LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS IN THE INCLUSION PROGRAMME FOR STUDENTS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine principal leadership behaviors and their influence on successful inclusion of visually impaired students in public schools in Saudi Arabia.. The following research questions framed this study: 1)What are the factors identified by principals, general and special education teachers that support or inhibit inclusion program, 2) What are the resources principals use to support the change process toward inclusive program? 3) What are the contextual factors surrounding the school which affect the principal's change strategies? and 4) What changes, if any, occurred as a result of the principal's efforts to implement inclusive? program for visually impaired students? Qualitative inquiry techniques were employed to determine the effective administrative practices from the perspective of principals and teachers. Depth interviews were conducted with three principals, eleven special education teachers, and sixteen regular education teachers in the three separate public school. These elementary schools were identified by key leaders in Al-Ahsa Educational Directory on the basis of participants' favorable position toward inclusion.

The literature on effective schools and systemic change clearly states that the principal's leadership is crucial to successful implementation of any innovation. Various studies indicate that the majority of successful attempts in the area of inclusion of students with visual impairment are largely due to cooperation and commitment from principals. Findings found that the 3 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 3 schools it was clear that leadership was shared and connected to the process of achieving inclusion. Recommendations on this study were to encourage staff development and help teachers realize they are a source of information for each other.

The many factors identified in this study that seem to contribute to successful inclusion, coupled with their success stories, can help educators and policy makers at all levels of the educational system to understand that inclusive programs can be built and flourish when responsible and committed principals choose to make a difference. The findings in this study would be particularly useful to persons responsible for restructuring their schools and implementing change to better meet the needs of all learners.

APPROVAL

I certify that I have supervised /read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, as a thesis for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfillment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contribution from any other persons or sources are probably and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Visually impaired students in Saudi Arabia have been integrated into public schools since 1984. However, due to inadequate management behaviors of inclusive visually impaired students into 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 in the most productive way, 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 be fully committed in implementing that part of their education policy which promised to equalize educational opportunities to all students regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Al-Mousa, 2017).

A common problem in inclusion of visually impaired students into Saudi Arabia public schools and which has been contributing immensely to the mismanagement of blind education into regular schools is that the majority of those who head the various inclusive schools are not properly prepared to help in providing appropriate services to the visually impaired or blind students (Al-Mousa, 2017). It is important for the legislations and polices in the Ministry of Education to properly implement the provision of appropriate services to these blind students.

The segregation of children with disabilities has recently begun to be questioned in Saudi Arabia. Some argue that children with a disability are being marginalized and that more should be offered to them within the general education (Alanazi, 2012). Debate about inclusion is emerging in all sectors of education in Saudi Arabia. Disability in children and parental advocacy groups have begun to form and they pressure the Saudi government to include children with

disability into the mainstream education. They are focused on the adverse effects of segregating students into special schools (Aldabas, 2015).

Internationally, at the end of the 20th century, inclusive program became widely recognized as an appropriate philosophy and an important structure for reforming education. Persons with disabilities lack equal access in society as well as lacking access to education in developed states (Amayo, 2005).

Thus, being aware of this issue, Saudi Arabia has established a standard national curriculum whereby all children are offered an opportunity to access education including children with disabilities. In order to meet this objective, teacher education programs have also been developed to aid in the process of the implementation of government policy concerning inclusive program (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018). Saudi Arabia has a history of offering special education in regular schools for visually impaired children, those with hearing difficulties as well as those with less severe disabilities. However, the country is currently expanding its system of special education institutes to make them more consistent with the inclusive policies and practices of other nations. The state also offers children with different special educational needs and the educational help they require (Alanazi, 2012). It has also increased specialization programs for children who require educational, social, emotional and behavioral assistance (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018). In this way, the national government aimed to address the gap in the standardized national curriculum. Thus, this study will further examine the gap in the national curriculum.

The first Al-Noor Institute for the Blind was opened in 1960 (Alenizi, 2012). Since its establishment, the country has continued to participate in the training of special education teachers and has also expanded the development of educational aids and equipment to assist these students. The country has also implemented an inclusive policy based on the international model.

The move towards inclusive education shows the shifting perceptions and attitudes towards disability. But how much has this move succeed is yet to know. Therefore, this study will investigate the existing inclusive program and identify how much has the program improved through the years.

Saudi Arabia's education policy targets two groups of students for inclusion. The first consists of students with learning disabilities, physical disabilities, poor vision and those with behavioral problems who attend regular schools. The other group, specifically targeted by newer education policy, includes those students currently educated in the special education institutions. The Saudi Ministry of Education policy emphasized that it is mandatory for all children, including those with disabilities, to receive free education. Although the international literature and policy highlight the importance of inclusion, however, a significant gap exists within the Saudi context where few studies have been undertaken to examined the impact of these measures taken by the Saudi Ministry of Education (Alsalem, 2015). Thus, this study aimed at filling the gap as well as examined the impact of the measures that have already been implemented.

Two major challenges faced by special educators in Saudi in terms of the curriculum for visually impaired children are: the existing core curriculum and the expanded core curriculum (Al-Mousa, 2010). In the existing core curriculum there are standard lessons in English, Arabic, social studies, science, and so forth. Therefore, major adaption of these subjects have to be made to allow visually impaired children to absorb the concepts. Thus, this study will examined to what extent principals facilitate the change and make inclusive school concept effective (Al-Mousa, 2010).

In addition, there is a need for an expanded core curriculum exclusively for visually impaired children that deals with the use of orientation and mobility, independent living skills assistive

technology, and career education (Al-Mousa, 2009). Thus, specially trained teachers will be needed to present the expanded core curriculum to these students. Therefore, school principals need to address this issue. The increasing trend towards including children with visual impairments in the public school would mean schools require special adaptations of the environment and the instruction, as well as specially trained personnel (Kirk, 2012). As such this study hope to identify to what extend teachers in the schools are qualified to handle visually impaired students.

How are we to educate children who have visual impairments when so much of standard education is based on the ability to see? The core curriculum makes clear that there are expectations that these children will and should master the standard curriculum of subjects such as, mathematics, language arts, science, social studies and so forth. It is through this study we will discover whether the existing core curriculum helps the visually impaired students to cope with their learning.

In addition to adjustment to the core curriculum, Hatlen (2000) stressed that there is a need to expand the core curriculum which includes those skills needed specially by students with visual impairments. One of it is the orientation and mobility, which enables the student to master spatial concepts and physical environment. Only trained specialist (certified orientation and mobility specialists, or COMS) will be able to help visually impaired children on how to orient themselves in space and to travel safely around their schools, homes or their communities. The goal is to make children with visual impairments as independent as possible (Fazzi & Naimy, 2010). Thus, this study will attempt to examine what are the skills being taught to the visually impaired students to assist them in their daily movements in school, homes or communities.

In recent years، instructional leaders have changed from an autocrat to more democrat approach (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Principals today must know academic content and pedagogical techniques and must also serve as leaders for children's learning. However, there is a lack of qualified principals of inclusion program for visually impaired students in Saudi public elementary schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Therefore, this study intends to examine to what extend school principals are able to handle inclusion program for impaired students in their schools.

Only few studies have mentioned the role of a principal as an effective instructional leader of inclusion programs for students with visual disabilities in public primary, intermediate and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Education, 2014). Other studies however have focused on developing a collaborative leadership structure (Ministry of Education, 2014). Yet the importance of creating collaborative learning communities on school improvement, has been mentioned in a research (Lashway, 2002). Cooperation between grade level classroom teachers and special education personnel including paraprofessionals, is necessary for inclusion program to succeed. As such, this study will also examine the collaborative leadership practiced by the principal in ensuring a smooth implementation of the inclusive program in the school.

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 (Ministry of Education, 2014). 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.

Today, 80% of visually impaired students, in which they represent a large percentage (57%), spend their school days in general education classrooms, most likely at their neighborhood school, and receiving support from an itinerant teacher or resource specialist (OSEP, 2006). Visually impaired students in the general education participate in the same curriculum with their sighted classmates and, they tend only to perform well academically if they do not have multiple disabilities. Aids such as technology that enlarges type or glasses to enhance visually impaired vision for accessing information and moving independently at school and in the community are used (Corn & Koenig, 2002).

The principal's role has become increasingly complex and demanding. The diversity of students served and increase in special programs designed to meet their needs have resulted in new challenges for educational administrators. Supporting students with special needs and supporting the education program for general education students 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 attend their home school with age and grade peers and, to the maximum extent possible, receive in-school educational services in the general education classroom whereas an inclusive classroom is one that accepts all students, recognizes that all students have strengths and weaknesses and celebrates the uniqueness of all students. In an inclusive school, staff work towards common goals and share the ownership of their students, while a cooperative spirit pervades the school (Corn & Koenig, 2002).

General education does not concede responsibility for visually impaired students and special 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 for all students. By including students with visual impairment, other students are not excluded.

Much has been written regarding the philosophy of the integration of students with special needs into neighborhood schools (Frost & Kersten, 2011); full integration of special education students into "normalized" classrooms (Smith, 2005); and the rights of children with disabilities to receive quality educational programs (Fortin, 2009). This study will further add to the gap in the literature by examining existing schools in Saudi Arabia with inclusive programs and how leadership behaviors impact an inclusive program for visually impaired students

1.2 Statement of Problem

The segregation of children with disabilities has recently begun to be questioned in Saudi Arabia. Some argue that children with a disability are being marginalized and that more should be offered to them within the general education (Alanazi, 2012). Debate about inclusion is emerging in all sectors of education in Saudi Arabia. Disability in children and parental advocacy groups have begun to form and they pressure the Saudi government to include children with disability into the mainstream education. They are focused on the adverse effects of segregating students into special schools (Aldabas, 2015). This concern has led the researcher to delve into this issue more seriously. Those schools that have started welcoming children with disabilities, how far are they in achieving this objective? Thus, this study intends to find answers that could help future schools to include children with disability successfully.

Saudi Arabia has a history of offering special education in regular schools for children with impaired visual those with hearing difficulties as well as those with less severe disabilities. However, the country is currently expanding its system of special education institutes to make them more consistent with the inclusive policies and practices of other nations. The state also offers children with different special educational needs and the educational help they require (Alanazi, 2012). It has also increased specialization programs for children who require educational, social, emotional and behavioral assistance (Alharbi & Madhesh, 2018). In this way, the

national government aimed to address the gap in the standardized national curriculum. Thus, this study will further examine any missing gap that may exist in the national curriculum.

The first Al-Noor Institute for the Blind was opened in 1960 (Alenizi, 2012). The country has implemented an inclusive policy based on the international model. The move towards inclusive education shows the shifting perceptions and attitudes towards disability. But how much has this move succeed is yet to know. Therefore, this study will investigate the existing inclusive program and identify how much has the program improved through the years.

The Saudi Ministry of Education policy emphasized that it is mandatory for all children, including those with disabilities, to receive free education. Although the international literature and policy highlight the importance of inclusion, however, a significant gap exists within the Saudi context where few studies have been undertaken to examined the impact of these measures taken by the Saudi Ministry of Education (Alsalem, 2015). Thus, this study aimed at filling the gap as well as examined the impact of the measures that have already been implemented.

In addition, there are only few studies that have been directed towards the role of a principal as an instructional leader in an effective inclusion program for visually impaired students in elementary school (Grogan & Andrews 2002; Portin, DeArmond, Gundlach & Schneider, 2003). Thus, this study intends to fill the gap in the literature by examining the impact of leadership behavior among principals in an inclusive program for students with visual impairment.

Two major challenges faced by special educators in Saudi in terms of the curriculum for children with visual impairment are: the existing core curriculum and the expanded core curriculum (Al-Mousa, 2010). In the existing core curriculum there are standard lessons in English, Arabic, social studies, science, and so forth. Therefore, major adaption of these subjects have to be made to allow children with visual impairment to absorb the concepts. Thus, this study

will examine to what extent principals facilitate the change and make inclusive school concept effective (Al-Mousa, 2010).

In addition, there is a need for an expanded core curriculum exclusively for children with visual impairment that deals with the use of orientation and mobility, independent living skills assistive technology, and career education (Al-Mousa, 2009). Thus, specially trained teachers will be needed to present the expanded core curriculum to these students. Therefore, school principals need to address this issue. The increasing trend towards including children with visual impairment in the public school would mean schools require special adaptations of the environment and the instruction, as well as specially trained personnel (Kirk, 2012). As such this study hope to identify to what extend teachers in the schools are qualified to handle children with visual impairment.

In recent years، instructional leaders have changed from an autocrat to more democrat approach (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Principals today must know academic content and pedagogical techniques and must also serve as leaders for children's learning. However, there is a lack of qualified principals for inclusion program for students with visual impairment in Saudi public elementary schools (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). Therefore, this study intends to examine to what extend elementary school principals are able to handle inclusion program for students with visual impairment in their schools.

Cooperation between grade level classroom teachers and special education personnel including paraprofessionals is necessary for inclusion program to succeed. As such, this study will also examine the collaborative leadership practiced by the principal in ensuring a smooth implementation of the inclusive program in the school.