

An Exploration of Special Education Teachers' Practices in a Preschool Intellectual Disability Centre in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract : Background: In Saudi Arabia, it is essential to know what practices are employed and considered effective by special education teachers working with preschool children with intellectual disabilities, as a prerequisite for identifying areas for improvement. Preschool provision for these children is expanding through a network of Intellectual Disability Centres while, in primary schools, a policy of inclusion is pursued and, in mainstream preschools, pilots have been aimed at enhancing learning in readiness for primary schooling. This potentially widens the attainment gap between preschool children with and without intellectual disabilities, and influences the scope for improvement. Goal: The aim of the study was to explore special education teachers' practices and perceived perceptions of those practices for preschool children with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia Method: A qualitative interpretive approach was adopted in order to gain a detailed understanding of how special education teachers in an IDC operate in the classroom. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced and qualified teachers. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, based on themes identified from the literature review together with new themes emerging from the data. Findings: American methods strongly influenced teaching practices, in particular TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped Children), which emphasises structure, schedules and specific methods of teaching tasks and skills; and ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), which aims to improve behaviours and skills by concentrating on detailed breakdown and teaching of task components and rewarding desired behaviours with positive reinforcement. The Islamic concept of education strongly influenced which teaching techniques were used and considered effective, and how they were applied. Tensions were identified between the Islamic approach to disability, which accepts differences between human beings as created by Allah in order for people to learn to help and love each other, and the continuing stigmatisation of disability in many Arabic cultures, which means that parents who bring their children to an IDC often hope and expect that their children will be 'cured'. Teaching methods were geared to reducing behavioural problems and social deficits rather than to developing the potential of the individual child, with some teachers recognizing the child's need for greater freedom. Relationships with parents could in many instances be improved. Teachers considered both initial teacher education and professional development to be inadequate for their needs and the needs of the children they teach. This can be partly attributed to the separation of training and development of special education teachers from that of general teachers. Conclusion: Based on the findings, teachers' practices could be improved by the inclusion of general teaching strategies, parent-teacher relationships and practical teaching experience in both initial teacher education and professional development. Coaching and mentoring support from carefully chosen special education teachers could assist the process, as could the presence of a second teacher or teaching assistant in the classroom.

Keywords : special education, intellectual disabilities, early intervention , early childhood

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