem-solving abilities, behavioural issues, delay in development of motor skills (walking, running, sitting) and difficulty in following society rules and norms. (Alnahdi, 2019) Scholarly attention has focused on various areas, from developing more nuanced pedagogical paradigms and effective teaching methods, to exploring the experiences of different stakeholders. One direction that many public school systems have taken, presumably based on the outcomes of previous research, is in increasing the allocation of resources to enable greater integration of students with intellectual disabilities into inclusion classrooms (sometimes called inclusioning). This inclusive model of integrating students of all intellectual capabilities moves away from the previously accepted medical model of disability, which considered students with intellectual disability as being mentally incapable of learning age-appropriate educational content, and so resulted in their segregation from same-age students (Thomas & Loxley, 2007). Under the inclusive model, students with intellectual disability are considered capable of learning the same material, and posits that such students have the right to learn in inclusion classrooms where affordances are made to accommodate their specific needs (Thomas & Loxley, 2007).

However, while various studies have touted the benefits of integrated classrooms, such as improvement in the students' communication and social skills (Bennett et al., 1997; Avcioğlu, 2016), considerable criticism has also been raised against integrated classrooms by different stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and parents (van den Bos et al., 2007; Kauffman & Hallahan, 1995). An integrated classroom is defined as the environment where no disabled students learn equally with

their peers. Extra support may be provided to the group but most of the activities involve equal participation. As such, this presents a relevant issue that is the focus of this study.

This study considers the context of Saudi Arabia where the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into integrated classrooms has been slower than in other similarly developed countries. While other countries such as the United States were moving away from the medical model of intellectual disability in the 1980s and 1990s, Saudi Arabia continued to support this model. It was not until quite recently that this position has been increasingly challenged by educators, researchers, and parents (Alanazi, 2012; Aldabas, 2015), leading to the government acquiescing to improving its inclusion policies and introducing integrated classrooms within the public school system (Alanazi, 2012). In relation to these changes, one group of stakeholders that can be considered to have been uniquely affected is the teachers. As integrated classrooms increased, the need for having sufficiently well-trained teachers to handle such classrooms also increased. The government correspondingly allocated resources for this purpose and teachers were expected to undergo the appropriate professional development in order for them to be able to effectively teach integrated classrooms. All teachers were not trained to teach in integrated classrooms as it was not government policy to train all teachers for such environment. This meant that many teachers had to undergo a transition from teaching non-integrated classrooms to teaching integrated ones, which presented new challenges to these teachers, irrespective of whether they were originally trained to teach inclusion or previously segregated special education classes.

This study seeks to understand the challenges and experiences of teachers in Saudi Arabian high schools with regard to teaching integrated classrooms. It is important to define the concept of pedagogical setting. In simplest terms it means the learning setting which is arranged for a particular audience or group of people. In particular, the study seeks to provide some insight into the following issues: How well are teachers in integrated classrooms professionally prepared to handle this pedagogical setting? What are teachers' perspectives about the benefits and disadvantages of integrated classrooms in relation to their classroom experiences? What are the challenges that teachers face in teaching students with and without intellectual disabilities together? What educational policy development implications can be drawn from teachers' experiences that can potentially benefit different stakeholders in the Saudi Arabian school system?

2. Historical Review

2.1. Development of Disability Services and Special Education Policy

Formal attention to special education in Saudi Arabia

began in the late 1950s with the government's recognition of the need to provide specific attention to the education of visually impaired children in the country (Aldabas, 2015). This led to the establishment of state-run schools for the blind. It was not until several decades later that Saudi Arabia would recognize the need to provide parallel services to students with other disabilities, particularly disabilities relating to mental health. The 1970 General Educational Policies of Saudi Arabia detailed 236 articles that described the country's overall goal in the field of education, which was to provide each citizen with sufficient knowledge and skills for them to become a functioning and productive member of society (Rabaah et al., 2016). As with Saudi Arabian legislation in general, the rationale behind the stipulations in this document was explicitly tied to religious beliefs, particularly that of the right of every individual to resources that can enable them to enjoy a good life (Rabaah et al., 2016).

In 2000, the government enacted its disability law which was intended to protect individuals with disabilities in the country and uphold their rights. In this law, a disabled person is defined as any individual who has partial or total inability to function in a stable manner in terms of physical, sensory, mental, and psychological capacity (Al-Jadid, 2013). This law guarantees provisions for services necessary for such people to be able to enjoy a healthy life. The definition adopted by the law is consistent with those accepted by the United Nations, indicating that the government was striving to accord a comparable level of importance to providing essential services for people with disabilities as those in other parts of the world. In terms of education, the law states that people with disabilities have the right to the same level of proper education as other people in the country, and that the state must provide appropriate means for them to be able to achieve such education despite of their disability (Al-Jadid, 2013). Furthermore, the law requires that each learning institution in the country have the means necessary to address the needs of students with disabilities, and that periodic assessment of curricula offered to students with disabilities be conducted in order to ensure that they are effectively addressing these students' educational needs (Al-Jadid, 2013).

Despite of this, an independent report from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in 2002 stated that there was relatively little attention provided by the Saudi Arabian government towards helping people with disabilities gain sufficient training for employment. The report pointed out that although the number of educational institutions in the country with facilities to provide special education had increased considerably, little information has been released about the actual effectiveness of the country's special education programs (JICA, 2002). In contrast to this, a survey conducted by Abahusain (2016) conducted on the parents of female students with intellectual disabilities studying in schools in Riyadh

reported that parents were generally satisfied with the special education services provided to their children.

2.2. Steps towards Inclusive Education

As discussed by Aldabas (2015), until the late 1980s, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education did not have proper facilities to provide inclusive education for students with intellectual disabilities and subscribed to the medical model of intellectual disability in guiding its policy development. This changed considerably in the early 1990s as more research evidence from other countries about the value of integrating students with intellectual disabilities into inclusion classrooms accumulated. The government's first step towards inclusive education was the introduction and implementation of resource rooms in the public school system (Al-Mousa, 2010). Resource rooms were special classrooms located within inclusion public education facilities where students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities could receive special education services that augment their inclusion education (Al-Mousa, 2010). In 2012 the Ministry of Education was able to report that 746 of their public schools have special education classrooms and that students with mild to moderate intellectual disabilities have largely been integrated into inclusion classrooms while having access to additional education through resource rooms.

In 2016 the government released a Special Education Policy document to provide details on its direction in special education across different stakeholders. The policy defines students with disabilities across a broad spectrum of conditions, and highlights the different responsibilities that general teachers, resource room specialists, and support staff have in providing educational services to them (Abahusain, 2016). The document also provides a framework for institutions to construct intervention and teaching plans for students with disabilities who are part of their inclusion student population. However, Abahusain (2016) argues that the government has not done enough to ensure that the policy is fully implemented and that specific aspects of the policy lack detail to enable effective implementation. In particular, while the policy document does stipulate the need for inclusion classroom teachers to be sufficiently trained in inclusive education and to be aware and prepared for accommodating students with intellectual disabilities, it does not provide particulars on how these are to be accomplished. Alnahdi (2019) observed positive impact on intellectually challenged students when they study with normal kids. This is supported by Battal (2016) who points out that while progress has been made in educating teachers on inclusive special education through the introduction of special education departments at Saudi Universities, there is not yet sufficient data gathered on the effectiveness of these programs. It is this informational gap that this study seeks to address.

It is clear that while policy is in place to ensure that students with intellectual disabilities receive proper education in an inclusive environment, there is uncertainty over the extent to which those policies have been effective. One way of examining this is from the perspective of inclusion teachers who are teaching in classrooms which include students with intellectual disabilities. (Alquraini & Rao, 2020). These teachers are different from the specialists in the resource rooms who are assumed to be extensively trained to specifically address the needs of students with disabilities. Rather, these are the teachers that students with intellectual disabilities interact with in the inclusion class, and are expected to be able to help such students adapt and thrive in an inclusive environment. It is not possible to make inclusive classrooms successful without providing proper training to teachers. Standard teacher training in Saudi Arabia are not good enough to equip teacher with necessary skills to deal with intellectually challenged and normal kids in same space. (Schwab, Alnahdi, Goldan, & Elhadi, 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Study Approach

This study utilizes a phenomenological approach based on the work of Farber (1943) and developed in later works such as Finlay (2009) and Schmicking (2010). Phenomenological approach is a type of qualitative tool which is used to analyse individual life experiences. The scope of this research is limited to specific areas. This qualitative approach used focuses on the phenomenon of the fast-growing implementation of inclusive education in Saudi Arabian schools and the corresponding increasing presence of students with intellectual disabilities in inclusion classrooms. This phenomenon is investigated from the experiential perspective of a specified group or groups of stakeholders – namely, inclusion teachers who are tasked with teaching in classrooms with a mix of students with intellectual disabilities and students who do not have such disabilities.

3.2. Participant Sampling

Consistent with a qualitative approach, sampling for the study was conducted purposively. Administrators from public secondary education institutions in Saudi Arabia were contacted and asked about their existing policy implementation of inclusive education. From this, permission was sought to recruit teachers who are currently teaching in their inclusion classrooms that have students with intellectual disabilities. Contact with these teachers are made and those who were willing to participate in the study were scheduled for data collection.

3.3. Recruitment and Participant Description

Three teachers matching the inclusion criteria for the study were recruited. Each of the teachers worked in the same school. Henceforth, the teachers are referred to as Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C. Teachers A and C both taught mathematics while teacher B taught science. Teacher C was the most experienced, with 20 years of teaching, while Teachers A and B had 3 and 2 years of experience respectively. All three teachers were male.

3.4. Data Collection

Data was collected through the use of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were constructed to examine different aspects of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon of interest. In this study, these aspects were identified as follows:

- 1) The extent of participants' academic and professional preparation for teaching in inclusive classrooms.
- 2) The extent of participants' experience with intellectual disability in general.
- 3) Participants' experiences with students who have intellectual disabilities in inclusive classrooms.
- 4) Challenges that participants encounter which are related to have students with intellectual disabilities in inclusion classrooms.
- 5) Participants' evaluations of their current preparedness and effectiveness in fulfilling their responsibilities in inclusive classrooms.

3.5. Data Analysis

In line with the phenomenological approach, the analysis of data was done through descriptive categorization. Participants' responses to questions under each of the five aspects of interest were collated and similarities and differences between them were identified in order to construct frames of experience with respect to the phenomenon of interest.

4. Results

4.1. Academic and Professional Preparation for Teaching in Inclusive Classrooms

All three teachers claimed to have attended school-provided seminars on teaching students with intellectual disabilities in the context of inclusive classrooms. In addition to this, Teacher A recalled taking at least once course during his undergraduate years that extensively involved topics on inclusive education. Teacher B claimed to have attended an external short course on inclusive education the previous year. This course was described by Teacher B as being much more extensive than what was provided by the school, lasting for

4 sessions within the span of one month. As Teacher B recalled, topics discussed included what to expect from inclusive classrooms and students with intellectual disabilities in such classrooms, strategies on how to address student motivation and behaviour for both students with and without disabilities sharing an inclusive classroom, and how to ensure fairness in student assessment. Overall results showed that inclusive learning has many benefits for teacher and student. The main aim of study was to increase motivation for inclusive learning.

4.2. General Experience with Intellectual Disability

Both Teachers A and B claim that their only experience with children that have intellectual disability is in their classrooms. In contrast to this, Teacher C shared having a nephew who was diagnosed with an intellectual disability (namely, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder). (Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder is a type which highlights the problem of attention and excessive activity.) While his nephew is now already an adult, Teacher C recalled the difficulties that the child's parents had experienced concerning the child's education when he was growing up. Teacher C interacted often with his nephew and discussed how, even then, he understood the challenges of having such a student in a classroom. Teacher C said that while there were no inclusive classrooms back then, his nephew was enrolled in a special school and that this school was able to address his nephew's specific needs. The main purpose was to state that disability comes with special needs. The student needs a particular attention from teacher which sometimes is not provided in non-inclusive classrooms.

4.3. Experiences with Students in Inclusive Classrooms

All three teachers have taught in inclusive classrooms for at least the past two years of their careers. Teachers A and C both described their experiences as relatively new and challenging. Teacher A discussed how it had brought a newfound sense of responsibility as a teacher, as he needed to consider not just the general delivery of content to the class, but whether or not the content was actually reaching specific groups of students in the class. According to Teacher C, teaching in inclusive classrooms is considerably more difficult. For him, it was not a simple matter to anticipate the needs of students with intellectual disabilities, especially since these needs actually differed from one student to the next. Both Teachers A and C recognized the importance of resource rooms as a means to augment the instruction that students with intellectual disabilities receive in the inclusive classroom. Teacher C in particular explained that the resource room is necessary because there is simply not enough time to accommodate all students with different needs in the current inclusive setting. In contrast to this, Teacher B discussed the

treatment of students in his inclusive classroom, on the one hand, as the same in that all students were equally deserving of his instruction and attention, but on the other hand as different in that the students has distinctive and varying needs. In his view, the challenge was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each student in the class, regardless of whether they had been diagnosed as having intellectual disability or not, and designing instruction in a way that could play upon the strength of each student and minimize the impact of their weaknesses. In fact all the teachers shared their views with inclusive classroom and it was connected to the major argument of study.

4.4. Challenges in Inclusive Classrooms

Each of the participants identified challenges in teaching in inclusive classrooms. For Teachers A and C, these challenges were perceived as difficulties or barriers that impaired their ability to be able to teach the entire class effectively. Teacher A explained that having students with intellectual disabilities in his classroom meant that there would be students who could not be expected to maintain the same learning pace as the rest of the class, and so recourse was made to set the pace based on their ability to understand. This meant slowing the lessons down, which had some impact on how the entire class was able to perform. The difficulty was more even more frankly expressed in the opinion of Teacher C, who described challenges such as lack of motivation and unwillingness to learn among some of the students with intellectual disabilities in his classroom. In contrast to this, although Teacher B admitted that an inclusive classroom did present a different challenge from a conventional classroom, he also asserted that the challenge is not necessarily better or worse. Rather, he described it as identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the students in the class and working to capitalize on those strengths and limit the impact of the weaknesses. Particularly for the students with intellectual disabilities, he discussed how he identified the best ways that they learn, such as visually or through tactile activities, and how he mixed strategies into his lesson plans. In this way, he was able to teach the entire class with strategies that he felt he knew could reach those with intellectual disabilities better than otherwise. The challenges were correctly identified and there was a good connection with practical exposure.

4.5. Preparedness

Teachers A and C both felt that their preparation to handle inclusive classrooms still need further improvement. Teacher B felt that he was prepared, but that additional training and updating of his skills was something he was interested in pursuing. At least in this case, it seems evident that the in-school training provided to teachers to handle inclusive classrooms is insufficient. All teachers

underwent this training, but only Teacher B underwent more rigorous professional development in the area of inclusive education.

5. Discussion

The results of this study substantiate the conclusions offered in other recent work such as Abahusain (2016) and Battal (2016) regarding the state of inclusive education in Saudi Arabia. Based on the experiences and perspectives of the participants in this study, further professional development is needed to be provided to teachers in Saudi Arabian schools in order for them to be able to optimally teach in inclusive classrooms. The relative competence of Teacher B compared to A and C, seems to reflect the additional voluntary development that Teacher B underwent which the other two did not. Clearly, while the legislation exists to bring about transformational development in Saudi Arabian schools towards being better prepared to address the needs of students with intellectual disabilities in inclusive settings, the implementation of such legislation and policies has not been sufficient. It is recommended that the Ministry of Education should give greater attention to implementation moving forward, in order for it to be able to successfully deliver on its promises to families with children who have intellectual disabilities who are counting on the school system to provide the inclusive education that such children need.

Funding

This project is funded by Jouf University, research project reference (40/102).

REFERENCES

- [1] Abahusain, W. (2016). The Level of Satisfaction of Female Learning Disabilities' Parents with Their Kids' Integration in Regular Schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. *International Education Studies*, 9(6), 196-222. doi:10.5539/ies.v9n6p196
- [2] Alanazi, M. (2012). *Teachers' and parents' attitudes towards inclusion in inclusive schools in Saudi Arabia*. University of Warwick.
- [3] Aldabas, R. A. (2015). Special Education in Saudi Arabia: History and Areas for Reform. *Creative Education*, 6(11), 1158-1167. doi:10.4236/ce.2015.61114
- [4] Al-Jadid, M. (2013). Disability in Saudi Arabia. *Saudi Medical Journal*, 34(5), 453-460.
- [5] Al-Mousa, N. (1999). *Development Process of Special Education in Saudi Arabia*. Riyadh: Directorate General of

Special Education in Saudi Arabia.

- [6] Alnahdi, G. H. (2019). The positive impact of including students with intellectual disabilities in schools: Children's attitudes towards peers with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. *Research in developmental disabilities, 85*, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2018.10.004>
- [7] Alquraini, T. A., & Rao, S. M. (2020). Assessing teachers' knowledge, readiness, and needs to implement Universal Design for Learning in classrooms in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24(1), 103-114*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1452298>
- [8] Avcioğlu, Hasan (2016). Classroom Teachers' Behaviors and Peers' Acceptance of Students in Inclusive Classrooms. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 17(2)*, 32-41. doi:10.12738/estp.2017.2.0034
- [9] Battal, Z. (2016). Special Education in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Technology and Inclusive Education, 5(2)*, 880-886. doi:10.20533/ijtie.2047.0533.2016.0113
- [10] Bennett, T., Deluca, D., & Bruns, D. (1997). Putting inclusion into practice: perspectives of teachers and parents. *Exceptional Children, 64(2)*, 15-18. doi:10.1177/001440299706400108
- [11] Farber, M. (1943). *The Foundation of Phenomenology*. State University of New York Press: Albany.
- [12] JICA (2002). *Country Profile on Disability Saudi Arabia*. Retrieved from: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/MENA/JICA_Saudi_Arabia.pdf
- [13] Kauffman, J., and Hallahan, D. (1995). *The Illusion of Full Inclusion: A Comprehensive Critique of a Current Special Education Bandwagon*. PRO-ED, Inc., Austin, TX.
- [14] L. Finlay. (2009). Debating Phenomenological Research Methods. *Phenomenology & Practice, 3(1)*, 10-15. doi:10.29173/pandpr19818
- [15] Rabaah, A., Doaa, D., and Asma, A. (2016). Early Childhood Education in Saudi Arabia: Report. *World Journal of Education, 6(5)*, 1-18. doi:10.5430/wje.v6n5p1
- [16] Schmicking, D. A Toolbox of Phenomenological Methods. *Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science*. Eds. S. Gallagher and Daniel Schmicking. New York: Springer.
- [17] Schwab, S., Alnahdi, G., Goldan, J., & Elhadi, A. (2020). Assessing perceptions of resources and inclusive teaching practices: A cross-country study between German and Saudi students in inclusive schools. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 65*, 100849. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2020.100849>
- [18] Thomas, G., and Loxley, A. (2007) *Deconstructing Special Education and Constructing Inclusion* (2nd Edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- [19] Van den Bos, K.P., Nakken, H., Nicolay, P.G., and van Houten, E.J. (2007). Adults with mild intellectual disabilities: Can their reading comprehension ability be improved? *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 51(11)*, 830-845. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2788.2006.00921.x