

The Views of Teachers and Parents of Special Education Schools in Saudi Arabia

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Summary

This research examines the views of teachers and parents of special schools in Saudi Arabia, exploring the schools' strengths and disadvantages, as well as their impact on teachers, parents, and students with disabilities. The respondents' key views of the schools are identified, including the areas of consensus and conflict, and recommendations are made for the future, based on the findings. This research concerns a specific special education school in Saudi Arabia, and focuses on the understanding of special education in the country. The approach to the study is targeted and qualitative, with the six participants, three teachers and three parents, intentionally selected. The data collection is conducted via semi-structured interviews that explore the participants' views of special education in Saudi Arabia. A number of issues emerge from the results, and one raised by all three teachers is the need to improve school facilities. Although all three parents report that their children clearly benefited from attending a special school, two felt that the offering was insufficient, in terms of the teaching methods, and of supporting cognitive skills.

Keywords: *special school, disabilities, parents, teachers, Saudi Arabia.*

1. Introduction

Professionals in both mainstream and special education go to great lengths to improve their teaching skills, in order to support their students' effective learning. A teacher helps their students to overcome the educational barriers associated with any physical, cognitive, social, or psychological difficulties they experience; the fewer the children with obvious learning difficulties, the more successful the teaching. Successful teaching requires that the school education system considers the needs of students with disabilities (Frederickson, 2004). The main aim of special schools is to implement inclusive education, and to consider the different needs of individuals with special needs through curriculum development (Norwich and Gray, 2006). The study programmes of the national curriculum in many countries have been adopted by numerous special schools wishing to implement an appropriate, relevant, and comprehensive curriculum, and visionary education professionals can create harmony between the legal and teacher requirements in designing an effective curriculum.

The key role any effective special education school is helping its students to gain confidence through the learning process, in order that they can contribute as much as possible to their community (Ware et al., 2009). Other roles played by special schools include providing a rich and stimulating experience for their students, and improving their skills to prepare them for independent adult life, as well as contributing to a number of essential aspects of their students' personal development, providing students with a learning experience that boosts their confidence (Ware et al., 2009). Building good connections between special schools and wider society and mainstream schools engenders several benefits, including breaking the existing isolation of certain special needs schools, and creating equal opportunities for all children.

In addition, special schools can play an important role in establishing mutual interaction with mainstream schools, in order to maintain a balanced, flexible, and relevant curriculum (Lambert, 2003), and Norwich and Gray (2006) argued that teachers should be aware of every child's learning difficulties. The successful teaching of students with learning disabilities requires a full awareness of how to use stimulation and resources imaginatively, and how to engage all children, including those with academic ability and those with severe and multiple learning disabilities, in activities that challenge their creativity and intellectual participation. Clear and successful learning outcomes require effective planning, including inventing methods that promote student confidence and achievement, as well as providing constant feedback. The teacher should employ techniques such as questions and explanations to improve and expand their students' knowledge and identify their needs. All learning methods should be consistent with the children's needs and curriculum requirements, employing the appropriate use of professional skills and effective time management (Ware et al., 2009; Department of Education and Skills, 2003).

Special schools can make several important contributions to the wider education process, including the promotion of low student-teacher ratios, the employment of a variety of experienced and supporting professional staff,

and the development of individuals who, upon reaching adulthood, will be able to communicate with children in an understanding and understandable manner (Department of Education and Skills, 2003).

In addition, special schools should recruit professionals who are able to develop curricula for children with different needs, as well as creating new methods for its delivery that ensure that individuals with disabilities feel valued and respected, and which encourage them to learn independently. Success in this area encourages such students to work harder and for longer, consequently becoming knowledgeable and experienced, and able to participate in various high level activities.

2. Method

The main purpose of this research study was to examine the views of teachers and parents of special schools in Saudi Arabia, identifying the strengths and limitations perceived by the parents, and the impact of such schools on teachers, parents, and students with disabilities. It also sought to identify areas of agreement and conflict in the participants' views, and to provide recommendations for the future development of special schools and the students they serve. The study also explored how teachers and parents can contribute to the success of special education. After reviewing the relevant topics in the literature, and collecting the necessary data, a semi-structured interview procedure was employed.

As the respondents' views and culture were the main elements of the study, different types of interviews were considered, and the semi-structured interview format determined to be most appropriate for the purpose of this study, due to its structure and flexibility, since a range of responses were required. The semi-structured interview model enables the collection of a range of information about the respondents (May, 2011). For this study, specially prepared questions were posed to the teacher and parent participants, with any further questions that arose during the conversation asked in the next conversation. Since this type of interview is time-consuming, and the sample size is therefore limited to a small number of participants (Bell & Waters, 2018), six participants were selected for this study, the interviews with whom lasted approximately 20-40 minutes each. Interviews can be recorded by the interviewer in the form of note-taking, or audio-recording, however this can cause issues regarding the interpretation of the responses, as the interviewer's own emotions and beliefs can affect the reliability of the data collected. While Bell & Waters, (2018) argued that such bias is inevitable, it can be avoided, at least in part, by the interviewer seeking to remain rational and objective when analysing the data collected. Nevertheless, in the case of this study, although

all efforts were made to analyse the data objectively by recording every interview and transcribing all the responses, the validity of the data collected could not be fully verified.

An inductive and learning-theoretical topic analysis was chosen for the interpretation of the interview results, due to its flexibility, systematic approach, and clarity. Although the flexibility of a thematic analysis can limit the interpretive aspects of the data, it can also highlight the similarities and differences across the dataset, and generate unexpected insights (Braun and Clarke, 2012), which was appropriate for the aim of this research study. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), a study is driven by a theoretical interest in an area.

The analysis of this study was theoretical and inductive as it was data-driven, and learned because it was interpretive. The data gathered from all previous research sources, and from the interviews conducted for the present study, was coded according to the specific research questions (RQ). The findings were then interpreted according to standard methods of analysis, with a focus on the problems reported by the teacher and parent participants. The interviews were conducted with six participants: three parents between the ages of 40 and 50, whose children were registered at special schools as students with disabilities, and three teachers from a special school, aged between 30 and 45 years. The aim of the research was explained to the respondents before the data was collected and analyzed, namely to examine the views of teachers and parents of special schools for children with disabilities. During the interviews, four particular aspects related to the research questions were considered:

- Parental concerns regarding children with disabilities in special schools;
- The views of teachers of special schools for children with disabilities;
- Barriers that prevent the success of children with disabilities in special schools;
- The teaching qualifications required for teaching at special schools.

For documentation purposes, all the points discussed during the semi-structured interviews with each participant, conducted in a school-based setting, were audio-recorded with the interviewees' consent. Each recording was annotated and saved after the recorded information was transcribed. The transcribed data was categorized, sorted logically, and coded, with the relevant explanations in brackets. During the interviews, both similar and different themes were explored.

Ethical issues should be considered in any investigative study (Cohen et al., 2009), and the British Educational Research Association issued ethical guidelines requiring researchers to consider all questions from the respondents' perspective (BERA, 2018). These ethical issues include confidentiality, anonymity, the participants' right of withdrawal, and informed consent. Before commencing the interview, the participants should be informed about the aim and details of the study, and should be assured that any personal data will be kept confidential, and that any identifying information will be anonymized using pseudonyms or other such tools. In addition, they should be informed that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Cohen et al., 2009). Privacy ethics emphasize that under no circumstances should respondents' personal data be made public (Cohen et al., 2009), so accordingly the participant names, school names, and addresses in the present study were omitted, and pseudonyms employed instead of real names. The participants were satisfied that their privacy was protected, and that no actual names and addresses would appear in the published results. Signed written consent was obtained from each respondent after they had been informed of the purpose and nature of the study, and the fact that the researcher was the only person charged with interpreting the data. In addition, Cohen et al. (2009) emphasized that the researcher should obtain permission from the relevant school board to conduct any interview(s) within a school, as well as permission to access data sources. Due to the limited time available to conduct the present research, all the interviews were conducted outside the official institutions, with the consent of the respondents. At the completion of the study, all the participants were able to request a final report with the detailed research results.

3. Findings

This section describes the research findings. It will also present the analysis of the findings collected from the interviews with the three teachers and three parents, supported by participant quotations. The most common themes are presented under the relevant research questions.

RQ1: What are the views of parents and teachers regarding their children's experiences and education in special schools?

A number of issues emerged when the parents and teachers were asked about their views of the experiences and education of children in special schools. The first issue raised by all three teachers was the need to provide more services in this area, and to improve special education facilities, while the second, also raised by all the teachers interviewed, was the need to educate students with

disabilities in all aspects of their daily life, in order that they can become more independent.

Speech and language training for children with disabilities is crucial, but there are many problems involved in tackling this, including the lack of specialists in this field. I also hope that the individual education programme [employed] is the tried and tested programme in the education of this group, and takes individual characteristics into account better. For example, I hope to have a specialized space for specific teaching tools that encompasses a range of tangible and concrete teaching tools. (Teacher 1)

As a teacher of students with disabilities ... to empower them in all aspects of life, like going to the bathroom [and] doing their daily grocery shopping, I hope to bring out the best in my students, no matter what the educational nature or services. For example, to provide unique, excellent healthcare services to students in both local and private schools. (Teacher 3)

I wish and wish that our sons and brothers who suffer from a disability receive education, encouragement, and an appropriate and kind approach to help them develop their awareness, skills, and knowledge with the help of competent and dedicated teachers to develop and expand what they love. This could be supported by building and improving facilities ... fully prepared for the needs of these children, who we all care about and should sincerely help ... My main goal is to enable children with disabilities to learn the basics of activities and skills of daily living, so that they can rely on themselves as much as possible, and not have to rely too much on others, except when necessary, and also to provide the appropriate school environment. (Teacher 2)

Meanwhile, all three parents indicated that their children's special education had a clear, positive impact, although two felt that the school's teaching methods and coverage of cognitive skills were insufficient:

A clear, positive impact on my son's [developmental] level is that he gained certain academic skills and improved his language skills. For example, he learned counting, including electronic counting, he can also distinguish some colours, knows his senses, and his ability to hold a pen has improved. Also, his speaking and speaking skills have improved, and he can now say every word you point to, and is now able to form a sentence. (Parent 1)

It's having a direct, positive impact on my son, but not in the way I was hoping. It has helped him to some degree, because he used to see his younger and older brothers going to school, which had a bad effect on his psyche, but after he got accepted into the special school it got better, as he is now going to school as well. In his school he does physical

activities that make him tired and he needs to rest. He feels a bit more like his normal brothers, but not to the extent that I expected. (Parent 2)

Yes, but not enough, as the following points make clear: the life skills they acquire at special schools are very good, [but] from my point of view, the learning skills are low for the following reasons: the curriculum is not developed, [and] I saw no role for the teaching materials in question. In addition, the pedagogical experience of the teachers is not sufficient. (Parent 3)

RQ2: What barriers do the parents and teachers identify that children with disabilities in special schools face?

The teachers and parents identified several barriers they believed children with disabilities face in special schools. These fell under three particular categories: the infrastructure of special schools, such as the lack of fully equipped buildings; insufficient human resources, for example, a lack of professional competence; and deficiencies in organizational skills, such as a lack of teamwork.

[There is a] lack of [suitably] equipped buildings for them, as well as [a lack of] suitable teaching aids. Also, the tedious routine task of filling out certain declarations, as well as the pressure that the work team is under. The failure of psychologists to properly diagnose students with a disability. Parents' ignorance and frustration in dealing with such a child, without any knowledge [of their needs]. Not allowing the teacher to teach the student the necessary skills. The classrooms for children with disabilities are overcrowded. (Teacher 3)

Poor organization, insufficient learning environment, weak or no potential educational resources, and a lack of team spirit among workers and teachers. For example, sometimes in physical education or art class, the teacher needs teaching aids that are not available. Some teachers need more training to deal with students with disabilities. (Teacher 2)

There are many aspects that are seen as barriers to fulfilling the learning process of a child with disabilities, such as a lack of cooperation between parents and teachers, the education level of the family, the low income of the families affected, a lack of learning aids and necessary skills, a lack of support services for the special schools, a lack of compatibility between teaching and treatment teams, a lack of clear learning methods and curricula for the group, the heavy burden on the class teacher in creating the curriculum and plans and providing the appropriate means and tools for teaching, and sometimes incorrect assessments and evaluations. (Teacher 1)

Meanwhile, the barriers identified by the parents included the following:

A lack of expertise in these schools, a lack of communication and collaboration in some cases, a lack of schools with adequate resources, a lack of the resources required, a lack of work planning, or sometimes it is just so inadequate, and the lack of training and job improvement programmes ... I think most of the main obstacles are finding a better educational structure than the current one. We also need educational material of a high level, similar to that in private and public institutions. Teachers must be appreciated more, and receive physical and financial rewards and incentives. Schools and school environments need to increase their resources and update them regularly, when required. (Parent 1)

I firmly believe in enrolling children with different disabilities in one class, by age group. You will find a tall, older child in a class alongside smaller children, and this affects the younger normal students negatively. The presence of severely disabled children or young people means that [a child sometimes refuses to attend] the same school. In addition, [regarding the] curricula and study programmes, there is a lack of educational programmes to support the main curricula. (Parent 2)

The obstacles are as many, as follows: non-specialized teachers. For example, using the regular teaching methods for ordinary children for those with disabilities. The lack of professional approaches to addressing the problems of those with disabilities. The lack of cooperation between parents and teachers. For example, if there is no continuation booklet for the child to inform the parents about what the child is learning, this is a big problem for addressing their disability needs. Some teachers may object to, or not accept a parent writing a child's homework, but some agree. (Parent 3)

RQ3: To what extent do the parents feel they are part of the special school?

A strong theme that emerged among the parents that was also mentioned by one teacher was the fact that parental cooperation can often take one of two extreme forms: excessive attention, or gross negligence. Meanwhile, the other two teachers indicated that parental involvement often appears to be limited. Nevertheless, all the teachers felt that parental cooperation plays a key role in the implementation of education for students with special needs.

In fact, there are only two sides, either excessive attention from a family who want to improve their child's learning ability and quality, and who are very cooperative, but find

the results unsatisfactory; or excessive negligence and lack of cooperation with the school, despite constant attempts to contact them, which causes an additional burden on the teachers, and in turn has a negative impact on the teaching process. (Teacher 1)

There is very limited cooperation, mainly focused on transport and buses and children's health. This is, of course, due to the neglect of the parents in their child's upbringing. For example, I remember once when a child had just entered the institution, he started vomiting and had severe stomach pains. I hurried to call his father to tell him about his son's condition and sent for him to take care of his son. (Teacher 2)

In fact, it is quite limited, although it is vital for the parents to work with the teachers and administration, as most do not have the experience to deal with them at home, which leads to depression, frustration, and definitely a worsening of the child's disability. (Teacher 3)

Meanwhile, two of the three parents interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with the special school, because they felt that the teachers did not like, and did not want to work with the family. However, the third parent seemed to be satisfied with the level of parental and family involvement in special education, a different view that might be explained by the parent's level of awareness and knowledge of special needs.

Yes, of course there is daily attention paid to keeping track of the daily school records, in which the teacher records his remarks and checks in with Dad. In addition, we need to visit our son at school from time to time, and have face-to-face meetings with the relevant people there, to understand and follow our son's level of progress. Also, at the end of each week, we get a weekly report on the skills my son has learned, and his progress. (Parent 1)

There is indeed some collaboration between parents and teachers, but not to a satisfactory degree; it is often a routine exam at student level. The institution usually says that our son is the best in his class, and maybe the best in the whole institution! But there really isn't any significant impact in improving my son's literacy skills, except in certain simple things. I admit that I am also responsible and have to work and help to improve his skills. (Parent 2)

As a result of my experience with his teachers, I found that some of them, may Allah reward them, enjoy working with the family and like to help the child, and accept certain suggestions from them. On the other hand, others never help, neither the child nor his family. What the child learns in class depends on the personality of the teacher at the end of the day. (Parent 3)

RQ4: To what extent do the teachers have the training and skills necessary to teach in special schools?

A strong theme that arose, and was mentioned by the majority of the parents (two out of three) was that while some teachers have some of the skills necessary to teach in special schools, they are often young and lack experience and training, and there is therefore a need for the government to issue an increased number of, and more creative financial incentives to train in the profession. In addition, there was a belief that teachers without the appropriate knowledge, experience, or support may lack confidence in their skills. Nevertheless, one of the parents believed that the teachers did have the skills necessary to address the needs of the diverse group of students in a special school.

I believe that the teacher has the ability required to deal with my son, because he is trained and has to deal with different cases. I found this with some teachers, may Allah reward them, who taught my son how to pronounce certain letters that he used to have difficulty pronouncing. (Parent 1)

I believe that some teachers in this school have some of the skills necessary to deal with my son, but I don't think that these skills allow them to perform the task at the level required. They need their management to increase their financial rewards, and they also need to increase the amount of qualifying sessions and morale incentives. (Parent 2)

The teachers available are good, but still young. They lack experience and training, but in general they are willing and excellent at carrying out their work. (Parent 3)

RQ5: To what extent are the teachers in special schools attuned to the needs of children with disabilities?

A strong theme that emerged, and was raised by all three teachers, was the belief that special schools are the best place for children with disabilities to receive the attention required by their needs. They felt that integrated classes were also useful, but only for a minority of children with disabilities, and that special schools in particular have many advantages that regular schools lack.

The type of disability a child has, and their abilities, actually determine the appropriate place to get the attention they need. I believe that in most cases inclusive classes are the best environment for students to gain [an education alongside typically developing students] in regular schools. They can participate in extracurricular activities and certain other classes with the regular students, such as technical and sports lessons. No one can deny the role of

special schools, in particular they provide certain specialized services that ordinary schools do not provide. This may not be possible in inclusive classes, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy. (Teacher 1)

In my opinion, the presence of a child with a disability in a special school is very good, but not for moderate and severe disability cases, and I think the inclusion of children with disabilities in integrated classes in mainstream schools should be limited to those who have only mild disabilities ... Yes, I do think that very strongly, because special schools have many advantages that mainstream schools lack. For example, measurement tests and intelligence tests, which only exist in private schools. (Teacher 3)

Yes, and this will certainly lead to an increase in the child's learning abilities, which will eventually lead to positive growth and improvement in their life, and in addition to the right education, will also help them to adapt to society and to their [typically developing] peers. It will also improve their overall mental health, self-esteem, and confidence-building process. (Teacher 2)

4. Discussion

This study found that while some of the respondents supported the inclusive education approach, others expressed frustration with the low level of expertise of special education teachers, believing that their children were not developing as they should. However, their support of inclusive education was for negative reasons, namely because the special schools in the present study were perceived to be underfunded and failed in their purpose as a result. If the Saudi government invested significantly in such schools, creating better facilities, and most importantly ensuring that the teachers received specialized and better training, the parents of children with disabilities would likely have more confidence in these schools. In addition to this lack of appropriate funding and teacher expertise, the literature review identified several additional global issues that are currently also present in Saudi Arabia, including the fact that the needs of students with only mild disabilities are often neglected, individual education plans are not provided, and the provision of speech and language pathology is ignored in too many cases. In addition, practical difficulties in Saudi Arabia related to the link, or lack thereof, between regulation and implementation means that many students with disabilities do not receive the education to which they are legally entitled.

This study also identified areas in which there is a lack of collaboration between parents and schools, due either to a parental lack of interest in their child's education, or because they feel that the teachers are unwilling to work

with them. Moreover, many students in Saudi special schools are unable to see their family on weekdays, illustrating a lack of holistic, networked approach to their education. In addition, students with disabilities are often referred to underfunded special schools that do not meet their needs, or do not develop their social skills adequately, which means that they are unable to continue their education beyond the age of 18 years.

It can be argued that too many parents do not work closely with these schools in addressing the various matters related to their children's education and special needs. This may be especially the case in the special education of students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia, and further research should therefore be conducted to determine the reasons for the success or failure of the special education sector in the country. According to this study's findings, the sector requires significantly more investment, with teachers trained more effectively and given both more incentives and significantly more support. In addition, a more effective curriculum should be developed, as children with special educational needs require more attention than typically developing students, and current practice in Saudi Arabia does not appear to reflect this adequately.

5. Conclusion

This study employed semi-structured interviews with three parents of children with disabilities, and three teachers at a special school in Saudi Arabia, in order to assess the participants' views of their experience of the special education of their children. The findings demonstrated that all three teachers highlighted the lack of adequate facilities at their school, and the failure to provide effective training and support in all aspects of the students' lives to enable them to live more independently in adulthood. Meanwhile, two of the three parents interviewed also considered the quality of the teaching, and the school coverage of cognitive abilities, to be inadequate.

In addition, the findings revealed the presence of insufficient infrastructure, insufficient human resources, a lack of professional competence, and a lack of teamwork and cooperation, both between the teachers and between the parents and the schools. Moreover, insufficient attention was reportedly paid to developing an effective, appropriate curriculum, to students' individual learning styles, or to providing appropriate support and incentives to staff. The analysis of the findings evidenced an apparent disconnect on the part of the parents in cooperating with their child's school, as the teachers reported that the parents were either overly involved, to the point where they appeared not to trust the teachers to do their job properly, or overly disinterested to the point of carelessness. Meanwhile, some of the parents reported that their children's teachers were

unwilling to work with them, and that they were often not suitably qualified for such a challenging role. It can be argued that these issues are damaging for the children concerned, who require an holistic, integrated approach to home and school that focuses on their social, cognitive, and academic development, in order to progress effectively in their education.

However, all of those interviewed also commented positively about the school; all the parents perceived benefits in the education their child received, believing it to be the best place for their education, and expressing gratitude to the teachers they had encountered. Meanwhile, all the teacher expressed a desire to help students with disabilities as much as possible, and cared deeply about their work.

These findings implied that the Saudi special education system could be successful were there the will to make it so, and to address the current lack of funding, poor organisation, lack of facilities, lack of proper teacher training, and most importantly the lack of an holistic, inclusive approach to education with thought and care given to the process at every level of regulation and delivery to ensure the success of special schools in Saudi Arabia. These are all factors to which the government must respond if the needs of future generations of children with disabilities are to be addressed appropriately.

By combining the findings of this study with those of other research in the field, it is possible to make certain recommendations for improving special schools in Saudi Arabia that contribute positively to the changes that are already occurring, as the government seeks to improve the country's special education system. The primary recommendation is that policy makers should assess current legislation relating to students with disabilities, reviewing all laws and regulations relating to the existing practice of special schools and reforming them in line with those of developed countries. In addition, the Ministry of Education should appoint a professional team to assess and report on the performance of the country's special schools and the quality of their services annually. This regular, periodic report should be published and made available to public education institutions as a means of assessing how best to improve special education services, with emphasis placed on providing more support to teachers, in order to improve their performance. The key elements of successful teacher performance should be strengthened, along with regular curriculum development, and closer, more effective

communication with parents. In addition, the process for identifying children who are eligible for special education should be reviewed, based on the insights of the multi-experience team, as well as the elements discussed above. Finally, special educational projects should be supported by accompanying offerings, such as ergo therapy, physiotherapy, and speech therapy.

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