



INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL

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Abstract

Although special needs schools (schools for the blind and deaf) have existed in the MENA region since the 19th century, special needs education has only recently been introduced in the Gulf region due to the novelty of public education itself. Recently, GCC member nation Ministries of Education are embracing a broader policy view of 'inclusive education' which seeks to provide opportunities for all learners. Although fully inclusive classrooms, in which services for differently-abled pupils are integrated into the normative curricula and classroom, are not the norm internationally, many countries are grappling with attempts to achieve this ideal. The GCC represents a particularly interesting case, since, as M. Ghaly has argued, disability has only recently received adequate attention in Islamic theology. Therefore both the theoretical and philosophical framework of inclusive education, in addition to the practical considerations, remains a challenging arena for policy planners and educators in the GCC.

Key Words: Inclusive education, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman.

INTRODUCTION

The terms "inclusive education" and "inclusion" are unfortunately used in several different senses among GCC policy makers and educators: inclusive education and inclusion can mean both 'education for all' (all learners have access to educational institutions, either segregated or integrated) or more narrowly and technically, the mainstreaming of disabled and handicapped students into the regular, traditional classroom. Inclusion has also recently taken on a broader meaning of providing opportunity for the large MENA youth bulge alienated from the workforce and society and facing high unemployment and poverty. This paper focuses on the programs, policies, barriers and attitudes related to either segregating or integrating disabled and handicapped students into mainstream classrooms.

Education is widely recognized internationally as a fundamental right for everyone as first stated in 1948 in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The traditional biomedical model of disability which views the disabled person as 'abnormal'—therefore in need of fixing by therapy or other special interventions—has been giving way to a newer sociological model that places emphasis on what the disabled can do and how they can contribute to society, as well as their basic human and social rights such as education and freedom from harm, discrimination, and unequal treatment.

The UNESCO World Declaration on Education for All (1990) was a milestone in establishing the ideological underpinnings of inclusive education. In 1993, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, appended to resolution 48/96. The 22 rules encourage the fostering of equality and full participation of persons with disabilities in daily social life at all levels including education and employment. In addition, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994) states: "The fundamental principle of the inclusive school is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties or differences they may have. Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of their students, accommodating both different



styles and rates of learning and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnerships with their communities. There should be a continuum of support and services to match the continuum of special needs encountered in every school” (UNESCO). Thus mainstreaming special needs students, many of whom do not complete their education and subsequently are difficult to employ, provides the best option for success. In 2000, The Dakar Framework for Action issued the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA), aiming to provide every girl and boy with primary school education by 2015. The Dakar Framework specifies Inclusive Education (IE) as one key means of achieving EFA (Peters, 2004, p.5).

Both in the Gulf and in OECD countries, consensus on who should qualify for special needs education is difficult to achieve. Historically, the disabled have been defined in most cultures as the blind, deaf, physically disabled and mentally retarded. However, the definition of special needs education has been expanded in the last few decades to include children with social disadvantages (poverty, ethnic or linguistic minority, displaced persons, etc.) or highly functioning ('gifted') children. In the concept of education for all, returning adult learners could also be classified as a learner population with special needs. Thus internationally, special needs education is shifting away from a focus on biological or physiological impairments, towards a social model that takes into account all barriers that impede learning. For example, the WHO's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) adopted in 2001 recognizes these factors. "ICF takes into account the social aspects of disability and does not see disability only as a 'medical' or 'biological' dysfunction. By including Contextual Factors, in which environmental factors are listed ICF allows to record the impact of the environment on the person's functioning" (WHO).

The UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (2006) both came into force in 2008. Over 152 signatories and 108 parties have signed the convention. Al-Kaabi notes: "The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of 2008 also calls for enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by children with disabilities, and points to the importance of early intervention and their inclusion in the education system from an early age to ensure their visibility and roles in society" (Al-Kaabi, 2010, p.18).

Inclusive education theory and practice is well developed in OECD nations, but a relatively new concept in the Arabic-speaking world. The situation in Arab countries is extremely complex and controversial due to differences in educational policy and different models and approaches based on cultural and historical factors (for example, colonial influences).

Under the U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990; amended as IDEIA, 2004), public schools receiving federal funds must provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) including an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for children with disabilities (medical conditions, emotional or health impairments) who also require special accommodation for these conditions. The IEP concept, although expensive and resource-intensive (requiring trained specialists for diagnosis, testing, and monitoring) is becoming increasingly common in inclusive education as is the related legal concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), which allows some flexibility for under-resourced schools who cannot fully comply with national regulations. However, it is questionable whether these concepts and approaches can be adopted by other countries without adaptation or considerations of cultural impact, for example in Gulf countries with already well developed segregated special needs schools and with unique cultural restrictions such as gender segregation of unrelated men and women which is common in their mainstream school systems at all levels.

Inclusive Education in the Gulf

There is no GCC-wide common strategy for dealing with special needs students and each individual nation has adopted a spectrum of responses from segregation to partial, to (theoretically) full integration. Disability is particularly serious for women in the region, as "Mothers may be repudiated by their husbands and non-disabled siblings, particularly daughters, will find their marriage prospects blighted" (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2007, p.53). As Nadra notes in her 2009 LAU thesis: "the introduction of inclusion in the Middle Eastern countries is still new, and it is too early to judge if it is going to be put effectively into practice or not. So far in



the Gulf of Arabia, inclusion is practiced mainly in privately run international schools. Nowadays, modern thinking about inclusion is becoming more evident in Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain” (p.19). Care for fellow Muslims, including the disabled, is enshrined in several Quranic passages and hadith, such as Al-Bukhari’s hadith: “Mohammed said: ‘A Muslim is a brother to other Muslims. He should never oppress them nor should he facilitate their oppression’” (vol. 9, 85.83).

However, local and pre-Islamic customs and attitudes often prevent Gulf families from approaching disabled children without reproach, blame or shame. Sheikha Hessa Al Thani, former UN Special Rapporteur on Disabilities, describes the problems faced by many disabled persons in Arabic-speaking societies: “Persons with disabilities are a source of shame, a financial burden, even seen a curse on their families; the words used to describe or denote disability are derogatory and pejorative; people are often identified by their disability, or their disability replaces their given name. In colloquial languages the words that denote different types of disabilities have become common swear words. Such attitudes are no longer as prevalent as they used to be a decade or so ago, but they do still exist and constitute the basis of an awareness raising agenda for the Arab region” (Al Thani, 2009). She then emphasizes that these attitudes are not Quranically based, and go against both the spirit and textual authority of Islam: “It is important to note that such attitudes do not stem from Islamic religious beliefs. In fact, the Quran has very little to say about disability per se. The mentions of disability—such as blindness or deafness—in the Quran are figurative references; (e.g. the blindness of the heart, or the deafness to God’s teachings). According to the Islamic scholar Sheikh Isse A. Musse, of the Islamic Council of Victoria, ‘Islam sees disability as morally neutral. It is seen neither as a blessing nor as a curse. Clearly, disability is therefore accepted as being an inevitable part of the human condition. It is simply a fact of life which has to be addressed appropriately by the society of the day’” (Al Thani, 2009). Segregation of the disabled in the Gulf either by keeping them at home or educating them in special schools removed from the public eye greatly reduces both the public acceptance of their limitations and the possible range of work opportunities for them. In addition, the confusion, even among highly educated members of Gulf societies, of mental disability with mental illness creates fear and misunderstanding (Gaad, 2011, pp.13-14; Hilawani, 2008, p.3).

Professor Eman Gaad, who has written the most comprehensive monograph on inclusive education in the Gulf, notes: “Historically the people of [the Gulf] region have not had a very open and accepting attitude towards those with special needs and/or disabilities” (2011, p.91). In the pre-oil era before the social welfare and universal free public education (including special needs education) provided by oil wealth—when children were expected to contribute to family income from a young age by tending animals and performing domestic labor—a disabled child was in fact a considerable economic burden on the family and was often greeted with anger and disappointment. Gaad believes that the common cultural understanding in the Gulf region fosters an approach “based on supporting the ‘weak and vulnerable’ from a charity-based approach rather than supporting citizens with equal rights and benefits from a rights-based approach as the region is still in a transitional phase between the two notions” (2011, p.81). Rights-based approaches to disability and special needs education are more common in Western cultures which place emphasis on the individual, while in the Gulf, tribe and family have always taken precedence.

Sheikha Hessa Al-Thani, the UN Special Rapporteur on Disabilities, noted in 2007: “the general condition of children with disabilities in Arab societies is invisibility” (qtd. in Al-Kaabi, 2010, p.20). With inadequate support and with negative social attitudes towards the disabled in most Arabic speaking countries, disabled children are often isolated from society within families. According to Qatari Assistant Professor of Social Work Ibrahim Al-Kaabi, historically in the region: “In particular these children are considered sources of shame and a burden on their families. Families with children with disabilities experience multiple stress factors, including psychological and economic pressure. Due to the traditional division of social roles within the family that assigns the mother the reproductive role and considers her the custodian of the family values, the burden of care of the disabled children shifts to her. In most of the cases, the mother has inadequate knowledge and abilities to raise their disabled children effectively or to respond to their special demands proactively” (Al-Kaabi, 2010, p.20).

The way Gulf societies deal with the disabled has shifted, however, towards greater reliance on national governments, since family structure has been evolving away from the traditional extended tribal unit to



smaller, more nuclear families: “Barka Saleh Shahbal Al Bakry, the deputy chairman of Al Noor Association for the Blind, argues in the *Times of Oman* (2005) that the full support from the extended family system is something the society can no longer count on: ‘In the past, most blind people in Oman depended on the extended family for basics; however, the family structure in Oman is changing’” (Profanter, 2011, p.1252).

Education is also rapidly changing in GCC region, with large investments in Qatar and UAE as regional educational hubs (Education City and DIAC), as well as philosophical realignments such as Qatar’s Education for a New Era initiative – thus inclusive education may be realizable in the near future in GCC countries that choose to adopt its philosophical framework, since GCC nations are committed now to best practices based on international frameworks as well as developing knowledge-building capacities (education, science and technology research, publishing, and literacy) (Weber, 2011a; 2011b).

To contextualize the current situation in the Arabian Gulf, even in MENA countries with well developed and long-standing educational systems such as Lebanon and Egypt, inclusive education is still in its early phases or sporadically available (ELZein, 2009, p.164).

METHODS

Published government educational reports and peer-reviewed published literature on inclusive education were consulted for both the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the individual member states of the GCC. Regional experts were also consulted. Also, international development reports (i.e. United Nations) and OECD scholarship was examined to contextualize inclusive education within the international educational context. Gaad (2011) provides a detailed and well-researched summary of the topic for the Gulf region. However a great deal of contradictory and inaccurate information was uncovered during the literature review which the present author attempted to verify and crosscheck. Confusion sometimes arose from the lack of up-to-date and unstratified government statistics in this area of research (for example, data for citizens is sometimes aggregated with data from semi-literate itinerate expatriate work forces), necessitating the cross-referencing of information with individuals working in the field. Also, government reports and websites sometimes describe non-existent planned initiatives and programs as if the programs are already fully functioning. In addition, lack of standardized terminology about inclusive education in English and Arabic, discussed above, can hinder cross-country analysis.

DISCUSSION

Historical Background: Special Needs Education and Inclusive Education in the GCC

Modern Special Needs Education began in the Middle East as segregated institutions, such as the Deaf and Blind Schools in Egypt which operated from 1874-1888. A number of blind and deaf institutes were founded in the early 20th century, mostly supervised by European expatriates (Gaad, 2011, pp.4-5). In 1956, the first school for students with low IQ (50-70) opened in Egypt. The special education department became a separate department from the main Egyptian education department in 1964. Some countries, such as Kuwait, have continued to develop and support their impressive infrastructure of segregated schools, while other Gulf nations, spurred by the U.N. frameworks and resolutions, are shifting towards mainstreaming special needs students. The historical development and current state of both special needs and inclusive education in each GCC member nation is provided below.

Qatar

The State of Qatar ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in October of 2008. Inclusion is becoming more widely practiced in Qatar and over 6,000 special needs students attend 84 schools in Qatar. The UN Special Rapporteur on Disability Shuaib Chalklen visited the country in 2010 and was impressed by the technologically advanced Al Noor Institute and the Shafallah Centre, but recommended that “there is a need in Qatar to consider the mainstreaming of disability’ (Chalklen, 2010, p.4). For example, according to Chalklen: “There appears to be a distinct lack of mainstreaming of disability in Qatar and an indicator of this is that many of the Government buildings are not accessible. There was a clear lack of wheelchair access and accessible bathroom facilities” (Chalklen, 2010, p.5). The country currently follows a two-



pronged approach in which some students are included in regular classrooms, while specialty institutes (for example the Shafallah Centre for students with autism spectrum disorder) cater to individual disabilities. The Al Amal Institute for Boys and Al Amal Institute for Girls were opened in 1980 and 1981 respectively. The Special Needs Committee of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, founded in 1979, began planning for special needs schools and programs in 2001-2002, and set up a special Centre for the Talented and Gifted in 2001 (Yossef, 2002). The first steps towards inclusion involved providing segregated classrooms within regular schools and integrating all students during the day as much as possible, such as during breaks and assemblies. Tuition for special needs educators is subsidized by the government with twelve targeted scholarships at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain. As of 2011, there are 105 special needs educators working in Qatari schools (Gaad, 2011, p.28). In 2003-2004, more resources were added for inclusive and special needs student services and in 2006-2007, more students were integrated into existing schools with five more government schools equipped to receive special needs students (Gaad, 2011, p. 31).

In general, policy makers in Qatar have followed a strategy of establishing both private and public separate schools (often gender segregated, following the typical Gulf paradigm) for impaired children, while implementing inclusive education in some schools. Although the Qatari Law for People with Special Needs states that children should be educated according to the least restrictive environment appropriate, “the concept of including them in general education is relatively new in Qatar” (Al Attiyah and Mian, 2009, pp.30-31). Dr. Asma Al Attiyah, a professor in the Psychological Sciences Department (Special Education Diploma Department) of Qatar University and colleagues issued a report *An inclusion strategy for children with special needs in the State of Qatar* in 2005. Previously, childhood disability had been handled by segregated classes or separate schools: in 1975, a class for boys with hearing loss was set up in a public primary school, and an all-boys deaf school in 1981 and an all-girls deaf school in 1982 (Al Attiyah, 2007, p. 366). Male and female schools for the mentally retarded were established in 1984. In 1998 a private co-educational school for visually impaired students opened as well as a school in 1999 for children with developmental disorders, including autism (Al Attiyah, 2007, p.366). An important inclusive education pilot program and cross-sectional survey of participant attitudes was carried out in Qatar from 2001-2004. Twenty-seven general education and twenty-seven special needs students were interviewed and the data provided a mixed picture of the program: for example, 55.5 % of the general education children believed that special needs children faced problems such as aggressive behavior from other students, harassment, lying, etc. However, special needs children reported that teachers treated them well (74.0%) as well as other students (85.2%) (Al Attiyah, 2007, p.368). Special Needs schools (segregated institutions) are still prevalent in Qatar – in 2005, there were 3522 males and females enrolled in 7 schools (Al-Shafallah Center, Mental Education, Hearing Impaired Education, Al-Noor Center for Visually Impaired, Al-Rumaila, Qatar Association for Special Needs, Qatar Union for Special Needs Sport) (State of Qatar, 2008, p.64).

Al-Kaabi found the following concerns with special needs and inclusive education in Qatar, which mirrors the situation in many of the Gulf countries due to the novelty of this educational philosophy and the lack of trained personnel (including medical personal for proper medical diagnosis): “Current care services are focused on the child as a problem child, without consideration of the parents and their circumstances. There are no facilities to encourage children with special needs aware of the world of work and interested in acquire work skills. Further, places of employment lack awareness of the needs of workers with disabilities. Central to the problem of the education framework is that there are no clear strategies for systematically providing families with information about the rights of their children, the goals of the educational programs, and the change process in order to effectively engage and advocate for their children” (Al-Kaabi, 2010, p.21).

The Arabic-speaking world was fortunate that a member of the Qatar royal family Sheikha Hessa Khalifa bin Ahmed al-Thani of Qatar served as the Special Rapporteur on Disability of the United Nations Commission for Social Development from 2003-2008, having been elected to 3 successive terms. She succeeded in raising consciousness about special needs individuals throughout the MENA and Gulf regions in addition to her international activities.

As described on the UN website, Al Thani “is a founding member of the Qatari National Committee for People with Special Needs, which was established in 1998 by Sheikha Moza bint Naser Al-misnad, the consort of the Emir of Qatar, and has been serving as a Vice-President of the Committee since 1999. She took part in preparing



a draft law on the Rights of People with Special Needs, and helped to organize a number of local and regional seminars and conferences in Doha on issues relating to disability. Recently she took part in organizing the seventh Scientific Seminar of the Arab Union of the Deaf (Doha, 2000) and the third Gulf Forum on Disability (Doha, 2003)" (UN Enable, 2003).

Al Thani's wide ranging activities included: "Using the momentum created by the adoption of the Arab Decade, I persuaded the Arab Parliamentary Union to establish an Arab Parliamentary Committee on Disability within the Union. This was followed by practical and immediate steps to build the capacity of Arab Parliamentarians with regard to disability legislations through a series of Symposia held in a number of Arab countries and hosted by the Parliaments/Shoura Councils of these countries, using one or two Rules from the Standard Rules as a theme for each symposium: Amman (March 2005); Beirut (December 2005); Yemen (March 2007); Morocco (July 2007); Qatar (January 2009). The Symposia marked the first time that Arab Parliamentarians and Legislators had met and held an open dialogue with persons with disabilities. These efforts were the catalyst for the establishment of new partnerships, chief among them with the Council of Europe, the Commission on Disability in the German Federal Government; the Flemish Parliament in Belgium" (UN Special Rapporteur, 2009).

In 2010, the Education Institute in Qatar issued policies and guidelines for students with Additional Educational Support Needs (AESN) aimed at K-12 students. These policies cover a broad range of students including students with Learning Problems (SWLP), students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SWSLD), students with Disabilities (SWD), and students with behavioral problems (SWBP). The Learning Center, part of Qatar Foundation, has recently been renamed the Awsaj Institute of Education, and seeks to accommodate K-8 students with learning challenges using an evidenced-based approach and on-site school psychologist.

Kuwait

The policy and legal framework of Kuwait's learning disabled education is adopted almost wholly from older U.S. and UK models of segregated education. Kuwait was one of the first countries to formally recognize the rights of disabled students with the establishment of the Higher Council for Disability Affairs (HCDA) in 1996 with shared representation between government officials and various non-governmental groups who represent disabled constituents. However, despite the pioneering early approach, little experimentation or openness to inclusive education appears to be going in Kuwait. But the country claims to have met the needs of all its students requiring special needs education through the provisioning of special schools each devoted to a specific disability.

Bazna and Reid have criticized the traditional western approach to medicalizing disability and exclusionary education (segregation) as a poor match for Kuwaiti and Islamic cultural history (Bazna, 2007; 2009a). Al-Shammari recommends pre-service training for teachers to attend to special needs students (Al-Shammari, 2005). A school for the visually impaired was opened in Kuwait in 1955 and each impairment category in Kuwait has its specialized school: "Along with visual impairments, other handicapping conditions are recognized: hearing impaired, mentally retarded, emotionally impaired, physical/orthopedic disorders, Down's syndrome and autism. Each of these handicapping conditions like visual impairments have their own schools" (Al-Shammari, 2007).

The process of identification, assessment and placement of special needs students in Kuwait follows a familiar three step process: first a medical assessment is made, then a battery of psychosocial testing takes place. If special needs education is recommended, the student is placed in a classroom and observed and all of the previous data is examined to determine a final placement or exemption.

Lack of inclusion appears to be a deliberate religious and cultural policy of Kuwaiti society. As Al-Shammari notes: "As of 2005, inclusion was not a strategy of the Kuwaiti educational system. The general culture itself is deeply segregated along tribal, gender, and socio-economic lines. Girls and boys attending 1st through 12th grades in the public schools are grouped separately in different classrooms and schools; the exception to gender differentiations is in kindergarten where both boys and girls are grouped together in the same classrooms. Gender differentiation of teaching staff also is used in which male teachers teach boys and female teachers work with girls (except in kindergarten where female teachers teach both girls and boys). The attributes of lack



of inclusion and separation by gender for public school students and teachers are determined by culture and religion" (Al-Shammari, 2007).

Although government reports appear to endorse the integration model theoretically, a 2008 report on educational development noted the following obstacles to the implementation of integrated inclusive programs: building and renewal of special education facilities, the fact that education officials do not feel the time is right for integration, opposition of non-disabled students, and the opposition of teachers facing an increased teaching burden (State of Kuwait, 2008, p.94).

Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) ratified the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009. Also, if individuals in the KSA feel that their rights under the UN convention have been denied, they can contact the International Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities according to the UN Optional Protocol also signed by KSA. Saudi Arabia has also made advancements in education for the intellectually gifted (Alamiri, 2011). The first special needs schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were the so-called 'scientific institutes' for the blind created in 1958 (Alquraini, 2011). The Department of Special Learning was established in 1962 to serve blind, deaf and mentally retarded students. The Saudi Disability Code of 2000 guarantees free medical, educational and rehabilitation services to disabled citizens. An integration program for placing special needs students in normal schools began in 1990-91 and according to the Directorate General of Special Education, by 2007, 3130 programs (segregated and integrated) existed covering 61,089 students (2011). The Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes (RSEPI), modeled after U.S. law, appeared in 2001. Disabled students are entitled to a wide range of services, including an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and access to a theoretical least restrictive environment (LRE) similar to U.S. policies. The extent of inclusion for students in Saudi schools depends on the type of disability. According to Alquraini, "Students with mild learning disabilities receive their educations in typical classrooms with some support from special education services such as source rooms. These students also fully participate in the general education curriculum with some modifications and accommodations. Students with mild and moderate cognitive disabilities still receive their education in separate classrooms in public schools" (Alquraini, 2011). A 2007 report claims that "more than 90% of male students and 65% of female students with special educational needs in Saudi Arabia are mainstreamed in regular schools" (Mousa, 2007, 2). However, severely disabled students are taught separately: "According to the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia (2008), 96% of students with multiple and severe disabilities received their education in separate institutes in 2007-08" (Alquraini, 2011).

Special needs education has been the focus of several recent Saudi doctoral and masters theses on teacher attitudes to SNE and IEPs for the mentally retarded, demonstrating the growing interest in this field (Al-Ahmadi, 2009; Al-Faiz, 2006; Al-Herz, 2008). As part of Saudi Arabia's 'Inclusion Project,' the sixth objective of The Ministry of Education 10-Year Plan in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia specifically describes provisions for special needs students:

- To develop educational programs for gifted male and female students in scientific and creative fields
- To develop special education systems to correspond with contemporary international expectations and attitudes
- To develop special education programs for students with disabilities
- To secure the materials and proper educational environment for students with special needs
- To increase teachers' vocational development to fully prepare them to work effectively with students with special needs
- To increase the opportunities for the development of the special categories of education shared with the private sector
- To expand society's participation in protecting the rights of children with special needs (Saudi Arabia MOE).

Special needs education in Saudi Arabia encompasses both gifted students and the disabled and ranges from partial to full inclusion in the classroom. Over 233 programs and institutes have been developed to meet the needs of the recent Inclusion Project (Gaad, 2011, p.20). The Inclusion Project was studied by researchers from King Saud University during the pilot phase. Dr. Naser Mousa, who was instrumental in the development of



special education in Saudi Arabia, writes about the Inclusion Project: “regular schools are considered the natural environment for both children with special needs and regular children to grow together....the Inclusion environment contributes to the increase of social acceptance of students with special needs by their regular peers....regular children can get rid of their limited perceptions about special needs people” (qtd. in Gaad, 2011, p.22). The Supervisor-General of Special Education in KSA admits that current programs are not fully servicing the estimated 5% of Saudi students with learning disabilities, but the government target is a 100% success rate in providing special education to these students (Gaad, 2011, p.24).

Bahrain

Bahrain “is considered by UNESCO to have excellent integrative policies. Here the rights of children with disabilities to education represent a distinct criterion of social development in this society, in keeping with equal opportunities” (Ashencaen Crabtree, 2010, p.200). A report prepared by Bahrain for UNESCO states: “all children should be subject to similar learning-teaching methods regardless of their social and cultural background and the different abilities and skills they possess. Education opportunities should be provided for all even for those with special needs of whom the ones with certain potentials should be integrated with the normal students” (Kingdom of Bahrain, 2008, p.49).

Responsibility for special needs education in Bahrain is shared between the Ministry of Education (Special Education Administration) and the Ministry of Social Development. An Inclusion Programme began in 2005. The government funds special education teacher training at the Arabian Gulf University. Bahrain also requires employers of 50 persons or more to hire special needs employees based on a percentage decided upon by the government. The Ministry of Education asserted in 2008 that all students in Bahrain were included and accommodated in the national educational system, using the broader definition of inclusion as education for everyone: “we can safely say that exclusion from education is not an educational phenomenon in Bahrain since there are no exclusions in the Kingdom due to disability, poverty, geographical distance, economic and political suffering or sex or racial discrimination. Alternate programmes are arranged for failures and secondary school dropouts who can attend evening classes or study as external students” (Kingdom of Bahrain, 2008, p.57).

UAE

Bradshaw estimates that the percentage of people with disabilities in the UAE is close to the worldwide average of 8-10 percent of the population (Bradshaw, 2004, p.51). The concept of social equality, safety, and fairness for all Emirati citizens is enunciated in Article 14 of the UAE Constitution. A disabled person was broadly defined as “one who has a disability that hinders a person totally or partially from participating in life” (Rashed, 1995, p.99). The government first supported the disabled through direct financial assistance and the establishment of rehabilitation centers. In 1979, the first special education classroom was established with forty students, and special needs teacher training also began at the same time at United Arab Emirates University (Alahbabi, 2009, p.43). In 2006, UAE federal law No. 29 Articles 12 and 15 (The Disability Act) specified that “the country assures equivalent education chances for the Person with Special Needs in all educational establishments....it shall be in the regular classes or in special classes” which provides the option of inclusive education (Gaad, 2011, p.4). Due to this foundation, the majority of special needs students in the UAE are educated in separate classrooms or institutions. The law provides a framework for inclusion in the classrooms and encourages it; however, it is not clear that the 2006 law *requires* a school to accommodate special needs students. In fact, the law mentions the establishment of specialized centres as a possible means of respecting the rights of the special needs individual. Some parents and general education teachers believe that special needs children can be best accommodated in separate facilities targeted towards them and many parents do not feel that the general education system contains enough qualified special education teachers to meet the needs of their children. Alahbabi’s 2009 survey of UAE teachers found that support for inclusive education was significantly higher among special needs education teachers than among general education teachers (Alahbabi, 2009, p.51). Alghazo and Gaad’s 2002 survey of UAE teachers revealed that most general education teachers had negative attitudes towards inclusion for students with disabilities in the general classroom (2004, p.97). This corroborates almost 30 years of scholarship in OECD countries which reveals similar attitudes, with the exception of attitudes towards children with learning disabilities (for example, dyslexia) which general education teachers view more sympathetically.

Despite the promising legal framework in the UAE, several challenges exist. For example, Down syndrome



children and low functioning children are generally not welcome in mainstream classes. Severely handicapped students are placed in rehabilitation centres by the government which are often earmarked only for citizens and which may have long waiting lists (Gaad, 2011, p.79). Private centres charge very high tuition fees affordable only by wealthy parents. There are few public or private autism centres comparable to Qatar's well-financed Shafallah Center (Gaad, 2011, p.79). Farooq's 2007 master thesis indicates that placement of autistic students in regular Dubai classrooms is virtually non-existent (Farooq, 2007; cited in Gaad, 2011, p.12). Gender issues are significant in the Gulf, as all GCC nations are gender-segregated societies and there is a shortage of both general education male teachers in addition to special needs teachers, since many males consider teaching to be a feminine profession (Gaad, 2004, pp.3, 6).

Alghazo and Gaad (2004) and Gaad (2004, p.319) demonstrated that UAE teachers were the least accepting of including students with intellectual disabilities in the classroom. Also, attitudinal problems and terminology are hampering efforts at inclusive education – until recently, children with Down's Syndrome were known as 'Mongols' (Gaad, 2001, p.199; Gaad, 2006, p.136), a particularly troubling term given the brutal destruction of Baghdad by invading Mongol troops in the 13th century. However, the first national support group for Down Syndrome children, parents and caregivers was formed in 2004 (Gaad, 2006).

The studies by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) and Gaad and Khan (2007) indicate that the majority of teachers in the UAE prefer the traditional method of delivery of special needs education (segregation) over the model of inclusion. It is understandable that if teachers do not have training or experience with special needs students, that they would be reluctant to include them in class rooms with high functioning students, since students with behavioral problems can disrupt the classroom and giving individual attention to special needs students, if adequate teacher assistants are not available, can be simply impractical, even if instructors philosophically support the inclusive philosophy and have a willingness to help.

Oman

As with Qatar, Oman provides services to special needs students through both traditional mainstream schools and specialized institutes. A whole spectrum of levels of inclusion currently exists from exclusion in special schools on one hand, to partial and full inclusion, and social inclusion (students integrate with mainstream students during non-academic activities). Oman has a very new educational system as formal education was almost non-existent before 1970. In 2007-2008 there were only 705 total students studying at three special institutes: The Al-Amal School for the hearing impaired (est. 1979), Al Fikryah School for the mentally challenged (est. 1984), and the Omar bin Khataab Institute for the visually impaired (est. 1999), which based on international averages appears to indicate that disability in Oman is under-diagnosed or not publically acknowledged. Officially, the Sultanate of Oman accepts and endorses the UNESCO "definition of inclusive education. It implies the need to provide opportunities for all young people to have learning opportunities in mainstream schools regardless of their cultural and social backgrounds or differences in abilities and capacities" (Sultanate of Oman, 2008, p.52).

In 2005, the Oman Ministry of Education launched an inclusion program for primary school students with special needs in the Al Batinah and Al Dakhelia regions. Although the inclusion project has achieved some success in Muscat, the most populous city, challenges, primarily financial and attitudinal, remain in the rural areas. Oman is a large and spread out country occupying 2/3 of the tip of the Arabian peninsula containing extensive mountainous areas and portions of the empty quarter (Rub al-Khali). Traditional attitudes to the disabled as a burden are still prevalent. Resources are therefore not evenly distributed, with a bias towards urban inhabitants, but this is a problem that is publically recognized by the government. Also, the national university Sultan Qaboos University introduced a special needs teaching diploma in 2006 to address the needs of inadequate staffing. The Ministry of Education believes that cultural and social factors are the most important barriers to inclusive education, i.e. society and teachers need to be convinced that education as well as equal access to educational resources is a moral right.

CONCLUSION

Clearly a growing interest in inclusive education in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries is developing,



paralleled by international efforts to establish the rights of children and special needs children in particular in the last two decades. The untiring efforts of the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability Sheikhha Hessa Al Thani were instrumental in raising awareness about the disabled in the GCC and MENA regions. Some GCC states will retain their established special schools systems, while many are moving towards mixed models of partial inclusion and mainstreaming. As judged by official reports, all GCC states have embraced the theoretical framework of education for all and providing educational opportunity for all citizens, broadening the definition of inclusion to embrace gifted individuals, returning adult learners, socially and economically disadvantaged individuals as well as the physically disabled or mentally impaired. Part of this shift in educational policy and attitudes stems from concerns about the large under-thirty populations of the Gulf (youth bulge), the large influx of expatriate workers to the Gulf in the preceding decades, and the need for Gulf governments to shift their economies from hydrocarbon production (i.e. declining natural resources) to knowledge producing activities and more diverse economic activity. In this future scenario, every citizen needs to play a role in the newly developing society, and for very practical reasons, anyone who can make any kind of contribution, even if it is limited because of an innate or environmental restraint on ability, must be encouraged, trained, and embraced by the culture.

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