

Investigating the Role of Social Media in Supporting Parents and Teachers of Students with Down Syndrome: Focus on Early Intervention Services in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

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Abstract : The number of social media users amongst special education teachers and parents of children with Down Syndrome (DS) is increasing annually. This is also the case in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). However, according to the best of the author's knowledge, there are no qualitative studies which testify to the true nature of the interaction between teachers and parents when using social media, nor the role of social media in supporting and assisting parents and teachers with regards to the children's educational needs in KSA. Therefore, this ongoing study aims to identify the role of social media in supporting parents and teachers of DS students, with a special emphasis on early intervention services in KSA. By bridging the knowledge gap on social media and special education in KSA and presenting socially relevant and applied information on the topic, this research provides a theoretical and practical base for the establishment of appropriate and effective programmes between the ministries of Information and Special Education in particular. A qualitative approach was selected because it was the most suitable approach for exploring the participants' experiences, which could not be determined through scientific tests. Interviewing, chosen as the research instrument, allowed the researcher to obtain a detailed understanding of the topic linked to the study objectives. Initially, a pilot study was conducted at the Daycare Center in May 2016. Its aim was to examine and refine the methodology and assess whether the questions were understood with the potential for re-drafting them, if necessary. The main study consists of five teachers and five mothers with experience of using social media and with links to the Daycare Center. Thematic Analysis has been chosen for analysing the findings because it is a flexible method that allows themes to emerge from the data. Results of the current study are still in the initial stages, but the preliminary findings are as follows: (1) social media is an important tool in encouraging parents and teachers to access the necessary information and knowledge about, and experience in, early intervention services; (2) it acts as a support network for the parents; (3) it helps raise awareness about DS and the need for early intervention; (4) it can be used to put pressure on the government for an expansion in early intervention services, and finally (5) its use can be problematic in that parents and teachers face some difficulties and challenges when using the different platforms. It can be concluded that social media plays a significant role in the lives of teachers and parents with special needs children in KSA.

Keywords : down syndrome, early intervention services, social media, support parents and teachers

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