Challenges and Bottlenecks Involved in Educating Children with Special Needs: A Study in Al Dhahirah Governorate of Sultanate of Oman

Mr. Shreesha M
Lecturer, College of Applied Sciences, Ibri
Ministry of Higher Education, The Sultanate of Oman
Email : shreeshapunacha@gmail.com

Dr. Amed Jumah Al riyam
The Dean, College for Applied Sciences, Ibri
Ministry of Higher Education, The Sultanate of Oman
email: dean.ibr@cas.edu

Dr. Dileep M.R
Ass. Professor, College of Applied Sciences, Salalah
Ministry of Higher Education, The Sultanate of Oman
Email : dileepmadhav@gmail.com

Abstract

Childhood is the most crucial stage of human life. In fact, it is the time when kids need extreme care on their cognitive, emotional, communication, social and physical development. Present day education system, which is very competitive in nature, focuses on the overall personality development of the children by adapting the new teaching and learning methods in primary school education. But, unfortunately around 93 million children or 1 in 20, who are aged below 14 years, in the world are deprived of the privilege of having formal education as they live with disabilities or disorders of some kind (UNICEF, 2013). Those disabilities may vary widely, which may include learning disabilities, hearing and visual impairment, deaf blindness, communication disorders, and Traumatic brain injuries etc., that are directly affecting their cognitive development and social life. In order to overcome those issues, to provide proper education to the children with special needs, and to bring them to the mainstream, a number of therapy based education initiatives are being introduced and serious efforts are being made through special schools around the world.

As reflected in the estimation of Ministry of Health of Oman, the Sultanate has around 24,000-64,000 children below the age of 16 years suffering from disorders and disabilities of some kind as a result of congenital, genetic disorders or complicated pregnancies. With a view to offer proper assistance and education to the disabled children, the Sultanate is running special schools in various parts of the country. But, the Herculean task of training and educating the children with such impairments requires great attention, care and scientific approach.

On this backdrop, the paper attempts to study on the challenges and bottlenecks involved in educating children with special needs in the Sultanate of Oman, with special reference to Al Dhahirah governorate, where three dedicated centers and 10 formal schools are working for the noble cause of educating disabled children. The study will be conducted using the interview and questionnaire based survey method.

Key words: Education, Impairment, School, Children, Disabilities

Introduction

Education is considered a fundamental right of everyone. It helps them to broaden the horizons, get exposed to the larger world, and develop mentally and intellectually, along with a range of other advantages. Yet, there are many in the world who are deprived of proper education. Of them, children who are mentally and physically disabled constitute a major category who are ether not
getting proper education or facing limitations to get quality education. It’s a responsibility of every others to provide such children to have an access to the quality education. Usually, governments undertake special education with this purpose, yet many of such initiatives do not meet the desired results due to a wide range of factors, both from internal and external environments.

Sultanate of Oman, a country that has been surging ahead in education arena, with a significant rate of evolution during the last two decades. This evolution is marked by significant progress in the quality of the educational infrastructure and facilities, along with qualitative progress in the nature and content of education. The same has to be there in the case of special education as well. The country has a significant percentage of children with special needs and hence it is of paramount importance to impart quality in special education. Yet, it has been observed that the same is facing some challenges and issues and the same need to be discussed from various aspects dimensions. This makes the necessity to take a look at it seriously and form the basis and rationale for the study. The focus of this study is to examine the problems and challenges faced by the special education sector in the country, from an internal environment perspective, taking a wilayath as the study area. The outcome will give ample insight into the issues and challenges and the same would have relevance in the policy and planning related to special education in the country.

1.1 Who are Children with Special Needs?

Special need is a term generally used in clinical diagnostic and functional development to describe individuals who need assistance for their disabilities that may be medical, mental, or psychological. Children who are suffering from these disabilities are called as children with special needs. According to Department for Education and Skills, England (2005) these disabilities may cause different kinds of problems to the pupils in the early childhood itself, which includes - specific learning difficulties like dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia; moderate, severe and profound learning difficulties; behavioral, emotional and social difficulty; speech, language and communication needs, autistic spectrum disorder; visual, hearing and multi-sensory impairment. In United States of America, areas of development and related disorders are categorized in to mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, speech and language impaired and orthopedically impaired. (Farell, 2008, p3).

Halliwell (2003) observes that children suffering from these disorders face many challenges as they are unable to lead the life of normal people. The children with special needs require special care on- personal, social, emotional development and communication, language and literacy development. The disabled students will not have proper knowledge and understanding of their world. These students may also face problems in education due to the lack of mathematical and creative development, when compare to the normal students.

1.2 Challenges faced by Children with Special Needs

Beckley (1999) opines that students who are gifted with learning disabilities generally have difficulties in cognitive processing which affects affecting overall intellectual ability. Difficulties with spelling are very common, including reversals in reading and writing letters of the alphabet (Pendavriset 1990); poor reading, writing and spelling skills (Mendaglio 1993); language deficits (Ellistont 1993); and difficulty in memorizing spelling (Dix and Schafer 1996). One side of the argument would say that this indicates problems with auditory sequential processing impairments. However, research done by Vellutino (1979) and Vellutino and Scanlon (1987) and followed up by Montgomery (1997) does not support this premise. These authors state that the problem is a phonological processing difficulty which then makes all verbal tasks difficult to code, and we see deficits in digit span, coding, arithmetic, naming tasks in general and learning of the alphabet. Thus when students have difficulty with segmenting and encoding in spelling, they appear to have auditory sequencing difficulties; however, the underlying cause is actually the phonological processing problem.
Another problem is the quantity of writing that these students produce. They may have untidy handwriting (Fall and Nolan 1993) and they find it difficult to actually get thoughts down on paper. Reading is an area of frustration to both the student with special needs and the teacher because the student displays obvious inconsistencies when reading aloud, such as good comprehension but poor reading skills, or good reading skills but poor comprehension (Dix and Schafer 1996). Mathematics is another area of difficulty where students may have problems such as with numeric transpositions, and often, problems with basic computations which require ability with coding and rote learning (Willard-Holt 1999).

In addition to this, their inability to organize time management skills, goal setting skills and study skills leaves these students feeling frustrated and negative about their schooling experiences (Westwood, 1995). Often the child with special needs has a poor self-concept, with low self-esteem. These students, lacking appropriate goal setting skills, set extremely high goals for themselves and are very critical of them when they fail to reach these goals.

Children with speech, language and communication needs have difficulty in understanding or making others understand information conveyed through language. Their acquisition of speech and/or written language skills is noticeably behind that of other children. Their speech may be poor or unintelligible. Children with speech needs have difficulties in producing speech sounds or problems with pitch or voice quality. They may stutter or be hesitant in speaking and have trouble in getting others to understand. Children with language disorders find it hard to understand and use words in a meaningful way. These are the common problem faced by the children with special. Their problems may differ according to the type of disability and severity of the disorder.

1.3. Importance of Special Education

The general understanding of students who have special education needs is that they encounter barriers to learning. As we discussed earlier, their difficulties may be specific to language or mathematics or can come from a physical impairment that affects their movement, sight, or hearing, or from a complex combination of several disabilities. Children without disabilities are able to sit unsupported, walk, talk, and to actively play and participate in events in their environment without undue effort. They learn from ‘doing’ and through play, children under age 3 years being unwilling to accept being trained or taught (Nielsen, 1997). For children with multiple disabilities, however, it may be very difficult to achieve any of the normal milestones. Thus it becomes necessary to actively provide opportunities to enable these children to ‘do’ and to learn. This can be achieved by alternative teaching methods, suitable materials, appropriately adapted equipment, or personalized tutorial support.

During the first half of the twentieth century there was hardly any specialized educational system for children with disabilities. Until the mid-nineteen-fifties voluntary organizations and religious orders took the initiative in establishing schools for students with such disabilities. (NCCA, 1999, p 5) Later, special education, was started as a branch focused mainly the educational needs of disabled children. Moving one more step forward in empowering children with disability, recent theory and practice in special education strongly favor providing students with general learning disabilities with appropriate access to mainstream education. Experience of education in the broader setting of a mainstream class can enhance the self-perception of students, encourage others to have a higher expectation of them, and contribute to their wider social development. Children with disabilities need some additional support and help to reach their potential. This extra support can be provided for them in a number of different ways within their mainstream schools. Different techniques and strategies are used in educating children with special needs not just to give the access to information or knowledge; and also to enable disabled children to receive their rights and entitlements and to feel a sense of achievement which will increase their self-esteem and self-confidence, and to develop the overall personality.
1.4 Special Education: Techniques and Strategies

Various techniques and strategies are used in educating the children with special needs according to the types of student’s disorder. There are several efforts are being done to bring the students to the main stream of education. Empirical studies show that practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time along with their non-disabled peers fosters understanding and tolerance, better preparing students of all abilities to function in the world beyond school. In a study conducted in California shows that mainstreaming had positive effect on children with disabilities. In the study all the students in California who went to a different school prior to attending a mainstreaming program were asked to fill out an assessment of their old school as compared to inclusion program. The study conducted by National research center in 2007, showed that out of all students with disabilities 96% felt they were more confident, 3% thought they had the same experience as an excluded student, and 1% felt they had less self-esteem. Overall, students felt that they were equal to their peers and felt that they should not be treated any differently. A research conducted by Wolfberg P.J., & Schuler A.L. (1999) mainstreaming is particularly beneficial for children with autism By interacting with same-aged non-disabled children, children with autism were observed to be six times more likely to engage in social relations outside of the classroom.

Students have the ability to work one-on-one with special education teachers, addressing any need for remediation during the school day. The school often develops a plan to provide additional support or teaching that is different from the normal differentiated teaching that is provided for the rest of the class. This individual plan is known as an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP will specify three or four short-term learning or behaviour targets for the pupil. The plan will indicate the strategies that will be used to support the achievement of the targets and the resources that will be needed. (Halliwell 2003, p 6) The aim of the IEP is to identify three or four clear individual learning targets which when attained by the pupil will enable him/her to progress and where possible catch up with his/her peers. It specifies a pupil’s learning targets and the planning and teaching for that pupil which will be different from that of the rest of the class. In practical terms an it is a record of the progressive learning targets. (Halliwell 2003, p 13) These educational plans should be reviewed at least twice a year. In many schools IEPs are reviewed termly and in some cases more frequently. Measuring progress is not always easy when the area of difficulty is behaviour. In developing an educational plan, careful thought needs to be given not only to the target but also to how progress will be recognized and measured. The successful teacher will show these students the big, holistic picture first, explaining why they are doing the work, what they will achieve by doing it and where they will be at the end of it (Silverman 1997).

1.5. A Review of Growth of Education in Oman

Sultanate of Oman is located in the south eastern part of Arab semi peninsula, which is sharing the border with UAE and Saudi Arabia in the west, Republic of Yemen in the south, Harmoz bay in the north, and Arab sea in the eastern border. Oman, being third largest country of Arab peninsula, has played a key role in connecting Arab states with different countries of the world and it has the luxury of rich culture and tradition.Oman has been emerged as one of the powerful countries in the gulf by improving the socio economic condition of the society. Educational revolution has played a crucial role in the progress, which helped people to get adapted to the changing needs of the society, challenges of technological revolution and globalization. The table 01 shows the magnificent grwth of primary education in the country over the last four decades.
Oman had an informal education system throughout its history. However, modern education system is relatively new. The Sultanate had started its educational initiative for the modern education on 23 July 1970, under the guidance of H.M.Sultan Qaboos, by opening several schools across the country. As shown in the above table, in 1970-71, 16 primary schools were opened and 6941 students started to get basic education from 169 teachers. By end of the first five year plan, in 1975, numbers of schools were increased to 207. Students and teachers numbers rose to 55752 and 1980 respectively (Ministry of Education, 2012).

The above figure shows the success story of the primary education in Oman. It can be noted that the Sultanate has witnessed a myriad growth in education from its inception from first five year plan. In 2010-2011, by the end of seventh five year plan Oman has 1040 schools across the country, which constitutes 522520 students and 45142 teachers under the ministry of education.

During the first stage of the growth, from 1970-1980, focus was more on the quantitative development of the education. From 1980, quality of the education became a concern for the ministry of education. During this time the whole educational system was reviewed, including curriculum, teaching materials and methods, with the help of competent educational expert. In 1995 to 2003 several new reforms were introduced, which ensured that all the children in the Sultanate get 10 years of basic education for their better future. Now, primary education sector is trying to meet the challenges of ‘Vision 2020: Policies for countries economic future’, by improving the quality of education, status of the teachers and infrastructure in the schools (Ministry of Development, 1997). As a part of ‘Vision 2020’, emphasis is given to introduce computers in schools, to improve the quality of teaching and learning English language and to pay more attention to science subjects in primary education. (Rassekh, 2004) Overall, the Sultanate is witnessing a rapid qualitative and quantitative growth in primary education, especially in the last decade.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>schools</th>
<th>students</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970-71</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6941</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-76</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>55752</td>
<td>1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985-86</td>
<td>588</td>
<td>218914</td>
<td>9793</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>953</td>
<td>488797</td>
<td>22292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-006</td>
<td>1046</td>
<td>568074</td>
<td>37500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>1040</td>
<td>522520</td>
<td>45142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.6. Special Education Initiative by Ministry of Education

Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman has taken several actions to meet the challenges and requirement of the society. One of the most important initiatives is to provide educational facilities to students who are blind, deaf, dumb, or any other mental or physical disabilities. Sultanate of government considered the disabled children as special students and established a department of special education in 1974-1975 in the ministry of education.

In 1975 some of the disabled students were sent to foreign countries for getting the education and same year classes for the deaf were opened in some schools. 1980-1981 these classes were developed in the form of new school: Al Amal School for Deaf. It was boarding school and students who had hearing disabilities started to get special education. In 1984-1985 schools for mentally challenged was opened started to provide eleven years of basic education. The school also offered training carpentry, tailoring, weaving etc. (Ministry of Education, 2011)

Even now, Al Amal School continues to educate the disabled students and recognized as one of the best schools for special needs in the Sultanate. Omar bin Al Khatab, a privately founded school for blinds, was started in Al Seeb in January 2002 with the support of Ministry of Education. Besides, there are many private institutes working for the noble cause of educating the children with disabilities. Al Wafa is one of them, which has 14 dedicated centers in different parts of the country (Rassekh, 2004).

In 2001-2005, during the sixth five year plan, ministry of education has decided to admit the children with special needs to the normal schools for basic education. This attempt is seen as first step towards bringing the children with special needs to the main stream of the society. Children with disabilities started to study along with the other students but with the special care of the teachers. In all the governorates-Muscat, North Al Batinah, South Al Batinah, Al Dakhliyah, South Al Sharkiya, North Al Sharkiya, Al Buraimi, Al Dhairah, Dofar, Al Wasta, Musandam, several schools were identified to offer the special education program, which is not only helping disabled children to get education but also encouraging them to join the mainstream of the society.

1.7 Educating Special Children in Al Dahirah Governorate

Figure 02: Al Dahirah Governorate

A'Dhahirah Governorate descends from the southern slopes of the western Al Hajar Mountains. It forms a bridge to the caravan trade routes between Oman and the neighboring countries. A'Dhahirah includes Bat Tombs, which are on the world heritage list. As shown in the figure 02, Al Dahirah governorate is divided in to 3 willyats-Ibri, Dank and Yanqul, which constitutes total population of around 205000. In order to meet the educational needs of the people of the governorate ministry of education, ministry of higher education and ministry of man power have opened several educational institutes in different part of the governorate. Currently, Ministry of education is running 80 schools in
the governorate for the purpose of providing primary education to the children (Ministry of Education, Governorate of Al Dharah, 2013).

In the academic year 2007-2008 special education was introduced in the schools of Al Dahirah governorate. Out of 80 schools 10 schools are selected for the purpose of educating and mainstreaming the children with special needs. 112 disabled children are studying in the academic year 2013-2014, in different classes ranging from 1 to 5. (Ministry of Education, Governorate of Al Dharah, 2013). Mental and hearing disability is the two commonly found problems among the students who are admitted to these schools. In addition to this, Ministry of social affairs is also taking several efforts to enable the children with special needs in Al Dahirah governorate, after the royal decree of Sultan Qaboos in 2011. Ministry of social affairs is providing the necessary equipment to disabled students such as wheelchair, hearing aids etc. Al Wafa Centre for rehabilitating disabled children, which was opened in 1993, is providing basic training and medication for the disabled children of the governorate. Ministry of social affairs is supporting the children of Al Wafa center by giving the necessary financial assistance to give education and treatment to the children. Thus, ministry of education and social affairs, both government authorities are taking extreme care to educate the special children and to give them a normal life.

2.0 Problem, Objectives and Scope of the study

As pointed out earlier, the ministry of education has taken an initiative to educate the special children in the formal schools along with normal students from last several years. Different teaching and learning strategies are adopted in order to educate these disabled children and to bring them to the mainstream of the society. An evaluation of the facilities, techniques and strategies adopted in special education is necessary, especially to understand the challenges and problems faced by teachers in educating the children with special needs. The primary objective of the study is to examine the various challenges and bottlenecks involved in teaching disabled children, which possibly will help to improve the overall quality of special education in the country. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To evaluate the current status of special education in the Al Dahirah governorate
- To examine the challenges faced by educators in teaching the children with special needs
- To identify the problems encountered in special education in the Al Dahirah governorate

The outcome of the study will throw some light into the current situation of special education in the Al Dahirah governorate. The study will enable to understand the various challenges and problems faced by the teachers in educating the children with special needs, especially in the context of Sultanate of Oman. Hence, the outcome of the study would be of much relevance for educational planners, policy makers, educators and other authorities, in order to improve the existing environment of special education and to improve the status of children with special needs in the Omani society.

3.0 Methodology

The focus of the study is to examine the challenges involved in educating the children with special needs Al Dahirah governorate. The study is based on primary data. After having extensive literature review, the primary data have been collected. All 10 schools belonging to three wilayats- Ibri, Dunk and Yanqul, functioning under the Ministry of Education of Al Dahirah governorate were taken as the locale for primary data collection. Quantitative and qualitative techniques are used for data collection. Data was collected through a questionnaire based survey and interview method in order to understand the strategies adopted and the challenges faced in teaching the students of children with special needs. Interviews were conducted with the officials of the ministry of education of Al Dahirah to understand the process of selection of students and teachers, teaching strategies, vision and mission of special education in Al Dharah. Besides, the officials of the ministry of social affairs were also interviewed to examine the condition of the children with special abilities, the measures taken to give care and treatment to those children in the Al Dahirah governorate. A questionnaire, which
included 17 statements and 2 open ended questions, was used to collect the data from the teachers, who teach the children with special abilities in the governorate. The questionnaire was given to all 30 instructors who teach children with special needs in schools of ministry education, the governorate of al Dahirah. Of those, only 27 properly filled up questionnaires were collected. The data have been analyzed using basic statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation for consensus. Mean score having four is of maximum significance.

4.1. Discussion: Challenges and Bottlenecks Involved in Special Education

The data collected have been analyzed in three sections: View of administrators of the Ministry of Social Affairs, view of the Administrators of the Ministry of Education and the teachers’ view. The analysis is following.

4.1.0 Administrators View: Ministry of Social Affairs

Interview was conducted with four officials of Ministry of Social affairs of Al Dahirah governorate, who are dealing with issues concerned to disability and training the disabled students. The interviews reveal that ministry of social affairs is assisting disabled children, who are socially and economically backward. AlWafa centers supported by the ministry admit the students who are between 4-14 years of age. Children suffering from mental, auditory and physical disabilities are taken care there and rendered special care. The classes run in those centers concentrate more on training and medication of disabled students than a particular curriculum, unlike schools run by the ministry of education.

![Figure 03: Number of Students and Trainers in Al Wafa Center](image)

The children who are registered in the center will undergo a medical checkup and they are sent to the classrooms to get necessary training on the skills required for the daily activity. Equipment like wheel chair and hearing aids are also provided according to the needs of the disabled children. As shown in the figure 03, currently, 75 disabled students are getting training in the center and the number of trainers is 17. They are taking care of mental, hearing, visual and motor disabled children, but none of the trainers have specialized knowledge in training the disabled children. The center has only one psychotherapist, who is supervising students of mental disability. Officials feel that because of lack of awareness on various aspects of the disabilities, children with special needs are discriminated by their own parents, which has been a matter of concern.

Children are given treatment in the center till the age, maximum, of 14 years. Based on the IQ and competency level they are admitted into the schools affiliated to the Ministry of Education. Children with severe auditory or physical disability are enrolled into the rehabilitation center in AL Khoud and those students with paralysis are directed to the disabled children’s center. With the cooperation of the private sector, the ministry is developing a plan for job oriented training, which will support the rehabilitation of mentally disabled students in future.
4.2.0 Administrators’ View: Ministry of Education

Interview with the officials of special education section in the Ministry of Education, Al Dahirah governorate, reveals that special education is an ambitious and noble initiative of the ministry to bring the disabled ones into the mainstream of education and to the society. Students who are having different kinds of disabilities are admitted in the schools run by the ministry through the formal selection process. The selection committee consisting of doctors, teachers and ministry officials select the students based on their IQ level, medical report and the basic communication skills. Most of the students come with the reference of the ministry of social affairs, but opportunity is given to the other eligible students as well. The schools run by the ministry of education admit only two types of special students—mental and hearing disabilities. Students, who have mild and moderate mental disorder, are admitted to the school, after the recommendations of the doctors, if their age is in between 5 years 4 months to 15 years.

Figure 04: Main Streaming of Children with Special needs in Oman

As shown in the figure 04, the students with special needs will be divided in two groups based on their disabilities. Students with hearing disabilities will get prescribed hearing aid and join the same classes with normal students. These students will study the same curriculum, developed by the ministry for normal students. But, children with mental disabilities will follow a customized ‘Individual Instructional Plan’ (IIP) prepared by the teachers. IIP is developed based on the level of disability, IQ, communication skills, and behavioral pattern of the students. The plan differs from student to student. Individual attention is given to address the requirements of the students while preparing the IIP. A separate file, for each student, is maintained to record the development in different stages of their special education.

Ministry of education is offering special education from class 1 to 9. Schools follow two sets of teaching and evaluation strategies— one for students with hearing problems and normal students, another one for students with mental disabilities. But, as shown in the above figure, all the students converge together for the activities like music, sports and art. This convergence plays a crucial role in the personality development of the children with special needs, which helps them to overcome from their inferiority complex and develop self-confidence. Children with the mental disabilities are promoted to the next class based on the subjective assessment of the teacher. There is no specific curriculum or uniform rule in developing IIP. The evaluation process is based merely on the observation method. Whereas, children with hearing disabilities share the same class room and follow the same curriculum, examination system recommended by the ministry of education with normal
As shown in the figure 04, after the completion of 9th standard, students with mental disabilities are also moved to the common classroom. These students are integrated into the mainstream education in 10th standard and here onwards continue their study like normal students.

Figure 05: Students and Teachers for Special Education in Al Dahriah

The Ministry of Education has offered special education only in 10 schools of Al Dahriah governorate. Above figure (05) reveals the number of teachers and students for special education in the governorate. 112 students are getting the benefit of the special education which includes 64 boys and 48 girls. 30 teachers are appointed for the purpose of special education, and of them 24 are female and 6 are male teachers. 29 teachers are permanent employees of the ministry, but one teacher is serving on the contract basis. Children with special needs are spread across different classes from 1 to 5.

Figure 05: Distribution of classes, teachers & Students

The above figure reveals the distribution of classes, teachers and students in the academic year 2013-2014, according to the wilyats. Al Dahriah governorate is divided into 3 wilyats-Ibri, Yanqul and Dunk. Ibri, being the main town of the governorate has more population compared to the other wilyats. So, 6 schools and 16 classes of Ibri special education program are offered, which includes 87 students and 22 teachers. 78% of total number of students and 73% of total number of teachers are working in the Ibri wilayat. In both Yanqul and Dunk wilayats, 2 schools are offering special education. Total number of teachers in both the wilayats are 4 each. But, Yanqul wilayat has slightly more students compared to Dunk. In Yanqul, total number of special children is 16, whereas in Dunk it is 9.
As mentioned earlier, the ministry of Al Dhariah governorate admits only the students with hearing and mental disabilities. 9 schools out of 10, which are offering special education is dealing with the mental disabilities. Only in one school, located in Ibriwilayat, students with hearing disabilities are given the education. As shown in the above figure 93% of special children are suffering from mental disorder. Total number of these mentally disabled students is 104. 7% of students, i.e. 8 students are suffering from the hearing disabilities and they are sharing the class room with normal students after getting necessary hearing aids. Ministry has assigned 4 teachers to supervise students with hearing disability and 26 teachers to mental disability. Two speech specialists are rendering their service to the schools, if necessary, on request of the schools.

Interview with the officials of ministry revealed that special education in Al Dahirah facing several challenges. Most important challenge of those is lack of qualified teachers. Out of 30 teachers, who work in special education, none of them are academically qualified to teach the program. Most of the teachers are holding degree in general education. They are given just 2 to 3 weeks of training in order to get acquainted with techniques of dealing with of children with special education. Some of the schools in Al Dahriah governorate are facing problem due to lack of adequate number of class rooms. Teachers adopt lessons dramatization and fun approach in the teaching. Usage of the new technological tools and audio visual instructional material can enhance the quality of education.

4.3.0 Teachers View

The teachers’ opinion is summed up, based on the analysis of the data collected from all the instructors/teachers engaged in the training of the mentally challenged students of the schools in the governorate. A census method is used, and out of the thirty of the instructors, twenty seven usable filled up questionnaires were analyzed using simple statistical tools such as mean and standard deviation.

Among the respondents, 21 (78%) are bachelor degree holders, 4 (15%) are master degree holders and the remaining two are post graduate diploma holders. The majority of them (74%) have teaching experience less than five years whereas 15% have experience between 6 and 10 years. The rest has up to 15 years of teaching experience. Also, only 52% have specialized qualification for teaching children with special needs. The opinion on the challenges and issues of the existing system of educating children with special needs are collected on a four point scale consisting of strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The data collected from the 27 respondents were analyzed using mean and standard deviation and the same against each statement is furnished in the table 02. The mean with higher values are considered for acceptance.
Table 02: Opinion of teachers on existing system of educating children with special needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Variables/Statements</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>S.D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My educational qualification is not related special education, but I teach mental or auditory disabled students</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>My qualification for teaching the students with mental/auditory disabilities is the training from the ministry</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>It is difficult to teach children with disabilities in the same class room that has other students as well</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Selection criteria of children with special needs to the schools of ministry of education should be changed</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Teaching the disabled children along with general students in the same room helps to develop confidence and to bring disabled students to the mainstream</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>We face difficulty in teaching children with mental abilities because we don’t have good facilities in the schools</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>We have to pass students with mental abilities to the next level considering their age, even if they don’t have required knowledge, skill and/or IQ level</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Individual instructional plan (IIP) for mentally challenged students’ needs scientific curriculum and proper assessment guide lines</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Children with hearing disabilities face problem in learning as they don’t have required hearing aids</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Our school needs more educational toys and other equipment to teach mentally retarded students effectively.</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>We are unable to handle mentally challenging students because of lack of knowledge and experience in this field</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Our school invites resource person from outside if we face any problem in educating them</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>We need more training from ministry on educating the special children so that we can teach them effectively</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>We should get equipped with modern technology and instructional materials to enhance the quality of special education in our schools</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>We are not able to give individual attention to mentally challenged students as we have less number of rooms in our school</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Special children of our school are not able to accomplish expected success in their education because of lack of parental guidance</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>We want to have a meeting with parents of special children at least once in a month so that we can discuss their child’s problem and progress personally.</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As per the table, the mean scores which are above 2.5 is considered for acceptance. The first statement was about the suitability of the qualification for teaching the children with special needs. The analysis reveals that the respondents are of the opinion that the qualifications they possess are not those required for teaching such students. It means that that special qualification that is required for educating such children are not possessed by the respondents, yet they handle such students. The second statement reveals that though they do not possess specific qualifications to teach such children, they have got special training for a short term, with that emphasis. The third variable was on the feasibility of educating special needs’ students with normal children. The respondents are of the view that it is very difficult to teach children with the disabilities in the same class room where other students are also there. This is a practice in all the schools, though such children have some special sessions exclusively. Also, by giving a positive opinion for the variable that the selection criteria of children with special needs to the schools of the ministry of education should be changed, they point out that the current system of selection of such children needs a revision. Though the respondents...
pointed out about the difficulty of educating such children, they are also of the opinion that teaching the disabled children along with general students in the same room also helps to develop confidence and to bring disabled students to the mainstream. This points to the benefit of mingling with normal children for enhancing the confidence level and to get specialised.

The sixth variable was about the lack of adequate facilities for imparting training for the mentally retarded children. They are of the opinion that further facilities are needed in order to have better training and education. The next variable was about a bottleneck in ensuring the quality of education. According to their opinion, the students are qualified and promoted to the next level based on their age, though they have not acquired adequate knowledge, skill and IQ level. Eighth variable was about the suitability of Individual instructional plan (IIP). The analysis reveals that the existing IIP for such students needs to be revamped based on scientific curriculum and proper assessment guidelines. The analysis of the next variable reveals about the severe shortage of hearing aids for the Children with hearing disabilities as they are essential for learning for them. The tenth variable also reveals about the shortage of supplementary tools for educating children with special needs. It specifically mentions about the need for more educational toys and other equipment to teach such students effectively. The analysis of the next variable did not get significant consensus. The statement—we are unable to handle mentally challenged students because of lack of knowledge and experience in this field- got only minimum level of acceptance. The twelfth variable also could not get the consensus. It denotes that the schools do not undertake the practice of inviting resource person from outside in the case of a need for educating certain specific areas which need extreme expertise and knowledge.

All the remaining variables got acceptance as per the analysis. They are of the view that there is a need for more training from the ministry on educating the special children in order to teach them more effectively. Also they opine that the schools should be equipped with modern technology and instructional materials to enhance the quality of special education. Lack of adequate number of class rooms are one reason they pointed out is not giving individual attention to those children. Insufficient parent guidance is another factor in not getting much success in the education and training of children with special needs. Furthermore, they suggest to have a meeting with parents of special children at least once in a month in order to discuss their child’s problem and progress personally.

The analysis of the open ended questions is following.

For the question - what are the problems you face in teaching the mentally retarded students in your school?- the following responses were obtained from majority of the respondents:

- Lack of specialized staff like psychologist, speech specialist.
- Lack of training for teachers in educating and handling the children with disabilities.
- Lack of parents collaboration. There is communication gap between teachers and parents of students. Which is affecting the academic and social development of the children with disabilities.
- More number of students is given to teacher. Due to high student-teacher ratio it is has been very difficult to give individual attention to the children with special needs.
- There is inadequate guideline and well set syllabus for IIP.

The response of the majority of them on the question - what are the additional requirements you have to teach the mentally challenged students in your school – points to the following factors:

- Special rooms are required for vocational training and IIP based teaching.
- Need for increased focus on language development.
- Need more education toys and computer based instructional material

5.0 Summary of the findings and Conclusion

A range of factors are discussed in this analysis. The major finding are summed up here. AlWafa centers are one category of centres that impart training for children suffering from mental, auditory and physical disabilities and they focus more on training and medication than a particular curriculum, unlike schools run by the ministry of education. The center has shortage of specialists. Ministry of Education also offer such provision for educating such children. The schools run by the
ministry of education admit only two types of special students - mental and hearing disabilities. Students suffering other types of disabilities are facing problem and unable to get their education. The children with mental disabilities will follow a customized ‘Individual Instructional Plan’ (IIP) prepared by the teachers. The schools follow two sets of teaching and evaluation strategies - one for students with hearing problems and normal students, another one for students with mental disabilities. Children with the mental disabilities are promoted to the next class based on the subjective assessment of the teacher. There is no specific curriculum or uniform rule in developing IIP. The evaluation process is based merely on the observation method. Whereas, children with hearing disabilities share the same class room and follow the same curriculum, examination system recommended by the ministry of education with normal students. 9 schools out of 10 situated in the Al Dahira governorate which are offering special education is dealing with the mental disabilities. There are a range of challenges for such schools. Most important challenge of those is lack of qualified teachers. Out of 30 teachers, who work in special education, none of them are academically qualified to teach the program. Most of the teachers are holding degree in general education. They are given just 2 to 3 weeks of training in order to get acquainted with techniques of dealing with of children with special education. Some of the schools in Al Dahriah governorate are facing problem due to lack of adequate number of class rooms. Teachers adopt lessons dramatization and fun approach in the teaching. Usage of the new technological tools and audio visual instructional material can enhance the quality of education. The opinion taken from teachers also matching with the same.

Qualification of the teachers are not adequate. Teaching such children with the disabilities in the same class room where other students are also there is difficult and have limitations. Still it helps the students to have better confidence. The current system of selection of such children needs a revision. Lack of adequate facilities is a major bottleneck in all the schools. The existing system of preparing IIP for such students needs to be revamped based on scientific curriculum and proper assessment guidelines. More supplementary tools are also needed, like educational toys and other equipment to teach such students effectively. Also there is no such liberal policy to invite experts in handling such crucial areas where it is required. There is a need for more training from the ministry on educating the special children in order to teach them more effectively. The schools should be equipped with modern technology and instructional materials to enhance the quality of special education. Lack of adequate number of class rooms, insufficient parent guidance and lack of provision to meet with the parents of special children are some other factors that limit the success of special education. Also, due to high student teacher ratio it is has been very difficult to give individual attention to the children with special needs. Need for increased focus on language development is also a factor to be considered.

The analysis emphasize on three major aspects. One is the infrastructural limitations, next is the teachers centred factors mainly related to qualification and training as well as related to IIP setting. Third is the lack of instilling external expertise whenever and wherever required. A number of other factors are also there. Improving such things will definitely enhance the quality of special education in the country.

Based on the findings, the study would like to recommend the following

- Establish a pool of external experts in the areas concerned at the country level and governorate level
- Prepare a board of experts and teachers to envisage and design IIP on a broader level. The same can be a base material for making individual IIPs.
- Increase the infrastructure and facilities at the earliest.
- Redesign the qualification and experience aspects of selection of teachers

6.0 Limitations of the study

The study has several limitations. The study is focused on the empirical examination of learning and teaching aspects, which is limited only by taking the opinions of the teachers and interview of officials of ministry. Insufficient literature availability too limits the scope of results. Further, the focus of the study was on specific governorate.
7.0. Scope for further research

It seems it is essential to test the effectiveness of the existing system of educating the children with special needs and the future of such children in order to understand whether the efforts are successful or not. The qualitative as well as quantitative assessment of the curriculum and teaching strategies will give more insight into the problems involved special education. Study can further be extended using higher levels of statistical tools to identify the behavioral, cognitive and psychological challenges in educating the children with special needs. The research can be further extended by doing a comparative analysis of status of special education in Oman with the international standard.

References: