

# The Development of LD Education in Saudi Arabia: Services and Implications for the future

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### Abstract:

*Saudi Arabia has been consistently honing its educational services for students with Learning disabilities (LD) since the recognition of the category by the Ministry of education in 1996. This review includes scholarly published articles and government websites to address the following research questions: 1) What were the main factors to influence the educational services offered to students with LD in Saudi Arabia within the past decade? 2) To what extent have these changes been implemented across genders? We conclude that the main factors include: legislation implementation, government support, awareness level of the society, globalization, and an increase in specialized cadre of Saudi special education professionals. Also, at this time, the LD services are equal across gender. Future research should focus on establishing a more specialized identification process, and provide greater training opportunities for both general and special education teachers on the needs of students with LD. Also, the authors suggest that highlighting the impact of collaboration between regular and special education teachers are essential.*

**Keywords:** Learning disabilities, special education, public education, Saudi Arabia

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## INTRODUCTION

Although Saudi Arabia is not known for its social and cultural changes, much has been changing in the field of education, in terms of gender equality and LD education. In 1925, when public schooling became official in Saudi Arabia, females did not have access to schools (Al Harbi, 2014). At that time, girls were taught at home by same-gender tutors. In 1960, King Faisal established public schools for females separate and unequal to the education that was available for males (Al Harbi, 2014). Although public education for females faced several obstacles (Al Harbi, 2014), female literacy rate reached 91 percent in comparison to 97 percent for men (World Economic Forum, 2014).

For the past 15 years, special education services in Saudi Arabia have received a great deal of attention (Alnahdi, 2014). In fact, Saudi Arabia is currently considered one of the leaders in the implementation of LD learning approaches among the Arab world (Al-Mousa, 2010). The Saudi government has encouraged and financially supported the education sector to ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender, age and race is provided access to free and equal education (Alquraini, 2011).

The Ministry of Education recognized special education as a category 25 years after the public education system was established. In 1950s, the first blind private school was sponsored by the Ministry (Bin Battal, 2016), which served only blind adults with no other special needs category (AL-Wabli, 1996). In 1960, the Ministry of Education opened the first official public school for male blind students (Aldabas, 2015). Once the ministry created the Department of Special Education in 1962, three distinct types of disabilities were identified: intellectual disability, blindness, and deafness (Afeafa, 2000).

In 2000, the Saudi government established a disability law (Alquraini, 2011), This law ensured that all individuals with disabilities would have access to free and adequate medical, rehabilitation, social, and educational services in the public sector (Alquraini, 2011). Although there were rapid gains in services for students with disabilities in Saudi Arabia, there is still a need to improve the special education services provided (Alruwaili, 2016). One example is the category of learning disability (LD), which was officially recognized in 1996 (Al-hano, 2006). Since then, the number of students in elementary schools identified with learning disabilities has been rising (Alnaim, 2015). Afeafe (2000), Alnaim (2015) and Alquraini (2011) have described the attempts of the Saudi government in providing services to students with LD. With the growing number of LD students, most of the research literature has been focusing on how to identify LD students, stressing the need for services. However, there is a formidable lack of research about what services are needed, and how to provide such services effectively (Alnaim, 2015).

Several studies have reported that there is a huge transformation in the service provided for students with disabilities since the establishment of disabilities legislations in the 1950's (Aldabas, 2015; Alquraini, 2011; Battal, 2016). Since the notion of special education

is relatively recent in Saudi Arabia, many studies focused on services for certain categories of disabilities, such as blindness and deafness (Afeafe, 2000; Battal, 2016). Most of the research literature highlights the development of services that occurred since the establishment of the special education services in Saudi Arabia (Alnaim, 2015; Alquraini, 2011; Alawafi, 2017). According to Battal (2016), the movement towards enhancing educational opportunities individuals with special needs in Saudi Arabia could be divided into three stages: the emergence, development, and expansion. The emergence stage, refers to the time when special education was first introduced, in 1958, to provide services to blind students. The development stage, in 1962, began when the first institution for blind and deaf students was opened for both genders in Riyadh—the capital city (Battal, 2016). After 1995, the third stage, the expansion stage, focused on delivering new learning models, recognizing more categories of disability, and providing students with the appropriate services (Battal, 2016).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors that influenced the reform of practical special education services in Saudi Arabia for students with learning disabilities. Also, it will investigate whether there is a gender difference in provision of services for students with learning disabilities in terms of number of schools supported. The following research questions guided my study:

A) What have been the main factors that influenced the educational services provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia within the past decade?

B) To what extent have these educational services been equal across gender?

### *Theory of Change*

Michael Fullan, a Global Leadership Director and the Canadian educator has mobilized four specific elements to establish new pedagogies in education and learning. Fullan (2006) believes that the system can merely take place when the learning in schools is differentiated from each other. It is quite essential for the system reform and commonly named as “lateral capacity building”. The change process in education and learning, as introduced by Michael Fullan., occurs voluntarily when there is the feeling of something going on incorrect or the existing techniques lack precision, suitability and correspondence with the present time period. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Services provision for blind students started voluntarily when there was lack of official learning institutions for the blind.

Fullan’s characterized change by struggle, nervousness, and ambiguity that can further endow with the need of mastery, professional enhancement, and success. However, Fullan has described the change process as comprising of four interconnected stages such as initiation, implementation, continuation and outcomes. The stage of initiation is the stage of identifying and developing innovativeness while correlating with the main agenda. The most significant stage is the implementation stage as it comprises of all the key activities

and resources that are needed to carry out the plan (Fullan, 1991a). The third stage, continuation is the decision made for the institutionalization i.e. the positive and negative aspects of implemented change are evaluated in order to decide whether it should be continued or not. In the last stage, the outcomes of implemented change are judged where there is pressure, support, negotiation and changes occurring in thinking, skills and actions committed. In order to learn about the complexity of change process, Fullan (1993) endowed with the fundamental principles for thinking about change i.e. change is non-linear and can provide with unexpected and exciting outcomes, problems are inevitable and they cannot be solved without bringing change, complex changes must not be pressurized, change management is learnt internally and externally in good organizations, change does not work in centralization or decentralization, and every person happens to be a change agent (Fullan, 1993).

## METHOD

In order to address the questions posed earlier, several steps were employed. I conducted a search for studies that investigated service provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia using the terms “Special Education and Saudi Arabia”, “Saudi education and learning disability”, “Education System in Saudi Arabia”, “Learning disability in Saudi Arabia”, and “Special Education reform in Saudi Arabia”. The following academic search engines were employed: ERIC, Education Full Text, PsycINFO, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. All articles accessed were published in scholarly peer-reviewed journals. Because the category of learning disability was only established in Saudi Arabia in 1996 (AL-hano, 2006), only article after 1996 were reviewed. Also, due to the limited availability of English-language articles related to the factors influence the Development of LD in Saudi Arabia, Arabic language search was conducted to gain access to any relevant information. In addition to articles published in Arabic, I also searched Saudi Government websites, such as the Ministry of Education, the Embassy of Saudi Arabia, and the General Authority for statistics of Saudi Arabia.

### *A Brief Snapshot of Saudi Arabia*

Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Arabian Peninsula (Al-Jadid, 2013), covering 830,000 square miles. Arabic is the official language. Saudi Arabia is divided into five regions with the city of Riyadh as its capital. Saudi Arabia is home for two holy Islamic mosques, Al- Masjid Al-Nabwi in Medina and AL Masjid AL Haram in Mecca, the cradle of Islam, where all Muslims should visit at least once in their life to do Haj. Since it is a sacred place, only Muslims are allowed to visit Mecca. As of 2016, the population of Saudi Arabia had reached 31,742,308 (General Authority of Statistics, 2016). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdulaziz Al-Saud in 1932 (Royal embassy, 2017). Geographically, it is surrounded by the Red Sea on the West, with a coastline of 1.76 kilometers, Oman and

Yemen on the South, and the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the Arabian Gulf coast line of 560 kilometers on the East (Ministry of Education, 2017). See Figure 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Map of Saudi Arabia



Figure 2. Saudi Arabia Location

Source: CIA Word Fact Book

### *Public Education in Saudi Arabia*

The general education policy of Saudi Arabia affirms the right to access free education from the elementary level until higher education (AL-Mousa, 2010; El-Sanabary, 1994). The first public education in Saudi Arabia was established in 1925 (AL-Harbi, 2014; Ministry of Education, 2017). At that time, public education was only accessible for boys under the supervision of the director of knowledge. When King Abdulaziz Al-Saud unified the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, education was limited; access to education was only available to wealthy individuals in the major cities (AL-Quraini, 2011). In 1951, the Ministry of Knowledge was established with the responsibility of boys' education in three levels: elementary, middle school, and high school. By 1953, the Ministry of Education was established with the responsibility of providing education to all levels (Battal, 2016).

The Ministry of education at that time was only responsible for males' education (Alamri, 2011). In line with the social status of women in Saudi Arabia that requires a strict separation of genders in educational institutions in all levels (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013), the General Presidency of Girls' Education (GPGE) was established in 1959, as a separate unit from the Ministry of Education, to ensure that Saudi girls have access to public education (Ministry of Education, 2017; El-Sanabary, 1994). The GPGE was established to guarantee that its progress aligns with religious values and Saudi tradition (El-Sanabary, 1994). The first public school for girls was opened in 1960. At that time, Saudi Arabia was the only Islamic country that had a separate female education policy, including separate administration and physical facilities (El-Sanabary, 1994). However, since 2003, the Ministry of Education has taken responsibility for the education of both genders and the General Presidency for Girls Education was terminated (Ministry of education, 2017). Despite the obstacles for girls in the beginning, today male and female rates of enrollment in primary

schools is almost equal (UNESCO, 2017), and in 2015, female student enrollment exceeded the male enrollment rate by 3.22 (UNESCO, 2017). See Figure 3.

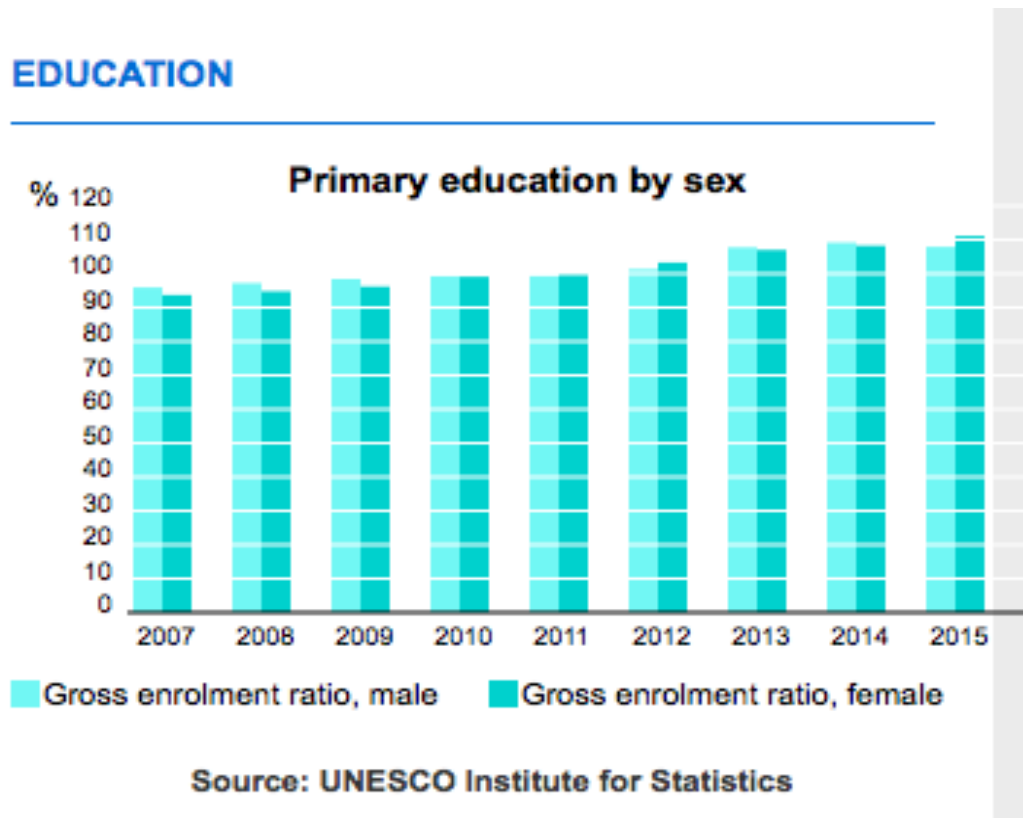


Figure 3. Male and female enrollment rate in primary schools

The first university, King Saud University, was established in 1957, in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. In 2010, King Saud University was in the Times Higher Education – QS World University Rankings as 221 with the highest ranking among Arab universities (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). In 1975, eighteen years later, the Ministry of Higher Education was established with the responsibilities of planning and supervising the Saudi higher education system (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). Today, there are 25 public universities in Saudi Arabia (King Saud university, 2017). The enrollment rate has dramatically increased from 7,000 in 1970 to almost 1 million students enrolled in Saudi Universities. Over half of the million university students are females.

In addition to schools and universities, the Ministry of Education initiated and established the General Department of Adult Education to eliminate illiteracy, a primary goal of the Saudi education system (Ministry of Education, 2017). This program provides opportunities for adults to attend schools and universities. This clearly demonstrates the concerted effort Saudi Arabia has directed to provide every individual, regardless of age, with an opportunity to learn to read. These efforts have resulted in a low rate of illiteracy in Saudi Arabia. As of 2015, the male literacy rate was 97% and the female rate was 91.1% (World Factbook, 2017).

Saudi Arabia's current public education system spans 12 years' total: 6 years in elementary school, 3 years in middle school, and 3 years in high school (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 2017). The Saudi Government ensures that all citizens have access to free education from primary school through higher education (AL-Mousa, 2010). Also, it mandates that all children should be admitted to primary school by the age of six (ALquraini, 2011).

The public school system in Saudi Arabia is segregated by gender in all education levels (Baki, 2004), with the only exception being preschool, where both genders are integrated (Smith & Abouammoh, 2013). In all other schooling levels, the genders are separately taught by same gender instructors in same gender schools.

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

The 1950's was the era of the birth of special education In Saudi Arabia. By 1958, the first special education service was offered to blind students by a Saudi citizen (Battal, 2016). After realizing the need to establish services formally, the Ministry of Education started the foundation to establish a plan for administration concerning special education in 1960 (Battal, 2016). In response to the success stories of individual attempts to provide blind and deaf students special education services, the Ministry officially opened the first school for blind students in 1960 (Battal, 2016). In 1962, the Department of Education established the Department of Special Education to provide learning and rehabilitation services to individuals with special needs (Afeafe, 2000). At that time, three categories of special needs were recognized: the blind, the deaf, and those with intellectual disabilities (Afeafe, 2000).

The first legislation for people with disabilities in Saudi Arabia was introduced in 1987 (Alquraini, 2011). This law was to ensure providing equal access to learning opportunities to all individuals within the society. It was not until the year 2001, that the Saudi government announced the formation of Regulations of Special Education Programs and Institutes (RSEPI) which emphasized rights and laws for all students with disabilities. The categories of disabilities, under the RSEPI, expanded to include: intellectual disabilities, learning disability, deafness, blindness, and individuals with multiple disabilities (Alquraini, 2011). Although the recognition of special education field is relatively recent, many developments have been made by the government to ensure providing quality services in education settings for students with disabilities (Alawfi, 2017).

The expansion of services provision for students with disabilities was one of the development characteristics of the development of special education services in Saudi Arabia. For example, there was an expansion of the services including students with language disorder, hearing impairment, and intellectual disabilities to ensure that all students within their categories receive appropriate accommodation (Alamri, 2014).

### *LD Education in Saudi Arabia*

The term learning disability (LD) was officially introduced in Saudi Arabia as a new category of disability in 1996 (Al-hano, 2006). The LD category, currently, is the second category among students with special needs, with 33% of identified students (Battal, 2016).

The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education Regulation of Special Education Institutions and Programs (2002) defined LDs as:

“Disorders in one or a multiple of fundamental mental processes that are involved in the comprehension and use of spoken and written languages whose manifestation is apparent in listening, reading, thinking, spelling, writing or arithmetic related disorders not related to family issues, mental retardation, educational or social background, or hearing or visual impairments” (AlRasheed, 2010, as cited in Alawfi, 2017, p.3).

The Ministry of Education established the Department of Learning Disabilities (DLD) in 1995 (Alquraini, 2011). Since that time, special education teachers were hired and trained in public schools to be able to identify students with LD and provide them with the appropriate support (Alawfi, 2017). By 2012, The DLD affirmed that there are 2713 public schools, including schools serving girls and boys, that adopted the Saudi Learning Disability Program (SLDP). These schools received services under the newly established support programs and were assigned IEP plans to receive the support they needed (alnaim, 2015).

Students with LD receive their education in general education classes with special education support in resource rooms (Alquraini, 2011). In Saudi Arabia, general education teachers are responsible for referring students with LD in the general classroom (Hussain, 2009); therefore, programs that enhance the knowledge of general education teachers are crucial in the identification process.

### *Education reform of services for students with LD in Saudi Arabia*

Several factors have profoundly influenced the reform in service provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia: legislation implementation, government support, awareness level of the society, globalization, and a specialized cadre of special education experts (Aldabas, 2015; AL-Jadid, 2003; Alquraini, 2011; Alawfi, 2017; Battal, 2016).

Legislation implementation is the first main factor that has influenced reform of services for students with LD in Saudi Arabia (Aldabas, 2015; Alquraini, 2011; Alawafi, 2017; Battal, 2016). Laws have been established to provide high-quality services in education and rehabilitation for individuals with disabilities in Saudi Arabia. The first law concerning the legislation of disability was passed in 1987; the scope of this law was to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their needs, receive equal opportunities in education and employment (Ministry of Health Care, 2010). Also, it included definitions of disabilities and required public intervention programs to ensure that individuals with disabilities learn skills for independent living (Ministry of Health Care, 2010).

In 1995, the Department of Special Education under the Ministry of Education planned on establishing the DLD (Alquraini, 2011). Since its establishment, research on identification and instruction has been conducted to ensure that students with LD receive the appropriate accommodation (Alawfi, 2017). Realizing the importance of legislation in the provision of services, Saudi Arabia's government formed the RRSEP in 2001 (aldabas , 2015).

The RRSEP ensured a provision of the appropriate service for students with special needs including transition, early interventions, and individual education plans (Ministry of



Education, 2017; Alquraini, 2011). The RRSEP regulations were strongly influenced by the United States' IDEA legislation (Alquraini, 2011). The RRSEP contained many provisions concerning learning disabilities' definitions and future directions of the Saudi system with special education (Alquraini, 2011). Since the Ministry of Education is responsible for providing equal learning opportunities for both genders (Ministry of education, 2016), legislation was produced to ensure that both genders have the same equal opportunities both in terms of the services established and the support provided.

The second factor that has influenced the reform of service provision in Saudi Arabia for students with special needs is government support (Aldabas, 2015; Battal, 2016; Ministry of Education, 2016). One form of government support is the Saudi instituted Rules and Regulations of Special Education Programs (RRSEP). The RRSEP was established by the Department of Special Education in the Ministry of Education in 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2017). Its aim was to ensure that all students with disabilities have access to proper services in education and rehabilitation (Aldabas, 2015; Ministry of Education, 2017). In addition to the RRSEP, the government provided support through providing a number of programs to support students with LD. For instance, continuous support to the SLDP to ensure that all students with LD would be identified and receive appropriate service (Alnaim, 2015).

The third factor that has influenced the reform of services provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia is the awareness level among individuals of the society (AL-Jadid, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2017). According to the Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia (2017), since the establishment of the LD concept, the Ministry made a great deal of effort to improve the negative attitudes towards LD held by individuals in the society. For instance, on May 3, 2009, the Ministry introduced Learning Disabilities Day by initiating a campaign called "I Know My Difficulties". This day was celebrated yearly under different campaign names. To enhance positive attitudes and raise awareness among people in Saudi society, it is mandatory that all learning institutions take part on that day and celebrate it.

The fourth factor that has affected the change in services for students with LD is globalization. Globalization is considered as a meta myth that uses politics, economic, and cultural aspects of life to make sense of the existing social transformation and plan in according to it (Vaira, 2004). In Saudi Arabia, globalization has affected the government and educators. When the Saudi government witnessed positive change in service provision for students with special needs around the world, it initiated more new rules to ensure that all students, despite their varied needs, have free access to proper education and rehabilitation services (AL-Mousa, 2010). Saudi educators, similarly, were influenced by the services and laws benefitting students with LD around the world, especially in the U.S. For example, in 2015, there were 92,618 Saudi students sent to earn their degrees in American Universities (International Trade Administration, 2016). Thus, the Saudi education system has been strongly influenced by and is now based on the US system (AL-Naim, 2015). Therefore, learning theories and concepts promoted in the US are likely to be adopted by the Saudi Learning Disability Program (SLDP). Even the SLDP's definition of LD is very similar to the US definition. According to (AL-Naim, 2015), the SLDP definition of LD is:

"Disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken and written language which is manifested in disorders in listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic

and it is not due to factors related to mental retardation, visual or hearing impairments, or educational, social, and familial factors” (p. 1041).

The fifth factor that has affected the reform of service provision for students with LD is the availability of a Saudi cadre of special education educators (Battal, 2016). Lack of specialized teachers was a fundamental issue in the early stages of the development of Saudi special education (Battal, 2016). The government initially overcame this shortage by hiring foreigners with special education degrees to provide the services needed. For instance, in 1974, 44.3% of Saudi Arabia’s special education teachers were foreigners (Anita, 1978). However, once the first Department of Special Education was established in King Saud University, it played a major role in building up the Saudi cadre of special education educators (Battal, 2016). Today, special education departments have spread across the kingdom into more than 11 Saudi universities. Additionally, in 2005, the King Abdullah Foreign scholarship was launched. One of the main objectives of this program is to educate Saudi individuals in foreign countries who return as qualified professionals in different fields (Ministry of Education, 2016). This program ensured the availability of a specialized Saudi cadre in the special education field to continuously provide students with needs the services required.

Looking at the factors that influenced the reform in services provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia, including: legislation implementation, government support, awareness level of the society, globalization, and a specialized cadre of Saudi special education professionals, it is crucial to highlight that these changes in services have been equal across gender. Although when the special education field was established in Saudi Arabia only males were receiving services, today both genders have equal rights and access to all levels of education.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the factors that have profoundly influenced the reform in service provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia. The factors, including legislation implementation, government support, the awareness level of the society, globalization, and the specialized cadre of special education experts, have all contributed in shaping the reform of the services provision. All the factors have had a great influence over all. However, government support could be one of the main factors that enhanced the establishment of services. The Saudi Government has supported the education sector since the establishment of the Kingdom, and government support had an influence on attitudes of individuals within the Saudi community to accept individuals with disabilities (Battal, 2016). Also, the government supported the field of special education financially (Murry & Alqahtani, 2015). The special education field in Saudi Arabia has developed in a remarkably short time (Battal, 2016). However, observing the development pace of the services provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia, there is still a challenge in the identification process of students (Alquraini, 2013). There is a need to establish a process and identification tools. According to recent study conducted by [محمد عمر محمد أبو]

الرب] Mohammad Omar abu alrab (2016) based on surveying 63 LD specialists, there is problems in the identification process of LD students. Also, Because students with LD are referred by general education teachers, there is a need to establish programs that train general education teachers about the concept of inclusion (al-dabas, 2015).

## IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND TEACHING IMPLEMENTATION

The purpose A variety of studies have shared important information about the development of LD education, but there is still a gap of studies that identifies the factors that have profoundly influenced the reform in service provision for students with LD in Saudi Arabia. Future researchers should address investigation of the factors influenced the reform in services provision. This could be accomplished by conducting qualitative studies that includes interviews with teachers, principals, and parents. Moreover, future studies should consider pervious international experience and the existing literature as a guide to establish more laws and guidelines for ministries, teachers, and parents.

From practical perspective, additional research could be designed to provide both general and special education teachers more training opportunities to be able to provide students with LD the support needed. Since students with LD is referred by general education teachers, designing a referral and diagnostic tool that could be used as a tool by the general education teachers could help discovering the needs of LD students earlier. Moreover, more training programs should be designed on including both general and special education teachers to facilitate collaboration. Future research should highlight the impact of how collaboration between general and special education teachers is crucial to provide students with LD the support needed.

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