

Mainstreaming of Students with Intellectual Disability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Special Education Teachers' Perceptions

Nizar H. Bagadood¹ and Mona F. Sulaimani²

¹ Faculty of Education, Umm Al-Qura University, Makkah, Saudi Arabia

² Faculty of Educational Graduate Studies, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Summary

Educators have been making strides in the research into and practices supporting the policy of mainstreaming students with disability. A move towards including students with intellectual disability in community schools with all the other students can be seen in many countries' education systems, including that of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The 'rights of the child' has been the main argument put forward by advocates of this policy in an attempt to move from the medical to the social model. This study argues that, although mainstreaming can be viewed as a positive trend toward effective education, its implementation remains somewhat problematic. It is believed that more investigative research into professionals' attitudes is needed to improve service provision and inform the administration of mainstreaming practices. The attitudes of special education teachers on the policy of mainstreaming are examined and emerging key themes discussed. Furthermore, challenges that continue to inhibit mainstreaming practices in Saudi Arabia are identified.

Keywords: *intellectual disability; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; mainstreaming; special educational needs; teachers' attitudes*

1. Introduction

The mainstreaming of students with disability has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of special education needs, with good arguments being made on both sides of the divide (Mejia, 2015). Although there can be no denying that everyone deserves a mainstreaming learning opportunity and the chance to be an active participant in their community, it is a fact that access to education can be difficult for persons with disability (Gabel and Danforth, 2008), including students with intellectual disability. Such students have historically been excluded from schooling as well as other services (Jellison, 2015), making them feel even more isolated within their own societies. In recent years, however, there has been a shift toward ensuring greater equity and social justice by recognizing the right to education for all students with disability (Francisco, Hartman, and Wang, 2020).

The mainstreaming approach generally sees students with disability attending typical schools but having specific learning arrangements being made for them (Gargiulo and Bouck, 2019). There is, however, a degree of uncertainty surrounding the terminology used. It can mean different things in different contexts and can also be linked with the inclusion approach (Schuelka and Johnstone, 2012). This indicates that there is a need to clarify exactly what is meant by the words 'inclusion' and 'mainstreaming', specifically within the Saudi context. The term inclusion is generally used to refer to the learning arrangement whereby students with disability are seated with their neurotypical peers in the same class (Kauffman, Hallahan, and Pullen, 2017).

In the Saudi context, however, this is not a typical arrangement especially for students with intellectual disability. Instead, the mainstreaming approach involves setting up a learning arrangement where special educational provisions are made for students with disability who are seated in self-contained classrooms. This means that students with intellectual disability have minimal social interaction with neurotypical peers and this would be during non-curricular events such as the morning school assembly, break time and sports sessions. In the Saudi context, this is the only mainstream learning arrangement that is possible for students with intellectual disability. This study investigates the learning arrangements in mainstreaming programs for students with intellectual disability. According to a definition provided by the Saudi Ministry of Education, 'mainstreaming [programs] operationally, means educating children with special educational needs in regular education schools, and providing them with special education services' (Almousa, 2010, p:17).

Students with intellectual disability are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and are often alienated (Rothblum, 2020). What contemporary teachers are advocating is to include all students in the classroom, irrespective of their differences. This mainstreaming approach offers an alternative to alienating students with

physical, emotional, or intellectual disability to enable all children to acquire relevant knowledge and skills (Alnahdi, 2020). For example, mainstreaming settings enable students with intellectual disability to develop positive social skills such as cooperation, effective communication and flexibility. Therefore, as teachers in Saudi Arabia embrace mainstreaming education, it results in social reforms that promote a welcoming environment that embraces diversity.

Teachers' attitudes directly influence the implementation of educational programs. Since teachers are primary stakeholders in mainstreaming programming, their perceptions, attitudes and contributions determine the success or failure of mainstreaming programs (Burke, 2019). Although implementing effective mainstreaming teaching programs can present challenges, teachers are adamantly determined to establish effective mainstreaming classrooms to give all students an equal advantage (Rekaa et al., 2019). Therefore, the successful implementation and adoption of mainstreaming education practices depend on teachers' knowledge, positivity and ability to facilitate quality learning opportunities for all students. To that end, it is imperative to discover how improvements in service provision can be made by monitoring the attitudes of education professionals. There is a particular lack of empirical research on the topic of professionals' perspectives on students with intellectual disability mainstreaming programs (Feiler and Watson, 2011). This article makes a small contribution to address this vital gap, by exploring the perspectives of special education teachers in Makkah city.

The mainstreaming approach offers diverse advantages to students with disability. One such advantage is that mainstreaming supports the development of social skills, such as cooperation, and socially appropriate behaviors. In mainstream settings, students with and without disability form meaningful friendships that increase their appreciation for diversity (Rezai et al., 2018). Unlike separate settings, mainstreaming classrooms allow both students with and without intellectual disability to cooperate and develop an appreciation for one another without discrimination, prejudice or marginalization (Gavish, 2017). For instance, students with intellectual disability are often shy and have lower self-esteem, which may impact their ability to socialize, resulting in a negative impact on their self-worth and social competence. Including them in a mainstreaming classroom provides them with positive role models and an opportunity to develop practical communication skills and flexibility in social situations.

Additionally, mainstreaming environments expose students with intellectual disability to higher level learning opportunities. Students with intellectual disability are exposed to higher level skills in math, science, and reading

when educated in a mainstreaming environment, which boosts their academic achievement. For instance, most students with disability lose motivation to learn when they are alienated and secluded (McLeskey et al., 2017). However, when they are in a mainstreaming environment, students develop increased interest in learning, which enables them to perform highly in both technical math, science and reading (McLeskey et al., 2017).

One aim of mainstreaming education is to support the academic competence, social responsibility and economic contributions of individuals with intellectual disability. However, ensuring maximum academic benefit for students with intellectual disability and attainment of their educational goals requires a high level of collaboration between parents and teachers (Li, 2018). Such coordination allows relevant stakeholders to monitor students' academic and social development to evaluate the effectiveness of mainstreaming education. For example, parent-teacher collaboration ensures the implementation of effective mainstreaming programs that benefit all students without marginalization, discrimination or prejudice (Shilshtein and Margalit, 2019). When parents and teachers collaborate, they ensure consistency in their understanding and management of the challenges the students may face both in school and at home.

Furthermore, active communication between parents and teachers facilitates the decision-making process to establish viable programs that are vital to mainstreaming programming. Home-school cooperation enables teachers to adjust their educational practices, roles, responsibilities and actions efficiently to ensure the desired positive outcomes (Paseka and Schwab, 2019). It also provides a platform for clarifying the roles of all the relevant stakeholders involved in the students' lives. For instance, it enables teachers to obtain a deeper understanding of and respect for the parents' domestic and social roles in supporting the emotional and physical development of the child, while they manage the academic growth of the students.

2. Method

The study uses qualitative analysis in order to gain insights into the perspectives of special education teachers who provide mainstreaming programming for students with intellectual disability in Saudi Arabia. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven special education teachers from Makkah (four females and three males) individually. All special education teachers from mainstreaming programs were selected on the basis of their position, specialization and current location. Demographic data can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Data

Participant	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6	#7
Gender	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
Age	33	39	37	30	34	33	28
Years of experience	11	12	15	7	4	2	3
Level of education	Post-graduate	Currently studying masters	Bachelor's degree	Bachelor's degree in education + Montessori Diploma	Bachelor's degree	Higher Diploma in special education	Bachelor's degree

This research depends on the idea of data saturation in order to determine the appropriate sample size. A pilot study was carried out with one special education teacher to determine an appropriate interview timeframe. The interview lasted between 30–40 minutes and the questions included: What kind of services and equipment are available to support students with intellectual disability in mainstreaming programs? Are there training programs for special education teachers to help them develop their teaching skills in mainstreaming programs? If yes, can you give an example? If no, why do you think there aren't? Are there types of cooperation with parents of students with intellectual disability? If yes, explain what the types are. If no, why do you think there aren't? Do you have a teacher assistant to help you with students with intellectual disability in mainstreaming programs? If yes, what is their role? If no, why not? Do you think that the mainstreaming of students with intellectual disability is beneficial? If yes, why? If not, why not?

All the interviews carried out with special education teachers were recorded and the transcripts were primarily analyzed separately to identify emerging themes (Merriam, 2015). The themes were then compared with other themes that emerged from the interviews in order to produce a more well-established set of categories. Lastly, selective coding was used and the main themes were identified (Robson and McCartan, 2016). It is worth noting that no independent

coding was conducted to assess interrater reliability, which means that the identification of the themes within the data set was, to some extent, based on subjective interpretation. A number of core themes emerged from the interviews with special education teachers who work with mainstreaming programs, including the themes of support resources and services; the importance of the mainstreaming program, parent-teacher cooperation, and use of technology. Each of the themes is discussed below.

3. Findings

The study's findings reveal that overall there is a positive attitude among teachers regarding the promotion of mainstreaming education, with five of the seven participants indicating that they supported the mainstreaming programs. The findings from this study were organized into four themes: support resources and services; importance of the mainstreaming program; parent-teacher cooperation; and, use of technology.

Support Resources and Services

The responses coded under the support resources and services theme focused on the kind of support and resources needed by mainstreaming teachers. Six of the seven participants declared that there was a need for training programs for teachers, stating, in response to an inquiry about the availability of professional development or training, that, "No, there is nothing."

In addition, teachers highlighted a shortage of teaching assistants, necessitating the need to train more teachers. Four of the seven participants stated that they had no assistant in their schools, making teaching exhausting and ineffective. Two participants recommended that the government, through the Ministry of Education, establish more colleges to train more teachers, equipping them with skills to support children with disability. Similarly, participants recommended training traditional teachers to appreciate diversity and to enhance their ability to offer differentiated instruction to learners.

The study participants reported that there are insufficient resources to support the learning process of students with intellectual disability. All seven participants cited a shortage of learning materials for children with intellectual disability. Similarly, two participants indicated a shortage of support resources and services and stated that this discourages them from carrying out their duties and led them to think that there was no need for the mainstreaming program: "There is no clear system for ... mainstreaming."

Four of the seven participants admitted that the shortage of resources and teachers discourages them from teaching in a mainstreaming environment. In response they are advocating for the proper allocation of resources to facilitate the learning process. One participant mentioned that the government should set aside sufficient funds to purchase learning materials and set up special facilities within the institutions to create favorable and supportive learning environments. Similarly, all the participants agreed that special schools should be given priority when resources are being distributed. The shortage of resources and supportive programming led two teachers to highlight the fact that it is important for students with intellectual disability to be able to learn alongside neurotypical students within the general education system.

Importance of Mainstreaming Programming

Five of the seven teachers interviewed admitted there was a need to expand mainstreaming programming. One participant noted, "Yes, it is very useful to integrate students with special needs with regular students." The respondent recognized the significance of the mainstreaming program in bridging the learning disparity between students with and without disability. Five of the seven teachers had a positive attitude towards students with intellectual disability and were in support of the mainstreaming programs that included students with intellectual disability to ensure that they would receive an appropriate education.

Two teachers reported instances of negative attitudes towards the mainstreaming program and the students. Three teachers encouraged and advocated for teacher training programs to develop positive attitudes. Similarly, four of the seven teachers suggested that there was a need for public education of all members of the society to help build positive attitudes.

Parent-Teacher Cooperation

Five of the seven participants indicated there generally is cooperation between teachers and parents, but at varying levels depending on the family. As one person explained, "Yes, there is cooperation with parents, but the level of cooperation varies from one family to another." Two of the five participants said that they maintained constant communication with the parents of their students, while two reported there was no constant teacher-parent communication. All the participants mentioned the need to include parents in the learning plans of students with intellectual disability to ensure success. Another teacher stated, "Yes, there is a good connection between parents of special needs and teachers through follow-up of the student." All the participants insisted that parents need to be involved to support their children. Parent support was

reported to play a significant role in motivating the positive attitude towards and implementation of various programs.

Use of Technology

The respondents held positive views on mainstreaming and the use of technology. They all recognized the ability of technology to provide students with alternative tools to express themselves and answer questions. One interviewee emphasized the importance of technology to improve students' writing skills and another indicated how technology improved overall communication.

Another category that emerged was related to the motivation of students and special education teachers. Four participants pointed out that technology can increase students' interest and attention. Two interviewees stated they used technology to motivate students, while another interviewee emphasized the importance of using technology to expand the mainstreaming program. The use of technology in mainstreaming programs was reported to promote a cohesive and positive learning environment, increasing teachers' positive attitudes towards students with intellectual disability.

4. Conclusion

This study's findings lead to several recommendations. The teachers indicated a need for additional training and resources, a finding that was also identified in previous studies by Agbenyega (2007) and Rouse (2008). This finding has implications for the training of preservice teachers as well as the professional development for practicing teachers. A model of teacher preparation, where all teachers are trained in mainstreaming practices, would help alleviate teachers' concerns regarding their lack of preparedness to work with a wide range of student needs. It is recommended that universities train teachers to provide differentiated instruction for learners at all levels and provide professional development opportunities for practicing teachers to develop the strategies and skills needed to work with a wide range of learners.

Mainstreaming education has many benefits for students with and without intellectual disability (Bryant, Bryant, and Smith, 2019). In order for all students to benefit from a more mainstreaming environment, it is important for teachers to work together to provide all students with the knowledge and skills they need to become contributing and active members of their communities. For this to happen, teachers need to feel better prepared to support their students' learning. The findings of this study suggest several ways to achieve these positive outcomes for all students.

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Nizar Bagadood obtained his BA in Special Education-Intellectual Disability from the Department of Special Education, Faculty of Education, King Abdul-Aziz University, Saudi Arabia. He joined the Graduate School of Education, Bristol University, UK, and received his MEd & MPhil/Ph.D. in the field of Special and Inclusive Education. His specific interests relate to the educational experiences of students with intellectual disabilities and the role of special education provision in supporting them. Nizar continues to work closely with schools and teachers and is committed to the principles of inclusion, social justice and participation in every aspect of the work, including designing research that is meaningful and important to the people he works with.

Mona Sulaimani holds the B.S. in Art Psychology from King Abdul-Aziz University and the M.Ed. in Special Education - Early Childhood Intervention Specialist - from Ohio University. She holds the Ph.D. Curriculum & Instruction in Special Education at Ohio University. Her primary research interests include autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and social stigma around autism.