

Improving Special Educational Needs Access in Dubai's Private Schools

By Fatma Belrehif

ABSTRACT

The provision for students with special educational needs in schools in Dubai is in a developmental stage as it seeks to meet identification, pedagogic and access challenges. Recent inspections by Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau [DSIB] of the provision for students with special educational needs indicate significant variation in the capacities of schools to meet these challenges consistently and in accordance with international expectations. This policy brief explores the access, identification of the special education needs of students and the quality of the provision in place now and how the future might be shaped for these students across all curricula in Dubai.

Introduction

Every parent wants the best for their child. When a child has a special educational need, the educational journey of that child presents challenges other parents do not confront. Globally, the challenges faced by students with special educational needs, their parents and the range of other stakeholders linked to their life journey, have been and continue to be very significant.

Families of students with special educational needs in Dubai face difficulties to work effectively with educational providers, other special needs professionals and other families and students. Their aim is to achieve acceptable, or hopefully better, levels of academic progress across the range of skills such students require to function appropriately in their lives.

Regulators endeavour to understand these needs and match best international practice and expectation in order to assure the quality of provision and outcome deserved by these children. This process requires productive relationships between families and providers based on an awareness of and commitment to fulfilling the needs of these students.

Educational providers face the challenges these needs present in the classroom and the playground. The degree of variability of understanding, provision and outcome across the educational landscape of Dubai is a major concern in the pursuit of successful outcomes for these students.

Parents, schools and regulators all have a role to play in helping students with special educational needs progress in their education to the best of their ability. In Dubai, some gains have been made in advancing the issue of special educational needs but much more needs to be done.

Special Educational Needs - Internationally Recognised Categories

"The guiding principle is that schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, emotional, linguistic or other conditions." (UNESCO 1994) Special Educational Needs (SEN):

"Educational needs that are different from those of the majority of students. They include those who need additional support or challenge in their learning." (Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau, 2011)

Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau [DSIB] inspected the quality of provision for special educational needs according to six areas.



In line with international expectation and convention, these areas are:

Type of Need	Compiled from a range of international best practice and using the DSIB definition and UAE School for All guidance.
Behavioural, Social, Emotional	Students whose behaviour presents a barrier to learning.
Sensory and Physical	Blind students or those with partial sight Deaf students or those with partial hearing Students who are deaf and blind
Medical Conditions or Health Related Disability	Medical conditions may lead to an associated 'special need.' These conditions may be temporary but are more likely to be ongoing and include such illnesses as asthma, diabetes allergies.
Communication and Interaction [This does not include students with additional language needs.]	Students who cannot speak well enough to be understood or who stutter or have a speech impediment such as a lisp. Students who find it difficult to respond to language and so cannot follow simple instructions or make themselves understood. Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a range of communication disorders related to students who find it difficult to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • communicate with others; • understand social behaviour ; • think and behave flexibly.
Learning	Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) - students who have specific difficulties with any of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reading, writing, spelling • using numbers • writing General Learning Difficulty 1 - students' whose attainment is well below expected levels in all or most areas of the curriculum.
Gifted and Talented	Gifted and Talented – students who demonstrate outstanding ability or aptitude in one or more areas of creative or academic achievement.
Disabled	Disabled students are those who have any permanent or temporary condition resulting from illness or congenital disorder.

Key Stakeholders

The existence of a very wide range of perspectives on how best to meet the requirements of students with special educational needs has been well documented. The intentions, demands and expectations of different stakeholders are at the core of understanding the way forward. Meaningful educational experiences and qualifications for children whose profiles do not fall within regular boundaries can take place when these different perspectives are taken into consideration.

The Student

It is the adults in the lives of these students who feel the need to categorise, make budgetary allocations

for resources, allow time in the timetable for support from another teacher or build formal structures, committees and "policies". Students with special educational needs see their world through their unique lens, just about as clearly as every other child sees the world from their specific standpoint. If they have a particular need, then they want to get on with their education, be challenged and supported as necessary and make progress they can celebrate and build upon. Like every other student these children want to learn, play and work with their peers, enjoy what technology and practical resources can do for them as part of their learning journey. They want to make progress.

“Hanna is autistic. She compares herself in issues that all kids face such as playing at recess. By demystifying her autism, she underscores the many things she and her schoolmates have in common, thus prompting a typical child to think, «Hey, I experience that, too!» [Joanna Keating-Velasco, 2007]

A key challenge for us all in Dubai is to remember the fact that it is the adults that are identifying the need in terms of difference. A student with a special educational need does not see himself or herself as radically different from any other student. For some, this is sometimes overlooked. Every child or student has unique needs that would benefit from personalised learning. It is the nature of the need that requires more detailed input in terms of inclusion, pedagogy, resourcing, legislation or planning.

The Parent

The role of the parent of a child with a special educational need is paramount. Their influence on the quality of their child's life journey cannot be overstated. The hope of a parent of child with a special educational need is no less than any other parent. However, it is defined by a much broader range of factors such as constant identification, assessment, explanation and justification by the stance of other stakeholders. This rightly justifies parents' suspicion and confusion of how best to ensure their children can go to a school and make good progress just like any other child. The development of the quality of their expectation for their child travels from identification through access to individual lesson outcome. Parents spend too much trying to access education for their child with special educational needs while other parents can focus on the quality of the education provided. It is a widely held belief that parents of students with special educational needs have to cope with significantly lower expectations of outcomes for their children. This is not because they have unreasonably high expectations. It is because they are sometimes just so glad to see their child make their way through a school door wearing the same uniform as other children.

“Most parents do not perceive their schools present curricula as meeting their child's intellectual needs.”[Feldhusen& Kroll, 2010]

What happens inside that door can, at times, not be of the quality that child and parent can reasonably expect and deserve.

The School

Schools typically play a hugely central role in the journey of a student with special educational needs. When performing well, in accordance with international expectations, this role begins with

- A warm and sincere welcome, and continues with;
- The strongest possible commitment to the placement of the student at the heart of the process and journey that will support and achieve the greatest possible outcomes for him/her
- An accurate and detailed assessment of the need
- An individually tailored plan, an Individual Education Plan [IEP], that maps out the short, medium and long-term intentions
- Regular feedback on progress made and subsequent adjustment to the level of expectations
- Key, specific advice and guidance from advisors and professionals
- Purposeful collaboration between the specialist teacher and the class teacher and other experts on how best to guarantee specific and appropriate outcomes for the student as he/she enters each learning opportunity
- Regular and constructive assessment of progress, living the commitment to the student as being at the heart of the journey in terms of involvement, participation and communication
- Modification of the school's curriculum to enable the child to proceed in a manner that embodies the principles of life-long learning
- Effective cross-phase co-operation that maximizes the skills of the student in every subject and learning experience

- High-quality use of the widest range of quality resources that enable the learner with special educational needs to be as independent, collaborative and participative as possible in the learning objective set out in each lesson.

When school performance does not fall within the tramlines of international best practice, some or all of the above do not occur. This means they do not fulfill their promise to parents and students with special educational needs. Such schools face the challenge of incompetence and irrelevance to the student they must, as part of their mission statement, care most about.

The costs to be borne by schools as they seek to provide high-quality learning opportunities for students with special educational needs are not insignificant. The training of personnel to meet the wide variety of educational needs of these students and the use of the specialised resources is not always available or of sufficiently quality. Dubai Schools Inspection Bureau [DSIB] expects schools to enable students with special educational needs to achieve their potential. Schools have to demonstrate high and improving levels of capacity in their management of these students.

The Government & Society

“The special needs do not constitute intrinsically an obstacle hindering from applying to enroll, join or enter any educational institution whether governmental or private.” (Federal Law No.29, UAE, 2006). Children with special educational needs cannot be prevented from enrolling in a private school on the basis of that need.

Dubai Government has an acute interest and commitment to the improvement in provision and outcomes for students with special educational needs. As a government regulator, the Knowledge and Human Development Authority [KHDA] plays a number of key roles in determining quality, awareness, inclusion and understanding of international standards in relation to students with special educational needs. KHDA seeks to support parents and schools in bridging the gaps in expectations, and outcomes.

Societally and culturally, the special educational needs landscape in Dubai is diverse. Student progress and benefit can often be hindered by some cultural and traditional perspectives that remain unaware of the potential and achievable gains. If children can be supported through collaborative stakeholder engagement and specific planning and

learning opportunities that focus on the substantial skill sets possessed by each individual student, irrespective of the need with which they present, these gains can be realised. This is another clear reason why the stakeholders must concentrate on the single substantive issue: maximising the learning and skills development outcomes for the student with special educational needs at every available opportunity.

The Specialist Provider [Non-school based]

Dubai has ample supply of private, specialist centres, not schools, that seek to assess, diagnose, construct IEPs and support families of students with special educational needs. When best practice is in place through such centres, close collaboration is evident between it, the school and the family. The student becomes empowered through accurate diagnosis, systematic and graduated planning, to become more participative in lessons, celebratory of any achievement and conscious of the building blocks created in order for the next step to be achieved. Schools find confidence in their capacity to implement the guidance provided. Parents see positive change in learning and living experiences for their child.

However, the impact of this collaboration between school, parents and specialist providers can at times be inconsistent and variable in quality.

KHDA Inspection Findings on Provision for Students with Special Educational Needs in Dubai

During the 2011-12 inspection cycle, DSIB inspectors evaluated a range of issues influencing the progress of those students identified by the schools with special educational needs. DSIB inspectors found that a majority of schools were weak in the identification of and provision for specific special needs. The needs of too many students were missed in schools where ensuring these needs were met was not prioritised. Internationally, typical proportions of students with special educational needs as part of the entire school-going population are significantly higher (OECD, 2005). This indicates a weakness in the identification and admission processes in private schools in Dubai for students with special educational needs.

DSIB inspectors evaluated the following aspects in relation to current international best practice:

- Progress across key subjects,
- The accuracy of identification arrangements operating in schools,
- How well schools modified their curriculum for students with special educational needs,

- The quality of parental involvement and
- How well schools monitor students' progress.

In Dubai, more needs to be achieved on a consistent basis, at class, department and school levels to improve the progress made by students with special educational needs. Currently, ensuring that your child with special educational needs receives high-quality teaching and learning experiences, irrespective of the teacher, phase, subject or curriculum with which they engage is not a reality. Collective stakeholder engagement has not yet solved these difficulties for families of students with special educational needs..

How good is the teaching & learning of children with special educational needs?

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The quality of in-class learning experiences for students with special educational needs varies enormously in Dubai [DSIB, 2012]. Several factors impinge on the degree of success arising from the experience. These include;

- teacher quality and experience,
- the level of understanding of the particular need,
- the severity of the need itself,
- how severe the difficulty is and how it manifests in a classroom setting,
- the availability and use of high-quality resources including ICT and specialists.

Class teachers can sometimes find teaching a child or children with special educational needs stressful and both time and energy-consuming. Some inexperienced teachers rely excessively on

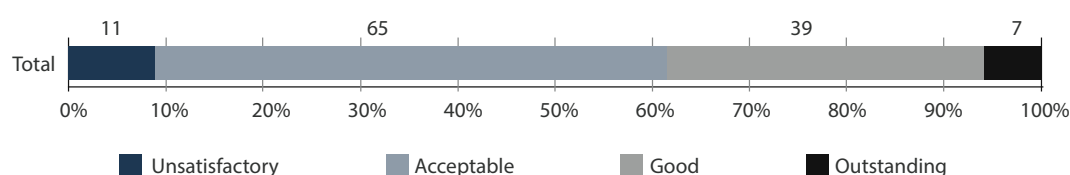
the support provided outside the main classroom in order to assure themselves that the student makes reasonable progress. Difficulties arise for the student themselves when they find it challenging to understand why adults in positions of authority and responsibility just don't "get" them and their learning needs.

Best international pedagogic practice indicates the need for careful planning to ensure the intended targets are reached for students with special educational needs in every lesson. Good and outstanding teachers design questions, activities and group role opportunities for these students *within the context of the learning objective for the whole class*. They use the skills of the student, and there always are some very established competencies present, to build deliberate learning blocks for the student to be successful in terms of that learning objective. The child will know their intended learning target, understand the work to be done by them in order to achieve it and they will have some capacity to review the result. All participants will recognise the learning from the Individual Education Plan [IEP] that they have co-authored.

Accessing a school for a child with special educational needs is still a difficulty for the majority of parents in Dubai. In general, parents in the higher fee-paying schools have better access to good and outstanding provision for their child. Inspectors found that a majority of schools were active, to varying degrees, in engaging parents with the effective educational provision for their child.

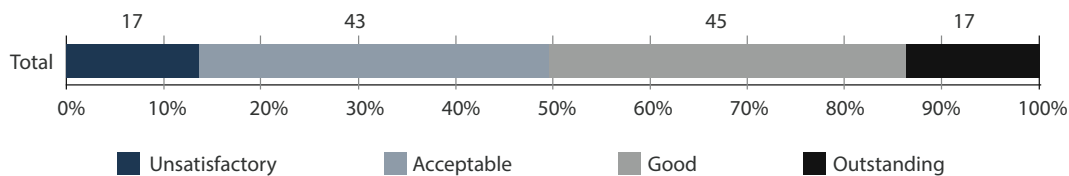
In the few schools that were evaluated as engaging parents successfully in the progress of the students, several common factors are in place. Parents are perceived as central to the process of support, target-setting, providing essential information for

How good is the progress made by students with special educational needs across key subjects?



[DSIB 2012]

How successful are the arrangements made by the schools to involve parents of children with special educational needs in their education?



[DSIB 2012]

both home and school actions and communicating with the school in the review of outcomes and the identification of further improvements. Students make better progress when successful parent and school partnerships are in place.

A significant minority of schools involve their parents in the design and implementation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs). However, these plans vary in quality and outcome. Where the process is successful, parents are actively involved in the initial structure, if not always effectively involved with the setting of appropriate targets. Consequently, for a majority of parents, targets for students are not always manageable and are unclear in their meaning and application at school but especially at home. Too many parents feel excluded from meaningfully supporting their child’s progress. A significant minority of parents expressed concern about having to meet extra financial demands in school because their child had special educational needs.

Challenges for Stakeholders in Dubai

Current arrangements for students with special educational needs in Dubai present many challenges. While there is clear evidence of a growing awareness of inclusion, pedagogy, financing and legal requirements and expectations, it is also clear that significantly more needs to be done. By ensuring best practice provision for these students, the key stakeholders can, through co-operation, openness and attention to detail, provide a way forward for the effective management of special educational needs in line with international expectations. These challenges are noted below;

- Ensure that every child who has a special educational need is identified and assessed appropriately. This will provide early, greater and directed clarity for parents, initially, but also

for providers as they seek to address the identified needs and finally for regulators in their efforts to safeguard each child’s right to a high-quality education.

- Overcome the struggles faced by these parents. Parents of students with special educational needs in Dubai must be able to access education and have a wide range of options.
- Develop a proper understanding and implementation of “inclusion”, placing students with special educational needs at the heart of the school’s mission, just like every other child, among all stakeholders. An automatic opt-in rather than opt-out culture must be enabled.
- Assure the quality of provision for students with special educational needs. This means, continued inspection and evaluation of the provision available and highlighting schools and practices that consistently meet the highest international standards as well as those that do not.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations are suggested:

1. Create a culture where parents of students with special educational needs have all necessary information easily available to them in a manner that enables rather than challenges them. Parents should not feel, as too many of them currently do, that the access to a school is the summit of their ambition rather than achieving the maximum degree of high-quality provision and outcomes for their child.
2. Regulators must continue to raise the profile of students with special educational needs in schools in Dubai and the concepts, practices and expectations associated with this journey we are all on, in line with international standards.
3. Schools must ensure that students with special educational needs are admitted into all schools

in Dubai. Some parents still believe that, because their child has a special educational need then their admission into a school must meet different criteria than any other child.

Appropriate access to the entire range of facilities in a school is as important for the student with special educational needs as any other student.

4. Schools must broaden their understanding of inclusion. The students with special educational needs must become as central to the planning, pedagogic and monitoring work of the school as every other category of student. The involvement of the parent in this work is vital to provide greater consistency and accountability.
5. Teachers will benefit hugely if their view of the special educational needs student is more positive, focused on the child's abilities and is based on teachers having the appropriate qualifications and skills to ensure good progress is made. Reviewing the work of the lesson in the context of the IEP and the topic for the whole class will tell teachers how successful their efforts have been and how these can be improved in the next lesson!
6. Specialist providers of services in the diagnosis and treatment for students with special

educational needs must ensure the highest levels of diagnostic rigour, professional collaboration and value for money, as possible in order to contribute to the consistent improvement.

Conclusion

The journey for a student with special educational needs in Dubai has begun. Awareness by stakeholders of the responsibilities, capacities and challenges that define this aspect of education is developing. The identification of the need and the competence to act on the nature of that need in order to make high-quality progress on an individual basis remains the preserve of the good and outstanding schools.

Too many parents must still struggle to gain access to the appropriate provision for their child in an environment that values all students for what they can contribute. School inspections are highlighting the weaknesses in identification of needs and the lack of appropriately qualified personnel in place to meet these needs. Through collective and well-informed action that seeks to prioritise benefit to the student above all other considerations, each child with special educational needs in Dubai can make exceptional progress, no matter what.

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KHDA is an education authority, created to improve schools and other human resource sectors in Dubai. They work to promote lifelong learning to fulfill Dubai's aspirations. KHDA's mission is to assure quality and to improve accessibility to education, learning and human development, with the engagement of the community. They coordinate with many different partners – students, parents, teachers, the private sector and other Government bodies. KHDA's work plans are derived from the Government's strategy and carried out in a transparent manner to make sure everything they do benefits their highest priority – Dubai's students.

About the Dubai School of Government

The Dubai School of Government (DSG) is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, in cooperation with the Harvard Kennedy School, DSG aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

Toward this goal, the Dubai School of Government also collaborates with regional and global institutions in delivering its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world.

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