

Inclusion in Saudi Arabia: Present Status and Suggestions for the Future

Abdulkarim Alhossein

Kent State University

### Abstract

This paper presents an overview of inclusive education for students with disabilities and current educational placement options for students with a variety of disabilities in Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, it presents the results of some studies that investigated Saudi educators' attitudes towards inclusion and some studies that examined the effectiveness of inclusion in Saudi Arabia.

Obstacles that may hinder the implementation of successful inclusion practices in Saudi Arabia are discussed and suggestions to improve the implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia are provided.

### Inclusion in Saudi Arabia: Present Status and Suggestions for the Future

The implementation of IDEA in the U.S. has increased the number of students with disabilities in regular schools (Aud, Hussar, Johnson, Kena, Roth, Manning, Wang, & Zhang, 2012). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2011), approximately 98% of students with disabilities are included in the general education classroom. Most of these students (59%) spend 80% or more of their time in the regular classroom with their typical age-appropriate peers. This includes students with mild, moderate, and significant needs. For instance, in the 2009-2010 school year approximately 13% of students with multiple disabilities spent 80% or more of the time in the regular classroom (NCES, 2011). The increased number of students with disabilities in general education classrooms has led to a decrease in separate settings for these students. Now, only 3 % of students with disabilities ages 6–21 are enrolled in separate schools (NCES, 2011).

Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the concept of inclusion has gained more attention in the last two decades. This has precipitated an increasing number of students with disabilities in regular schools (Al-Ahmadi, 2009). In 2006-2007, more than 93% of male students and 73% of female students with disabilities were educated in general schools (Al-Mousa, 2010). This has dramatically increased the number of special education programs in regular schools from 12 in 1994-1995 to 3,171 in 2006-2007, whereas separate schools for students with disabilities increased only slightly, from 54 to 68. This small increase was due to mainly dividing multi-level schools (i.e. elementary, middle, and high school) into three different schools. For example, instead of offering one separate school for elementary, middle, and high school students with disabilities, three schools were established (Al-Mousa, 2010).

### Development of Special Education in Saudi Arabia

Before 1957, individuals with disabilities were not provided any type of education in Saudi Arabia. Their parents were solely responsible for educating and teaching them (Al-Ajmi, 2006). However, this obstacle did not stop some ambitious blind individuals from learning on their own. They had the good fortune of learning braille, so they wanted to teach it to other blind people. They convinced some educational agencies to open evening classes in order to teach braille. As a result, scientific institutes accepted their request and opened these classes in 1957 (Afeafe, 2000). A few years later, in 1960, the Ministry of Education established a new school for blind students and then established a new Department of Special Education. The purpose of this department was to provide social, academic, and vocational education for deaf and blind students as well as students with mental retardation (Almoussa, 2010). The Department of Special Education established many special schools for these populations and in 1994, it started to include students with disabilities (Ministry of Education, 2012). These students were first enrolled in general schools for several years and then, were included in the regular classrooms in nonacademic and academic classes (Almoussa, 2010). However, the special education services are currently provided outside regular classrooms. Students with disabilities are not fully included in the general education population. In fact, the concept and implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia differs somewhat from that in the United States. The next section will explain the concept and implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia.

#### Type of Inclusion and its Implementation in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned previously, the philosophy of inclusion in Saudi Arabia differs from that in the United States in that there are two types of inclusion. The first is full inclusion in which students with disabilities participate in the general education classroom at least 50% of the time, but receive special education services from special education teachers in the resource rooms

(Almoussa, 2010). This type of inclusion targets student with mild needs such as learning disabilities, physical disabilities, behavioral and emotional disturbances, low vision, and communication disorders. These students are expected to learn the same general education curriculum with some accommodations and modifications. They are pulled out from regular classrooms by special educators to receive special education services only in the subjects in which they need extra help. The pullout services are provided based on several variables such as nature and severity of disability, the educational needs of students, and the grade levels (Almoussa, 2010).

The second type of inclusion is partial inclusion. This is devoted to students with moderate and significant needs such as blind, deaf, or hard-of-hearing students as well as students with intellectual disabilities, autism, or multiple disabilities. In this type of inclusion students with disabilities are taught in self-contained classes in regular schools but may participate with their peers without disabilities in non-curricula activities such as arts and physical education (Almoussa, 2010). They also share school facilities with other students (Alquraini, 2011). Moreover, students with mild intellectual disabilities and students with high-functioning autism may participate in some academic classes in the regular classroom. However, they are taught different curricula in the special education classroom. In contrast, deaf, hard-of-hearing, and blind students may participate only in nonacademic classes in the regular classroom and learn the same general education curriculum in the special education classrooms with some accommodations and modifications (Almoussa, 2010).

After describing the implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia, I will discuss research on Saudi educators' attitudes towards inclusion.

Saudi Educators' Attitudes towards Inclusion

A few studies have been conducted to assess Saudi educators' attitudes towards inclusion in general classrooms of students with disabilities. The literature review revealed only five such studies (Al-Abduljabber, 1994; Al-Ahmadi, 2009; Alquraini, 2011, Alfaiz, 2006; Dubis, 1987). They assessed attitudes towards including students with mild, moderate, and severe disabilities. The populations of the studies included male and female educators and special and general educators as well as administrators. They compared participants on several independent variables: gender, previous experience with students with disabilities, types of educational positions (special vs. general educators), family member or relative with disabilities, and educational levels.

The results of these studies are somewhat inconsistent. For example, Alfaiz (2006) and Dubis (1987) did not find significant differences between male and female teachers. However, Al-Abduljabber (1994), Al-Ahmadi (2009), and Alquraini (2011) found significant differences between them. Alquraini indicated that male teachers had a more positive perspective toward inclusion of students with severe disabilities than did female teachers. In contrast, Al-Ahmadi and Al-Abduljabber found that female teachers had more positive attitudes for including students with disabilities. Moreover, Alfaiz found that teachers with special training about autism had more positive attitudes towards including this population. Interestingly, Alquraini found that general educators were more positive in their perspectives regarding including students with severe disabilities than were special educators. Experience with students with disabilities also affected the attitudes of teachers. Those with more experience had more positive attitudes than those without experience (Alquraini, 2011; Al-Abduljabber, 1994). However, Alfaiz (2006) found that teachers with less than five years experiences had more positive attitudes about including students with autism. Finally, one study indicated that having a child or other relative

with disabilities affected the attitudes of teachers. Teachers with a family member or relative with disabilities would be more positive than those without (Alfaiz, 2006). Also, the position within the school (teachers vs. administrators) influenced the attitudes of educators.

Administrators had more positive attitudes about including students with disabilities (Al-Abduljabber, 1994).

Although the overall results of these studies revealed positive attitudes towards including students with different types of disabilities, the findings are limited for several reasons. First, most studies were conducted in a single city. Therefore, no information is available about the attitudes of educators in suburban and rural areas. With this in mind, it is difficult to generalize the results of these studies to all Saudi educators in all cities. Furthermore, the studies included only elementary educators; none of them assessed the attitudes of secondary educators towards inclusion. Including secondary educators would reveal very important information regarding the attitudes of educators since there is great emphasis on including students with disabilities in secondary schools. Finally, all studies used quantitative methods to collect information from participants. They gave participants surveys and asked them to agree or disagree with each statement. So, some educators may have indicated positive attitudes towards inclusion, but in fact may not be willing to work with students with disabilities in their own classrooms. As a result, conducting qualitative research would help to obtain detailed information regarding the attitudes of educators. For example, observing teachers in their classrooms might reveal more important information than just asking them about their opinions or feelings. Researchers would be able to see how teachers actually interact with students with disabilities. Interviewing educators also would help researchers learn valuable information regarding inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom.

### The effectiveness of Inclusion in Saudi Arabia

It has been approximately 17 years since implementing inclusion of students with disabilities began in general Saudi Arabian classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, a few studies have examined the effectiveness of this initiative. The literature review revealed only four studies (Al-khashrami, 1995; Buaksh, 2000; Haron, 1996; Kudar, 1991) that assessed the effects of inclusion on students with disabilities. Furthermore, most of these studies were conducted some ten years ago and included only a small number of students with disabilities.

The first study was by Kudar in 1991. He selected 12 secondary students aged 12 to 19 years with IQ scores ranging from 25 to 55. These students were divided into control and experimental groups. Each group consisted of six students. Before a student was included, his or her self-concepts were tested. Six students were then included in physical education and music with their typical peers. Next, participant self-concept scores before and after inclusion were compared. The results indicated no significant differences on self-concept scores before and after including students with intellectual disabilities.

Al-khashrami (1995) conducted a study to investigate the effects of inclusion on the language, self-concept, and adaptive behaviors for children with mild intellectual disabilities. First, the author selected 39 preschoolers from inclusive and segregated settings. Then, in each setting she divided participants into two groups – control and experimental. The first experimental group consisted of 17 participants (i.e. 11 males and six females) and the second experimental group included nine participants (i.e. five males and four females). As for the control groups, the first consisted of six participants (i.e. one male and five females) and the second group included seven participants (i.e. five males and two females). Finally, she compared the performances of these groups. The results indicated statistically significant

differences between these groups. Preschoolers, in inclusive settings, improved significantly more in language, adaptive behavior, and self-concept than did those in segregated settings.

Haron (1996) studied the effectiveness of inclusion on developing relationships with others with 30 students with mild intellectual disabilities (i.e. 23 males and seven females). The age of participants ranged from five to eight years old. Eleven participants were fully included whereas the remaining participants were included only in non-curricular activities and recess. The results of this study indicated that participants in general education classrooms were able to develop more relationships with others than were those in special education classrooms.

Finally, Buaksh (2000) evaluated the effects of inclusion on self-concept and adaptive behaviors. The author selected 20 female students with mild intellectual disabilities from two settings. Ten students were from segregated settings, the remaining ones came from special education classrooms in a regular school. Participants' ages ranged from five to eight years old and the IQ scores were 50 to 60. Buaksh matched groups based on age, IQ score, and socioeconomic status for families and found no significant differences between groups before starting the study. After including these students, the results revealed significant differences between the two groups on self-concept and adaptive behaviors in favor of students in special education classrooms in the regular school.

However, these results should be read with caution for several reasons. First, no studies randomly selected participants nor randomly assigned them into groups. They mainly focused on students with intellectual disabilities, so it is difficult to generalize the results of these studies to other populations such as students with autism, learning disabilities, deafness, etc.

Obstacles to Successful Inclusion in Saudi Arabia

As mentioned previously, the special education services have improved in Saudi Arabia. Now, students with disabilities can attend regular schools with their typical peers and some students with disabilities may participate in the general education classrooms. However, there are some obstacles to the successful implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia. These include, but are not limited to, providing appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities, lack of effective collaboration among professionals, lack of family involvement, weak administrative support, and shortage of professional development opportunities. This section will be devoted to discussion of these obstacles.

### *Accommodations*

Providing examination and instructional accommodations to students with disabilities is a critical factor in successfully implementing inclusion. These accommodations can help some students with disabilities demonstrate what they have learned and let them access and make progress in the general curriculum (Alquraini, 2012). Research has indicated that instructional accommodations can help some students with significant needs to participate and access the general education curriculum (Alquraini, 2011). Also, examination accommodations may help some students with disabilities to achieve higher test scores. For example, Calhoom, Fuchs, and Hamlett (2000) found that reading questions on a standardized math test to students with learning disabilities can improve their outcomes. Also, providing extended time on an examination may help some students with disabilities to perform more effectively (Weaver, 2000).

Fortunately, Saudi educational agencies require schools to provide accommodations for students with disabilities. For example, it has been indicated that teachers should orally read questions on math tests (Ministry of Education, 2012) but educators rarely follow these regulations (Alnahdi, 2007). In fact, Saudi teachers might not be familiar with making

accommodations for students with disabilities. The literature review revealed that general and special education teachers may not be prepared to provide accommodations to students with disabilities because I reviewed coursework for several universities (e.g. King Saud University and King Abdul-Aziz University) and found none of them offers classes that enable future teachers to make and provide accommodations for students with special needs. The lack of appropriate accommodations in inclusive settings would limit the positive effects of inclusion.

#### *Insufficient Family Involvement*

Parental involvement is a critical component of successful inclusion. It can promote positive outcomes for some students with disabilities (Alquraini, 2012). Therefore, developed countries highlighted and required schools to involve families in their children's education. For example, in the U.S., schools are required to work collaboratively with the parents of children with disabilities to provide special education services for those children (Turnbull, Turnbull, & Webbmeyer, 2010).

Unfortunately, some Saudi parents do not participate in their children's education. Usually, school personnel work alone to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom. According to Alherz (2008), Saudi parents do not effectively participate in determining the needs of their children and rarely participate in preparing and implementing the IEPs. Interestingly, Alnahdi (2007) found a significant difference between special schools and special education programs in regular schools in terms of communication with parents. Educators in special schools regularly communicate with parents to collect information about their children with disabilities more than do teachers in regular schools.

The lack of parental involvement may limit the effectiveness of inclusion in Saudi Arabia because family members can provide IEP teams' important information that can help to

effectively include students with disabilities. For example, family members can assist educators to identify the needs of the students and to find appropriate reinforcements that might work with their child. They may also participate in implementing some academic or behavioral interventions to improve their child's performance. Family members can play important roles in generalizing academic and social skills to different settings such as home and community. For instance, when a student with disabilities learns counting numbers without using objects, a parent can generalize this skill by asking the child to count his or her siblings.

#### *Lack of Effective Collaboration Among Professionals*

Successful inclusion requires collaboration among professionals. professionals must work collaboratively to identify, refer, diagnose, and teach students with disabilities. The main goal of this collaboration is to increase the quality and effectiveness of educational programs for students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Alquraini, 2012). It might be difficult to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom without effective collaboration among special educators, general educators, psychologists, physical therapists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, paraeducators, and others.

Although the necessity of effective collaboration among professionals in successful inclusion, Saudi professionals rarely work collaboratively. According to Alnahdi (2007), general schools lack effective collaboration among professionals to include students with disabilities. For instance, school psychologists usually determine the student's eligibility for special education service without participation from others professionals. Also, Alharz (2008) indicated that parents and other professionals rarely participate with special educators in identifying needs and strengths of students with disabilities and developing appropriate annual goals. She concluded

that the lack of effective collaboration among professionals obstructs the provision of effective and appropriate IEPs for students with disabilities.

#### *Weak Administrative Support*

School administrators play a key role in the implementation of successful inclusion. They can facilitate collaboration among professionals to provide educational services for students with disabilities. They can improve the implementation of inclusion by providing educational resources and emotional support for teachers to successfully include students with disabilities in the general schools (Alquraini, 2012). Without effective and adequate administrative support some teachers might find it difficult to include students with disabilities in their general education classrooms. Yet, the literature review of Saudi studies did not reveal research that assesses the roles of administrators in the implementation of successful inclusion. According to the writer's experiences in Saudi Arabia, when he worked as a special educator for several years, some administrators do not participate effectively to include students with disabilities in the regular classrooms because they may not have enough knowledge about students with disabilities. As a result, they may not be able to support professionals or provide educational resources that teachers need to successfully include these students. Administrators usually expect teachers and other professionals to do their jobs without support and encouragement. As a result, successful inclusion of students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia might be limited.

#### *Lack of Professional Development*

Successful inclusion of students with disabilities cannot occur without adequate knowledge and staff preparation. In fact, it entails professionals acquiring several skills to provide appropriate and effective services for students with disabilities in regular schools (Alqurni, 2012). Teachers and other professionals need extensive pre-service and in-service

development opportunities. These opportunities may include, but are not limited to, effective methods for dealing students with disabilities in regular classrooms (e.g. making accommodations, utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL), etc.), effective ways to communicate and collaborate with parents and other professionals, and effective interventions to teach students with disabilities in general classes. In response to this need, some countries require teachers in inclusive settings to attend several courses and workshops related to working with students with disabilities. For instance, in Singapore educators are required to attend a minimum of 100 hours of professional development per year (Man, 2012). Similarly, Saudi teachers are expected to attend several professional development opportunities in order to improve the implementation of inclusion.

However, some studies (Al-Kahtani, 2009; Alherz, 2008) found an obvious lack of professional development opportunities for Saudi teachers in inclusive settings. Alharz (2008) indicated that 60% of teachers believe that lack of in-service training in terms of preparation and implementing IEPs is one obstacle to provision of effective IEPs. At least 90% of teachers suggested providing more in-service training to overcome this obstacle. Moreover, Al-Kahtani (2009) found that lack of in-service professional development opportunities hinder teachers from using effective strategies to teach students with disabilities. She also found significant differences between teachers who attend more professional development opportunities and those who attend fewer. Teachers who attended more professional development opportunities regarding effective teaching strategies were able to use them (e.g. project-based learning strategies, field trips, role playing strategy, or cooperative learning strategy) in their classrooms, where most teachers usually use traditional teaching methods such as lectures, storytelling, and didactic questioning and they rarely use effective teaching strategies.

### Suggestions for Successful Inclusion in Saudi Arabia

Previously, I talked about several obstacles that hinder successful implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia. There appears to be a pressing need to take steps to increase effective inclusion in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, this section will provide some suggestions that should be taken into account when any attempt is made to improve the implementation of inclusion.

#### *Providing Accommodations*

Saudi educational agencies can attempt several solutions to improve provision of accommodations for students with disabilities. Foremost, they should provide in-service (i.e. for former teachers) and pre-service (i.e. new teachers) training sessions for teachers about accommodating students with disabilities. These training sessions should include hands-on activities because it is not enough to just give teachers some information about making accommodations. Instead, they should practice what they learn in those training sessions. This would give them the opportunity to practice what they learned during the workshops and receive feedback which in turn would make them more prepared to make accommodations for students with disabilities. Colleges can also participate in this effort (Rainforth, 2000). They can offer classes at the bachelor and master levels about effective ways to accommodate students with disabilities in the general education classroom. They might require their students to visit schools to work with real students with disabilities and provide some reasonable accommodations and then write reflections about the experience. During practicums, student teachers should work at both inclusive settings and special schools and should be required to provide some accommodations for their students. This would include examination and instructional accommodations.

#### *Family involvement*

There are many suggestions that can help school personnel involve parents of a child with disabilities in the implementation of successful inclusion. One is to meet with parents after their child has been identified as having a disability. During this meeting, educators should educate parents about the importance of their participation in their child's education. For example, school personnel may inform parents that teachers may not be able to accurately know a child's needs if the parents do not participate in this process. It would be also difficult for educators to determine the effectiveness of some interventions and the generalization of skills at home. Then, teachers should ask parents about appropriate ways to communicate and meet with them. Additionally, during IEP meetings educators should listen carefully to parents and try to understand them (Turnbull et. al., 2010) and emphasize the importance of parental participation. When possible, other parents may participate in encouraging some parents to be involved in an IEP team (Alquraini, 2012). Perhaps active parents of children with disabilities could meet with passive parents of such children to discuss how parental participation has increased academic and social performance. Another suggestion could be assigning active roles to parents in their child's education. For instance, educators might ask parents to implement some interventions at home, or they might collect data about target behaviors to assess the generalization of skills to other settings.

#### *Effective Collaboration Among Professionals*

Administrators play an important role in facilitating collaboration among professionals, so they should have enough knowledge about special education services for students with disabilities and the role of each professional to facilitate collaboration. Without such knowledge it would be difficult for collaboration to occur within inclusive settings. Also, administrators should make sure professionals have appropriate and enough time to work collaboratively in

providing special education services for students with disabilities (Alquraini, 2011). If they do not have enough and appropriate time for meeting and discussing the needs of each student, each professional will work alone with the students with disabilities.

#### *Administrative Support*

Saudi principals should take steps to support successful inclusion. For instance, they should immediately solve conflicts among professionals or between parents and professionals. By doing that, they would create a positive climate that fosters collaboration and respect among all participants in the implementation of inclusion. Also, they should provide educational resources and emotional support for educators (Alquraini, 2012). For example, teachers may encounter difficulties in dealing with some students with disabilities in their classrooms, so principals should support these teachers, to overcome such difficulties. For instance, they might provide teachers with teaching aids to assist in teaching these students.

#### *Pre-service Training Programs and Professional Development*

One effective method to improve implementation of inclusion is to offer some professional development opportunities (Alquraini, 2012). Thus, educational agencies should offer workshops about several topics that can have positive impacts on inclusion. For example, they might train teachers about using evidence-based practices in the general education classroom. Teachers may attend workshops that present effective ways to utilize UDL and differentiate instruction to address the needs of students with disabilities in the general education classroom. These and other topics can help improve the implementation of inclusion by assisting teachers to acquire necessary skills to include students with disabilities. Furthermore, education teacher programs at universities should prepare future teachers to include students with disabilities. They may provide future teachers with information about characteristics of students

with disabilities and how to teach them in the general education classroom. Teachers may be instructed about critical factors that promote the effectiveness of inclusion for students with disabilities. These efforts could be done through coursework and field-based experience with students with disabilities. It would give future teachers the opportunity to practice what they have learned and receive feedback about it, so it would be easier for them to include students with disabilities in their classrooms.

### Conclusion

Recently, several efforts have been taken in Saudi Arabia to improve educational services for students with a variety of disabilities. For example, more students with disabilities are now included in the general education classrooms and concerted efforts will continue to include more at their maximum extent. However, these efforts have encountered several obstacles. As suggested, these obstacles could be overcome by providing appropriate and reasonable accommodations, effective collaboration among professionals, promoting family involvement, sufficient administrative support, and offering pre-service training program and professional development opportunities. Finally, there is a pressing need for future research to study the effectiveness of inclusion and factors that can promote the implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps future researchers could use randomized controlled trials to examine the effect of inclusion on students with and without disabilities. These studies should assess the effects of inclusion on social, academic, and communication skills and they should include students with a variety of disabilities such as learning disabilities, autism, and severe disabilities. The results of these studies should guide the improvement of inclusion in Saudi Arabia.

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