

Special Needs Education in Sultanate of Oman: Past, Present and Future

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Abstract: This paper provides a descriptive account of special education needs including how its past has shaped its present and how current times are influencing and delineating its future. The special Education system in Sultanate of Oman is reviewed in depth, in other words, a comprehensive picture on special education in Oman will be presented.

Keywords: Special Education system, Sultanate of Oman.

Introduction

Special education field, as its name suggests, is a specialized branch of education. As defined by U.S. law, special education is: “specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and other settings; and instruction in physical education” [1-4]. The law also stipulates that students with disabilities are entitled to related services, as needed. Related services include such services as transportation, occupational and physical therapy, and psychological, counseling, speech/language pathology, audiology, and interpreting services[5].

Special education field includes thirteen disability categories. They are learning disabilities, speech or language disorders, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, autism, orthopedic impairments, hearing impairments, developmental delay, visual impairments, emotional disturbance, other health impairments, traumatic brain injury, and deaf-blindness[6-7].

History of special education needs

The history of special education reveals a pattern characterized by alternating periods of progress and optimism and regress and pessimism. In spite of these fluctuations, overall special education has progressed from a relatively primitive state to its present-day robust status as a viable service option in public schools and as a field of scientific inquiry.

History of special education needs back to the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century, when many European and American physicians, clergymen, and other reformers tackled the

issue of rehabilitating and educating children with a variety of disabilities[6].

Many of the basic instructional principles upon which special education is built were created by Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard (1775–1838) [8-9], and Eduoard Seguin (1812–1880), who carried forward many ideas that served as the foundation of special education, and assumed that all children can make some progress[6].

In the late nineteenth century, much of the optimism and interest in quality care began to wane[10]. Interest in educating and rehabilitating those with disabilities was decreased by economic conditions and rapid industrialization and urbanization.

The early twentieth century brought mostly positive developments for students with disabilities like offering special education classes and resource rooms for students with various disabilities, and the beginning of interest of segregation versus mainstreaming of students with disabilities, early identification and prevention of disabilities[11].

One of the most important developments of the twentieth century was the emergence of parent groups and organizations such as the National Association for Retarded Children and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities. The end of the 20th century saw increasing of special education research and services, and passing of several pieces of landmark legislation that mandated special education as a civil right for children with disabilities and their families, which established special education as a major piece of the educational landscape in world.

The main issues concerning the future development of special education are the employment of specialists in special education and developing integration in regular classes[12].

Education in Sultanate of Oman

Education in the Sultanate of Oman is free at all levels. General education is the former type of education and a unified education for all in Oman. It was a twelve year curriculum that consisted of three phases (primary, preparatory and secondary[13]. The ministry of education began to phase in (Basic Education) gradually in 1998/99. Basic education is a 10 year program and on completion, the student moves onto the post-basic education which covers four semesters in two years[14].

Omanization curriculum was even contain characteristics and key objectives of the community, and after completion of the application of the curricula at all levels evaluation process conducted. Then, Ministry of education conducted successive operations aims at modernizing curricula leading to the basic education curricula[14].

Throughout last three decades of the history of educational process in Oman has undoubtedly achieved what makes proud of this rich extent of the march of knowledge in its tremendous achievement[14].

Education in Oman was confined in mosques "Almasjed", under the shade of trees, or in the public boards known (Balsph). Teachers taught Quran, Arabic language, and numeric. There were no clear criteria for evaluating education in Oman. The sole criterion of excellence students is the quality of keeping the Quran. Despite the simplicity of the possibilities, but there are many scientists, leaders, literary and talented were graduated[14].

The beginning of formal government education in Oman was in 1930 with a scarcity of schools. The first school called Sultaniyah School. In fact, renaissance education in Oman started, when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said ruled Sultanate of Oman in July 1970. While the number of public schools in 1970 was only three include 900 students, it became 207 schools include 55752 students in 1974. Also there was beginning of secondary education. According to the educational statistics available to the Ministry of Education in the academic year 72/73, there were only two private schools with total of (115) students, distributed on the stage of pre-school education and elementary school, as the number of faculty only (12) teachers[14].

The education budget was increased to jump from one million RO in academic year 1970/1971 to seven million in academic year 1981/1982. Sultanate of

Oman used and developed the curriculum and books from some Arab countries.

In 1976-1980, institutes specializing in technical education and agricultural and Islamic Institute were established. Also this period saw improving the quality of the school building replacement schools unserviceable educationally which was rented or unfixed tents, and providing the necessary facilities and laboratories, libraries, workshops professional activity, especially in primary school. Sultanate of Oman started sending scholarship students to complete their university studies in various disciplines[14].

The great event in this period is establishment the first school for student with special needs called Hope school for deaf and dumb students. It provides educational programs commensurate with the capabilities of this category. The beginning of the providing special education services for children with special educational needs was through ministry of social affairs.

The period 1981-1985 can be considered a real period of special education. It saw establishment Alfikriyah school in Muscat to accommodate students with intellectual disability, to provide them rehabilitation and educational services. As well, Omar Bin Al Khattab Institute for the Blind students was established.

Special Education Policy in Oman

Various services are offered to those with disabilities in Oman. These are based on preserving a natural relationship between those with disabilities and their families. Responsibility for special education is shared between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Development, with some further responsibility (for assessment) vested in the Ministry of Health[13].

Administrative decisions about special education in Oman are taken at national level. There is department of special education, within the Ministry of Education, responsible for those schools which provide special educational provision. Within the Ministry of Social Development there is a department of associations and communities clubs which has a wide range of responsibilities for educational provision, staff development and program development, as well as supervision of all centers and societies.

The underlying principles of Oman policy are: the human concept, which is based on tradition and the Islamic commitment to helping people in need like those with disabilities; the economic concept, whereby a person with disabilities contributes productively to building up the country's economy; and the democratic

concept, which guarantees the rights of persons with disabilities[13].

In 2008, the law of care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities was passed and put into action. According to this law, the philosophy of the Sultanate of Oman for treatment of students with disabilities stems from Arab-Islamic values, the Omani constitution, the National Charter, the Laws governing education and higher education[15], the World Declaration of Human Rights[16], and the International Declaration of Disabled Persons[17].The law stresses the following principles:

1. The right of persons with disabilities to be integrated into the general life of the society.
2. The right of education and higher education commensurate with his/her abilities
3. The right of persons with disabilities to employment commensurate with their capabilities and qualifications, and their right to sports and recreation.
4. The right of persons with disabilities to preventative health Care and medical treatment.
5. The right of persons with disabilities to a suitable environment that allows them freedom of movement and transportation in a safe and secure manner.
6. The right of persons with disabilities to obtain such aids, equipment and materials that assists them in education, training, movement and transportation.
7. The right of those who have multiple and severe disabilities to education, training and rehabilitation.
8. The right of needy parents with disabled dependents to relief, welfare and support services.
9. The right of persons with disabilities to participate in decision making.

Sultanate of Oman is seeking to integrate person with disabilities into mainstream schools and then society to eliminate the effects of disability, equip them with daily living skills, and develop students' self-confidence. There is a policy of encouraging integration by establishing special classes in regular schools and providing support teaching in regular classes.

Special Education in Omani Public Schools

Special education needs witnessed a great development during the last two decades, despite the short experience of the ministry of education in Sultanate of Oman[14].

Ministry of education provides several services for special education students as following:-

1. School of Hope (Specialized schools for deaf).
2. Special Education Needs Schools (Specialized for low IQ).
3. School of Intellectual disabilities (Specialized for Intellectual disability).
4. Omar bin Khatab Institute (specialized school for blinds).
5. Learning disabilities/difficulties processing program (at schools).
6. Integrating program of special needs children (at schools).

Integration of students with disabilities into regular schools

The modern trends endeavor to integrate students with disabilities into regular schools. To keep up with recent development in service provided for students with disabilities, ministry of education in Oman started applying integration program in two schools for students with learning disabilities in 2000/2001 (see Table 1 and 2). In the followed academic year, integration program has expanded to include six schools. And in academic year 2002/2003, the number of schools reached to fifteen schools[19].

Since 2005/2006, ministry of education in Oman has implemented integration program of students with disabilities into regular schools to include other categories. The categories that were integrated are hearing impairment and intellectual disability. Providing educational services for these categories is a sincere belief in their rights in obtaining educational and rehabilitative care. In addition to provide them the best outreach programs and educational services to make them active, productive, interactive and run concurrently with modern life in a changing world. Some students are excluded from the public education system because there is no appropriate place for them[19].

Table 1: Distribution of regular integrated schools in Sultanate of Oman according to categories

Category	2000/2001	2007/2008	2014/2015
Learning disabilities	2	226	1471
Hearing impairment	-	-	47
Intellectual disabilities	-	-	155
Total	2	226	2573

Table 2: Distribution of regular integrated schools in Sultanate of Oman according to Governorate

Governorate	Learning disabilities	Hearing impairment	Intellectual disabilities
Muscat	324	-	23
Ad Dakhiliyah	162	8	25
Ad Dhahirah	89	1	11
Al Wusta	24	-	-
Al Batinah South	161	5	23
Ash Sharqiyah South	128	5	10
Al Batinah North	243	13	28
Ash Sharqiyah North	99	3	9
Al Buraimi	39	4	5
Dhofar	181	6	14
Musandam	21	2	7
Total	1471	47	155

Special Education in Ministry of Social Development (MoSD)

The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) was established in 1972 to be responsible for providing the educational, vocational, rehabilitation, care, and accommodations services for the persons with disabilities via institutions, centers, and associations under the immediate supervision of the Ministry; implementing a rehabilitation employment program in the open market; providing duty free services and other tax exemptions for the persons with disabilities and institutions that provide services to the persons with disabilities in coordination with other service providers[20].

Sultanate of Oman issued law of care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities in 2008. After that, Oman ratified on convention on the rights of persons with disabilities and optional protocol in 2008/2009. Since that time, ministry of social development (MoSD) in Oman provides a several services to persons with disabilities by non-benefit societies and social care centers[20].

Social Care Centers

There are many centers affiliated to ministry of social development. The first center was established was the center of care and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities in 1988. It provides services to persons with hearing and physical disabilities aged 14 to 25 years. In 2002, center of care of persons with cerebral palsy was established to provide them a medical rehabilitation (physical therapy - occupational therapy - speech therapy) to persons aged 3 to 14 [21].

In addition, there are 11 rehabilitation centers affiliated to the Association of care and rehabilitation, which serve persons with hearing, mild and moderate intellectual, and multiple disabilities aged 5 to 13 years old, and three private rehabilitation centers have been licensed in 2008 by ministry of social development[21].

Sultanate of Oman has paid attention of community based rehabilitation since 1989. It established center in every state in Oman (currently 23 centers) to meet needs of persons with disabilities, it called Alwafaa centers. Besides that ministry of social development provides persons with disabilities several assistant devices such as medical and prosthetic devices[21].

It is noteworthy that there are no interior residence centers in Sultanate of Oman. For this reason, the government of Oman is sending persons with severe and multiple disabilities to other Arab countries such as Jordan and Kuwait to provide required services to them, in the same time, the government is establishing specialized center to shelter these categories inside Oman.

Non-Government Organizations and voluntary Societies

Sultanate of Oman pays attention of non-government organizations (NGOs) and voluntary societies; it decelerated many non-government organizations to support the government's efforts in serving persons with disabilities^[21], as follows:

- The Association for the Welfare of Handicapped Children was registered in 1991. The Association serves children from the age of 6 to 14 through comprehensive program of education, health, physical and academic services. Give disable children an opportunity to enjoy life fully and to integrate them into the community so as to benefit from the services provided. Aim's to reach every disabled Omani child with any form of disability education, train, advocacy role and establish as many centers as possible in the country. Support scientific studies and research into causes of disability.
- Oman Association for Disabled was registered in 1995, which serves mainly persons with physical and motor disabilities, to support

education and recreational activities for persons with disabilities. As well as to provide the necessary prosthetic devices. The Association also works towards achieving a better understanding of the needs of persons with disabilities in the wider community, in order to activate their integration into society.

- Al Noor Association for the Blind was registered in 1997. Al Noor Association for the Blind serves the interest of the Blind in social, economic, welfare, education, health, training, placement and teaching of Braille. Prepare and implement plans and programs that aim to improve the living standards of the blind in the Sultanate of Oman. It is financed via donations.
- Association of Early Intervention for Children with Special Needs, was formed in 2000, which serves children from birth to 6 years, who are at risk or disabled, with a comprehensive early intervention program that covers social, medical, physical, academic and therapeutic services; with the objective of having the children enroll in regular schools or minimize their disabilities to ensure a better quality of life for them and their families. The association also undertakes an educational and advocacy role to improve societal awareness of people with special needs.

Special Education at Higher Education in Oman

Higher education that follows secondary education includes all types of education, whether in universities or other education institutions concerned with higher education, training or research. Higher education in Oman inspires to accelerate at a global and

local level the development of a highly educated youth. Since its inception in 1994, the Ministry of Higher Education is dedicated to expand higher education in the Sultanate of Oman to cover different areas and multiple disciplines to meet the needs of the overall development and labor market [22].

The government of Oman provides scholarships to students that cover the tuition fee and monthly allowances. In other side, some students enroll at their own expense or that of a specific company or government institution. The private higher education institutions provide flexible systems offer educational opportunities to students who wish to continue their education with the option study part-time or full-time [22].

The universities in Oman offer programs at special education field (see Table 3). These programs are offered with three levels, diploma, bachelor, and master. Two universities are interested in rehabilitation of employees who work with persons with disabilities. First one is Sultan Qaboos University, which is governmental university. It offers two programs of special education field, diploma of special education and master of learning disabilities. Second one is University of Nizwa, which is nongovernmental university. It offers many programs of special education field such as diploma of special education and bachelor of special education (learning disabilities, Intellectual disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment, giftedness). Currently, the University of Nizwa is preparing and developing other programs in special education field such as diploma of autism and master of special education.

Table 3: Special education programs offered at universities in Sultanate of Oman

University	Diploma	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Sultan Qaboos University	1	-	1	
University of Nizwa	1	1	-	
Total	2	1	1	

Funding

Persons with disabilities are getting many facilities and services provided that are funding by the government of Oman [21], such as follows:

- Issuance of a disabled Card to person with disabilities as an official document to get the rights that are guaranteed by law.
- Bringing servant or maid to serve person with disabilities into home for free.
- Bringing driver for person with disabilities for free.
- No fees to register new or renewal a car of person with disabilities.

- Giving persons with disabilities special offers and discounts when buying a car, house, or home appliances.
- Reducing a price of airline tickets up to 50%.
- Giving a person with disabilities a small land without fees.

Ancillary Services for Student with Disabilities

Although all public and private institutions in Sultanate of Oman joint efforts to provide comprehensive services to persons with disabilities, there is still need to activate cooperation among psychological, educational, and medical institutions to follow a team approach towards providing integrated and excellent services to persons with disabilities.

However, the comprehensive ancillary services can be categorized as follows:

- First, assessment and diagnostic services that are a big concern in Oman. The customized versions of intelligence, educational, perceptual, social-adaptive behavioral scales and checklists used in the diagnoses of persons with disabilities were the result of cooperation among professionals and paraprofessionals. These tests help educators and authorities to make decisions about eligibility and to determine the least restrictive environment that is appropriate for the persons with disabilities. The ministry of health in Oman evaluate and diagnose persons with disabilities, despite of there are many non-official centers for assessment and diagnosis.
- Second, related services that are delivered by many public, private, and international organizations. These services are early intervention services for children with disabilities under the age of six, day care services, residential services and inclusion Services.
- Third, rehabilitation and vocational employment services are introduced for adults with disabilities through Alwafaa centers.
- Fourth, Community based Rehabilitation Services (CBR).

Challenges, Limitations, and Improving Services

Special education services in Oman, like many other services, are facing many challenges and limitations. The government of Sultanate of Oman makes much effort to meet these challenges; however, these efforts are considered insufficient and must be reconsidered in any future plans. These challenges and limitations are:

1) Financial

Sultanate of Oman give priority for financial of special education needs services, but it is insufficient financial. A shortage in funding represents a vital challenge for the current delivery of services. Furthermore, new innovations in the field of assistive technology, technical aids, and communication services, demand an increase in financial input. However, many special education services need to be revised and improved to meet the needs of persons with disabilities.

2) Practices

Many of the present practices used in institutions of Sultanate of Oman to provide special education services are quantitative, not qualitative values. These practical limitations can be described as follow: teaching methods, disregard of the role of parents, ignoring the importance of in-service training, conducting research, providing assistive aids, and

improving quality of services. Many of the teaching methods used have to be updated in order to improve the services provided, and to follow-up with any new supplementary instruction that increases the efficiency of services provided for persons with disabilities.

3) Institutions

Most institutions and centers for students with disabilities have limited resources to provide effective and suitable services. These institutions have problems in the basic fundamental educational components such as inadequate building construction, transportation, class space, staff, health insurance and salaries.

4) Information

This problem represents in absence of accurate and adequate data on the prevalence rate of disability in Oman. Collection accurate and adequate data and evaluation of effectiveness and efficiency of services are very necessary to use it in the future as guidelines for future planning policies and improvements.

5) Community Awareness

There is a lack of Omani community awareness about rights of persons with special needs and available services of special education needs in Oman. In addition, there is insufficient involvement of families of persons with disabilities in supporting, introducing, and conducting services for their children.

6) Cooperation

Sultanate of Oman needs to establish higher authority to organize and integrate all efforts between schools, associations, institutions, societies and centers to provide comprehensive services for persons with disabilities, and to accelerate the creation of an effective system of accountability.

Suggestions and Aspirations:

In order to improve services provided in Sultanate of Oman, the government has to work cooperatively with international organizations, secure agreements with other countries, and get grants to support and improve services for persons with disabilities.

Sultanate of Oman has to take the following points into consideration:

1. Increasing and creating new financial resources and funding opportunities to help current institutions and societies improve their services.
2. Establishing new centers and institutions to expand the services provided to all persons with disabilities in Oman. For example, there is an urgent need to establish centers for Autistic persons.
3. Creating independent Public Authority for persons with disabilities in Oman as an

umbrella, to organize, supervise improve, account, evaluate, and expand the delivery of services for persons with disabilities.

4. Re-evaluating current pre-service and in-service teacher preparation programs in order to further meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Most of current teachers of special education in Oman are not qualified. For this reason, launching new programs of special education (diploma, bachelor, master, and PhD) into public and private universities in Oman must take into consideration. Furthermore, current teachers need to improve their skills of behavioral management, IEP, and using variety of instructional methods.
5. Using effectively new technological innovations and assistive technology into special education programs to improve training and teaching of persons with disabilities.
6. Increasing awareness of Omani community about disabilities and persons with disabilities (reasons, prevention methods, medical issues, early intervention, and support resources for families of persons with disabilities. Awareness of Omani community can be increased through using public media such as mass media, newspapers, and television, seminars, lectures, and workshops.
7. Establishing a widespread information database to include all information needed about a disability in Sultanate of Oman. A basic data source must be available and updated annually to professionals, parents, political decision makers, researchers, and others.
8. Equipping the public and private schools to be ready to integrate all categories of students with disabilities (a school that does not exclude anyone), as well as expanding the service delivery system and give further consideration to educational issues that support inclusion.
9. Providing and using new editions of diagnostic scales and tools. Right now there is a lake of codified intelligence scales and other scales on Omani community.
10. Focusing on quality of services provided for persons with disabilities especially new services like vocational rehabilitation, prevention services, early medical, social and technological support services, and family services.
11. Following up the implementation of laws and regulations that insure the rights of persons with disabilities especially their right of get a job.

Conclusion

This paper provides insights into special education needs services in Sultanate of Oman: past, present, and future. In addition, the article emphasizes

the challenges and limitations that are encountered in the services provided for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, some suggestions and aspirations made to overcome specified limitations to the education delivery system may help to meet the challenges and continue the work in serving all persons with disabilities in Sultanate of Oman as we move into the future.

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