

A Discussion on Home-Institutions' Relations with Reference to Children with Intellectual Disabilities in Saudi Arabia

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Summary

Private specialized institutions differ from public ones in that they mostly act independently. This paper reports a study designed to assess the provision of specialized institutions for children with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. The approach taken in this study was qualitative, involving a case study strategy that enabled the researcher to gain rich and in-depth information based on the shared experiences of participants comprising institution leaders, educators and families from two specific specialized settings, one public and one private. The study aimed to examine the existing disparities in service delivery so as to develop a clear picture of the service quality provided by public specialized institutions for children with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia. The results suggest that the weak relationship with inpatient and specialized institutions is a consequence of the parents' poor responsiveness, which may result in these institutes developing a negative impression of the parents. Conversely, the lack of active initiative on the part of the public specialized institutions led to a negative parental attitude towards these institutions. A sensible approach to resolving this problem might be to recognize that these institutions have a significant responsibility to encourage parents of children with intellectual disabilities to become involved in their children's learning, to promote positive attitudes.

Keywords:

intellectual disabilities; specialized institutions; home-institutes; parents; Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

Typically, the Saudi Guiding Principles on Special Education emphasize the need to actively maintain home-institution's relationships to support the educational process of children with disabilities. There are additional rules that educators must follow to better interact with the parents of children with intellectual disabilities studying on special education programs (Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, 2002). However, the parents of children with intellectual disabilities often express concern about poor communication with their children's institutions, even arguing that existing initiatives to support such children are inadequate (Aldosari and Pufpaff, 2014; Almasoud, 2013). It can further be suggested that both educators and families encounter several challenges when requiring such criteria to be met by specialized public bodies (Aldosari and Pufpaff, 2014). This is particularly relevant as the number of

children with intellectual disabilities has increased, resulting in many parents having to consider alternative ways to meet their children's needs (Alajmi, 2006). For example, many families have transferred their children with disabilities to the private sector, because it offers better services and higher quality care.

Related research studies also emphasize the crucial role of parental involvement in schools, which has had a major impact on the quality of support provided by specialized institutions for children with intellectual disabilities. In a study focused on the dilemmas faced by Korean teachers when introducing transitional services in specialized institutions for students with intellectual disabilities, Park (2014) surveyed 35 teachers. The findings indicate that the active involvement of institutes' leadership, the home, government organizations for people with intellectual disabilities, and legal counsel are essential to create an environment in which teachers can deliver effective transitional services to learners. Lawson et al. (2015) further emphasize the vital importance of collaboration between teachers and family members of students with intellectual disabilities attending specialized settings. An Australian study conducted by Skora et al. (2001) examined curriculum competencies and 86 parents of students with intellectual disabilities from five specialized institutions in Victoria by distributing a questionnaire. The results not only reveal the important role played by parents, but also suggest the significance of their involvement in decision-making. Similar findings were reported by Strnadov and Cumming (2014) who surveyed 75 teachers to examine the transitional process for students with intellectual disabilities in New South Wales, Australia. According to Feiler (2010), who conducted a small study in a specialized setting, an ideal option is to work with three staff members, one parent and four students. The aim being to take advantage of the finding that learning is more effective when parents are actively involved.

2. Method

The context for this study is two specialized institutions for children with intellectual disabilities, one

public and one private, in a city in the western province of Saudi Arabia. In this research, semi-structured interviews were utilized as the main tool of data collection. Targeted selection was undertaken to identify a sample of school principals, teachers, and parents of children with intellectual disabilities; selection was based on their positions and experience within the specialized institutions. A total of twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with five parents, five teachers, and one principal from each institution. The questions prepared before conducting the interviews were unique to each group of participants, and considered their role relative to the specialized institution. A review of prior literature in this area guided the formulation of the questions, as well as the central research questions.

The number of people who would participate in the study was determined according to data saturation; i.e., the point at which the researcher believed adding new participants would provide no novel data. It should be noted that all the interviews were conducted in Arabic, the native language of both the participants and the researcher, and permission was obtained from the participants to use an audio recorder during the interviews after it was explained that the recordings would only be used for research purposes after transcription for analysis. Document analysis of Saudi special education policies and regulations was also performed as a secondary data collection method, and the information obtained in this way was used as the basis for the interviews and to compare the participants' responses. Upon completion of the transcription process, all the interviews were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for conducting a thematic analysis, the six phases being: familiarize yourself with your data, generate initial codes, fix publication issues, check problems, define and name problems and create the report. It should be noted that the data was first analyzed in the original Arabic, and any relevant quotations were subsequently translated into English to avoid unintentional changes in meaning. The initial themes that emerged from the data were continuously revised based on data from the participants from both institutes before the final thematic map was created detailing the main themes.

3. Findings and Discussion

An important finding that emerged from this study was the possible weakening of the quality of the provision at public specialized institutions for students with intellectual disabilities, with emphasis on the relationship between home and institution. This becomes most evident when comparing the two settings. According to the professionals at private institutions, parents are expected to play an important role in their children's entire educational path,

while at public institution the parents of children with intellectual disabilities are largely ignored.

Many researchers have stressed the critical importance of parental involvement in special educational settings for children with intellectual disabilities (Park, 2014; Skora et al., 2001; Strnadov and Cumming, 2014; Strnadov and Evans, 2013). Previous research suggests the level of collaboration and communication between parents and the staff at specialized institutions themselves affects the quality of the education delivered to the children. Feiler (2010) examined factors that might be influential, and indicated that when parents engage with their children's learning, learning is effectively promoted. This confirms statements by Dobbins and Abbott (2010), which suggest that encouraging parental involvement and fostering collaboration between parents and the specialized institution responsible for their children's learning can have positive effects on overall outcomes. It can also be argued that the current conditions at public specialized institutions for students with intellectual disabilities are more likely to improve if parental involvement is encouraged. Therefore, care should be taken not only to develop effective cooperation between the parents of children with intellectual disabilities and public specialized institutions, but also to ensure that mechanisms to support such cooperation exist.

This study revealed a significant positive relationship between the home and private specialized institution. When the participants from the private institution were asked to share their experiences, perspectives and insights into the home-institute relationship, all the responses received were very encouraging. This is unsurprising as the importance of building productive relationships within the home is prioritized in the context of the private specialized institution. A specific policy to encourage parental involvement has been adopted and implemented by the private specialized institution to maintain and improve the quality of relationships with the home institution. This policy discourages children with intellectual disabilities from continuing in a private specialized institution unless their families fully cooperate with them and the special education teachers.

Therefore, parents of children with intellectual disabilities studying at the private institution are left with no choice but to become involved in their children's learning. Some concerns have been raised in the literature in relation to this strict approach, particularly in reference to the potential pressure this might place on families. However, according to Feiler (2010) such strictures are appropriate. Additionally, the results of the present study point to the possibility that the relationship between the home and the public specialized institution for children with intellectual disabilities in the Saudi context would benefit from direct political intervention. A teacher explained:

You give the parents a warning the first time, and then a second time. If that does not work, then you just pass them on to the social work department or the administration office, or sometimes to the psychology department if that is needed! The worst-case scenario is if there is no help from their side at all! No homework done, or if the student is not clean enough. We can then prevent him from coming to the institute for one to three days so that the parents will understand how serious this is to us. Ultimately, it is for the good of their child. It is bad for me when he is absent. It means that I will have to do many things with him that I could have done before. So, you really need the parents to cooperate. That is the condition: cooperate if you want your kid to come to our institute.

(Teacher from the private specialized institution)

Alongside the stringent guidelines, the private specialized institution has also developed a range of strategies and activities to facilitate the successful parental engagement. Meetings with parents of children with intellectual disabilities are held regularly to share experiences and concerns, and many participants from the private institution's community have reported that these meetings enable them to work effectively with parents of children with intellectual disabilities by improving communication. The importance of parenthood is highlighted in the literature. Feiler (2010) argues that both sides, home, and institute, express specific concerns about their children's learning; Thus, the goal of such meetings is to achieve effective two-way communication between educators and parents. One of the teachers explained how this unique commitment has developed:

We always call upon parents to meet us, as we believe that it influences the student's education. We show them how to communicate with their kids. We bring them to class and show them how we explain the lessons to their children. We teach both the child and the family, for the sake of the child.

(Teacher from the private specialized institution)

Parents of children with intellectual disabilities attending the private intuitions also appreciated the positive effects of such good communication. The view shared by parents was that this approach not only helped them to build a strong positive relationship between the private specialized environment and the home, but that they saw the results of this reflected in their children's overall educational progress. The connection between home-institution and children's progress is supported in the literature (Dobbins and Abbott, 2010). A positive home-institution relationship can have a direct and significant impact on learning progress (Feiler, 2009). One of the parents described this:

They send us the school plan at the beginning of each year, which even includes the schedule for sports activities. They also give my son regular homework and check it. If he does

not do it, they call his mother asking about the homework, and why we have not checked it with him.

(Parent from the private specialized institution)

Despite the successes reported, the director of the private specialized institution explained that working with and involving the parents of children with intellectual disabilities is not always easy, as the needs of each parent are unique. Faced with the pressure to effectively respond to parents' demands, the head of the private specialized institution also have to prepare children with intellectual disabilities in advance. Similarly, UNICEF (2000) emphasized the need for educators to adopt an attitude that can be tailored to meet families' needs in terms of accessibility, warmth, and flexibility, all of which are known to ensure the development of positive relationships. The headmaster said:

It is not easy to conduct those kinds of meetings [parent-teacher meetings]. It could backfire on the institute, due to the wide range of parental needs. Therefore, it is important to educate teachers about how to listen to their needs. We need to listen to what they say, even if they are mad at us. The kid stays in the school for six to eight hours a day, so they need to know what he is doing. If they do not know, the job will only be half done.

(Principal of the private specialized institution)

Surprisingly, the private specialized institution also offer a variety of activities to engage the extended family members of children with intellectual disabilities (e.g., grandparents and siblings). Indeed, the importance of involving extended family members in underpinning the home-institution relationships is has been recognized as pivotal by researchers (Feiler, 2009). They note that activities that involve family members from home at the institution can promote even more positive learning outcomes for children with intellectual disabilities. One of the teachers explained:

The family's role is so important for us, because whatever we do here, we need families to help us practice with their children at home. We have open days, which are held once every year—there is an open day for fathers, one for mothers, and even one for grandmothers. We invite them on their scheduled days, take them on tours to different sections of the center, and let them do something with their children. We also hold open days for their brothers and sisters. The administration is considering many more opportunities to help families share in activities with their children. Brothers and sisters have a considerable influence on children. I had one student who was taken by his brother to participate in a car racing competition. His brother sent us the video and we watched it with all the students. This brother was a great example! This shows how a family can help a child to become engaged with society. Mothers should also be involved, because there are behavioural

problems that we cannot resolve without total cooperation from mothers and the other members of the family. Students are here at the institute for seven hours a day, and the rest of the time they are at home. So, the family's role is very important.

(Teacher from the private specialized institution)

To encourage the parents of children with intellectual disabilities to become more involved, the private institution even supported a parental initiative to set up a parents' council. By communicating with the parent council, the head of the private institution seeks to ensure the voices of parents of children with intellectual disabilities are heard, as are their requirements for benefits and services. This could then impact the overall decision-making process. Previous studies have shown the importance of parents of children with intellectual disabilities participating in the decision-making process (Skora et al., 2001). The head of the private specialist institution explained:

We have five parent councils at the institute. This is a very good idea that the parents themselves initially came up with. They formed their own council and started sharing their concerns and ideas. We only asked them to be a part of the council.

(Principal of the private specialized institution)

It is also very interesting that the private specialist institution has tried not only to involve the parents of children with intellectual disabilities in the upbringing of their children, but also the parents of those who are about to graduate from school; a group which the institute attaches great importance to. This takes the form of a specialist program to support the families of those children with intellectual disabilities who will graduate in the coming year. This program is specifically designed to prepare parents to better manage their children with intellectual disabilities after they leave the private specialized institution. According to Park (2014), active collaboration and communication between parents and the institute can help them effectively transition. As one of the teachers commented:

Another program is provided for families whose kids are about to leave the institute. It is called 'My family and me.' It is a program in which we let the parents know a year ahead that their children will be graduating at the end of the year, and we give them a full report on their child. So, when he or she is eighteen years old, the parents get invited for psychological preparation for post-school life and to share their concerns with the psychological department—establishing what problems they might have and where they should go if they encounter any obstacles... Because they will certainly face psychological problems in their lives. The same approach is arranged with the speech therapy department. They give them instructions and information about what to do after graduation and what they might need.

It is the same also with the nutrition department, and every department at the institute.

(Teacher from the private specialized institution)

In contrast, the data suggests that parental involvement in the education of their children with intellectual disabilities appears to have been largely ignored by the public. As a result, there is a significant gap between children's experiences at home and in the community, which could impact on their progress. When participants from the public professional environment were asked about this, the majority expressed a deep concern. However, contrary to previous findings, previous researchers suggested that these challenges represent a global phenomenon. Feiler (2010) argues that communication with the home institution is undoubtedly an issue of significant importance and concern. The following comment from a parent illustrates her poor relationship with the specialized public environment:

We are completely marginalized because there is no communication between the parents and the institute. We, the parents, are not at all involved. If the teachers do get in touch with us, they will see the outcome. We need to find someone to ask when we have any questions, like how to do something, or where can I buy that thing, and so on. We need guidance from someone with experience. For example, I have always demanded an explanation for the teaching plan at the institute. This year they told me that during the first semester they would focus on picture-based learning. However, I have not received any information about this so far. I cannot follow his progress at home. My child has started his second semester already and I am not seeing any program being applied to him. I want them to inform me about any new programs or requirements that might benefit my son. I am an educated man, but there are many other parents who are illiterate. Imagine... how will they help their children?

(Parent from the public specialized institution)

Unsurprisingly, parental involvement has emerged as a critical measure of the quality of education for students with intellectual disabilities in the public sector. It is simultaneously interesting and disappointing, however, that different perspectives and often contradictory discourses are evident. This was a strong pattern affecting the participating staff members, and the parents of public-school students with intellectual disabilities, in that both groups were shifting the blame for lack of parental involvement to each other. Each side seemed to believe the other had not responded appropriately when fulfilling their responsibilities to their children with intellectual disabilities. Some of the teachers in the public department expressed a belief that poor responses from the parents of children with intellectual disabilities prevented them from developing

effective collaborative practices. For example, on teacher noted:

Although the involvement of the family has a positive impact on both teachers and students, the reality is that the family does not want to become involved. Since I was hired, I have given them homework with a form for their parents to write their comments. Sometimes it was done, sometimes not, and sometimes the form was just lost. So, I feel there is no care from the parental side. It got to the point where I started doing in-class work only, no homework. We got used to this. There is not even a follow-up book anymore. As a result, the teacher cannot work properly, which has a negative impact on the student.

(Teacher from the public specialized institution)

This view was shared by the manager of the public professional institution, who also linked the lack of effective cooperation between the home and the institution to parental attitude. However, the literature on parental involvement typically reports a strong correlation between parental involvement and institutional policies and practices. Arguably, when institutions introduce active initiatives to accommodate the diversity of abilities and interests of parents of children with intellectual disabilities (and other family members) when designing curricula and institutional activities, parents' willingness to engage in their children's learning increases (Feiler, 2009). Unfortunately, this does not appear to have been the case in the public specialized setting described in this study. Conversely, the following comment depicts school leaders' beliefs about the public specialized environment:

Unfortunately, some parents' perceptions about the parent-teacher meeting are inaccurate. They bring their sons to spend a couple of hours here and that is it. Some parents are not even interested in what we do with their child.

(Principal of the public specialized institution)

However, all the participating parents of children with intellectual disabilities in the public department blamed the institute for their lack of participation. Parents were asked to explain this belief, and a widely held view was that the professional public institution was solely responsible for the education of their children with intellectual disabilities, as there was a lack of initiative on the part of the institution to encourage their participation in their education children. For example, many parents of children with intellectual disabilities indicated that specialized public institutions do not organize regular parent-teacher meetings. One of the parents from the public specialized setting stated:

The family's role is completely absent here. The institute does not even hold meetings with parents. Imagine, during the last seven years, I was only invited to attend a parent-teacher meeting once. There should be a meeting before the beginning of the academic year, so that parents are aware of their rights and duties. They should know what will be

provided for their children, and be able to explore the teaching plan that is supposed to be ready two to three weeks before the beginning of the academic year, so they can familiarize themselves with it.

(Parent from the public specialized institution)

When the participating public educators of children with intellectual disabilities were questioned about the lack of regular parent meetings, one of them attributed this to administrative obstacles, stating that a lengthy and formal process is often required to hold such meetings. Another public-school teacher cited the poor institutional learning environment as a reason for lack of parental involvement, as even when staff want parents to be involved in the development of their children with intellectual disabilities, the learning environment is usually perceived as uncomfortable. This finding supports Feiler's (2010) observation that parents are typically less involved when barriers are created by the educational institutions themselves. Feiler (2010) also suggested that more attention should be paid to developing support within institutions as a way to involve parents more effectively. After a teacher was interviewed for this study, he commented:

There are no parent-teacher meetings. I have been here for ten years, and I have not yet heard about one. We got a note that we are not allowed to meet parents; we can only meet parents in an official way through the administration. The most important thing for a student is to improve communication between his or her teacher and his or her family, because we should teach him or her in class and they should teach him or her at home.

(Teacher from the public specialized institution)

Another teacher pointed out:

The first thing we learned was that the family's cooperation is essential, but there isn't any! Well, even if a parent comes, where should we take him? We get him to sit here in the sun; you see the playgrounds, the poor learning environment! The parent will say, why am I here? Did I come here to get burnt by the sun? Keep my kid in the classroom until I come and get him.

(Teacher from the public specialized institution)

It is interesting to note that the private specialized environment places high value on developing a strong relationship with the home, and that this tends to contribute significantly to the quality of education provided and the progress of students with intellectual disabilities. Notably, the private specialist framework not only initiates and promotes parental involvement, but also supports its continuation through a wide range of activities. Conversely, it was disappointing to observe the remarkably weak relationship between the home and the public institution's faculty members. This was reflected by the two contradictory discourses that emerged in the interviews,

which attributed the lack of communication to the hostile attitude of parents of intellectually disabled children towards the institution and vice versa. Regardless of this discrepancy, there is no question that there is a low availability of specialized public services in Saudi Arabia, and the lack of regular parent-teacher meetings to encourage parents of children with intellectual disabilities to engage in their children's learning is acknowledged to be a significant problem. In general, the lack of any active initiative on the part of the professional community seems to generate negative attitudes.

4. Conclusion

According to the participants' perceptions, learning in a private specialized learning environment tends to be more effective when parents are fully involved and play a significant role in their children's educational journey. Such involvement can also contribute significantly to the quality of services provided as well as the progress of the children with intellectual disabilities. It also emerged that private specialized institution not only prioritize parental involvement, but also facilitate it through a wide range of activities aimed at building productive relationships with the home. However, the situation in public institutions differed considerably, leading to conflicting reports from parents and teachers. The teachers explained that the relatively weak relationship with the home- institution was a consequence of the parents' poor responsiveness to the institute, which may have led them to develop a negative impression of the parents. Meanwhile, the lack of active initiative on the part of the public faculty led to parents forming a negative opinion of the institute. A sensible approach to resolving this problem might be to recognize that specialized institutions have a significant responsibility to encourage the parents of children with intellectual disabilities to be involved in their children's learning and to pursue strategies to guarantee and support this.

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