Exceptional Learners 101

Steps to Identifying a Student with Special Needs

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the fundamental need to develop a systematic

approach and guidelines for identifying students with exceptional needs in our Islamic schools.

Special Education is a field that has significantly developed over the past several decades. As our

Islamic schools have dramatically expanded over the past ten years, we have witnessed a drastic

increase of diverse learners entering into our classrooms. Exceptional learners include students

who have been identified to have a learning or behavioral need in a school setting. Many of our

traditional Islamic schools struggle with the aspect of meeting the needs of exceptional

learners. What if there was a created collaborative, comprehensive, and step-by-step approach

towards developing an effective special education program in our Islamic Schools? This effort

would allow for our Islamic schools to meet the needs of our entire community and launch our

schools into the next stage of professional development. We must begin this process with a

clear and comprehensive approach towards identifying exceptional learners in our schools.

Statement of Problem

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) is an identifiable category of disability within the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA 2004). The special education field has been in existence for a long time and has undergo several different reforms over the years. However, it is in our own Islamic schools which require the much needed reform in this area. Traditionally, our Islamic schools were institutions which serviced traditional learners and typically produced traditional style teachers. This approach and style of teaching did not allow for exceptional learners to flourish in the classroom. I have worked at three different Islamic schools and have attended Islamic schools my entire life and during this time I observed many diverse learners struggling to progress in these environments. Many of these students went without the adequate support and identification of their learning disability for years. This isn't the fault of our Islamic schools, as special education has been under reform for years. Initially, special education was relatively private and these students were educated in separated environments. However, with the revision of IDEA, more students are being educated and supported in their general education classrooms. "In 2008, IDEA-report- dropping out since school year 1996–97. ed data indicate that 5,660,491 students with disabilities were educated in general education classrooms for more youths with disabilities are enrolled in post- at least part of the day, depending on their individual secondary programs," (U.S Department of Education, 2010). This huge endeavor requires more teachers trained in the area of special

education to be hired and additional funding to provide these increased supports in our Islamic schools. Until recently, special education has faced many taboos and barriers in our schools. We now must propose a solution to serve, empower, and educate all of our children. Our beautiful deen compels us to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave and I personally believe that every Muslim child has a right to an adequate and fair Islamic education. I hope to challenge the minds of our current education community by introducing a more comprehensive approach towards identifying exceptional learners in our Islamic schools.

Review of Literature

In 1977, the term learning disabilities was included as a category of exceptionality in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142). As time and the field progressed, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) was signed into law in December 2004. There was a significant shift in how special education was addressed and approached in our schools. Thirteen disabilities are briefly defined in the federal IDEA regulations: autism, deaf blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, mental retardation, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other impairment, serious emotional disturbance, learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment (IDEA, 2004).

I serve as the lead for special education Al Falah Academy in Lilburn, GA and initially we began with an intervention program. When the school hired me to oversee the intervention program, I slowly began to introduce the RTI process to our teachers. RTI or 'Response to Intervention' is a critical component of the identification process for special education, which involves targeting students in different tiers based on the level of academic or behavioral support they require. During this process, we closely monitor their growth and progress. If a student isn't progressing over a specified amount of time, we consider testing and evaluating the child for special education services. This process is beneficial because it involves a series of specified steps and a system of structure (Olson, Daly, Andersen, Turner, & LeClair, 2007). This

framework creates an atmosphere of fidelity and data during every step of the identification process.

Utilizing RTI at Al Falah Academy has truly advanced us into the area of special education. Tier four of the RTI process involves eligibility for special education services (Ervin, Schaughency, Goodman, McGlinchey, & Matthews, 2006) and when a student reaches this tier, our school must clearly develop a plan and make a decision to either refer the student to public school or provide services.

The process of identifying a student with special needs strictly follows the guidelines and procedures of the Department of Education. It is critical for us to work as a collaborate team with our local schools to ensure the accuracy of data for our students. I have personally worked with countless public schools to help provide eligibility for some of our students. This process requires us to be effective, maintain a high level of data and fidelity, and adhere strictly to the intervention process. As research suggests, we must constantly ensure the alignment between the student's skill level, the curriculum materials, and instructional strategies is appropriate (Howell & Nolet, 2000).

Methods

The identification of students with exceptional learning needs can be extensive and overwhelming for a small private school. However, with the support of research and your local educational community, a clear and concise plan can be developed for our schools. There are various methods which are recommended for this process of identifying and providing adequate support to exceptional learners. Based on my experience with this process, I am positive that our Islamic schools can implement a simplified process for identifying students with special needs with the proper documentation.

The methods for this process should begin with choosing a research supported and well-developed benchmark assessment. These assessments are critical, as they provide necessary baseline data to measure student progress and to help develop a swift action plan for student success. Personally, we utilize the NWEA MAP Assessment, as it is one of the most renowned benchmark assessments in our nation. Some of the best schools utilize this assessment and it provides very clear and concise data on every student. As with any assessment, there are pros and cons to the assessment, such as it is strictly computer based. This could be a disadvantage for some of our diverse learners. However, I firmly believe in always having access to a secondary appropriate benchmark assessment. This alternative assessment can be utilized when you find there may have been issues or inconsistencies with the computer based assessment.

Additional methods include the full implementation of the RTI tier process in our schools. RTI begins with high quality, differentiated instruction in the classroom. Based on the

academic needs of a particular student, a school may decide to provide appropriate intervention support to help the progression of the student (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007). This may include pull-out or push-in support to students in core subject areas. This method is critical and it is truly the only way we can fully monitor the growth and progress of exceptional learners. During this entire process, the educators involved should be constantly critically analyzing if the student has specified learning gaps or if he/she may possess an actual learning disability. This can only be identified after time is given to providing research based targeted interventions in the academic area of concern. Currently, the public school system requires a minimum of six to eight weeks of progress monitoring data prior to making a referral for eligibility for special education services. Based upon my research and the implementation of this process, six to eight weeks of data is a critical and necessary pre-requisite for identifying a student with special needs.

The final method for identifying a student with special needs involves psychological testing provided by a certified school psychologist. Since many of our Islamic schools do not have access to a school psychologist, it may be necessary to utilize and access the resources provided in your public school community. As tax payers, private school students are granted the same access to public school resources and services as public school students and they should be utilized effectively. Despite this advantage, it is still critical to have a well-informed advocate from the Islamic school to ensure that each step and process is followed accurately and without bias for our students. The process of testing can be a long, daunting, and often emotional process for the parents. However, the end results of the evaluation can lead the Islamic school and parents feeling a greater sense of direction on how to move forward to

ensure the success of their student.

The implementation of this process requires diligence and effectiveness from the Islamic school's personnel. It is highly recommended to hire a passionate leader for the success of this process in the school. This process requires someone to always collect and analyze data, schedule and facilitate meetings, and monitor the growth and progress of the individual child. This leader should be well versed with not only RTI, but the federal and state legal requirements and processes for special education. With the Help of Allah, your Islamic school can truly thrive and be a model school for exceptional learners.

Recommendations of Practical Implementation

Implementation of a successful identification program within the Islamic school can only begin after implementing a successful intervention program. In an effort to identify exceptional learners, there must be procedures and resources in place to provide the student with every opportunity for success. In the absence of these intervention supports and adequate general education instruction, identified learning disabilities could be grossly inaccurate. Identifying students with specified learning needs or disabilities requires accuracy and fidelity, which can only be achieved through following a strict set of processes.

The first recommendation for practical implementation involves selecting your appropriate benchmark assessment and developing a schedule for progress monitoring. There must be an initial focus on the general education classrooms, by ensuring a highly qualified teaching staff and the selection of a rigorous curriculum. Once this is in place, there must be training for the classroom teachers on providing differentiated instruction to diverse student learners. Differentiation allows all learners to have equal access to the curriculum and to be able to identify the difference between a diverse learner and a student with an identified learning disability.

Utilizing the RTI tiered process ensures a system of checks and balances for your teachers, administration, and school. If utilized accurately, RTI is already designed to eventually lead to the identification of a learning disability. At Al Falah Academy, we utilize a four tiered RTI process. Tier one involves high quality classroom instruction, tier two includes small group targeted intervention instruction based upon the identified academic need, and tier three typically involves both small group targeted intervention and a more individualized approach

towards identifying the learning needs of the student. This is the critical thinking tier and it involves carefully reviewing and monitoring all data from the student on a very frequent basis. The student would utilize a set of testing probes consistently in the targeted area of concern to gauge their level of progression. In this phase, the school is actively looking to identify a more signification problem other than typical skill gaps. Additionally, tier three involves psychological and/or academic testing and a series of student support meetings.

In the final phase of implementation, the school team would collectively review and analyze all data from the student. This process should involve input from a psychologist, speech therapist, grade level teacher, special education teacher, and administrator. Considering our Islamic schools may not have all of the necessary support personnel to complete this process, it is critical to reach out to the resources within your public school community. Based upon the recommendations from this diverse team of educators and specialists, the school should be equipped to make a decision regarding how to support the learning needs of the student.

A public school will draft an IEP or Individualized Education Plan if the student has been found eligible for special education services. Legally, the student is required to enroll in the public school to receive these services. However, if the private Islamic school has the capabilities and services to support the student's IEP, the parent of the child would officially "deny" the IEP from the public school. Fortunately, the private Islamic school can utilize and implement this same IEP for the student with clear goals and requirements provided.

Once the student has been appropriately identified with an exceptional learning need and has access to an IEP, the Islamic school can begin the process of implementation. Our Islamic schools have to become better equipped with providing these necessary services to the

exceptional learners in our community and this process should cause our schools to act immediately. Providing special education services is a very delicate process and it involves a lot of legal implications. So, it is upon us to do the necessary research and invest in an adequate special education program for our students. It is time for us to unite and develop objectives and goals for our exceptional learners to master Quran and Arabic, with appropriate support. I have personally been involved in research involving supporting special education students with understanding the Quran and there is much to be done to support this area of research. With the help of Allah, we will continue to educate, support, and advance all of our students equally (insha'Allah).

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Speaker Biography

Sabria Mills is currently serving at Al Falah Academy as the Intervention Coordinator and Special Education Lead. She is the first to serve in this role at a private Islamic school in Georgia. Sabria Mills is currently Georgia certified in elementary and special education. Additionally, she currently holds an ESOL Georgia certification. She currently serves on the administrative team at Al Falah Academy and monitors the growth and success of students at risk. In addition to her role as an academic interventionist, she facilitates the RTI process by supporting and coaching teachers, screening and supporting exceptional learners, and creating data driven student goals. She is one of the forerunners in the recent launch of Al Falah Academy's first mild to moderate special education program, which services students with an IEP. She currently resides in Atlanta, GA with her husband and three daughters