

Teaching Assistants as a Prerequisite for Best Practice in Special Education Settings in Saudi Arabia

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Summary

The Saudi Arabian Special Education Regulations define the role and requirements from teaching assistants within the educational process. Although all public special education programs are subject to such regulations, their implementation in practice sometimes appears contradictory. Therefore, special educators frequently encounter a range of problems when they fail to comply with such regulations. This article discusses how teaching assistants influence the teaching practices delivered to students with disabilities in special education settings. A qualitative case study approach was conducted using 22 semi-structured interviews. The results suggest a need to focus on the role of the teaching assistant in special education classes to ensure exposure to effective learning practices for students with disabilities. Based on these findings, a number of important implications for future practice, in terms adopting appropriate provisions are suggested.

Keywords:

disabilities, Saudi Arabia, special schools; teaching assistants.

1. Introduction

There is growing concern that some special education teachers and institutions are being disadvantaged due to a shortage of teaching assistants (Ravalier et al., 2021), or inadequate integration of teaching assistants and poor training. A significant component of the teaching assistant's job is working with and assisting special education teachers, and there is ample opportunity for individual learning as well as group work. Teaching assistants may also be required to work with students who are not performing as expected (Hedegaard-Soerensen et al., 2018).

Teaching assistants can have a positive impact on the class by allowing special education teachers to spend more time teaching the curriculum and less time on students' schoolwork. Teaching assistants and special education teachers collaborate continuously to plan, teach, and assess students (Hedegaard-Soerensen et al., 2018). Therefore, educators with different areas of expertise can collaborate to teach subjects in the same classroom. Research on the role of teaching assistants shows that this type of

collaboration not only benefits students socially, behaviorally, and academically, but also that differentiated instructional strategies improve the accessibility of content for students (Jard et al., 2021).

Although the number of teaching assistants working with students with special educational needs has increased in recent years, research on teaching assistants has been sparse (Chan et al., 2020). Many children with disabilities receive help from teaching assistants, and the use of teaching assistants is recognized as an effective method of supporting learners with disabilities. Teaching assistants are regarded as a necessity, allowing teachers to focus on the quality of their teaching by augmenting teacher-supported learning. In addition, teaching assistants ensure students receive the individual attention they need (Cassim and Moen, 2020).

However, Rama et al. (2020) found that minimizing interactions between teaching assistants and students in fact increases opportunities to optimize interaction and learning. This approach has been shown to increase engagement in activities, as well as accountability (Rama et al., 2020). Likewise, students who receive the most support make less progress than those who receive less support (Blatchford et al., 2012). In the same vein, Sharma and Salend (2016) argue that unclear job roles, limited training opportunities, and communication problems can result in teaching assistants taking on important teaching, leadership, and socialization roles. Evidence suggests that teaching assistants' belief in their self-efficacy is associated with training (Breyer et al., 2020).

Similarly, Symes and Humphrey (2012) found that students with disabilities were less likely to be socially involved or work independently in the presence of a teaching assistant. This finding was later supported by Bowles (2017), who determined that despite an increase in the number of teaching assistants working in schools with special educational needs, student education and training has rarely been adequate. In fact, teaching assistants do not see much need for training in many areas of relevance to their professional role (Carter et al., 2018). Similarly,

Troeva (2015) drew attention to the possibility that teaching assistants are detrimental to academic performance, due to issues related to assistant use, training, and teaching practices, which calls for a reconsideration of the way in which this resource is used. Vogt et al. (2021) found that teaching assistants spent more time interacting with SEN pupils than the teacher, and that they used approaches such as telling pupils how to tackle tasks and providing answers, rather than a co-constructive approach that would include scaffolding.

2. Method

In this research study, which has a very specific topic, a quantitative approach would not have been suitable. As Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) have suggested, a qualitative approach is the only way in which a researcher can produce a detailed account of society. Additional information is needed to answer all the research questions. Qualitative data is important to better understand the complex and subtle issues of teaching assistants and the impact this can have on the provision of educational services for students with disabilities in special education settings in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the qualitative method was considered to be the most appropriate for the current study's research goals due to its in-depth nature and examination of experiences, interactions, human behaviour, and cultural and social relationships related to the research topic. For all the above reasons, it was decided to use qualitative research methods to achieve the research goals.

The study was conducted in two different special schools for students with disabilities in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The study involved 22 people, including five parents of children with disabilities, five special education teachers, and two special education teachers from two different special education institutions. One of the special education institutions selected employs teaching assistants to support teaching practices and the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities, while the other has no such facilities. Each selected participant represents a different dimension to be considered in the research, as well as his or her experience and position in these environments. The interviews were conducted at a date, time and place that had been agreed with the researcher. Voice recordings were made using an iPhone app and then transferred to a computer for transcription. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed and then translated into English. The research team conducted a literature review to identify possible areas of investigation in the interviews. Therefore, the table contains questions about the required teaching and learning support and cooperation with other professional groups.

The study used systematic and flexible methods of thematic data analysis presented by Braun and Clarke (2012). The data analysis revealed several themes and sub-themes. The thematic analysis identified a number of issues that may arise with regard to collaborating with other professionals to achieve best practices when working in special education settings with students with disabilities. The thematic analysis strategy presented by Braun and Clarke (2012) was considered a suitable method of data analysis for this study.

The link to ethics should be considered both during the planning phase and the actual research process. Babbie (2012) emphasizes that it is important to remember from the outset that ethical issues may dictate particular research methods or require particular elements in research design. As Miller et al. (2012) argues, potential ethical conflicts are particularly important in qualitative research because the focus is primarily on the study and description of individual experiences and natural situations. Qualitative researchers therefore need to be aware of the potential ethical issues that may arise from such interactions. This was taken into account in this study.

3. Findings and Discussion

As mentioned above, the present study examined how the effectiveness of teaching assistants' collaboration affects the teaching of students with disabilities in special education settings. Findings were determined primarily as a result of comparing and contrasting responses from key informants from one of the selected special education institutions where teaching assistants are employed to support classroom practice and the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities. The other special education institution selected has no such policy or provision. This approach was chosen to allow all stakeholders to focus on the potential lessons to be learned from considering each type of deployment in order to improve future practice.

The study found that the quality of public special education provision for students with disabilities is affected by a lack of teaching assistants or other support staff in the classroom. This was illustrated by comparing private and public provision, noting that in private special needs settings the availability of teaching assistants and support staff appears to be a feature of support for teachers and learners with disabilities. In public special needs settings, this is not the case, leading to increased pressure on the educators of students with disabilities.

A number of studies have identified the significant benefits of providing teaching assistants (Moran and Abbott, 2002; Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong, 2005; Lewis et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2011; Devecchi et

al., 2012; Park, 2014; Sharples et al., 2015). It has been suggested that learning outcomes are only more effective when special education teachers work collaboratively with teaching assistants in the classroom, and the availability of such teaching assistants can also reduce teachers' workloads. Research by Parks (2014) in Korea suggests that the availability of teaching assistants and support staff can be helpful in providing individualized support to students with behavioural problems, thereby potentially reducing the amount of classroom time that is wasted. The lack of teaching assistants in the classrooms of public special schools for students with disabilities could be an important factor informing service quality.

The data revealed that all classrooms in the private special education institutions were provided with an assigned qualified teacher for students with disabilities and two teaching assistants, who played a crucial role in reducing teachers' stress and workload. Webster et al. (2011) point out that teaching assistants have a positive impact on the functioning of classrooms and in particular on teacher workload and student learning outcomes. All participating teachers of students with disabilities from the private special education sector confirmed the importance of the presence of teaching assistants in their classes. It is evident that teaching assistants gave them flexibility, including the ability to leave the classroom if necessary, as their presence allowed the learning process to continue during a scheduled lesson. An interviewee stated:

I am the official teacher and others are assistants in my classroom. I thank God that everything is going well in the class. Especially when I have something like a meeting, I feel absolutely safe because they [teaching assistants] are helping and working together as they can easily follow what I have planned for the class.
(Private special education teacher).

Another teacher in the private school also remarked:

I feel the need for teaching assistants to be made available to me so that they can take over classes when I am busy with something else.
(Private special education teacher).

It is also worth noting that many of the participating teachers from the private special education institutions spoke of collaborating with teaching assistants and other support staff, both when preparing lessons and for supporting students with disabilities during the learning process. Moran and Abbott (2002) argue that teaching assistants can be effective in promoting teamwork. The Education and Manpower Bureau of Hong Kong (2005) also notes that teaching assistants generally show a positive attitude towards assisting teachers in preparing for classes

and in the day-to-day mentoring of learners. These efforts may improve the quality of instructional management and help avoid potential difficulties. One participant commented:

Here there are main teachers and teaching assistants who play an important role in preparing the teaching materials, papers and books. Sometimes they prepare part of the lesson with teachers, and sometimes they just sit between the children and make sure they are quiet and paying attention to the teacher. This makes teaching a lot easier, especially for children with intellectual disabilities because they need an educational assistant. If there are no teaching assistants, teachers cannot keep everyone focused.
(Private special education teacher).

There were a number of other positive comments on the important role that teaching assistants play, not only within the classroom but particularly in providing activities outside of the classroom. This is because of the importance of supervising students with disabilities in physical activities outside the classroom, which are usually challenging and only usually have a single teacher available. It was therefore evident that private special education teachers benefited greatly from the presence of more than one teaching assistant to ensure that students with disabilities were closely supervised. This supports the views of Lewis et al. (2010), who argue that teaching assistant support can be helpful in a variety of learning activities. A teacher observed:

The availability of one or two teaching assistants is required for increased security and supervision. For example, if you put the students in the garden, you spread the students out better and observe them better. Students can play anywhere because three people are watching them.
(Private special education teacher).

Directors of private special education institution also tended to share this teacher's opinions about the importance of having an educational assistant working side-by-side with the main teacher in the classroom to meet the needs of people with disabilities. This perspective seems consistent with research that has concluded that the use of teaching assistants is important because classroom teachers lack the time to meet the needs of all students with disabilities (Devecchi et al., 2012). Therefore, the presence of a teaching assistant helps fill any gaps. One person commented:

Of course, the students with intellectual disabilities should have at least one teacher and one teaching assistant because they get tired. With 12 or more students, only one teacher and no teaching assistants, it is a completely

normal, regular institute. It doesn't look like an institute for children with intellectual disabilities.

(Private special education director)

The data also showed that the majority of participants viewed the lack of an educational assistant in public special education institutions as a barrier to learning for people with disabilities. However, it was pointed out that the Saudi Special Education Document recognizes the position of teaching assistants, as it clearly states the required qualifications for a teaching assistant. This would seem to suggest, at least in theory, that teaching assistants are allocated to public special education teaching, when in fact this is not the case. Article 6/3-B (below) of the Document of Rules and Regulations for Special Education Institutes and Programs (Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, 2002) focuses specifically on the qualification requirements for teaching assistants:

Qualifications required for a Teaching Assistant: A qualification from High School with a diploma, or a training course of at least a full semester in special education

(The pathway of intellectual disability: p.24).

Although the above statement makes it clear that the government document states that a teaching assistant should be employed in a public special education institution, the current study found only a single teacher in each class, which had an average of 10 to 12 students with disabilities. When asked about the reasons for the absence of such an important facility, the director of public special education expressed concern that the director might delegate all responsibility for teaching to teaching assistants, which could affect the quality of teaching. This suggests that the lack of a teaching assistant has arisen due to Saudi cultural perspectives that accommodate teaching assistants with different areas of expertise. The director pointed out:

There is a reason for the absence of the teaching assistant. It is quite possible that the teaching assistant has a different professional or academic background. So if the class teacher is busy with something, he/she can transfer all responsibility for the class to the teaching assistant. Then the teaching assistant takes over the entire responsibility for the lesson from the class teacher. The assistant teacher is forced to do something that is not in his area of expertise, which is a waste of time.

(Public special education director).

It is suggested that the lack of teaching assistants has an even greater influence on the quality of teaching for students with disabilities. This is apparent from the numerous negative statements made by the participating teachers from the public curative education institutions

about the lack of provision of teaching assistants, considering this to be a major disadvantage for them. Stressing the importance of the role of teaching assistants in the classroom, a teacher from the community described a day in the classroom as follows:

The role of teaching assistants is important. When you have eight students, it's very tiring. It's hard to keep up with them, to keep helping them, telling them to do this and that. A teaching assistant helps recruit, mentor, and prepare a group of students. The teacher does not have to do everything alone. In the absence of the teacher, the assistant takes over the lessons. The quality of teaching differs when there is a teaching assistant. You can teach anywhere, even on the street, but the quality varies from place to place, that's it!

(Teacher from the public special education settings).

The teachers' statements show those concerns over their actual responsibilities. One teacher expressed this as follows:

Here the teacher is responsible for everything. What should I do exactly? Teach them or pay attention to them? It's really hard to deal with this situation.

(Public special education teacher).

Indeed, the difficulties inherent in this situation are understandable when one considers that teachers in the public special education classes are responsible for everything involving the students with disabilities assigned to them. Therefore, it is likely that this pressure exposes them to a range of workload issues and increased stress (Webster et al., 2011). The following comment clarifies the lack of teaching assistants as a possible contributory cause of existing high levels of job dissatisfaction and burnout:

The pressure on the teacher is too great because there are too many things to do. Normally, anywhere in the world, there should be a teacher and a teaching assistant in a classroom. When I worked with 10 to 12 students, I was really exhausted. This was because I couldn't deliver the class the way it should be as my attention was everywhere and again you have to give each student what they need. Some students are at the same level, some need more special attention than others, some just need to guide you and can finish the task at the end, while others need to guide you and then help.

(Public special education teacher).

One of the participating teachers from the public special education institutions also suggested that they should either be provided with teaching assistants in their classes to help them teach, or that the number of students with disabilities in a class should be reduced to limit the

amount of resources required to ensure that the others receive the available minimum standard of instruction (Devecchi et al., 2012). A teacher explained:

The lack of a teaching assistant hits us naturally. Either hire a teaching assistant or reduce the number of students to four to seven per class. I currently have ten students in my class. There are some teachers who teach 15 students in a single class. And there are days when everyone is present. To be honest, in 10th grade I can only communicate with three students.

(Public special education teacher).

The data also reveals similar concerns among participating parents of children with disabilities attending public special schools. This consistency may further support the impression that the use of teaching assistants in the classrooms of public special education institutions has been highly anticipated as favorable. The lack of teaching assistants can potentially present a number of difficulties for teachers of children with disabilities when it comes to properly managing their lessons. The following comment from a parent alludes to this notion, suggesting that teachers, rather than focusing on teaching, appear to act as nannies for students:

I have encountered some teachers who could not control their assigned classes. So they just gathered the children in one place and sat with them. I spoke to one of the teachers about this one day and he justified his actions by saying that even if he had seven or eight students in his class, he couldn't teach them individually. There should be teaching assistants to help teachers teach students more effectively. I think there are many parents who have complained about this problem before.

(Public special education parent).

It was recognized that teaching assistants play a significant role in the classrooms at private special education institutions, whereas public special education institutions seemed to ignore their importance. It is possible that the absence of teaching assistants is due to school's headteachers believing that the presence of teaching assistants with expertise in different subjects may affect the quality of teaching for students with disabilities.

4. Conclusion

The results of this study show that teaching assistants in special education settings can effectively support students with disabilities. It has further highlighted the crucial role that teaching assistants play in special education settings by allowing the learning process to proceed smoothly. It is a widely held view that supporting teachers and learners with disabilities through a variety of learning

activities reduces teachers' workload, since each classroom in special education institutions is assigned a qualified teacher and two teaching assistants. In some cases, when special educators accept full responsibility for their assigned students with disabilities, they face additional pressures that negatively impact their teaching practices. Therefore, strategies are needed to improve the services provided by special education teachers and ensure that these are better tailored to the needs of students with disabilities.

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