

Chapter 11

Assessment of Students With Disabilities in the UAE Toward Thriving in Inclusive Classrooms: Reality and Vision

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the reality of assessment with disabilities in the UAE. A related purpose is to delineate suggestions and strategies that can help in the establishment of a coherent assessment system that strives to accurately identify different disabilities in schools. It presents information relating to how students with disabilities are identified. This entails several steps and different organizations that are involved in the assessment process. It presents information about the provision of inclusion the country and connections to assessment of students with disabilities. Two focus-group discussions were conducted with special education teachers and administrators which explored the participants' views and practices in relation to how students with disabilities in the schools are identified, whether the assessment procedures are sufficient, and requirements of a solid assessment system. The chapter concludes with several suggestions as a framework of developing a comprehensive assessment system that ensures that students with disabilities are not misidentified.

INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities have been at the center of education debates for the last decades. Their education, assessment of skills, and inclusiveness are three major areas to be explored within the current education standards. To begin with, it is essential to establish a clear understanding of the difference between an impairment and a disability. An impairment refers to a medical condition that causes a long-

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term limitation to a person's sensory, mental, communicative, physical, or cognitive functions (Oliver, 2017). A disability, on the other hand, is more like "a social condition that occurs when an individual with a long-term limitation, experiences attitudinal, social, and environmental barriers that prevent full and effective participation within a community (KHDA, 2017). With that said, a disability can be considered a result of the individual's contact with society rather than being a personal attribute.

Eventually, impairments become disabilities when the person is exposed to attitudinal, social and/or environmental experiences that hinder his/her participation within community. Once, these barriers have been excluded, disability is more likely to decrease or disappear. Data from the United Nations shows that approximately 10% of people in the world are diagnosed either with medical impairment or a disability (KHDA, 2017) and of course, learners are part of this. In the context of education, inclusive education comes as remediation for students who have been diagnosed with impairments or disabilities. Inclusive education is the concept that addresses this category of students and highlights their basic right of being educated in the mainstream classrooms with age-appropriate peers whenever possible (Czeladnicki, 2011; MOE, 2010; Nehring, 2014; Varnish, 2014). As an overview, the educational system has developed remarkably over the last four decades in the purpose of guaranteeing that all learners would have equal access to reach their maximum potential and be educated regardless of their needs (NFOR, 2017).

The United Arab Emirates is one of the countries embracing inclusion with arms wide open. The UAE has joined the inclusive education arena since 1994 during the Salamanca Convention that was held in Spain. The main purpose of the conference was to ensure that all children would be educated in mainstream classrooms. The Salamanca Statement proposed a policy shift requiring all schools to become inclusive and attend to the needs of all children, especially SEND (Special Education Needs and Disability). The Salamanca Statement was derived from the studies about disability as a social outcome and has hence, advocated inclusiveness because SEND students cannot advance in isolation and they should receive their education with other peers (NFOR, 2017). This convention has called for major reform in schools and in the educational system and mainstream schools must now offer a child-centered teaching and learning environment which can accommodate SEND. As a result, the UAE government has taken steps to promote inclusive education. The Federal Law No 29 of 2006, concerning the "Rights of Persons with Special Needs" hence formally recognizes the rights of this category to guarantee equitable educational opportunities (Gaad, 2011).

The services and programs in relation to special education in the UAE has evolved since 1979 to include more special needs categories. The special needs categories have expanded to include gifted students and those who show exceptional abilities in different domains. In 2006, the special education services extended to include students until grade 9. According to General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Programs and Services (General Rules for the Provision of Special Education Services, n. d.), before the student is referred to determine his/her eligibility for special education services, students who show signs of low academic performance as compared to peers should be referred to the School Support Team (SST) whose job will be developing an intervention plan to help the student catch up with his/her peers. Several types of special education programs exist. For example, students in the program 'inclusion in regular classrooms with community-based support' receive special education services provided by community. In the 'inclusion in regular education classroom with classroom-based support', students with special needs receive support in the classroom from general and special education teachers (e.g., a student with a speech disorder might receive therapeutic services from a speech and language pathology specialist in the regular classroom. In the 'inclusion in regular classroom with support from the school', students with special needs who attend the regular classroom receive special

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