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Managing Visually Impaired Students: Factors that Support and Inhibit Inclusive Programs in Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine how elementary school principals managed visually impaired students in their schools. Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the factors that support or inhibit inclusion programs in three elementary schools in the district of Al-Ahsa in Saudi Arabia. These elementary schools were identified by key leaders in Al-Ahsa Educational Directory based on the principal's favorable position toward inclusion. Data was collected through interviews with the three principals. Studies have indicated that the successful inclusion of students with visual impairment is largely due to the cooperation and commitment of principals. Findings found that the three principals were generally distinguishable from traditional educational administrators. Their roles were complex, and their schools were improving consistently even though problems surfaced that presently needed to be addressed. In the three schools, it was clear that leadership was shared and connected to the process of achieving inclusion. The findings in this study would be particularly useful to persons responsible for restructuring their school and implementing change to better meet the needs of all students.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Visually impaired children in Saudi Arabia have been integrated into public schools since 1984. However, due to inadequate management of inclusive visually impaired students in Saudi Arabia public schools, many of these students do not have the opportunity to reach their highest potential capabilities in education. If the opportunity is given to them to use their potential most productively, they could have contributed immeasurably to the progress of their education. Teachers and parents of students with visual disabilities are concerned that the Ministry of Education has yet to fully include these students into the mainstream of their education policy which promised to equalize educational opportunities to all children irrespective of their abilities or disabilities.

A common problem in the inclusion of visually impaired students into Saudi Arabia public schools and which has been contributing immensely to the mismanagement of visually impaired students' education in regular schools is that the majority of those who head the various inclusive schools are not properly prepared to help provide appropriate services to the visually impaired or blind students.

The exclusion of children with disabilities into normal schools has raised the concern of parents recently in Saudi Arabia. This is due to the issue of children with disabilities being marginalized. Some believed that these children should be included in the normal school system and be allowed to follow general education. Thus, there were arguments about including these children in public schools in Saudi Arabia. Non-government organizations that advocate on issues concerning children with disability have also voiced their concern that these children should be included in mainstream education in Saudi Arabia (Aldabas, 2015). Due to the growing pressure made by the public on this issue, a standard national curriculum was designed to cater to all Saudi Arabian children irrespective of their background. This has allowed children with disabilities to join the mainstream. To achieve this goal, all teacher education programs have been revised and designed to include inclusive programs in public schools.

Public schools in Saudi Arabia have to a certain extent included disabled children in their schools. For example, the visually impaired, hearing difficulties, and less severe disabilities children were seen enrolled in public schools. Recently, the effort has increased as can be seen when the special education institutes have revised their curriculum to ensure that they are in line with the policies and practices of inclusive education in other countries. In addition, Saudi Arabia also extended the move to include opportunities to be given to children with different special educational needs and render help to those that require assistance and help. Due to these efforts, currently, Saudi Arabia is offering specialization programs, especially to children that need education and behavioral support to see them through their growing years.

The increasing trend towards including children with visual impairments in public schools would mean schools would require special adaptations of the environment and instruction, as well as specially trained personnel. As such this study hopes to identify to what extent principals have made the effort to change their schools to accommodate the visually impaired students.

In recent years school administrators have changed from an autocratic to a more democratic approach (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Principals today must know academic content, and pedagogical techniques and serve as leaders for children's learning. However, there is a lack of qualified principals of inclusion programs for visually impaired students in Saudi public elementary schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Therefore, this study intends to

examine to what extent school principals can handle inclusion programs for impaired students in their schools.

The literature on inclusive education, especially in Saudi Arabia, has reported few studies that mentioned the role of school principals in handling visually disabled students in their public primary, intermediate and secondary schools. Other studies however have focused on developing a collaborative leadership structure and the importance of creating collaborative learning communities on school improvement. As such, this study will also examine the collaborative leadership practiced by the principal in ensuring a smooth implementation of the inclusive program in their schools.

This study responds to the new challenge which is the effective role of a principal in an inclusion program for visually impaired students in elementary schools. From the researcher's experience in the field for about 28 years, principals of schools in Saudi Arabia only know how to manage public schools with sighted students but when it comes to including visually impaired students, the principals are unable to provide the best learning environment. As such, this study will identify the role of principals in an effective and successful inclusion program for visually impaired students in 3 public elementary schools in Saudi Arabia.

In recent years, the role of the principal has become increasingly complex and demanding. The diversity of students and the increase in special programs designed to meet their needs have resulted in new challenges for school administrators. To support children with special needs together with those from the mainstream within a school system requires a strong obligation to the concept of an inclusive school. For example, this growing trend towards inclusion of visually impaired students in regular schools considers that all students, no matter what disabilities they may have, are taught in general education classrooms (Cook, 2004). In such programs, students with visual impairment are placed together with peers of the same grade and age. They are also required to follow the same curriculum as the mainstream students. Whereas an inclusive classroom accepts all students, recognizes that all students have strengths and weaknesses, and celebrates the uniqueness of all students. In schools with inclusive students, staff work towards common goals and share the ownership of their students, while a cooperative spirit pervades the school (Corn & Koenig, 2002).

The curriculum for mainstream students does not cater to the needs of the visually impaired students. Similarly, special needs education does not "own" certain students within a building. This crucial difference opens the way for real integration of not just visually impaired students, but it includes all students in the school. The presence of students with visual impairment in the schools does not mean excluding mainstream students.

Studies have reported on the inclusion of special needs students into neighborhood schools (Frost & Kersten, 2011), the full integration of special education students into "normalized" classrooms (Smith, & Kozleski, 2005), and the rights of children with disabilities to receive quality educational programs (Fortin, 2009). The current study intends to add to the body of knowledge by examining existing schools in Saudi Arabia with inclusive programs and what are the factors that support or inhibit these principals in the process of implementing an inclusive program in their schools.

2. METHODS

2.1 Participants

The sample for this study was principals from three elementary general education schools in the Al Ahsa Elementary School District in Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. Their selection was based on recommendations from the Superintendent of Schools, the Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, and the interest expressed by the school's principal. Successful implementation of inclusive practices was based on the following criteria:

- (i) Scheduling that promotes collaborative planning.
- (ii) Attendance by local students.
- (iii) A common philosophy or mission that promotes inclusion.
- (iv) Heterogeneous grouping instead of ability grouping or tracking.
- (v) The absence of special education, remedial, or pull-out programs.

Evidence of instruction strategies that support interaction such as cooperative learning or technological support. **Table 1** provides an overview comparing the three research sites and including variables such as size, staff, and program. Elementary school principals of selected research sites were contacted first by telephone and then by letter to discuss expectations for the interviews.

Table 1. A comparison between the three schools.

Schools	School A	School B	School C
Tenure of Principal	10 yrs.	9 yrs.	4 yrs.
School Population	385	504	406
Average Class Size	22	24	25
Visually Impaired Students	11	32	22
General Education Teachers	43	61	53
Special Education Teachers	32	42	37
Support Staffs	11	19	16

All three school districts were similar in organizational structure with superintendents, directors of pupil services, and principals, though they differ in size (**Table 1**). The elementary schools representing these three districts have the same ethnic population which is predominantly Saudi.

The ethical consideration was the participant's privacy. This was overcome by assigning a pseudonym name for each participant involved in the study. In addition, any identifiers in the interview transcripts were eliminated. Field notes, interview transcripts, and audio recordings were kept in a safe in the researcher's office for at least 5 years. The researcher was the only person with access to this safe.

To provide an environment for comfortable interviews with honest responses, anonymity was promised to the participants. Although the interviews were taped and transcribed, last names were not used, nor was any information sought that specifically identified a particular participant. All names of participants and their schools were changed to fictitious names.

2.2. Instrument

The instrument was designed based on the literature review regarding what special education principals' behaviors are needed to effectively serve students with visual impairment. The literature on special education leadership showed there has been a major shift in the role of the principals regarding special education, specifically on the impact of the principal's behavior on the inclusion of visually impaired students. In addition, the credibility of the interview questions has been demonstrated by showing how each question is related

to the concept derived from the review of the literature. Content validity and face validity of the questions were further enhanced by having the questions reviewed for this purpose and approved by two independent reviewers who experts in the field were.

2.3. Data collection

The procedures for actual interviews were the same in each school. Trust, rapport, and comfort level between the researcher and the participants were established before the direct questioning. The initial dialogue began with an explanation of the research methods for the study, how the information would be retrieved, and how the results would be used.

In two of the schools, School A and School B, interviews were conducted in private, quiet rooms unoccupied by any staff. In the third school, School C, the interview area was also used as an office space, making several interruptions necessary. In all the interviews the interviewee sat across a table from the researcher. They agreed that the session be recorded. In addition, the researcher jotted notes and conversed with each participant interviewed.

The formal interview protocol was followed with each participant. This method of gathering data allowed the researcher to qualify and expand participants' ambiguous responses if needed. Through active listening, repeating the interviewee's response, or interjecting a "why" or "how", the interviewer was able to ascertain needed information. Frequently, towards the end of the interview, two questions were added to broaden the description of changes that had occurred. For example, "Are you a better principal now?" and "Would you prefer working in an inclusive or non-inclusive school?" were questions that generated rich data clarifying changes in teaching practice and how the principal influenced school improvement.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. factors that support visually impaired students in schools

3.1.1. Provide assistance

All three principals provided constructive suggestions on what to be carried out in their schools. For example, the principal of School A started by stating that his teachers were offered more assistance to ensure the success of the inclusive program:

"I believe teachers will feel more comfortable implementing inclusive practices if they are offered more assistance and support when questions and concerns arise".

This was supported by the statement made by the principal in School C where he further added how he prepared his general education teachers to meet the needs of the inclusive group of students in their classroom:

"Preparing teachers for inclusion classrooms should focus on such areas as characteristics of specific disabilities, making instructional accommodations, and developing collaboration skills among school personnel. The success of inclusion is reliant upon preparing general education teachers to be competent in meeting the needs of all their students including those with visual impairment."

3.1.2. Existence of a conducive learning environment

Besides preparing the general education teachers with the necessary skills to handle the visually impaired students in their classes, the next step was to ensure the existence of a conducive learning environment for the visually impaired students. This is the reason why the principal in School B seemed to agree with the idea to equip the general teachers with the necessary skills as he believed that these teachers will be more receptive and open towards preparing a conducive environment for the visually impaired students:

“To make this happen there needs to be more preservice training, professional development opportunities, and administrative support. More visually impaired students are receiving instruction in the general education classroom. It is vital to find ways to support the general education teachers to ensure a successful inclusive classroom environment.”

The principal of School B further explained that his school created a conducive learning environment for the inclusion of visually impaired students in his school:

“...inclusion of visually impaired process in this school addresses all learning styles in a child-centered, risk-free, and dialogic environment.”

He further justified his statements by expressing his belief that the general teachers should not only be trained in handling the visually impaired students in their classes but also need to be experienced. According to him those teachers who are experienced in inclusive education possessed a better attitude towards the students who are visually impaired compared to teachers who lack experience in handling this type of students:

“Teachers with experience in inclusive education hold more positive attitudes than those with less experience.”

3.1.3. Constant communication between Principal and teachers

Another supportive step taken by these three principals to ensure that inclusive programs run smoothly in their schools is that they developed quality communication between themselves and their teachers. The principal of School C placed this aspect as a number one priority in his school:

“We talked for a whole year before we did anything.”

This was supported by the principal of School A who added that communication is the key to a healthy teachers relationship and a positive way of building a conducive learning environment:

“Communication is vital . . . talking to people . . . We had a lot of discussions during staff meetings and professional growth days.”

He further elaborated on why he stressed so much on communication in his school:

“Communication allows co-teachers to understand the team effort and contributes toward a learning environment for the co-teachers to help strengthen the relationship. Co-teachers can focus on their conflicting personalities and use these traits as strengths to contribute to the co-teaching relationship.”

The same opinion was also voiced by the principal of School B:

“Students would benefit from more frequent teacher-teacher communication, and more diverse means of communication.”

3.1.4. Co-teaching

Another factor that was agreed upon by the principals of Schools A and B as contributing to a positive teaching environment in their schools is the existence of co-teaching. The principal of School B elaborated on what was meant by co-teaching:

“The co-teachers relationship collaboration factors respect, communication, and trust... to strengthen the co-teaching relationship. ... communication and time are allowed for the co-teachers to strengthen their co-teaching relationship... for co-teaching success. Time can improve co-teacher relationships...”

The principal of School A supported the idea of co-teaching and he linked it to the importance of communication as he believes it contributes to team success.

“Interdependence in co-teaching is essential. Co-teachers rely on one another for support and learning for their co-teaching arrangement.”

He further explained what happens when these teachers communicate:

“Co-teachers can understand co-partner differences establish the co-teachers role in the relationship... understand the co-partners view is important for meeting instructional goals and newer goals.”

“On-going communication allows special and general education co-teachers to share new ideas and differences.”

The principal of School C stressed this aspect to ensure success in implementing the inclusive program, that is, the general education teachers must be allowed to co-teach with the special education teachers:

“To truly support regular education teachers and their students with disabilities, special education teachers need to be allowed the time and access to co-teach and team-teach with their regular education teacher counterparts.”

But, for co-teaching to be effective, he added that there must be good communication between the teachers:

“Effective communication is essential for a successful co-teaching arrangement and the sharing of ideas was addressed by several co-teachers. As for the general and special education co-teachers, they contribute their ideas through communication and identify roles that are beneficial toward the team, then the collaboration can be a success for the co-teaching team.”

3.1.5 Collaboration between General and Special education teachers

It cannot be denied that collaboration among teachers would help to improve successful inclusive practices. The principal of School A further explained the importance of collaboration among his teachers:

“... developing collaboration skills among school personnel would significantly aid regular education teachers to better meet the demands of students with special needs.”

He further stressed that:

“...collaboration is needed amongst general and special education teachers for successful inclusive practices to take place.”

The principal of School B also assured the importance of special education teachers' collaboration with the rest of the school staff and what resulted from it:

“Their relationships with classroom teachers, administration, support staff, and parents have changed as they have moved into a more collaborative mood ... their effectiveness depends on their ability to pull the inclusion team together and implement appropriate educational strategies.”

He went on to stress:

“Cooperating and working in the team by utilizing effective communication skills allows for the sharing of newer ideas, and strategies, and the effort contributes toward successful collaboration. Ideally, the co-teacher collaboration fosters best practices for meeting students' instructional needs.”

Finally, the principal of School C links communication to collaboration among the teachers:

“Effective communication supports the team effort and creates the sharing of different ideas and strategies.”

3.1.6. Respect between teachers and students

Another aspect that the three principals stressed among their teachers and students is the ability to create mutual respect between them. The principal of School B added that there must be mutual respect between teachers and students to ensure the inclusive program is a success:

“A risk-free learning environment where stakeholders respect students' privacy, where students respect one another's privacy, and where the teachers conduct classes where individual students are not put on the spot.”

The principal of School C also believed that a free-risk classroom atmosphere will help create a safe place to learn:

“All teachers facilitate their classrooms in such a way that led to a risk-free environment... the students in all classrooms feel safe... they eagerly answer questions and discuss the new concepts present to them throughout the lesson.”

Thus, the principal's ability to exercise influence on teachers is vital to ensure the success of the inclusive program. This influence is built, in part, by meeting teachers' demands for valued commodities, such as autonomy, order, and support. All three principals mentioned communication as an important support for the success of inclusion. Principals from each school mentioned the existence of strong special education teachers who are flexible, who listen to other teachers, who are helpful, who are team players, and who are key leaders in the inclusion process. All three principals also stress a risk-free environment as a support in their schools. Their openness, hard work, and commitment to students have influenced other teachers to work with them collaboratively.

3.2. Factors that inhibit visually impaired inclusion program

As mentioned in the literature, obstacles such as negative attitudes of parents, students, and teachers; cost constraints and lack of resources and educational policies that do not require general education teachers to have special education training and do not address heterogeneous groupings of students are among the obstacles that hinder a successful inclusion program.

During the interviews, the actual word “attitude” was used by some of the respondents to describe a negative disposition toward placing students with visual disability in their regular classrooms and a major obstacle to inclusive students. Other words and phrases such as “resistant,” “against,” “unsupportive,” “unopen,” “refusal to change,” “don't want to be bothered,” and “can't break the mold” were all used to describe how certain regular education teachers with negative attitudes felt about students with visual impairment being in their regular classrooms.

3.2.1. Unwillingness of Parents to support inclusive program

The principal in School B believed that parents need to be educated if they are going to be part of the process of the inclusion program for their children so that they do not pose an obstacle:

“We had several meetings with parents. We had a couple of parents who were very wary of inclusion because they had come from situations where their youngsters were pulled out, and they didn't like it. We met with these parents and talked about what we were trying to do . . . and explained the impact on the will to learn.”

3.2.2. Lower expectations towards visually impaired students

It was reported that generally general education teachers tend to have lower expectations towards visually impaired students compared to regular students.

The principal of School C found that the general education teachers tend to have lower expectations toward visually impaired students:

“General education teachers may have lower expectations for the special education students in their classrooms. It has been found that most regular teachers tend to compare visually impaired students with regular students.”

3.2.3. Tight schedule

The principal of School C stressed his concern about the teaching schedule allotted to the special education teachers working in different schools within a day. This reflects his sensitivity toward the workload imposed on these teachers:

“They have all the problems other teachers have and then they have some additional ones because they are itinerant. That puts a whole new set of obligations on them and it’s tiring. It is more exhausting than having a regular classroom environment, colleagues on each side of your classroom that you know and work with all the time”.

He further elaborated on his concern on this issue:

“Daily problems with schedules at two or more schools is a recurring theme. All the special education teachers indicate that they feel pulled in several directions, particularly when it comes to class times, duty, and activities within each school.”

The principal further described the emotional state of his special education teachers:

It is hard to shift gears and change from one school to another. You go into a different school and there are different expectations, different personnel, different personalities that you must deal with . . .”

3.2.4. Untrained general education teachers

Another factor raised by the principal of School C was that the general education teachers were not trained to handle special needs students in their classes:

“... without such knowledge, general education teachers have no base from which to draw information when they encounter difficulties.”

The principal of School B also raised a similar issue as the principal of School C which is the training of the general education teachers:

“... not everyone is trained for handling visually impaired students, but then the student has to move from grade to grade, ... not everyone is trained and that’s a challenge for them to teach such students....”

“The majority of the general education teachers do not have enough training or understanding of students with disabilities to effectively implement inclusive practices.”

3.2.5. Lack of teaching materials

The principal of School C felt that the teachers were not given enough teaching materials to teach the visually impaired students:

“That’s a fact. Teachers do not have enough teaching materials. The national and province administrators are not pushing to make sure that those instructional materials are available. So that’s something that we need to look into.”

4. CONCLUSION

The three principals noted that insufficient resources hindered their ability to easily offer differentiated instruction to the general education teachers. Most general education teachers were scared to teach in inclusion classes simply because there is limited knowledge of how to handle these students. There is also a lack of training for them in inclusion strategies and practices and this may lead to their negative attitudes towards the program. Improving general and special education teachers' abilities, competencies, cultural awareness, and commitment toward inclusive programs will enhance the school and organization climate thus resulting in greater school improvement. The three principals reported that these obstacles are at the beginning of the change process and those same factors continue to be present to varying degrees as they managed inclusive programs in their schools.

This study suggests several directions for future research. First, the study was limited to principals at three elementary schools. Future researchers may want to expand the interviews to other stakeholders, including parents and students to document their beliefs on the inclusion process and principals' influence on change. More schools at the elementary level or combined elementary and secondary levels would broaden the scope and breadth of the study. Multiple focus group interviews conducted over a school year with students, staff, and parents would offer a more complete picture of perceptions and attitudes toward principal efficacy in implementing the change to inclusive practices.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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