

Educating Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities in Regular Schools in Jordan

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Abstract

This article presents a description of current practices in educating students with mild intellectual disabilities in regular schools in Jordan. The data were obtained using several methods, including interviews with special education staff at the Ministry of Education, summaries of documents and published research related to resource rooms and mild intellectual disabilities in Jordan, and teacher interviews. Findings are reported and recommendations are offered.

Introduction

This paper summarizes the findings of a study that was conducted within the context of the National Education Strategy adopted by the Ministry of Education of Jordan in light of the Education Reform for the Knowledge Economy (ERfKE 1) Program. This program seeks new educational vision in which schools' roles include the provision of equal educational opportunities for all students regardless of their abilities. This entails providing students with special needs, including those with intellectual impairments, with specialized programs and resources for support. The National Education Strategy calls for the commitment of the Ministry of Education to offer appropriate educational programs in regular schools for students with special educational needs. In this study, the current situation of educational provisions for students with mild intellectual disabilities was analyzed. Main emphasis was put on referral and diagnosis, curriculum modification, instruction and evaluation, and international standards of best

practices in these areas and methods for improving practices and make them more aligned with those standards. During the implementation of this study, different sources of information were used. For the purposes of objectivity, participation of key staff as well as field practitioners was encouraged and the consensus building model was utilized.

Public Schools and Students with Special Educational Needs

The Ministry of Education, through the Directorate of Special Education, has a significant role to play in supporting students with mild intellectual disabilities and other special needs through remedial and special education services. At the present time, there are more than 511 part-time resource rooms in public schools offering remedial and special education services to 12,300 2nd to 6th graders with special needs, including children with mild intellectual disabilities (Directorate of Special Education, 2007). The Ministry focused on establishing resource rooms

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in geographical areas where special education schools are non-existent or in schools that demonstrated commitment to inclusion programs. Students are referred to these rooms without precise diagnosis. In these rooms, an individualized education program is developed for each student. Emphasis is placed on offering remedial education in academic areas where students face difficulties. Resource room teachers also assist students in regular classrooms, support regular class teachers, and provide counselling and consultation to parents.

However, students with mild intellectual disabilities are not identified as such since intelligence tests and adaptive behavior scales are not used due to lack of appropriate test and shortage in assessment specialists. Rather, they are commonly referred to as students having slow learning or learning disabilities or developmental delay based solely on teachers' observations and subjective impressions. Only assessment tools related to perceptual disorders are used in some cases. Thus, educational programs that meet the unique needs of these students are obviously called for.

Several of studies related to resource rooms in Jordan have been published in the last ten years (e.g., Abu Hassona, 2004; Al Ayed, 2007; Badarneh, 2006; Bustanji, 2002; Khazaleh, 2007; Khezai, 2001; Makahleh, 1999; Obeidat, 2003; Zaghlawan, Ostrosky, & Al Khateeb, 2007). Most of these studies were experimental and focused on investigating the effectiveness of various training programs on improving students' academic and social skills. In this paper, only descriptive studies addressing the situation of resource rooms are reviewed. Hadidi (2003) investigated common problems encountered by resource room teachers in both public and private schools in Jordan. Two hundred and nine teachers participated in this study. Problems were ranked by teachers in the following descending order: (a) working with parents, (b) student referral and assessment, (c) program development and implementation, (d) teachers' role, (e) school community, and (f) instructional resources.

Bairat (2005) investigated the perceptions of 301 parents of inclusion practices with their children in

resource rooms in Jordan. The results showed that parents were most satisfied with teacher competence and least satisfied with psychological support offered to their children. Perceptions of inclusive schools among regular and special school teachers in Jordan were addressed by Al Khatib (2002). Three hundred and ninety eight teachers responded to a questionnaire consisting of 26 items. Results revealed that teachers moderately supported some and not all concepts related to inclusion.

Al Ayed (2003) also explored challenges encountered by resource room teachers in the middle region in Jordan. A questionnaire consisting of 88 items was distributed to a purposefully selected sample of 150 teachers. Challenges were encountered in all eight domains covered by the questionnaire. The three major challenges reported by teachers were related to working with parents, the philosophy of inclusion, and the school community. In another study, Jafar (2003) attempted to identify major obstacles to inclusion of students with special educational needs in Jordan. One hundred teachers (50 regular classroom teachers and 50 resource room teachers) responded to a questionnaire consisting of 36 items. Participating teachers reported facing difficulties in all areas covered by the questionnaire in the following descending order: progress by students with special needs, teacher qualification, learning environment, administrative support, and attitudes of non-disabled students. The learning environment was perceived as the most pressing problem by regular classroom teachers while resource room teachers perceived attitudes of non-disabled students as the major problem.

Current Situation of Special Education Programs for Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities

Although interest in educating individuals with intellectual disabilities in Jordan dates back to late 1960s, educational programs for these persons has traditionally been offered by special day schools or residential institutions run by the Ministry of Social Development. Until today, institution-oriented models

of service delivery remain common since, according to legislation, the Ministry of Social Development rather than the Ministry of Education is the national authority held responsible for educating and training people with intellectual disabilities. Despite that, thousands of children with mild intellectual disabilities infiltrate the regular education system due to absence of any identification procedures upon school entry. In other words, there is a “hidden mainstreaming” for children with mild intellectual disabilities where these children are not identified or provided with adequate educational support in regular schools.

The situation is changing currently as a result of the commitment of the Ministry of Education to make special education provisions. However, we cannot talk about clear policies of inclusion of students with mild intellectual disabilities. Most of these students are to be found in regular classrooms. Some of them, however, are referred to resource rooms and are believed to be children with learning disabilities or slow learning. In addition to incorrect diagnosis of these children’s difficulties, most resource room teachers have not been trained to teach children with intellectual disabilities and are offered no guides for adapting the curriculum or instruction to meet their needs.

There are currently 69 centers and special day schools for children and youth with intellectual disabilities administered by the Ministry of Social Development in Jordan. In these segregated settings, about 2,700 students with mild to severe intellectual disabilities are being served (Directorate of Disability Affairs, 2007). If the international prevalence rate of 2% is adopted, the total number of school-aged children with intellectual disabilities is estimated at 50,000. In light of this, only 5% of the target population is being served by the Ministry of Social Development. So where are the remaining 95%? There is no precise answer, but an educated guess would lead us to expect that many of them are included in public schools.

In the absence of objective assessment of intellectual and adaptive functioning, the number of students with intellectual disabilities in regular schools remains unknown. McBride (2007)

estimated in a recent report submitted to the Ministry of Education the number of students with mild intellectual disabilities in public schools in Jordan at approximately 7,160. That is a reasonable estimate given that almost 85% of cases of intellectual disabilities are mild cases.

In light of the documents available at the Ministry and surveys and interviews conducted by the researchers, the following facts related to resource rooms in Jordan were evident:

1. There are currently 511 resource rooms serving 12,300 students.
2. About 80% of resource room teachers are regular class teachers who have earned a graduate degree in learning disabilities and the remaining 20% have a bachelor’s degree in special education.
3. The staff in the Directorate of Special Education cannot monitor field practices.
4. The Ministry’s experience with resource rooms has not yet been evaluated.
5. Special education provisions are tailored to children from the 2nd grade to the 6th grade only.
6. The budget of the Special Education Directorate is very limited, and almost none is allocated for teacher training.
7. There are only twelve resource room supervisors in the Kingdom.
8. The Ministry has recently agreed to equip a resource room in each public school.
9. There is a child study committee in each school having a resource room.

Also, a core team of national trainers consisting of twenty three resource room teachers and supervisors who were nominated by the Ministry to participate in a training workshop were asked to respond to five open-ended questions related to their perceptions of major problems faced in teaching students in resource rooms in Jordan. These teachers and supervisors ranked problems in the following descending order:

1. Diversity of resource room students’ needs, with some students getting no benefit from being in these rooms.

2. Most parents hold negative attitudes toward resource rooms.
3. The numbers of students with special needs in the school are more than resource rooms' capacity to accommodate them.
4. Teachers do not follow a clear referral process. Students are referred to resource rooms in light of their achievement and teacher observation rather than accurate psycho-educational diagnosis. Some teachers refer students to resource rooms just to get rid of them.
5. Resource rooms in some educational directorates are inadequately equipped.
6. There is an absence of administrative flexibility related to curriculum, instruction, and evaluation adaptation/modification.
7. There is an unavailability of curriculum materials to meet the needs of resource room students.
8. There is a scarcity of assessment tools or teachers' inability to use available tools appropriately.
9. There is a lack of monitoring of child progress.
10. There is a lack of collaboration of regular classroom teachers, counselors, principals, or parents.
11. There is a lack of supervision of resource room teachers or accountability measures.
12. There is a huge amount of paperwork.
13. There are difficulties in transferring students from the regular classroom to the resource room and in daily schedules in the resource rooms.

Participants were also asked about their views on current practices in resource rooms. Their responses are shown in Table 1. Teachers were least satisfied with: opportunities for professional development, counselors' involvement in programs for resource room students, extent of test accommodations authorized by school policies, materials and equipment available in resource rooms, and extent of curricular and instructional modifications authorized

by school policies. On the other hand, teachers were most satisfied with: relationships among resource room teachers and their students, referral of students to resource rooms, administrative support to resource rooms, relationships among resource room and regular class teachers, and relationships among resource room students and their non-disabled peers.

Additionally, in-service training needs of resource room teachers were assessed using an 11-item questionnaire. Only 17 teachers returned completed questionnaires; the results are presented in Table 2. Training was perceived as most highly needed in evidence-based practices (100%), program evaluation (100%), curriculum modification (94%), behavior modification (88%), and referral and assessment (88%).

International Standards Related to Education of Students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities and Benchmark of Jordan's Programs

A major goal of this study was to develop an adapted version of international standards of best practices in inclusion of students with mild intellectual disabilities, prepare a benchmark report on practices in Jordan, and provide suggestions for aligning existing programs and services with international standards. Standards were identified by reviewing and summarizing standards adopted by the Council for Exceptional Children and the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, among others, and reviewing and summarizing standards derived from research studies published in refereed journals. This process produced a matrix of standards consisting of seven core standards and more than seventy sub-standards.

To benchmark special education practices in Jordan with international standards of best practices in educating students with mild intellectual disabilities in regular schools, meetings were conducted with the nine key staff at the Directorate of Special Education (director, heads and members of remedial education, assessment, and supplies units) and a consensus concerning its contents and congruence with international standards was reached (Table 3).

Table 1

Teachers Perceptions of Educational Practices in Resource Rooms (N=23)

#	Item	Satisfactory		Somewhat Satisfactory		Unsatisfactory	
		Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1	Opportunities for professional development	1	4	5	22	17	74
2	Counselors' involvement in programs for resource room students	2	8	6	26	15	66
3	Extent of test accommodations authorized by school policies	0	0	11	48	12	52
4	Materials and equipment available in resource rooms	1	4	12	52	10	44
5	Extent of curricular and instructional modifications authorized by school policies	0	0	17	74	6	26
6	Assessment of students enrolled in resource rooms	2	8	15	66	6	26
7	Relationships among resource room teachers and parents	6	26	7	30	10	44
8	Professional competence of resource room teachers	3	13	16	70	4	17
9	Designing educational programs for students in resource room	3	13	16	70	4	17
10	Regular classroom teachers' support to resource room students	2	8	19	84	2	8
11	Relationships among resource room students and their non-disabled peers	3	13	17	74	3	13
12	Relationships among resource room and regular class teachers	7	30	10	44	6	26
13	Administrative support to resource rooms	4	17	16	70	3	13
14	Referral of students to resource rooms	7	30	15	66	1	4
15	Relationships among resource room	13	57	7	30	3	13

Table 2

In-service Training Needs of Resource Room Teachers (N=17)

#	Topic	High Need		Low Need	
		Number	%	Number	%
1	Behavior modification	15	88	2	12
2	Normal child development	5	29	12	71
3	Assistive technology	12	71	5	19
4	Modifying attitudes	10	58	7	42
5	Program evaluation	17	100	0	0
6	Referral and assessment	15	88	2	12
7	Early intervention	14	82	3	12
8	Evidence-based practices	17	100	0	0
9	Instructional strategies	14	82	3	12
10	Curriculum modification	16	94	1	6
11	Designing learning environment	12	71	5	9

Conclusions and Recommendations

Since special education practices in educating students with mild intellectual disabilities in regular schools in Jordan were judged as either partially consistent or non-consistent with international standards of best practices, it is clear that efforts are needed for enhancing the quality of educational programs for these students. The Directorate of Special Education is not adequately equipped to meet the numerous challenges in the field. Of

particular importance are challenges related to: (a) teacher training and support; (b) psycho-educational assessment of students; (c) curriculum modification; (d) increasing involvement of parents, regular class teachers, and counselors; (e) widening the base of services to include more students from all age levels; and (f) offering more options for service-delivery. Accordingly, the Directorate of Special Education should be empowered in terms of manpower and its relations with other directorates within the Ministry so that educational policies can be modified as

Table 3

Benchmark of Special Education Practices in Jordan with International Standards of Best Practices

Core Standard	Consistent	Partially Consistent	Non Consistent	Data Unavailable
Foundations of Education				x
Child Characteristics and Development		x		
Instructional Strategies		x		
Organization of the Learning Environment		x		
Child Assessment and Diagnosis			x	
Professional and Ethical Practices			x	
Collaboration, Consultation, and Team Work		x		

necessary and adaptations of curricula, instruction, and tests can be regulated. Establishment of a special education unit within each educational directorate is also recommended. It is suggested that these units' main functions include, but are not limited to, development of referral and diagnosis tools and procedures, monitoring remedial and special education programs, mentoring new teachers, and implementing training workshops.

Furthermore, the scope of remedial and special education services should be extended so that they not be limited to 2nd to 6th grade only. More attention needs to be given to early intervention and transition services. Also, more service delivery models (i.e., itinerant teachers, consultant teachers, etc.) needs to be explored.

It would be helpful to launch periodic and purposeful education programs in the school

communities to foster realistic expectations and positive attitudes toward children with special needs. It would also be helpful to support special education teachers and regular classroom teachers with teacher assistants and guides for adapting academic curricula and life skills curricula. On the other hand, schools need to encourage the use of the peer-tutoring approach and voluntary work in schools to support students with special needs.

Rethinking both regular teacher and special teacher training programs so that teachers can work collaboratively is also a priority. Similarly, procedures for the enforcement of legislation, regulations and policies related to the education of students with special needs should be developed. Finally, the Ministry of Education should search for practical solutions to the assessment and diagnosis problems. This might best be achieved by collaborating with a

local university in the implementation of a diploma program in psycho-educational assessment of children with special needs for a carefully selected group of graduates holding a bachelor's degree in special education, psychology, or counseling.

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