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**The Inclusion of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in  
Public Education Schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia:  
Challenges and Difficulties of Implementation**

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### Abstract

Inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in public school classrooms in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has been facing challenges in terms of access to appropriate and adequate services and in terms of quality and equality of educational services provided. Inclusion of students with ASD in public school classrooms in Saudi Arabia has been mainly for students with low and moderate level of ASD. This study explores these challenges through available literature on inclusion of students with ASD in Saudi Arabia as well as relevant literature on inclusion of students with ASD abroad.

In terms of access to appropriate services for students with ASD, this study has found a huge disparity between provision and need. In addition, the quality of provision for students with ASD has been greatly influenced by several factors. Chief among these factors are public school teachers' qualifications and training, financial incentives and their perceptions about the severity of autism. Parents' understanding of the process of inclusion has been marked by much skepticism about the inclusion environment and qualification of public school teachers. The cultural dimension of the process of inclusion has also been much influenced by the Islamic teachings and local traditions. These factors taken together has shaped the nature of challenges facing inclusion of ASD in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** Inclusion, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Challenges, Saudi Arabia.

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## دمج طلاب اضطراب طيف التوحد في مدارس التعليم العام في المملكة العربية السعودية: التحديات وصعوبات التنفيذ

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### الملخص باللغة العربية

يواجه دمج الطلاب من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد في فصول التعليم العام بالمملكة العربية السعودية تحديات من حيث إمكانية الوصول إلى الخدمات المناسبة، ومن حيث الجودة والمساواة في تقديم هذه الخدمات، حيث أن دمج الطلاب من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد في فصول التعليم العام في المملكة العربية السعودية متاح بشكل رئيس للطلاب في المستوى البسيط والمتوسط من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد. وقد هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى التعرف على هذه التحديات من خلال الأدبيات المتاحة حول دمج الطلاب من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد في المملكة العربية السعودية وكذلك الأدبيات ذات الصلة حول دمج طلاب اضطراب طيف التوحد في الخارج. من حيث توفر الخدمات المناسبة لطلاب اضطراب طيف التوحد، وجدت هذه الدراسة فجوة كبيرة بين المتاح والاحتياج، كما تأثرت جودة الخدمات المقدمة للطلاب من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد بشكل كبير بعدة عوامل، من أهم هذه العوامل هي تأهيل معلمي التعليم العام وتدريبهم، والحوافز المالية وتصوراتهم حول مستوى شدة الاضطراب. علاوة على ذلك، فقد شاب تصور بعض الأسر لعملية دمج أبنائهم في مدارس التعليم العام شيئاً من الشك حول بيئة الدمج وتأهيل معلمي التعليم العام. كما أن البعد الثقافي لعملية الدمج يتأثر بشكل كبير بالتعاليم الإسلامية والتقاليد المحلية، وقد شكلت هذه العوامل مجتمعة طبيعة التحديات التي تواجه دمج الطلاب من ذوي اضطراب طيف التوحد في المملكة العربية السعودية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** دمج، اضطراب طيف التوحد، التحديات، السعودية.

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**Introduction**

The aim of this study is to explore the challenges and difficulties facing the implementation of the inclusion of students of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in public school classrooms. Despite the fact that the Saudi Ministry of Education (MOE) has made provision for the education of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) since 1958 (Aldabas, 2015), the Inclusion Project started only in 1990 (Gaad, 2011), and only in the 2000s that pupils with ASD have been educated alongside their non-SEN peers in mainstream classrooms (Aldabas, 2015). According to Al-Zaiady (2019), Head of the Department of Special Education in the Ministry of Education, students with ASD in the public school system can be classified into three categories, based mainly on the level of severity of ASD cases, where students with high level of ASD to be educated in the Centers of Early Intervention, while students with low and moderate ASD to be partially mainstreamed in the public school system in separate classrooms, and students with mild ASD to be fully mainstreamed with their peers in the public classrooms. Table 1 below illustrates these classifications.

**Table 1: Classification of Students with ASD in the Public School System in Saudi Arabia.**

<b>Level of ASD</b>	<b>Institution</b>
High	The Early Intervention Centers
Low to moderate (partially mainstreamed)	Public schools – separate classrooms
Mild (fully mainstreamed)	Public schools – public school classrooms

**Sources:** Statement by Head of Special Education Department in the Ministry of Education (2019).

This study is mainly concerned with the last two categories; the fully and partially mainstreamed ASD students in the public school system. This leaves students in the Early Intervention Centers as well as those in the private sector schools and centers, whether under the supervision of the MOE or the Ministry of Labor and Social Development.

The main challenges facing inclusion of students with ASD can be at glance summarized under two main headings; (1) challenges concerning access to support services; (2) challenges concerning equality and quality of such services. Recent statistics concerning students with ASD have revealed serious challenges in terms of access to appropriate services. Total number of male students with ASD in inclusion programs in all levels for the academic year 2016-2017 is only 1018 student, while total number of female students is only 326 (Binhayyan, 2017).

Information on the website of King Salman Center for Disability Research (2019), which is based on statistics provided by the General Agency for Statistics for the year 2017, shows that there are 53,282 persons with ASD, 32,758 of them are males and 20524 females. There is no breakdown of these numbers by age. Therefore, the total number of ASD school-aged students among that aggregate population of ASD people in Saudi Arabia is unknown.

It would do injustice to the efforts of the MOE to take the number of ASD inclusion-supported students as a percentage of that aggregate total (53,282), which amounts to about 2.5%, as the MOE's public schools are to cater only to ASD school-aged students among that total ASD population. In addition, the MOE caters to ASD students in its Early Intervention Centers; however, these centers, do not provide ASD inclusion support services; and therefore, not within the scope of this study.

On the other hand, challenges concerning equality and quality tend to cover a wider range of issues and factors; however, literature discussing equality and quality of inclusion support services for students with ASD in the whole of the Arab World are very rare (Theb and Mohidat, 2013), and Saudi Arabia in no exception as far as my search confirms. Therefore, discussion of these challenges below is mainly based on literature from Western resources combined with my own experiences of local realities, where the researcher worked for many years in different educational provinces.

The researcher tried to approach challenges concerning equality and quality of services provided to ASD students from several angles; chief among these, (1) variations in the nature of support services provided; (2) influence of Islamic percepts and cultural traditions; (3) teachers' perceptions, incentives and qualifications; (4) parents understanding and interactions with the inclusion process.

### **Challenges Concerning Access to ASD Inclusion Support Services**

Inclusion has been defined as a process that refers to students with disabilities becoming part of the general education classroom, receiving a meaningful curriculum with necessary support, and being taught with effective strategies (Smith et al., 2005). Sayaslim (2006) indicates that there are two definitions for inclusion; the first is the partial inclusion, where students of SEN have their own classrooms and spend part of the school day with their public school peers; the second is full inclusion, where students of SEN spend their whole school day with their peers in public school classrooms. In Saudi Arabia, inclusion practices have mainly been partial inclusion, which comprise of SEN classrooms in public schools (Emam, 2016).

In addition, Al-Mousa (2010) points out that in Saudi Arabia students with SEN have been separated in two groups; the first group comprises of gifted, talented and physically disabled students; the second is low-to-moderate learning disabled, and behaviorally/emotionally disturbed children. The first group has already been integrated into primary and middle schools, while the second group is still being taught in segregated special education units or separate classes and includes children with ASD (Al-Mousa, 2010). However, the process of inclusion has since then gained some momentum under the Initiative of Developing Special Education of 2017, whereby more full inclusion programs have been launched (Ministry of Education, 2019).

This has been confirmed by the head of the Special Education Department in the MOE, as shown in table 1 above, who stated that students with ASD in the public school system can be classified into three categories, based mainly on the level of severity of ASD cases, where students with high level of ASD to be educated in the Centers of Early Intervention, while students with low and moderate ASD to be partially mainstreamed in the public school system in separate classrooms, and students with mild ASD to be fully mainstreamed with their peers in the public classrooms (Al-Zaiady, 2019). There are no statistics on the numbers of ASD students in these two streams of inclusion programs in the Saudi public school system. However, Binhayyan (2017) has demonstrated, as shown in table 2 below, the breakdown of the total number of students with ASD in inclusion programs by their gender and school level.

**Table 2: Total Number of Male and Female Students with ASD in Inclusion Programs for the Academic Year 2016-2017**

Level	Number of Pupils		Number of Classes	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Preparatory	22	163	7	50
Elementary	855	157	240	57
Intermediate	107	6	37	4
Secondary	34	0	14	0
Total	1018	326	298	111

**Sources:** Adapted from Binhayyan (2017) based on Statistics by the MOE

Although there are also students of ASD in 21 Early Intervention Centers operated and supervised of the Ministry of Education (Alzaiady, 2019), not included in the information presented by Binhayyan (2017), by any optimistic estimate they would not exceed the total number of students (1344) already in the inclusion programs. Information on the website of King Salman Center for Disability Research (2019), which is based on statistic provided by the General Agency for Statistics for the year 2017, shows that there are 53,282 people with ASD, 32,758 of them are males and 20524 females.

This was even confirmed by Tayseer AL-Mofareg (2018), representative of the General Agency of Statistic, in the Third Gathering for the Exchange of Expertise on Autism in 2018. There is no breakdown of these aggregate numbers by age. However, if optimistically assumed that the number of students with ASD in these Early Intervention Centers is equal to that of students with ASD in the inclusion programs, then the share of those catered for directly by the MOE is only small fraction of total number of

people (53,282) with ASD, about 5%. Again, this share percentage would certainly have been higher, had it been of the school-aged population only. Nonetheless, It has to be noted here that (1) the MOE is not, according to the pertinent Council of Ministers' decree on the Project of Dealing with the ASD, the only governmental agency responsible for people with ASD; (2) the MOE provides educational vouchers to every child whose parents wish to educate him/her in a private school, provided that the concerned school is assessed as type A or B by the MOE (Al-Zaiady, 2019). This landscape concerning access to appropriate support services for ASD students can easily be characterized by a severe challenge in the form of lack of capacity to accommodate students with ASD in the public school system, regardless of the type of inclusion.

### **Challenges Concerning Equality and Quality of ASD Inclusion Support Services**

This section discusses challenges concerning equality and quality of provision of the ASD inclusion support services from four main angles; (1) variations in the nature of support services provided; (2) influence of Islamic percepts and cultural traditions; (3) teachers' perceptions, incentives and qualifications; (4) parents understanding and interaction with the inclusion process.

### **Variations in the Nature of Inclusion Support Services**

According to a study by Strain, Schwartz, and Bartorr, (2011) summarizing literature on inclusion of students with ASD, all students with ASD benefit from the process of inclusion regardless of their abilities, and that lack of inclusion in mainstream public schools increases symptoms of ASD (Theb & Mohidat, 2013).

The practice of ASD students’ inclusion takes different shapes in Saudi Arabia. As discussed above, Al-Zaiady (2019), Head of the Department of Special Education in the Ministry of Education, stated that students with ASD in the public school system can be classified into three categories, based mainly on the level of severity of ASD cases, where students with high level of ASD to be educated in the Centers of Early Intervention, while students with low and moderate ASD to be partially mainstreamed in the public school system in separate classrooms, and students with mild ASD to be fully mainstreamed with their peers in the public classrooms, as shown in table 1.

However, variations in the provision of ASD support services are not, according to my experience as a practitioner, only related to the care giving institution, to which ASD students placed based on severity of the level of ASD, but also encompass the type of academic curriculum they are taught, teacher professional qualifications, and availability of SEN support services, Table 3 illustrate these variations.

**Table 3: Variations in the Provision of ASD Support Services in Saudi Arabia.**

<b>Severity of ASD</b>	<b>Institution</b>	<b>Curriculum</b>	<b>Teachers’ Profession</b>	<b>SEN Support</b>
High level	Early Intervention Centers	ASC curriculum	ASD teachers	yes
Low to moderate level	Public Schools: separate classes	Public curriculum plus individual plans	ASD teachers	Yes if available
Mild level	Public Schools: full inclusion	Public school curriculum	Public school teachers plus ASD teachers	No

*Sources:* Variations in institutional placement based on severity of ASD adapted from Al-Zaiady (2019). Variations in other factors based on researchers experience and familiarity with ASD support services in Saudi Arabia.

As illustrated in table 3 above, the idea of the inclusion process is not well served by placement of students with ASD in the Early Intervention Centers, as ASD students there lack the opportunity of social interactions with regular public school students. They are also being taught a special curriculum, designed based on their specific individual needs. In addition, students with ASD partially mainstreamed in public schools, though they are taught public school curriculum, lack sufficient social and communication interactions as interactions with their public schools peers is only during extracurricular activities, which are usually limited during the school day. These practices of none and partial inclusion do not go along with recent trends and developments in relevant inclusion research (Luxlow, lombardi, & Thomas, 2000). The variations in the qualification of teachers and services provided seem also to impact the equality and quality of ASD support services provided, and that in turn may have a serious impact on ASD students' achievements and social and communication skills.

### **Cultural Perspectives on Educating Students with Autism**

The cultural dimension to the process of inclusion has been of much concern to many researchers in the field. Emam (2016), for example, has argued that this dimension ought not to be overlooked and that cultural beliefs and values have varying impacts on the practices of inclusion in the different environments, starting from the larger social setting, the whole society, down to the smaller social units, such as the family or the school. Therefore, he adds that the practices of inclusion should adapt to the cultural and social settings, and that caution ought to be taken when importing a specific model of inclusion, as there is no universally accepted model of inclusion for all cultural environments (Emam, 2016).

The cultural approach to the process of inclusion of ASD students seems to emphasize the uniqueness of the inclusion environment and the players in it. The one-size-for-all approach to inclusion is neither suitable, nor effective, from this point of view. Crawford (2013) in her study of the inclusion of students with ASD in secondary schools found that the inclusion experience of these students had been problematic, and attributed much of that to “failing to acknowledge the individuality of their pupils, staff, and the uniqueness of their contexts.” In Saudi Arabia, the Islamic cultural values and social traditions are also an important player in the process of inclusion. Al-Anazi (2012), in her study to explore perspectives and practices of inclusion in Saudi Arabia and understand how the country’s culture informs understandings of inclusion, has found “that understandings and implementation of inclusion in Saudi Arabia are informed mainly by Islamic precepts, especially those concerning equity and difference, but that cultural traditions also play a role.”

Al-Anazi (2012) also indicated that “attitudes towards inclusion were generally positive.” This cultural dimension to the process of inclusion can become a challenge if not given due consideration. From my own experience in Jazan, where an influx of Syrian refugees was accommodated, many of the Syrian ASD children were experiencing problems, in addition to the trauma of their displacement, related to communication, particularly language and accent difficulties, as well as problems coping with social and cultural variations between the Saudi and the Syrian society.

### **Teachers' Related Challenges**

Teachers' qualification and professionalism have been a major challenge to the process of inclusion of students with ASD. Despite the limited literature on challenges related to teachers' qualifications and motivation, available literature indicates that the main challenges in this respect: (1) lack of sufficient understanding of the needs of students with ASD (Al-Anazi, 2012); (2) some SEN teachers resist the process of ASD inclusion as they were/are accustomed to teaching in separate environments (Emam, 2016); (3) not adequately qualified to work with ASD students due to lack of proper qualifications and appropriate professional development (Binhayyan, 2019, Emam, 2016), particularly, in my view, lack of regular on-job mentoring and training ; (4) doubts and negative perceptions by public schools teachers about abilities of ASD students to cope with public school curriculum (Britton, 2016); (5) lack of reasonable incentives for staff and assistants working with ASD students, mainly financial incentives, but also working hours (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018); and (6) lack of suitable educational environment (Binhayyan, 2019).

### **Challenges Related to Parents**

Parents have always been an important factor in shaping the inclusion process for their own ASD children in public schools. The most important challenges related to parents in this regard, according to literature available, are: (1) lack of understanding of the inclusion process and its significance for children (Gaad, Almotairi, 2013); (2) negative impressions about the inclusion process and its effectiveness for their children's

performance (Majoko, 2017); (3) feelings that the inclusion process for their ASD children in public classrooms is not suitable (Majoko, 2017); (4) lack of trust in public school teachers to provide proper care for their ASD children and that necessary resources for successful inclusion of their children are not available for them (Kasari et al. 1999). Although the literature above is mainly from non-Saudi environment, most of these challenges related to parents are also present in the Saudi environment. From the researcher's experience, parents sometimes play a very crucial role in the decision to enroll their ASD children in inclusion classrooms.

The above discussions about challenges to the inclusion process of students with ASD in Saudi Arabia have attempted to cover challenges related to access to ASD inclusion support services as well as challenges related to equality and quality of these services. This study may provide a relevant background work for further research of these challenges. Research on these topics is very limited and much needed at this stage, as the MOE embarks on further expansion and development of its inclusion support services and provisions. This study should also help inform future efforts in developing the process of inclusion as it highlights priorities of development in terms of access and quality of ASD inclusion support services provided by the MOE. The acute need to expand access to the ASD inclusion support services cannot be further emphasized. However, such pressing access priority should not compromise the equally important emphasis on quality, particularly as it refers to teachers' continuous professional development, whether for public school teachers educating ASD students or SEN teachers.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study has explored the main challenges facing the process of inclusion of ASD students in public school classrooms. It has approached these challenges from two main angles; (1) challenges related to access to ASD inclusion support services; (2) challenges related to equality and quality of these services. The main findings of this study highlight the huge disparity between the level of ASD inclusion support services provided by the MOE and the growing need for them.

Challenges related to equality and quality cover a wider spectrum of variables, with much limited local literature on them; however, this study has attempted to employ available literature as well as my practitioner experiences to draw as much understanding of these variables as possible. Discussion of challenges related to equality and quality has revealed that teacher qualification and competence is central to ensuring better inclusion of ASD students. The discussion of challenges related quality has also revealed that: (1) adapting the inclusion process to the Islamic percepts and cultural values is important; (2) variations in the provision of the ASD inclusion services impact the equality and quality of these services; (3) parents play a crucial role in the decision to enroll their ASD children in the inclusion process.

In light of the findings of this study, the researcher recommends that (1) the ASD inclusion support services be expanded to meet the acute and rapidly growing needs. Expansion should include more teachers and resources; (2) teachers of public schools as well as teachers of SEN should be provided with continuous professional development on inclusion thinking and practices, particularly mentoring and on-job training.

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