

Meeting the needs of all: Why schools in Kuwait are failing to meet their moral obligation and what can be learned from the U.S. education system

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Abstract: *Inclusive education is an aim for all nations. To achieve that goal, countries such as Kuwait need to focus on educational policies and strategies designed to ensure that all students benefit from an appropriate educational environment. Factors needed to create inclusive schools are leadership, vision, commitment, professional development and effective instructional practices centered on individualized and differentiated curricula. First, the authors of the paper describe the United States (U.S.) experience with inclusion and how Kuwait can reshape, import, and adopt the U.S. special education model. Second, the authors present recommendations for implementing inclusive education. It is hoped that the recommendations made in this paper move Kuwait forward in a speedy manner as they design and implement inclusive education policy.*

1. Introduction

Though we may never reach perfection, nations remain relentless in the effort to achieve two parallel goals in education: first, excellent teaching which results in student achievement, and second, equal opportunity for all children (Kochhar, West & Taymans, 2000). These two goals are grounded on the concept of equal opportunity, underpinned by inclusive education. In the United States (U.S.), inclusive education is an integral part of education policy at state and federal levels; it is viewed as an opportunity for all learners to receive a quality education that meets basic learning needs and enriches lives. Inclusion is the full acceptance of all students and leads to a sense of belonging within the classroom community (*Florida State University*, 2002). The U.S. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004)

requires that states have policies assuring all children with disabilities have the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and are educated with their peers without disabilities in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) to meet their unique needs. (IDEA) is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities (*Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004*, 2011).

“The ability to understand and appreciate diverse peoples both within and across international borders profoundly affects one’s ability to flourish in the global economy and the world political community” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 13). Nowhere is this more exemplified than in the classroom. Kochhar, West & Taymans (2000) explain that students without disabilities experience growth in social cognition and gain a greater understanding and acceptance of students with disabilities and of diversity in general when they experience inclusive programming. Students without disabilities also experience increased self-esteem and overall improvement in self-concept. Parents of students without disabilities confirmed the findings of overall improved outcomes as a result of the inclusion of students with severe disabilities within the general education classroom (Kochhar, West & Taymans, 2000).

An inclusive classroom encourages students to understand and communicate with others in a variety of ways leading to greater empathy of individual needs. This ability to understand and appreciate the individual needs, skills and attributes of diverse peoples is of great benefit in society today both within and across international borders, profoundly affecting one’s ability to flourish in the global economy and the world political community (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009).

Successful inclusion requires a shift in attitude and beliefs of all school personnel and parents such that all involved truly believe that students with disabilities can succeed in the general education environment (*Florida State University*, 2002).

2. Education in Kuwait: Kuwait's History

While Kuwait's rhetoric suggests an increasing appreciation of the importance of creating an inclusive environment in schools as evidenced in teacher preparation programs, the reality is that this is not observable in the classroom or in current education policy.

Advocates of inclusion seek to change the philosophy and structure of schools so that all students, despite differences in language, culture, ethnicity, economic status, gender, and ability, can be educated with their peers in the general education classroom in neighborhood schools (Wade, 2000). Prior to 1934, there were no educational programs focused on special needs students in Kuwait, neither were there any written records for the field of education in that period. In 1955, the first school for students with visual impairments provided basic, but not comprehensive or inclusive education. In 1959, initiatives for special education were developed in order to include disabilities such as intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, hearing and visual impairments in the educational system. Moreover several centers for people with learning difficulties and autism were established (Hussein, 2002).

The Compulsory Education Law in 1965 emphasized free compulsory education for all children of Kuwait from the beginning of primary school till the end of the intermediate stage. Education in Kuwait is delivered at four different levels: kindergarten for two academic years; primary for five academic years; intermediate with four academic years and secondary with three academic years (Ministry of Information in Kuwait, 2011). The education system in Kuwait can also be divided into three categories: Public, Private and Qualitative. The religious education, special education, and adult education are supervised under the third category, qualitative education (Figure 1).

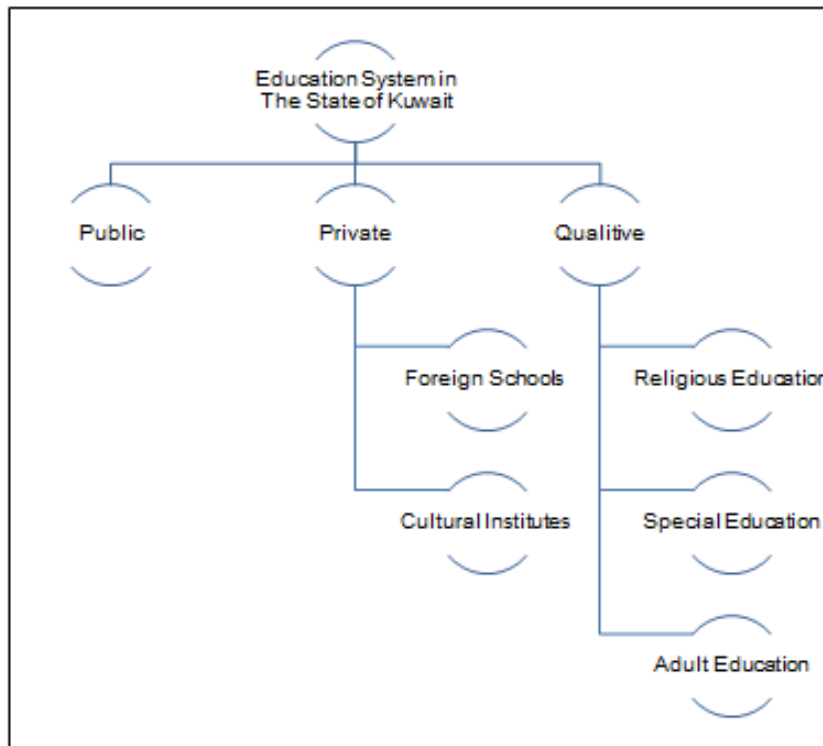


Figure 1. The education system in Kuwait

Kuwait is also committed to providing students with books, school buildings, teachers and other resources (Ministry of Information in Kuwait, 2011). In 1967, Kuwait established special educational programs for students with special needs. According to Kuwait's Association of Individuals with Disabilities, special needs students are defined as a category of the community with particular needs, especially in the educational aspects that made them need different types of education from what is required of other learners in traditional schools. Kuwait has also enacted legislation, guided by the constitution, supporting the rights of individuals with disabilities for access to education, rehabilitation and employment (Almuhareb, 2007).

Education in Kuwaiti government schools is open to all in order to ensure that every child avails themselves of their constitutional right to a free education. This right is

guaranteed by the government, along with associated costs such as free books, transportation and meals (International Bureau of Education, 2010).

2.2. Special Education in Kuwait Today

The legal and legislative framework for inclusive education in Kuwait is based on Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Ministry of Education in Kuwait has established an office to oversee the national special education programs to serve students with intellectual disabilities and Downs syndrome in special classrooms integrated within general education schools. Individuals with disabilities and their families are financially secured by the legislation. The Higher Council for the Disabled (HCD) was established to serve all government services designed for individuals with disabilities including healthcare, rehabilitation, education, social welfare, and advocacy. The HCD was authorized to fund private school tuitions for some students with disabilities who cannot be served in government special education programs (Kuwait Association for People with disabilities, 2011).

The special education and disability policy and practice in Kuwait provide educational programs and services for students with disabilities under special education setting; however, the policy of inclusive education has not yet been implemented. In order to ensure that special education remains high on the policy agenda, Kuwait rewards one person or institution for their outstanding work and activities in a field relating to education for people with disabilities. The UNESCO/Emir of Kuwait Prize was created in 2002 through the generosity of the government of Kuwait. The award consists of a sum of 40,000 U.S. dollars (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2009).

The Committee for People with Disabilities exists as part of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor, The Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor also provides extensive benefit programs covering transportation, job training, and social

welfare for the people with disabilities (U.S. department of Kuwait Human Rights Practices, 1994). In 2008, the National Report on Development of Education stated that Kuwait faces major challenges when implementing the policy of integrating children with disabilities into the education system in order to have inclusive education such as, political challenge, cultural challenge, social challenge, technological challenges, and cognitive challenge (Ministry of Education in the State of Kuwait, 2008).

The majority of students with special needs remain enrolled in government-run special education programs, centers and schools. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report in 2007, the total number of students enrolled in special schools was 2049, including 1663 Kuwaiti nationals, 166 Gulf State nationals, 91 from other Arab countries, 11 from non- Arab states and 98 unidentified (International Bureau of Education, 2007).

Recently, the Kuwaiti government merged students with learning disabilities, hearing and visual impairment into general education classes. Unfortunately, general education teachers have found this to be an immense challenge as there has been little preparation for this radical policy change. Most general education teachers were not originally trained as special educators (Almuhareb, 2007).

In 2001, the College of Education at Kuwait University began offering a National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) accredited major in Special Education to prepare teachers for public and special education schools. The intent of the program was to address the current status of general education teachers who work in schools for special education students, were not qualified in the field, had no specialized training and had an opportunity to gain specialist credentials. Indeed, due to the lack of qualified personnel and the labor market's need to prepare teachers of special education for minor and moderate disabilities (especially after approving the law of the disabled) responsibility for training was placed in the expertise of the College of Education (Kuwait University, 2010). Prior to the introduction of this program a few teachers each year were sent abroad to study for degrees in the field of special

education but these trained and high-qualified teachers represent a low percentage of the total number of teachers in the special education schools.

In 2010, Kuwait University (KU) organized a conference called “Preparing the teacher of special education for minor and moderate disabilities” KU pointed out the lack of qualified personnel and the labor market's need to prepare teachers for students with mild and moderate disabilities.

An additional issue is that the curricula followed in general education schools and special education schools are identical and as yet there is no policy of individual accommodations or of curricula differentiation. State school buildings are designed for able-bodied students and tend not to be accessible to students with physical disabilities. The Ministry of Education in Kuwait has future plans to construct new schools with the latest technology for all students’ with/without disabilities and facilitate transportation for them. In 2010, the Ministry of Education in Kuwait launched the New Technology Infrastructure Project (NTIP) in coordination with globally renowned technology leader Microsoft. The project serves more than 350 high schools and intermediate schools in Kuwait by introducing the latest technological infrastructure into the education process via the latest e-learning and 'smart school' technology (Al-Sharaa, 2010).

2.3. Arab States of the Gulf

The term of Arab States of the Gulf refers to the six Arab monarchical states of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. These six nations are part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that has common objectives. Many of these States have made positive advances in terms of vision of special needs education. These states have shifted from opening specialized schools for children with disabilities – although specialized schools still have an important role – to

integrating these children into the mainstream education system (International Bureau of Education, 2007).

In fact, countries in the Arab Gulf Region are facing some challenges towards designing and implementing more inclusive educational practices addressing the diverse needs of all learners. The IBE-UNESCO report in 2007 stated that there is still no unified concept of inclusive education in the Gulf Arab States, although there is a common tendency of seeking to broaden the idea beyond only serving children with special needs. They are seeking and looking to the successful global experiences in order to articulate and implement best practices of inclusive education. In fact, Gaad (2011) stated that there has been a significant interest in inclusive educational practices in the Gulf and the Middle East. Limited evidence suggests an interest in acknowledging and legalizing the rights of persons with special needs in general and educational rights started decades ago; however; the movement has been sporadic, lacking capital and influence.

2.4. The Moral Obligation-Separate but not Equal

The educational system in Kuwait provides separate services for each group of students in separate settings. Special education schools in Kuwait established in the fifties provided educational services for students with disabilities in isolated school environments (Ministry of Education, 2008). Kuwait needs strong support and guidance from its leaders to ensure proper implementation and appropriate decisions. In fact, people in leadership positions have a moral obligation to provide an environment that supports social justice in schools. The concept of inclusion for students with disabilities in Kuwait is segregated to a separate but not equal education.

3. Education in America: American History

During the 1950's and 1960's, the civil rights movement in the U.S. helped to raise interest in equality, resulting in grassroots efforts of parents and organized advocacy groups (Taylor, Smiley & Richards, 2009). The Brown v. Board of Education case in 1954 legally ended decades of racial segregation in America's public schools. Brown's case was a major victory for the civil rights movement and became the major underpinning for further civil rights action (Yell, 2006). Oliver Brown had filed a segregation case for his daughter who had to walk one mile to get to her black elementary school, rather than attending a white elementary school which was a few blocks away. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) assisted Brown with his case, and many other black parents joined him. Although it took time, the precedents set in Brown resulted in sweeping changes in all schools' policies and approaches to students with disabilities (Yell, 2006).

The civil rights movement changed the basic legislation of the American society. This legislation provided greater constitutional protection for minorities, and eventually for persons with disabilities (Yell, 2006). As an outcome of the Brown case, students with disabilities claimed their rights to be provided with the same education that students without disabilities were violated. The concept of equal opportunity of the Brown case was not just applicable to minority students, but to students with disabilities too. Additional federal cases came along after the Brown decision carrying the same concept of equal opportunity to children with disabilities (Yell, 2006).

They are many critical changes and acts in American history that positively affected children with disabilities. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) was founded in 1922 by a group of administrators and supervisors attending the summer session at the Teachers College at Columbia University. The council began with 12 members concerned that exceptional children were receiving inappropriate education and they worked to improve the quality of these individuals' lives (Yell, 2006).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) (PL 94-142) was passed in 1975 (later renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the act provided guidelines, requirements, and funding for education of exceptional students. The purpose of the EHA was to consolidate and expand the previous federal grant programs and to continue funding (Yell, 2006). Prior to 1975 the access of students with disabilities to educational opportunities was limited. The contained administrative and funding provisions provided that states develop policies assuring all qualified students with disabilities receive appropriate special education (Yell, 2006).

Former President Bush signed No Child Left Behind (NCLB) into law on 2002. It was a reaction of students' low achievement in the American public schools. The districts and the schools are accountable for bringing all students' academic level up to the state's standards in reading and math within a certain period of time including students with disabilities (Yell, 2006).

4. Next Steps for Kuwait

While the model of inclusion has not yet been fully implemented in Kuwait there are signs that the government is on the inclusion path. However, there are barriers, which include lack of resources and data for inclusive education, lack of trained teachers and staff, lack of clear educational/curricular guidelines addressing diversity, and insufficient family involvement (UNESCO, 2007). The National Report on Development of Education (2008) listed the major obstacles facing inclusive education. Professional preparation and training programs for all teachers, educational policies that exclude children with special needs education, and curriculum represent fundamental pillars of inclusive education.

Kuwait, in the course of its rapid development, has looked to the West for development strategies, research, and innovations to guide the planning of its disability and rehabilitation policy and practice (Almuhareb, 2007).

5. Recommendations Based on the US Model

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It is not easy to design, develop, and implement a new program or process, especially in a professional field such as education. In any given change effort, implementers will be operating in very different ways with new practices according to the circumstances and the culture. Kuwait needs to understand the phenomenon of the change process. The positive side of that change is that they have a specific target and they also have the option to explore the U.S. innovations and adopt the U.S. model. It is also important to plan, facilitate, research, and assess the change processes because the greatest gain comes from combination.

Based on the U.S. model of special education, educational leaders in Kuwait should apply the necessary strategies to help successfully implement inclusive education, focus on the awareness for people in power, and build their positive thoughts about the need for new policies that can assist districts, schools and teachers to support and provide services for these children with special needs. People in Kuwait need to realize that inclusion is both possible and necessary and influence teachers' attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities by providing additional training to develop teaching methods and techniques.

In fact, in order to have inclusive education and to improve the future, Kuwait needs to develop a vision. It is important to create a shared vision in order to implement any change. Kuwait needs to understand that inclusion does not happen overnight. The process must continuously be assessed including checking actions and gathering data. This is an important part for implementing inclusive education. Moreover, the U.S. has many specialized associations and universities that can be a great resource in providing formal and informal assistance.

The development of special education in Kuwait has several potential outcomes and impacts. However, all of these practices are still not enough to meet the needs of students with disabilities to integrate in society. After reviewing the history and the current education in Kuwait, it is clear that educators need to understand and explore the

concept of inclusion, the process of change and work toward it as a critical goal.

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