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Apryl L. Poch
University of Nebraska at Omaha, apoch@unomaha.edu

Duaa Alzahrani
Duquesne University

Jawaher Aljuwayhir
Duquesne University

Maram Alnahari
Duquesne University

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Educating Students With Learning Difficulties in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Apryl L. Poch, PhD, Duaa Alzahrani, MS, Jawaher Aljuwayhir, MEd, and Maram Alnahari, MA

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Abstract

Identification of and services for students with learning disabilities share both similarities and differences across cultures, including the term(s) used to label and subsequently provide services for these students. Learning disabilities, in Arabic, translates to “learning difficulties.” This column provides a brief overview of the current educational system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia including the identification and services available for students with learning difficulties and concludes with future directions. Much opportunity remains for supporting the needs of students with learning difficulties in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Identification of and services for students with learning disabilities include both similarities and differences across cultures, including the term(s) used to label and subsequently provide services for these students. This column provides a brief overview of the current educational system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), specifically noting the identification, diagnosis, and services available for students with learning difficulties (i.e., the Arabic term for learning disabilities; Al-Hano, 2006). It concludes with future directions based on the currently available research and “Vision 2030” policy introduced by the Crown Prince. Researchers, readers, and policymakers may benefit from the following description and discussion of critical issues that continue to hinder the delivery of special education services for students with learning difficulties to the level aspired to in the KSA. Many of these issues are not uncommon across various cultures and speak to the need of the global community for improving support for students with learning disabilities and other learning difficulties.

The Current Educational System

The educational system from early childhood education to higher education in the KSA is overseen by the Ministry of Education. The General Education Administration within the Ministry of Education is comprised of four sectors: (a) early childhood education; (b) public education from ages 6 to 18; (c) private, national, and foreign

education; and (d) special education programs (Unified National Platform, 2021a).

The Administration of Learning Difficulties operates under the Special Education Program and has offices throughout the Kingdom's regions. The responsibilities of this administration are (a) to develop education programs in schools, (b) to assess budget needs, (c) to hire special education teachers, and (d) to continuously evaluate program effectiveness.

However, the establishment of services for students with learning difficulties in the KSA has taken time to develop and evolve. Table 1 provides a chronology of educational laws and initiatives in the KSA and the focus of the law or initiative for students with learning difficulties. The release of the Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes (RSEPI) in 2001 marked a pivotal point for students with learning difficulties in the KSA. Until that time, learning difficulty programs remained scarce (Alquraini, 2011). As of the academic year 2014–2015, Battal (2016) reported that there were 2,393 institutions and programs for learning difficulties in the KSA to accommodate the increase in the number of students with disabilities, including students with learning difficulties in general education. Eleven universities in the KSA launched undergraduate and graduate special education departments (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2020), and the Ministry of Education started offering scholarships abroad for special education teachers who wished to pursue graduate degrees (Ministry of Education, 2021), as well as scholarships for university faculty members.

Table 1. Chronology of Educational Law in the KSA Supporting Students With Learning Difficulties.

Educational law or initiative	Focus of the law or initiative for students with learning difficulties
Ministry of Knowledge established the Administration of Special Learning (1962) ^a	Provided educational and vocational services in special institutions for three categories of disability: vision impairments, hearing impairments, and intellectual disabilities
Article 56 of the Education Law (1970) ^b	Provided special education for students with intellectual, hearing, and vision impairments
Article 30 of the Basic Law of Governance (1992) ^c	Sought to eradicate illiteracy; the state provides public education
Minister of Education ordered the establishment of the Administration of Special Education (1995) ^d	Created the Administration of Special Education and expanded the administration's services to include eight categories of disability, including learning difficulties; sub-department for each type of disability also established, including a department for the gifted and talented
Law No. 224 (2001) ^e	Released the regulation of the first special education laws in the KSA through the RSEPI and provided free and appropriate education for nine categories of disabilities including learning difficulties (ADHD added as the ninth category)
Revision of RSEPI (2002) ^f	Article 3 directed that students with disabilities (including learning difficulties) should receive a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment as determined by the individualized education plan while taking into consideration a continuum of alternative placements
Decree No. 139 of the Council of Ministers (2004) ^g	Made public education compulsory for children between the ages of 6–15 years
KSA signed and ratified the Convention on The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) ^d	Article 24 emphasized inclusive education for students with disabilities (including students with learning difficulties)
Vision 2030 Education Strategy (2016) ^g	Provided quality and equitable lifelong education for all in the least restrictive environment

Note. KSA = Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, RSEPI = Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes, ADHD = attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

^aAltamimi et al. (2015). ^bUNESCO (2020). ^cUnified National Platform (2021b). ^dBattal (2016). ^eAlquraini (2011, 2013). ^fMinistry of Education (2002).

^gMinistry of Education (2020); Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2020).

Furthermore, legislative and policy changes have sought to foster rights for children with disabilities, including learning difficulties, and their parents. Procedural safeguards under RSEPI provide specific and special education procedures that guarantee to parents/guardians of children with disabilities a high-quality education for their children and rights regarding special education disputes (Alquraini, 2013). More recently, Vision 2030 proposed the *Irtiqaa* initiative. The initiative—in collaboration with the Ministry of Education—produced *The Procedural Guide for Partnership between Schools, Families and Community*. The guide discusses the necessity and importance of the family's participation as an important and essential partner with the school in the education of their children with disabilities, including children with learning difficulties. The document discusses in 18 articles families' rights in participation, decision-making, and protection of information (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the RSEPI and Procedural Guide for Partnership between Schools, Families and Community do not discuss the legal channels that students and their parents/guardians can approach to protest the decline in services or guarantee the right of involvement in the decision-making process regarding services such as the educational placement decision and the identification and assessment process (Alquraini, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2018).

Definition, Identification, and Diagnosis of Learning Difficulties

According to Abed and Shackelford (2020), the Ministry of Education in 2002 defined learning difficulties as

. . . disturbances in one or more of the basic psychological processes involving the understanding and use of written or spoken language that appear in disorders of listening, thinking, speaking, reading and writing (spelling), and mathematics, which are not due to mental, audiovisual, or other disabilities, or other types of disabilities, learning conditions, or family care. (Abed & Shackelford, 2020, pp. 36–37)

The term *learning difficulties* has been adopted by Saudi educators from the United States. The definition of learning disability in the KSA is similar to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) definition, but it also lacks some of the IDEA's specificity, particularly in terms of inclusionary examples, which are lacking in the KSA's definition, and the exclusionary clause. Table 2 provides a comparison of special education practices for students with learning disabilities/difficulties in the United States and the KSA. Policy borrowing from the West is not uncommon. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (i.e., KSA, Kingdom of Bahrain, Sultanate of Oman, State of Qatar, State of Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates) have often developed and sought educational reform by borrowing policies and practices originally developed and implemented in the West (Romanowski et al., 2018).

Table 2. Special Education Practices for Students With Learning Disabilities/Difficulties in the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Practice	United States	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Identification and diagnosis	Three identification methods: (a) discrepancy model, (b) response to intervention, and (c) pattern of strengths and weaknesses.	Currently, rely on a discrepancy formula to identify and diagnose students with learning difficulties. Introduced response to intervention, but it is not yet used.
Services available	1- IEP services available for students with learning disabilities provided by a special team. 2-Related services are available. 3-Academic services based on evidence-based strategies.	1- IEP services available for students with learning difficulties provided by a special team. 2- Related services are available but not always in the same school the student is attending. 3- Academic services based on evidence-based strategies.
Least restrictive environment	Services provided on a continuum, and within the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate with the use of supplementary aids and resources.	Services provided on a continuum, and within the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate with the use of supplementary aids and resources.

Note: IEP = individualized education program.

According to Binbakhit (2020), the KSA Ministry of Education in 2017 clarified the procedure to identify and diagnose children with learning difficulties as similar to schools in the United States. As with many schools in the United States that previously relied on a discrepancy formula to identify and diagnose students with learning disabilities, schools in the KSA likewise rely on a discrepancy formula. Students in the KSA should present a clear academic weakness in their learning skills compared with their peers in academic achievement and perform poorly in one or more subjects academically. The general education teacher who observed the student's academic weakness should refer him or her to a special education teacher for a diagnosis, which allows the student to receive special education services after diagnosis. Today, the KSA Ministry of Education is introducing response to intervention, similar to that used in the United States, to identify learning difficulties (Ministry of Education, 2020), but it is yet to be implemented.

The number of individuals in the KSA who have been identified with learning difficulties has been increasing. However, there is a lack of information available in the KSA about the various types of disabilities that affect school-age children (Al-Shareef, 2017). According to Al-Jadid (2014), students diagnosed with learning difficulties comprise about 46% of the entire school-age population (K–12). The Prince Salman Center for Disability Research in the KSA estimates that more than 300,000 students with learning difficulties attend public schools (Al-Odaib & Al-Sedairy, 2014).

The General Authority for Statistics released a special report entitled “Saudi Youth Report in Numbers” on August 9, 2020, in honor of World Youth Day, which includes educational statistics of Saudi youth (General Authority for Statistics, 2020). They estimated that 1,445,723 individuals have been diagnosed with a disability, and this population includes people with learning difficulties (General Authority for Statistics, 2020). Unfortunately, there are no current statistics available about the incidence rate of learning difficulties from the Ministry of Education.

Nonetheless, the incidence rate of students with disabilities has continued to rise worldwide. As of the 2019–2020 school year, approximately 7.3 million students were served by the IDEA in the United States, which is about 14% of the total public-school enrollment (Irwin et al., 2021). Of this population, around 33% of all students receiving special education support qualified as students with specific learning disabilities (Irwin et al., 2021). Tracking the prevalence of disabilities on a global scale, however, is difficult due to differences in definition, diagnosis, resources, and governmental support (despite similarities in the name). For example, in Palestine, procedures for identifying students with learning difficulties remain in development (Nasir-Tucktuck et al., 2017). In Jordan, an investigation into the prevalence of learning difficulties among primary school students was high, with high comorbidity rates among all learning difficulty conditions (Abu-Hamour & Al Hmiuz, 2017).

Service Provisions and Educational Supports for Students With Learning Difficulties

As in the United States, the individualized education program (IEP) serves to facilitate an effective and precise education for students with learning difficulties in the KSA. For preparing each IEP, the school's multidisciplinary team must hold a meeting that is headed by the school administrator. To facilitate this teamwork, the school selects one personnel member to be responsible for arranging anything regarding the meeting. However, before the meeting, consent from the student's parents/guardian must be obtained regarding diagnosis and evaluation and the receipt of special education services (Ministry of Education, 2020).

During the IEP team meeting, the diagnosis and evaluation results are discussed to determine the student's current level of academic achievement, behavioral and social skills, and the student's physical and daily living abilities. Then, the team takes these targeted skill strengths and weaknesses into consideration when determining what specific special education and related services are needed to help the student be successful. In addition, they will decide who will provide the service, when, and for how long. The parent and the student are to agree upon the team's decisions. If they have any concerns with the plan, the team should consider a solution or an alternative plan, as the satisfaction of the parents and the student will encourage the team to collaborate and support the student toward reaching the goals outlined in the IEP. When the IEP team reaches an agreement, the implementation of the IEP must begin within 2 weeks (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The KSA Ministry of Education issued a guidebook to facilitate the process of providing services to students with learning difficulties. The guide, entitled دليل معلم صعوبات التعلم في المرحلة الابتدائية, which translates to "Teacher's Guide for Learning Difficulties in the Primary Stage" (i.e., hereafter Teacher's Guide; Ministry of Education, 2020), includes almost all that a learning difficulties teacher needs to know about the services available and how to provide them. Related services are indicated in this Teacher's Guide as well and include social services (e.g., teaching skills that help students participate in society

and school), psychological services, technical services, speech and language services, medical services, diagnosis and evaluation, and other services as needed. A specialist must provide these services. However, as noted within the Teacher's Guide, the related services will not always be available in the same school that the student is attending. Thus, these needed services must be provided by a local external source that specializes in the services and is approved by the KSA Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2020).

In terms of academic services, which include instructional methods, students with learning difficulties are commonly placed in and receive services in general education classrooms in public schools with their typically developing peers (Alquraini, 2011). All students study the same curriculum, with many students with learning difficulties receiving accommodations. In addition, the student is often pulled out of the classroom to the resource room by the learning difficulties teacher, who is also recognized as the resource room teacher in KSA schools. In the resource room, the learning difficulties teacher teaches the student strategies to meet the demands of the general education curriculum. The student may also work with other specialists to receive related services as needed (AlMedlij & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2018).

As described in the same Teacher's Guide (Ministry of Education, 2020), the resource room should be divided into four corners: the educational corner, the peer teaching corner, the teacher corner, and the assistive technology corner. The Teacher's Guide does not specify the maximum group size that can be included in the resource room. However, it requires the teacher to diversify the educational activities in the resource room to be between individualized and within-group activities that are based on evidence-based strategies (Ministry of Education, 2020).

The Teacher's Guide also provides learning strategies to support students with learning difficulties (e.g., reading, writing, math, and general learning strategies). These strategies are selected from well-known evidence-based strategies in the United States for students with learning disabilities including (a) direct instructional techniques, (b) self-regulated strategy development, (c) teacher modeling, and (d) peer-mediation techniques. The Teacher's Guide also provides guidance on how to implement these strategies. However, as the guide mentions, learning difficulties teachers are not restricted to these strategies; they can decide to use any other strategy that fits the student's needs. The goal of the Teacher's Guide is to assist teachers in providing quality services aligned with the KSA's future vision (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Future Directions

The education of students with learning difficulties in the KSA has improved in the past two decades. This improvement can be attributed in part to the educational policies established by the Ministry of Education, policies that largely are aligned with those of leading countries such as the United States (Murry & Alqahtani, 2015). Yet,

much work remains regarding research and the implementation of current policy for meeting the Crown Prince's "Vision 2030."

Current Issues

In the KSA, disability research is sponsored and funded by The King Salman Center for Disability Research. The center was established in 1992 to promote, conduct, and support scientific research and the application of new knowledge to the benefit of persons with disabilities and their families. Upon the center's establishment, the learning difficulties research program was founded. Currently, the program offers monthly professional development programs regarding the identification of learning difficulties and evidence-based practices; however, three decades after establishing the program, research on learning difficulties is still scarce, with little research produced by universities in the KSA.

Furthermore, while several laws and policies support the equal rights of individuals with disabilities in obtaining a free and appropriate education, some of these laws were passed decades ago and are not always applied in everyday practices. The paucity of effective implementation has created a gap between the framework (i.e., intent) of these laws and the provision of services, resulting in a lack of special education services (Alquraini, 2011). This issue persists today. Following the release of the reform agenda "Vision 2030," the Ministry of Education established the Agency of Planning and Development. Some of the agency's tasks are to follow-up on the implementation of the agenda's plans for each sector of education within the ministry, provide informational and statistical reports, and propose necessary changes in the educational policies based on research findings. However, according to the Ministry of Education's website, the Administration of Special Education sector is not one of the sectors that the agency evaluates. As Romanowski et al. (2018) have argued, cultural beliefs and values, along with epistemological conflicts, might help explain such a gap between laws and implementation.

Suggested Solutions

Much opportunity remains for supporting the needs of students with learning difficulties in the KSA. Learning difficulty researchers in the KSA must take advantage of research opportunities and expand their partnerships with The King Salman Center for Disability Research beyond professional development seminars. Learning difficulties research is crucial to the progress of the education of students with learning difficulties.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Education must continue to monitor the implementation of policies and laws and take strict measures in holding inclusive schools accountable for providing quality educational services to students with learning difficulties as mandated by RSEPI and "Vision 2030." They must also encourage learning difficulty teachers to pursue scholarship opportunities for higher education in leading countries in the field of learning disability research and practice, keeping in mind the cultural beliefs and values that must be maintained for fostering student success.

Conclusion

Improving educational outcomes for students with learning difficulties will continue to require a sustained global focus as well as the attention of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. However, just as the establishment of the field of learning difficulties took time to develop in the KSA, time will be needed to obtain the goals of current policy (e.g., the RSEPI and “Vision 2030”). This column provides a brief overview of the current educational system in the KSA; the identification, diagnosis, and services available for students with learning difficulties; and the identification of future directions and suggested solutions.

While similarities exist across cultures (e.g., comparable labels, procedures, and services), the global community must continue to rectify differences and ensure that adequate research supports comparable procedures across cultures and educational units. Indeed, the sheer size of the population of learners with learning difficulties demands attention, and special educators in the KSA will “need more resources, more training, and more opportunities to empower themselves to effectively educate students” with learning difficulties (Nasir-Tucktuck et al., 2017, p. 186). This includes advanced opportunities to learn about the needs of learners with learning difficulties within effective teacher preparation programs (Keller et al., 2016). It may also be an opportunity for GCC countries to reevaluate the ways in which policy borrowing is allowing them to adequately meet the needs of learners with learning difficulties and their families, and instead shift to policy learning practices that can account for the important role of culture and context (Romanowski et al., 2018).

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