

Evaluating the Quality of Learning Disabilities Program from the Perspective of Omani Teachers

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Received: 23/09/2022

Modified: 01/02/2024

Accepted: 05/02/2024

Abstract: The purpose of this descriptive study was to evaluate the quality of the learning disabilities program (LDP) in the basic education schools as perceived by teachers of LDP in the Sultanate of Oman. A convenience sample of 277 teachers was selected from Omani governorates. A scale of 83 indicators was developed and distributed to teachers. These indicators included six standards related to program philosophy, educational environment, program staff, individualized education program, transitional services, and family involvement. The results indicated that the availability of quality standards in LDP ranged from a moderate to a high level. The indicators of the educational environment standard and the program philosophy standard achieved a high level. While the indicators of program staff standard, transitional services standard, individualized education program standard, and family involvement achieved an average level. The results also revealed that there were statistically significant differences due to the educational qualifications and teaching experience of LDP teachers. Based on these results, the researchers recommended that the Omani Ministry of Education adopt the indicators and standards that have been developed in this study.

Keywords: Evaluation; indicators; Oman; quality; standards; LDP

تقويم جودة برنامج صعوبات التعلم من وجهة نظر المعلمين في سلطنة عُمان

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قُبِل بتاريخ: 2024/02/05

عُدِل بتاريخ: 2024/02/01

اُسْتُلِم بتاريخ: 2022/09/23

الملخص: هدفت هذه الدراسة الوصفية إلى تقويم جودة برنامج صعوبات التعلم بمدارس التعليم الأساسي من وجهة نظر المعلمين في سلطنة عُمان، وبأسلوب العينة المتيسرة استجابت 277 معلمة من مختلف محافظات سلطنة عُمان على مقياس تألف من 83 مؤشراً موزعاً على ستة معايير متعلقة بفلسفة البرنامج، والبيئة التعليمية، والعاملون في البرنامج، والبرنامج التربوي الفردي، والدمج والخدمات الانتقالية، ومشاركة الأسرة. وأشارت النتائج إلى أنّ توافر معايير الجودة في البرنامج تراوحت بين المتوسطة والعالية؛ إذ حصل معيار البيئة التعليمية ومعياري فلسفة البرنامج على درجة عالية، بينما حصلت معايير العاملون في البرنامج، والدمج والخدمات الانتقالية، والبرنامج التربوي الفردي، ومشاركة الأسرة على درجة متوسطة. كما أشارت النتائج إلى وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية تبعاً لتغيري المؤهل العلمي وسنوات الخبرة التدريسية. وبناءً على هذه النتائج أوصى الباحثون بأن تتبنى وزارة التربية والتعليم العُمانية المعايير والمؤشرات الواردة بهذه الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقويم، برنامج صعوبات التعلم، الجودة، المؤشرات، المعايير، سلطنة عُمان

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Introduction

Services for persons with disabilities have been seen as a feature of civilized societies. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities transferred special education services from care and kindness to integrated rights (Al-Hadabi et al., 2021). The Convention included a set of educational, health, social, political, and sports rights for persons with disabilities (Al-Zoubi et al., 2021). As a result, the field of special education has experienced interest in developing programs and services provided to persons with disabilities according to standards and indicators that seek the quality of special education programs (Al-Zoubi & Bani Abdel Rahman, 2013). These standards and indicators contribute to improving special education programs and the quality of life for persons with disabilities (Al-Khateeb et al., 2012).

Learning disabilities (LDs) are one of the special education categories described as the “confusion category” because of disagreement among scholars on the concept, causes, and diagnosis. Thus, educational, psychological, physiological, and medical opinions and theories have appeared in the definition of LDs. LDs are a heterogeneous group of disorders in one or more of the basic psychological processes (Frank, 2014; Hallahan et al., 2015). Educationally, LDs can be referred to as including any group of students who need help acquiring learning skills (Istanbuli et al., 2022). These students show a decline in attainment and comprehension across school subjects. Despite their average or above-average intelligence, students with LDs show problems in the developmental and educational aspects (Hallahan et al., 2015; Al-Harathi, 2020; Aljbri et al., 2023).

Special education in Oman has evolved significantly over the past two decades (Al-Maskaria, 2012). The Omani Ministry of Education launched LDP in general education schools in 2000 (Ministry of Education, 2019). The number of LDPs reached 629 for the academic year 2019/2020. These programs were distributed to basic education schools in the Omani governorates (Ministry of Education, 2019). The Omani Ministry of Education prepared a guide for educational supervisors and teachers of LDP. This guide includes the following (Ministry of Education, 2019):

1. Program philosophy includes vision, mission, definition of LDs, and the financial budget.
2. Program staff includes the qualifications, competencies, and teaching experiences of the program staff.

3. Individualized education program (IEP) includes program elements, a multidisciplinary team, diagnosis, referral, and teaching methods.

4. Educational environment includes facilities and equipment.

5. Family involvement includes family participation in the events and activities of LDP.

6. Transitional services include educational, social, and professional plans and programs that prepare students with LDs to move to secondary school, university, or the labor market.

Evaluation is a component of any educational system. It pushes educational systems toward the achievement of goals. Therefore, evaluating the LDP contributes to the success of its vision, mission, and goals (Asaeed, 2019). The development of standards in educational programs is one of the priorities of educational leaders because it contributes to students' access to high-quality education (Crutchfield, 2003). On the other hand, teachers with high self-efficacy positively affect the quality of education (Nosair et al., 2021). Therefore, there must be indicators that control the quality of performance for teachers of LDP.

International quality management systems have proven their effectiveness in improving special education institutions and centers. The implementation of a quality system and obtaining a globally accredited certificate have become indicators of increasing confidence in the quality of performance of these institutions and centres (Al-Khateeb et al., 2013). The quality standards and indicators applied by countries may differ, but they agree in terms of content (Al-Zoubi & Al-Zoubi, 2019). Standards must be available in the educational process to meet beneficiaries' needs and prepare efficient outputs to meet societal needs (Al-Zoubi & Al-Zoubi, 2019). Furthermore, indicators are a set of educational performance indicators to measure the performance of the educational institution (Alkhaldi & Gadhum, 2017).

According to international trends toward inclusive education for students with special needs in general education institutions, international organizations have been established to assess the quality of special education programs and services. The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is an international professional association for persons with special needs. The CEC aims to improve the chances of success and the quality of life for a person with special needs, in addition to improving special education teacher preparation programs. As a result, the CEC has developed initial preparation standards for candidates to work

with persons with special needs. These standards include: (1) learning development and individual learning differences; (2) learning environment; (3) curricular content knowledge; (4) assessment; (5) institutional planning and strategies; (6) professional learning and historical practices; and (7) collaboration (Fan et al., 2019).

The Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States has issued a guide that includes a set of standards for the quality of Gulf general education institutions. This guide includes standards for teaching students with special needs. These standards include indicators related to the establishment of special education programs in general education schools, adopting procedures for identifying these students, and evaluating the effectiveness of these programs (Al-Rumaih, 2015).

At the national level, the Omani Ministry of Education has emphasized the necessity of developing the teaching and learning processes and improving education through the implementation of the ISO 9001 quality management system as one of the Ministry's strategic initiatives. The General Directorate of Educational Programs was concerned with applying the ISO 9001:2015 quality management system to all its services, including LDP (Ministry of Education, 2019). The LDP began in Omani schools in the academic year 2000/2001 (Asaadi, 2015; Al-Maskaria, 2012), but it was integrated into basic education schools and expanded to reach 629 programs in 2018/2019 (Ministry of Education, 2019). In other words, this is the first study in the Sultanate of Oman to evaluate the quality of LDP based on developing standards and indicators. The results of this study will help those responsible for educational programs to understand the deficits and improve the quality of Omani LDP. Furthermore, this study opens the way for researchers to conduct further studies to evaluate the quality of Omani special education programs.

Previous studies dealt with LDP, students with LDs, and program quality from multiple aspects. In this regard, Al-Hassan (2009) showed that the standards related to family involvement, program staff, and program evaluation were low in the LDP. Furthermore, Khasawnah (2013) and Al-Kuthairi and Alkhalaf (2018) recommended encouraging the participation of parents of students with LDs in the activities of the LDP. Similarly, Turki and Sawalha (2013) recommended conducting a revision of the Jordanian LDP in terms of family participation, equipment, facilities, and teaching methods to align with national and international standards. Asaadi (2015) stressed the improvement of professional competencies for Omani

teachers of students with LDs related to learning development, individual learning differences, institutional strategies, and collaboration. Other research emphasized reconsidering the services provided to students with LDs (Ghanem, 2015; Assartawi & Alhumaidi, 2018; Al-Huwaiti, 2019). However, other research indicated the existence of financial obstacles and low educational supervision for LDP (Al-Bahrani et al., 2016; Al-Zoubi & Bani Abdel Rahman, 2016; Al-Zoubi & Nefaie, 2019, Al-Zeidi et al., 2023). Perhaps the special education programs in Arab universities needs to be reconsidered to align with national and international academic accreditation (Al-Zoubi & Bani Abdel Rahman, 2013).

Consequently, the researchers found that although the results of previous studies varied depending on the goal of each study, they all emphasized the importance of continuous evaluation of the LDP, enhanced and supported the process of developing and formulating quality standards for the program to give them special entitlement and priority in developing and improving the programs and services provided.

The current study agreed with previous studies in adopting the descriptive approach and choosing the questionnaire as a study tool. After reviewing the previous studies, there were discrepancies in the effect of categorical variables (years of experience, academic qualification).

Research Problem

The LDP was established in Omani schools in the academic year 2000/2001. Therefore, 23 years have passed since the establishment of the LDP. The researchers in this study believe that LDP needs to be evaluated in terms of inputs, processes and outputs. It has been noted that the program faces obstacles related to its implementation process, technical follow-up, and methods for evaluating teachers of LDP, in addition to the presence of financial obstacles (Al-Bahrani et al., 2016). It became clear to the researchers, after reviewing the Ministry of Education, that there are no standards or indicators to judge the quality of services provided in the program. This is not in line with global trends that have established standards and indicators to evaluate the quality of special education programs. It is also not compatible with the ministry's vision to implement the ISO 9001 quality management system project, and therefore the problem of the study can be summarized in the following question: "What is the quality of LDP in basic education schools in the Sultanate of Oman?"

Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What is the availability of the quality standards in LDP?
2. Does the availability of the quality standards in LDP differ according to teachers' qualifications?
3. Does the availability of the quality standards in LDP differ according to teachers' teaching experiences?

Research Objectives

1. Detecting the availability of quality standards and indicators in LDP.
2. Identifying if there is a relationship between the availability of quality standards and the categorical variables (qualification and teaching experience).
3. Developing standards and indicators to evaluate the quality of LDP.
4. Recommendations to improve the quality of Omani LDP.

Methodology

Research Design

Descriptive research was used. This type of research aimed to obtain quantitative data about the quality of Omani LDP.

Participants

The study population consisted of 1157 teachers who teach students with LDs in LDP at basic education schools in the Sultanate of Oman. The study sample consisted of 277 LDP teachers from various governorates of Oman. This sample represented 24% of the teacher population. The sample was selected using the convenience sampling method.

Research Instruments

To achieve the objectives of this study, the researchers developed the quality scale by reviewing the literature and previous studies (Al-Ajmi & Al-Saify, 2018; Al-Khateeb et al., 2013; Al-Khatib & Al-Sharaman, 2016; Al-Sartawi & Al-Humaidhi, 2018; Al-Zoubi & Bani Abdel Rahman, 2013). The Omani Guide of the LDP (Ministry of Education, 2019) was also reviewed. Therefore, the first draft of the scale consisted of 86 indicators distributed into six standards. Each indicator is answered on a 3-point scale: achieved (2), partially achieved (1), and not achieved (0).

To verify the validity of the scale, it was reviewed by 13 educational experts at Sultan Qaboos University

and the Omani Ministry of Education. According to the reviewers' comments and suggestions, the final draft of the scale consisted of 83 indicators distributed into six standards related to program philosophy (1-19), program staff (20-31), IEP (32-52), educational environment (53-61), family involvement (62-72), and transition services (73 -83). To verify the reliability of the scale, it was applied to 30 teachers of LDP. The results of the Pearson correlation coefficient and Cronbach's alpha indicated that the scale has high reliability. To analyze the results of the current research, the following criterion was adopted to judge the mean level of quality of LDP: low (0.00 to 0.67), average (0.68 to 1.34), and high (1.35 to 2.00).

Data collection

The participants responded to the quality scale that was designed using Google Forms and distributed to them via email, WhatsApp, and Twitter. This form allows the respondent to answer the scale of the study only once.

Ethical considerations

The ethical approval letter was obtained from the Assistant Dean for Postgraduate Studies and Research at the College of Education, Sultan Qaboos University, and the Omani Ministry of Education.

Research Results

Results of the first question: What is the availability of the quality standards in LDP?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations were used. Table 1 shows the level of availability of the quality standards in LDP.

Table 1: Means and standard deviations according to the quality standards

Standards	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
Educational environment	277	1.78	0.33	High
Program philosophy	277	1.39	0.44	High
IEP	277	1.33	0.34	Average
Program staff	277	1.27	0.37	Average
Transitional services	277	0.87	0.55	Average
Family involvement	277	0.86	0.52	Average

Table 1 showed that the educational environment and program philosophy standards were at a high level, while the other standards were at an average level.

Results of the second question: Does the availability of the quality standards in LDP differ according to teachers' qualification?

To answer this question, means, standard deviations, and a t-test were used as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: T-test results according to teachers' qualifications

Standards	Qualification	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Program philosophy	Bachelor	198	1.37	0.45	1.61	0.10
	Postgraduate	79	1.45	0.39		
Program staff	Bachelor	198	1.28	0.40	0.94	0.34
	Postgraduate	79	1.24	0.29		
IEP	Bachelor	198	1.33	0.39	0.09	0.92
	Postgraduate	79	1.34	0.29		
Educational environment	Bachelor	198	1.75	0.36	2.63	0.01*
	Postgraduate	79	1.85	0.25		
Family involvement	Bachelor	198	0.89	0.53	1.60	0.11
	Postgraduate	79	0.78	0.48		
Transitional services	Bachelor	198	0.91	0.56	2.13	0.03*
	Postgraduate	79	0.76	0.50		

* ≤ 0.05

Table 2 illustrated that there were statistically significant differences according to teachers' qualifications. These differences were in favor of postgraduate in the educational environment standard and bachelor in the transitional services standard.

Results of the third question: Does the availability of the quality standards in LDP differ according to teachers' teaching experience?

To answer this question, means, standard deviations, and a t-test were used as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: T-test results according to teachers' teaching experience

Standards	Teaching Experience	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Program philosophy	10 years & less	129	1.33	0.45	2.24	0.02*
	11 years & above	148	1.45	0.42		
Program staff	10 years & less	129	1.25	0.38	0.53	0.59
	11 years & above	148	1.28	0.36		
IEP	10 years & less	129	1.34	0.36	0.10	0.92
	11 years & above	148	1.33	0.32		
Educational environment	10 years & less	129	1.74	0.35	2.05	0.04*
	11 years & above	148	1.82	0.31		
Family involvement	10 years & less	129	0.87	0.49	0.22	0.82
	11 years & above	148	0.86	0.54		
Transitional services	10 years & less	129	0.94	0.56	2.02	0.04*
	11 years & above	148	0.81	0.52		

* ≤ 0.05

Table 3 presented that there were statistically significant differences according to teaching experience. These differences on standards of program philosophy and educational environment in favor of teachers with experience (11 years and above). This table also shows that there were differences in the transitional services standard in favor of teachers with experience (10 years and less).

Discussion

Availability of the quality standards in LDP

The results indicated that the program philosophy and educational environment standards were achieved at a high level. These results can be explained by the fact that LDP has received attention from the Omani

Ministry of Education. This was represented by developing a guide for LDP that included the vision, mission, and goals in addition to the instructions, laws, and LDP budget. On the other hand, the Omani Ministry of Education was keen to prepare the educational environment to include facilities, equipment, safety conditions, and appropriate ventilation in accordance with international standards for school buildings and LDP. The results also indicated that the standards of program staff, IEP, transitional services, and family involvement were achieved at a moderate level. For this, special education teacher preparation programs need to be revised. We need to think about pre-service special education teacher preparation programs in higher education institutions. Recently, it is noticeable that there is no BA program in special education in Omani universities. However, Sultan Qaboos University offers a master's program in LDs. This program may be better at preparing supervisors to supervise in LDP. Additionally, in-service training programs for supervisors and teachers are not specialized in LDs. The training programs held by the Omani Ministry of Education were characterized by general topics and did not address issues related to diagnostic methods and contemporary teaching strategies used in teaching students with LDs. Accordingly, Al-Hassan (2009) indicated that the availability of quality indicators in staff standards was at a low level. In this regard, Fan et al. (2019) recommended improving the competencies of special education directors through professional development programs. The IEP in Oman faces many problems. The program needs a multidisciplinary team to determine the present level of performance of students with LDs and formal scales standardized in the Omani environment (Al-Shibli et al., 2023). Therefore, the availability of these scales contributes to the decision to refer students to the services of the LDP. In this case, the response to intervention (RTI) can be used as an alternative to the discrepancy criterion (DC). The DC depends on formal achievement tests and intellectual abilities tests in diagnosing students with LDs. Furthermore, the RTI approach is used to conduct a comprehensive scan of all students and to provide students who face academic problems with early intervention programs. In this regard, Reschly (2014) indicated that the RTI includes multiple levels of identification, intervention, and early treatment for students with LDs and meets the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The results also indicated that the transitional services standard achieved a moderate level. Transi-

tional services are a set of services that enable students with LDs to move from one educational stage to another, such as the intermediate, secondary, or university stage. It includes professional, educational, and independence transition services (Frazier et al., 2020). Therefore, raising awareness and training teachers is the first step in planning successful transitional services in the LDP. In this regard, Al-nahdi (2014) asserted that the majority of Saudi special education teachers are unfamiliar with transitional services programs and 50% of them did not receive any pre-service training programs related to transitional services. The Omani school administrations are required to provide transitional service programs for students with LDs in the intermediate and secondary school stages. The Omani LDP provides remedial instruction services for students with LDs from first to sixth grade. Unfortunately, the Omani Ministry of Education has canceled the education program in the fifth and sixth grades, and there are no LDP in the secondary education stage or follow-up plans for these students when they join this stage, universities, or the labor market. The weakness of transitional services provided to students with disabilities is also prevalent in the rest of the Arab countries. For example, Assartawi and Alhumaidi (2018) indicated a low level of transitional services provided to Saudi students with LDs, while it was on average for Jordanian students with intellectual disabilities (Al-Ramamne et al., 2018), and these services were low in Jordanian centers for intellectual disabilities and autism (Al-Khateeb et al., 2012; Al-Khateeb et al., 2013). On the other hand, there is a weakness among Saudi special education staff in providing transitional services for students with multiple disabilities (Alquraini, 2013). Students with LDs in university expressed their dissatisfaction with the transitional plans and services that were provided to them in the secondary education stage because their participation was minimal in IEP meetings (Georgallis, 2015). In contrast, university students with LDs who received transitional services at school and early special education services at university reflected positively on their academic achievement (Lightner et al., 2012). These results led to the activation of transitional services programs for students with LDs in secondary education through the adoption of international models by decision-makers in the Omani Ministry of Education.

The results also indicated that the family involvement standard achieved a moderate level. The family-school partnerships require the school to provide information to parents about the LDP, information to

parents about their child, and to include them in the IEP. In addition, they are encouraged to attend meetings, parent–teacher councils, and school committees and activities. This result can be justified by the absence of a plan by the teachers and supervisors of Omani LDP to activate the family–school partnerships. This may be due to a lack of training programs for participants in the IEP and a lack of family counselling services. In general, the family's participation in the activities of LDP needs attention from the school administration and teachers (Al-Hassan, 2009; Khasawnah, 2013). In this regard, Şahin and Sari (2016) recommended that school principals, teachers and parents have educational activities that promote a culture of thinking in the school environment.

The quality standards and teachers' qualifications

The results showed that there were statistically significant differences in the educational environment standard in favor of graduate teachers. This can be explained by the fact that postgraduate teachers are better able to determine the requirements of the educational environment. The educational experiences that they gained during their master's studies also helped to provide all potentials and equipment and to innovate educational activities that enrich the educational environment in LDP. The results also showed that there were statistically significant differences in transitional services standards in favor of bachelor's teachers. This result can be explained by the fact that these teachers are recent graduates of Omani universities and may have studied subjects related to inclusive education and transitional services. Previous research indicated that the level of educational services in LDP was affected by teachers' educational qualifications (Turki & Sawalha, 2013). This result is consistent with the results of Al-Zaydi (2012) showed that there were no differences in the degree of contribution of principals and teachers in achieving the goals of LDP.

The quality standards and teachers' teaching experience

The results indicated that there were statistically significant differences in the program philosophy and educational environment standards in favor of teachers with experience of 11 years and above. This can be explained by the fact that these teachers have been with the program for a longer period; they have been exposed to many experiences and training programs

that have given them in-depth knowledge of the general framework and philosophy of the program. These experiences have developed their ability to organize the educational environment to include facilities, equipment, and security and safety conditions. It also improved their abilities to innovate educational activities and utilize the program's financial budget. The results also showed that there were statistically significant differences in transitional services standards in favor of teachers with experience of 10 years and less. Previous research indicated that the level of educational services and transitional services in LDP were affected by teachers' teaching experience (As-sartawi & Alhumaidi, 2018; Turki & Sawalha, 2013). This result is consistent with the results of several studies (Al-Shehri & Al-Batayneh, 2009; Al-Shudaifat, 2016; Al-Tuaim, 2013), which showed that there were no significant differences in the reality of educational services provided to students with LDs due to the academic qualification variable. It is also consistent with the results of a study by Al-Ajmi et al. (2018), whose results showed that there were statistically significant differences attributed to the academic qualification in the field of "support services" in favor of the academic qualification. While it differs from the results of the study by Turki and Sawalha (2013), which showed that there were significant differences in the reality of resource rooms due to academic qualifications, in favor of teachers with higher qualifications than a bachelor.

Conclusion and implications

This study aimed to evaluate the quality of LDP from the Omani teachers' perspective. The results indicated that the availability of quality in LDP was high in the educational environment and philosophy program standards. It was moderate in standards related to IEP, program staff, transitional services, and family involvement. This study recommends that the Omani Ministry of Education adopts standards to improve the quality of LDP and activate a multidisciplinary team in the IEP. This study also recommends revised pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. It is suggested that future research evaluate transitional services and family involvement in LDP. It is crucial to conduct in-depth studies on each criterion outlined in this research to enhance comprehensive understanding. Additionally, the Quality Control Department in governorate educational directorates should conduct a comparative field study of the learning difficulties program in the basic education schools, aligning its results with the results of this

study for a more holistic evaluation and informed decision-making.

Limitations

The study faced significant limitations due to the slow response of the participants caused by the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, limited responses from specific academic categories, such as master's and higher diplomas, led to their inclusion in the broader category of postgraduate studies. The study was hindered by the absence of established quality standards for the LDP in Oman. To address this gap, the researchers had to develop standards by referring to Arab and international standards. This reliance on adapted standards might have introduced variability in the application of the program.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank the teachers of LDP for their support and their response to the study instrument.

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