

# Special education programs for students with Intellectual Disabilities in Saudi Arabia: Views of Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCos)

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## Abstract

*The Saudi Arabian education system has undergone a tremendous transformation from an education system, which was available to only a few children belonging to wealthy families living in cities, to one that provides free education, books, and health services to all Saudi citizens. It is now a better-planned and more robust system that includes more than 50 public and private universities, many colleges, and other institutions, and over 3,000 schools. However, globally, research exploring the views of special educational needs coordinators (SENCos) in special education is limited. Moreover, in Saudi Arabia there is virtually no research examining special education programs for students with intellectual disabilities from the perspective of SENCos. It is important to note that generalizing study results can be challenging due to the variety of problems faced by learners. In addition, there are*

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*numerous limitations to using SENCOs. It is, therefore, essential to ensure that their role is not viewed solely in one context, as there are also numerous national and school-level considerations. This study aims to understand the views of SENCOs, to examine the current issues in Saudi special education provision, how special education programs in the country can be improved, and, most importantly, how they can improve the benefit of students with intellectual disabilities. The research employed a case study research design, in which the qualitative data concerned was collected via semi-structured interviews. This study is expected to benefit Saudi policymakers, SENCOs, and students with intellectual disabilities, as well as their parents, by filling the current gaps in the understanding of the need for special education programs, specifically in terms of the resources, training, performance, and learning outcomes concerned and seeks to ensure their continued development. The study highlights several key concerns of the SENCOs involved regarding the specific educational programs currently being developed for students with intellectual disabilities in the Saudi context. It concludes that educating people with intellectual disabilities is a significant challenge and requires implementing specific plans and strategies.*

**Keywords:** Intellectual Disabilities; Saudi Arabia; SENCOs; Special education.

## 1. Introduction

The term “Special educational needs coordinator” (SENCo) refers to the professionals responsible for overseeing the teaching and learning processes of special education classrooms, especially leading teachers, resources, and development in providing support for students with special educational needs and disabilities within specific programs (Curran, Mortimore, & Riddell, 2017). Therefore, SENCos can be seen as a critical factor in developing special educational needs and disability services. Despite the importance of their role in the learning processes related to special education, previous studies, addressing issues related to special education and disability needs, tended to focus on the views of students, teachers, and parents and placed less emphasis on those of other stakeholders, including SENCos. Indeed, Curran and colleagues (Curran *et al.*, 2017) highlighted the lack of such research and Smith (2018) raised similar concerns, suggesting that the role of the SENCo is unclear and underexplored in the existing and latent literature.

An established facility assumes that the role of SENCos includes running the day-to-day operations of special education. Most SENCos appoint an educator as their representative, while the SENCo as an individual undertakes roles such as coordinating additional support for teachers, students, and parents with special needs. In general, institutions appoint an educator as their SENCo. However, Boesley and Crane (2018) highlighted the current paucity of research regarding their views, even though they play an increasingly central role in supporting students with disabilities. This lack of research can be since the role of the SENCo has remained vague and has sometimes been neglected, and consequently has not had a sufficient impact in the field due to the different functions of SENCos within schools and the fact that the role is not defined clearly. Consequently, tensions have arisen regarding the SENCo as a key player, as several obstacles have been identified in determining the attributes and characteristics of the role. Another critical aspect involved is the definition of intellectual disability, which recognizes limitations in a person’s ability to learn at the expected capacity and level in daily life. However, intellectual disability varies from child to child. Moreover, every child is also gifted differently (Hallett & Hallett, 2010; Tissot, 2013; Curran *et al.*, 2017).

In addition, not only has limited attention been paid to the role of SENCos in the context of Saudi Arabia, but no studies have been conducted to date that assess the effectiveness of special education programs from the

perspective of a SENCo or that identify the barriers or concerns they face in this context. Therefore, the present research was aimed at examining the views of SENCos concerning the nature of Saudi special education programs to determine if obstacles impeded their success. The study's findings have the potential to support the development of an appropriate framework that facilitates the proper education provision for people with intellectual disabilities, as it examines critical factors, such as the learning environment, instructional strategies, parental involvement, resource availability, and teacher professionalism.

### *1.1. National and local context*

The education system in Saudi Arabia consists of a kindergarten, six years of elementary school, and three years each of intermediate school and high school. After elementary school, students choose between studying high school programs, such as arts or commerce, or attending a vocational school. After graduating from high school, it is possible to enroll in undergraduate studies at a university. Saudi Arabia has two kinds of institutions for students with special needs, one of which targets individuals with modest to extreme disabilities. These schools are designed to address subjects with such disabilities in specific areas; for instance, there are schools for people with intellectual disabilities, students with visual impairments, and those that cater to the needs of students with hearing impairments. Additionally, there are institutions for students who suffer from mild disabilities; these include basic programs for differently abled students within the standard education system. Some of the facilities included in these institutions are resource room programs, self-contained classrooms, follow-up programs, teacher-consultant programs, and itinerant teacher programs. The only placement options available in these fields include resource rooms and self-contained classrooms.

In Saudi Arabia, the term "special education teacher" refers to educators working in special education programs or institutions. Most special education teachers must hold a bachelor's degree in special education. In contrast, the term "general education teacher" or "general teacher" refers to educators who have studied subjects that are not necessarily related to special education and who are employed in schools that have special education programs but do not exclusively offer the curricula. As part of Saudi Arabia's effort to reduce illiteracy and to provide education for all, the country's Department of Education includes special schools explicitly

designed for students with special needs, namely for the blind, those requiring special education, the deaf, and those who are intellectually and physically disabled.

### *1.2. Literature review*

The published literature concerning the support of students with intellectual disabilities has expanded in recent years due to the desire to develop inclusive classrooms that conform to the disability social model (Klang, Göransson, Lindqvist, Nilholm, Hansson, & Bengtsson, 2020). Previous studies found that many degrees of intellectual disability vary by ability. Typically, an IQ score of 50-70 indicates the presence of an intellectual disability (Algahtani, 2017). Such a score implies some level of intellectual deficit. It also demonstrates that a student will have difficulty accessing a curriculum since their learning involves the slow comprehension of concepts and skills (Gibbons, Cihak, Mynatt, & Wilhoit, 2015). Students with intellectual disabilities might experience frustration and encounter social and conceptual skills that they find challenging to comprehend, resulting in a low motivation (Algahtani, 2017). Underlying deficits in problem-solving and decision-making are the most apparent indicators (Haegele & Park, 2016).

In Saudi Arabia, there are currently clear gaps in the collaboration between staff and teachers when addressing individuals' educational difficulties. According to the United Nations (UN), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) is a human rights instrument with social and explicit developmental dimensions. It adopts a broader categorization of disabled people and reaffirms that they should also enjoy fundamental freedom and human rights. It identifies the contexts in which adaptations are needed for disabled people. Given its components, existing gaps have contributed to low-quality inclusion services and outcomes, further exacerbating the lack of advancement for students with special needs in the country. The Saudi "School for All" initiative represents an essential factor in improving the educational opportunities of students with disabilities in the Saudi public education system. According to Haddad (2019), there is a need to involve the student in the learning process and to take his/her wishes into account. In addition, King and colleagues (King, Ní Bhroin, & Prunty, 2018) noted that both legislation and international policy recommend that there should be circular access and inclusion for students with special needs within education. Since the experience of education and

level of education influence education leadership, teachers with leadership qualities are required (Gajendran, 2020). Moreover, quality education requires well-trained individuals to achieve an effective learning.

The existing literature in this field also emphasized the need for specialized schools and highlighted the role of the SENCo, despite the overarching desire for inclusive education (Klang *et al.*, 2020). For instance, Vlachou and Fyssa (2016) examined the quality of support in mainstream schools for students with intellectual disabilities in Greece and found no meaningful evidence. In the context of mainstream schools, previous studies found that teachers have concerns regarding addressing challenging behaviour in the classroom and whether they have the professional skills required to support students with disabilities adequately (Forlin, Keen, & Barrett, 2008). Specialized SENCos are believed to employ a broader range of strategies to help students with disabilities because of their training and expertise (Vlachou & Fyssa, 2016). This situation does not necessarily mean specialized schools are ideal for students with disabilities. For example, studies conducted in the United States (US) identified concerns that the pedagogy involved may be over-reliant on rote learning and revealed concerns regarding the low expectations that SENCos have of students in specialized schools (Hord & Bouck, 2012). Indeed, previous research demonstrated the presence of a strong correlation between the way pedagogy is delivered and the expectations a SENCo has of a student's ability (Klang *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, Burns (2007) supported rote learning for students with disabilities, arguing that repetition and rote learning are successful teaching methods. There is, therefore, a current lack of consensus regarding this matter.

Several previous studies, mainly conducted in Sweden, focused explicitly on curriculum effectiveness in a specialized school setting. Swedish law states that a student who cannot reach the required level of achievement due to an intellectual disability should have an adapted curriculum, which implies that an abbreviated curriculum is offered that focuses only on basic skills and provides little depth of knowledge (Klang *et al.*, 2020). This adapted curriculum can be taught in both mainstream and special schools. The study by Klang and colleagues (Klang *et al.*, 2020) examined the differences between pedagogical practices in general and special education settings and found that the teachers in typical settings had much higher expectations of students with intellectual disabilities than their college peers. Moreover, the teachers at special schools were found to place far greater emphasis on the social participation and socialization of their students.

Another important finding of the study was that in both settings, a very high percentage of teachers employed traditional learning activities for students with intellectual disabilities. According to Meece and collaborators (Meece, Herman, & McCombs, 2003), learner-centered education is associated with far greater student motivation and education progress. Active learning approaches involve students in the learning process, with the teacher taking less control of the learning environment and trusting the learners more, a technique that indicates that controlling behavior is central to teacher pedagogy when working with students with intellectual disabilities.

Determining the best source of support for a student with a disability is a subject of hot debate in the existing literature. For instance, Harris and Handleman (2000) argued that mainstream students might exhibit higher levels of adaptive functioning than their special education peers; this allows them to adapt better to classroom life without raising concerns among the staff involved. In contrast, other studies demonstrated that placing a student in a special school often has little to do with disability and more with family background and the perception of mainstream schooling. In the classroom, specific steps are considered highly beneficial for all students with intellectual disabilities. In addition to instant feedback, Douglas and colleagues (Douglas, Ayres, Langone, & Bramlett, 2011) believe that visual aids, including graphic organizers, are considered valuable tools. In addition, Aykut and collaborators (Aykut, Dageven Emecen, Dayı, & Karasu, 2014) claimed that the effective teaching of students with intellectual disabilities involves breaking tasks into smaller units, as suggested by behavioral theory, and ensuring a clear framework for the learner. As students with intellectual disabilities struggle to understand a complex content, breaking learning into building blocks ensures that the first building block is understood before another is added; when a teacher rushes through a lesson, an intellectually disabled student can become frustrated and disengage his/her attention.

Lemons and colleagues (Lemons, Zigmond, Kloo, Hill, Mrachko, Pattera *et al.*, 2013) instead argued that the focus of special education should be literacy, as the key to improving school life for students with intellectual disabilities is successful progress towards reading fluency. In addition, using age-appropriate texts is essential because older students, even those with low reading ability, perceived barriers to learning development when presented with texts intended for younger students (Shurr & Taber-Doughty, 2012). Previous research also identified the best approaches to improving the literacy skills of students with disabilities. For example, Riepl and

collaborators (Riepl, Marchand-Martella, & Martella, 2008) recommended not only using decoding strategies but also found great success in applying a phonetics-based approach with adults who had previously made mistakes. They also focused on a broader area of literacy support that included family support to encourage students to read at home to develop their literacy skills.

When referring to the instructions employed with students with disabilities and students without disabilities, Vygotsky, as cited in Luzet (2013), emphasized the importance of communication, noting that the one who does the talking does the learning. Indeed, Vygotsky was a strong proponent of social development theory by employing social interaction as a tool to facilitate the development of cognition, which is the product of the social behavior children learn by interacting with adults and peers (Luzet, 2013). Therefore, the theory of collaborative learning is essential for SENCOs, as interacting with students with disabilities is central to their learning to control their behavior and frustrations that can upset both the learner and those around them. Therefore, providing an explicit and systematic guidance is crucial and must motivate and convey achievable goals (Peterson, Marchand-Martella, & Martella, 2008). As students with disabilities may be accustomed to repeated failure, the SENCO, with support from the student's home environment, should help students gain a more positive self-image.

### *1.3. The role of a SENCO*

A SENCO plays many roles in the lives of people with disabilities. For example, they play an essential role in the lives of the children as auditors, rescuers, and arbiters. They fulfill their part by helping individuals, such as teachers and parents, feel included in negotiations and help in monitoring and rationalizing the use of resources. Additionally, the SENCO focuses on teaching individual students with disabilities through demonstrations of empathy while ignoring collaboration or management work with other parties (Fitzgerald & Radford, 2017). Finally, they also hold an audit function that addresses the administrative and management agenda to ensure that service delivery meets the standards set by local and national authorities, together with those of stakeholders and SENCO scheme promoters.



#### 1.4. Medical model changes

The social model of disability is currently the preferred approach in special education, in place of the medical models used previously. The medical disability ideal, namely a biomedical disability model, presented disability as a problem and proposed treating and teaching people with intellectual disabilities in special schools. However, the societal ideal was criticized by certain parties who believed that it did not consider the differences between people with disabilities, i.e. the model assumed the multiple connections that existed between oppressed individuals and states (Fitzgerald, 2006). It was not until 2007 that academic papers explicitly referred to “intellectual disability” (Burns, 2007). Such a referral demonstrated the existing common use of the medical paradigm. In contrast, the social model seeks to change the education environment so that everyone with a disability can be supported and have access to educational curricula (Quicke, 2007). According to Baker and colleagues (Baker, Rivera, Morgan, & Reese, 2015), people with intellectual disabilities can achieve progress in education by implementing appropriate guided support and pedagogical modifications. Moreover, it is argued that education does not solely concern learning the curriculum. Instead, there is a greater need to prepare young people for life and to strive to enhance their social skills (Baker *et al.*, 2015).

Overall, in Saudi Arabia, two kinds of educational placements are often used for learners with intellectual disabilities, i.e., mainstream schooling and institutions. In institutionalized schools, intellectually disabled learners can study in institutions depending on their disabilities. For such placements, students are separated from their counterparts with no disabilities. This option is the last choice learners with multiple disabilities, severe disabilities, or autism should follow. The “mainstream” programs refer to programs in special education for learners through follow-up initiatives, teacher-consultant programs, itinerant teacher programs, resource room programs, and self-contained classroom programs. For learners with intellectual disabilities, only self-contained classrooms are available for mainstream programs, which have often been identified in the latent literature as “special education programs”. The primary purpose of this study was to fill the current gaps in understanding the need for special education programs, specifically in terms of the resources, training, performance, and learning outcomes concerned, and to ensure their continued development. The study highlights several key concerns of the SENCOs involved regarding the specific educational programs currently

being developed for students with intellectual disabilities in the Saudi context. Besides, the findings from this research will be crucial to exploring the current situation in the country concerning the offer of special education programs to identify existing weaknesses and find ways to help improve the services offered. As such, findings from the study will enhance the quality of special education in Saudi Arabia.

## 2. Methods

### *2.1. Research design and hypothesis*

The present study was conducted in Saudi Arabia and focused on two special education programs for students with intellectual disabilities. A case study research design was employed to collect qualitative data on the country's institutional and special education programs. Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. Data from the Ministry of Education was assessed to gather information concerning the number of institutes and schools offering special education programs in the country. In addition, letters from the Ministry of Education to the schools were used to obtain the curriculum of the institutions, indicating the number of classes required for each competence according to the different weekly plans for the special education programs. Observational data was drawn from approximately 25 programs for students with intellectual disabilities, and observational data was verified from teacher interviews with educators working in different special education programs to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Based on the findings of the comprehensive professional and academic literature review, we hypothesized that in the Saudi Arabia context there was a mild to moderate level of intellectual disability for the students to whom the two different special education programs had been addressed. The Supports Intensity Scale (SIS) was an instrument adopted to evaluate the level of intellectual disability. Moreover, we hypothesized that there was a strong correlation between learning outcomes and the participation of SENCOs in the general education system.

### *2.2. Participants and sampling procedures*

In total, one SENCO from each setting involved (Participant A, Participant B) was invited to participate in an interview; these individuals

were selected according to their length of service in administration and within the education system and their willingness to participate in the research. The purpose of these interviews was to gather the views and perceptions of the participants regarding the issues they encountered within their special education programs. Both participants held a master's degree in special education, had over four years of experience in the SENCo system, and were actively working to support the unique needs of students. Thus, a convenience sample was selected for the interviews to discuss the main issues that emerged from the literature review.

The review of the existing literature in the field enabled the development of a list of questions to address the areas of interest for this study. The questions were reviewed by both participants involved in the study to ensure their simplicity, clarity, relevance, and focus. Although both the SENCos interviewed were asked the same questions, additional questions were sometimes added to allow them to add specific details. The participants gave their consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded after being informed how and in what manner the recordings would have been used. Interviews were transcribed for coding and analysis purposes.

### *2.3. Procedure for data analysis*

Interviews were analyzed thematically in line with Braun and Clarke (2012). The data collection was the first step in the analysis process. By listening to and transcribing the data recorded, the researchers identified a range of pertinent concepts in the participants' responses, some of which constituted potential topics and subtopics. After interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were read multiple times, which helped to familiarize the researchers with the data and allowed them to identify the aspects of the participants' responses that were important and relevant to the study. This procedure, namely recording the interviews, then listening to them, transcribing and reading the data repeatedly throughout the study, was an appropriate and valuable technique that enabled a comprehensive understanding of the data.

In the second analysis phase, the data was coded. The detailed mapping and listing of codes were necessary to study the relationships between the various elements involved. The researchers read the data and recorded the critical comments and concepts both on a separate sheet of paper and in the margins of the interview transcripts themselves. This was followed by the process of theme identification, which was greatly facilitated by the coding

and the previous identification of the notable concepts. The codes that reflected the same meaning were grouped; for example, there was a strong correlation between learning outcomes and the participation of SENCos in the general education system. This ensured that each code fitted at least one theme, and sometimes many codes constituted a theme. Each theme was then reviewed, and further connections were identified. Consequently, some themes became sub-themes, and the main themes were revealed. Following a continuous revision of the data-related topics, the topics were ultimately defined and named in a process that enabled the researchers to group the ideas and views of the interviewees into specific groups and to create a final thematic map.

To ensure that the research was conducted ethically, factors such as ensuring confidentiality, anonymity, and access to the participants were addressed, and the data gathered was stored securely (Thomas, 2017). As the respondents' willingness to participate in the study and to access to the data collected were the primary ethical issues considered, it was necessary to obtain certain documents before the start of the research. Since the privacy of the participants and the sensitivity of the questions posed in the interviews were of concern, neither of the respondents were asked personal, sensitive, or private questions. Moreover, the researchers maintained and protected the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, who were informed verbally of their unconditional right to withdraw from the study for any reason. A cover letter explaining this included information regarding the protection of the participants' anonymity: this is a crucial matter, especially when an interview involves voice or videorecording. Informed consent to participate in the interviews and for them to be video and audio recorded was therefore required by all the participants, who were informed of the aims of the project and the time required to carry out the interviews.

The final phase of the data analysis involved the creation of a report of the findings. Following Larry (2019), research is generally conducted using readily available tools that enable researchers to build a body of knowledge in a particular field. This is also a determinant of ethics in research, as a study's results seek to benefit other researchers.

### 3. Results

Based on the interviews, about 75% of the institutions and schools offering special education rely on intelligence tests to validate intellectual disability. One of the insights that emerged from the data collected from this

study was related to the discrepancy between what is taught in special education courses at universities and the actual practice by SENCOs. For example, the curricula taught in the special education courses in Saudi universities derive by different contexts, such as the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, which do not always suit the Saudi context. As Participant A explained: *“The theories you study in books are very different from the actual experience of working as a teacher or trainer. As you may know, most of the books and syllabuses that we study here at university are usually literal translations of foreign books that present cases of people living in different societies with different living conditions and different cultural values”*.

In addition, Participant B noted that universities and colleges lack practical training opportunities, asserting: *“I would recommend attending training courses rather than studying books. The theory part should only be 20%, the practical part at least 60%”*. To teach students with special needs successfully, teachers must be qualified by SENCOs to become agents of change. Therefore, the successful teaching of students with special needs depends partly on SENCOs, as their peer perspectives influence teaching practices (Qureshi, 2014).

The SENCOs who participated in the present study also commented on the inadequate education inspection system implemented by the Saudi special education department. Indeed, Participant A highlighted specific systematic issues that underlie the lack of success of surveillance approaches, repeatedly stating that they had encountered problems with visits from education inspectors. These feelings were also supported by Participant B, who explained: *“At our school, a good teacher can take the initiative to design and adapt a curriculum that meets the needs of students with disabilities, but a local inspector can visit our school and express one-sided criticism based on his/her opinion without reason”*. Previous studies also identified inspection-related problems for special educational needs in the UK, including insufficient time spent by school inspectors, a lack of consistent reporting of the pupil’s Special Educational Needs (SEN) as well as inspections that detected SEN deficiencies but without offering solutions. These schools were therefore criticized quickly but not supported (Marshall, 2008).

Moreover, the respondents in the present study expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of adequate funding and support, reflecting another failure of Saudi special education programs. As Participant B explained: *“We have limited resources and were waiting for many improvements to be made, so*

*we had to do them at our own expense, as our school does not have a budget, unlike private schools. You describe our type of school as a self-financed school, which usually has no income, apart from the external investment fees for the school canteen*". A significant lack of resources for SEN schools was also noted by Done and collaborators (Done, Murphy, & Bedford, 2016), who raised specific concerns about the provision of communication-interaction and body-sense resources. In addition, the study by Robertson (2022) found that such schools did not provide special education support to students consistently because the amount earmarked for special education was perceived to be small.

The SENCOs who participated in the present study also identified family involvement as another issue that had a significant impact on the special education programs with which they were involved. Indeed, the data suggested that the level of parental involvement in special education programs may often be relatively low. Participant B explained: "*Normally, the parents of students with intellectual disabilities have no hope that their children will be better off. They think their kids are crazy*". This belief is of particular significance as parents have influence and power over the allocation of resources and the development of special education provisions (Maher, 2016).

Another obstacle, cited by the respondents in the present study, regarded the high expectations many families had of their children's schooling, discouraging them from sending their children to special schools. For example, Participant B noted: "*Because the environment at our school is poor, compared to private schools, well-educated parents are usually put off by the low standards of our facilities and level of hygiene; therefore, they decide not to send their children to our school. With such poor school standards, only parents with little or no education consider our school acceptable because they do not know the internationally recognized standards for such schools*". Parental distress in this situation was reported by Wedell (2019), specifically regarding the relationship between SENCOs and parents, even when the SENCO seeks to rectify the situation despite the need for the presence of a SENCO. The study highlighted the challenges SENCOs encounter with parents and the strategies they employ to resolve such concerns.

Another critical issue that emerged from the data collected by the present study was the lack of teamwork. The respondents indicated that the work environment in special education programs is a barrier to successful teaching because the staff employed at such facilities do not work as a team

to benefit students with intellectual disabilities. For example, Participant B commented: *“Everyone does their part of the job, but we lack cohesion and initiative in this environment where everyone avoids taking responsibility. People working in schools gradually lose their team spirit and stop using many procedures implemented at the beginning”*. This supported the observations made by Esposito and Carroll (2019) that teamwork between parents, teachers, and school management is required to improve learning opportunities for students.

Another essential matter that emerged from the present study was the relevance of a curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. As the participants noted, the curricula employed in special education settings are the same as those for students without disabilities, and there are no tailored special curricula for students with intellectual disabilities. For example, Participant B stated: *“Our special education programs do not have a tailored special curriculum. Instead, we use the same first-grade curriculum that they use in mainstream elementary schools, with instructions to break it into two parts for each semester”*. This reflected the findings of Strogilos and colleagues (Strogilos, Lim, & Binte Mohamed Buhari, 2021). With regard to differentiated teaching, these authors claimed that the only difference between the non-special needs education curricula and that of special needs curricula is that the content alters according solely to teachers’ views of learner readiness, including changes necessary for students with disabilities (Strogilos *et al.*, 2021).

Another issue raised by the participants of the present study concerned staff issues, as both SENCos noticed that the special education programs were faced with teacher shortages. Participant B explained that the number of teachers at their school was sufficient to oversee only 90% of the students, while Participant A commented: *“Our main problem is not having enough teachers ... We accept new college graduates on a six-month induction program to become qualified teachers. Unfortunately, they drop out of college as soon as they get the chance to become state public school teachers. So our main problem is not being able to retain them”*. Likewise, the participants identified the lack, or absence, of support staff in special education classes, namely teaching assistants and social workers, as a further problem.

Indeed, the data demonstrated that classroom teachers generally work alone, without teaching assistants to support their teaching, and to support their students with their academic and social development. Participant B explained that *“We do not have teaching assistant positions. Since our*

*system is entirely dependent on the class teacher, they are responsible for everything: tuition, food, and the transportation of the students”*. This was in sharp contrast with the ideal situation explained by Participant A: *“In every classroom, there must be a teacher, an assistant teacher, and a specialized social worker. An assistant teacher usually assists the teacher in teaching and guiding the students and takes charge of teaching the class when the principal teacher is absent. The social workers only perform social service tasks and never take on pedagogical tasks”*. Indeed, Vogt and collaborators (Vogt, Koechlin, Truniger, & Zumwald, 2021) found that teaching assistants spend much more time with students with special educational needs than their teachers, illustrating the invaluable nature of teachers’ role for students with special needs.

#### 4. Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, strong arguments were made in favor of SENCOs working with a range of external agencies, as well as with the care providers of children with SEN, to provide a network that benefits the child (Algahtani, 2017). The participants in the present study recognized the need for additional support for such students but also acknowledged the barrier due to insufficient financial support for SEN institutions. Such funding is crucial because, without sufficient financial resources, it is not possible to attract the additional professional staff needed to create an environment conducive to the social model of disability effectively.

In addition, this study identified the need for SENCOs in special education classes. Moreover, the participants recommended that the staff structure of such courses should include a teacher, an assistant, and a specialist social worker. Although the social worker is not involved in the actual teaching, they can support Vygotsky’s concept of learning through communication (for more details regarding Vygotsky’s concept refer to Luzet, 2013). Supported learning means supporting students with disabilities through active learning, experience, physical contact, and visual learning materials. This requires differentiated tasks and the additional time needed for the preparation means that supporting the teachers of SEN students is essential.

The participants in the present study also highlighted the benefits of tailor-made curricula in special education. One of the schools represented in the survey had introduced such a curriculum, although its implementation required resources and a management team willing to foster instruction with



parental support. The participant from this school reported that the parents concerned held little hope for their children's success. Nevertheless, in special education, parents must play an active role in planning and implementing the curriculum because parents and caregivers play an essential role in a child's development as they provide the child with a supportive structure at home, help to reinforce school learning and provide homework support. A significant element of learning is confidence and failure patterns must be broken to boost morale and encourage a desire to learn. According to Vygotsky, as cited in Luzet (2013), as soon as a child enters the zone of proximal development and interacts with a teacher, they are in a space where learning can occur. The child must be confident to ask and answer questions and communicate effectively.

Finally, the participants in the present study recognized the need for better teacher training, reporting the current presence of a gap between teaching theory and practice and the need for more practical training. SENCos in technical schools should also be trained not to feel uncomfortable in teaching students with disabilities; this training might form part of their professional development, but management systems must also be supportive and allow teachers time off to attend courses.

## 5. Conclusions

In Saudi Arabia, special education programs have attracted much attention in the past 15 years. This focus is clear in the growing number of special education services offered in the country in recent years, including special education programs for students with intellectual disabilities. Currently, multiple facets point to the growth of special education, with learning disabilities, gifted/talented students, and autism. These are just a few non-traditional categories of exceptions now covered by the country's special education services. Additionally, rather than an institutional paradigm, a continuous care model has become a viable choice for placement. Finally, unlike two decades ago, these services now reach remote areas of the country and small towns and are no longer confined to big cities.

Although Saudi special education programs have generally made significant progress in recent years, the findings of this study indicated that further investment in special education programs is required to achieve the ideal learning requirements for learners with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, the current increase in special education provision has not been evaluated regarding applicability, outcome quality, or future development.

Therefore, various measures must be taken to ensure that students with intellectual disabilities are provided with all appropriate learning opportunities to reach their highest potential, particularly in settings that claim to provide highly specialized services. Notably, this research is limited in having or choosing few participants, which reduces the chances of generalizing the feelings shared by the teachers interviewed about the threat facing special education in Saudi Arabia to other teacher populations.

The experience of the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, while far from being comprehensive, demonstrates what developing countries must and can do to offer special programs to children with special needs. This study highlighted several key concerns of the SENCo participants regarding developing specific educational programs for students with intellectual disabilities in the Saudi context. Education for people with intellectual disabilities is a significant challenge and requires implementing specific plans and strategies. Thus, the Ministry for Education needs to define the relationship between special education teachers and other teachers before integrating disabled students with their peers. A healthy educational environment will help ensure that all applicable standards are applied, especially regarding the diagnosis and assessment of intellectually disabled students.

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