



ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IS THE BEST POLICY FOR THE FUTURE

Areej Alsaysi, Taibah University, Saudi Arabia

This study investigates the need to develop alternative education programs in Saudi Arabia and indicate the most suitable ones for the Saudi context. The study has adopted a qualitative methodology and incorporates interviews with faculty members at the Faculty of Education in Taibah University (Madinah, Saudi Arabia). The results gleaned from the study reveal that all study participants agree on the real need for alternative education programs in Saudi Arabia. However, some participants expressed concerns about the suitability of the Saudi context for such programs. The interviewees have also indicated their eagerness to see such programs implemented in the country as they would provide an excellent environment that meets student needs. Accordingly, the current study puts forward a demand for educationalists and relevant decision makers in Saudi Arabia to allow for this critical improvement in the country's education system through the smooth integration of alternative education programs.

Introduction

The world Education system still suffers from high student drop-out rates. One example is the United States, as mentioned by Smith and Thomson (2014): every year approximately one in three students drops out of high school. This is an escalating problem, especially in light of growing concerns about economic and social challenges. High drop-out and low graduation rates, as well as an increase in discipline problems and other problems which prevent student education, show that the traditional school system is not very effective. Consequently, alternative programs have been developed to respond to this problem and support student needs. In a national survey, 64% districts were reported to offer at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students: the programs served 646,500 students in the United States (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014), and reflects a sharp trend toward alternative education. Even though many students trend to public education, alternative education is often more helpful to students due to its flexibility, and the strong programs offered. Porowski and others define Alternative education programs as educational activities that fall outside the traditional K-12 curriculum, and serve students who are at risk of school failure. Because individual states or school districts define and determine the features of their alternative education programs, programs may differ in key characteristics, such as target population, setting, services, and structure.

Whereas public education is more suitable for students and is system-focused, alternative education is more effective at meeting student needs and is focused on the student. The curricula of these schools are different because they meet different learning needs. For

example, different alternative programs may be designed for students with disabilities, high-risk health behaviours, or those seeking vocational and technical education (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). Furthermore, alternative education begins with diagnostic steps that identify academic skills. Following this, the teaching begins, as does learning. Meeting the student wherever they are ensures that the programs are tailored to suit the needs of the individual student (Schargel Consulting Group, 2011). In this way, alternative education is more adaptive to students, in accordance with both their state and academic level.

While traditional education offers many programs, alternative education has the opportunity for students to get a better education and have a more positive experience. Alternative education offers a variety of environments, allowing students to succeed as Porowski and others have stated. In addition, there are many ways to become educated, as well as many types of environments and structures within which this may occur (2014; p.2). This type of education gives children a chance to better their knowledge and an opportunity to learn with students from different backgrounds (Thompson, 2012). Moreover, while public schools are larger, alternative schools stay relatively small and have smaller class sizes that allow students to receive more attention from teachers (Williams & Neal, 2015). Therefore, Alternative education is the best way to get a good education; in a good environment for those have had obstacles prevent them from attaining an education.

Also, alternative education helps students experiment educationally, under the right conditions. These alternatives make education more popular and trendy for many students all over the world because alternative education is specifically designed for individual students' needs.

Arguments for alternative education programs

There are multiple reasons to establish alternative education. Among them are:

Repetition rates at all educational levels

According to a study by Akhter (2011) on the Saudi environment, there is an increased repetition rate at different educational levels, especially in high schools, and it is higher in the girl's education system than the boy's. Also, the rate in elementary schools is 0.35% higher among girls than boys. This indicates that there are educational challenges in the traditional education system which requires solutions.

Table 1: Repetition rates in the traditional education system

Repetition rates at different education levels		
Educational levels	Female	Male
Elementary	2.20%	1.85%
Secondary	1.41%	1,75%
High School	4.48%	4.10%

Student dropout rate

The student dropout rate is one of the most important indicators reflecting the internal quantum efficiency of education systems. Akhter (2011) found the increase of the student dropout rate in Saudi to be higher among boys by 6.5%. The rate for girls is 7.81%, while 1.31% for boys. The rate was at its highest at a third grade level in secondary schools and it is 0.64% higher among boys than girls. Moreover, the rate sees a sharp increase among girls at a first-grade high school level, which may be due to marriages. All of this reflects the need for alternative education programs.

Table 2: Student dropout rates in the grades of education

Grades	Female	Male
S1	7.81%	1.31%
S2	3.7%	0.86%
S3	12.2%	11.56%
H1	10.18%	0%
H2	9.32%	0.96%
H3	0.04 %	4.09%

S = Secondary, H = High School

Illiteracy rate

Table 3: Illiteracy Rate (2005-2014)

Illiteracy Rate	Gender	
Youth Illiteracy rate ages 15-24	Female	1%
	Male	1%
Adult Illiteracy rate 15 and older	Female	9%
	Male	3%

Since literacy is an essential tool for individuals and states to be competitive in the new global knowledge economy, the higher the proportion of adults with low literacy proficiency, the slower the overall long-term GDP growth rate (Literacy Foundation, 2017), so a high illiteracy rate in adults as it appears in Table 3 gives a negative indicator for traditional education and points to a need for the application of alternative education programs.

Methodology

In line with the orientation of the current study, interviews have been used to advance a better understanding of the research context. Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study to achieve its objectives, and in line with Merriam (2002) who stresses that this interview type is beneficial for research, as it saves researchers both time and effort. In addition, there may well be an opportunity for interviewers to encourage respondents to provide full answers and to probe into any emerging topics which allows for broadening the scope of understanding an investigated phenomenon (Kvale, 1996). According to Chenail (2011), semi-structured interviews commence with closed questions about a certain topic and end with open-ended questions such as, how, when, where and why; offering in-depth information which structured interviews cannot provide. Interviews were conducted in order to explore the

viability of the Saudi educational environment for the application of this type of education with 12 faculty members in the Department of Educational Administration, Department of Instruction Methods, and the Department of Education Technology at Taibah University in order to obtain varied views of the research subjects. The participating sample was selected following principles of “purposeful sampling” where more informative participants were given priority. The interview questions were as follows:

1. To what extent does the Saudi educational system need Alternative Education Programs?
2. What are the obstacles that the implementation of Alternative Education Programs in the Saudi context faces?
3. What are the implementation capabilities of Alternative Education Programs in the Saudi context?

Transcriptions of the interviews were done and the data was cross-checked with researchers’ notes and audio recordings before being analyzed preliminarily. Following this, the researcher undertook more interviews in the field. This took place in line with Merriam’s recommendation (2002) that transcription and preliminary analyses cannot be left until all interviews are complete. The majority of the respondents supported having alternative education programs in Saudi Arabia to make for a much-needed leap in quality of education, and they have also emphasized the vital need for such programs in creating a rich learning environment and solving problems faced by disadvantaged groups in the society through improved quality of education. The answers provided by the study interviewees revolved around the following four issues:

First issue

The Saudi education system’s need for alternative education programs was reiterated, as the majority of the study respondents asserted that the Saudi education system needs this kind of education, or as referred to by (Dr. F), “the presence of this type of education leads to educational justice.” Dr. SH, another interviewee, considered alternative education “an efficiency tool” and stated that this type of education contributes to raising the level of education and reducing drop-out rates. On the other hand, Dr. A, another interviewee, considered alternative education a vehicle of educational innovation, stressed that educational innovation will be required in the future and that school buildings may vanish while the system shifts to an alternative one. Dr. B, considered alternative education a mechanism of knowledgeable societies which do not exclude anyone from education, and a means of absorbing crime, extremism and ignorance through the creation of an educated Saudi populace. Dr. AM confirmed that the need for this type of education during the age of technical advancements and student reliance on mobile phone technology is increasing. According to her, alternative education could be utilized through the use of mobile phones, for instance, as she has attended a workshop whilst undertaking her household duties. Therefore, alternative education could indeed be enriching educational curricula. It may include extracurricular activities or classroom instruction, and thus becomes integrated with

the curriculum or provides extra support for it. This type of arrangement may be considered creditable for teachers in their job performance evaluations. Added to this, Dr. H claimed that the overcrowding of students in classrooms, an uncomfortable school environment, and inadequate infrastructure hinders students' reception of traditional education, which necessitates the need for renewal and a search for more modern educational methods. He also added that rates of student drop-out, failure, learning difficulties and underachievement in addition to the lack of students' willingness to stay in the classroom for extended periods of time are among the reasons for a call for alternative education programs (AEP). This type of education can also provide the type of future that saves time, effort and money.

On the other hand, opponents of these calls, such as Dr. B, consider the Saudi context unsuitable for accommodating alternative education and argue that there are many obstacles that face the implementation of such programs. Dr. H also stressed that Saudi Arabia is not ready for this type of education and there are a number of challenges that must be addressed for the application of AEP. However, Dr. AM confirmed that such programs already exist, even though they are not considered official or recognized as such. For example, there are free virtual public education classes created by teachers who "rent" a virtual classroom for a month. A number of teachers have set up virtual classes, but unfortunately these have not been recognized by school principals and supervisors –those responsible for teachers' evaluations. This has led to the painful reality that in cases where a diligent teacher offers this kind of education to his students, it will not be recognized or supported and the teacher will be told that this alternative form of education shall take place outside the school context.

Second issue

Stakeholders benefiting from alternative education programs were discussed with the study respondents. Dr. BR mentioned that the main reason for the existence of alternative education is to provide education in line with the individual characteristics of certain categories of students. For instance, all the respondents in the current study considered this kind of education fruitful in serving students with education difficulties or disabled (physically and mentally) students, and students with behavioural problems. Dr. R added that there are a number of students who may pose a danger to other students and thus they may further their education through this kind of education. According to Dr. SH, AEP is the best alternative for students with behavioural problems, or those with an imbalanced psychological status as Dr. R has argued. In addition, famous students, students with criminal records who may pose a real threat on their fellows, or those who have been deprived of education because of school punishment can benefit from this type of education. Moreover, Dr. M pointed out that alternative education has long been implemented in the USA and Canada. Dr. AM added that there is an increasing need for this type of education for advanced students as well. It is also needed by students with special needs, including the disabled and people students. AEP can be beneficial for all of these student categories. In a similar vein, Dr. SH states that this kind of approach can be very helpful for women who have been deprived of education for various reasons. Both Dr. AM and Dr. A agreed that AEP is consistent with the privacy of Saudi women in particular. This viewpoint was endorsed by Dr. A who stated that this type of

education is commensurate with the nature of Saudi women. Dr. O also went further to mention that AEP can benefit any student who has been deprived of education for one reason or another.

A number of respondents have also confirmed that the geographic factor is an obstacle to many students, so the alternative education can indeed contribute to solving this. Dr. O, for instance, stated that the distance of school from home is an obstacle to some students' education. This viewpoint is supported by Dr. H and Dr. SH who state that the remote location of some educational centres does hinder student enrolment. Dr. AM added that by giving even ordinary students (who account for the largest proportion), a new active online, program, an AEP can take the form of extra-curricular activities. They can also benefit from the school merging project published on the Ministry of Education's website, which is adopted in order to contribute to the enrichment of virtual learning in educational processes for the students of such schools.

Third issue

Barriers to the application of alternative education programs (AEP) in the Saudi context have also been addressed in more depth. The study interviewees listed a number of obstacles that hinder AEP implementation. These are as follows:

1. *Resistance to change*: A number of respondents said that resistance to change is a prominent feature in the Arab community, especially within the Saudi community and that it may be the first obstacle to the application of such educational innovations. To Dr. A, the Arab administrative mentality tends to resist change. Dr. HZ added that there ought to be some resistance and went on to argue that the level of resistance within Arab societies including the Saudi society is higher than other counterpart communities. In addition, this kind of education might be resisted by the leadership, since, according to Dr. AM, educational leadership is not sufficiently equipped to implement AEP.
2. *Societal culture* is one of the most influential factors in the educational process, both in positive and negative terms. The respondents of the current study agreed that Saudi society and culture are not so open and thus will not, according to Dr. HZ, accept this form of education, which as a result may adversely affect the application of AEP. This viewpoint was echoed by Dr. B who argued that parents are not prepared to accept this type of education as valid. Dr. O also added that Saudi society's rejection of this kind of education is a major obstacle. This viewpoint was supported by Dr. H who stated that the most important barriers to the application of AEP are the local society itself and the lack of student and teacher acceptance of the notion. To further explain this, Dr. AM added that it is a shame that we still look at alternative education as a privilege rather than an educational necessity. She also added that the lack of acceptance amongst parents with regards to this type of education – as some consider it 'playing' as opposed to education – does hinder its application. In addition, families may not accept AEP, as according to Dr. H, Saudi families are not ready for this kind of education and that the

educational level and the number of members of the family itself has an influence. This viewpoint has been supported by Dr. F who stated that the average number of children in a Saudi family is five, a reality that makes it difficult for families to apply this kind of education. He also added that social relations in Saudi society negatively affect this kind of education, whilst Dr. H on the other hand did not see this element as an obstacle.

3. *Learner autonomy* is one of the important elements of success of this pattern according to the majority of study participants who have also agreed that the Saudi student will have to bear the responsibility if he/she applied AEP. Dr. A added that the Saudi student is competent enough to handle alternative education if the opportunity arises. This viewpoint was further endorsed by Dr. R who argued that Saudi students need someone to understand their needs, and he stressed that there are many circumstances Saudi students. Dr. H also expressed similar ideas and stated that students will succeed in alternative education if the path to them trying it is cleared and their self-confidence is enhanced.
4. *Infrastructure deficiency*: All of the study participants agreed that infrastructure in the Saudi context is an obstacle to AEP implementation. Dr. R mentioned that the lack of proper infrastructure and technological facilities negatively influences the implementation process. She also added that there is an extreme shortage of technical support, which AEP requires. Dr. H also asserted that the lack of technical facilities including Internet access in rural schools hinders the application of AEP.
5. *Inadequate teacher qualifications*: The study respondents agreed that the inadequacy of teacher qualifications negatively affects teachers' ability to utilize AEP. Dr. AM, for instance, argues that teachers are not qualified enough to use this kind of education. In a similar vein, Dr. H asserted that teachers do not have sufficient experience to implement AEP and that teachers are unable to design virtual classes. Dr. O also confirmed this and went on to argue that more manpower in the teaching profession is needed to implement AEP. In addition, Dr. R stated that teachers are not qualified to implement this kind of education.
6. *Administrative and technical staff*: Some respondents have pointed out that a lack of sufficient administrative and technical staff in the Saudi educational context affects the implementation of AEP. Dr. AM mentioned that there is an extreme shortage of qualified administrative and technical staff. This issue was also further endorsed by Dr. R.

Fourth issue

Conditions for the implementation of AEP in the Saudi context were also touched upon in the study interviews. The study respondents mentioned that this kind of education requires the following:

1. *Infrastructure*: The study respondents asserted the necessity for developing the existing infrastructure in order to ensure accommodation of this kind of education. Dr. AM, for instance, argued that there must be a very powerful infrastructure that comprises high-

speed telecommunications and Internet at a reasonable cost. In addition, there is a desperate need for funding given that AEP requires expensive devices, as mentioned by Dr. HZ who also added that the provided materials must accommodate this kind of education. This viewpoint was echoed by Dr. F who mentioned that the provision of adequate infrastructure is necessary for the success of AEP given that the level of technology usage within Saudi society is relatively advanced.

2. *Increased awareness:* Dr. AM stated that awareness must be increased with regards to AEP culture until the whole society is convinced of its importance and only then can it be publicized with both visual and audiovisual aids. She also added that spreading this kind of awareness amongst society is important before implementation so as to ensure success. Dr. H also added that there is an extreme need for awareness raising within society. Dr. HZ also added that we must inform the local community about the levels of failure, drop-out, illiteracy and the numbers of deprived students amongst so as to reflect the importance of AEP implementation as a suitable environment that works on tackling these issues.
3. *Legislation:* Most study respondents considered the existence of a clear and decisive legislation one of the most important elements of a successful application of AEP. Dr. HZ, for instance, called for strong legislation to make this kind of education successful. For instance, distance learning has not succeeded in the Arab context due to a lack of legislation. Dr. A also strongly affirmed the need for a rigorous and critical system and the presence of stringent legislation. This viewpoint was also supported by Dr. HZ who stressed the need for mandatory legislation aimed at parents in the form of financial penalties, as well as more positive incentive policies for them, such as certificates that are not inferior to formal education certifications, together with the creation of a system of further incentives. This insightful opinion was supported by Dr. F. Dr. H also mentioned that AEP requires imposing new regulations and changes in current policies and regulations. Dr. F also confirms that there must be specific standards and regulated tests together with confidence on the part of senior leadership. In addition, Dr. AM mentioned that this type of education must be recognized and that laws shall be enacted and taken into account when evaluating teachers so as to ensure their usage of this type of education. Dr. R also sees that AEP must be imposed on administrative staff and that laws must be enacted to ensure full implementation.
4. *Teachers:* The study respondents agreed that the teacher holds a primary role in the implementation of AEP. Dr. O, for instance, stated that the success of this type of education depends on teachers and their efficiency. Dr. HZ also added that the provision of qualified teachers to deal with this kind of education is important to the success of its application. In addition, Dr. O stressed the need to focus on rehabilitation and training for teachers and professional development of teachers' educational capabilities and compatibilities. Dr. R also said that teachers should be trained to apply this kind of education and she sees the need to make use of teachers' free time during school hours in the development of his abilities and the implementation of such educational innovations. Training Dr. AM mentioned that available manpower should

be trained in the implementation of this type of education, including student training supervisors and educationalists. Dr. HZ confirmed this and pointed out the need for coaching a team of technicians and administrators with high efficiency to support teachers and the whole educational process. This viewpoint was endorsed by Dr. R who said that there is a great need for administrators, experts and technicians to implement AEP. Dr. R also added that the organization of training courses for parents as well as students, administrators and leaders would be needed. She summed this up by pointing to a need for comprehensive training centres.

Results of study

The most important results of the study:

- The results of the study reveal that all study participants agree on the real need for alternative education programs in Saudi Arabia.
- Alternative education could indeed be enriching and at the heart of educational curricula., the two elements that our society needs.
- All the respondents in the current study consider this kind of education fruitful in serving students with education difficulties or disabled (physically and mentally) students, and students with behavioural problems.
- The study interviewees listed a number of obstacles that hinder AEP implementation, including: resistance to change, society and culture, learner autonomy, infrastructure deficiency, inadequate teacher qualifications, and untrained administrative and technical staff.

The study respondents mentioned that this kind of education requires the following:

1. The development of existing infrastructure in order to ensure the accommodation of this kind of education.
2. Increased awareness with regards to AEP culture until all of society is convinced of its importance.
3. The existence of clear and decisive legislation is one of the most important elements of the successful application of AEP.
4. The provision of qualified teachers to deal with this kind of education is important to the success of its application.

Recommendations

- Apply alternative education programs in Saudi Arabia as this will provide an excellent environment that meets students' needs.
- Educators and relevant decision makers in Saudi Arabia work on improvement in the country's education system through the smooth integration of alternative education programs.

Conclusion

The advantages of alternative education programs are that students receive individualized attention from staff, which contributes to their academic achievement in Saudi Arabia especially for students who have been prevented from receiving an education as a result of different obstacles. The disadvantages of AEP are the obstacles that hinder its implementation. However, there are numerous requirements that must be fulfilled in order for these programs to succeed. I propose that additional AEP research needs to be done that looks at parent involvement, the implications that the program has on the home life of the students who participate, and how to expand on the support systems available to students.

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