



# Special Educational Needs provision in mainstream schools in Dubai – is it working?

## A review of the evidence and recommendations for further research

### Introduction

In this paper, we review the published evidence to provide an analysis of how well inclusive education is working in Dubai and the challenges facing public and private schools in making inclusion a reality. The practice of inclusive education – where mainstream classrooms and schools adapt their strategies, curriculums, testing, and teaching methods to cater to the diversity of needs of all learners – has become increasingly popular across the world since the 1990s. However, inclusive education in Dubai, with specific reference to provision for children with special educational needs (SEN), is arguably still in its infancy.

Implementing any new or emerging practice requires amongst other things a commitment to data collection, research and evaluation and academics, researchers and government authorities have therefore all contributed to the evidence base on SEN provision in Dubai. The published evidence to date includes research on attitudes towards disability and inclusion – more specifically, social and cultural attitudes, teachers' attitudes and parents' attitudes. The evidence also includes a number of reviews and evaluations of the implementation of inclusion in mainstream schools, primarily public primary schools. Finally, the Knowledge and Human Development authority (KHDA), which is the regulator and inspection body for private schools in Dubai, has published data and reports about the effectiveness of SEN provision in private schools. We review this evidence and conclude by identifying gaps and outlining further research opportunities that can make a valuable contribution to the evidence base on inclusion in Dubai, and more widely across the UAE.

### 1. Special Educational Needs and inclusion

There is considerable variability in how different countries define SEN. However, in general SEN tend to refer to students with disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities that can make it more difficult for them to learn and who therefore need additional support and adaptations in content and methods (UNESCO, 2011). In Dubai there has also been variability in how the term has been

defined over the years. However, in 2010 the Ministry of Education (MOE) – which oversees both public and private education in Dubai – identified SEN as students from 9 categories (specific learning disabilities, physical and health related disabilities, visual impairment, hearing impairment, speech and language disorders, Autism Spectrum disorders, emotional and behavioural disorders, intellectual disabilities and gifted and talented students) who require 'special teaching approaches, equipment, or instruction within or outside of a regular classroom' (MOE, 2010, p. 58). There are no reliable estimates on the prevalence of SEN or more widely on disability in Dubai. Bradshaw et al (2004) report that the disability prevalence estimates across the UAE are probably similar to the global average of 8-10%.

The notion of inclusive education started to gather global importance following the publication of a number of declarations including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1980), the UNESCO Salamanca Statement (1994) and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Declarations such as these stated that 'schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions' (UNESCO, 1994, p. 1) or 'state parties shall ensure that... children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability' (UN, 2006, p.24). However, inclusion remains a much debated and contested concept. Many have framed the definition of inclusion as ensuring that students with SEN are able to have their needs met in mainstream classrooms (National Centre on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). Others favour a broader definition – for example, 'educational access, support for learning and equal opportunities for all pupils, whatever their age, gender, ethnicity, attainment and background' (Ofsted, 2000, cited in Jones and Smith, 2004, p. 115). Proponents of the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream classrooms stress human rights, equality and social justice and argue that there is enough evidence on the benefits of inclusion for both children with and without SEN (Lipsky and Garner, 1996; Stainback, Stainback and Bunch, 1989). These reported benefits include improved achievement, communication, social skills and positive peer interactions for students with SEN. Benefits also extend to students without SEN and include greater acceptance of people with disabilities and increased self-esteem (Salend and Duhaney, 1999; Bennett, Deluca and Bruns, 1997).

Opponents of inclusion also draw on the evidence base to argue that children with SEN make small gains in an inclusive setting and that teachers aren't equipped or schools aren't structured to support these students. They also argue that the achievement of students without SEN can also suffer as a result of diverted teacher attention and 'watered down' curriculums (Baker, Wang, & Walberg, 1995; Lieberman, 1992). There are also many who believe that full inclusion is not the best course of action

and that services along a continuum are better suited to meeting individual students' needs (Zigmond, 2003; Marston, 1996). However, regardless of these debates, the movement towards inclusive education continues to gather pace globally and in the UAE, as discussed in the next section.

## 2. Development of SEN provision in Dubai

The education system in Dubai is relatively new, with rapid education expansion starting in the 1960's. The public education system was developed to cater primarily to Emirati residents whilst the private education system caters to the diverse population of expatriates. However as of 2014/2015 approximately 60% of Emiratis were enrolled in private schools. There are 79 public schools and 169 private schools in Dubai. Private schools in Dubai offer a range of curricula, including, but not limited to the British curriculum, International Baccalaureate, American, Indian and Iranian curriculums.

The government initially supported people with disabilities, including those with special educational needs, through the provision of financial support and access to government-run centres which used to be referred to as 'Centres for Preparation and Rehabilitation for the Handicapped'. These have more recently changed their names to 'Centres for People with Special Needs' due to pressure from rights-based and advocacy groups (Gaad, 2011).

In the public school system, special classrooms started to open in 1980. These classrooms were based in mainstream schools but were separate from general classrooms and were manned by special education teachers. They were created to cater to students and children who were identified by their teachers to be 'slow learners' or 'under-achievers'. Referrals were also often made by the Ministry of Social Affairs or the Ministry of Health (Gaad, 2011). Special needs teacher training started at the United Arab Emirates University (UAEU) around the same time (Weber, 2012). Approximately ten years later, there was a move towards creating less restrictive educational environments and resource rooms started opening in public mainstream schools – these are 'pull-out' rooms that provide remedial instruction to small groups of students and are also manned by teachers with training in SEN. Children who didn't progress well in these classrooms or those with more severe disabilities tended to be excluded and sent to the aforementioned centres.

There is less information available on the provision for SEN in private schools during this time. Bradshaw et al (2004) have reported that most private schools did not knowingly provide admission to children with special needs because of a lack of funding and/or expertise to provide appropriate support. However, it is likely that, as was the case in public schools, there were many students

enrolled with less obvious SEN such as mild learning disabilities and attention deficit disorders.

Change started to gather pace when in 2006 the UAE issued Federal Law No. 29 aimed at protecting the rights of people with disabilities. Access to equal education opportunities at all educational institutions (public and private) was one of the key rights addressed by the law. The law states that no school in the UAE can refuse admission to a child with SEN. However, the law also provides for the education of children with special needs in a range of settings - general classrooms, special classrooms or in special centres. Some authors have argued that whilst the law provides a framework for inclusion it is not clear whether it 'requires' a school to accommodate children with SEN (Weber, 2012).

Following the introduction of the law, educating children with SEN became the remit of the MOE and public schools with willing principals started piloting inclusion of children with mild or moderate learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. However, the first practical measure by the MOE to implement the law was in 2010, with the introduction of the School for All initiative which included the publication of the 'General Rules for the Provision of Special Education and Programs and Services' for public and private schools. The publication highlighted that *'being educated in regular education classrooms with peers in their age range, in their neighbourhood schools with necessary supports is the optimal environment to meet the educational, social, emotional and vocational needs of individuals with special needs'* (MOE, 2010, p. 7). It went on to state that *'inclusive education means that students with special needs have the opportunity to participate in educational programs and services in the least restrictive environment that is commensurate with their individual strengths and needs. In many cases, the least restrictive environment is the regular education classroom, though not all the time'* (MOE, 2010, p. 14). The Rules therefore defined six different settings for the education of children with SEN along a continuum of most to least restrictive environments ranging from a regular education classroom to a special education centre. Whilst some have argued that such a continuum may be limiting progress others feel that it is necessary whilst the UAE tackles negative attitudes and a lack of expertise and training amongst educators (Alborno, 2013).

The Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA) was set up in 2006 with the remit of regulating private schools in Dubai and started collecting data relating to the quality of SEN provision in private schools approximately three years ago. Moreover, in 2014 the KHDA stated that going forward private school inspection reports would include a judgement of a school's effectiveness SEN provision.

Other recent developments that have shaped the special needs education landscape in Dubai include Law No. 2 of 2014 which was issued to protect the rights of people

with disabilities in the emirate of Dubai. Amongst other things, the law highlighted the cooperation amongst authorities to provide educational opportunities to people with disabilities that are equal to those provided to their peers at all stages. The 'My Community....A City for Everyone' initiative launched in 2013 aims specifically at making Dubai disability friendly by 2020 and outlines a commitment to inclusive education, amongst other objectives. Similarly, the Dubai strategic plan 2021 launched in 2014 clearly outlined a commitment to the inclusion of vulnerable groups in society, in particular people with disabilities.

A number of private and voluntary sector organisations such as Stepping Stones, Indemaj, Dubai Autism Centre and Child Early Intervention Medical Centre (to name just a few) have also been playing an important role in helping schools with the transition to inclusion. Over approximately the last ten years public and private schools in Dubai, and across the UAE, have been engaged in a range of activities to transform their ways of working and to facilitate inclusion. This includes teacher training, infrastructure and facilities modification, partnership working with specialists and local SEN coordinators, investing in IT, equipment, and resources to facilitate learning, setting up resource rooms and/or learning resource centres for pull-out support, evaluating their progress and submitting to inspections.

The implementation of inclusion has for the most part been driven by the legislative, strategic and regulatory context as well as advocacy and pressure by parents and educators. This undoubtedly highlights the important role played by these groups and entities in incentivizing schools to embrace change.

### 3. Attitudes towards disability and inclusion

Attitudes form the very bedrock of communities (Deaux and Philogene, 2001; Fraser and Gaskell, 1990) and therefore the extent to which inclusion can be successful is based in part on attitudes towards disability. Attitudes drive behaviour and in this case direct the type of provision that is put in place for children with SEN. They shape the actions of all stakeholders – teachers, principals, policy makers and parents – and have therefore been explored by a number of academics and researchers in the UAE.

#### 3.1 Social and cultural attitudes towards disability

Two small-scale qualitative research studies with parents and teachers of children with SEN have specifically explored social and cultural attitudes towards disability in the UAE (Gaad, 2004a; Crabtree, 2007). The authors have drawn on the findings from their research and on wider research in other Muslim and/or Middle Eastern countries to report that these attitudes can be characterised by superstitions whereby individuals fear

that disability is hereditary or that contact with a person with a disability can result in disability in one's own family. Similarly, gender norms and roles dictate that early child rearing, educational progress and spiritual development are all the responsibility of women. With the birth of a disabled child there can therefore be an element of 'mother blaming' which can result in the threat of divorce, polygamy, or the evaporation of marriage prospects in the case of unmarried women with a disabled family member (Gaad, 2004a; Crabtree, 2007). These attitudes are also characterised by misconceptions and ignorance about disabilities and how they impact on function and behaviour. For example, intellectual disabilities can be often confused with mental illness, leading to fear and apprehension (Gaad, 2011). Moreover, religion also plays its part in shaping attitudes towards disability. As Gaad (2011) and Crabtree (2007) report, a disabled child can be viewed by parents as a 'test' or 'punishment' from God that requires pious acceptance followed by care and support rather than striving for change.

Attitudes towards disability in the UAE, and more widely in the Middle East, are therefore characterised by stigma and prejudice which can lead to seclusion and isolation for people with disabilities. Moreover, some authors have argued that these attitudes have the most significant impact on disabled women who by virtue of being both female and disabled can experience even greater restrictions on their autonomy, mobility and access to educational and employment opportunities (Weber, 2012; Crabtree, 2007; Abu-Habib, 1997).

#### 3.2 Teachers attitudes towards inclusion

There is a significant amount of international evidence that teachers' attitudes are an important predictor of successful implementation of inclusion in schools (Bacon and Shultz, 1991; Coates, 1989; Semmel et al, 1991). More specifically, the extent to which teachers support and adopt inclusive pedagogy, and therefore are motivated to differentiate teaching strategies and make the necessary accommodations and modifications, has an impact on children with SEN being able to achieve improved educational outcomes in general education classrooms (Garvar-Pinhas and Schmelkin, 1989; Sharma, Florin, Lowerman & Earle, 2006). It is therefore not surprising that much of the research conducted in the UAE over the last ten years has focused on exploring teachers attitudes towards inclusion.

Three studies have focused specifically on the attitudes of pre-service teachers or teachers in training, arguing that it is imperative that attitudes are shaped early as negative attitudes can become entrenched and therefore resistant to change (Al Zyoudi, Al Sartwai and Dodin, 2011; Bradshaw, 2009). However, most studies have focused on exploring the attitudes of general teachers, at times comparing these with the attitudes of special education teachers or pre-service teachers (Gaad and Khan, 2007;

Alahbabi, 2009; Alborno and Gaad, 2014).

There has been some variability in the findings across these studies. A few studies indicate that teachers – general and pre-service – tend to have negative attitudes towards inclusion (Al Zyoudi, Al Sartwai and Dodin, 2011; Al Ghazo and Gaad, 2004; Gaad, 2004b). For example, a survey of 300 pre-service teachers in the UAE and in Jordan found that the UAE pre-service teachers had a mean ‘belief in inclusion’ score of just 21.66 (out of 40) compared to a much more positive score of 38.90 for Jordanian pre-service teachers (Zyoudi, Al Sartwai and Dodin, 2011). Another older study by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) found a mean ‘belief in inclusion’ score of 3.2 out of 5 for a sample of 152 general teachers in Abu Dhabi – a fairly neutral score. Two older and more small-scale qualitative studies by Gaad (2004a; 2004b) also found that some teachers were opposed to the idea of inclusion. These attitudes are invariably shaped by the social and cultural attitudes discussed above. For example, Arif and Gaad (2008) report that insensitive language such as ‘retarded’ was often used by staff in schools and even included in records paperwork sent to parents. Additionally, some pre-service teachers have reported experiences of stigma and being labelled ‘teachers of the insane’ or ‘teachers of morons’ (Gaad, 2004c).

A number of other factors have an impact on the extent to which teachers support or oppose inclusion in mainstream schools. For example, six studies (quantitative and qualitative) reported that the **type and nature of disability** or special need has a direct impact on teachers’ attitudes. For the most part, they are less supportive of including children with intellectual disabilities, severe learning disabilities or with behavioural disorders as they find them to be too ‘disruptive’ to the classroom or feel ill-equipped to meet their educational needs (Bradshaw, 2009; Gaad and Khan, 2007; Gaad, 2004a; Gaad, 2004b; Alghazo and Gaad, 2004; Alborno and Gaad, 2014).

There also appears to be a difference in attitudes based on **years of teaching and training relating to inclusion**. For example, a relatively older survey by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) found that teachers with fewer years of experience are less supportive of including children with SEN in mainstream classrooms, which indicates that those with fewer years of teaching experience feel ill-equipped to manage a classroom characterised by diverse learning needs. Conversely, Alborno and Gaad (2014) found that younger teachers were in fact more supportive than older teachers, perhaps because of their exposure to inclusive policies in their training years which had not been available during the time of Alghazo and Gaad’s survey in 2004. This could indicate that training relating to inclusion during pre-service years is now a better predictor of support for inclusion than number of years on the job.

Similarly, **grade level** also has an impact on support,

with Alahbabi (2009) reporting that based on a survey of 714 teachers (special education and general education teachers) across the UAE, elementary school teachers are more likely than high school teachers to support inclusion, perhaps because the greater focus on subject matter and content at the high school level can potentially make adaptations and modifications more difficult.

There are also studies that indicate a **‘conditional’ belief** in inclusion. That is, teachers report that they do in fact support the ‘philosophy’ or ‘ethos’ of inclusion, but do not feel they currently have the knowledge or skills necessary to implement inclusion in their classrooms. In particular, they feel ill equipped in behaviour management, adapting teaching styles and modifying testing and assignments and also feel that large class sizes and heavy workloads can hinder the inclusion children with SEN. They also report a sense of ‘fear’ and ‘apprehension’ which is linked to the potential repercussions of failure and blame (Gaad and Khan, 2007; Gaad 2004b; Alborno and Gaad, 2014). Teachers’ belief in inclusion is therefore conditional on ensuring that the challenges arising from limited expertise and lack of adequate support and resources are resolved. More specifically, they feel that ongoing professional development, support from specialists and access to learning tools, equipment and materials will make them more supportive of including children with SEN (Anati, 2012; Anati, 2013). It is interesting to note that many of the findings relating to a ‘conditional’ belief in inclusion are from more recent studies (Anati, 2013, Alborno and Gaad, 2014; Alborno, 2013) which could potentially indicate a positive shift in attitudes towards inclusion amongst teachers.

### 3.3 Parental attitudes towards inclusion

As is the case with teachers, the attitudes of parents of children with SEN are shaped by cultural and social factors as well as concerns about expertise and resources. Gaad (2004b) in her review of the inclusion of eight children with SEN in primary schools found that, in line with cultural attitudes, a few of the parents have very real concerns that their children will face bullying and stigma. Cultural attitudes also reinforce the idea of seclusion to the extent that some parents believe that enrolment in special classrooms in mainstream schools *is* in fact inclusion (Gaad, 2004a). Others would rather accept low achievement or performance by their children rather than experience the stigma associated with identification of SEN. Three studies (Alahbabi, 2009; Alborno and Gaad, 2014; Gaad 2004b) report that some parents are wary of inclusion as they fear that their children will not get the one-to-one attention they need in general classrooms. Similarly, they also have doubts about whether general teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to manage and educate their children.

On the other hand, there are some parents who are supportive of inclusion and are relieved that their

children have been accepted into mainstream schools. Gaad (2004b) reports that for some parents support for inclusion is often a result of the positive changes that they have seen in their children, for example an increase in confidence, improved social skills or an enhanced vocabulary. The attitudes of parents with children without special needs also tend to vary. According to qualitative research by Gaad (2004b) and Alborno and Gaad (2014) some are supportive whereas others are concerned that inclusion of children with SEN will lead to classroom disruption and impact negatively on the educational achievement of their own children. Whilst the research conducted has been too small scale to draw any conclusions about levels of support for inclusion amongst parents, it is clear that they could benefit from clear information, guidance and reassurance that the learning and well-being needs of their children – both with and without SEN - will be met.

## 4. The implementation of inclusion - how well has it worked?

### 4.1 Public schools - the quality of SEN provision

A number of studies have reviewed and evaluated the extent to which inclusion has been successfully implemented in public schools (Alghawi, 2007; Arif and Gaad, 2008; Alborno, 2013; Alborno and Gaad, 2014; Elhoweris and Alsheikh, 2010). Most of these studies have focused on primary schools. For example, Alghawi (2007) evaluates the implementation of inclusion at schools that participated in the MOE pilot inclusion programme and Alborno (2013) reviews schools that signed up to the MOE School for All initiative. Other authors have explored specific aspects of inclusion such as testing modifications (Elhoweris and Alsheikh, 2010). Findings have indicated that these schools have faced a number of challenges which hinder the inclusion and educational progress of children with SEN whilst also displaying areas of progress and promising practice.

**Curriculum modification** has been identified as one of the key areas of concern. As it stands, there is no defined curriculum for children with SEN or a guidebook on curriculum modification. A lack of expertise means that many teachers often do not feel confident in making decisions based on particular needs of children with SEN. What this means in practice is that more difficult or denser aspects of the curriculum are simply deleted or omitted by teachers. These deletions are based on teacher preference or student willingness rather than a systematic appraisal of content suitability for children with SEN (Alghawi, 2007; Gaad and Arif, 2008; Alborno, 2013). Teachers at some schools that were part of the MOE pilot inclusion programme reported that they had failed to receive training by SEN supervisors as had been planned and therefore didn't have the know-how needed to modify the curriculum. Other teachers reported that

modifying the curriculum required too much effort given their already heavy workload (Alghawi, 2007; Arif and Gaad, 2008).

In some schools that were involved in the MOE pilot inclusion programme there is also evidence of **inappropriate placements** where children with SEN are placed in grade levels that do not suit their needs or abilities. Often children of different ages and with very different abilities are placed in the same class (Alghawi, 2007). Similarly, the needs of children with SEN are often not properly assessed which can lead to unsuitable Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and therefore limited educational progress (Alghawi, 2007; Arif and Gaad, 2008).

Teachers have also reported a **lack of sufficient support from specialist staff**. More specifically, there are not enough teaching aides supporting children with SEN in mainstream classrooms. At times this has meant that Special Education Needs Coordinators take on this role and Alborno and Gaad (2014) have argued that this can in fact be more stigmatising and exclusionary since these professionals aren't appropriately trained to support children in the classroom. Additionally, a number of schools also report that they do not have enough access to Occupational Therapists and Educational Psychologists and that there are often limits on the hours provided by Speech and Language Therapists (Alghawi, 2007; Alborno and Gaad, 2014). A lack of sufficient support from these specialists can greatly hinder the progress made by children with SEN.

Another key area of concern is inconsistency in the use of appropriately **differentiated teaching and testing strategies** employed by teachers. As discussed earlier a number of studies have found that teachers do not feel they have the confidence or skills necessary to educate a 'diverse-ability' classroom. Moreover, the continued focus on rote learning and memorisation in schools particularly disadvantages children with particular types of SEN like communication disorders or intellectual disabilities (Alborno and Gaad, 2014). The MOE and KHDA are driving a shift from such learning towards critical thinking and problem solving but such systemic change is likely to take time. Other studies have found that teachers do in fact employ a range of teaching strategies including question and answers, group activities, and multimedia presentations. However, this tends to be coupled with a lack of lesson planning or course material differentiation to suit the needs of children with SEN (Alborno, 2013). Similarly, many researchers have observed that teachers particularly struggle with adopting effective behaviour management strategies. Additionally, even when they do employ such strategies they report that these strategies don't tend to work with all students (Arif and Gaad, 2008; Alborno, 2013; Gaad and Khan, 2007). Elhoweris and Alsheikh (2010) report that teachers' tend to favour using testing modifications that can be used with all

students rather than those that are specific to students' individual needs. For example, teachers are most likely to use modifications such as special lighting, including well-spaced items or oral reading of test directions. They are less likely to use modifications such as offering breaks, changing the schedule or using computers for answering questions, even though these modifications could be very beneficial students with a range of learning disabilities.

There is also some evidence to indicate that although public schools have access to **assistive technology** (Anati, 2012; Alborn 2013) aimed at supporting engagement and learning, the use of these resources by some teachers remains limited. Teachers do not have the training needed to learn how to integrate these resources into lesson planning and teaching strategies. Moreover, some teachers also report a degree of fear and apprehension associated with damaging these items as a result of misuse (Alborn, 2013).

One of the key factors contributing to the challenges experienced above is the training and professional development received by teachers. In particular, teachers feel that the training provided by MOE as part of the School for All initiative was too theoretical with not enough focus on practical strategies for class management and differentiating teaching methods (Alborn, 2013). Moreover, the inevitable outcome of these challenges is that teachers and schools often revert to exclusionary practices. For example, children with SEN tend to spend a considerable time in resource rooms with special education teachers. General teachers often report that spending time in resource rooms and receiving more one-on-one attention from teachers with the relevant skills and knowledge in fact enables children with SEN to 'catch up' and then return to mainstream classrooms. However, Alborn and Gaad (2014) argue that even when *'students are physically present in mainstream classes, academically they are not necessarily participating and engaging in classroom dynamics.'* (Alborn and Gaad, 2014, p. 243)

On the other hand, there is also good progress on some aspects of inclusion. There is evidence to indicate that the **philosophy of inclusion** and a belief in its value and benefits is starting to take hold amongst some educators in the UAE. Alborn and Gaad (2014) in their review of inclusion practices at three schools found that disability awareness was present amongst the educators and there was no use of insensitive terminology. Moreover, there was evidence of non-disabled students providing their disabled peers with help and support both inside and outside the classroom. The head teachers demonstrated a commitment to inclusion, encouraging differentiated teaching strategies amongst teachers, actively monitoring the progress of students with SEN and were therefore the driving force for the implementation of inclusion. Some teachers also reported that although the training provided by MOE did have its drawbacks, it did however serve to ameliorate some of the 'psychological barriers'

to inclusion. It provided them with an awareness about the benefits and principles of inclusion, assuaged their fears and apprehensions thereby making them more accepting of inclusive education. It also educated them about different types of disabilities and their associated learning needs. Schools also tried to create a community of awareness, for example by distributing leaflets to parents and students to explain the vision of the School for All initiative. Finally schools that took part in the School for All initiative have also demonstrated some success in improving the physical accessibility of schools through making modifications to the infrastructure and facilities (Alborn, 2013; Alborn and Gaad, 2014).

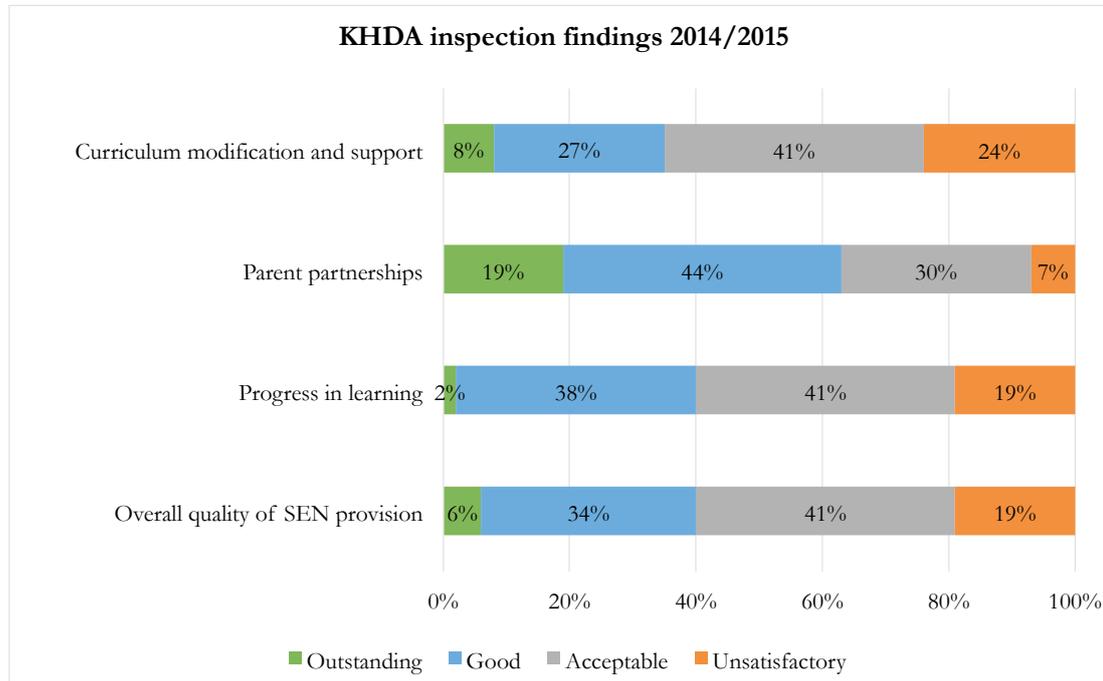
Some schools have also demonstrated some good practice in **engaging with parents**. They have a welcoming induction programme with workshops with parents with children with and without special needs, individual parent meetings and welcoming assemblies. They also often operate an open door policy which can result in the speedy resolution of any potential problems. However, educators also reported that engaging parents can be difficult and that there is significant variation based on background, age and family size. For example, younger mothers tended to be more involved compared to older mothers and those with larger families have less time for engagement (Alborn, 2013; Alborn and Gaad, 2014).

## 4.2 Private schools - the quality of SEN provision

There has been much less research conducted about private schools and most of the data and information relating to the quality of SEN provision in private schools has been published by the KHDA (2013; 2015). As mentioned earlier, in February 2014 the KHDA released new guidelines and an inspection handbook for private schools which stated that going forward private school inspection reports would include a judgement of a school's effectiveness of SEN provision. More specifically, the handbook states that schools inspections will focus on: the schools admission procedures; identification of students' SEN; teaching of students with SEN; monitoring strategies; attainment of students with SEN, the involvement of parents; and the leadership of the provision for SEN. Evidence is gathered from a range of sources including lesson observations, scrutiny of student records, discussions with teachers, parents and students and analysis of IEPs and assessment information.

Most recently the KHDA has published an in-depth investigation of SEN provision in their 2013 Annual Report as well as key findings from its 2014-2015 inspections. They report that on the whole schools offering the British curriculum or the International Baccalaureate tend to have the highest number of children identified with SEN. Children in these schools also tend to make the best progress in most key subjects (KHDA,

2013). The chart below highlights the performance of schools with respect to SEN provision and is based on inspections of 143 schools in 2014-2015:



*Adapted from KHDA (2015) 7 years on...inspecting for school improvement: A collaborative journey*

The chart illustrates that the weakest aspect of support in private schools is **curriculum modification and support**, with almost a quarter (24%) providing unsatisfactory provision and only about a third of schools doing this well (35%). The KHDA (2013) reports that schools with insufficient curriculum modification also offer suffer from a lack of training and support for teachers and low levels of understanding about SEN. On the other hand, schools which do demonstrate some success with curriculum modifications tend to benefit from teacher training and the involvement of parents, students and teachers in planning for provision.

The chart also illustrates that less than half of students (40%) with SEN are demonstrating good or outstanding **progress in learning**. In schools where progress is better it is not surprising that there is also accurate identification, a modified curriculum and support from specialists who play an active role in boosting the development and progress of each child (KHDA, 2013).

As the chart demonstrates, schools do tend to **work well with parents**, with approximately two thirds (63%) doing this well. More specifically, schools with the UK or IB curricula are involving parents at a good or even outstanding level. Parents are involved from the start – in admission procedures, in the development of IEPs, in the support of their children and on through higher education.

Although the law forbids schools from denying children

with SEN **admission**, many parents still struggle to find a place for their children. As it stands there are no government subsidies or funds provided to private schools

which means that the resources and support needed to support students with SEN can make the admission of these students prohibitively expensive for many schools. Gaad (2011) reports that because private schools tend to be profit making businesses inclusion hasn't historically been a top priority. These schools are also often concerned with scoring and ranking in league tables, in order to remain

competitive, and therefore worry that the admission of children with SEN may weaken their academic reputation. According to the KHDA schools often have clauses that allow them to reject applications from students with SEN (KHDA, 2013). This has also been echoed in research conducted by a consultancy called WhichSchoolAdviser (2014) which reports that some schools 'overinflate' the number of registered students with SEN by including categories such as dyslexia or even English as an Additional Language in order to reject applications.

The KHDA also reports that the **identification** of students with SEN is an area of weakness amongst private schools. Both inaccurate identification and a failure to identify SEN is reported and is often linked to a lack of expertise amongst the SEN team in the school as well as unclear policies on inclusion. In practice this means that students do not progress in learning because they don't receive the support they need.

Another key challenge faced by private schools tends to be access to **specialist staff**. This refers to access to occupational therapists, audiologists, educational psychologists and speech and language therapists. The employment of specialist staff tends to be concentrated in schools that are providing outstanding support for students overall. Similarly, there is a lack of sufficient and appropriately trained **learning support assistants or 'shadow' teachers**. These support roles are funded by parents and there tends to be a great deal of variability in their quality and experience. This is partially because there are no legal guidelines or standardised qualification

requirements for teaching assistants. In practice these assistants can often end up being more disruptive than helpful in the classroom. For example, teachers can end up abdicating their teaching responsibilities to these assistants or students with SEN can become over dependent on them (KHDA, 2013; WhichSchoolAdviser, 2014)

Finally, the KHDA (2013) report that a key factor that drives successful inclusion in schools is **leadership and commitment** to the philosophy of inclusion. They report that the minority of schools who have in fact demonstrated excellent provision for students with SEN all have one thing in common – principals and governors who support the admission of students with SEN and believe in the benefits associated with inclusion for the whole school community.

## 5. Conclusions and research recommendations

The evidence presents a varied picture of the quality of SEN provision in Dubai. Both public and private schools are clearly struggling with some aspects of SEN provision, most notably, curriculum modification, differentiating teaching methods and access to specialist staff and trained support staff. On the other hand, there is also positive evidence that some schools are making good progress in engaging with parents and creating an ‘ethos’ of inclusion. It is important to note that Dubai, and the UAE more broadly, represents a unique context where the pace of social, economic and demographic change over the last few decades has undoubtedly put a lot of pressure on the education sector. The sector has not only had to rapidly expand its infrastructure but also respond to demands for new and varied teaching methods and curriculums and ambitious achievement in tests such as PISA and TIMSS. It is teachers and principals who have had to bear the brunt of these changes and have in effect been asked to transform their ways of thinking and working. Whilst there is clearly a need for improvement in schools’ inclusionary practices, the transformation from complete exclusion characterised by special centres to efforts by most schools to offer at least some degree of inclusion over the last 30 years represents a significant achievement and should be celebrated. Moreover, the fact that many teachers are now expressing a ‘conditional’ belief in inclusion is particularly encouraging as this could potentially indicate a shift in attitudes – and attitudes towards disability and support for inclusion are a key part of providing children with SEN with a quality education.

The evidence base reviewed is also varied in terms of focus and coverage. There is very little literature published on inclusion in private schools and hence data and reports published by the KHDA are the only source of information on inclusion in this sector. In the public sector, most research is focused on primary schools and less is therefore known about inclusion

in secondary schools and the associated challenges and quality of provision. Much of the literature has focused on educators’ attitudes towards inclusion and the challenges facing inclusion in the UAE. Whilst this is understandable given that the implementation of inclusion is in its formative stage, it also means that there has been little work conducted on promising practice and successful implementation. Similarly, a significant amount of the literature was published many years ago, as early as 2004, and before Federal Law no. 29 was issued in 2006 and there may have been some progress in terms of implementation and attitudes. Some of the literature, particularly focusing on cultural or parental attitudes, has tended to be quite small in scale and often draws on wider regional work to draw strong conclusions which need to be validated through further research with larger and more diverse samples. Further research is critical to developing the evidence base on inclusion and contributing to the development of the sector. Our recommendations for such research are outlined below.

### 5.1 Identifying emerging good practice

There is a plethora of evidence on the challenges facing and barriers to the inclusion of children with SEN in mainstream schools in the UAE. However, there is little evidence that explores what good practice looks like in the local context. There is an urgent need to better understand how schools can tackle the challenges they are facing in making inclusion a reality. Moreover, identifying the strategies, processes and systems employed by schools that have been successful in providing children with SEN with a quality education is also important. Harnessing this learning – across public, private, primary, and secondary schools - will be key to ensuring sector-wide progress. The learning from this research, by providing guidance, practical tips and stakeholder recommendations will therefore be invaluable to schools and policy makers. The Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government is currently conducting research on this topic and the findings will be published in 2016.

### 5.2 Understanding the role of social and cultural attitudes towards disability

The evidence relating to social and cultural attitudes towards disability specifically in the UAE is limited and small scale in nature. Moreover, this literature posits that these attitudes can be stigmatising and discriminatory and can play an important role in shaping educational provision for children with SEN. There is therefore a need for a larger and more in-depth study that aims to better understand *what* attitudes towards disability are, *how* these are distributed across the population, *why* people hold these attitudes, and *how* these impact on inclusion of people with disabilities in schools and in wider society. A combination of in-depth interviews with key individuals that work closely with people with disabilities and a representative population survey would

constitute a robust research design for this project. The evidence collected will be key to identifying how best to motivate schools leaders to embrace inclusion, ensure teachers adopt differentiated teaching methods and engage parents in their children's education. It will also be key in contributing to the wider disability rights agenda.

### 5.3 Admission into private mainstream schools – challenges facing parents of children with SEN

There is some evidence to indicate that parents of children with SEN are facing challenges in gaining admission into mainstream private schools. Much of this evidence tends to be anecdotal, often reported in newspaper articles and small scale research studies. The evidence indicates that these challenges are varied and can relate to lack of resources and support, unclear school admission policies and competition between schools. There is therefore an urgent need to better understand the nature and scale of the problem of admission facing parents of children with SEN. Exploring parents' needs, rights and expectations of education for their children and contrasting this with their experiences of seeking admission will help identify gaps and areas for immediate action. Additionally, it is equally important to identify how private schools can be incentivized to facilitate admission and role of different

stakeholders in making this a reality. This will enable policy makers to act swiftly to ensure that this vulnerable group of children do not face permanent exclusion.

### 5.4 Action research with teachers

The evidence base is clear that teachers are struggling to modify curriculums, adapt their teaching and testing strategies and manage behaviour. Whilst the training received is reported to have been useful, it has also been critiqued as too theoretical. What is needed is a more practical, applied and reflective approach to teacher training and here action research – the use of evaluative and investigative research methods by practitioners to diagnose problems and develop practical solutions – has a potentially valuable role to play. Action research has a rich history of success in the educational sector and has also specifically been used by teachers in the context of inclusion (Noffke and Somekh, 2009). A pilot study designed around a small group of teachers from a handful of schools will be useful in exploring whether the wider roll-out of such an approach would be useful in improving practice. Key to the design of this study will be practical support offered by a research team, in order to train teachers, design and facilitate practice share sessions and support evidence collection.

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## About Mohammed Bin Rashid School of Government

Launched in 2005 under the patronage of His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai as the first research and teaching institution focusing on governance and public policy in the Arab world. The School aims to support good governance in the UAE and the Arab world, and build future leaders through an integrated system offering education and training programs, as well as research and studies. The School's operations are founded on global best practices developed in collaboration with the Kennedy School at Harvard University, and it is considered a unique model for academic institutions in that it focuses on the practical side of governance. The School also collaborates with several government and private institutions both regionally and internationally. The overall design and implementation of training programs is built on the foundation of scientific thought and is inspired by the reality of Arab public administration and with a view to addressing the issues and helping future leaders meet the challenges facing public administration in various parts of the Arab world. The School also organizes international and regional conferences and specialized workshops, and holds forums to facilitate the exchange of ideas and knowledge between Arab region and the world.

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