

# Multidisciplinary Team Approach In Special Education Settings In Saudi Arabia: Perceptions And Issues

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## Abstract

Although there exists a substantial volume of international research which places particular importance on the concept of a multidisciplinary team approach, collaboration within these teams has been patchy. Unfortunately, many special education teachers still struggle in the classroom due to the lack of understanding this approach and a lack of institutional support. In Saudi Arabia there has been acknowledgement of the need to include the multidisciplinary team approach in special education settings, however, implementation has been sparse. Towards understanding poor implementation and use of this approach in Saudi Arabia this paper investigates the issues and understanding of a multidisciplinary team approach, including perceived benefits in a special education setting in Saudi Arabia in both public and private settings. A qualitative case study was conducted via semi-structured interviews with key respondents in public and private education setting in Saudi Arabia. The findings underscored that there is a significant level of understanding of the benefits and the need for institutions to support a multidisciplinary team approach. Accordingly, there are a number of significant implications for the future implementation and practice of multidisciplinary collaboration in the context of Saudi special education settings.

**Keywords:** special education, Collaboration, Multidisciplinary Teams, Saudi Arabia, Students with Disabilities

## 1. Introduction

Multidisciplinary teamwork is internationally recognized as essential for attaining positive learning outcomes in special education settings [1]. Teachers and other professionals within these institutions work together to create a more predictable learning environment and to take specific responsibilities for planning, teaching, and assessment. Such interactive experience is based on mastery of the knowledge behind one's professional practice, and the ability to recognize and respond to content provided by others in their locally distributed knowledge system [2]. In addition, multidisciplinary staff are deployed to support learning and provide their respective services

within special education settings. Furthermore, countries are currently debating whether such programs should be part of regular school support systems, so as to provide targeted support to students in need [3].

The concept of special education for people with intellectual disabilities is an under-researched area in Saudi Arabia and there is a notable lack of research studies in the field of special education in both the English or Arabic language. Additionally, access to some of the earlier work in Saudi Arabia is severely restricted. Thus, this study draws on international literature and aims to incorporate relatively recent international sources to provide a current perspective. An initial search

revealed several research studies on special education settings for a range of disabilities. Therefore, it was decided to conduct a narrower search to focus on more relevant and recent literature, which enabled the researchers to find research studies on special education settings, specifically designed for people with intellectual disabilities.

The focus is on the literature related to education of people with intellectual disabilities and covers topics such as interventions and care. An overall review of research studies shows that there is a wide range of literature on special education, with contributions from a number of authors [4-8]. Hence, research studies directly relevant to people with intellectual disabilities and the special education settings they attend have been given more attention to effectively support the goal of this research. Some policy documents were also used in the literature review [9-11]. Thus, this review considers a wide range of literature, including journals, doctoral-level research, and government reports.

The literature review carried out in this study provided information about the development of the interview questions by defining the areas to be examined. The interview included questions about teaching and learning strategies, the learning environment, the curriculum, parental involvement, teacher professionalism, collaboration with other professionals, leadership and management styles, and resource availability. Addressing these areas in the interview questions helped identify some of the strengths and weaknesses of special education settings for learners with intellectual disabilities. For instance, the researchers were able to check whether the teachers in such special education institutions receive sufficient support, whether there are obstacles that impair the teachers' performance, whether the teachers are sufficiently trained and whether sufficient resources are available. Unfortunately, while Saudi Arabia's special

education policy encourages the practice of multidisciplinary team collaboration theoretically, there is a lack of practical implementation alongside a need to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach.

## **2. Literature Review**

Most relevant research to date has consistently demonstrated that collaboration with other professionals and multidisciplinary services can contribute positively to the quality of support that special education settings provide for students with disabilities. Effective assessments in four special education establishments for students with multiple disabilities in the United States were examined [12]. After observing class collectives and interviewing teachers and other professionals, his results demonstrate that partnerships and collaborative approaches are key factors in guiding people with disabilities into adulthood [12]. This is wholly in accordance with the findings discussed by [13], whose research within special schools for students with disabilities also led them to conclude that teamwork and a collaborative approach is one of the factors contributing to effective implementation of provision.

It is argued that insufficient collaboration between services and multidisciplinary teams is one of the main problems perceived by special educators [14]. They further emphasize the need for clear guidelines to be established to facilitate such collaboration in terms of assigning roles and responsibilities within the department, in order to provide opportunities to support the education of students with disabilities. This echoes the findings of [15], who stresses the importance of collaboration between all special educators and multidisciplinary teams in special education settings, which he states as useful in creating an environment that allows special educators to facilitate the transition for students with disabilities successfully. The importance of building a collaborative multidisciplinary work culture to meet the

individual needs of learners at school and at home has been acknowledged [16].

With regard to Saudi Arabia, [17] states that improving special education in the kingdom requires the involvement of parents, educators, policy makers, and other professionals, and that these parties should consider the critical components of inclusive education. Furthermore, it is important for both general and special education departments in Saudi Arabia to work together to develop skills and strategies in order to implement special education [18]. Similarly, [19] argue that the successful use of technology for special education in Saudi Arabia requires collaboration between professionals, special educators, and administrative support. A recent study by [20] found that a particular barrier to using one of the early intervention programs in special education centers in Saudi Arabia is related to the lack of multidisciplinary team collaboration.

In light of these issues, this article presents primary research findings on the perceptions and issues particularly relating to understanding of the benefits and issues that could be relevant to implementation of

multidisciplinary collaboration for learners with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. Two different special education institutions, one of which is privately operated, and which has introduced multidisciplinary team collaboration, with the other in the public sector without such an approach.

### 3. Research Method

This research article examines in real-world settings how the knowledge derived from the stakeholders can help to bridge the gap between theory and practice in relation to how multidisciplinary collaboration impacts classroom practice and the delivery of educational services in special education settings. Multidisciplinary collaboration is defined as a team of members with different professional backgrounds and skills that can compensate each member who work together in same direction to achieve the same goals [21]. A qualitative approach was chosen in this study because it can be used to construct a detailed and deep understanding of accounts [22]. Qualitative data enables understanding of complex and subtle problems and facilitates the exploration of experiences, beliefs, and interactions, as well as behaviors and relationships. The interview questions are presented below in Table 1.

**Table 1 Interview Questions**

Parameter	Question
External-level focussed questions	What do you think about the special education institute's policies and regulations? What are the most significant things you like/dislike? Why?
	Do you think the staff were well prepared before working in this special education institute for students with intellectual disabilities? Do you think it is appropriate to deliver good quality education? If yes, why? If no, why do you think not?
	What do you think about the resources, equipment and facilities provided to support students with intellectual disabilities? Do you think it is appropriate to deliver good quality teaching? If yes, why? If no, why do you think not?
Institute-level focussed questions	How would you describe the way the school is led? What are the most significant things you like/dislike? Why?

	Can you describe how you are involved in this special education institute for students with intellectual disabilities? What are the most significant things you like/dislike? Why?
	Are there any kinds of co-operation and working with other professional groups? If yes, explain how. If no, why do you think there are not?
	Can you describe the enrolment process for your child with an intellectual disability in this special education institute? What are the most significant things you like/dislike? Why?
Classroom-level focussed questions	What do you think about the number of students with intellectual disabilities in each class? Do you think it is an appropriate size to deliver good quality teaching? If yes, why? If no, why do you think not?
	What do you think about the teaching strategies being used in institutes for students with intellectual disabilities? Do you think they are appropriate to deliver good quality education? If yes, why? If no, why do you think not?
	What do you think about the curriculum implemented in your institute for students with intellectual disabilities? Do you think it is appropriate to deliver good quality education? If yes, why? If no, why do you think not?
	What's your opinion of the special institute? Could anything be done to make it a better school?
	Overall, do you consider that this special education institute meets the needs and requirements of students with intellectual disabilities in Saudi Arabia? Where are the gaps and how could these gaps be filled in order to meet the deficits?
	Is there anything else you would like to add?

This research study was conducted in a city in the western region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This city was chosen due to its status as one of the largest cities in the country and is urban in nature and inhabited mostly by middle- and upper-class families. The researchers chose a specific public and private educational institution because their main goal was to care for children with intellectual disabilities and these two institutes showed a positive attitude towards participating in the research study. As this is a comparative case study, it included these two specific educational institutions for students with intellectual disabilities, one public and one private. The average size of each institution was around 350 enrolled students at the time of the study. Classes at both institutes were similar in terms of average size with about 12 students. According to the Saudi Ministry of Education, both institutions accept and care for children of all school ages up to the age of 18.

In addition, students come from different socio-economic backgrounds. The study was conducted between December 2014 and January 2017.

The interviews were conducted and recorded in Arabic and later transcribed for translation into English and for analysis. The questions were developed based on existing relevant research, and covered areas such as teaching and learning support, and collaboration with professional groups.

#### • Sampling

The sampling consisted of two phases, in the first phase researchers selected initial participants based on their work, age, background, experience, and position in each institute to conduct semi-structured interviews, including school principals, teachers, and parents of children with intellectual disabilities in both institutions. The second phase used a

snowball approach, asking early participants to use their connections and knowledge of who had influence, interests or concerns about the topic under study to identify more participants. A total of 22 participants were interviewed for this research study. Five parents of children with intellectual disabilities, five teachers and one principal from each institute. The parents and teachers were selected in consultation with the school management.

#### 4. Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted to discover a number of themes and sub-themes [23]. The analysis was specifically designed to reveal issues of working in a special education setting and collaborating across teams for best practices. Ethical practices were considered when planning the research; it was important to be mindful that ethical issues have an impact on research design and research methods [24]. It is stated that ethical conflicts are a crucial aspect in qualitative research as it concerns the description of individual and personal experiences [25].

#### 5. Findings and Discussion

The participants in the public educational institution were all male, while the participants in the private educational institution were both male and female. All participating public-school teachers were Saudis, while most participating private school teachers were non-Saudi. In both institutes the participants were mixed, i.e., Saudi and non-Saudi parents.

The issue of a multidisciplinary team approach is an important element that emerges from this study, particularly in relation to the level of instruction, which has a significant impact on the quality of special education provision for students with disabilities.

There was a recognition of the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach. The data shows that participants from private special education settings tend to emphasize the importance of the multidisciplinary approach.

This was explained by the need to ensure that the progress made by children with disabilities continues to achieve the desired outcomes. A teacher commented:

At the institute we have a multidisciplinary team! It is necessary. We need to work as a team to assess the children's progress. (Private special education setting - teacher)

The teachers from the public special education sector all expressed concern about the need for multidisciplinary work in their classes. When describing the situation on a day-to-day level, it is assumed that a multidisciplinary team approach could resolve all the problems that teachers might encounter in the classroom. One participant commented:

The institute should provide students with intellectual disabilities with specialists in psychology, health, and physiotherapy so that we can immediately seek the help of the specialists if we have problems in class. (Public special education setting - teacher)

The head of the public sector special school also highlighted the importance of the multidisciplinary approach. It is evident that, while the role of teachers in the classroom is crucial, the significance of involving multiple professionals in the educational journey of a child with disabilities is equally recognized. The school principal stated:

There is a lack of interdisciplinary work here. The teacher's role is the most important in a classroom because he is able to spot all the problems with a child. But the role of the other specialists is also important. (Public special education setting - principal)

It would appear that the private special education sector both understands and has successfully adopted a multidisciplinary approach. Such services allow practitioners and professionals from a range of different sectors to work in an integrated manner in order to assist students with disabilities and

their families, and also ensure that appropriate professionals are available when needed. In contrast, the data indicates a complete lack of such a multidisciplinary approach in public special education provision. It appears that the problem of a multidisciplinary approach has led to a significant number of disadvantages that have contributed to poor instructional delivery and learning within the public special education setting.

In addition to acknowledgement of benefits there were also examples provided of success using the approach... It is evident that these participants benefitted from such an approach to assist in making an appropriate decision about applications for enrollment at their institute as it later helped in decision making about catering for the needs of students with disabilities. One of the participants reported:

Whenever a new student submits an application, all professionals should conduct a review as a team of the case for evaluation. The team should include specialists in speech therapy, nursing, psychology, social work, the physical department, teachers, and parents. At the end each team member should write an individual report for the administration to decide whether or not we can meet their needs. (Private special education setting - teacher)

Teachers of students with disabilities had a very positive dynamic in their classrooms as they were given access to almost all subjects. It can be concluded that this approach has been helpful in solving possible problems that arise in relation to individual children with disabilities. One interviewee remarked:

But if there is a problem affecting the well-being of the child, we as class teachers try to solve it with the help of our departments, such as the social welfare office or the psychological office or the nursing office and so on.

Each teacher has access to each of these areas. (Private special education setting - teacher)

This view was shared by another private special education teacher, who expressed the belief that a multidisciplinary approach makes teachers' work more practicable. This was mainly attributed to the fact that solving all of the problems was made relatively easier with the assistance of various specialists. One of the teachers remarked:

Communication between the different professionals is important as the presence of the departments helps the children to progress. We discuss among ourselves how this problem arose when we spot it in another child – what we can do and how we deal with it. I believe that their role is very important for the teacher. (Private special education setting - teacher)

One of the private special education teachers described an example of how they could be supported in their own classes by the multidisciplinary team approach, noting that they often encounter difficulties with a variety of children with disabilities that require the intervention of a range of professionals. Collaboration between members of a multidisciplinary team can therefore provide opportunities to develop ways of working together. One of the respondents stated:

It is necessary to divide the duties and the responsibilities. For example, if a teacher has problems with a child, sometimes they turn to the psychiatric ward, which is just one way we can deal with the issue. Sometimes in a class we use up to three pathways with one child. There was a girl who was very good in class but wouldn't listen to me. I felt that I had a problem that I couldn't solve by myself, so I took her straight to the hearing-impaired department. We soon found out that she had a problem with her hearing and needed a device for it. I noticed

another girl's eyes rolled around when she looked at the board or at me. I didn't know if she needed glasses or not, so I sent her to the nurses. (Private special education setting - teacher)

The parents from the private special education establishment also appeared to have recognized the importance of the multidisciplinary team approach, with one father being satisfied not only with the health aspect, but also with the general care of his disabled child by the various specialists. He further explained that parents were kept informed of almost every step taken by the class teacher, as well as the various bodies set up to care for their children. One parent illustrated this as follows:

They even take care of their health. The children are regularly medically examined, and if a child needs to be hospitalized, they let us know and give us a full report of their illness. Thank God we were referred to this institute. (Private special education setting - parent)

Another parent from the private special education sector supported the above view and outlined how a teacher might seek help from relevant specialists, including the parents of a child with disabilities, to deal with specific difficulties within the classroom. Such connections and regular follow-ups help them work together to ensure the progress of a child with disabilities. An interviewee stated:

If they have something to tell us about, or to follow up with them (for example, if there is a psychological problem you go to see the specialist), of course there is a communication and a follow-up. They send us notes at home. All of them communicate with us very well. They call if there is anything we need to know. (Private special education setting - parent)

Despite the positive understanding of the multidisciplinary team approach there is

evidence of a lack of material commitment. Although participants could theoretically draw on a pool of specialists, in reality the teachers only had one psychologist at their disposal. Consequently, the absence of other professionals in the classroom greatly complicated the work of the teacher.. A participant stated:

We have a group of specialists, but only one psychologist works with us. The others never showed up. (Public special education setting - teacher)

There was also a suggestion of a bureaucratic impediment to the implementation of multidisciplinary teams. It was suggested that among the available specialists there was an increasing tendency towards paperwork that seemed disproportionate and unhelpful in meeting the needs of children with disabilities. A parent of a disabled child gave the following example of the problem of excessive documentation in the special public setting:

I see the psychologist, who does nothing helpful other than doing paperwork. Even the speech therapist here needs a plan of work. A student sometimes has only four days in the whole term with him, sometimes nothing. (Public special education setting - parent)

There were also a number of negative comments, including concerns about the lack of proper health care or follow-up care that could impede the progress of children with disabilities. This included being screened by different specialists at the beginning of each school year; however, this was lacking in public special education. It is therefore understandable that the majority of teachers emphasized the importance of diverse professionals and the benefits of teamwork.. One of the teachers remarked:

I would prefer the institute's administration to include both medical and scientific staff. Students with intellectual disabilities need more

care. We do not have health services or physical therapy. For example, by the beginning of the academic year, every student should ideally have a medical record and be checked out by the relevant specialists in all areas: eyes, teeth, digestive system, respiratory system, muscles, bones, everything. There is nothing like that here. Specialists from different disciplines should work together because students have different health problems. (Public special education setting - teacher)

A sense of dissatisfaction was noted among the participating parents of children with disabilities from the public special education sector, who also shared the teachers' views and emphasized the importance of a multidisciplinary approach. One parent pointed out that, despite regular speech therapy, their son is still not getting the support he needs:

I informed the teacher that my son needs regular speech therapy as he suffers from articulation disorders. The child needs at least five sessions, especially if he cannot speak at all. But he will probably attend one or two sessions a week throughout the school year. That is not enough. (Public special education setting - parent)

## 6. Implications of Study

In line with the findings of this research, researchers are increasingly recognizing the learning quality benefits of being supported by thorough classroom-level multidisciplinary teams [26-28], [16], [29-31], [11]. This is largely because special education teachers face many challenges when it comes to accommodating the varied needs of their students. However, it has also been found that working in a team with other professionals, including health workers, social workers, psychologists, counsellors, and families, is a more effective way to support educators in

meeting all children's needs [30]. It is therefore somewhat surprising that no interdisciplinary team approach can be observed in the public-sector support classes for pupils with disabilities, since it can be assumed that the lack of such an approach has a negative effect on the quality of the facilities in these target classes.

It is observed that working with other professionals and multidisciplinary services has many benefits, including improving student learning outcomes through a wide range of easily accessible integrated support services [32].

Emphasizing the need for a multidisciplinary approach is consistent with the findings of [33] on the development and implementation of quality instructional services in Hong Kong schools, which suggest that special educators need functional multidisciplinary teamwork to ensure adequate support for all learners with disabilities in order to achieve effective performance evaluation.

It has been pointed out that failure to adopt such an approach can lead to difficulties, which in turn can negatively impact operational planning [30]. This aligns with research reports from the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau [27], which have made a number of positive comments about the benefits of the multidisciplinary team approach to problem solving as a strategy used by teachers to ensure students' learning progress. Therefore, the contribution of the multidisciplinary team approach needs to be considered, a view supported by [31] who points out that students in a special needs' environment can often have specific difficulties.

The results showed that parents also recognized the benefits of multidisciplinary teams. The importance of the role of parents alongside a multidisciplinary team to positively influence the planning of the provision has been emphasized [30] and insufficient access to multidisciplinary support



has been identified [11]. The neglectiion of an understanding of complex health needs of learners was revealed in the results. Despite the almost unanimous belief that working with other professionals has a positive impact on the lives of students and their families, this approach also suffers from a number of disadvantages, including a lack of information about the complex health needs of students [34]. In reference to the limitations of this research, it included public and private institutions and while comparisons were made there was a limitation in terms of the relevance of public and private institutions and the relevance to the implications of the use of multidisciplinary teams. It is recommended that a future study emphasizes the potential effect the nature of the institution has on the approach to such teams.

## 7. Conclusion

There was a pertinent need to understand the reasons for the sparse implementation of a multidisciplinary approach in special education settings in Saudi Arabia. This study revealed both the attitudes and the issues towards an understanding of such issues which would contribute to policy development in the future. The results of this study indicate that there was a high level of understanding of the benefits of a multidisciplinary approach and how it should be applied, this was the case for both professionals and parents. However, there was acknowledgement of a lack of institutional support. Therefore, there is a need at the institutional level to change attitudes to a multidisciplinary approach.. Establishing a functional, multidisciplinary teamwork approach within public and private special education institutions would ensure adequate support for all learners with disabilities. Therefore, adopting such a multidisciplinary team approach in the special education settings should be a priority for students with disabilities, as this would certainly improve future practice. The data reported here seems to support the notion that, if special education

teachers in the public sector were able to work alongside other professionals to meet these needs, this would solve any potential problems that arise in relation to individual children with disabilities.

- **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank everyone who supported this study.

- **Authors' contributions**

All authors participated in the critical revision of the manuscript and approved the final version.

- **Funding**

Not applicable.

- **Availability of data and materials**

The datasets used and/or analyzed in the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

- **Ethics Declarations**

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Bristol, Graduate School of Education. All methods were performed in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations. Researchers clarified the purpose of the study and the right for participants to opt-out or withdraw at any time without impacting their courses or grades. Researchers obtained informed consent from participants to participate in the study and ensured privacy and confidentiality.

- **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they do not have any conflicts of interests.

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