

**SPECIAL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: ANXIETIES,  
ATTITUDES AND ASPIRATIONS**

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*The purpose of this article is to provide a brief background about the educational system in the United Arab Emirates and particularly describe the present types of programs and services offered within the country with respect to individuals with special needs. In addition, findings of an ongoing study about the attitudes of teachers and preservice teachers towards the integration of children with special needs into regular schools across the United Arab Emirates have been discussed. As the country continues its dramatic period of change as a nation, changes in the education of children with special needs will occur at a rapid rate. For success in the change process information on the attitudes and anxieties of the major stakeholders needs to be investigated and addressed. The findings of study would contribute to the literature base. Finally, the educational implications and recommendations will be explored within the social, religious and cultural contexts of the country.*

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is comprised of seven emirates. Situated on the Arabian Gulf, east of Saudi Arabia and north of Oman, the UAE has a long history of local tribal lifestyle and of later European influences. The country has dramatically emerged into the mainstream of modernism over the past 40 years. The economy is driven by oil and gas and recently tourism. There is a large expatriate population.

In 1951, the Trucial States Council was formed, bringing all the leaders of the various groups throughout the region together. In 1971 the formal joining of the seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ras-Al-Kahaimah, Fujairah, Umm Al Qaiwain, Ajman) was

completed in Dubai. There are no political parties or elections since the country is ruled by appointed families established at the time of the forming of the UAE.

The major religion of the country is Islam. In Islam there are specific human rights that are universal. Those that have the most direct impact on the education system are:

- The right to equality.
- The right to social welfare and the basic necessities of life.
- The right to dignity, and not to be abused or ridiculed.
- The right of education.

Islam makes it obligatory for the wealthy and able-bodied to support the less fortunate. According to the Islamic word: *none of you is a true believer until you wish for your brother what you wish for yourself* (Bukhari and Muslim).

#### *The Education System*

The education system of the UAE is in comparison to other countries is relatively new. In 1952, there were few formal schools in the country. In the 1960's and 1970's a school building program expanded the education system with separate schools for boys and girls. This still largely exists today within the public schools.

Primary education is now compulsory across the UAE and secondary education is available in most areas of the country. At the same time, many of the expatriates developed private schools to meet their religious, cultural and education needs. Today, both systems are operating in almost equal numbers throughout the UAE. The curricula vary considerably, mostly influenced by the educational curricula from the UK, Canada, USA and India.

The United Arab Emirates Ministry for Education and Youth is responsible for both the public and private education systems that operate within the country's seven emirates. For the public school system, the Ministry for Education and Youth assumes a much broader set of roles, similar to Ministries of Education in other countries. They build new buildings, hire staff, determine the standards of education, provide curricular materials and support, coordinate a variety of educationally relevant activities and ensure adequate programs are operating.

The relationship of the Ministry for Education and Youth with the private education system are mainly in licensure and supervisory roles. They ensure that the basic requirements for the physical components of schools are met and that the private schools provide sound educational programs.

The Government is committed to the welfare of children. Children who are citizens receive free health care and education, and are ensured housing. A family also may be eligible to receive aid from the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare for sons and daughters who are under the age of 18, unmarried, or disabled. For nationals of the UAE,

all tertiary education is free. To encourage nationals to contribute to their country, individuals who decide to further their education are given a generous allowance even if they choose to study abroad.

The school system follows a calendar based on the same summer break as many Western countries (July & August) along with special holidays as set out by the Islamic calendar.

### *People with Special Needs*

People with special needs are found in the general population of the local people's of the UAE who are of Arabic descent. It is difficult to estimate the percentages in each of the usual special needs categories (e.g. Autism or Cerebral Palsy) since there is no central data collection agency. Evidence would suggest that the percentage of people with disabilities in the UAE is similar to the worldwide average, i.e. 8-10 percent of the population.

There is no federal legislation requiring accessibility for people with special needs. A number of centers are sponsored by the government to provide facilities and services. Services include funds, special education, transportation to sending a team to the Special Olympics.

With respect to students with special needs, the Ministry of Education and Youth is also involved through two separate departments; one for the private school system, the other for the public domain. At the present time, a specific categorical system for identifying and supporting students with special needs does not exist in any formal way.

The public system has staff at the upper Ministry level and in each of the regional divisions across the country who are involved in supporting the special education system. Educational psychologists and speech-language pathologists provide school-based assessments and consultative support to schools. This is accomplished usually through a referral system generated at the school level. Selected clients for special supports are determined by a screening system.

Within most Ministry schools, counselors provide support for social-emotional needs. They also act as one of the front-line resources for identifying and referring students who may have special needs.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is drafting a new law which will require private sector companies with more than 100 employees to reserve three per cent of jobs for people with special needs.

In the UAE job opportunities are very limited for people with disabilities. Among the 1422 people with disabilities in Abu Dhabi (the capital city), only 20 persons are employed.

*Special Education and the Private School System*

The private school system varies considerably in its organizational sophistication for supporting students with special needs. At this time, the Ministry for Education and Youth requires all private schools to provide extra support if they knowingly accept students with special needs. The ministry has indicated they are in the very early stages of attempting to develop guidelines for the private schools.

The Ministry's goal for the private schools system is to be able to clearly indicate the requirements for accepting and supporting students with special needs. They also are interested in developing ways to increase awareness and to foster effective intervention approaches for students with special needs. These efforts are being collaboratively approached with the same group who are responsible for special needs services within the public system.

Many private schools will not accept students with special needs because they do not have the funding and/or expertise to provide appropriate services.

However, it is quite likely that there are many students enrolled within private schools who would fit into the upper levels of a typical categorical disabilities system (i.e. mild disabilities, learning disabilities, ADD/ADHD). Since most of the private schools do not have sophisticated assessment resources, these students often are maintained in their schools until it becomes very obvious that they have significantly different needs as the gap in their performance levels widens in the grades six to seven levels.

*Special Education Services and the UAE Public School System*

Special education services within the UAE public school system presently appears to focus on an early intervention system. Young students in kindergarten and grade one levels are usually identified through the school-based team process, then assessed by the educational psychologist and/or speech-language pathologist and finally accepted for extra support. Identified students are then assigned either to a special class or to resource room support.

It appears that students with more obvious and/or severe types of disabilities do not enter the public school system at all. Parents are told there are no services for these more involved disabled students. Apparently the onus is on the parents to find appropriate programs and services. Many parents of children with disabilities choose to keep their children at home.

Extra support consists for students accepted into public special education classes. This may consist of either enrolment in the special class setting or time in a resource room program. For the special class students, the majority of their academics are provided in the small classroom setting of a maximum of 12 students.

The resource room programs provide intensive, small-group remedial instructional services in a pull-out system. Groups vary from two to about five students. The resource

rooms are staffed with teachers who have studied special education in the United Arab Emirates University in Al Ain (UAE) or by equally qualified individuals who are fluent in Arabic from other countries.

This public system for supporting students with special needs operates up to about the fourth grade level. If students appear to be able to cope with the regular classroom expectations, they will continue in the system. If the evidence from their time in either support system indicates severe learning issues, the students will not be accepted back into the regular school system. It is then up to the parent's to find appropriate educational supports for their children.

The Ministry for Education and Youth also operates a night-school type of program for people who have not completed their high school education. The degree of intensiveness varies according to the resources available within the local communities around the UAE. Individuals must be at least 19 years of age to qualify for attendance. It is quite likely that these programs also have students who would be identified as operating in the mild disability levels of a Western categorical special education system.

#### *TWO SPECIAL EDUCATION CENTRES*

##### *Dubai Center for Special Needs (Dubai)*

Students with more severe types of disabilities that are not accepted into the public education system are able to register to attend the Dubai Center for Special Needs, a non-profit program serving students from ages of three and a half to twenty two. Students with a wide range of disabilities including Autism, physical difficulties, Down Syndrome, mental handicaps and developmental delays attend the programs. However, this excellent operation has a two-year waiting list due to difficulties obtaining funding and attracting experienced staff. The Center has full facilities for working with most areas needed to support students with special needs including physiotherapy, nurses, occupational therapy, speech-language services in English and Arabic, and some family counseling capacity. Limited assessment of students is carried out by a staff person with a master's degree, generally limited to determining academic levels and functional skills. The Center's programs offer modified academics, behaviour classes, vocational programs, working shops and job placement experiences.

##### *The Future Center – Special Needs School & Rehabilitation Center (Abu Dhabi)*

The Future Center Abu Dhabi, a charitable organization was opened in September 2000. The Future Center caters for children with speech impediments, learning and other disabilities. It is run as a private school but for a charitable purpose. It is run by a Board of Directors. The Board of Directors oversee the management from a financial, educational and health perspective. The parents pay a fixed fee if they can afford it and if not fees are negotiated. Oil companies, prominent organizations and philanthropist make donations. The school is also run on UK charity guidelines.

Seventy students presently attend the school and represent various nationalities but majority are from the emirates. The school caters for children aged from three to

eighteen. The school does not integrate children into regular schools. The medium of instruction is mainly English and based on the British disability curriculum. A few classes are conducted in Arabic.

The aim of the school is not to integrate children into regular schools, but instead to help them obtain job training placements so that they can find jobs for themselves and also find a place and respect in society.

All the students are fully assessed by a team of specialists before admission. Children are only taken if staff feel they can make a difference. The schools mission is to provide a happy and stimulating atmosphere in which children can develop both their academic and social skills, as well as acceptable behaviour with family, school and community. The children's progress is monitored by individual educational/medical plans.

The school takes initiatives in organizing in ongoing professional development for their staff and hosting conferences and seminars on a larger scale for people to attend across the emirates.

Student Teachers and Practicing Teachers' Attitudes towards integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms and regular schools

For over two decades nations across the world have been adopting a range of special education options, including integrating children with special needs into regular classrooms within regular schools. As the United Arab Emirates embarks on this process is it important to obtain information on teachers' attitudes to these changes, in particular the process of moving children with special needs from the present situation, home and limited special centers, to the regular classroom and regular schools. What procedures and strategies need to be implemented to assist the process? The planning process needs to consider the views of the main stakeholders assess their attitudes, anxieties and aspirations and plan accordingly.

A study across the emirates (Bradshaw 2003) is examining the attitudes of teachers and preservice teachers towards the integration of children with special needs into regular schools across the United Arab Emirates. The participants of the study were asked to comment on how they feel about children with special needs being educated in the regular schools. The respondents were asked to indicate which category of children with disability they consider would be the most difficult to integrate into the regular classroom. While the study is ongoing, the first phase of the study, within the Abu Dhabi Education Zone, has been completed. Preliminary data analysis from the information obtained from about 100 participants have indicated common concerns such as teachers' time taken away from the rest of the students, class size, safety of children with special needs, lack of training, and resources.

Hall & Loucks (1979) describes the seven levels of concern that teachers experience as they adopt a new practice. Student teachers appear to be at the CONSEQUENCES stage

they need programs which deal with a change in attitudes based on awareness of successful integration programs. This can be done through visits to schools, Discussions with people with special needs Strategies to avoid labelling and programs available to assist in the integration process.

Teachers appear to be at the MANAGEMENT stage. Teachers need to address issues to do with classroom management, resources and materials. Workshops for teachers need to be planned around strategies for programming for children with special needs. An exposure to teaching strategies that are individualized, student centered and evaluated at the individual's level need to be considered.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, as the United Arab Emirates continues its dramatic period of change as a nation, changes in education, and changes in the education of children with special needs, will occur at a rapid rate. For success in the change process information on the attitudes and anxieties of the major stakeholders needs to be investigated and addressed and the role of the ministry of education and higher education have to be stressed.