



مجلة كلية التربية . جامعة طنطا
ISSN (Print):- 1110-1237
ISSN (Online):- 2735-3761
<https://mkmgt.journals.ekb.eg>
المجلد (٨٩) يناير ٢٠٢٣ م



Learning disabilities in Saudi education

Prepare

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Volume (89), Issue (1), January 2023



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Abstract:

The objective of this study is to learn about stakeholders' lived experiences and interpretations of the notion of learning difficulty in higher education.

The aims of this study in particular are to:

- Understand the phrase Learning Disabilities Knowing and Understanding.
- Find out how young people with disabilities are cared for in Saudi Arabia.
- Know how to cope with university learning issues.
- Reveal how specific programmes are offered to people with learning challenges.

The study showed that government support could be one of the most crucial factors of service growth as it has been sponsoring education since the Kingdom was founded, and has had an impact on the acceptance of Saudi society regarding people with disabilities.

The government has also contributed financially to the area of special education. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the field of special education has progressed over a remarkably short period. In Saudi Arabia, despite the increasing development of services for learning for disabled pupils, identifying students remains a concern.

Keywords: Learning disabilities, higher education, Saudi Arabia.

ملخص الدراسة:

هدفت الدراسة التعرف على خبرات أصحاب المصلحة وتفسيراتهم لمفهوم صعوبة التعلم في التعليم العالي.

أهداف هذه الدراسة على وجه الخصوص هي:

- فهم مصطلح صعوبات التعلم.
 - التعرف على كيفية رعاية الشباب ذوي الإعاقة في المملكة العربية السعودية.
 - معرفة كيفية التعامل مع قضايا التعلم الجامعي.
 - الكشف عن كيفية تقديم برامج محددة للأشخاص الذين يعانون من تحديات التعلم.
- وأظهرت الدراسة أن الدعم الحكومي يمكن أن يكون أحد أهم عوامل تطور تقديم خدمة التعليم لذوي الإعاقة، حيث أنها ترعى التعليم منذ تأسيس المملكة، وكان لها تأثير على قبول المجتمع السعودي فيما يتعلق بالأشخاص ذوي الإعاقة.
- كما ساهمت الحكومة مالياً في مجال التربية الخاصة. تقدم مجال التربية الخاصة في المملكة العربية السعودية خلال فترة قصيرة بشكل ملحوظ. في المملكة العربية السعودية، على الرغم من التطور المتزايد لخدمات التعلم للطلاب ذوي الإعاقة، لا يزال تحديد الطلاب ذوي الإعاقة مصدر قلق.
- الكلمات المفتاحية:** صعوبات التعلم، التعليم العالي، السعودية.



1. Introduction

Education was restricted to a few schools serving a tiny populace until the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was unified in 1932. Access and cost were also a source of worry. The expansion of education has continued to be gradual and fragmented. Roughly 300 schools served several thousand students when the Ministry of Education was founded, mostly in metropolitan areas. Today, 47,325 schools teach over five million pupils, with over 420,443 teachers. Schools can also be found in both rural and urban regions.

The creation and development of the area of special education is a pivotal contributor to this rapid expansion. Special education services in Saudi Arabia have moved from segregated to mainstream schools. Since the Ministry of Education was established in 1953, the number of schools in Saudi Arabian mainstream programmes serving various types of students with special needs has risen.

In addition, the government offers a variety of benefits to people with disabilities, including monthly educational and living expense reimbursement, disability equipment, free transportation, 50% off air travel, and scholarships for gifted disabled people.

In Saudi Arabia's educational system, learning disabilities (LD) were recognized as an official and new impairment category in 1996. The first teacher training programme in the Kingdom was created in 1992 by the Special Education Department at King Saud University, which offered a sequence of courses culminating in a Bachelor's degree in learning disabilities; when the first group of LD teachers graduated, the main obstacle confronting them was the lack of knowledge in Saudi society about the phenomenon of LD. Learning impairments experts sought to raise awareness of the status of children with LD in the Ministry of Education, noting that the identification of LD coincided with an increase in worldwide interest in the educational requirements of students with LD.

The Saudi government passed a disability law in 2000, ensuring that all people with disabilities in the public sector have access to free and sufficient medical, rehabilitative, social, and educational services. Despite significant improvements in services for disabled children in Saudi Arabia, there is still a need to strengthen



exceptional education programmes. One example is the learning disability (LD) category, which was established in 1996 and has seen an increase in the number of children with learning impairments in primary schools since then.

Afeafe (2000), Alnaim (2015), and Alquaini (2011) have described the attempts of the Saudi government in providing services to students with LD. With the growing number of LD students, most of the research literature has been focusing on identifying LD students, stressing the need for services. However, there is a formidable lack of research about what services are needed and how to provide such services effectively (Alnaim, 2015).

According to Battal (2016), the movement in Saudi Arabia to improve educational possibilities for people with disabilities may be split into three stages: emergence, growth, and expansion. The emerging stage relates to 1958 when special education became available to blind pupils for the first time.

The purpose of this paper is to study learning difficulties in Saudi higher education; it will also investigate whether there is a gender difference in the provision of services to students with learning disabilities in terms of the number of schools supported.

2. Literature Review

Learning disorders have piqued the interest of scientists from a variety of fields, including psychiatry, neurology, psychology, education, and sociology, as a complex phenomenon.

A study of how learning impairments have been conceived and interpreted, both within and beyond disciplines, can demonstrate the category's complexity. Furthermore, debates about the nature and meaning of learning impairments, as well as identification criteria, continue to dominate the profession, prompting some to label learning disorders as the most disputed and elusive topic in special education.

Learning disorders' critics argue that the learning disorders model medicalizes and individualizes school problems by portraying them as deficiencies in children that can be objectively diagnosed by trained experts, concealing the importance of social and educational variables in schoolchildren's learning challenges.



Furthermore, debates about the nature and meaning of learning impairments, as well as identification criteria, continue to dominate the profession, prompting some to label learning disorders as the most disputed and elusive topic in special education.

2.1 Learning Disabilities: -Brief History

It's not simple to tell the narrative of LD's origins. The LD construct comprises several assumptions and notions, some of which are buried in history, making it difficult to understand. Several authors have sought to comprehend LD by breaking it down into several historical periods (Bender, 2004; Hallahan & Mercer, 2002; Lerner, 2000; Wiederholt, 1974). The history of LD will be described in this chapter using the historical framework proposed by Hallahan and Mercer (2002) and Lerner (2000), which includes the Foundation Era (1800-19230), Transition Era (1930-1960), and Emergent Era (1960-1980). (1960-1975).

Disturbances in one's ability to communicate verbally.

People have thought that the brain is the center of human intellectual activity throughout history. However, until the early 1800s, the human brain was frequently depicted as a single object that functioned uniformly (Head, 1963). Franz Joseph Gall (1758-1828), a German physician, questioned the prevalent idea. Gall thought that the brain comprises several sections, each of which is located in a distinct location and is responsible for certain cognitive and moral functions. As a result, Gall's hypothesis is known as the localization theory.

In the 1830s, John Baptiste Bouillaud, Dean of the Medical School of the College of France, reignited interest in the idea of brain function localization. Bouillaud abandoned phrenology in favor of a more scientific approach that focused on the relationship between the brain and language and relied heavily on clinical examination and autopsy.

In the United States, the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed the mental hygiene movement in which the well-being of American schoolchildren came to the fore. According to Hallahan and Mercer (2002), Samuel Orton was the key figure in setting the



stage for the study of reading disabilities in America. During the 1930s, Orton worked from a mobile clinic in the state of Iowa examining and helping schoolchildren with learning problems; Orton created an explanation for reading impairment based on his clinical evaluations of children over a ten-year period that was substantially different from what Torgesen had stated earlier.

2.2 Recognizing and Defining Learning Disabilities

The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children (NACHC) was established by the US Office of Education in 1968 with the goal of establishing a definition of LD to guide categorization, policy, and financing for programmers that support kids with LD. The committee, led by Samuel Kirk, produced the definition that is currently the most commonly used.

Children with special (specific) learning impairments have a problem in one or more of the core psychological processes involved in comprehending and using spoken and written language, according to the criteria. Listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic impairments are examples of these.

Perceptual handicaps, brain damage, minor brain malfunction, dyslexia, developmental aphesis, and other disorders are among them. They exclude learning difficulties caused largely by visual, hearing, or motor impairments, mental retardation, emotional instability, or environmental factors.

The federal definition lacked mechanisms for schools to identify children with LD, and there were rising worries that nearly any child who had scholastic challenges might be labelled as having LD. As a result, experts attempted to develop practical criteria for identifying students with LD. The first issue that experts in the LD area confront, according to Christensen (1999), is the inability to pinpoint the brain abnormalities that cause learning difficulties. The quest for the cause of the neurological impairment has been fruitless.

Early identification practices concentrated on identifying and correcting deficiencies in basic psychological processes. However, the failure of process assessment and training programmes in the 1960s and early 1970s left the field of LD with doubts about the



validity and practicality of psychological processes in identification practice.

The US Office of Education recommended using the concept of "severe disparity" between intellectual capacity and accomplishment to identify children with LD in the Federal Register in 1977. Schools may determine that a student has a specific learning disability under the discrepancy model, also known as the aptitude-achievement discrepancy model, if he or she has a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability in one or more of seven areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematic ability (Almalki, 2021).

2.3 Trouble Facing the LD Field

Since 1975, the learning disability sector has seen an extraordinary growth in the number of children diagnosed with LD. As the learning disability idea has evolved in the actual world of schools, new complications and ambiguity have surfaced (Spoon, R.,2020) As the issue of misidentification and overrepresentation of minority children in the LD category took center stage in the LD area, criticism of the idea grew.

According to the US department of education, learning impairments affect around 3% of the school population. However, the number of children categorized as learning impaired has risen dramatically in recent years. Learning impairments accounted for just 29% of people with disabilities in 1978.

Learning disabilities are the most common type of disability in the United States, accounting for 52 percent of all students receiving special education. According to Hallahan (1992), the rise in identification reflects the field's maturation and advancement of assessment procedures, as well as the rise in hazards in modern society such as substance abuse and poverty.

The validity of the IQ discrepancy criterion for diagnosing LD has been at the focus of debates and has garnered the majority of the criticism.

The sources of these critiques are many, but for convenience's sake, the critiques may be classified as coming from two general sources:

-
- a) studies questioning the reliability and the validity of current identification tools to differentiate LD students from other low achieving students.
- b) research questioning the school's use of the technology of identification.

James Ysseldyke's University of Minnesota Institute focused on the decision-making process around the identification of individuals with learning impairments. Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, and McGue (1982) compared fourth-grade school-identified children with LD to a group of low-achieving children who were not classified as LD in commonly referenced research.

4. Problem Statement

In many ways, the introduction of LD into the Saudi educational system marks a watershed moment in the development of Saudi special education. For two essential reasons, it is a turning point:

- By providing “formal, institutional mechanisms where child performance is converted from ‘normal’ to ‘learning impaired’ through procedures of identification, psychological evaluation, and educational planning,” LD places conventional schools at the center of special education operations.
- The introduction of LD as a new form of impairment necessitates a redefining of disability and normality in Saudi schools and society as a whole.

Therefore, the main problem of the paper revolves around discussing learning difficulties in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in higher education.

5. Aim and Objectives

Higher education is where meaning is created and learning impairments in young people are discovered. Students' eligibility for the Learning Difficulty Program must be determined by the Learning Difficulty Team, according to Saudi Ministry of Higher Education standards and regulations.

The purpose of this study is to learn about stakeholders' lived experiences and interpretations of the notion of learning difficulty in higher education, as well as the significance and relevance of recognizing young people with learning disabilities.

In particular, there are two objectives of this study:-

- Knowing and understanding the term Learning Disabilities
- Finding out how Saudi Arabia has cared for young people with learning disabilities
- Knowing how to deal with learning difficulties in universities
- How to provide special programs for people with learning difficulties

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1 LD Education in Saudi Arabia

In recent years, the KSA has heightened its interest in special education through decree enactments, the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in general education, and teacher training (Aldousari and Dunn, 2022). Although there were no special education services for children with disabilities before 1950s, according to Rana et al. (2011), the country recently registered over 20,000 students for special education services. Provisions for special education were initialized in 1958 when the government began providing special education services (Aldousari and Dunn, 2022). However, they were only limited to adult students with blindness and were offered in learning institutions referred to as “scientific institutes” (Salloom, 1995). These services were just provided in Riyadh and only in the evening. Furthermore, the respective students also received financial support and medical services and were taught how to use braille (Alruwaili, 2016).

In the beginning of the 1960s, the Department of Special Learning was created as a formal institution of special education in Saudi Arabia. It was set up to improve rehabilitation and learning for students with intellectual disabilities, blindness, and deafness (Bin Battal, 2016). In 1964, Aneaza, Makkah, and Alhofouf established learning institutions for students with visual impairment (Al-Mousa,



1999). According to Alquraini (2011), the students with intellectual disabilities and deafness began receiving access to learning institutions in 1972. The Intellectual Education Institute was established in 1972 to train students with intellectual disabilities based on a curriculum that emphasized communication, social behavior, and life skills.

Several studies have reported a huge transformation in the service provided for students with disabilities since the establishment of disabilities legislation in the 1950's (Aldabas, 2015; Alquraini, 2011; Battal, 2016). Since the notion of special education is relatively recent in Saudi Arabia, many studies focused on services for certain categories of disabilities, such as blindness and deafness (Afeafe, 2000; Battal, 2016). Most of the research literature highlights the development of services that occurred since the establishment of the special education services in Saudi Arabia (Alnaim, 2015; Alquraini, 2011; Alawafi, 2017; Almedlij, 2018).

According to Battal (2016), the movement towards enhancing educational opportunities for individuals with special needs in Saudi Arabia passed through three stages: emergence, development, and expansion. The emergence stage refers to the time when special education was first introduced, in 1958, to provide services to blind students which lasted for 12 years. The development stage, in 1962, began when the first institution for blind and deaf students was opened for both genders in Riyadh (Battal, 2016). In the mid 1990s, the third stage began, the expansion stage, focused on delivering new learning models, recognizing more categories of disability, and providing students with the appropriate services (Battal, 2016).

6.2 Education Reform of Services for Students with LD in Saudi Arabia

Several factors have had a significant impact on the reform of services for children with LD in Saudi Arabia, including law implementation, government backing, societal awareness, globalization, and the availability of a trained cadre of special education professionals.

The first law addressing disability legislation was passed in 1987, with the goal of ensuring that all people, regardless of their needs,



have equal access to school and employment. It also contained disability criteria and public intervention programmes to guarantee that people with impairments gain skills for independent functioning.

The Ministry of Education's Department of Special Education proposed to establish the DLD in 1995. Since its inception, the organization has performed research on identification and instruction to guarantee that kids with LD receive the required accommodation. Saudi Arabia's government established the RRSP in 2001 after realizing the importance of legislation in the provision of services.

The RRSP guaranteed that children with special needs received appropriate services, such as transition, early interventions, and personalized education plans.

Since the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing equal learning opportunities for both genders, the RRSP regulations were heavily influenced by the United States' IDEA legislation. The RRSP contained many provisions concerning learning disabilities' definitions and future directions of the Saudi system with special education.

The second aspect that has influenced Saudi Arabia's reform of special education services for students with disabilities is government funding. Saudi Arabia's Special Education Programs Rules and Regulations (RRSP) are one example of government support.

Its goal was to ensure that all disabled children have access to appropriate educational and rehabilitation programmes. In addition to the RRSP, the government offered assistance to students with LD through a variety of programmes; continuous support to the SLDP, for example, to ensure that all students with LD are recognized and given appropriate services.

The third aspect that has influenced the reform of services for students with learning disabilities in Saudi Arabia is the level of public awareness.

According to the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia (2017), since the establishment of the LD concept, the Ministry made a great



deal of effort to improve the negative attitudes towards LD held by individuals in the society. For instance, on May 3, 2009, the Ministry introduced Learning Disabilities Day by initiating a campaign called “I Know My Difficulties”. This day was celebrated yearly under different campaign names. To enhance positive attitudes and raise awareness among people in Saudi society, it is mandatory that all learning institutions take part on that day and celebrate it.

Globalization is the fourth element that has influenced the evolution of services for students with LD. Globalization is regarded as a meta myth that employs politics, economics, and cultural aspects of life to make sense of and plan for existing social transformations.

Globalization has had an impact on Saudi Arabia's government and academics. After seeing significant changes in service provision for kids with special needs around the world, the Saudi government enacted further new guidelines to ensure that all students, regardless of their needs, have free access to adequate education and rehabilitation services.

Educators in Saudi Arabia were equally affected by services and policies that aid children with LD around the world, particularly in the United States. In 2015, for example, 92,618 Saudi students were sent to American universities to pursue their degrees. As a result, the Saudi education system has been heavily impacted by the US system and is now based on it.

The availability of a Saudi cadre of special education educators is the sixth element that has influenced the restructuring of service provision for students with LD. In the early phases of the creation of Saudi special education, a lack of specialized teachers was a major challenge.

Initially, the government remedied the shortage by employing foreigners with specific education degrees to supply the necessary services ; for example, in 1947 foreigners made up 44.3 percent of Saudi Arabia's special education teachers. As King Saud University established the first Department of Special Education, it played a critical role in developing the Saudi cadre of special education educators.



The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship was also established in 2005. One of the program's main goals is to educate Saudis in foreign countries so that they can return as qualified professionals in various fields. This program also ensured the availability of a specialized Saudi cadre in the field of special education to provide students with special needs with the services they require on a continuous basis.

7. Methodology

The goal of this research was to look at a new category of learning problems that was recently introduced into Saudi Arabian higher education. The following two questions were posed to the participants- :

1. What are the perceptions and understandings of learning problems among Saudi Arabian higher education stakeholders?
2. How do Saudi Arabian institutions detect students with learning disabilities?

The Earth theory approach's research methodology was chosen to direct the inquiry, and this article covers this methodology.

It covers how places and participants were chosen, as well as how data was collected and processed, and it looks into the problem of trustworthiness and how the researcher's history and position may have impacted the research and the study's limits.

7.1 Grounded Theory Research Approach

Qualitative research in education offers an alternative to standard quantitative research techniques. Naturalistic, interpretative, and poststructuralist are some of the terms used to describe qualitative research.

Grounded theory is one of the most used qualitative research techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The goal of grounded theory is to develop a theory from facts, which means that the theory is founded on the viewpoints and experiences of participants.

In the 1960s, two sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, collaborated on a study of the treatment of dying patients in hospitals, which led to the development of grounded theory.

Grounded theory embodies three characteristics essential for sound qualitative research, these assumptions are: -

1. the socially constructed nature of reality and multiplicity of meanings
2. close relationship between the researchers and participations
3. Emergence design

Grounded theory is based on the symbolic interactionist and social constructionist theoretical traditions. The essential idea of these two theoretical approaches is that meaning is coauthored by the self in its connection with the other, rather than being entirely produced or constructed by a person.

Individuals and social groups use language in their everyday interactions and socializing since it is the channel through which thinking, feeling, and meanings are produced and conveyed; individuals and social groups utilize language in their daily interactions and socialization.

They interpret actions and occurrences, negotiate meaning, and define objects and events in social situations. People build common understandings as well as distinct ways of perceiving events in their environments through language, resulting in various realities and layers of meaning.

Because people in society have a variety of interests and goals, they generate a variety of discourses and tales about objects, events, people, and phenomena in that society. As a result, the idea that social/ reality is made up of a single, concrete reality that exists independently of the observer is replaced by the premise that it is made up of numerous realities.

Interpretative social science emphasizes meanings by involving multiple voices, stories, and interpretations of the people involved in the study rather than discovering a single objective reality. Qualitative grounded theory research methods advance interpretative social science by involving multiple voices, stories, and interpretations of the people involved in the study.



The researcher becomes the primary instrument in grounded theory, guiding data collection, analysis, and interpretation.

Researchers interact with participants, commit to spending a significant amount of time in the field, and form deep bonds with them in order to get access to their perspectives, ideas, perceptions, and experiences.

7.2 Sites and Participants Selection

In contrast to quantitative research, which stresses random sampling in order to ensure generalization, qualitative research is more concerned with picking the sample that best represents the complexity of the phenomena under examination.

According to Mason (2002), qualitative research entails a deliberate and practical sampling strategy that aids the researcher in locating the data required to answer his or her research questions. As a result, the sample for this study was chosen using a combination of convenience and maximum variance sampling techniques.

7.3 Data Collection

The division between data collection and data analysis is intended to ease presentation and descriptions. The main method of data collection in this study was semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted during a four-month period. Through interviews, I intended to gain an in-depth understanding of participant world views, and to understand how participants perceive learning disabilities and the event of identification.

8. Research Limitation

The meaning of learning difficulties in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia was investigated in this study. The study also sought to comprehend how children with learning impairments are defined in Saudi secondary schools. As with any study, this study has limitations. Boys' schools are distinct from girls' schools in Saudi Arabia since the educational system is centered on single-sex schooling. Because the researcher is a woman, she only had access to female-only schools. As a result, only female individuals were interviewed in this study.

As I had expected, I had considerable problems interviewing a number of parents and principals. It was difficult to reach the parents, and



some of those who were contacted rejected participating in the research. I was also apprehensive about approaching parents.

9. CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to shed light on children with learning disabilities in secondary schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Factors and the extent to which people are aware of the service delivery reform have been shaped by society, globalization, and a devoted cadre of special education experts.

The growth of special education is reflected in several facets. Many non-traditional categories of exceptionality, such as learning disabilities and gifted are now included in special education services. In addition, the continuum of service alternatives is becoming an option for placement instead of the institution-only model. Finally, the services are reaching remote areas and small towns and are not restricted to major cities, as was the case two decades ago.

Government backing may have been one of the most important elements in the growth of services. Since the formation of the Kingdom, the Saudi government has sponsored education, and this support has had an impact on Saudi society's acceptance of people with disabilities.

In addition, the government has made financial contributions to the field of special education. The field of special education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has advanced in a remarkably short period of time. However, given the rapid rate of development of services for students with learning disabilities in Saudi Arabia, student identification remains a concern.

The experience of the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, although far from being complete, is a good example of what developing countries may need and can do to provide specialized services for their children with exceptional needs.



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مجلة كلية التربية . جامعة طنطا
ISSN (Print):- 1110-1237
ISSN (Online):- 2735-3761
<https://mkmgt.journals.ekb.eg>
المجلد (٨٩) يناير ٢٠٢٣ م



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