Responding to pupil differences in Oman: A study of two primary schools

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of PhD in the Faculty of Humanities

2017

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SCHOOL OF ENVIRONMENT, EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT
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**GLOSSARY**

**Muscat**: Capital of Oman.

**Basic education**: the formal school system in Oman which divides schools into three levels, cycle one schools (grades 1-4 where boys and girls study in the same classroom), cycle two (grades 5-10 where boys and girls study in separate schools), post basic education (grades 11-12 where boys and girls study in separate schools).

**Government schools**: schools built by the Ministry of Education and offering free education to all learners within them. Government schools in this study refer to basic education schools.

**Expatriate**: is any non-Omani individual who lives in Oman for work purposes, either in the government or private sectors.

**Zanzibari**: Omani citizen who has Zanzibari origins and speaks the Swahili language besides Arabic.

**Baluchi**: Omani citizen who has a Baluchi background and speaks the Baluchi language.

**Orphanage**: a government institution which is under the umbrella of the Ministry of Social Development. It includes abandoned children mainly who are born for unknown parents.

**Integration Classroom**: is special unit within some government schools that are allocated for pupils with hearing or mental disabilities. The unit has a special education classroom, teachers and helper.

**Learning Difficulty Program**: a program implemented in all basic education schools (cycles one and two) aiming at providing adult support, for pupils with numeracy and literacy difficulties, to reach the government standards.

**Learning Difficulty Teacher**: a special education teacher or a classroom teacher with two weeks training to implement strategies aiming at supporting pupils with numeracy and literacy difficulties. They implement strategies and tests that are centrally designed.
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BE</td>
<td>Basic Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EFA</td>
<td>Education for All</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDEA</td>
<td>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>Inclusive Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEPs</td>
<td>Individualised Educational Plans (IEPs)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Learning Difficulty</td>
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<td>LDT</td>
<td>Learning Difficulty Teacher</td>
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<td>MDGs</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoSD</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>SDGs</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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<td>UPE</td>
<td>Universalise Primary Education</td>
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Word Count Excluding the References, Figures, Tables, and Appendices is: 87,928
Abstract

This thesis explores how the Omani primary school system responds to pupils’ differences. The study took place within a centralised school system, which has a high level of government commitment to meet the international agenda with regard to Education for All and, more recently, the Sustainable Development Goals. Influenced by the thinking of the Index for Inclusion, the study generated a series of ‘signposts’, which were grouped under the themes of policy, practice and culture, which guided data collection, data management and the presentation of the findings.

Qualitative data were generated via a multi-method approach that included documentary analysis, interviews with senior policy makers, school administrators, teachers, pupils, and parents. Data collection also included general and classroom observations, as well as a participatory photography exercise with eight pupils who were believed to be facing forms of exclusion. These data were analysed using thematic analysis, informed by literature relevant to the study focus, the series of signposts, and the researcher’s insider knowledge as an experienced member of the Ministry of Education in Oman.

The findings confirm that current national policies in Oman are committed to ensuring that all children have access to schools. However, despite these good intentions, there are various context-specific barriers that impede the system from responding to pupil differences. These barriers were identified as stemming from a confusion in understanding about certain key concepts arising from international trends, such as ‘all’, ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘quality’. This confusion, combined with certain structural barriers related to communication, collaboration and leadership, makes it difficult to implement international thinking across the system. In addition, attitudes and assumptions about the abilities of some groups of learners proved to be further major barriers when responding to pupils’ differences. Together, these barriers create a context of inequality of opportunity for various pupils and appear to restrict their future life chances in comparison to those of their classmates.

Drawing on these findings, a context-specific model of conceptual, structural and attitudinal barriers is proposed as a way forward for the Omani school system to better understand the barriers faced in responding to pupils’ differences. This model is seen as a contribution to knowledge with regard to responding to pupils’ differences that may be relevant to other national contexts, particularly those with centralised educational systems.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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Acknowledgments

This journey would not have been possible without the support and guidance of many people. First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to my advisor, Professor Mel Ainscow, for his keen interest in my work, and for having faith in me and my abilities. He selflessly gave his time, support and effort, and was always willing to go above and beyond. His help has been invaluable for successfully completing this PhD thesis.

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Susie Miles and Dr Alison Alborts for their continuous assistance and support throughout the process. Both were generous with their time and insightful comments, particularly in the final stages of the thesis.

This research would never have been possible without the support and understanding of the many participants in this enquiry, senior policy makers, classroom teachers, principals, pupils and parents, who generously offered me a window to their world. Their involvement in this research is highly appreciated.

My special thanks to my husband Ibraheem Alhosni who believed in me when I doubted myself and to my sons Ahmed and Abdulrahman for their prayers, encouragement, and patience throughout my studies.

Without the intellectual and emotional support of my many friends (in Manchester and Oman) this journey would not have been such a holistic experience. Even though I cannot list all my near and dear ones I am grateful to each one of them for their companionship. In here, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Lina Bashatah, my great and amazing friend who made this journey possible and who was always there for me whenever I needed her, and walked with me through many highs and lows. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to Dr. Shareefa Alharthy for her invaluable support and continuous assistance. I would like also to thank Jameela Alraisi, Dr. Dalal Alabassi, Dr. Sahar Abdulelah, Nasser Alhosni, Asma Alhosni and Nada Abdulelad for their support and continuous encouragement.

Thank you to my family and all those who prayed for me, believed in me and have been there during both the good and the bad times during this long process.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

A personal journey

As a person who was born with sickle cell disease in the early 1970s, when Oman was in its very early years of development and where access to hospitals and schools was very limited, the struggle and pain I and my family endured was indescribable. I remember that during my school years I struggled alone to prove to my family, classroom teachers and the surrounding community that I was as capable as others, regardless of my sickness. People had low expectations of me, as no one thought that a child with a chronic disease and frequent hospitalisation episodes would be capable of learning or even living like others.

In a school system that values and prioritises attainment and celebrates high achievers, I did not receive any support as a pupil with special needs and knew that getting high marks was the only way to prove that I was capable and self-confident. Yet, it was a hard task as I had to expend extra efforts to understand and catch up with all lessons that I missed because of frequent hospital admissions (I used to get very frequent sickle cell crisis episodes, sometimes once a month, which lasted between five and eight days) as classroom teachers did not consider helping me as part of their responsibilities. I remember that some classroom teachers used to call me ‘the sick student’ and many used this term to describe me in front of other pupils without considering how hurtful and embarrassing it was for me, although they did use me as an exemplar student. For example, many classroom teachers used to say that the ‘sick student’ is really smart, and the ‘sick student’ gets high marks. This title they gave me followed me wherever I went including within my surrounding community. In Oman, we have a culture of labelling, which is frequently used to undermine individuals and stigmatise them.

I knew that my only way to escape that under-estimation and stigma was to aim high and, therefore, I had to work hard and make multiple efforts to become one of the top pupils in my secondary school. In view of this, my decision to go to university was not an easy journey because the structure of the higher education system and its policies does not adequately recognise various pupils' differences; as a result, I faced various challenges and obstacles during my university years. With the frequent
admissions to hospital, I used to miss many lectures and that negatively impacted my attainment, as the system was again focusing on examinations and marks. Nevertheless, I was used to working alone and catching up with lessons that I missed once I had left hospital.

During my second year at university, I nearly gave up my studies as I had bad joint problems and had to use crutches for more than a year. The university building was not suitable for pupils with physical disabilities or even health issues. My classes were on the second floor, where there were no slopes or elevators. I had to walk with my crutches for very long distances and use stairs to reach classes that were distributed in different buildings. The daily struggle that I went through and the negative comments sent me into a deep depression and I was about to give up my studies. However, the support I received from an American lecturer changed my life – he had high expectations of me – he saw my capabilities - and believed that with some support, I would be able to achieve my degree.

My tutor took on the responsibility ‘to respond to my differences’. He communicated with and convinced all staff to move my classes to the first floor and arranged for them to be held in one building to make them accessible. On some occasions, and when it was difficult to move the classes from one building to another, he arranged transportation and would travel with me. When I was admitted to hospital, my tutor would come to see me with hand-outs and material to read.

**Responding to differences**

The high expectations and support of an individual teacher made a huge difference in my life, as he supported me to complete my degree and to graduate. Since then, I have strongly believed in the role of classroom teachers in supporting the learning of their pupils and the positive impact they can make in their lives.

My personal interest and experience as an individual with special needs impacted my professional experience where I graduated from university as a teacher with a strong belief that all pupils can achieve if provided with suitable support and that my role as a teacher can shape their lives and learning experiences. However, during my three years of teaching I was unable to support various pupils because I lacked the skills and knowledge relating to inclusion/exclusion or the various strategies that classroom teachers can use to respond to differences, which limited my abilities to make a
difference or prevent various pupils (including some with sickle cell disease and Thalassemia) from dropping out of school.

In 2006 I received my Master’s degree in curriculum design and I moved to work at the central offices at the Ministry of Education (MoE) as an educational researcher. In 2008, I was assigned to follow up the special education department projects and that was based on my personal interest in the area of special educational needs. Visiting special schools and sitting with pupils, parents and staff informed me about the various challenges pupils, as well as staff, face. Therefore, I decided to travel abroad to undertake my PhD in special education with an initial plan to look at and how to improve the integration classrooms.

At the beginning of my PhD course, I was not aware of inclusive education and the big debate in that area. During my first year at the University of Manchester and while I was doing my MSc, inclusive education, equity and social justice were the main topics we discussed during the classes and that was the first time I had the opportunity to read about and discuss them in depth. On the course I heard, for the first time, the argument that inclusion should form the core philosophy of national educational developments where its main concept is welcoming and celebrating differences, which is different to that which I experienced in Oman. Information about inclusive education and the knowledge I gained during my first year of postgraduate study motivated me to think about ways to foster inclusive education in the Omani school system and to identify the barriers that are hindering various pupils from attending, participating and achieving in primary schools. This therefore became my research agenda.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to understand how Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences, especially those identified as being ‘different’, by conducting in-depth exploration of two Omani primary schools. The schools were selected from within the Omani centralised school system, where policy is largely dictated to classroom teachers (see appendix 3). In this study, pupil differences refer to the ‘self-evident differences between primary-aged children. These include differences in attainment, gender, ethnic background, family and social background, interests and aptitudes, social skills, amongst many others, which have direct implications to
students' attainment and which play a major role in shaping educational experiences and outcomes, and often calling for policy and practice responses’ (Ainscow, M., Conteh, J., Dyson, A. and Gallanaugh, F. (2007).

This study is based on the argument that responding to pupils’ differences cannot be achieved through individualised approaches, but requires whole-school system reform. In this approach, reforms are made at national level, as well as at the school and classroom levels, to ensure that schools are both equitable and excellent. This approach concentrates on the kind of schooling pupils are offered access to, as well as focusing on what happens in schools to which access is granted. According to this approach, those within schools are requested to develop practices that can support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners. Such a process is described as continuous, including the identification of good practice to respond to learners’ diversity, where inclusive education is an approach to education embodying certain values including equity, participation, community, respect for diversity, and sustainability. This continuous process also includes identifying and removing the ‘barriers’ to the presence, participation and achievement of all pupils.

These ideas are consistent with the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), a school review instrument that is used in many parts of the world (see appendix 1). This being the case, I chose to adopt the thinking behind this instrument to generate a series of signposts for my study, using these to explore how Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences. The signposts supported the data collection and data management, and helped me in presenting the findings. These signposts were grouped under the themes of policy, practice and culture.

The research addresses a gap identified in the literature concerning the response to pupils’ differences in centralised systems, particularly in the case of Omani primary schools.

**Research questions**

The study addressed the following questions:

1- How do Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences?
2- What are the key challenges facing schools with regard to responding to pupils’ differences?

Data collection included content analysis, interviews, observation, and participatory photography with eight pupils from both schools. Analysing the collected data informed my understanding of how national educational policies, school policies and practices, and attitudes affect pupil inclusion. It also equipped me to propose a typology of barriers that, I suggest, are resulting in the marginalisation of some pupils within Omani primary schools.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is organised in ten chapters. In chapter one, the research positionality and study purpose are presented. In chapter two, international literature relevant to the development in thinking around education as a basic human right has been traced back to 1948 and reviewed. The chapter also overviews the frequent efforts made to transform the educational systems and accordingly achieve Education For All (EFA) and inclusion through the adoption of a school-based approach where those within schools engage in a process of collecting and engaging with various forms of evidence to stimulate creation of more inclusive practices. Chapter three presents a literature review which examines some of the most recent and noteworthy publications discussing the concept of inclusive education and the practical ways by which schools can move towards more inclusiveness. In chapter four, the Omani context and the Omani government commitments in providing education for all pupils are described. Chapter five describes the approach and methodology employed in this study together with relevant ethical considerations and the design of the data collection methods.

Chapters six to ten present the analysis and findings, where chapter six presents data analysis from the senior policy makers and I then move to show the impact of these findings on schools’ policies, practices and cultures which are presented in chapters seven and eight. The information is generated through observations, interviews, participatory photography with eight pupils, and analysis of documents. Chapter nine compares contrasts and interprets the findings from both schools as well as from the government level. It also focuses on presenting the identified barriers to the
participation of some pupils, and the resources that might be drawn on to overcome these barriers. Finally, chapter ten sets out a statement of the study’s contribution to knowledge and its specific significance to the Omani educational context, as well as to the field of inclusive education within educational settings in general.
CHAPTER 2
INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

Introduction

This chapter locates my study in the context of international educational developments. In so doing, it clarifies some key ideas that were important for my research in Oman. Over the last 30 years, these developments have involved a series of major efforts in relation to the theme, ‘Education for All’ (EFA), during which time thinking about this issue has changed. With this in mind, I trace developments in international thinking, noting the efforts made over time to ensure that the notion of EFA really does apply to everyone: in other words, driven by the principle of inclusion. For this purpose, I use the framework provided by Opertti, R., Walker, Z., and Zhang, Y. (2014) which traces stages of development in relation to the idea of making EFA inclusive. This framework is particularly helpful in that it signposts the key international developments that have taken place.

Stages of development

Figure 1 outlines the stages of development mapped by Opertti and his colleagues. In what follows I use this framework to summarise international trends in thinking.

Figure 1: The evolving journey to inclusion
(Source: Opertti et al., 2014, p.151)
Human Rights-based Perspective (1948 onwards). The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights was announced as the first United Nations (UN) declaration to formally recognise the rights of all people to have certain civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and development rights, regardless of any differences between individuals.

With regards to education, Article 26 of the Declaration was the first international recognition that all human beings have the right to education; therefore, educating all learners then became an issue of social justice (Rioux, 2007, cited in Opertti et al., 2014). According to Opertti et al. (2014), this rights-based perspective of education was:

*the first step in overcoming categorical approaches, and therefore considered inclusion as a guiding principle so as to ensure that the goals, expectations and needs of all learners are met. It also reaffirms that each student has the right to access, profit from and enjoy a relevant education.* (p. 152)

Response to Children with Special Needs (1990 onwards). This calls for the provision of education as a basic human right, continued where women and the poor were continuing to face exclusion from education. To respond to this, participants from 155 countries and representatives of 160 governmental and non-governmental agencies met in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, for a world conference on Education for All (EFA). Here, education was viewed as an essential element able to tackle poverty, stabilise and develop the economies of developing countries accordingly, and thus democratise their political structures (Buchert, 1995). The conference aimed to universalise primary education to benefit all children worldwide (UNESCO, 1990). National governments were given full responsibility to meet the six stated goals and were further encouraged to set realistic national and local targets within (but not necessarily incorporating all of them) the Jomtien target dimensions.

This conference was described as a landmark in the development of thinking about inclusive education because it acknowledged that large numbers of vulnerable and marginalised groups of learners were excluded from education systems worldwide and represented a vision of education that was far broader than that of schooling (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Miles and Singal, 2009).
The discourse of inclusive education as a basic human right was given international impetus by the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994). The Salamanca Statement reinforced the idea that every child has a fundamental right to education, and further reiterated the idea of mainstreaming pupils with special needs into regular schools along with the prioritisation of targeted excluded groups linked to ethnic, gender, cultural, socio-economic, and migrant factors (Opertti et al., 2014). Accordingly, policy makers started to show more interest in wider issues of social inclusion/exclusion (Armstrong, D., Armstrong, A.C. and Spandagou, I. (2011), which led to the questioning of the logic underlying separate systems (Singal, 2004) and the real benefits of educating children through different provisions or in special schools (Dunn, 1968). Therefore, researchers started to call for changes and improvements in segregated provisions (Semmel, M. I., Abernathy, T. V., Butera, G., and Lesar, S. 1991), where the ideas of the right for all to learn in the ‘same environments’ was first presented when Peters and Oliver (2009) stressed that ‘all students “physically” belong in the same learning environment and each individual has the right and opportunity to actively participate in a community of their peers’ (p. 273). Nevertheless, the Salamanca Statement failed to explicate the mechanisms for how marginalised pupils should be included (Miles and Singal, 2009). This in turn negatively impacted the EFA agenda, where several groups of learners remained excluded and marginalised in various countries (Farrell and Hartwell, 2008).

**Response to Marginalised Groups (2000 Onwards).** Ten years after Jomtien, and regardless of the slight success made in relation to universalising access to education, different forms of exclusion still existed and pupils were excluded and marginalised on the basis of language, ethnicity, socio-economic status and religion. It was also evident that the quality of learning and the acquisition of human values and skills fell far short of the aspirations and needs of individuals and societies (UNESCO, 2000, p. 8). This resulted in delegates to the World Education Forum meeting once again in Dakar in 2000 with the objective to reaffirm the Jomtien agenda so as to ensure the right for education for all and accordingly adopt the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which aim to:
ensure that by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

It was believed that the new agenda came to focus on two aspects of education: universal primary education to be achieved by 2015; and progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women through the elimination of gender disparity in primary and secondary education, which needed to be achieved by 2005 (King, 2007).

Various concerns were raised about the EFA agenda, which was described as narrowing its focus to the second MDG, ‘ensuring that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015’ while overlooking the issues about attendance of children with impairments (Miles and Singal, 2009). In addition, the EFA agenda was also criticised for directing its focus more towards guaranteeing access-oriented education of children than to ensuring their participation and achievement (UNESCO, 2000) with insufficient attention paid to inclusion and equity (Burnett, 2008). This focus on access meant that all learners would have to fit into an unchanged school infrastructure, culture, values, system and curricula (Apie, 2016). In this approach, schooling is seen as a place rather than an appropriate delivery of educational provisions for the children placed in the school (Peters, 2004).

Since the Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000, governments and UN agencies have monitored progress towards the achievement of MDGs at global, regional and national levels; therefore, for each of the eight goals, there are 18 associated targets and no less than 48 indicators (King, 2007). Such indicators are used to determine progress across each target and goal (Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein, 2010) and thus enable the acquisition of ‘comparable’ scores from different countries. These indicators were recognised as important, particularly to donor agencies, which shaped the educational agenda and accordingly set the preferred benchmarking until 2015 (King, 2007). This reflected a tendency to favour more measurable quantitative goals, which took precedence over other issues and the entire series of qualitative factors that were believed essential in achieving the stated goals, such as ‘capacity development for effective, democratic and accountable governance, the protection of human rights and respect for the rule of law’ (Clemens, M. A., Kenny C. J. and Moss, T. J., 2007).
This numerical concern about indicators resulted in a narrowing of the concept of quality (the sixth goal) to an input-based approach, where school quality is assured through focusing on class size, infrastructure adequacy and teacher qualifications, among other factors, with little or no emphasis on actual pupils' learning (Filmer, D., Hasan, A. and Pritchett, L. 2006). In addition, the success of individual educational achievement is measured against a set of predetermined, norm-related standards and, therefore, success and quality education may be achieved by achieving proficiency levels in academic subjects of reading and mathematics (Peters and Oliver, 2009).

This standard-based approach was criticised for concentrating on a narrow view of attainment as evidence for quality and educational reform, and some believed it had the tendency to discourage the use of teaching approaches that are responsive to pupils diversity (Ainscow, M., Dyson, A. & Kerr, K. 2006b), whilst also creating various forms of inequalities (Rouse and Florian, 1996). The view was also held that it was one of the key causes of increased exclusion in schools through categorising, selecting and grouping pupils based on notions of similarities and differences; this further encouraged schools to welcome ‘high achievers’ and support them to stay at schools and proceed to higher education whilst neglecting the ‘low achievers’ and their needs, and similarly ignoring the different environments and their associated factors that might affect achievement such as the socio-economic status of students (Kerr and Raffo, 2016, p.2).

It has also been argued that schools under pressure to raise standards tend to ‘hide’ their lowest-achieving pupils (Peters and Oliver, 2009; Rouse and McLaughlin, 2007); such practices tend to promote a culture that blames, stigmatises and excludes pupils and their classroom teachers and establishes mechanisms that guarantee segregation, retention or dropping-out of school (Peters and Oliver, 2009). This principle of the higher standards of attainment and the narrow understanding of quality and attainment, as evidenced by national literacy, numeracy and science tests, negatively affected the progress towards inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006a), which has been outlined as a core principle to achieving EFA:

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\text{a fundamental philosophy throughout UNESCO’s programs and the guiding principle for the development of EFA (UNESCO, 2002, p. 17).}
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A number of studies have identified significant tensions as schools attempt to become both more inclusive and to provide large areas of the population with an equitable
high-quality education in decent neighbourhoods for all children (Peters and Oliver 2009), and where these features of the standards agenda are responded to as necessary (Ainscow et al., 2006a; Black-Hawkins, K., Florian, L., and Rouse, M. 2007). Therefore, the suggestion was made that the post-2015 agenda should focus on reaffirming the notion of education as a fundamental human right, where EFA, representing more than just access for all, is concerned with the participation and achievement of all, particularly those groups who traditionally have been excluded and left behind, and where the retention of learners is strongly related to quality as well as equity (Barrett, 2009).

This concern about ensuring quality and equity led to the release of the EFA monitoring report in 2010 by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which emphasised the role of inclusive education as a condition for achieving EFA and building inclusive societies, and further highlighted the consequences associated with failing to place inclusive education at the centre of the EFA agenda:

...as a guiding principle to strengthen education for sustainable development, life-long learning for all and equal access of all levels of society to learning opportunities (UNESCO IBE, 2011. p.7).

**Transforming Education Systems (2005 Onwards).** Although the Dakar Conference was recognised as a step forward in visualising equity and quality as complementary foundations for achieving EFA through the adoption of inclusive concepts and the identification of groups that used to be left behind, the statement was made that ‘at the very moment when there is a growing interest in the issue of rights and inclusion, there is mounting evidence of exclusionary practices and disabling ideologies at different social contexts’ (Armstrong et al., 2000). Further, regardless of the numerous human rights declarations, exclusionary practices continue to be identified in many contexts as ‘declarations may create conditions for policy practices but they do not determine them’ (Vlachou, 2004, p. 3). This goes some way to explain the continued existence of different forms of exclusion in schools where it has remained clear that some children were marginalised regardless of their inclusion in mainstream settings simply because many of those settings sought to replicate the special school situations (Clark, C., Dyson, A., Millward, A., and Skidmore, D. 1997) and seemed to lack equity and quality (Eliadou, 2013).
To promote inclusion as a core principal to achieve the EFA agenda, UNESCO released guidelines for inclusion in 2005, which defined ‘inclusion’ as:

*a dynamic approach of responding positively to pupils’ diversity and of seeing individual differences not as a problem, but as an opportunity for enriching learning*’ (UNESCO, 2005, p. 12).

This view of diversity entails changing the educational system generally, whilst also personalising it, where diversity is recognised as an entrance point to valuing all children through an equal lens (Booth, 2011) and as a core to achieving inclusion, where the groups most at risk of marginalisation and underachievement are prioritised (UNESCO, 2005, p. 16). Building upon this vision of inclusion, the World Conference on Inclusive Education emphasised that: ‘the move towards inclusion is a gradual one that should be based on clearly articulated principles, which address system-wide development’ (UNESCO, 2008; p. 31); therefore, inclusion is described by Peters (2004) as a core philosophy underlying UNESCO’s programmes and it serves as a guiding principle for educating all children in the future (UNESCO, 2002; 2008; 2009).

Following this conference, several meetings and policy discourse events were held at inter-regional, regional and national levels, focusing on the need to rethink vision, cultures, policies and practices of the educational systems whilst also understanding inclusion as a key to democratising education and society, and as a model of the type of democracy one would like to see throughout and across society (Thomazet, 2009, cited in Opertti et al., 2014). Importantly, this approach involved moving away from viewing inclusion as associated with groups and categories to a more holistic perspective which was concerned about learning how to live with difference and, indeed, learning how to learn from difference (Ainscow, 2014, p. 55). Therefore, inclusive education is increasingly perceived internationally as a discipline grounded within the realm of human rights approaches to education (Eliadou, 2013), and draws on values of equity (Ainscow et al., 2007; Blackmore, 2006) and social justice (Artiles, A.J., Harris-Murri,M., and Rostenberh,D. 2006; Gill and Chalmers, 2007). Such discourses reflect the United Nations’ global strategy to achieve “Education for All” (UNESCO, 2000; Lewin, 2007), which decrees that the right to education should be extended to all children.
Therefore, the suggestion was made that, in order to provide quality education, which is the core of the EFA agenda and, accordingly, to sustain the moves towards inclusive education and equity, policy makers need to develop sound understanding of the complexities and commonalities of regional and inter-regional challenges and issues, as well as of the implications of different social, political, economic and educational contexts (Opertti et al., 2014), with additional focus directed towards the process of challenging exclusion in schools and communities where threats to equity may arise (Dyson, 2004, cited in Miles and Singal, 2009). Furthermore, there is the additional suggestion of the need to ensure the continuous restructuring of most learning environments in an effort to improve learning opportunities for children of all abilities and backgrounds (Peters and Oliver, 2009; Unicef, 2000), in addition to viewing quality as a mirror of equity where shifts towards equity represent, in themselves, improvements in the quality of education (UNESCO, 2004).

Nevertheless, equity is not a straightforward concept; it is by implication problematic particularly with regard to the educational systems (Dyson, 2001). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2007 report No More Failures: Ten Steps to Equity in Education (OECD, 2007) views equity in relation to two dimensions: first, as a matter of fairness, which implies ensuring that personal and social circumstances—for example, gender, socio-economic status or ethnic origin—should not be an obstacle to achieving educational potential; and second, in relation to inclusion, which is about ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all. The report notes that the two dimensions are closely intertwined: ‘tackling school failure helps to overcome the effects of social deprivation which often causes school failure’ (p. 11). Ensuring equity entails acceptance of difference, negotiation of particular concerns of groups or individuals that are based on agreed-upon values, and the setting of rules and procedures that are not on the basis of majority rule or the intensity of one person’s view with regard to another. This is achieved through a process of reasoning and reflection, with consideration towards social change whilst setting rules and regulations (Unterhalter, 2009, p. 417).

The current international context

Regardless of the various efforts since 1990 to achieve the goals of EFA, the latest Global Monitoring Report of 2015 clearly states that several countries are still facing
challenges to meeting EFA, and particularly in the universalisation of educational objectives where several factors still pose challenges to this aim:

*In addition to poverty, barriers to education can include children’s gender, caste, ethnic and linguistic background, race, disability, geographical location and livelihood* (UNESCO, 2015, p.94).

Reaching the marginalised and ensuring equity and fairness were clearly stated in the report as real challenges facing various countries and impacting the achievement of EFA. Therefore, the Global Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which is a consultancy process aimed at developing a holistic vision of how best to reflect education, training and learning in the post-2015 agenda, emphasised that regardless of the structure the post-2015 agenda may take, education must claim an explicit goal focusing on equity, access and quality learning:

*Inequality remains a big challenge, and poverty and exclusion the major markers of disadvantage. Exclusion from education – including being left out of consideration in education related development planning, policies and budgeting – occurs most often among girls, rural and indigenous peoples, working children, children living in conflict, orphans, migrants and nomads, children with disabilities, persons living with HIV/AIDS, and persons living in conflict and disaster contexts, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), as well as linguistic and cultural minorities* (UNESCO, 2015, p.4).

The Incheon Declaration for the EFA, which was adopted on May 21, 2015 at the World Education Forum (WEF) held in Incheon, the Republic of Korea, constitutes the commitment of the education community to Education 2030. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognises the important role adopted by education as a main driver of development. It was stated that the Vision 2030 needs to achieve the following objective:

*To ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all* (UNESCO, 2015).

The delegates in this conference reaffirmed the vision of the worldwide movement for Education for All, initiated in Jomtien in 1990, and reiterated in Dakar in 2000, where education is believed to be a public good. The new vision focused on the importance of applying a holistic approach when striving to transform education through directing additional focus to inclusion and equity, quality and learning outcomes at all levels.
within a lifelong learning approach. It also directed extra focus to the need for increased efforts to reach those who are marginalised or otherwise in vulnerable situations, including all people, irrespective of demographics or countless other factors, whether gender, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth or disability, or those labelled as migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth.

So as to ensure this quality and inclusive education, it was stated that there is a need to design and implement transformative public policies to respond to learners’ diversity and needs, and accordingly address the multiple forms of discrimination resulting from social, cultural and economic barriers that deprive millions of children, youth and adults of education and quality learning through ensuring the implementation of relevant, realistic and intermediate benchmarks (UNESCO, 2015, p. 8). The role of equity and fairness in achieving EFA agenda is stressed by Ainscow (2016, p. 145), who states that:

*Equity is a concept that can be used to guide a process of strengthening the capacity of an education system to reach out to all learners in the community. This means that it must be seen as an overall principle that guides all educational policies and practices, starting from the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society.*

In his paper, Ainscow presented a road map for how educational systems can be moved towards equity, fairness, inclusion and quality for all. That included a description of what needs to be done with regard to national policy levels and to improve schools’ practices in relation to pupils diversity. It is these topics that I discuss in the following chapter.

**Conclusion**

In order to contextualise my study in Oman in relation to international trends, this chapter has traced the development in thinking around education, as a basic human right, back to 1948. It has outlined how the EFA agenda was operationalized in Jomtien in 1990, reiterated in Dakar in 2000, and subsequently reaffirmed in Incheon in 2015.

Throughout these years, education has been perceived as a basic human right and a public good that should be provided on the basis of equity and fairness, regardless of
the different needs and contexts. However, this was challenged by several social, political, economic and cultural pressures, which resulted in the marginalisation and exclusion of several pupils. Such challenges included the adoption of the so-called standards agenda, which has led to the narrowing of the quality agenda to an input/output agenda, focused on a particular view of pupils’ outcomes. Importantly, this has resulted in several forms of exclusion and inequalities in schools, through the tendency to label some pupils based on their relatively low achievements.

This chapter has also traced the evolution of the idea of inclusion in education, summarising literature that describes it as an approach centred on the learning of all children from different backgrounds and with varying characteristics. Within such a view, it is argued that mainstream schools need to be transformed in an effort to respond to the needs of all children. A key element of this is the way classroom teachers perceive and respond to pupils’ differences. The central concern of this thesis is to identify ways to address this task.

In what follows, I move to analyse literature with regard to more practical ways of moving forward national and school policies and practices to be more responsive to pupils’ differences. This leads me to formulate a framework for my research.
CHAPTER 3
RESPONDING TO PUPILS’ DIFFERENCES

Introduction

In the previous chapter I traced international policy developments, focusing in particular on the changes in thinking that have occurred over the last 30 years or so. Central to these changes has been a concern to ensure that Education for All really is focused on ‘all’. This has led to an increasing concern with ways of promoting inclusion and equity within education systems. At the heart of this agenda is a focus on finding ways of developing schools and classrooms that respond to all pupils, whatever their personal characteristics and circumstances.

This, then, was my area of interest as I carried out research within the Omani education system, where I have extensive experience as a pupil, parent and government official. In planning the study, I looked for ideas from international research that would act as ‘signposts’ as I collected data. At the same time, I wanted, as far as possible, to maintain an open mind in order to learn from what was going on within the schools. This was, I felt, particularly important because of my status as an ‘insider’.

With all of this in mind, this chapter examines practical suggestions from international research literature about ways of responding to pupils’ differences at the national, school and classroom levels. In so doing, I engage with the different ways that this task has been formulated, drawing from literature around the theme of inclusion in education.

The chapter is two parts. The first part has three main sections. The first section considers national policy issues; the second considers research regarding inclusive school development; and the third looks more specifically about what research suggests regarding how to respond to pupils’ differences within classrooms.

Building on this analysis of relevant literature, the second part of the chapter explains the development of the signposts that I use in generating my findings.
National policies

In response to the increased international focus on inclusion, and in order to ensure effective response to pupils’ differences, it has been argued that countries and educational policy-makers will need to restructure their educational systems (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007). It has also been suggested that, in so doing, they should adopt reforms that value co-operation, equity and diversity as an alternative to an approach which assumes that all pupils must achieve similar standards, as measured by testing regimes (Peters and Oliver, 2009). Yet, educational systems have responded in different ways to this challenge (Alves, I. Andreasson, I., Karlsson, Y. and Miles, S. 2016).

Some countries have tended to adopt and generalise definitions developed by international agencies. Miles and Singal (2009) state that definitions provided by international agencies might help in promoting initial discussions, but are likely to be less helpful when practitioners attempt to make sense of inclusive education (p. 8). The adoption of international trends and definitions was also criticized for its tendency to distract people from exploring the realities of practices (Booth and Ainscow, 1998).

These concerns are evident in various contexts where Pather and Nxumalo (2013) state that the developments of education in Swaziland were essentially inspired as a result of colonial influences and the involvement of external consultants with relevant expertise in the field. Many of the ideas appear to be exported from the North, or from neighbouring South Africa, which has itself been influenced by Northern models. The authors also state that although various practitioners showed support for the idea of inclusion, there was resistance from other practitioners because of the lack of attention to detail pertaining to the practitioners’ (in this case, a policymaker’s) own country context, which challenges reflection on what might be sustainable ideas for consideration. In similar regard, Eliadou (2013) studied how the educational system in Cyprus responds to diversity and argues that some of the system pitfalls are due to borrowing trends and policies from England and Greece, and uncritically introducing these trends to an educational system that is historically and politically unprepared to implement them.
The same can be stated about the Gulf countries where Barr (1983) pointed out that in the second half of the 20th century, the Arabian Gulf countries were greatly drawn to Westernising trends and therefore they imported pre-packaged educational philosophies for special education, school curricula, instructional methods, teaching practices and assessment tools developed in Western countries. The same argument was raised by Aldaihani (2011) who considered that movements towards teaching individuals with disabilities and SEN in Kuwait was a result of the colonised period, when the British controlled Kuwaiti foreign affairs until Kuwait’s independence in 1961. Similarly, Donn and Al-Manthri (2013) described the reforms in the Omani educational system as initiatives that tended to adopt and borrow ideas and models that have been ‘tested elsewhere’ rather than having a wise reform based on the country’s context and needs (p.9). Accordingly, inclusive education theory and practice in Arab countries is usually associated with the efforts to support learners with disabilities (Gaad, 2010; Opertti et al., 2014, p.161). In addition, Gadd (2010) claims that inclusive education in the six Gulf countries is mainly about providing education to students with disabilities in special schools and centres with the gradual movement to including those children in ‘integrated classrooms’ within government schools. This policy borrowing, described by Tanaka (2005) as an ‘authoritarian importing/exporting’, imposed educational policy and practice on locals whether or not the locals understood them.

The implementation of international trends and policies as well as the tendency to over generalise practices without consideration of local contexts was discussed by Booth and Ainscow (1998) in their book From Them To Us. The authors argue that there is no single national perspective on inclusion and exclusion. Therefore, understanding how inclusion and exclusion are interpreted in different countries is essential to identifying the barriers to inclusion and mobilising resources within each context. They also stress that although there is an international focus on adopting inclusion as a way to achieve the EFA agenda, generalising practices across countries without attention to local contexts and meaning can produce undesirable results.

Generally, national policies are described as playing a crucial role in thinking about how schools can be encouraged to become more inclusive and responsive to diversity (Ainscow, 2005a; 2016). Conversely, they can be an obstacle and the main creator of confusion if they focus on a narrow view of inclusion where, instead of addressing the
differences amongst all individual pupils, they focus on designated ‘categories’ of pupils (Dyson 2004; Dyson and Gallannaugh, 2007).

In addition, a major concern about the national policies of various countries such as the UK is that they tend to request that schools respond simultaneously to two contradictory approaches - standards and inclusion - where the commitment to raising standards is more powerful (Dyson and Gallannaugh, 2007).

The focus on the ‘standards agenda’ in recent years, for example, has brought with it a culture of ‘performativity’ and competition (Ball, 2003; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Broadfoot, 2001). Reviewing inclusion policy under the UK New Labour Government, Armstrong (2005, p.147) argues that:

*Under the banner of inclusion, educational equality is being reconceptualised in terms of conformity to quite narrowly defined performance criteria, a definition that is designed to select, place value upon, and advance the opportunities of certain individuals. Yet such a utilitarian system of performativity inevitably promotes exclusion for those who do not meet the standard.*

Dyson and Gallannaugh (2007) state that, with increased attention and focus on achievement in the UK, several policy documents were released and mechanisms on how to raise performance are put in place to support schools to meet these national agendas. Schools are encouraged to use mechanisms such as the ‘Pupil Achievement Tracker’ to monitor the performance of individual pupils and whole populations in relation to the sorts of categories used by official statistics and articulated in these policy texts. This means that the school population is ‘relentlessly characterised in relation to outcomes’ and, based on the distribution and interaction of characteristics which are evident in the national statistics, it is believed that particular groups of learners in particular places are likely to be overwhelmed by negative characteristics – as are the schools that serve them (Ainscow et al., 2007, p. 8). This reinforces a particular way of understanding the diversity of the school population.

The confusion with regard to understanding differences and its impact on policies and practices is discussed by Ainscow et al. (2007), who argue that a cluster of perceived differences around children’s attainments and capacities for learning have led to a range of practices in schools and classrooms (sometimes directed by national policy)
in terms of streaming, seating by level of attainment, grouping by homogeneous attainment, grouping by differential attainment, social grouping, withdrawing low attainers, and providing adult support.

Authors such as Artiles and Dyson (2005), Raveaud (2005) and Broderick et al. (2005), however, go beyond how difference is understood, to claim that differences are not universal facts or conditions, but are actually constructed and change between contexts and over time. Artiles and Dyson (2005) and Raveaud (2005) state that the way those differences are explained and the policy responses that are then deemed appropriate are not fixed, and different types of difference seem to move in and out of focus over time. They also believe that differences vary between cultural contexts, whether that is at the national level or at the level of particular institutions.

A more detailed discussion of difference is provided by Norwich (2008) in his book ‘Dilemmas of Difference, Inclusion and Disability; International perspectives and future directions’ where information from three countries (UK, USA, and Netherlands) was collected in relation to dilemmas of difference relevant to children with disabilities and SEN in three related areas: (i) identification (whether to identify children as having a disability/difficulty relevant to education or not); (ii) curriculum (whether to provide a common curriculum to all children or not); and (iii) placement or location (to what extent children with more severe difficulties/disabilities will learn in ordinary or general schools and classes or not). Norwich claims that the basic dilemma in regard to difference is whether to recognise and respond or not to recognise and respond to differences, as either way there are implications or risks. The negative perspective is that ‘difference’ reflects lower status, less value and perpetuates inequalities and unfair treatment. Therefore, recognising difference can lead to different provision which might be stigmatised and devalued; but not recognising difference can lead to not providing adequately for individuality (p.2). The positive perspective is that ‘difference’ reflects the recognition of individuality, individual needs and interests. Therefore, a tension between these concepts of difference is evident.

Norwich states that dilemmas are not just difficulties or issues, they represent a particular decision-oriented view about hard choices, where options all have some unfavourable consequences. The findings of the Norwich study showed that
participants in the three countries have recognised the dilemmas related to identification, curriculum, and placement and provided some resolutions in regard to each area. Resolutions would involve some balancing between the contrary options and improving the general education schools to be more responsive to differences which are a stand I adopt in this study.

In summary, the confusion in understanding key policy concepts, such as inclusion, diversity and difference, as well as the dilemma of whether to recognise or not recognise differences can result in the introduction of national policies that are creators of confusion and exclusion (Artiles and Dyson, 2005; Broderick et al. 2005; Raveaud, 2005). In my study, I was, therefore, keen to analyse how such ideas were defined and understood amongst stakeholders at the different levels of the Omani system.

**School policies**

The confusion over the meaning of diversity, inclusion and standards and how schools can move towards better responding to pupils’ differences has led to a range of suggested approaches to the way support is provided for individuals. Such approaches usually involve the identification of needs. Then, schools may adopt a range of organisational arrangements, such as streaming, setting and grouping, grade repetition, and adult support, explanations of which are provided below.

The arrangements may also include modification of classroom practices as an effort to respond to differences. Here, it should be noted that I include some reference to approaches with regard to the classroom level in this section on school policies. This is based on the approach adopted in the study, which starts from the assumption that policies are made at various levels of an education system (Fulcher, 1989). Therefore, classroom teachers’ decisions under this section are regarded as policies (enacted).

**Identification of needs.** which is described by Norwich (2008) as a major area where tension exits based on whether to identify or not to identify pupils differences and then what happens when identification occurs. Identification usually involves a process that mainly concentrates on identifying learning differences based on attainment approaches, and accordingly making changes to the teaching or support arrangements (Squires, G., Humphrey, N. and Barlow, A. 2013). This support usually
takes two forms. The first is managing the school and managing the physical arrangements of the classroom. It is believed that these actions have the potential to encourage desirable behaviour or contribute to pupils’ misbehaviour, depending on the outcome (Daniels, 1998), which ultimately might help classroom teachers to identify and prevent problem behaviours discreetly before they occur without the need to utilise unnecessarily intrusive interventions (Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008). The second form involves managing the various forms of teaching and learning arrangements.

Squires et al. (2013) criticise this identification process for its tendency to ignore children’s natural development process when assessing the adequacy of their progress. That is because, in contexts like the UK, children tend to be compared in cohorts, rather than against other children of the same chronological age due to the fact that classroom teachers and schools under the standard agenda are under pressure to identify children who will not achieve politically defined levels by the end of each Key Stage (p. 23). In this case, identification is used as a judgement rather than to appreciate the progress made by the child in relation to their developmental age. Similarly, Norwich (2008) argues that identifying difference can have a negative impact on children as they are associated with negative perspective that ‘difference’ reflects lower status, less value and perpetuates inequalities and unfair treatment which might stigmatise children.

Identification is nevertheless still a common practice in many educational systems, including Oman, regardless of the continuous debate of the impact of identification on classroom and school practices which are beyond the interest of this study. The identification process usually results in adopting some school policies such as streaming, setting and grouping as well as managing the teaching strategies including the Individualised Educational Plans (IEPs).

IEPs also tend to guide the provision on a practical and short-term basis despite containing a wealth of information (Alves et al., 2016). The plans include areas of need, pupils’ strengths and views, desired targets, and support provided by the school. Therefore, classroom teachers, parents, special education teams and the pupils should be included in the development process of the IEPs (Cramerotti and Ianes, 2016). The importance of the collaborative work in developing IEPs is described by Test, D. W.,
Mason, C., and Hughes, C. (2004) who clearly emphasise the importance of active participation and involvement of pupils in the development process of their IEPs. In terms of pupils with disabilities, special education programmes and support services are ensured through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Sperry, 2016).

The support provided usually ranges from a variation of tools and responses. In the UK, for example, it includes human resources like teaching assistants, SENCOs, ELA coordinators, physical resources such as accessible buildings, radio transmitters, visual timetables and home-school diaries as well as support from external services, Ethnic Minority and Travellers Achievement Services, and special schools. Conversely, in other countries such as Sweden, pupils are organised into groups with those who have similar difficulties and are taught by the special education teacher in separate rooms outside the regular classroom (Alves et al., 2016). The IEPs, in many contexts, tend to focus on and analyse pupils’ ‘disabilities’ and/or ‘difficulties’ for making provisions without taking into consideration the environmental factors (Tomlinson, C. A., Brighton, C., Hertberg, H., Callahan, C. M., Moon, T. R. Brimijoin, K., Conover, L. A. and Reynolds, T. 2003).

Therefore, Norwich (2008) through studying the identification dilemma in three countries stated that tensions about identification could be resolved by finding alternative ways of providing additional provision through improving general education, either by preventing difficulties through more adaptive provision and/or by additional provision organised through more general and less separate systems. He also concluded that:

where identification for special education was still required, efforts would be focused on going beyond negative labelling, changing attitude to SEN/disabilities and enhancing communication between professionals, parents and children/students. All this would depend on various national and local developments and as some suggested might involve student choice about additional provision (p. 215).

**Streaming, setting and grouping.** Streaming and grouping are recognised as widespread methods applied by mainstream schools, where pupils are assigned to classes based on an overall assessment of their abilities, and where they stay in the same class for all subjects. Within each subject, pupils are sometimes divided into
groups according to their abilities in that specific subject; this is called ‘setting’. On occasions re-grouping the whole class is used instead to teach pupils according to their abilities. The rationale underpinning streaming and grouping lies within the traditional intelligence theories, which argue that individuals have fixed levels of intelligence which they acquire genetically and which can be measured through standardised testing (Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998).

Some educators use these methods to reduce the heterogeneity of groups and therefore reduce the diversity of pupils in classes, allowing for a whole-class approach of teaching where classroom teachers can adapt class content, pace and teaching methods to pupils functioning on different levels (Slavin, 1983; Sorensen and Hallinan, 1986, cited in Linchevski and Kutsche, 1998).

Several studies, though, have shown that ability streaming and grouping is an obvious case of creating unequal learning groups within the same school where low-ability settings lead to low-quality teaching. This imbalance is characterised by a number of elements, including classroom teachers’ low expectations; a low-status, non-academic curriculum; valuable class time spent on managing pupils’ behaviour; and most class time devoted to paperwork, drill, and practice (Gamoran, 1993; Kutnick, P., Sebba, J., Blatchford, P., Galton, M. and Thorp, J. 2005; Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998). In other instances, however, ability grouping as an organisational strategy adopted to respond to pupils’ differences is criticised for diverting schools’ attention from what is happening within pupils’ groups inside classrooms in relation to teaching, learning and attitudes (Kutnick et al., 2005).

**Adult support.** With this increasing popularity of inclusivity, pupils who were previously judged as “less able” and would be referred to specialist forms of provision are now more likely to be integrated into mainstream education (Vislie, 2003). In-class support is believed to be a way that reduces stigma among pupils (Norwich, 2008).

However, even when classroom teachers show willingness to include pupils with disabilities in their classrooms, they tend to provide reinforcement and establish rapport with the pupils rather than modify their teaching strategies (Tomlinson et al., 2003). The common argument is that classroom teachers lack adequate knowledge
and skills in dealing with such pupils as it is not part of their job; they are not aware of the needs of the learners; and they lack knowledge in modifying the curriculum (Florian and Linklater, 2010; Norwich, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2003). Therefore, it is common for classroom teachers to seek support from the school’s special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO); if this does not lead to progress, the SENCO then would call on outside specialists to provide further guidance, assessment and specialist intervention (Squires et al., 2013). This special support and intervention was initially provided by experts in the special provisions on how the services can be individualised for certain pupils who are described as ‘having special educational needs’, including developing individualised plans.

Regardless, mainstream classroom teachers have shown a tendency to ignore those plans based on the view that the plans do not conform to their daily practices due to lack of time, large number of pupils, and intensity of classroom teachers’ daily workload (Ainscow, 1997). Adult support, which aims to help classroom teachers in mainstream classrooms deal with the most vulnerable pupils, has its shortcomings as, whenever this support is withdrawn, classroom teachers felt unable to cope with the situation alone (Ainscow, 1997). However, the lack of knowledge and skills among the classroom teachers is not likely to hamper the implementation of inclusion in education, as evidenced by the study of Florian and Linklater (2010) that draws attention to an inclusion-specific teacher education programme. This programme does not focus on whether classroom teachers possess the required knowledge and skills to teach in inclusive classrooms, but how they could utilise what they already know. However, Jordan et al. (2009) note that there is little knowledge about how skills for effective inclusion are being developed or how changes in classroom teachers’ outlook on disability may be mirrored in practice-based changes.

**Classroom practices**

Research about responding to the differences of all learners concentrates on the importance of acknowledging the increasing heterogeneity of pupils in classrooms in many countries. This imposes further pressure on classroom teachers as they attempt to respond effectively to meet the needs of all members of their classes. Such practices may reflect the school’s (organisation’s) conditions and beliefs (Rosenholtz and Wilson, 1980). Below I consider the suggestions made by researchers who focus
on this issue, starting with a look at the way classrooms are arranged, differentiated instruction, engagement and participation, cooperative learning, redefining classroom teachers’ role, classroom teachers’ training, and collaborative work.

**Classroom arrangements.** Classrooms are physical entities as well as organisational units and the physical characteristics of a classroom setting are described as a major factor influencing the behaviour of its users (Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008). Therefore, awareness of such physical characteristics can help in creating high quality educational experiences for all children (Marx et al., 1999). Within classrooms, seating is one way of managing the physical environment; this is a widespread technique applied by classroom teachers, involving seating children in specific places within groups or rows according to their abilities or behaviours. Some classroom teachers prefer to seat certain pupils in specific places in the classroom in the belief that this is one effective way of meeting the instructional needs of pupils whilst also increasing their in-task behaviour (Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008).

This technique of seating and classroom arrangement is widely discussed in the literature (Hastings and Schwieso, 1995; Marx, A., Fuhrer, U. and Hartig, T. 1999; Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008) which reveals that it has significant impact on pupils behaviour and achievement. Marks et al. (1999), for example, argue that the positioning of pupils relative to the teacher in the classroom space shapes the interaction and the number of questions asked by pupils. They reached this conclusion after observing 28 German pupils in grade 4 for eight weeks where they noticed that most of the classroom interaction came from pupils seated in the front row and centre seats; this was described as the ‘action-zone hypothesis’. They also believe that pupils’ positions within the classroom space can affect the kind of task assigned to each pupils and the kind of response which reflects classroom teachers’ expectations of each pupils. With regard to pupil-pupil interaction, classroom observations revealed that pupils at the back of the classroom tend to interact with one another more frequently than those seated at the front, which negatively affects their attention to the task (Granstrom, 1996).

Therefore, Broderick et al. (2005) favour flexible grouping, arguing that it can encourage pupils to build personal connections by working with different pupils. Classroom teachers must be certain, however, that these groupings create a power
dynamic in which all pupils are actively participating in lessons. Nevertheless, the relation between seating and pupils’ interaction and achievement is not a simple issue – Rosenholtz and Wilson (1980) argue that: ‘the number of organisational conditions and a cluster of classroom characteristics are positioned to produce variation in the degree of ability differentiation: task differentiation, grouping practices, teacher evaluation practices, and student autonomy’ (p. 76). Among these variables are classroom teachers’ intentions and perceptions about pupils’ abilities which are usually reflected in the task demands, according to Hastings and Schwieso (1995). They also investigated the consequences of the seating arrangements, and assert that group seating arrangements facilitate and encourage interaction and are self-evidently appropriate for tasks or elements of work for which collaboration and discussion are necessary or deemed appropriate. Similarly, Kutnick et al. (2005) state that by using within-class grouping, in any context of organisational grouping, there is great potential to raise standards by personalising the learning experience for pupils; in particular enhancing the benefits of heterogeneous organisational grouping effects.

The studies of Hastings and Schwieso (1995) and Kutnick et al. (2005) reveal that although classroom teachers claimed that the grouping technique was used to support the collaborative work among pupils; most of the assigned tasks were of individual demands which revealed a mismatch between the purpose and the context.

Therefore, Kutnick et al. (2005) state that both intervention and naturalistic studies concerning the impact of organisational pupil grouping practices suggest that no one form of organisational grouping benefits all pupils and therefore seating and within-classroom grouping arrangements should reflect teaching intentions and task demands. Based on seating arrangement, classroom teachers argued that such techniques helped them notice the learning differences and make changes to teaching and supporting pupils’ differences by implementing changes in their teaching and support techniques. Those changes include individualisation of instruction.

Engagement and participation. According to Foreman et al. (2004), increasing research attention has turned to the educational experiences of all pupils, where increasing their participation has been described as a vital step to ensure inclusion. In this instance, Booth (2002) argues that participation:
involves going beyond access. It implies learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared lessons. It involves active engagement with what is learnt and taught, and having a say in how education is experienced. But participation also involves being recognised for oneself and being accepted for oneself. I participate with you, when you recognise me as a person like yourself, and accept me for who I am (p.2).

Based on this understanding of participation, Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse (2007) developed the Framework for Participation as a research tool to examine ways in which the cultures of a school support and/or impede opportunities for all its members to participate in the life of that school. Therefore, if a school’s community aims to support its pupils (and staff as well) to participate in these ways, then opportunities must be provided for everyone to be included and to achieve, and it is concerned with responses to all forms of diversity within a school (Black-Hawkins, 2010).

In similar ways, Black-Hawkins (2010) describes engagement as an important factor that needs to be ensured in inclusive schools as it reveals pupils’ attitudes towards schooling and their participation in school activities. The term disengaged from school is used to characterise pupils who do not feel they belong at school and have withdrawn from school activities in a significant way. The issue of engagement is central to my study where I focus on exploring how Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences and their efforts to include them in the school curriculum and activities.

Based on the growing interest in engagement and participation, Carter et al. (2007) examined the academic engagement and peer interactions of 23 high school students in inclusive classrooms; they found that instructional format, curricular area, and teacher proximity influence the degree to which diverse students interacted socially. They also found that small-group interactional structures tend to experience more frequent peer interactions, where the students do not receive direct support from the teacher. Academic engagement, on the other hand, is apparent during small-group/one-to-one instruction or when a teacher is near. This study provides useful insights about the factors influencing student engagement and participation in an inclusive classroom. In a slightly earlier study, Carter et al. (2007) replaced one-to-one support with peer-support interventions in high school classrooms and found that all participants tended to engage more in peer-support arrangements than adult-
delivered support methods. Additionally, their participation in peer support intervention did not diminish the pupils’ degree of academic engagements. The two separate studies therefore imply that diverse pupils in inclusive environments prefer working in small-group interactional structures with peer support arrangements.

**Differentiated instruction.** The basic principle of differentiated instruction is to conduct systematic planning of curriculum and instruction that meets the needs of diverse pupils by recognising the learning needs of each and realising the full potential of their learning capacity (van Garderen and Whittaker, 2006). Related to this, Broderick *et al.* (2005) note the value of differentiation as a comprehensive approach to teaching in an inclusive classroom; they state that differentiating instruction enables the successful inclusion of all pupils. As such, disability is seen not as a stable fact or condition but as an interactional process. The authors thus recommend planning responsive lessons with differentiated instruction for all pupils rather than modifying some lessons for some pupils with disability. When mainstream classroom teachers accept some pupils with different abilities and seat them in different groups, they are expected to differentiate the instruction and teaching methods to respond to their various needs. Tomlinson (1999) highlights the positive impact of differentiated instruction whereby classroom teachers who implement differentiated teaching in their classroom achieve great results for pupils’ school performance. Those classroom teachers are described as: “artists who use the tools of their craft to address students’ needs” (p. 2).

The Tomlinson study therefore corresponds to the purpose of differentiating instruction mentioned by Broderick *et al.* (2005), which is to ensure a comprehensive approach to teaching in inclusive education. Moreover, the implementation of differentiated instruction implies that classroom teachers accept that each child learns in a particular way and has significant needs so they adjust the curriculum, promote different learning styles, and try to engage all children in learning processes. It also means that school/classroom teachers do take into consideration the learning profile of their pupils – which is based on their interests, their school performance and the particular way they learn – when designing each teaching hour as the needs vary from lesson to lesson, even for the same pupil (Vassiliki *et al.*, 2011). With adequate and suitable support, including differentiated instruction, an inclusive classroom can foster
appropriate education for pupils with varying needs. To achieve this, Lawrence-Brown (2004) presents a multilevel lesson planning system and useful instructional methods and examples. Similarly, van Garderen and Whittaker (2006) state that individualised instruction and flexible grouping are specific characteristics of special education. More recently, emphasis has been placed on educating an increasing number of learners with exceptional needs in inclusive classrooms, and important questions have been raised with regard to the potential of providing individualised instruction in the inclusive environment. This is accomplished by a platform provided by differentiated instruction (van Garderen and Whittaker, 2006).

Some research suggests, however, that most classroom teachers still do little to adjust their instruction in ways that effectively reach out to academically diverse populations and instead tend to provide reinforcement and establishing rapport with the pupils rather than providing any kind of differentiation. The literature review conducted by Tomlinson et al. (2003) concludes that classroom teachers justified that by saying that doing ‘different things’ will call attention to pupils’ differences; they felt it was not their job; they were unaware of learners needs; and they did not know how to modify the curriculum. Their review also shows that classroom teachers were more likely to find adaptations for learner variance to be more desirable than feasible. Even when classroom teachers expressed support for inclusive classrooms, they were likely to plan for whole-class instruction (Morocco et al., 1996).

Therefore, literature suggests a need to examine the beliefs and practices related to teaching, learning, and the nature of young people as learners — in other words, beliefs and practices related to "how we do school" (Tomlinson et al., 2003, p. 125).

**Cooperative learning.** Bauwens et al. (1989) describe cooperative learning as the educational approach in which general and special educators work in a co-active and coordinated fashion to jointly teach academically and behaviourally heterogeneous groups of pupils in educationally integrated settings (i.e., general classrooms). It is widely recognised as a pedagogical practice that promotes learning and enhances socialisation among peers including more cross-ethnic and cross-gender relationships. Children with multiple and severe disabilities also benefit through acquiring enhanced communication and motor skills, and cooperative learning has also promoted positive changes in group members’ perceptions of their peers with learning disabilities.
The superiority of cooperative learning over the competitive and the individualistic approaches are stated in the literature; according to Johnson et al. (1981, p. 58), ‘the overall effects stand as strong evidence for the superiority of cooperation in promoting achievement and productivity.’

Murphy et al. (2005) note a number of reasons for adopting cooperative learning as an inclusion strategy. Classroom teachers face the key challenge of engaging all of their pupils in high-quality learning tasks. In cooperative learning, a more accommodating learning atmosphere is being fostered for pupils experiencing difficulties by giving assignments to small heterogeneous groups, and these assignments are organised based on cooperative learning phases. The enhancement of cooperative learning is carried out by the potentials being offered for realising various educational goals. As the cooperative learning approach emphasises academic and interpersonal skills, it appeals to classroom teachers because it is able to tackle diverse educational objectives within a single technique (Murphy et al., 2005).

Similarly, Jenkins et al. (2003) interviewed 21 general education classroom classroom teachers on their use of cooperative learning. They reported that the classroom teachers generally perceived that special education and remedial pupils benefited from cooperative learning. The respondents expressed a general positive view of the efficacy of cooperative learning for pupils with difficulties as they likewise acknowledged that cooperative learning worked better for some but not for all. Some of the key benefits highlighted for cooperative learning are improved self-esteem and improved classroom success rates.

It was, however, argued that placing pupils in groups and telling them to work together will not necessarily promote cooperation and/or social skills; it is only when pupils are taught the social skills needed to promote sharing and acceptance of others and when groups are structured so that pupils understand how they are expected to work together that cooperation and learning will be maximised (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1995). Those social skills include listening to each other during group discussions; acknowledging others’ ideas and considering their perspective on issues; stating ideas freely; resolving conflicts democratically; sharing tasks equitably; and allocating resources fairly among group members (Gillies, 2003).
The implication of the above arguments for my study is that schools with their teacher-directed pedagogies and traditional teaching styles require a great deal of support and training to adapt their practices and ensure that they are responsive to the differences of all learners.

**Teacher development.** Florian et al. (2010) argue that increasing pupils’ access to educational opportunity for different types and groups of learners was historically achieved through segregated provisions and different kinds of classroom teachers were provided for the different types of schools serving different kinds of learners as described in the individualized approaches section. As a result, classroom teachers were provided with different types of education according to the groups and ages of children they served. This reflected the idea of ‘specialist knowledge’ which was perceived as necessary for working with certain pupils identified as ‘different’ in schools. According to this ‘specialist’ approach, classroom teachers’ identities have been reinforced in terms of who they are qualified to teach (Young, 2008).

There is, however, a growing international recognition that responding to the differences of all pupils and ensuring inclusive school improvements requires the reforming of teacher education and preparing all classroom teachers for diversity instead of offering specialised courses for different groups (Florian, 2008). Despite this, there is an on-going debate within different national contexts about what classroom teachers need to know and how they should be prepared to respond to the increasing cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity of schools’ pupils (Florian, 2012). In this regard, Nieto (2000) states that when preparing classroom teachers for more inclusive practices, the teacher training programmes need to (a) take a stand on social justice and diversity, (b) make social justice ubiquitous in teacher education, and (c) promote teaching as a life-long journey of transformation. Offering a more detailed explanation, Florian (2012) describes the lessons learnt from the Inclusive Practice Project (IPP) funded by the Scottish government as an innovative approach to preparing primary and secondary classroom classroom teachers to view themselves as inclusive practitioners. She said that to start developing the programme, difficulties emerged based on the great debate about the meaning of inclusion. Therefore, the developers of the programme adopted Shulman’s (2005) conceptualisation of
professional learning as apprenticeships of the head (knowledge), hand (skill), and heart (attitudes and beliefs).

Within teacher training programmes, Florian emphasises the need to prepare all classroom teachers for diversity instead of specialising courses for different groups. This was earlier argued by Ainscow (1995) who states that two main strategies are of main importance in teacher development programmes: (1) opportunities to consider new possibilities through encouraging classroom teachers to explore ways in which their practice might be developed in order to facilitate the learning of all their pupils which implies redefining the role of classroom classroom teachers, and (2) support for experimentation and reflection through providing classroom teachers with opportunities to consider new possibilities and that encourage reflection on these activities and collaborative learning.

**Redefining the teacher’s role.** It has been argued that the traditional teaching methods involving a single teacher attempting to meet the diverse needs of a class of 20 or 30 children are no longer appropriate (Villa et al., 1995). Rather, literature from developed countries suggests that a shift is needed in teaching and learning from an approach that works for most learners existing alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for those (some) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves the development of a rich learning community, characterised by learning opportunities that are made sufficiently available for everyone, so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life (Florian and Linklater, 2009). This requires new school organisation and structures, which are centred on redefining the role of the classroom teacher as part of a teaching team, rather than as a solo performer.

Through such an approach, classroom teachers are perceived as the key persons for establishing the quality of the classroom environment (Stevens, 1997), and who therefore need to know how to respect as well as respond to human differences in ways that include learners in, rather than excluding them from, what is ordinarily available in the daily life of the classroom (Florian, 2007). Nonetheless, the literature reviewed so far suggests that in order for classroom teachers to reach this state, there is a need for collaborative work and reflective actions among school and classroom teachers to experiment with how things could be done differently, with attention focused on the overlooked possibilities for shifting practice:
Practices are unlikely to occur without some exposure to what teaching actually looks like when it is being done differently, and exposure to someone who can help classroom teachers understand the difference between what they are doing and what they aspire to do (Ainscow and Miles, 2008, p. 25).

Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) present what they refer to as ‘classroom teachers’ craft knowledge’ as an alternative approach to the traditional ‘additional needs’ approach, which is associated with the assumption that mainstream classroom classroom teachers are themselves somehow deficient or lacking in the specialist knowledge and skills required to teach pupils who have been identified as having special educational needs. In their research exploring what is required in an inclusive pedagogy, they adopted the framework for participation (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007) to help them gain focus while involved in classroom observations. After a prolonged study containing observations followed by teacher interviews, the conclusion was that the inclusive pedagogy requires (p.817); (1) a shift in focus from one that is concerned with only those individuals who have been identified as having ‘additional needs’ to learning for all—the idea of everybody (not most and some), (2) rejection of deterministic beliefs about ability (and the associated idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others), and (3) ways of working with and through other adults that respect the dignity of learners as full members of the community of the classroom.

Collaborative work. Classroom teachers have traditionally worked alone and lacked collaboration with fellow classroom teachers (Ainscow et al., 2006; Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Black-Hawkins and Florian, 2012). However, this type of isolated work has shifted towards one in which educators share ideas with one another, develop plans together, and carry out plans and assess outcomes with colleagues. Lee (2000) emphasises that genuine collaboration is shown only in the teams where the contributions of each are valued, along with clear goals, shared decision-making, and a feeling of being respected. Moreover, collaboration is one of the most critical skills for pupils with or without disabilities, where shared ideas are promoted as they develop new and improved strategies. Additionally, collaborative work enhances an effective inclusive environment and benefits all individuals involved in the learner’s education, such as classroom teachers and parents (Lee, 2000).
The notion of ‘collaborative work’ and ‘reflective thinking’ is highly emphasised in developing inclusive practices and pedagogy. Ainscow and Miles (2008) present ‘lesson study’ as an example of such collaborative work used in Japan and other Asian countries which is described as ‘a systematic procedure’ for the development of teaching. The aim of the lesson study is centred on improving the overall effectiveness of the experiences classroom teachers provide for their pupils, with collaboration at its core. Ainscow and Miles describe the process as follows:

_The content of this process is the planned lesson, which is then used as the basis of gathering data on the quality of experience that students receive. These lessons are called ‘study lessons’ and are used to examine the classroom teachers’ practices and the responsiveness of the students to the planned activities. Members of the group work together to design the lesson plan, which is then implemented by each teacher. Observations and post-lesson conferences are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial (p. 6)._ 

They also stress that this process can take place within school or between schools, whereby it becomes a part of a wider, managed network of classroom teachers, all geared towards working together.

**Adopting a stance**

So far, I have reviewed literature regarding ways of responding to pupils’ differences at the national, school and classroom levels. In this next section, I reflect on the implications of my review in order to define the stance I adopted in relation to the idea of responding to pupil differences

**Perspectives.** The point of my argument so far is that responding to the pupils’ differences in mainstream schools cannot be achieved through a narrowly defined view of inclusion that emphasises individualised approaches to children’s difficulties (Dyson, 1990), nor by implementing special education ideas and practices within mainstream settings (Ainscow, 1997), but through whole-school system reform. In this approach, reforms are made at national level, as well as at the school and classroom levels, to ensure that schools are both equitable and excellent (Ainscow et al., 2012; Fullan, 2006).
In this regard, some literature suggests that responding to pupils’ differences requires that policy makers and researchers must move away from central-based reforms that are led by policy makers and governments. Such perspectives view schools as implementers of national agendas. The alternative is to focus on more school-based reforms that support transformations to ensure that classroom teachers more capable of accommodating and responding to the diverse needs of learners.

In this approach, schools have to be reformed in ways that make them see pupils’ differences as opportunities for enriching learning through which they can develop agendas for reform (Ainscow, 2005b). This approach concentrates on the kind of schooling pupils are offered access to as well as focusing on what happens in schools to which access is granted. The argument underpinning the school-based approach is based on the belief that, as long as educational provision is fixed and children are diverse in their characteristics, there will always be some for whom the provision offered is inappropriate.

On the other hand, although the school improvement approach requires educational policies to concentrate on providing quality and equitable education to all (Ainscow et al., 2006b), it is far too simplistic to see schools as implementing a set of national policy directions because national direction gets interpreted at different levels and by different people (Thomas and Loxley, 2001). Therefore, efforts to change school practices often fail when methods used to manage reform consist of autocratic, or top-down, approaches. It is therefore suggested that school reform needs to move away from individualised approaches to change towards the transformation of the educational system as a whole (Dyson, 2005) through a critical rethink on the nature of schools:

*the typical organisation of schools physically divided into isolated classroom ‘cells’ and organisationally into hierarchically-ordered functions (classroom classroom teachers, subject developments, managers, pastoral staff and so on) is a barrier in responding to children who do not ‘fit in’ to the standard pattern* (Clark et al., 1997, p. 98).

Therefore, Ainscow (2016) argues that progress towards inclusive school development requires clarity of vision and purpose where policies focus their attention on the barriers experienced by pupils. The author argues that the implication is that overcoming such barriers is the most important means of development forms of
education that are effective for all children (p.148). Therefore, it may be stated that inclusive school improvement is mainly concerned with:

*the development of schools, rather simply involving attempts to integrate vulnerable groups of students into existing arrangements where those within schools collaborate towards developing practices that can ‘reach out to all learners’ (Ainscow, 2005a, p. 8).*

Processes of change. Much of the literature on school improvement suggests that schools can be improved when a focus is given to their internal processes of change, rather than only focusing on achieving better outcomes (Harris, 2002; Hopkins, 2007). Within this paradigm, Senge (1989) suggests the use of what is called ‘levers for changes’, which is described as ‘actions that can be taken in order to change the behaviour of an organisation and those individuals within it’. Such actions tended to focus on large-scale changes, applied in order to change the way things look but not the way they work. Ainscow (2005a) describes this process as: ‘low leverage of change’ such as policy documents, attending conferences, holding seminars, forming committees and in-service training.

Yet, there is another body of work which emphasises that schools can enhance their capacities to ‘reach all learners’ through putting schools at the centre of this framework, which Ainscow (2005a) describes as ‘high leverage’. Within this approach, practitioners alone or in partnership can research their own practices to an agreed focus in order to improve them through repeated cycles of action and reflection. According to this approach, those within schools are requested to develop practices that can support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners (Ainscow, 1999; Black-Hawkins, 2010; Dyson, 2001; Florian et al., 2010). Such a process is described as continuous (Ainscow, 2005a; Booth and Ainscow, 2011), including the identification of good practice (Booth, 1999) to respond to learners’ diversity where inclusive education is an approach to education embodying certain values including equity, participation, community, respect for diversity, and sustainability (Booth and Ainscow, 2011).

This continuous process also includes identifying and removing the ‘barriers’ to the presence, participation and achievement of all pupils (Ainscow et al., 2006b) particularly pupils at risk of marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement.

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(Ainscow, 2005a; Ainscow et al., 2006a; Manchester City Council, 2004). Barriers to inclusion can, it is argued, be related to curriculum, school and classroom organisation, assessment, or more generally to cultures, policies and practices (Dyson et al., 2002). Implementing this approach requires detailed examination of how school staff and associated policy and practice support the learning of everybody together (Florian et al., 2010) and finding alternative ways of looking at the phenomenon of educational difficulty.

**Signposts**

The stance I have defined is largely consistent with the approach used in the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), a well-known self-evaluation tool designed to support schools in analysing their ‘practices, policies and cultures’, as well as facilitating the establishment of priorities for development work and establishing an improvement strategy (Ainscow et al., 2007). This being the case, I chose to adopt the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion to generate a series of signposts for my study, using these to explore how Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences.

Implementing this approach required detailed examination of how school staff and associated policy and practice support the learning of everybody together (Florian et al., 2010), and finding alternative ways of looking at the phenomenon of educational difficulty. With this in mind, the following sections review relevant international research with regard to how policies, practices and cultures can be changed to ensure that schools are able to respond more effectively to learner differences.

**Policy signposts.** In thinking about inclusive school improvement, Avramidis et al. (2000) argue that attention should be paid to developing an inclusive policy (a mission statement) and that this policy and framework needs to be closely formulated with the help of parents, school administrators and classroom teachers (Barton, 2003). This policy and framework also needs to be based on ‘inclusive values’, such as those of respect for diversity, collaboration, equity, equality, participation and trust; therefore, the actions of people within schools are described as inclusive when they are connected to those values (Booth and Ainscow, 2011).
This requires a group of stakeholders within a particular context to look for a common agenda to guide their discussions of practice and, at much the same time, endeavours to establish ways of working that enable them to collect and accordingly find meaning in different types of information (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). This includes developing a common language between colleagues who can talk to one another about detailed aspects of their practices (Ainscow, 2005a), as well as ensuring a clear strategy and a set of guidelines for action. Forming such a shared vision for change is described as one of the main priorities towards developing an inclusive school (Aldaihani, 2011; Eliadou, 2013; Singal, 2004).

In this regard, Ainscow et al. (2012) argue that the starting point to strengthening school capacities is through collaborative work and the involvement and engagement with the views of different stakeholders, bringing together the expertise of practitioners, the insights of pupils and families, and the knowledge of academic researchers in ways that challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, not least in respect to vulnerable groups of learners. Various stakeholders, accordingly, need to invest in understanding what changes mean:

> Real organisational change occurs not simply when technical changes in structure and process are undertaken, but when persons inside and outside of the school construct new understandings about what the change means (Reihl, 2000, p. 60).

In addition, Ainscow et al. (2006a) argue that the development of inclusive policies and practice is not concerned with adopting new technologies but rather involves social learning processes within a given workplace. The authors reached this conclusion through working closely with 25 schools in England where they found that the network they developed influenced people’s actions and the thinking that informs such actions. These ideas are influenced by Wenger’s (1998) ‘Community of Practice’ (COP) approach, through which he argues that practices consist of things those individuals in a community do, drawing on available resources in an effort to further a set of shared goals. This extends beyond how practitioners complete their tasks to include, for example, how they make it through the day, commiserating about the pressures and constraints within which they have to operate (cited in Ainscow, 2005a, p. 10).
Therefore, inclusive school development is more likely to be successful in contexts where there is a culture of collaboration that encourages and supports problem-solving (Skrtic, 1991) in order to address the barriers to education experienced by some learners, which Ainscow (2007) describes as the ‘inclusive/reflective turn’. This will occur through a detailed examination of the experience of all pupils and staff in schools because, within a single school, the same pupils may be both encouraged in and discouraged from participation, where all schools respond to the diversity of their pupils with a mixture of inclusive and exclusive measures. These may involve, but might not be limited to, the inclusion of who they admit to the school, how pupils are categorised, grouped and disciplined, how teaching and learning is organised, how resources are used, how pupils experiencing difficulties are supported, and how curricula and teaching are developed so that such difficulties are reduced (Sebba and Ainscow, 1996, p. 338).

In such approaches of social learning processes, it is likely that staff will start to question the current discourse, values, and pre-existing assumptions and beliefs surrounding pupils and their abilities, in addition to the nature of educational provision that can be provided to them (Ainscow et al., 2004; Ainscow et al., 2006a; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Dyson, 2004). Pupils who cannot fit into existing arrangements and cannot meet the stated standards are not seen as problems but rather as ‘hidden voices’ and challenges, which require classroom teachers to re-examine their practices and reflect on them; and by implication encourage the improvement of schools (Ainscow, 1999).

In summary, so far I have argued that inclusive school development is a continuous process that focuses on identifying and removing the ‘barriers’ to the presence, participation and achievement of pupils, especially those at risk of marginalisation, exclusion and underachievement. This focus on barriers is, therefore, a crucial aspect of my study.

**Cultural signposts.** Ainscow (2005a) argues that moving schools towards inclusiveness requires the development of a school culture that fosters positive attitudes towards the study and development of practice. Similarly Artiles (2003) stresses the importance of giving attention to all aspects of school cultures that can
encourage ways to support, welcome and celebrate difference. The same ideas are discussed by Dyson (2004) who emphasise the importance of an “inclusive school culture” in promoting inclusion in schools.

In defining school cultures, Schein (2004) argues that cultures are about the deeper levels of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organisation, operating unconsciously to define how they view themselves and their working contexts. Therefore, the extent to which these values include the acceptance and celebration of difference, and a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all pupils, coupled with the extent to which they are shared across a school’s staff, relate to the extent to which pupils are enabled to participate (Kugelmass, 2001).

Similarly, Carrier (1990) suggests that cultures imply our knowledge and understanding of academic success and failure, and ability and disability. This is because the dominant group in a society defines the features of the culture that differentiate ‘those who can’ from ‘those who can’t’ and cultural understandings of difference are reflected not only in the beliefs and attitudes of people, but also in the reactions and behaviour of individuals (Gliedman et al., 1980). Therefore, Gerber (1994) argues that school reformers need to consider not only changes to the curriculum and the methods for assessing its impact, but also classroom teachers’ fundamental beliefs and knowledge. Ainscow and Miles (2008) also state that classroom teachers’ attitudes play a key role in moving schools towards inclusiveness because their beliefs and attitudes are what create the context that is required for children to learn.

When discussing attitudes, I refer to them as ‘learned and stable predispositions to react to a given situation, person or other set of cues in a consistent way’ (Rakap and Kaczmarek, 2010). Therefore, attitudes guide and influence people’s behaviours in their daily live (Parasuram, 2006). In a literature review with regard to attitudes toward inclusion, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) highlight that several variables can impact classroom teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion; these include:

- **Child-related variables** including the different categories of children with SEN and their perceived suitability for being in the mainstream and the type and severity of disability/difficulty. They state that various studies revealed that
classroom teachers were cautiously accepting of including a child with cognitive disability and were more accepting of children with physical disabilities and children with medical conditions as they saw them as ‘easy to manage’. The same findings are reported by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) who studied classroom teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). They found that classroom teachers’ attitudes varied according to the severity of disability where they were more resistant to including pupils described as having mental disabilities.

- **Teacher-related issues**
  1. **Gender**, where findings were inconsistent. Alghazo and Gaad (2004), however, who explored classroom teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion in the UAE, state that female classroom teachers in the UAE tended to have more positive attitudes towards inclusion than male classroom teachers did.
  2. **Years of experience**, where classroom teachers with 14 years’ or less teaching experience had a significantly higher positive score in their attitude to integration compared with those with more than 14 years. The same findings were stated in the study about the UAE where authors said that as educators gained more experience in teaching (12 years or more), their acceptance of including pupils with disabilities increased, with the less experienced classroom teachers demonstrating relatively lower levels of acceptance for inclusion.
  3. **Grade level taught** where various studies showed that senior high school classroom teachers displayed significantly more positive attitudes towards integration than did junior high school and elementary school classroom teachers, and junior high school classroom teachers were significantly more positive than elementary school classroom teachers.
  4. **Training**, where they found that various studies conducted in the UK revealed that college classroom teachers who had been trained to teach pupils with learning difficulties expressed more favourable attitudes and emotional reactions to pupils with SEN and their integration than did those who had no such training. The same findings are reported by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) and Rakap and Kaczmarek (2010); that classroom teachers who received pre-and in-service training with regard to inclusion in UAE and Turkey reported more positive attitudes.
  5. **Classroom teachers’ views and attitudes** about their responsibilities in dealing with the needs of pupils who are exceptional or at risk shape their practices in classrooms.
• **Educational environment issues:** Studies in this area focused on analysing the impact of environmental issues on classroom teachers’ attitudes. (1) Various studies revealed that positive attitudes are more evident where resources and support services (physical and human) are available in classrooms. (2) Other studies also concentrated on the role of support provided from head classroom teachers. These studies describe the encouragement and support of head classroom teachers as being instrumental in the creation of positive attitudes to inclusion. (3) Support from schools’ special education classroom teachers was also described in other studies as effective in creating positive attitudes towards inclusion. In addition various environmental factors were highlighted in various studies as ‘obstacles’ to inclusion. They included over-crowded classes, insufficient materials, insufficient time to prepare and plan the learning, inflexible timetables, and insufficient external support.

Based on their research synthesis, the authors conclude that the above points need to be addressed in order to move schools towards inclusiveness. More importantly, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) state that the process of implementing inclusion needs to be carefully planned where classroom teachers’ concerns need to be addressed. In addition, a significant re-structuring of mainstream schools is essential before pupils with disabilities and difficulties are included.

Linked to the idea of cultures is the role of leadership in fostering school change and gearing education systems towards inclusive values and bringing about sustainable change (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). In this regard, Reyes and Wagstaff (2005) assert that inclusionary schools do not simply happen as a result of random processes and actions, but through purposeful leadership where leaders have a fundamental role in gearing the whole school to respond to the diverse needs of pupils. Thus, leaders are a ‘**powerful intervening variable [that can determine] whether schools are successful or not with their students, especially those from diverse backgrounds**’ (Reyes and Wagstaff, 2005, p. 101)

Although leadership takes different forms in different contexts, not least because of the way it reflects local history, culture and, indeed, legislation, it is evident that the
issue of inclusion is increasingly seen as a key challenge for educational leaders around the globe (Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004). In discussing the issue of leadership and inclusion, authors like Ryan (2006) believe that, in their efforts to improve their schools, many educators tended to borrow their models of leadership from management studies which underpinned arrangements that promoted power and authority. The idea of competitiveness and authority was also described by Johnson and Johnson (1989), who state that leaders may structure staff working relationships in one of three ways: competitively, individualistically, or cooperatively. The competitiveness approach in leadership is criticised for concentrating on narrow organisational goals; while arguing that leadership in schools needs to be about deeper moral purposes like social justice where schools must do their part in contributing to a world that is fair for everyone (Blackmore, 2006; Marshall, 2004; Ryan, 2006).

Similarly Riehl (2000) highlights four broad classes of tasks that educational administrators face as they respond to diversity; principals’ approaches to these tasks determine the degree to which their practice can be characterised as inclusive and transformative. These tasks are:

(1) Fostering new meanings surrounding diversity and agreeing upon a shared vision for change and inclusion and accordingly moving their schools towards becoming ‘learning organisations’.

(2) Promoting forms of teaching and learning that enable diverse pupils to succeed, such as by examining the impacts of various organisational alternatives to promote pupils’ access to instruction achievement, and by making appropriate changes that promote both equity and excellence for all pupils. For heads to support their classroom teachers in responding to the different needs of their pupils, leaders themselves need to hold high expectations for pupils achievement, high visibility and frequent visits to classes, high support for staff, and strong goal and task orientations.

(3) Moulding inclusive school cultures where leaders focus on creating school cultures that are inclusive of multiple forms of diversity. This requires treating children as individuals rather than as representatives of a social group, creating a caring environment, and ensuring a high level of cooperation amongst pupils,
classroom teachers and families. This involves reconfiguring school structures through looping and detracting to ensure equal and effective access to instruction, taking strong steps to work with parents, meeting parents in their homes and work sites, establishing linguistic equity by providing translators whenever needed, developing parent competencies in leadership and other areas, and taking an advocacy approach regarding various forms of discrimination or inequity.

(4) Building connections between schools and communities through ensuring understanding of the embeddedness of schools, both within the neighbourhoods and in the communities in which they are located, and also within the network of organisations and institutions through which pupils move. Ainscow (2016) stresses that fragmentation within school systems can be reduced through collaboration between schools. In this article Ainscow refers to the collaborative research conducted in the UK, ‘Understanding and Developing Inclusive Practices in Schools’ that took place from 1999 to 2003. He states that collaboration between schools and the critical thinking processes that were encouraged resulted in improvements in the performance of some schools facing the most challenging circumstances. He also asserts that researchers who participated in these studies found that collaborative arrangements had a positive impact on the learning of pupils in all the participating schools.

A relative lack of such a commitment from school leaders is therefore seen as a barrier to responding to learners’ differences (Eliadou, 2013). A further factor related to culture is the relationship between a school and its wider community. Ainscow et al. (2006a) suggest that the development of a school should be integrated with the aspiration of improving the neighbourhood around it and emphasise that schools should not be separated from their local communities. Through this approach, the role of schools is more centred on supporting the education of communities, as opposed to being the sole source of education: that is what they describe as an ‘inclusive school’ (p. 1). In addition, Ainscow (2014) argues that schools can help pupils if what happens inside schools as well as outside schools (families and communities) changes in order to enrich pupils’ learning.
Aldaihani (2011) discusses the relationship between school and families in her comparative study between the UK and Kuwait with regard to implementing inclusion. She emphasises the importance of creating home-school links. That link proved to have a strong positive impact on children’s learning as well as in promoting social and educational inclusion for disabled children and their families (Mittler, 2000; Peters, 2004). Therefore, supporting all children can be facilitated through creating a better environment that moves from professional-dominance to parent-partnership, with its collaboration, involvement and participation (Norwich, 2002). This is based on the knowledge that pupils may come from cultures in which pupils and adults interact in different ways from what takes place in school where each culture may have its own rules; it is then essential to take this into consideration while dealing with pupils (Dukmak, 2010). This is highly important when considering the achievement of pupils categorised by staff as the ‘low-achievers’ as they are usually the pupils who have limited participation in lessons and classroom activities. Therefore, Mittler (2000) suggests that all school staff should be trained to work with parents where parents are given the opportunity to describe how they want to be involved in discussions and schools’ decision making.

In summary, the movements towards making school cultures more welcoming of and responsive to differences require consideration of various factors, including attitudes towards difference and abilities, leadership styles, and parental and community involvement. The literature suggests that the extent to which values within schools include the acceptance and celebration of difference, and a commitment to offering educational opportunities to all pupils, coupled with the extent to which they are shared across a school’s staff, relate to the extent to which pupils are enabled to participate. In addition, changing school culture requires “charismatic” leaders who can offer “transformative” responses to issues of inclusive education. Those leaders can set in place a range of “organisational conditions” that focus on promoting inclusion such as the use of distributed leadership styles, cooperation and problem-solving among staff and high levels of staff and pupils’ involvement.

To achieve the described tasks, leaders need to be viewed as decision-makers and not implementers of national policies and frameworks. They also need to be given adequate time to succeed in their schools and move their schools towards
inclusiveness, as any initiative to improve schools usually takes time to become institutionalised. It is also necessary to provide heads with proper training: literature reveals that heads usually learn their job from doing it and many move from their original role as leaders of change to being immersed in ‘maintenance dilemmas’. Finally, building good connections with parents and the community around the school can help all pupils’ learning. That will ensure that all pupils are provided with various forms of support that might be available beyond school level. These points on school cultures provided further signposts for my research.

**School practices.** As I have indicated, within some of the more recent literature there is an emphasis on strengthening the usual practices of classroom teachers in order to reach all members of a class. For example, Fredricks *et al.* (2004) found that increasing attention is given to the concept of school engagement as a potential cure to decreased academic motivation and achievement. It is presumed that engagement is responsive and amenable to environmental changes. The authors infer that the concept of the impact of school engagement on the learners’ experience has not been fully realised, and finely-tuned interventions could be carried out using fuller characterisation of the pupils’ manner of behaving, feeling, and thinking. Moreover, the concept of engagement is linked to inclusivity and is therefore seen by some as a necessary element that must be ensured in the inclusive classroom (Corbett, 2001; Norwich, 2012).

According to Jordan *et al.* (2009), effective teaching skills comprise advanced pupil engagement with the basis of effective classroom management skills; ability to structure learning that takes into account the current levels of understanding of students; students’ cognitive engagement in higher-order thinking; and encouragement of success. It is important to note that diverse pupils’ lack of engagement could lead to their gradual withdrawal from school activities and in some cases, participation in disruptive behaviour (OECD, 2012). Engagement therefore enables the pupils to identify with the school values and participate in academic and non-academic activities. Its concept usually covers psychological and behavioural components, where the psychological components pertain to pupils’ sense of belonging to school while the behavioural components comprise pupils’ participation
in school activities (e.g., Goodenow and Grady, 1993; Voelkl, 1997, cited in OECD, 2012).

In relation to this, Pianta et al. (2012) state that pupil engagement necessitates the nature and quality of teacher-pupil relationship interactions, which can be evaluated using standardised observation techniques and can be changed through knowledge provision to classroom teachers about the relevant developmental processes for classroom interactions and personalised feedback.

These findings regarding classroom practices that enable classroom teachers to respond to pupils’ differences provided me with yet more signposts as I planned and carried out my fieldwork.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed literature that focuses on how schools can respond to pupil differences. It has led me to propose an overall approach, the focus of which is directed towards moving away from central-based reforms that are led by policy makers and governments, which view schools as implementers of national agendas, towards more school-based reforms that support schools in ensuring they are more capable of accommodating and responding to the diverse needs of their learners. This approach requires giving school staff the space to modify their practices and provide them with the required human and physical resources. Finally, within this approach, national policies are considered important factors in the move towards inclusiveness and therefore there is a need to build an agreement among all relevant partners on a common vision supported by a number of specific steps to be taken to put this vision into practice. This vision needs to be based on inclusive values.

Within this approach, inclusion is defined as a continuous process that focuses on identifying and removing the ‘barriers’ experienced by some pupils. This means restructuring the cultures, policies and practices in schools in order to respond to the diversity of all pupils in their locality. The chapter has argued that this change is not concerned with adopting new technologies but rather involves social learning processes within a given workplace. This continuous process requires staff, parents,
pupils and community to work collaboratively to form a shared vision for improvement which is based on inclusive values. The identifications and discussions of these elements can lead to a wider understanding of inclusion and exclusion, and foster conditions within national and school contexts to respond to pupils’ differences.

In the chapters that follow, I describe how I adopted this overall perspective as I explored how Oman primary schools respond to pupils’ differences. In so doing, I used the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion and its three dimensions, by creating a series of what I have called signposts to guide my exploratory research.
CHAPTER 4
RESEARCH CONTEXT

Introduction

The overall purpose of this chapter is to enable the reader to form a clearer picture of the national environment in which the research was based and to make sense of the way education provision is structured in Oman. I start by providing basic demographic information about the Sultanate of Oman. I briefly outline the location, history, social fabric, and economic context of the country. This is important as it explains/illustrates how diverse the Omani context is and why it is important to consider the issues of responding to differences in schools.

In the second part, I examine educational developments in the Omani school system with regard to responding to pupil differences. This is important in that the two schools which I looked at are performing within a centralised school system, where policy is developed at the top level and schools are considered as implementers of various national policies and programmes. To set the context, I present a historical overview about the development of the school system in Oman and the roles of various external agencies and experts in this process.

It is important to state here that my research focus is on mainstream Basic Education schools (grades 1-4). However, in this chapter, the whole Omani school system including Basic Education schools (mainstream schools), private and international schools, and special education schools is reviewed.

Demographic information

- Location and population

As illustrated in figure 2, Oman is a member of the six Gulf Cooperation Council States (GCC) and has an estimated population of 3.855 million distributed over 11 governorates (Oman MoE, 2014).
Al-Barwani and Albeely (2007) describe Oman as multicultural as the result of its dominions in some parts of East Africa until 1964 – part of the United Republic of Tanzania and Gwadur until 1958 – part of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Nicolini, 2003). Such connections and relations with India and Africa underpin the wealth of diversity that Oman exhibits in its ethnic groups and native languages (Al-Hammami, 1999; Peterson, 2004). It is essential to this research to analyse the Omani connections with Tanzania and Pakistan, as a percentage of school pupils speak these languages. It is therefore important to understand to what extent the school system responds to the language differences and what impact this has on pupils’ experiences at school, which is the aim of this research.
Until 1970, Oman was described as a closed, and poor country, lacking education and medical care (Peterson, 2004). Most of the population was illiterate (66%) with only three schools in the whole country located in Muscat and Salalah providing education exclusively to boys aged 6-18 (Al-Nabhani, 2007; Oman MoE, 2008).

Once Sultan Qaboos bin Said took over from his father in 1970, he established a new government which was facing a challenge on how to turn Oman into a modern and influential state (Al-rahbi, 2008). One of the main priorities of the new government was to invest in an intensive modernisation programme that included roads, houses, electricity, an expanded system of irrigation, manufacturing industries, and a reinvigorated fishing industry (O'Reilly, 1988). That required the country to have skilled and educated people to implement such plans; however, where most of the population were illiterate due to the limited educational opportunities (Oman MoE, 2008), non-Omani experts and workers were encouraged to come and work in Oman. By mid-2013 the non-Omani nationals (expatriates) constituted 44% of the total population of Oman with a rise in the expatriate percentage from 24% in 2003 to 44%
in 2013 (Oman MoE, 2014). This increase in non-Omani residents has impacted on the demographic and social fabric of the country and increased its diversity (Peterson, 2004).

This change and increase in the diversity was also influenced by the return of many Omani emigrants after 1970 where the newly elected government started encouraging the Omans, who left Oman years ago, to return and participate in the development process. Currently, people from both Zanzibari and Baluchi backgrounds are settling in Oman as Omani citizens, but still maintain their Swahili and Baluchi languages as well as their customs and traditions. Although there is no formal documentation on the exact number of Omanis from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds, Peterson (2004) states that the Baluch constitute the largest non-Arab community in Oman and are concentrated along the al-Batina Coast, Mutrah and Muscat. Peterson also describes the Zanzibari community as ‘large’, but no records exist on their accurate numbers and that may be because the term ‘Zanzibari’ is used in Oman for Omanis with an East African connection regardless of where the African connection originated. For example, Zanzibaris are classed as the descendants of Omanis who went to Africa decades ago - in some cases centuries ago - and inter-married with African women. The term is also applicable for Omanis who were born in East Africa of Omani-born parents and for Omanis, particularly from the eastern port of Sur and the interior province of al-Sharqiyya (which traditionally viewed Sur as its route to the outside world), who tended to move between Oman and Africa with casual regularity (Peterson, 2004). The native language of the three groups is Swahili and although they returned to Oman after the 1964 revolution in Zanzibar, many of these Zanzibaris who came to Oman as adults in the 1960s and 1970s never fully mastered Arabic.

Based on the fact that various groups in Oman - whether citizens or expatriates - speak languages besides Arabic means that there is a percentage of school children who will also speak a range of languages besides Arabic, which is the language of instruction in schools and the formal language of the country. Therefore, the study explores how the school system responds to various pupils’ differences in the light of such diversity and wealth of languages that exist in Oman.
In addition, the diverse nature of the Omani social context is also shaped by the high number of individuals with disabilities in the country. According to the 2003 Ministry of National Economy Census there were about 41,303 people with various types of disabilities and only about 23% of the total numbers of people with disabilities were registered to different educational and rehabilitation centres (Oman Ministry of National Economy, 2010). However, reliable information in this regard is lacking, and current prevalence of mental and physical impairments throughout the Sultanate is estimated to be much higher, since many cases are not reported due to culturally associated concepts such as shame and guilt (Profanter, 2009). In addition, there was no information about the number of children with disabilities in the age of schooling. The high number of individuals with disabilities added another aspect of diversity and brought a new challenge to the newly established government to ensure that education is provided to all.

**Development of a school system**

In order to eradicate illiteracy and ensure an educated population who can build the country, the newly established government considered the expansion of education as one of its top priorities from 1970 (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012). Development in the school system was described as having undergone two periods: a quantitative period, which began in 1970 and continued until 1995, and was marked by the distribution of learning for all Omani areas which is providing access; and a qualitative [period], which started in 1998 with the implementation of Basic Education and greater focus on standards and examination (Al-Mamari, 2014; Al-Nabhani, 2007; Donn and Almanthri, 2013). Both stages were influenced by tidal waves of international influence; borrowing, development, and collaboration (Donn and Almanthri, 2013).

Below, I give a historical overview on the development of the school educational system with specific focus on exploring the government efforts and reforms with regard to responding to pupils’ differences. It is vital to understand the government’s efforts with regard to responding to pupil differences as the schools system is highly centralised and the information presented here will allow the reader the ability to better understand the various issues presented in the analysis and discussion chapters.
Various formal documentation clearly states that the newly established government considered the expansion of education as one of its top priorities (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012; 2014). The establishment of the school system is described in MoE documents as part of the efforts to meet goal 2 (expansion of education) of the MDGs and bridging the gap between numbers of male and female Omani pupils (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2014) and ensure equity between Omani and expatriate children.

To achieve this aim, the Ministry of Education (MoE) was established in 1970 within a centralised school system that aimed to reach all parts of the country (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008). The government’s justification for adopting a centralised system was:

\[
\text{to ensure that national standards are maintained in schools throughout the country and to allow for the deployment of strong accountability mechanisms} \\
\text{(Oman MoE, 2008, p.15).}
\]

Based on this centralisation, the MoE is in charge of building schools, designing curricula, developing assessment procedures, recruiting and transferring staff, providing resources, evaluating schools’ progress, and deciding on how schools operate on a daily basis including the school year, the daily timing, and school holidays. The school system is financed by the government although in recent years schools are provided with small amounts of money to cover their stationary requirements. With the establishment of the school system, it was agreed that 12 years of schooling was to be provided free of charge in a system that was named ‘general education’. This system was divided as follows: (1) Elementary; grades 1-6, (2) Preparatory; grades 7-9, and (3) Secondary; grades 10-12. Pupils were offered a certification of completion after each stage (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012).

Omani boys and girls without disabilities are allowed access to mainstream schooling. In addition, expatriate children who speak Arabic are allowed free access to the same system. Providing expatriate children access to government schools is described in MoE documents as part of the government efforts to ensure equity in education. The formal MoE statement asserts:

\[
\text{One of the most important principles of the Omani educational policy is to achieve equity between citizens and expatriates in general education and the provision of a free general education up to grade twelve for all citizens and Arabic speaking expatriates} \text{ (Oman MoE, 2007, p.35).}
\]
Expatriate children who do not speak Arabic are offered the choice between accessing government schools or having their ‘own schools’ (Oman MoE, 2008), like the British school, the American British Academy, the Indian school, the Sri Lankan school and the Phillipino school. However, there is no form of language support provided in government schools.

With regard to children with disabilities, MoE documents describe mainstream classrooms and government schools as unable to recognise the special educational needs of many children with disabilities (Oman MoE, 2006). Therefore, a special education needs department was established in 1972 to take charge of planning, designing and providing educational services to pupils with disabilities (Oman MoE, 2008). Under the umbrella of this department, three special schools were opened, Al-Amal school (for children with hearing impairments) which was opened in 1979, the Al-Fekreyah school (for children with mild to moderate mental impairment) opened in 1984, and the Omar Bin Al-Khatab institute (for children with visual impairments) opened in 1999. Therefore, the Omani school system can be described as a three-track system of mainstream, special, and private/international schools.

Back in 1970, providing access for pupils, even in segregated provisions, required qualified classroom teachers and with the limited number of educated people in Oman at the time – there were only 30 classroom teachers in the whole country, all of whom were male – the government tended to recruit Omani citizens with low qualifications as well as classroom teachers from Egypt, Qatar and Lebanon as well as from the UK, Sudan and India to teach English (Al-Balushi and Griffiths, 2013).

Similarly, curricula and textbooks were also borrowed from neighbouring countries; the Qatari and Lebanese curricula were used until the establishment of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981. The Education Bureau of the GCC coordinated educational policies and unified the curriculum framework among all member states. The curriculum at that stage was described as a ‘teacher-centered’, with a ‘content-driven’ approach that relied greatly on ‘high-task’ and final-year examinations which focused on testing memorisation (Al-Balushi and Griffiths, 2013).

I suggest here that this ‘borrowing’ from countries that share similar cultures and language was a wise decision, as it took into consideration the social and cultural
context of Oman at that time. Nevertheless, I also suggest that the reforms that were implemented after the 1990s took another direction and trends were implemented that are not context-based and not responsive to differences of all pupils; therefore this created various forms of exclusion and marginalisation in schools. I analyse these policies in the following sections.

**Changing priorities and the impact of the EFA agenda**

The status of the educational institutions became stable during the period 1986-1990 and, therefore, the educational planning shifted its focus to achieve a balance between quantity and quality (Al-Balushi and Griffiths, 2013). However, Al-Balushi and Griffiths (2013) state that the various school reforms during this period were shaped by *external agencies that were ‘enacting a form of educational supremacy’*(p.7) and that imposed policies and programmes on countries which were developed and tested elsewhere (i.e. under different country contexts), which therefore created various problems in schools. The authors described the implementation of Basic Education in Oman as one big example of such external policies.

As the government committed itself to meeting the MDGs, numeric data are continuously collected about the school system including the growth in the pupils’ net enrolment rates, increase in schools’ numbers and distribution in the Omani educational regions, increase in classroom teachers’ numbers, and gender equality, class size, teacher-pupil ratio, and school time (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012). The way data are collected is actually part of an international trend in this area which is led by various UN agencies, including the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF, as described in chapter 2. This process, I argue, resulted in the adoption of a limited vision for education and responding to pupils’ differences, and overlooked the realities of schools and their population.

The focus on collecting numerical data about the school system was also influenced by the recommendations of the *Vision for Oman’s Economy 2020* conference which was held in 1995. The aim was to find alternatives to oil which is the main income-generating resource in Oman in order to achieve economic balance and sustainable development in the country (Oman Ministry of National Economy, 1995). It concluded that in order to cope with the global change and meet the requirements in
such a competitive world, a number of reforms needed to take place including educational reform. Accordingly, various recommendations about how to reform education were made (Al-Balushi and Griffiths, 2013; Al-Nabhani, 2007).

To adopt reforms and implement the changes recommended by the conference, the government needed to know what needed to be changed in the school education and what the current problems in the school system were. To answer these questions, and as part of the commitment to meeting the MDGs, the MoE participated in the Monitoring Learning Achievement (MLA) study in 1997. The study was sponsored by UNICEF/UNESCO to evaluate the achievements with regard to meeting the MDGs and the government’s educational objectives. The study revealed that education was:

‘taking place in un-adequate school facilities which resulted in a lower than expected students achievement rates’ (Albalushi and Griffiths, 2013, p. 114).

It is evident that the focus at this period was standards and achievement and it is again part of the global focus on standards as described in chapter 2. At this stage, though, the World Bank influence became clearer as it sponsored a project to reform the Omani school system in the mid-1990s. The reform aimed at ensuring that Omani pupils gain skills to enable them to meet the global economic pressures where extra value was ascribed to particular types of knowledge (Al-Balushi and Griffiths, 2013). During this stage, pupil outcomes was described as the main challenge facing the system and therefore the reform needed to focus on raising standards; again a clear example of how the international focus on standards was imposed on Oman.

MoE documents, however, stated that the reform was aiming at broader objectives including:

improving the quality of schools environments for the learners and staff in a way that enable them of working collaboratively to develop a generation capable of building its country ,responding to global needs and welcoming diversities’ (Oman MoE, 2012, p.22).

Accordingly, and with the support of the World Bank, the Basic Education Reform (BER) was implemented through collaboration with a Canadian agency named CANADCOM where schooling years are divided as follows; cycle one (grades 1-4), cycle two (5-10), and post basic (grades 11-12). The system is described in most MoE documents and literature as: ‘a very vital change that led to the movement towards achieving quality education’ (Al-Mamari, 2014, p.111).
At this stage, inclusion as a concept did not exist in the Omani documents and was not an issue of discussion. Subsequently, segregated provisions kept on expanding as a way of responding to pupils’ differences.

**Basic Education (BE); ensuring quality**

As the World Bank sponsored the BER, it is important to note here that the naming of the system, I suggest, is also impacted by the discussions about primary/basic education that took place in the Dakar conference (see chapter 2). It is clear that Oman decided to consider 10 years of schooling as ‘basic’. Accordingly, the whole school system was changed to Basic Education (BE) and this gradually replaced the general education that was implemented in the Omani school system (see appendices 1 and 2). Basic Education in Oman refers to:

*a unified 10-year education, provided by the government in the Sultanate of Oman for all children of school age. It meets their basic education needs in terms of knowledge and skills, enabling them to continue their education and training according to their interests and dispositions. It also prepares them to face the challenges of present circumstances and future development in the context of comprehensive social development* (Oman MoE, 2006, p.99).

The celebration of the ability of the new ‘basic education’ to ensure excellence in education was highlighted in various MoE documents (2006; 2008; 2012; 2015). With the implementation of BE, the international trends that link inputs (the resources) and the school outputs (achievement), known as the production function approach (Hanushek, 1995), impacted the whole school reform after this stage. For example, implementation of basic education brought with it changes in several inputs including the curriculum, teacher education, assessment, schools development plans and special education programmes. These reforms, though, only targeted the BE and did not include the special education or private and international schools’ systems which led to underdevelopment of the special education system as described by the World Bank study (2001).

Al-Balushi and Griffiths (2013), however, state that the BER, which is a system externally imposed on Oman by the World Bank and developed by an external agency, created various problems in the school system as it brought with it policies that were developed and tested somewhere else and were not suitable for the Omani school context. They did not go into detailed description of the various problems of
the BER and did not collect evidence from schools about the problems they believed had been created by borrowing external ideas and policies. I contend that this is a significant gap in literature on the Omani school system which I intend to address in this research through collecting data from schools on the impact of ‘borrowing’, which I discuss in detail in chapters 7 and 8.

The following sections offer descriptions of the various policies and programmes that are currently implemented in the Basic Education schools with a focus on cycle-one schools (grades 1-4) where the study took place.

**School buildings and equipment.** All government schools are built on land owned by the government and allocated for MoE use. All schools follow the same design, which is a rectangular shape where classrooms and other rooms are built around an open area that is used for the assembly and physical education lessons. With the implementation of the BE, the structure of schools was modified to fit with the objectives of the new system. The typical provision for BE schools is:

- 30 classrooms for cycle-one schools (grades 1-4) and 40 classrooms for cycle-two schools (grades 5-9).
- All schools have a learning resource centre that is equipped with computers, audio and video aids as well as printing machines.
- They all have four rooms for administrator staff as well as a room for the school nurse.
- All have bathrooms and drinking areas with access for children with disabilities (Oman MoE, 2012, p.83).
- All schools have a canteen that sells juice, sandwiches, biscuits, and chocolate bars to children.

**Curriculum.** Cycle-one schools (primary) aim to cover subjects that are divided over two fields; the first field comprises Islamic studies, Arabic, and Social Studies and the second field comprises Science and Mathematics. Pupils also study IT, Music, Art and Physical studies. Textbooks are provided by the Curriculum Development Directorate (CDD) where the current system for curriculum development and design is objectives-based (Oman MoE, 2012). The formal MoE document states that the
The guiding principle of curriculum framework and reform in Oman is to move from a teacher-based approach to a ‘pupils-centered curriculum’ that includes relevant skills and knowledge that will help prepare pupils for work and life, and help raise their standards to be able to compete in the global economy (Oman MoE, 2007; 2008; 2012). The formal document named From Access to Success published in 2006 reported that, to achieve quality, Omani pupils require a stronger background in mathematics and science and greater proficiency in both Arabic and English (Oman MoE, 2006). This is clearly impacted by PISA where efficiency/high or minimum standards in the three subjects became a global trend (see chapter 2). In addition, Al-Balushi and Griffiths (2013) argue that one of the main problems of the BE system was asking classroom teachers who traditionally delivered through the teacher-centered approach to suddenly move to a pupil-centered approach without preparing them for the shift. This is a very essential issue in this research which I refer to in the analysis and discussion chapters.

In addition, the national curriculum is centrally designed by members of the curriculum directorate, and non-Omani experts in various areas. For each subject there is a classroom teachers’ handbook (in Oman we refer to them as classroom teachers’ guides) which is also centrally designed. Classroom teachers’ guides are expected to contain materials intended as basic core materials for ‘everyone’ and enrichment materials designed for pupils ‘who are above grade level’ as well as remediation material designed for pupils ‘performing below grade level’ (Oman MoE, 2006, p.69). The same document reports that classroom teachers’ guides are provided to ensure that classroom teachers implement new teaching and learning approaches and shift focus from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches (Oman MoE, 2006).

All subjects are taught in classical Arabic except English, which has its own books, classroom teachers’ guides and resources. This assumes that all pupils in mainstream schools (BE) are Arabic speakers because non-Arabic expatriates are provided education in private and international schools, as described earlier. However, many Omani pupils have non-Arabic backgrounds and speak either Baluchi or Swahili as their mother tongue. The language issue is one aspect of my focus in both schools as I expand on in chapters 7 and 8.
Assessment. With the implementation of BE and the great focus on standards, the MoE reported that there was an emerging need to evaluate the performance in the newly established system and know whether pupils were achieving the expected outcomes, or otherwise (Oman MoE, 2014). Other documents stressed that reforms are closely linked to assessment, evaluation and curriculum. Therefore, without assessment it would be impossible to know what pupils have learned and whether teaching has been effective (Oman MoE, 2006). That focus on exams was associated with a contentious trend in managing inputs/outputs to ensure quality.

Based on the trust invested in external agencies and experts, the whole assessment system was changed in 1997 based on recommendations from the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA). This agency suggested moving away from testing based on memorisation to test higher-thinking skills. Therefore, working groups for all subjects were established which comprised of supervisors and some classroom teachers who were trained by the SQA on how to develop test items that assess high-order thinking skills. Yet those working groups were disbanded just after the project with SQA ended (Al Balushi and Griffths, 2013).

With regard to cycle-one schools (grades 1-4), the SQA suggested also moving away from the pass/fail system of assessment; one main reason was to overcome the high level of drop-out rates in elementary schools (Oman MoE, 2006). Therefore, all pupils in grades 1-4 (where the study took place) automatically move to upper grades and classroom teachers are requested to follow up their achievements through what is termed ‘continuous assessment’ in the MoE documents; this process includes oral and short written tests, quizzes, performance assessment tasks, projects, portfolios, and pupils’ self-assessments (Oman MoE, 2006). The SQA also suggested moving away from comparing levels of pupils’ achievements though percentage scores to the use of letter grades.

The MoE documents state that classroom teachers are expected to follow the progress of the ‘majority’ pupils’ achievements, and provide evidence of the remedial programme provided to the ‘minority’ pupils at risk of not achieving the expected educational targets in one or more subjects, and those who have behavioural difficulties. These ‘remedial’ programmes are described in the formal MoE documents as the ‘Learning Difficulties’ (LD) programme which was implemented in
all basic and general education schools and which was first applied in 2000/2001. I
describe this programme in the following sections as it is central to this research and
has a clear impact on pupils’ experiences in both schools I investigated.

In addition, the great focus on standards and reliance on numeric data about the
achievement of the national standards resulted in the participation in Trends in
International Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMMS) in 2007 and in the Progress
in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) to identify the attainment of Grade 4
pupils in reading. I argue here that the main government focus on standards and
collecting numeric data overshadowed other aspects of school life and ignored the
complexities within schools’ day-to-day running, and that negatively impacted
appropriate and effective responses to pupils’ differences, as I expand on in the
following chapters.

_Schools’ development plans._ This is another programme that was established in
collaboration with an external agency and the MoE describes it as aiming to ensure
schools’ effectiveness, build a culture of self-evaluation, to interact with community,
and plan for professional development programmes based on schools’ needs (Oman
MoE, 2014). Omani government schools are expected to monitor and analyse data on
pupils’ performance, evaluate the quality of key aspects of schools’ work, plan
changes in light of the findings, and implement the plans (Oman MoE, 2006). To
achieve this, the Department of School Performance and Evaluation was established
in 2006 as a result of the collaboration between the MoE and OFSTED (based on
interviews with senior policy makers).

This system is based on two types of evaluation - internal and external. The internal
evaluation aims at making schools more self-critical and responsible for their own
development through evaluating three main aspects: (1) school administration, (2)
teaching, and (3) pupils’ learning (Oman MoE, 2012). The Omani formal documents
state that this system was a great accomplishment that enabled schools to diagnose
and sort out their own problems in a way that led to improvements in schools’ and
pupils’ performance levels through implementing a set of accurate evaluative tools
(Oman MoE, 2014). The tools are mainly sets of questionnaires distributed to pupils,
classroom teachers and members of the parents’ council. Those forms are then
supposed to be reviewed by a team headed by the school principal; they determine
what follow-up actions need to be taken, as well as school development plans, which are prepared accordingly.

With regard to the external evaluation, the formal documents report that this should be conducted by teams from the Department of School Performance and Evaluation, whereby some of its members visit schools once a year, conduct classroom observations, and spend time with classroom teachers, administrators, and some parents to support schools in overcoming the obstacles and difficulties they face. However, external evaluation was terminated in 2012 due to lack of human resources and lack of finance to recruit new employees (interview with senior policy maker during the pilot study, 2013).

Actually there is no framework in place for the development of this programme and, despite the continuous complaints about the unsuitability of this programme to the Omani school context, the MoE announced the establishment of the Center for School Performance with a joint team from OFSTED while this research was taking place. To date, however, there are no documents or literature on the aims and responsibilities of the Center; neither are there any documents of its structure.

**Learning Difficulty (LD) programme.** The formal MoE documents report that this programme was introduced as a way to increase pupils’ achievements in numeracy and literacy and support them inside classrooms as well as outside as pull-out sessions in the learning difficulty rooms (Oman MoE, 2006). Therefore, the programme can be described as adult support provided for pupils with difficulties in numeracy and literacy only (Al-Ghafri, 2011). The programme does not provide any services for pupils with disabilities or pupils who are categorised by classroom teachers as slow learners\(^1\). The MoE provides a LD resource room/classroom in each BE school which is usually equipped with facilities such as computers, overhead projector, TV, video, cards and posters, and sometimes the school administration helps by providing extra facilities. Yet, there is no specific syllabus; instead samples of academic tests are provided by the Ministry and Learning Difficulty Classroom teachers (LDTs) are directed to design exercises and activities to support pupils according to their difficulties.

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\(^1\) This is a categorisation classroom teachers use to refer to pupils who have difficulties in other subjects like science and social studies.
Pupils are accepted on the programme based on an identification process conducted by the LDT upon referrals from classroom teachers. At the beginning of the academic year, each classroom teacher is asked to nominate those from her class who she considers to have LDs. She does that based on the previous academic year’s formal and informal assessment results and her classroom observations. This means that the LDT may find she is asked to accept large numbers of pupils identified by classroom teachers as having LDs.

The LDT then conducts a baseline test for those pupils and, based on the results, takes a maximum of 25 pupils into the LD programme each academic year. Others remain on the waiting list and may join if someone leaves the programme for any reason (some pupils may move from the school, or show sufficient progress to be returned to their original classes - or may be denied access based on the LDT’s decision). As the LDT’s timetable is not more than 15 periods a week, she normally withdraws her pupils from their original classes individually or in groups according to their difficulties, where each pupil has two to three lessons a week in the LD room. Pupils are withdrawn from the subjects they need help with, so, if they need extra help in reading and writing in Arabic, they are withdrawn from Arabic lessons and if they need support in addition, they are withdrawn from the math lessons.

The LDT is usually one of the subject classroom teachers in the school, who has attended a two-week training course in Muscat before becoming a LDT. Others are special education classroom teachers who have a relevant degree in special education. LDTs are in charge of preparing Individualised Educational Plans (IEPs) for each pupil and although the MoE formal document states that a school committee works with the LDT to follow up the IPE and pupils’ progress, the actual practices are different, as we see in the analysis chapters.

Interestingly, the MoE documents released in 2006 and 2008 describe this programme as a way to ensure inclusion, while the same programme was described in other documents as a way to raise standards and reduce drop-out rates (2014). Actually, this reveals confusion with regard how to balance between the need to increase performance and meet the global pressure with regard to inclusion and decreasing marginalisation in schools. This specific issue has implications for schools’ practices and pupils’ learning experiences, as I describe in chapters 7 and 8. The study by Al-
Ghafri (2011) revealed that most LDTs were lacking the relevant skills and resources to enable them to support pupils on this programme. The study also recommended moving away from segregated provisions towards an inclusive school approach where all pupils can learn together and achieve. The study also recommended changing the approach to classroom teachers’ training and in-service training to enable them to better respond to diversity in their classrooms.

**Integration programme.** This was piloted in two schools in the 2005/2006 school year, and has since continued to expand. This pilot stage of the integration programme was part of the government’s commitment to the international agenda with regard to EFA and inclusion as discussed in chapter 2. Such calls for inclusion were discussed in a formal MoE document titled *Inclusive Education; the way of the future* (2008). The document clearly states that:

> the Ministry is aware of the universal trends with regard to inclusive education and working on adopting the broader definitions and practices of inclusion where schools can respond to ‘diverse’ needs of students ... and create a learning environment which addresses learners divers expectations and needs (Oman MoE, 2008, p. 52).

The same document, though, reported that the implementation of such a broader definition of inclusive education is difficult, in the light of a real shortage in trained staff. Therefore ‘a remedial approach of inclusion’ was adopted in the Omani context (Oman MoE, 2008, p.51). This approach focuses on allowing pupils with hearing and mental disabilities access to mainstream school in units named ‘integration classrooms’.

> Oman emphasises providing inclusive education accessible for all and does not neglect education for persons with disabilities...the Ministry is making a great effort in this area through three educational services for persons with special needs; (1) three special educational schools, (2) program on integrating children with disabilities into basic education schools, and (3) program on handling learning difficulties in basic/general education schools (Oman MoE, 2014, p.95).

With regard to the operational component of integration classrooms, pupils are grouped according to their disability (separate classroom for each disability) and taught by their own special education classroom teachers (around 6-10 pupils of the same disability in one classroom). These children are supposed to mix with the rest of...
the pupils during the assembly and activity lessons, yet that did not happen during the observation period I spent in one of the schools (see chapter 8).

Although the programme has no written framework, no vision, and no formal document or evaluation studies on its effectiveness and challenges, the programme is expanding in all Omani regions (see appendix 4). In addition, the operational side of the integration programme was not described in the inclusive education document or in other MoE documents including the latest EFA National Report 2014. The whole programme falls under the umbrella of the Special Education Department with no links to other departments that are in charge of designing policies and programmes for mainstream schools.

Pupils’ admission to integration classrooms is done either through referrals from the Ministry of Social Development or via direct requests from parents. In both cases, pupils need medical reports from the Ministry of Health, or Sultan Qaboos University hospital, stating that the child has a hearing or mental disability and needs to be in an integration classroom. Therefore, pupils with hearing or mental disabilities cannot be registered in MoE schools without such a report.

In May of each academic year, the MoE makes an announcement to the public through radio and newspapers in Arabic and English that if any parents have children of school age (six year upwards) with mental/hearing disability they should get a medical report and then go to the nearby school to register their children. This process usually lasts for two to three weeks during which time schools prepare lists and inform the Special Education Department about the number of children who require diagnostic tests in each region. It is important to note that there are no other techniques in place to ensure that parents are fully informed about the diagnosis process, or that they are even aware that their child may have a disability.

According to numbers at regional levels, the diagnostic team from the Special Education Department at the central level will move to specified regions to conduct the diagnostic tests and decide who is eligible to be enrolled in an integration classroom. Based on decisions from this team and the number of individuals with disabilities in each region, the decision on whether to open integration classrooms will be made by the Special Education Department and the Planning Department at the central level.
Schools are then informed about the decision either before the end of the academic year or sometimes by the beginning of the new academic year where they are directed to allocate an ‘empty classroom’ to be used as an ‘integration classroom’. A special education teacher and a helper are allocated for groups comprising five to seven pupils. The supervision and follow-up of the classroom and its classroom teachers are the responsibility of Special Education Department. The special education classroom teachers in the integration classrooms have full responsibility for following up their pupils’ performance where they are expected to prepare IPEs according to pupils differences; yet there are no formal documents that provide any details about the teaching strategies and approaches in these classrooms. Actually I was unable to find any written documents or textbooks or classroom teachers’ guides that are used in the classrooms for the pupils with mental disabilities.

**Teacher training.** Based on the fact that the traditional teaching approaches used in the Omani schools were teacher-centered with great focus on memorisation, the successful implementation of BE and the MoE reforms were perceived to be largely dependent on the quality of teaching and responses to pupils’ needs from classroom teachers and school staff (Donn and Al Manthri, 2013). Therefore, new teaching and learning approaches were introduced to shift focus from teacher-centered to learner-centered approaches (Oman MoE, 2006). The new teaching approach aims to help classroom teachers respond to the wide range of abilities inside classrooms (Oman MoE, 2006).

Classroom teachers’ in-service training involves classroom teachers learning how to apply a variety of teaching methods and classroom management techniques including individual, pair, small-group, cooperative learning and communication (Oman MoE, 2006). This training is provided by the Directorate General of Human Resources Development at the MoE and the training package consists of 75 hours of training in three themes: (1) Omani educational philosophy of education, educational plans, and philosophy of curricula and assessment; (2) teaching methods, class management, and educational media; and (3) subject-specific training.

Besides the central training, MoE documents state that in-service training is also provided regionally and at school level where the central training concentrates on informing classroom teachers about the latest developments within the system, while
the regional training programmes are ‘enrichments and remedial ones’ (Oman MoE, 2014, p. 151) to help classroom teachers improve their teaching skills. The training programmes provided at school level aim at moving schools to be ‘training units’ where principals are supposed to communicate with their staff on the needed training programmes and provide them based on need (Oman MoE, 2014).

Based on my insider knowledge and experience, there have been continuous complaints, particularly in the last 15 years, about the pre-service classroom teachers’ training levels and their skills. In 2011 specifically, and as part of the Arab spring, senior policy makers, parents, school principals and educational advocates requested that the government impose strict regulations to ensure that MoE does not hire graduates from institutes that are not MoE-accredited. However, this is still not in place and the Council of Ministers continues to put pressure on the MoE to hire all teacher graduates even when they lack the essential skills. To overcome their low pre-service qualifications, the Sultan announced the establishment of the specialised classroom teachers’ training centre to help in raising their skills to meet the requirements of the BE system.

**Implementation of national policies**

This section explains how national policies and regulations are implemented in cycle-one schools (grades 1-4) where the study took place. In this section I describe pupil admission and registration, grouping and placement policies, attendance policies, and school regulations and disciplines.

**Pupils’ admission.** The MoE internal document (Oman MoE, 2012, p.131) clearly states that the maximum number of pupils in cycle-one schools is 30; and 35 in cycle-two schools. In order for any parent to register their child; the child should:

- Be six years old
- Have all formal identity documents
- Have a medical report (should state all chronic diseases if any)
- Be without hearing or intellectual disability
- Pupils are placed in classrooms according to their age (grade 1= age 6 and so on).
- Pupils with disabilities should be referred to the special education department for diagnosis where they will be either registered in a special school or an integration classroom within government schools.

Despite this, it needs to be stated that parental choice is not considered when registering children in BE schools where each child must be registered in his or her catchment area. School principals have the right to reject any child who does not fulfill the stated criteria.

**Grouping and placements.** Both male and female pupils in all cycle-one schools (grades 1-4) study in the same classroom and are distributed among classrooms based on age-group and mixed ability approach. Surprisingly, the impact of implementing the age-based approach on pupils coming from non-Arabic speaking backgrounds has not been mentioned in the MoE documents, and was not discussed during our meetings at the MoE. As an insider, who worked in the MoE for 20 years ranging between teaching and research, the time I spent in schools raised questions about various policies that are implemented and believed to be the best option to respond to pupils’ differences; I expand on this in the analysis chapters.

**Attendance policies.** With the implementation of Basic Education and commitment to EFA, it was important to decrease school dropout and ensure that all children complete primary (basic) education (see chapter 2). To reach this aim, the MoE set out formal procedures to be implemented by schools in cases of pupil absence:

- If a pupil misses one lesson without a formal or acceptable reason; he/she is considered as absent for a full day.
- Schools have to form a committee to follow up pupils’ presence/absence.
- If a pupil misses two days of school, the committee should do the following:
  1. Advise the pupil and consult him/her.
  2. Provide the pupil and his parents with formal notice.
  3. If the pupil keeps missing school days to reach 10 days, the committee should study the case and apply the formal regulations which are (1) cutting 20% off his/her marks for grades 1-4; cutting 5% of the grades for pupils in grades 5-10; or prevent the pupils from sitting the final exams and consider the pupil a fail if he/she continues to miss days of school.
The contradictions in national policies is obvious here as there are no fail/pass initiatives in cycle-one schools (grades 1-4); therefore, cutting marks does not appear to be effective in practice. The findings from both case studies have confirmed this argument, as I explicate in chapters 7 and 8.

*Schools’ regulations and discipline.* MoE policy does not allow classroom teachers to use verbal abuse or corporal punishment (Oman MoE, 2012) and an internal document was provided to schools highlighting the formal regulations and procedures schools should follow towards cases of misbehaviour or disrespect by pupils. In the case of breaking schools’ regulations, leaving classrooms without permission, misbehaving during school assembly, tampering with school facilities, not bringing books and school homework, or cases of disrespect to classroom teachers and administrators, the pupil will receive a formal notice and will be asked with his parents to sign a formal pledge. Repetition of any of the above behaviours will result in suspension for 3-10 days. In cases of smoking, sexual behaviours, or causing physical harm to a colleague or member of staff, the pupil may face the possibility of being moved to another school or to an adult education school (evening classrooms).

Despite this list, it seems that the stated policy is not implemented in schools where several cases of verbal and physical abuse were evident in both schools I observed. The lack of follow-up and communication between central and school levels had (negative) implications for classroom teachers’ practices (see chapters 7 and 8).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have presented basic demographic information about Oman including the location, the history and the social and economic context. Evidence from the policy documents, literature and interviews with senior policy makers reveals that the Omani school system is centralised with a top-down hierarchy in decision making. The school system is a three-track school system of mainstream, special education, and international and private schools.

Various programmes in the mainstream system, which is the focus of the study, were implemented and sponsored by the UN and external agencies including CANADECOM, World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF. The effectiveness of the
school system is evaluated in collaboration with external agencies which focus on numeric data.

Having outlined the context for the study, I now move on to explain the research methodology I adopted.
CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this chapter, I explain the methodological strategies I employed in order to generate data that would help me to address the two research questions posed by this study.

As I explained in chapters one and two, the purpose of the study was to conduct in-depth exploration of how Omani primary schools respond to pupil differences and try to identify and removing the key barriers to the learning of all. I also aimed to identify the nature of these barriers. Later in the thesis I use the themes that emerged from my analysis and interpretation of findings to present a context-specific model of barriers.

In what follows, I first describe the pilot study which was the first step towards clarifying the research problem and developing a suitable research design. Then I move on to explain the research design, including the approach, data collection methods, design of instruments and the sampling. In the next section, I address issues related research integrity. These include ethical issues, such as assurance of voluntary participation, power dynamics, data protection, and researcher positionality. In the final section I explain how I dealt with trustworthiness in the study, including credibility, transferability, reflexivity and language issues.

Pilot study

I conducted a pilot study in Oman from July-September 2013, with the aim of exploring policy-makers understanding of EFA and the impact of that understanding on policy development. To do that, I had to think of a framework for my study, starting from the questions to the conclusions as well as thinking of the design as ‘a research design is the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of a study’ (Rowley, 2002, p.3). For the pilot study, the case study approach was adopted where the Omani Educational Council was chosen to be my unit of analysis as it is the only official body that has entire responsibility for developing educational policy in Oman. Semi-structured interviews with five members of the Educational Council were used as my data collection tool to get in-depth explanations about the discussed issue. Before proceeding with the pilot study,
ethics forms were prepared; both information sheet and consent forms were prepared to ensure that participants would be well informed about the whole process and would be willing to participate on a voluntary basis.

Through interviews, I wanted to discuss the priorities of the educational system in Oman, the parameters that formulate the educational policy, try to relate those parameters to the dynamics of the policy formulation and try to look for a link, if any, between the different parameters. The discussion was decided to be from the point of view of different members of the Educational Council (each represents a sector) who were purposively chosen, as I believed that they were equipped with specific qualities that could provide me with the required information about the area of research, so my sample “has been chosen for a specific purpose” (Cohen et al., 2007, p.115).

The findings from the pilot study showed that the whole Omani educational policy is still evolving and members of the Educational Council are at an early stage in developing the educational strategy and policy. This led me to conclude that the best way to develop a better understanding of this context would be through focusing more directly on analysing what happens in schools and how the national policy impacts it.

The pilot study also confirmed the effectiveness of using a qualitative case study approach and the design as it allowed gathering in-depth data about the issue of focus particularly with the use of case study, and the selected data collection tools. The semi-structured interviews proved their usefulness as they allowed me to explain some terminologies that are not familiar to the Omani context. They also gave my participants the opportunity to elaborate on certain points. Therefore, my methodological knowledge and skills were deepened. Finally, the pilot study revealed the usefulness of conducting the study in Arabic which gave the participants and the researcher the opportunity to express their views in the mother tongue language. Therefore, the actual study was conducted in Arabic where interviews, focus group discussions and even the field notes were written in Arabic.

**Research design**

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative approach. The qualitative approach allows the researcher to ‘get a feel’ for the educational setting’ (Creswell, 2011, p. 182) and allows for direct interaction through field work with classroom teachers,
children, parents and administrators in order to investigate the reality of the contexts (Mertens and McLaughlin, 2004).

More specifically, I chose to adopt an exploratory case study design (Yin, 2003, p.6-8). Case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used without intending to manipulate the behaviours of the participants (Yin, 1989, p.23). Agreeing that the case study supports the investigation of a contemporary phenomenon, Stake (1995) posited that this approach also facilitates the investigation of real-life events through studying the particular cases within their contexts to develop clearer meanings of the studied phenomenon. This aligns with Merriam’s (1988) belief that the case study approach provides the opportunity to gain a deeper and richer appreciation for the phenomenon under study.

With regard to conducting studies in schools, the suitability of case studies was reinforced by Ghesquière et al. (2004), who explained that qualitative case studies: “had enormous success in educational research because it allows researchers to unravel the complex school and classroom realities” (p. 172).

Therefore, a multiple case study (Yin, 2003) was employed to provide a holistic and comprehensive picture about responding to pupil differences in Omani primary schools. Accordingly, I used two case studies, namely Newtown School and City School. Within each case, I examined the school’s policies, practices and cultures in relation to their ways of responding to pupils' differences. More specifically, I analysed both; what was common between the two schools and what was particular to each (Stake, 1995) in relation to my research focus.

As I spent eight months in the two schools, the case strategy drew on some features of ethnography, creating the opportunity for me to get immersed in the local cultures of the participants and examine the phenomena and contexts in accordance with the focus of the study (Creswell,1998; Silverman, 2005). Creswell (1998) explains that ethnography is the description and the interpretation of a cultural or social group or system where the information is located or contextualised within a larger perspective
about the group, in terms of its social, political, historical, economic and religious aspects.

**Methods of data collection**

Yin (2003) states that in case studies it is important to include and prepare for rigorous data collection, collection of evidence, analysis of the evidence and composition of the case study report. Rigorous data collection entails application of multiple data sources to collect evidence to cover a wide range of issues, locate the areas of convergence and divergence via triangulation.

The data collection methods were relevant to my research questions, the stance I adopted in this study which is consistent with the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011) and my use of a series of signposts. Therefore, a multi-method approach was used to collect data in relation to my research questions, guided by the signposts I generated, which relate to policy, classroom practice and culture (see appendix 5). Data collection included documentary analysis, observations, semi-structured interviews, and participatory photography (PP).

1) **Document analysis**

As the school system in Oman is centralised, I needed to look at the national policy documents in relation to the issues of responding to pupils’ differences and the signposts I presented in chapter 3. Therefore, some criteria needed to be highlighted in order to ensure objectivity. By deciding upon clear criteria or a strategy for evaluating the data, I tried to minimise the possibility of any bias in the research (Gray et al., 2007).

Silverman (2005) highlights the importance of careful selection of documents; therefore I focused on documents about school education only including international studies, evaluation studies, Ministry of Education five-year plans, Ministry of Education internal reports, and literature about school education which was very limited. I also looked at the Omani Economic Vision 2020 document which sets the basis for the five-year plans for all ministries. It also states the financing, the planning and manpower needed as well as the main training and human development programmes that will be implemented to achieve the stated goals. The documents were released between 1980 and 2014 and describe the reform in the school system and the development that took place in this regard.
At the school level, I looked at the school development plan, pupils’ enrolment and attendance records, and school evaluation records. I could not access any report about pupils with chronic diseases, or any special needs, in the schools because administrators stated they were confidential. Therefore I relied on what information I got from parents, administrators and teachers during the interview process.

2) Interviews
According to Cohen et al. (2007), interview styles differ in the level of structure, therefore, semi-structured interviews with senior policy makers, school administrators, classroom teachers, and parents were conducted. Interviews are known as a: “virtually unique window that opens on what lies behind our actions” (Robson, 2002, p. 272). It also allowed me to re-emphasise certain points and ask for more explanation (Cohen et al., 2011). I decided to reject using open or unstructured interviews because they are time-consuming and because some of these interviews were conducted with senior policy makers who had very busy schedules and with school administrators, classroom teachers, and parents between classes. Therefore, it was deemed practical and considerate to keep these interactions within a reasonable time limit and to keep the questions focused to enable coverage of all relevant research themes.

The advantages of using a semi-structured method of interviewing was that while the interviews were kept focused, there was flexibility in the manner of questioning, the order and wording of questions could be changed, and it gave me the ability to probe beyond the responses given by the interviewees (Cohen et al., 2011; Kvale, 1996). That allowed modifications in the line of enquiry, and provided me the chance to follow up interesting or significant responses and probe deeper to investigate underlying motives (Robson, 2002).

My decision to use semi-structured interviews was based on my knowledge about the educational field in Oman and the terminology that exists. Inclusion, exclusion, ethnicity, diversity, socio-economic issues and other terminologies in relation to inclusion are unfamiliar to the Omani context. Therefore, I knew that I needed to introduce those concepts in my interviews with language that is acceptable and understood. I also needed to give different examples and explanations to school administrators, classroom teachers, parents and pupils to ensure I got the information
that would be relevant to the discussed topic. Issue of flexibility was very important when using the language and asking the questions. All interviews were conducted in Arabic as to give the participants the ability to express their ideas without being worried about the language and translation.

To ensure reflexivity during interviews, I prepared an interview schedule that divided the questions according to the series of signposts I had prepared before the data collection and in relation to the allocated time. I left space for interpretations and extra discussions. I tried to steer the discussion in a professional direction rather than in the direction of an informal chat (Cohen et al., 2011). During the interviews, this receptive mind which required me to clear pre-existing thoughts and attitudes helped me to notice what I was doing during the interaction, my choice of words, my tone, whether to smile or not.

Interview guide. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection with senior policy makers, school administrators, classroom teachers, and parents. Interview questions were designed based on my stance and signposts I had prepared before the fieldwork. Each interview lasted for between 45 and 60 minutes and I used an interview guide to help me retain my focus on what to emphasise. Sets of questions were prepared for each group of participants and were modified according to the responses of the interviewee (appendices 6 and 7).

Interviews with senior policy makers took place in their offices at the MoE during the official working hours (8.00 am to 2:30 pm). Interviews with school administrators, classroom teachers, parents and pupils took place within schools’ premises so that the interview setting would be familiar to them. That was also done during the school hours (8.00 am to 1:30 pm).

Recording of interviews. It was clearly stated in the information sheets handed to all interviewees that interviews would be recorded. In most cases participants agreed on the recording option where I assured them that I used it to facilitate my note taking. Even when using the recorder, I took brief notes to help me to focus and listen to the main points, and I also noted down issues that I wanted to discuss further.

Digital recording was used for the quality recording it provided. In a few instances, however, I was not able to record the interviews where some classroom teachers preferred not to be recorded and I therefore reverted to note-taking. In addition, I
elaborated on points whenever they were needed and soon after each interview. I also used ‘triggers’ in notes to help me expand on them at a later stage (Singal, 2004). On return to my desk each evening, I ensured that I typed out my notes. At the end of each session, I asked my interviewee if they would like to have a look at the transcribed interview. All of them declined. I believe this was due to time constraints of school administrators and classroom teachers. In regard to parents, most were unable to read or write Arabic and did not show any interest in checking or reading my notes.

3) Observation

Observations were used to explore the practices of schools with regard to their responses to pupils’ differences. I also used them to enhance my understanding of each school’s contexts and practices in general and the research context specifically. I wanted to see the context through the ‘eyes of the researcher’ (Messiou, 2013). Therefore, observations were regarded as a useful complement to interviews conducted with participants (Robson, 2002).

Using observations was appropriate for this study, since they permitted the gathering of “live data” from naturally occurring social situations. This enabled me to look into what was taking place in context rather than relying on second-hand accounts (Cohen et al., 2007, p.396). Therefore, I felt it was important to observe what classroom teachers, school administrators, and pupils were doing rather than just asking them about what they thought they were doing (Singal, 2004) and that was done through spending approximately 140 hours of observation in the two schools (see appendix 8).

In these ways, my aim was to generate narrative accounts of school and classroom practices. Therefore, I followed a non-participant approach with the intention of minimising any interaction with the participants and focusing attention on the events (Burns, 2000). While I did not actively participate in the classroom, individuals in the field were aware of my role as a researcher. However, even though I kept my involvement to a minimum to prevent influencing the proceedings, I am aware that my presence might have had some effect (Burns, 2000).

As observations were critiqued on the basis of providing data on behaviours that occur solely in one instance, with no observation being the same as another (Bell, 2006), I exercised caution when interpreting the collected data to avoid
overgeneralisations of the findings. To ensure more objectivity and avoid bias in the interpretation of the data collected, I kept a research diary which contained my thoughts, and insights emerging during the data collection and analysis process (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994).

*Observation guide*. In carrying out the field work, the series of signposts that I mentioned earlier were used to help me plan the field work and record the data. The observation guides are an example of how I used the signposts. In specific, I included some indicators from the Index for Inclusion, part of my signposts, to design a general observation guide and a classroom observation guide (see appendix 9 and 10). However, I was not limited by my signposts, but kept my eyes and mind open to understand and capture what was actually happening in order to build a comprehensive picture about how do Omani schools respond to pupils’ differences.

Notes as well as photographs, when permitted, were taken with the aim of producing a comprehensive description which would reinforce the trustworthiness and credibility of the study. Data recorded from observations were used to revise and update subsequent interview guides.

During the observations, I maintained a non-participant approach (Gray *et al.*, 2007) where I sat at one end of the classroom, and the classroom seating arrangement made it rather difficult to move around.

I carried out all rewriting and saving of the resulting observational accounts immediately after the school visit, to minimise data loss and distortion (Foster, 1996) and notes from observations were transcribed and saved on a daily basis to avoid data loss (Foster, 1996) and for use in the analysis, at a later stage.

4) **Participatory Photography**

Guided by the work of Prosser (1998) on image-based research, I decided to use Participatory Photography (PP) as one of my data generation methods. Photography is an innovative method and a way of *looking into the inner world of schools from pupils’ perspectives… get the idea of how they experience their school through using a research method they are in control of* (Schartz and Loffler, 1998, p. 240, cited in Prosser, 1998).
Photography was appropriate in this study as it is primarily a qualitative approach, often combined with forms of interviewing, to allow for the in-depth interpretation of the photos taken (Harper, 2002; Kaplan et al., 2007; Miles and Kaplan, 2005). Therefore, I followed the PP with group interviews with pupils in each school in order to give pupils the chance to express their views and feelings as described by Elliot (1991) who argued that while the perspectives of staff and parents are often well represented in qualitative educational research, the perspectives of pupils are marginalised, and often ignored. Since the main focus of this study is to highlight the schools’ practices with regard to responding to pupils’ differences, it was vital to listen to pupils’ view with regard to their school experience. PP was used as a method to listen to children’s perspectives about their schools and to empower them (Einarsdottir, 2005) with visual images combined with verbal skill. Therefore, I needed to use a data collection tool that suited young pupils and helped me in building a relationship of trust with the pupils (Clark and Moss, 2001). This was particularly important in this research as I was involving pupils from grade 4 (age 9-10) who were not mastering verbal or written Arabic and therefore seemed to be facing exclusion. Kaplan et al. (2007) says that PP is a successful way of exploring pupils’ experiences as well as notions of pupils’ inclusion and exclusion at school particularly with young children who have poor writing and speaking skills.

Four pupils from each school were selected according to classroom and school observation (see page 99). The activity required each pair of pupils to capture 15-20 photos of places they like/dislike within school boundaries (assembly, classrooms, breaks, activity lessons, toilets, classroom teachers rooms) and avoid faces. They were then asked to select ten photos and divide them in two groups – five ‘like’ and five ‘dislike’ – to hold a group discussion and interpret their choices. This activity required discussing it with the schools' principals and social workers, where I explained the whole process, the ethical issues, and my responsibilities as an outsider to the schools (see appendix 11).

Using PP raises some ethical issues. One of these relates to the images themselves and the kind of information they can reveal about the context (school). Prosser (1998) claims that photos in image-based research can be categorised as positive or “safe”, and as negative or “unsafe” depending on what pupils capture, how they capture
images, and why. This process needed to emphasise pupils’ voices as well as protect schools’ reputations and confidentiality (Miles and Kaplan, 2005). The other ethical consideration while using PP was the question of who owns the photos, discussed by Thomson (2008). To address this issue, I decided to follow Walker et al.’s (2008) suggestion and involved my participants in which photos to use in this research. Therefore, I had to continuously negotiate and think of the data that I would include in this research and I involved the pupils in this process where they chose the photos that I used here, making sure they did not conflict with protecting information and confidentiality of participants.

Regardless of the concerns of the PP, I believe that this method provided me with valuable data about pupils’ school experiences, specifically those who might be facing forms of difficulty or marginalisation.

5) Group interviews facilitated by the photography
Following the PP project, group interviews were conducted with pupils to offer the means to explore, in depth, pupils’ views about their school experience. That was done through asking the four pupils from each school to present their photos and discuss what they like/dislike in the school and why. Each group took one hour of discussion where their photos were used to elicit information about their experience in the school and the classroom. At this stage, pupils were interpreting their choices and exchanging information and explanations about the topics they discussed. The discussions were tape recorded and the conversations were transcribed in Arabic to allow for analysis at a later stage.

The group discussion seemed to be very suitable to highlight pupils’ views and perspectives on their school experience. It highlighted issues that I did not notice before, such as the orphanage bus logo and the home sickness issues that two pupils from Tanzania were going through. In other words, group discussions may encourage respondents to express their feelings more than individual interviews do because they can express their views and feelings in front of a group, some of whom share the same feelings and perceptions. This was very clear during the discussions with pupils from both schools, as the topics were almost common to all involved in the discussion.
Sampling strategy: selection and description

The quality of a piece of research stands or falls not only by the appropriateness of methodology and instrumentation but also by the suitability of the sampling strategy that has been adopted (Cohen et al., 2007). As this was qualitative research, the aim was to find individuals who could provide rich and varied insights into the investigated phenomenon to maximise the learning (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, purposive sampling was used where I had initial criteria that shaped my selection. Purposive sampling, according to Silverman (2005), demands critical thinking about the parameters of the population studied.

Several factors shaped my selection: (1) the findings of the pilot study which confirmed the major role of views and beliefs of senior policy makers at the MoE in shaping schools’ policies and practices. Therefore, I conducted interviews with some of them to aid my understanding of what happens in schools; (2) deciding between selecting schools from urban or rural areas where two schools from the capital Muscat were chosen as the cases for analysis in this study; and (3) the age group of the pupils where primary schools catering for the needs of pupils aged 6-10 formed the focus of this study. This decision was based on the fact that boys and girls are studying together in the primary schools, but are separated from grade 5.

Why Muscat?

Muscat was chosen as it is the capital of Oman where all ministries are located as the system is a purely centralised one. Therefore Muscat is the hub for many formal and ministerial activities. Being a citizen in Muscat allowed me to keep track of all the current developments at the policy level and within the academic field; I had the chance to attend two main forums which revised the educational policy and strategy in Oman (both were held in Muscat).

Another main parameter for choosing Muscat was my familiarity with its schools; I worked in its schools for more than six years before moving to the MoE, which adds another aspect for choosing Muscat; ability to access the groups of the MoE senior policy makers and “access ‘knowledgeable people’, i.e. those who have in-depth
knowledge” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 115) as I have professional relationships with many of them.

Participants

- **At the government level**

The pilot study revealed the need to select senior policy makers who have information about the main policies and strategies of school education in Oman. Based on the fact that the MoE is the body in charge of developing and designing school policies and programmes, I drew up a list of members at the MoE whom I believed could have information in relation to the issues. This list was discussed with some colleagues at the MoE who amended it, and added and replaced names according to what each member can add to this study. In addition, senior policy makers themselves suggested that I meet members of the Educational Council as they were working on developing an educational policy and strategy. I therefore included two members of the Educational Council\(^2\) to get a closer look at what was happening in that regard (see appendix 12). The study information sheets and questions were translated into Arabic and submitted to the technical office at the MoE to get approval to conduct the study and interview my participants. Then, participants were contacted through a list of their names and contact numbers that I obtained from the technical office at the MoE.

- **At schools’ level**

I needed to look for information-rich cases (Patton, 2002) through choosing schools that could provide valid knowledge and meaningful insights for this study. Therefore, purposive sampling was useful as ‘it allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested’ (Silverman, 2005, p. 104).

The first step in the process was to identify government schools that cater for the needs of boys and girls from different social, ethnic, economic and linguistic backgrounds. Being aware that boys and girls are separated from grade 5, the search was limited to choose cycle-one schools that offer free education to boys and girls aged between 6-10 years old (grades 1-4). Because of the high number of primary schools in Muscat that seemed to have the needed criteria, I asked colleagues at the

\(^2\) Several were also interviewed during the pilot study and data were included.
MoE to help me select two schools within the boundaries of the capital, Muscat. Ten schools were suggested for varied reasons, but a common factor underlying all these schools was the fact that they serve diverse groups of learners. Two schools out of the ten were selected where the staff (administrators and classroom teachers) was described by MoE officials as ‘cooperative and understanding’ and therefore I started to contact them and negotiate my access. At the school level, I interviewed principal, vice-principal, social workers and learning difficulty teachers and classroom teachers (see appendix 13).

Having identified the schools, I had to get a formal approval letter from the MoE and that was obtained with the approval to conduct the whole study. After getting formal approval, I formally approached both schools through contacting the head classroom teachers who (in the first school) asked me to give a full explanation to other administrators and classroom teachers about the study and my data collection tools. She wanted to reassure classroom teachers that I was not inspecting them and that my focus was the pupils. The same happened in the second school, but I had to visit the school for three days before I was allowed to sit with classroom teachers and explain the purpose of my study and the data collection tools.

It is important to mention that Omani schools are not overly familiar with ethnographic research, where researchers stay for months in the school attending all lessons and, on some occasions, the classroom teachers’ meetings and discussions. Therefore, the resistance I faced from some of the classroom teachers was, to me, acceptable and normal. Issues of power and authority as an insider (working for the undersecretary office at the Ministry) added an extra complexity during the field work. This specific issue was discussed several times with my supervisors and during my panel where it was expected to be one of the main challenges I might encounter while approaching schools and trying to get access to classrooms. That did happen as many of the classroom teachers were hesitant to let me in as I was seen as an inspector who was there to report school performance to the higher authorities. It took me time to ensure them that I was just a researcher and had nothing to do with the Ministry at that stage. I assured them that their identities would not be revealed in the study and they could look at my notes if they wished. I handed each participant an Arabic version of the information sheet and consent forms (see appendix 14 and 15).
• **At classrooms' and pupils' levels**

To gather information and data on classroom practices, the decision was to enter classes for grades 1-4 and focus on the practices through describing the experiences of pupils who might be facing difficulties in learning or forms of exclusion. Then ask the identified pupils to participate in the photography activity to give an in-depth description of their school experience and how the school responds to their differences.

I was allowed access to all classrooms in both schools through the schools principals and vice principals after explaining to all classroom teachers the focus of the study and re-assuring them that I was not carrying out any inspection on them. Issues of confidentiality were also explained and assured. Some were still hesitant, but allowed me to enter without trying to have any informal chats with me.

*In the first school*, I was directed by school administrators and various classroom teachers to concentrate at one of grade 4, 3 and 1 classrooms where they had, according to administrators and classroom teachers, the ‘most difficult and hopeless’ pupils. After a one-week observation in grades 4, 3 and 1, six pupils were identified - classroom teachers described them as ‘difficult and hopeless’ - and I had observed that they were facing some forms of exclusion. Therefore, practice issues were examined by focusing on specific pupils perceived as ‘different’/’deficient’; four of them participated in the PP activity and all were from grade 4.

*In the second school*, I focused on one of the grade 4 classrooms which was also described by school administrators and classroom teachers as ‘having pupils with problems’ as well as the ‘integration classroom’ which is a self-contained classroom with five pupils with mental disabilities. After the one week classroom observation in grade 4, four pupils from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds were identified as facing forms of exclusion and they were the same pupils described by classroom teachers as ‘with problems’. Therefore I asked them to participate in the PP to describe and talk about their school experience.
The eight pupils who were asked to participate in the PP were approached through their classroom teachers and school social workers where I explained to them the photography activity and asked them to talk to the pupils if they would like to participate in my study. Next, the pupils were given the assent form (see appendix 16); I explained the aim of the study to them, why I chose them and what I wanted them to do. They were then asked to discuss their participation with their parents and let me know their decisions through their classroom teachers. With regard to the integration classroom, I was not allowed to interview any of the children or ask them to participate in the PP. Their special education classroom teachers considered that ‘not possible’ and therefore I collected the information through the observation and the interview with their teacher.

- **At parent level**

I also hoped to acquire a holistic picture about pupils’ experiences including home/school life and how these shaped their learning experience and affected their learning. Therefore, I planned to interview the parents of the ‘pupil participants’ to have an idea about the school-parent relationship and how the school collaborates with the wider community in order to respond to pupils’ needs. The parents of the eight pupils who participated in the photography activity were approached through schools’ social workers. I explained what I expected from them and provided them with written information sheets. The social workers phoned the parents, explained what I wanted from them and asked them to suggest dates where they could come to school for the interview (I gave suggestions for the dates and times to be within the period of my stay in the school).

**Research integrity**

*Ethical considerations and avoidance of harm*

Although the educational field is full of debate about different approaches and research methodologies, there is a consensus about the importance of ensuring the ethical component of any research (Greene and Harris, 2011). Social researchers, to a great extent, have ethical obligations to their colleagues, study populations, and the larger society, because they delve into people’s private social lives (Cohen et al.,
Social researchers, therefore, particularly when conducting qualitative research, should be concerned with establishing ethical research frameworks. Rossman and Rallis (2012) even argue that, for any research to be ethical, it should be conducted with its prospective usefulness for various audiences in mind, stating that: “An unethical study is not a trustworthy study” (p.60). Therefore, since this research was conducted in the Sultanate of Oman, and was performed as a requirement for the PhD studied in the United Kingdom, I was obliged, as a researcher, to uphold both countries’ ethical codes and cultures. Moreover, being an employee of the MoE in which the research was conducted, in Oman and until the end of this study, there were no ethical frameworks for research that I could acquire. However, Oman is an Islamic country and its ethical foundations are derived from the Islamic principles of equality and respect of human rights and privacy. The Omani culture has been known for its moderate manners reflecting a solid basis of respect for rights and beliefs. Basic law reserves the rights of privacy, security and freedom equally for citizens and residents (Al-shidhani, 2014). These rights are the foundations upon which relationships between different people are organised in the country. I, therefore, considered the Omani basics and values while conducting this study. Al-shidhani was the first to highlight the need for research ethical frameworks to be set and enforced in Oman to maintain standardised ethical processes, and set privacy and confidentiality bases and boundaries. Setting these frameworks will encourage research particularly in social and educational fields, as well as broaden the culture of research (Al-shidhani, 2014).

Within the British context, this study conformed to the British Educational Research Association’s Ethical Guidelines for Educational research (BERA, 2011) and gained approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC).

The main ethical considerations were obtaining respondents’ informed consent, preventing possible harm to the participants, ensuring the informants’ rights to refuse answering questions, maintaining their rights to withdraw at any point, and guaranteeing the participants’ privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity (Cohen et al., 2007). Therefore, I have taken all measures to ensure that the study is performed within the boundaries of the ethical codes and guidelines of social research.

With regard to consent forms, all documents were translated to Arabic and submitted to participants prior to conducting the interviews with senior policy makers and
schools administrators and classroom teachers. With regard to parents, most of them were unable to read Arabic and, therefore, the information was orally translated to them in Baluchi and Swahili languages. That was done through the help of school classroom teachers. With regard to the photography issue, ethical and cultural issues were explained to pupils and they were instructed not to take faces.

**Power relations**

The major ethical issue in this study is the unequal power relations between some of the participants, particularly between school administrators, classroom teachers and me. This, I believe, existed primarily due to my position at the undersecretaries’ office which is considered a high authority. I was aware of the probability that it might negatively affect interviewee responses as many perceived me as having all the answers, while others regarded me as judging them. Such a perception might have induced them to say things that they might assume that I wanted to hear, while others did not wish to engage with me at all. To address such issues, I spent time in the schools, familiarising staff with my presence. During classroom observations, I made sure that the non-participant approach was ensured; keeping silent, avoiding contact with pupils during classes, and avoiding giving any kind of comments even when some classroom teachers asked me to. During interviews, I tried to maintain a relaxed and friendly atmosphere, and encouraged participants to talk while reinstating my role as both a researcher, and a learner.

**Maintaining anonymity**

Another issue of concern was that of protecting the participants in the study, particularly when children and parents were involved and where some personal information was revealed. Being conscious of the fact that both schools could be identified due to the special characteristics in relation to the community both serve and the issues discussed, I chose to speak about the schools using anonymous names and therefore I named them Newtown School and City School. I have also omitted personal information that would point to the participants’ identities, and pseudonyms have been used particularly when reporting quotes by senior policy makers and school staff, as they occupy positions which stand out clearly. In reporting them, I have made efforts to use broad terms such as ‘senior policy maker, and ‘classroom teacher’ and
‘school administrator’. With regard to pupils, I gave each of them a different name making sure that none of the actual names appear in the thesis.

**Researcher positionality**

When addressing researcher identity, researchers are usually asked to consider and define their identity within the research they conduct; they are routinely taught how that identity might influence their research and urged to develop a practice of reflexivity to ensure trustworthiness (Thomson and Gunter, 2011). In this regard, many arguments appear which are usually divided between considering the researcher as either outsider or insider (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009). Insider research is undertaken with populations of which the researchers are members (Kanuha, 2000) so that the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Asselin, 2003). Those ‘insiders’ in qualitative research are believed to be capable of considering the social, ethical and political issues in the organisation in which they conduct their study (Burgess, 1984) where they are considered as the data collection instrument (Merriam, 1988). In this context, all data are mediated primarily through the researcher where the meanings that the researcher ascribes to the research are usually influenced by their own experiences, and values, norms and concepts that they have assimilated during a lifetime (Singal, 2004). Therefore, it is believed that an insider researcher is capable of expanding the understanding of a population (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

Other researchers, on the contrary (Gardiner and Engler, 2012; Kim, 2010), argue that even among insider researchers there are differences in the privileges they have to access knowledge and data, or influence the participants and therefore outsiders can, to some extent, have the same access to data. Therefore, being an outsider does not mean that the researcher will always have limited access to information and data. On the contrary, outsiders are viewed, on several occasions, as having criticality by virtue of being ‘fresh eyes’; but they can also miss important phenomena and thus seriously misinterpret local meanings and practices (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Rosaldo, 1989, cited in Thomson and Gunter, 2011).

Despite this, it is difficult to define researcher identity because an identity is never static; Thomson and Gunter (2011) observe this and acknowledge the complexity of
the issue of researcher identity where the insider/outsider construct is hard to describe. Therefore they talk about ‘fluid identity’ and use Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid identities’ to argue that identity can never be thought of as something singular possessed by an individual and which remains, at its core, relatively unchanged from birth to death. Therefore, the inside/outside construct may be politically helpful but also constrains understanding of the real politics and experience of disorganised research practice in and with schools.

Bauman (2004) describes how identities shifted and changed during research conducted at Kingswood High School in order to evaluate the changes that occurred in the school after implementing the subject project for secondary pupils. Although the researchers were considered as ‘outsiders’ not belong to the school system, they were also ‘not outsiders’ because they were chosen by the school head based on previous knowledge of their work and ideas. In addition, they were asked to present the school project to others, and therefore acquired another position which accordingly affected the identity they held. These multiple positions and various relationships the researchers experienced led them to suggest that researchers need to recognise that outsider/insider binaries are blurred across different places and times.

When thinking of defining my identity in this research which I conducted in two primary schools in Muscat, I started viewing myself as an insider because I had worked as a teacher in Muscat for four years and then moved to work at the Ministry of Education (MoE) where I was making frequent supervision visits to schools. I, therefore, believed that I knew about the MoE policies and schools’ practices and regulations. In addition, I share the same language, religion and culture with both schools and have that familiarity with the situation and contexts. Therefore, I believed I had all the right reasons to take the side of an insider and try to keep an eye on the boundaries between myself and the research I conduct in order to ensure the ethical requirements.

On the other hand, as being away from my work to undertake a PhD for four years gave me the space and opportunity to learn new knowledge and encounter different experiences, particularly when I was fortunate enough to be allowed to visit schools and observe their experiences and practices. Those combined insider and practitioner identities were challenged in some instances I started viewing myself as an outsider to
my system who can use the opportunity of being away to look at things differently and use the new knowledge and experiences to explore what happens in schools through fresh eyes and an opened mind.

Once I started the field work and had access to both schools and classrooms, I started questioning that ‘insider’ identity as I realised that being a researcher and a member of MoE who used to sit in the office and theorise placed me at a distance from the classroom teachers and school life. I never imagined how distinct I was until I lived the experience of being in the school and with pupils day by day and for six months. The ideal world we state in our educational documents and reports is far away from practice, and the regulations that we at the Ministry introduce to be followed by schools is far removed from understanding the complexity of the situation.

Moreover, that uncertainty about my identity also resulted from how school administrators and classroom teachers perceived me once I gained access to schools; some saw me an ‘outsider’ to the school as an organisation or an ‘inspection’ who came from the Ministry to spy on and judge them (as most of the school administrators and classroom teachers knew my position at the Ministry) without really knowing what they go through in schools. That resulted in encountering some difficulty in gaining classroom teachers’ trust, where some classroom teachers refused to allow me to enter their classrooms or attend the classroom teachers’ conversations in the classroom teachers’ rooms. On other occasions I was perceived as an ‘insider’ who knew everything and did not need to ask questions because I was a teacher myself and part of the educational system. Therefore some school staff and MoE members used to start their conversation with me by saying ‘as you already know’ indicating their belief that I actually knew several facts about the system.

My identity further shifted through the social relations I struck with school administrators, classroom teachers, pupils and parents in both schools where I maintained an ‘outsider’ position on several occasions, but shifted into an ‘insider’ on others. For example, I was trusted by school staff as a PhD student and allowed access to information based on the confidentiality I assured them; therefore it was my responsibility to keep the information for research purposes only. At the same time, I was engaged with pupils’ experiences and stories as I went through various forms of difficulties during my school life and therefore felt that I had the responsibility of
assuring their safety and protection. Accordingly, I had to take some actions at certain points where that ‘outsider’ identity was mixed with the ‘insider’ one and I engaged with discussions with staff and parents on how to access support which I facilitated as a member of MoE and a person with relations with other organisations. For example, school staff did not know about the child protection committees that were formed to protect children who are facing abuse or ignorance. As several children in both schools were facing issues of abuse (see chapter 7 pages 167-169, and chapter 8 pages 193 and 213), I facilitated staff communication with the child protection committees. I also facilitated having a doctor in both schools to examine children who were having health issues and several were transferred to hospitals for follow up. Therefore, during the research, having a ‘fluid identity’ which was beyond insider/outsider enabled me to be more aware of the ethical considerations that I needed to address to ensure trustworthiness.

Data analysis

Yin (2009) states that the researcher needs to be clear about what she/he wants the analysis to do in order to decide upon the fitness of the chosen procedure for data analysis. In this study, I felt it was important to be faithful to my data and give the reader a feel for what was happening in both schools (Stake, 2006). Therefore, ‘thick descriptions’ are presented, including detailed explanations of each context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As the study involved a qualitative design, it meant that there was a need for an ongoing process of data analysis, which began during the data collection period and continued after data collection was completed. This process is continuous since, “There is no particular moment when data analysis begins (Cohen et al., 2011). Various techniques were used to analyse the vast amount of data collected from documents, interviews, observations and PP, as well as the group interviews. The goal was to organise the ‘large quantity of specific details into a coherent picture, model, or set of interlocked concepts’ (Neuman, 2000, p. 419). Therefore, thematic analysis was adopted.

Thematic analysis is believed to be the foundational method for qualitative analysis as it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other forms of
qualitative analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis moves beyond counting explicit words or phrases, and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data - that is, *themes*. Boyatzis (1998) argues that thematic analysis is not employed as a specific method, but as a tool to use across different methods.

In what follows I describe the various stages of data analysis adopted in the study. Although these stages are presented here as a linear, step-by-step procedure, in practice they involved an iterative and reflexive process, which started before, and continued during and after the data collection period. In other words, they took the form of a challenging and, at times, confusing process of meaning making, as I tried to make sense of the great mass of information I have assembled. Through this process my previous professional experience was, at times, helpful in making sense of my data. On other occasions, it acted as a barrier as I engaged with evidence that challenged my previous assumptions.

**Stage 1. Reading and choosing signposts**

Before I started my field work, I reviewed international literature in relation to responding to pupils’ differences. This helped me to develop a series of signposts which served as a data management tool for organising the segments of similar or related texts to assist in interpretation (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). These signposts were grouped under the themes: policy, practice and culture (see appendix 5).

**Stage 2. Data collection, and transcription**

During the field work, I had the series of signposts in mind. However, I chose not to limit myself to these signposts, as my intention was to retain a degree of flexibility in responding to what I saw and heard in the field. All data collected was systematically transcribed in Arabic. I used Arabic I to ensure that meanings would not be lost during translation and to give strength to the data which were collected in the participants’ and researchers’ mother tongue. This process involved reading, listening to, and summarising the raw data (see appendix 17). Therefore, I used to write notes of new issues and do extra readings to identify the relevance of the noticed issues to my area of focus and what other researchers said about it.
With regard to interviews, each yielded one set of transcribed notes for each senior policy maker, school administrators, classroom teacher, and parent. In addition, one set of transcribed notes was produced for each group discussion in which the responses of participants about the photos constructed as part of the PP project can be readily distinguished. Barbour and Kitzinger (1999, p.173-186) state that the transcribed data can be analysed as “talk”, since the act of transcribing interviews and group discussions turns the spoken data into written text (Silverman, 2005). During this stage, specific attention was paid to the “narrator” in each instance (Hyden and Bulow, 2003) to identify whether answers were given by a dominant participant (Bell, 2006) or collectively (Smithson, 2000). Next, the data were organised under the initially identified categories.

With regard to the PP project, the first step began with pupils choosing ten photos from the 20 photos they each took. I then engaged them in a second mode of categorisation when they chose five pictures according to the topic of places they liked, in contrast to places they disliked at school. Finally, narrative data were produced from group discussions; these data were again produced as a transcribed written document.

**Stage 3. Coding and looking for pattern**

In the saved Arabic version of the collected data, I started to highlight, sort and code data in order to address the research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This coding was done in English and, as codes emerged, I kept a record of each and developed it as the process continued. Miles and Huberman (1994) have suggested that this step of coding forces the analyst to tie research questions or conceptual analysis directly to the data. Analysis at this stage was guided, but not confined by the series of signposts, where I was conscious about the possibility of discovering novel phenomena through the analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This sometimes involved me in confronting evidence that challenged my expectations of what was taking place in Omani schools. Grouping and thinking of a linkage between those codes was my next step as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggested that this would give the real sense of analytical work.
Stage 4. Theme generation

In this phase I started looking closer into the groups of codes that emerged from the data and begin to consider how different codes may combine to form an overarching theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is known as pattern coding and it can “pull together a lot of material into more meaningful and parsimonious units of analysis” (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 69). In this stage, I tried to combine and relate the codes that are relevant to my signposts. My aim from constructing the themes was to give me a full picture about the context in order to answer the first research question. This process resulted in producing three initial sets of data; two sets tell the stories of each school and the third set is about data collected from senior policy makers.

Stage 5. Reviewing themes

At this stage, I stepped back from the data and started looking at the whole content in a systematic way, giving full and equal attention to each data item (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Through this process, the researcher gets the chance to check whether the themes work in relation to the dataset or not and it allows the researcher to code any emerging themes. Comparing and contrasting the data collected from both schools as well as from senior policy makers at the government level resulted in recognising new patterns. The term ‘pattern’ refers to regularity in the data which later might become a code, category or a theme.

Therefore, I started putting notes beside the data and doing further reading to identify the relation between the new themes and the series of signposts. I looked closer to find extra connection between the various patterns added them up to produce new categories and the combination of these categories resulted in having new set of themes. These themes generated what I see as a context-specific model of barriers to responding to pupil differences. This formulation is answering the second research question and is proposed as my contribution to the knowledge, is explained in chapter ten.

Stage 6. Data representation

The process of reading, re-reading and coding of the data led to a systematic exploration of what the data were saying. This final step included putting all themes in a report or in another form that tells the complicated story of my data in a way
which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of my analysis (Bruan and Clark, 2006).

The analysed data suggested reviewing the initial three sets of data described in stage 4, and presenting senior policy makers’ perspectives with regard to the role and responsibilities of the national school system with regard to responding to pupil differences. That is followed by presenting an extensive account of each school (see chapters 7 and 8). In both chapters, I provide a thick description of the environments of both schools where the cases reports led the reader to have a feeling of what was happening in both schools (Stake, 2006). More specifically, I focused on giving the reader a comprehensive picture of the school story through describing its context including the school location and surrounding community, staff (administrators and classroom teachers), pupils, classroom practices and the daily life and relationships. The story of each school is presented in relation to the school policies, culture and classroom practices which are part of the series of signposts I decided to use in order to generate and organise the data.

Information extracted from documents, interviews, observation, PP and group discussions are used to present each the account of each school. Although pupils’ voice is not the prime focus of this study, the classroom practices are presented through focusing on the experience of some pupils seemed to be facing forms of exclusion.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a particular challenge in a study like this which involves a single researcher. In particular, methodologists suggest that we have to take serious measures to address the challenge of trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). In addition, Patton (2002) argues that any research strategy needs credibility to be useful. Therefore, it is imperative to seek meaningful, credible, valid, reliable and confirmable findings, aspects that have been discussed in the context of this study.

**Credibility** is about giving a fair, honest and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it every day (Singal, 2004). To do that, I ensured that there was prolonged involvement in the field. I also interacted with a range of different sources, using a variety of different methods for data collection. At the policy level, for example, I interviewed people in different departments and
institutions and at different levels to discuss the same issue in order to triangulate using different perspectives. To obtain member checks, I asked the interviewees if they would like to have a look at the transcribed interviews, but no one was interested due to their tight schedules and important positions. The data collected from policy level was also read and analysed against those gathered from government policies and documents.

With regard to the schools’ level, and as noted earlier, none of the participants or parents was interested in reading the transcribed versions either due to lack of time or interest. On some occasions it was done based on their trust in me. Following the suggestions of Robson (2002), the analysis and conclusions were shared with two critical friends, one based in Oman and the other based in Manchester.

**Dependability** describes whether the process is consistent and reasonably stable over time and across researchers and methods (Miles and Huberman, 1994). I strengthened dependability in this study through providing a thick description (Cohen et al., 2011) of the case study, participants, and data collection and analysis. Yin (2009) recognises providing a thick description of these factors as one way to establish dependability in qualitative research. I maintained a detailed description of the study processes and the data collection stages. I also offered detailed data about the study informants in order to offer the reader the opportunity to visualise the research process through which the data were collected and the conclusions reached.

**Triangulation** is an approach to conducting research that uses “multiple observers, theoretical perspectives, sources of data and methodologies” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). In this study various measures of triangulation were employed such as using multiple approaches to data collection including documentation, interviews and observation, photography, and focus group discussions.

**Transferability** in qualitative research is viewed differently. While Lincoln and Guba (1986) argue that it is possible to assess the typicality of a situation, the participants and settings to identify possible comparison groups and how the data can transfer to other settings and cultures, Thomas (2002, p. 115) adopts a different stance. He argues that a case is not usually studied to understand other cases; it is studied to understand the case itself.
Hence, in this study, two schools were selected to observe their practices with regard to responding to pupils’ differences. The naturalistic approach adopted makes it difficult to generalise the findings. However, transferability is possible as in-depth information is presented about the school system and the two selected schools. Specifically, others in similar centralised systems can find the information presented here similar to their contexts and, therefore, can benefit from what I have presented. The uniqueness of my study, though, derives mainly in the life stories of the participants.

Translation: as the field work took place in Oman where Arabic is the means for communication and teaching, all forms – consent forms, information sheets, interview questions, informal chats with school administrators, classroom teachers and pupils and photography discussions – were translated into Arabic. Hennink (2007) argues that the use of language in research and its appropriate interpretation is an ever-expanding field in qualitative research when research seeks to understand human behaviour, social processes, and cross-language meanings that describe human behaviour in natural settings. I then transcribed each interview (either digital-recorded or hand-written) into Arabic to ensure that authentic data are kept and referred to during the whole process of analysis and interpretation. Relevant parts of the script were translated to English; this is known to be one of the major difficulties of any kind of qualitative research in which the language of the people under study is different from that of the write-up (Larkin et al., 2007). However, there is still debate over whether the construct under analysis maintains the same meaning and relevance in the cultures of both the original meaning and the meaning into which it is being translated (Croot et al., 2011). Twinn (1997) therefore suggests that researchers in such meaning-making processes need to engage with meanings and discourses to come up with accurate and valid translations as well as use different researchers to check transcripts and translation. I did this with the help of a colleague who works as a professional translator in Oman. However, I had to omit/change some wording which seemed to be very offensive, discriminatory, and unacceptable to the Omani context while translating interviews with some senior policy makers and school administrators and classroom teachers. This is because I aim to present the findings of this study to the Omani context and therefore needed to be careful with issues of terminology.
Methodological challenges

A number of challenges were encountered with respect to methodology. Firstly, satisfying the selection criteria for schools that aimed at selecting information-rich cases presented a challenge in this study as there were no formal documents or database with regard to ethnicity in Oman. Distribution of pupils from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds, pupils with socio-economic status, pupils with disabilities or even the distribution of pupils with physical disabilities in schools was missing. Therefore, I had to rely on one piece of literature that describes ethnicity as well as my insider knowledge to select schools.

Second, as I work at the Ministry of Education and used to visit several schools for inspection and follow-up matters, this caused initial apprehension on the part of some school administrators and classroom teachers. That in turn affected the initial data collection process as most felt that I was inspecting; classroom teachers were reserved in disclosing their personal opinions and the special education teacher was extra careful in providing information about her pupils. Over time, though, repeated visits to the schools established familiarity and trust with most participants, where my role transformed from being the researcher, to that of consultant, friend and in many cases the messenger who would carry their concerns, problems and requirements back to the Ministry. This in turn presented another challenge with respect to bias towards the participants’ emotional experiences and difficulties with their pupils. I had to go through challenging discussions with both my supervisor and my colleagues during data collection in order to recognise and eliminate any bias towards participants.

Thirdly, there was a real challenge to provide total anonymity to participants including schools. All possible efforts were made to use pseudonyms for participants and schools, masking the school names as well as classroom teachers, and pupils’ names. However, trying to produce comprehensive descriptions through using photographs and documenting detailed and vivid accounts of settings, interactions and experiences to aid trustworthiness of the findings made it difficult in some cases to provide absolute anonymity.
Finally, the large volumes of data collected posed a real difficulty during translation, transcription and the data analysis process. Decisions needed to be made on the editing floor regarding the relevance of data collected to the research question and objectives of the study. I was aware of personal bias arising from my deep belief in inclusive education and my strong desire to have schools that can serve all pupils regardless of their adherences. However, I challenged myself at every opportunity, as well as employed the exercises of brainstorming and peer debriefing with my colleagues, in order to minimise any effect of personal bias.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the research methodology and procedures I employed to conduct this study. A case study approach was adopted, involving two primary schools (grades 1-4) from the capital, Muscat. Various data collection tools were employed to collect information, including document analysis, school and classroom observation, interviews with school administrators, classroom teachers and eight parents as well as the PP with eight pupils followed by group discussions.

The collected data was analysed through thematic analysis, starting by using the signposts as an initial guide to support the data collection, analysis and presentation of data. New themes have emerged from comparing and contrasting data which resulted in identifying context-specific set of barriers. In explaining these data analysis strategies, I have described them as a complex process of personal meaning making, within which my own professional assumptions were sometimes challenged.

In what follows I move to present my findings in three chapters. Chapter six summarises the views of a small group of senior policy makers with regard to the issue of responding to differences. I then follow this by presenting two accounts, one for each school. These chapters are followed by another that interprets and discusses the findings, comparing the views of policy makers with the realities in the grounds relating these to relevant international research literature. This leads me to provide a conceptualisation of what I see as a series of interconnected barriers faced by some pupils in Omani schools. The final chapter presents my conclusions and recommendations.
CHAPTER 6
RESPONDING TO PUPILS’ DIFFERENCES: VIEWS FROM THE GOVERNMENT LEVEL

Introduction

In Chapter 4, I explained that the Omani school system is centralised, with a top-down approach to decision making. In this context, senior policy makers are responsible for deciding policies, leaving those in schools as implementers of these policies. My own involvement as a member of staff at the Ministry confirms this to be the pattern. This being the case, it can be argued that senior policy makers’ views are, to some extent at least, shaping schools’ policies, practices and cultures.

Before looking at the realities in schools and classrooms, I therefore decided that my analysis must start by presenting senior policy makers’ perspectives with regard to the role and responsibilities of the national school system with regard to responding to pupil differences. In order to do this, in the first part of the chapter, I draw on my interviews with a small sample of senior policy makers in order to show how they understand the role of the government. The second part of the chapter highlights how school policies are developed and who participates in this process.

The role of government

The responsibility of the central government towards the provision of education is emphasised in all national documents, media, meetings, and national and international reports. In my discussions with the various senior policy makers who are actually in charge of developing educational policies and frameworks, there was evidence of a largely common view about what is important. In particular, they emphasised that the government is responsible for ensuring: access to education; equity in education; and quality of education. These themes reflect the international policy trends I summarised in chapter 2.

In what follows, the views of the government officials I interviewed regarding each of these themes are explained.
Ensuring access to education

There was a consensus that the government is responsible and committed to ensure education for ‘all’. For example:

‘All Omani and non-Omani children are provided education regardless of their background, social status, religion or ability’. (senior policy maker)

However, all the participants stressed that ensuring education for all does not mean that this has to be in a mainstream school. The subtly implications of what this implies are indicated in the following comment:

‘We don’t prevent anyone from having a form of schooling; expatriates are offered the right to learn in their own schools. We also offer pupils with disabilities learning opportunities in special provisions. Even children with severe disabilities have services that are provided by the Ministry of Social Development’. (senior policy maker)

This view was shared by all of the respondents. It indicates that the actual form of provision is decided based on pupils’ characteristics and differences and according to what central policy makers believe to be the best option for each group. More specifically, it indicates an assumption that, although all children have a right to education, ‘some’ do not belong in mainstream schools and therefore the government provides them different provision. In summary, the respondents referred to the following groups of learners when explaining these arrangements:

Pupils with disabilities. It was evident from the analysis that there is a consensus among all the policy makers I met that pupils with disabilities cannot be included in mainstream schools and, instead, are in need of something ‘different’ or ‘extra’. The views on the criteria by which these ‘different’ pupils are segregated vary. Some stated that segregation as for their good of pupils with disabilities because the structure of mainstream schools is not suitable to respond to their differences. In contrast, others asserted that it is important to put in place separate provisions for pupils with disabilities because placing them in the mainstream classrooms will negatively impact the learning of the ‘majority’ who are without ‘problems’. The concern was that because classroom teachers would need to focus attention on the ‘disabled’, they would neglect others. For example:

‘What you do with a normal child will take a longer time to be done with a handicapped child and that is unfair to normal pupils’. (senior policy maker)
We sense here a strongly held view that children can be grouped into those that are normal and that are not. Again, this was an assumption shared by all the respondents. Alongside it, I sensed a further assumption amongst these senior policy makers that they are in favour of the ‘majority’, who, they believe, are the future of the country and who will be able to contribute to the sustainable development of Oman. At the same time, they also shared the view that less fortunate children deserved care and attention.

*Pupils with low IQ levels.* Related to the view that some children are normal and others are not, were assumptions about the impact of intelligence, as measured by IQ tests. In particular, it was interesting to hear various senior policy makers saying that pupils with low IQs should be in special classrooms or even in schools.

Although there is no formal policy in this regard, one participant clarified that the MoE is currently working on opening special classrooms in government schools for ‘slow learners’. There is no formal definition for this term, but a participant defined it as pupils whose IQ is less than 70, a definition that was sometimes used in the past in the English speaking world. She stated that decisions in this regard are based on the identification process and medical reports from hospitals.

Statements such as this reveal the dominance of the medical approach to disabilities, where difficulties are perceived as arising from the individual characteristics of individual pupils and therefore need to be identified to ‘get fixed’. These views have major implications for classroom teachers’ practices, where, as I will illustrate in chapters 7 and 8, whoever is perceived as ‘different’ is assumed to be in need of ‘something’ different, usually provided outside of the mainstream classroom.

*Pupils who do not speak Arabic.* Most of the respondents stressed that if expatriates (non-Arabic speakers) want their children to attend a government school that is fine. However, they usually went on to clarify that it is not the responsibility of the MoE or the schools concerned to make extra efforts to respond to their language differences because they (families from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds) have their ‘own’ schools where they can be better served. Interestingly, various senior policy makers stated that segregating ‘some’ from the mainstream does not contradict the government’s commitment to achieve Goal 2 of the EFA agenda. For example:
'We didn’t exclude anyone or prevent them from access to education. Expatriates are given the right to open their own schools'. (senior policy maker)

Yet, those Omani citizens who come from non-Arabic backgrounds, as explained in chapter 4, are perceived by senior policy makers as:

‘...not in need for any different arrangements’. (senior policy maker)

Therefore, there are no policies with regard to providing language support in all government schools. Interestingly, various senior policy makers seemed surprised about being asked about the Omanis from Zanzibari and Baluchi origins. They all stressed that these individuals are full Omanis and that, therefore, the government rejects such categorization. For example, one said:

‘... they are Omani and will learn over time’. (senior policy maker)

The statements can be linked to the strict Omani regulations and 3 laws that incriminate whoever tries to insult any citizen based on their colour, physical appearance, language, and social or economic background. Trying to avoid discrimination can be linked to the dilemmas of difference discussed by Norwich (2008) where it seems that Omani senior policy makers are facing tension between identifying and not identifying differences where it seems that they tended to avoid recognizing some to avoid the negative impacts associated with the issue of identification, as discussed in chapter 3. Therefore, in order to avoid discrimination, it seems that senior policy makers have interpreted this law as a need to assimilate all school pupils in order to ensure they all attain the same stated objectives.

Accordingly, and trying to avoid discrimination against Omanis from non-Arabic backgrounds, most interviewees highlighted that the issues related to language obstacles faced by pupils coming from Zanzibar and Baluchistan, or from other non-Arabic countries, were not discussed at the Ministry level:

‘Such issues were never discussed during our meetings’. (senior policy maker)

Surprisingly, even officials from the Special Education Department stated that it is not one of the responsibilities of their department and its employees and classroom teachers to support pupils who do not speak Arabic. For example:

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3 Omani basic law
'It’s the families’ responsibility. They should teach them, not schools. If we include all pupils with differences under our umbrella and responsibilities it will be an endless story. Schools have pupils with various differences. We serve pupils with disabilities, with numeracy and literacy difficulties and the talented pupils only'. (senior policy maker)

Therefore, there were no school policies in place in this regard and I describe the impact of this absence of programmes in the following chapters.

Ensuring equity

The OECD defines equity as being concerned with inclusion and fairness. However, all the senior policy makers I interviewed had a much narrower view. Whilst they stressed that the government considers equity to be a basic principle and that the reforms that are taking place are based on this concept, I noted a dominant concern with statistical patterns. For them, the idea of ‘equity’ was defined in relation to building schools in all Omani regions. For example:

'\textit{The government is careful about ensuring equity. We build school in all regions; we provide all regions with similar facilities in these schools. So, we don’t prefer a region over others}'. (senior policy maker)

In addition, equity was defined in relation to providing all mainstream schools with common inputs, including the same curriculum, the same school buildings, the same pupil-teacher ratio, the same number of pupils in each classroom, and the same resources, and ensuring that and all regions have equal numbers of schools:

'\textit{All pupils in schools are provided with the same curriculum, same forms of assessments, same teacher-pupils ratio, same learning time and same facilities. All of that is done to ensure equity among all}'. (senior policy maker)

As I explained in chapter 4, these views about equity are formally stated in MoE documents as well as in the reports the government provide with regard to the EFA agenda.

Accordingly, all the senior policy makers described the international, private and special schools as one of the advantages and strengths of the school system because they allowed parents and pupils the right to choose the provision that best suits their children. However, despite this, it is not actually the parents’ right in some instances, particularly with regard to children who are seen to be different, a point I extend in the presentation of school practices and in the discussion chapter.
• **Ensuring quality**

As described in chapter 4, the formal Ministry of Education documents state that, after 1995, the government shifted its focus from access to education, to ensuring quality of education and raising standards. This was based on recommendations from external agencies, including the World Bank, UNESCO and UNICEF, as well as on recommendations from the *Oman Economic Vision 2020* conference. The focus on standards and the various reforms and policies that are currently taking place in the Omani school system are, I argue, also shaped by senior policy makers’ understandings of the meaning of quality and the impact of international agenda and trends in this regard. For example, it was clear throughout the interviews that there is consensus on understanding quality with regard to an ‘in-put/out-put’ approach to ensure that pupils meet national standards, as well as achieve high performance in national and international examinations:

> ‘Quality is pupils’ performance in national and international exams, their success in joining higher education, the adaptation of required skills’. (senior policy maker)

Required skills’ was explained in terms of those skills needed to enter higher education and the job market which can be achieved through controlling the inputs. For example:

> ‘The improvements need to be made to curriculum and textbooks and providing qualified classroom teachers’. (senior policy maker)

Accordingly, these senior policy makers believed that, if inputs are controlled, higher quality will be ensured. I suggest that these beliefs reflect a global misunderstanding and confusion with regard to quality which limited the term to in-put/put-put approach where numeric data became essential indicators to decide upon a country’s commitments towards the achievement of higher standards, for example, as defined by the various MDG indicators (see chapters 2 and 3).

Reflecting this view, one senior policy maker clearly stated that the government is following international regulations and guidance when talking about quality because the government is supposed to submit reports with regards to its achievements in meeting the MDGs’ indicators which are all based on presenting numeric data. He also stressed that even the evaluation reports conducted by international agencies, like the World Bank study, are based on inaccurate data and therefore their
recommendations were not revealing what is needed for the particular context. Nevertheless, all the recommendations of the World Bank study in respect to Oman were implemented, including the reform of the whole system to become the currently operating Basic Education which was also planned and developed by an external agency, as I described in chapter 4.

Interestingly, four senior policy makers clearly stated that the reliance on external agencies is causing problems because these experts are not informed about the context. Yet, they said that decisions to work with them are coming from the ‘top’. This idea, frequently repeated during conversations, reveals a lack of collaboration between various departments and senior policy makers, as I discuss later in this chapter.

The development of policies

Although various efforts are taking place to reform the school system in Oman in collaboration with external agencies, it was interesting to hear the various senior policy makers asserting that government still does not have a clear vision for education. Rather, their view was that different priorities exist. For example:

'I have discussed my vision before with other officials at the ministry, but we still don’t have a vision nor do we have clear strategy'. (senior policy maker)

Almost all of the respondents stressed that the lack of a unified vision is due to the lack of collaboration between various departments and officials in the Ministry. For example:

'Each member at the Ministry has a different vision and priority'. (senior policy maker)

Another one said:

'We don’t have a clear vision and our scattered projects and efforts are not helping in making real improvements in the system'. (senior policy maker)

Some of the policy makers also stated that although a range of evaluation studies were conducted by external agencies and recommendations were made, the problems occur because plans are not put into action. They also confirmed that they do not usually sit down with colleagues in other departments to plan because every department has different tasks. Interestingly, some interviewees repeated that the problems the system
is facing are because officials do not want to admit they have problems. One commented:

'...we keep on blaming each other'. (senior policy maker)

This ‘blaming culture’ was described as the result of a lack of unified vision. On the other hand, some felt that the emphasis on top-down policies is the main creators of confusion and problems in the system. For example:

'Ve don’t cascade it as team work…it is a top-down approach'. (senior policy maker)

It was difficult to understand who are the ‘top’ they were referring to and I could not get more clarifications in that regard, as it seems they considered it as a ‘political area’ they did not want to discuss. Yet, various senior policy makers referred to the school policy and strategy that is currently in the development process and said they were not part of that process:

'The Educational Council is currently developing the educational policy and I have no clue about it. I don’t know why it is perceived as confidential'. (senior policy maker)

Another respondent stated that the new policy is not going to change the current situation, as it is also based on the interests of specific people:

'Each member has a different vision and priority'. (senior policy maker)

In relation to the role of school staff (administrators and teachers) in the decision-making process, various officials stated that those in schools lack the knowledge and expertise to participate in decision making regarding policy. Others stated that national policies are the ‘state’s responsibility’ and said that involving other groups in this process will cause confusion because:

'...it’s impossible to agree on similar agenda, everyone has different views'. (senior policy maker).

Finally, it was evident throughout the interviews that all the senior policy makers have strong faith in the important role of external agencies, such as the World Bank, UNESCO, UNICEF, the Canadian agencies, the CFBT, OFSTED and other agencies and experts in reforming the system. To quote one person, they believe that it is
...important for countries to learn from Western countries and experts, as they are the leading with regard to education'. (senior policy maker)

Most participants however did state that it is important to work with external agencies because the government committed itself to international agendas and conventions, which are based on achieving international indicators and objectives. Therefore they believed it was important to work with these agencies to achieve their commitments.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the views of various senior policy makers with regard to education policy and how it is developed. In so doing, I have kept in mind my concern with the ways in which the Omani education system responds to pupils’ differences. It is evident throughout interviews that there is a consensus that education is a basic right to all children, but that this does not have to be in mainstream schools. Most participants believed that the form of education provided has to be based on pupils’ individual characteristics and that various pupils are perceived as ‘not belonging in the mainstream’, including those with disabilities, those with low IQ levels, and others who do not speak Arabic.

In addition, most respondents stated that equity is a basic principle in the Omani school system, but was defined in relation to placement and providing resources in each form of provision, but not with regard to the processes of learning and participation, as discussed in chapter 3. All the participants believed that all pupils need to be supported to achieve the international standards and to do well in international exams. Within this overall thinking, the idea of inclusion is defined as an approach to providing pupils with disabilities access to special units within mainstream schools.

The chapter has also described how government officials see school policies and reforms as being based on interpretation of recommendations from external agencies and experts. Given that they are developed centrally, they are not based on a unified vision for education, nor do they emerge as a result of collaboration with various sectors or stakeholders.
Having constructed a sense of the views of national policy makers, as well as having looked at the policy documents, in the chapters that follow I look closely at what actually is happening in schools and classrooms. In so doing, I compare these realities with what senior policy makers believe. I need to state here that being involved in policy making myself, various of the findings surprised me and, on some occasions, I was confronted with evidence that I found shocking.
CHAPTER 7

NEWTOWN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Chapter 7 presents the findings collected from Newtown Primary School in relation to the two research questions. As explained in chapters 3 and 5, the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion and its three dimensions is adopted to generate a series of signposts to guide my exploratory research.

Accordingly, this chapter presents my findings with regard to the school policies, practices and culture. I aim to pinpoint the barriers that might be hindering schools from responding to pupil differences in the Omani school context and identify resources that can be mobilised.

The school context is first presented to help the reader visualise the research setting and understand the data presented in the other sections. Under each dimension, I summarise the main issues that I highlight in the discussion chapter.

The school context

Newtown School is located in a highly populated area around 25 kilometers away from Muscat. The residence comprises a mix of Omani and non-Omani but there are no documents on the nationalities of the non-Omani and their spoken languages.

The Omani residents come from different backgrounds and Omani regions, where some are pure Omani speaking Arabic as their mother tongue while others are either Omani with a Baluchi or Zanzibari background (see figure 3, p. 66) and speak either Baluchi or Swahili beside Arabic; and some of them have not mastered Arabic at all.

The school is surrounded by houses, two other government schools, shops and bakeries. Most of the residents of those houses are from Baluchi background and Baluchi is their mother tongue although they are Omani citizens.

According to school administrators, almost 70% of the school pupils are from low socio-economic and educational status but there are no formal records about this. The Baluchi community which originally came from Pakistan and Baluchistan is large.

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4 See chapter 4
(see chapter 4). They have their own culture, forms of dress and living styles, and use the Baluchi language as a mean to communicate with relatives particularly the old ones (upon informal chats with friends from Baluchi backgrounds, school administrators, classroom teachers, and some pupil mothers). Pupils speak Baluchi with each other inside the school and I also heard classroom teachers using it among themselves and with parents.

Newtown school is one of the cycle-one government schools which provide free education for 852 (428 male and 424 female) children aged from 6-10 years (grades 1-4). Boys and girls are mixed in all cycle-one schools and classrooms with a full female staff. The school records shows that there are no pupils with disabilities registered in the school.

The building is located at the centre of a large plot of land (around 5000 meters square) owned by the government. The school is surrounded by high walls and four gates; two at the back and the other two at the front. The front gate is used as the main entrance and the guard room is located next to it to ensure the safety of the school pupils and building. One of the gates at the back is used as the bus entrance and the other one is the entrance for staff cars.

The entrance leads to the reception which is a beautiful and decorated area with four sofas on the side designated for parents and visitors, and surrounded by the administrators’ offices (principal, vice-principal, social worker, secretary, psychologist, and data-entry specialist). Outside the reception is the assembly yard which is a covered area located at the middle of the building and it is also used for PE activities most of the day (see figure 4).

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5 More than 20 years ago, the Government decided to expand the Ministry of Finance and the area around it; therefore they bought the houses around them and asked the owners to move and evacuate the area. Some owners preferred to get money and moved to different areas around the capital Muscat while others preferred to get new houses as a replacement. They moved to this area and were given new two- or three-bedroomed houses.
Thirty two classrooms are distributed around the two-floor building and all are connected by open and clean corridors overlooking the assembly area (figure 5). Grades 1 and 2 classrooms are on the ground floor and grades 3 and 4 classrooms are on the first floor. All classrooms are spacious (around 84 square metres) with four wide windows covered with curtains and two split-unit conditioners. Most classrooms have good lighting and air flow with white boards at the front of the class, and desks are distributed either in groups of five to seven pupils or in rows.

There are four toilets; two on each floor (two for boys and two for girls; each contains five WCs and washing areas). However, the school has no facilities to support pupils with disabilities; none of the WCs has access to wheelchairs and the all school doors are narrow which makes it difficult for any pupil with a wheelchair to pass through them.

Besides the classrooms, the building has a nurse’s room and a learning difficulties room with two special education classroom teachers (one for numeracy and the other for literacy). The room is spacious with coloured cabinets with coloured files, number cards, letters cards, and other illustrated materials. At the middle of the room there are two round tables with four chairs around each. The room has a smart board, laptop, a TV and several toys.

The canteen is located within the school back yard; it sells some snacks like juice, chocolate bars, falafel sandwiches, and biscuits. All school canteens are owned by the MoE and the snacks are under close scrutiny by the Ministry officials to ensure that food meets MoE criteria. Despite this it is easy to note the buying habits of the school children where almost all buy chocolate bars and juice. This is because the
sandwiches do not taste good, as stated by pupils and classroom teachers. The location of schools’ canteens drew continuous criticism from school administrators and classroom teachers as they are located in the yards where pupils usually fight to get access to the small windows of the canteen to buy things, and then they eat their food in the same ‘un-shaded yards’ where temperature reaches 45 degrees Celsius most months of the year.

Figure 5. The school canteen and crowds of pupils during the lunch break

There is a great deal of construction and workers around the school; the school administrators explained that the Ministry making expansions where extra classrooms are added to increase the school capacity. Therefore, expatriate workers (mainly Indian and Bangladeshi) can be seen around the building and in some cases I saw them talking to pupils during breaks. Although the school administrators tried to take precautions and ensure the safety of the pupils; the access to the construction area was easy and some pupil were occasionally seen playing with dangerous instruments. On some occasions I saw children hiding behind workers equipment and using some of it to hit their peers.
There are also other expatriate workers who take care of cleaning and maintenance, as well as one Omani porter (lady) who usually helps classroom teachers with photocopying and some paper work, and she takes the presence note book around classrooms where all classroom teachers register the present/absent pupils. This activity is usually done during the first two lessons and that book is then checked by the social worker and the head teacher. [Frequency of checks is unknown.]

Most pupils use the free school transportation which is buses of 25-50 passengers while some come to school either on foot, as their houses are next to the school building, or by private cars. Once they arrive, all gather in the assembly area before going to classrooms. The formal school day starts at 7.15 am, where the assembly lasts for 15 minutes.

During assembly, pupils read verses of the Quran, sing the national Anthem, and administrators make important announcements if any. After that the bell rings announcing the start of the school day from 7:30 am to 1:30 pm that is divided into eight lessons each lasting for 45 minutes. There is one break after the fourth lesson which lasts for 15 minutes where pupils can have some snacks either from the school canteen or eat the food they brought from home. Boys wear the Omani white dishdasha with the Omani Kumma (cap) and girls wear the formal elementary uniform which is a brown dress (to the knee), white trousers and a white head scarf.
Teaching staff and resources

As described in chapters 4 and 6, the senior policy makers, supported by the content of the MoE documents, believe that one way of responding to differences is through offering equity and quality to all pupils to ensure they are capable to meeting national objectives and standards. Accordingly all schools are provided with the following;

School staff (administrators and classroom teachers). The number is decided based on the size of the schools (see chapter 4). Accordingly, this school has 65 classroom teachers (all female) who are employees of the MoE, where the employment procedures are all done at the central level and all staff can be moved between schools and regions upon directions from the Ministry. Usually classroom teachers are consulted prior to a move, but on several occasions they are not and anyone could receive their transfer letter without any prior notice. All teaching staff are Omani except the music teacher who is Tunisian.

All staff hold Bachelor’s degrees in different educational specialties and the work experience of the staff varied from five to 30 years. They come from different backgrounds with many from a Baluchi one. There are nine administrative staff (head teacher, two assistants, social worker, psychologist, secretary, IT specialist, finance coordinator and activities supervisor) who hold either Master’s or Bachelor’s qualifications. The school has two special education classroom teachers (SENs) who
work as learning difficulty classroom teachers, one holds a special education degree from Jordan and the other one is a mathematics teacher who decided to become a learning difficulty teacher and received in-service training for that (diploma). It is common in the Omani schools to see subject classroom teachers working as special education classroom teachers after receiving such training as there is a big shortage in special education graduates. The school has a social worker and a psychologist who was pregnant and gave birth to her baby during the third week of the school. Therefore, her maternity leave fell during my stay at this school. All Omani government schools have almost the same range of staff and their numbers vary according to the size of the school. The MoE is trying to take the administrative load from classroom teachers to give them time to focus on teaching and issues related to pupils’ learning.

**Textbooks and teaching materials.** All pupils study the same subjects (see chapter 4) which are all taught in classical Arabic except the English subject. During all lessons, classroom teachers are not allowed to speak other languages inside classrooms except classical Arabic. However, during English lessons, several classroom teachers were using Arabic to translate the sentences that pupils found difficult to understand.

Each subject has its own national textbook and a teacher’s guide which are centrally designed. Classroom teachers are also provided with teacher manuals (in Oman we refer to them as classroom teachers’ guides) for each subject stating how to teach each lesson, and the time allocated for each lesson and in some occasions for each task. All classroom teachers stated that they are directed by the supervision department at the Ministry to follow the guide and meet the timeline to finish the curriculum, which is decided centrally. Classroom teachers also said that they are usually evaluated according to their commitment to national guidelines. Teaching materials and resources such as video/audio cassettes, overhead projectors, charts, and other materials are also provided by the ministry. Schools are getting extra budgets to spend on teaching materials and head classroom teachers are usually in charge of spending the money allocated.

Each subject group has a senior teacher who is also assigned by supervisors to work as a subject supervisor or subject head teacher and she is usually in charge of checking the subject teacher’s planning notes. This subject head teacher’s lesson load
is reduced (around 12 lessons per week) to enable her to join in supervision lessons with her classroom teachers and sit with them in discussion groups. Yet, most classroom teachers stated that meeting to discuss plans rarely happens and most of the time senior classroom teachers are busy with paperwork; this was confirmed by various senior classroom teachers:

‘...everybody is busy and classroom teachers are doing their work. I am either teaching my classes or filling in papers for the supervisors and the principal’. (a senior teacher)

The daily timetable is divided into eight lessons, each lasts 40 minutes with five minutes between each lesson and a 15 minutes break after the fourth lesson where pupils have a snack, either from the canteen, or something they have brought from home. Each classroom has a copy of the timetable and they are usually pasted on the classroom door, maybe for easier reference.

In summary, the government is in charge of providing free education to all pupils within the school. The school is built by the government and located in an area where most residents and school pupils are from a Baluschi background. Free transportation and books are provided where curriculum is centrally designed. School staff are employees of the government and decisions relating to their employment and transfer are made at central level. All pupils study the same subjects which are taught in classical Arabic except the English subject which is taught from grade one. Each subject has its own textbooks, classroom teachers and resources.

Policies

Having presented the school and classrooms context, I move now to describe the various policies implemented in the school. As described in chapter 4, all policies are decided centrally and schools are the implementers. In the first section, I describe how the school implements the centrally designed policies and try to capture staff views about these policies and how they impact the issue of responding to differences. The policies I address are registration, grouping and placement, grade repetition, pupils’ attendance, school development plans, and identification of needs and adult support.

In the second section, I present the policies designed by staff: I term these ‘school initiatives’.
1- Central government policies

Pupils’ registration; the national policy states that to accept a pupil in a government school he/she should be ‘without hearing or intellectual disability’ (see chapter 4). Accordingly, schools are given the right to reject any pupil with hearing or intellectual disability in mainstream classrooms.

This written policy reflects the views expressed by various senior policy makers who understood responding to differences as being achieved through providing segregated provisions or providing support by ‘specialised’ people. These views are echoed at school level where all staff were of the consensus that pupils with disabilities ‘don’t belong to mainstream’ and there is a need for specialised support in special schools or units as mainstream schools do not have the physical or human resources to help them.

However, although the national policy seems to be very clear in this area, some discrepancies were found in this school where the school accepted a pupil with a hearing aid; Amal⁶ who was registered in the school when she was six years old. That was explained by school administrators as the result of the government’s lack of vision and the gap in communication between the Ministry and schools. For example, one of the administrators said:

'We had to accept her because she has remaining of speech and doesn’t sign. There are no regulations and policies to such pupils, therefore her parents refused to send her to a special school and insisted on registering her here.' (School administrator).

The school administration stated that because the girl has remaining of speech, the Al-Amal⁷ school refused to register her as they use just sign language as a medium for instruction. Therefore, the MoE directed the government school to accept and register the girl without providing her or the school with any resources or training to support her. This was an example of the deviation from written policies once they reach different arenas and a clear example of how different members (Amal’s parents) win the argument and change the policies, particularly if policies are vague and not comprehensive.

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⁶ A student in grade 4 with a hearing aid who has remaining of speech.
⁷ Al-Amal school is the only school for students with hearing disabilities in Oman. They use sign language as a medium of teaching in all grade levels.
Classroom teachers complained about allowing the girl access without providing classroom teachers with any kind of support to respond to her differences:

"The administration allowed this pupil to be in the school without thinking of how to teach her. She is not my responsibility. I was trained to teach ordinary pupils not pupils with disabilities". (classroom teacher).

Grouping and placement (mixed-ability approach): pupils are placed in grades according to their age group and are distributed in classrooms according to a mixed-ability approach as explained in chapter 4. Therefore, in this school each grade level consists of six to eight classrooms with 30 to 32 pupils in each room. Based on the national policy which allow all pupils, except those with disabilities, access to mainstream schools, most classrooms had Omani pupils from a Baluchi background and who do not speak Arabic like Omar and Faisal in one of the grade 4 classrooms as well as non-Omani pupils who do not speak Arabic like Ahmed who is from Pakistan and who was offered access to grade 1.

Although all were allowed access, they were also left without language support. The lack of support was justified by senior policy makers as a way to ensure that Omani pupils are treated ‘the same’ with no form of categorisation made based on their language backgrounds (see chapters 4 and 6).

There was a consensus among all school staff that this policy is lacking clear knowledge about school contexts and the various challenges that are facing classroom teachers and pupils when allowing pupils who do not speak Arabic access to the mainstream. Classroom teachers stressed that pupils who do not speak Arabic should go to international schools:

"...they should go to an international school as it’s not the role of classroom classroom teachers to teach these pupils Arabic". (classroom teacher)

This national understanding of respecting rights seems to be having negative impacts on schools’ practices and pupils’ learning experiences as I explain in the practices section.

Grade repetition; there is no fail/pass as the MoE adopted the social approach in cycle-one schools (see chapter 4). Therefore, there is no national examination, but classroom teachers are responsible for setting short exams to follow up pupils’ progress and achievements. The school social worker believes that this system
resulted in careless pupils where many do not even bother doing the homework set and parents do not follow up their children’s progress in school.

Interestingly, all classroom teachers that I interviewed expressed the same opinion and thought that grade repetition has positive impact on pupils’ learning and outcomes. They also believed that the MoE should re-consider their decision regarding the social approach as it reduced the quality of pupils’ outcomes. For example one classroom teacher said:

‘...it is useless to move pupils to upper grades without mastering the objective of the previous level.’ (classroom teacher)

Pupils’ attendance; Once the pupils are seated in their groups and by the end of the first lesson, the school porter or a teacher enters each classroom with the school attendance book to register the presence and absence of pupils. There are formal regulations with regard to attendance and pupils’ affairs as described in chapter 4. In that document significant focus is given to cutting marks as a punishment procedure to prevent absence and that reflects the Ministry's priorities with regard to education which is mainly attainment as described in chapters 4 and 6.

The attendance policy was described by classroom teachers as reflecting the lack of clarity at the Ministry level and the gap between what happens in schools and what is ‘theoretically’ stated at the Ministry offices.

For example, a grade-3 teacher said that the document and the stated procedures did not stop one of her pupils from missing school days and did not curtail the drop-outs:

‘I have a boy who misses school frequently, sometimes once a week. We communicated with his parents and they are not cooperative. They said that they can’t force the boy to wake up early morning and come to school. On some occasions they take him to Dubai during week days where he misses school days. How can cutting marks help in such a situation?’ (classroom teacher)

Many classroom teachers said that there is a need for different regulations to ensure that parents send pupils to school every day such as paying a certain amount of money for each day the pupil misses school.

Moreover, the formal policy document did not have any information on how to support pupils who miss school because of health issues or chronic diseases like
Thalassemia and sickle cell disease which are very common\(^8\) in Oman. The only support provided is allowing them to be examined at home or in hospital if there are formal medical certificates stating their inability to attend school during exam dates. Therefore, when the father of the girl with Thalassemia reported his daughter’s absence due to the bone marrow transplant, the school staff gave him her books and asked him to teach her at home; yet no one was formally in charge of going to her and helping her by explaining the lessons or supporting her in study. That is left to parents.

The same happened when a pupil with a physical disability missed one full semester of school because she was hospitalised; the school had no communication with parents on how to support her and when the girl came back to school during the second semester classroom teachers could not help her to catch up with the lessons she missed, which resulted in her leaving school.

That enacted policy was built on staff perceptions of their role and duties with regard to pupils’ differences. For example an administrator said:

> 'What else can we do? It’s not our role to teach them out of school. Our duties are inside the school and during school time only'. (school administrator).

_School development plan;_ this centrally designed policy was developed by OFSTED where it initially intended to follow the internal and external inspection strategies for schools improvements (see chapter 4). The external inspection was centrally cancelled, though, and therefore schools were left with half of the project where they are directed by the School Development Department at the MoE to work collaboratively towards developing a plan that aims at analysing issues in relation to learning, teaching and school leadership and then developing an action plan to improve areas within each category. In the fourth week after the school opened, this plan was not ready; that was due to two main reasons.

First, the sudden transfer of the school head teacher to another school and replacing her with a new one who did not know anything about the school and its needs and therefore was unable to develop a plan to target areas that need improvements.

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\(^8\) Every year, 120-150 infants are born with sickle cell disease and 20-25 are born with Thalasemia every year (OHBDA, 2012).
Secondly and most importantly, most classroom teachers and school staff had negative beliefs about the usefulness of the school development plan where most stated that it was nothing but a paperwork exercise that added another load to their daily work. For example:

'We are asked to develop this plan, but when we face real problems we do not receive help from the school development department who just care about the papers and questionnaires'. (school administrator)

In addition, school administrators said that this policy is one of the Ministry’s various policies that aim at raising pupils’ performance.

These views reflect the lack of collaboration between the senior policy makers and schools during the policy-making stage where staff seemed to be lacking a clear understanding of the role of this policy. Classroom teachers showed a clear lack of knowledge about this policy and many said that they had not heard about it while others stated that the administrators used to work on this plan and never involved classroom teachers in this process. They said that what they get are questionnaires to fill without any discussions after that. Actually several classroom teachers complained about the lack of real communication between classroom teachers and admin where one said:

'No one is taking our views or ask us about anything; not here and not from the Ministry'. (classroom teacher)

**Learning difficulty programme and identification of needs**; as described in chapter 4, the aim of this programme is to provide pupils with support in numeracy and literacy through pull-out sessions. Accordingly, the national policy directs schools to identify pupils who cannot cope with the national standards, or achieve like their peers. The identification is done through classroom classroom teachers and usually based on pupils’ marks in Arabic and Maths. In this school, most school staff described pupils coming from a Baluchi background as ‘low achievers/slow learners’ who cannot cope with the national curriculum. Classroom teachers said that pupils’ difficulties are due to the Baluchi language they speak at home which is believed to be one of the main factors hindering their learning. One teacher emphasised this point:

'Most pupils are speaking Baluchi at home as in most of the families parents don’t speak Arabic and therefore pupils come here unable to understand lessons or classroom teachers’ talk'. (classroom teacher).
Pupils who are described by classroom teachers as “low achievers/slow learners” and on some occasions ‘hopeless’ and in need of ‘something different/extra’ are referred to the Learning Difficulties Teacher (LDT) who is in charge of taking the lists from classroom teachers and deciding upon who can be involved in this programme according to academic tests centrally designed (Arabic and Maths). This programme reflects the national understanding of how to respond to differences with its medial approach to education where pupils are pulled out, ‘fixed’ and changed to fit within the national agenda and classroom routine.

Although the policy formal documents state that LDTs are supposed to develop the IPEs in collaboration with classroom classroom teachers, the LDT in the school stated that they develop the IEPs without discussing its content or aim with classroom classroom teachers or parents as they believe that they are trained to do the job and do not need to involve untrained people in their work:

‘We prepare the IEPs and decide upon the kind of support each pupil need as we are trained to do the job while classroom classroom teachers or parents are untrained and can’t help in this process’. (school LDT).

Both LDTs expressed their frustration as many classroom teachers put pressure on them to enroll pupils they were not trained to deal with such as pupils from Baluchi backgrounds, the pupils with disabilities and the ones with socio-economic problems. For example one of them said:

‘...we were trained to support certain pupils, but not all the ones classroom teachers want to get rid of’. (LDT)

On the other hand, classroom classroom teachers believed that it is the LDT’s responsibility to help them with the ‘slow learners’ and the ‘low achievers’ where one teacher said:

‘...we are not trained to deal with slow learners but the LDT received special training and supposed to know how to deal with them and if the LD programme can’t take them, they should go to special schools’. (classroom teacher)

Surprisingly, the LDTs stated that the special needs department promised to open special classrooms for slow learners and pupils who do not benefit from the LD programme. In here, the impact of the medial approach and the great trust in professionalism as well as the great focus on standards are evident. I focus on this point in the discussion section.
In summary, the various described policies are developed at the national level where there is clear lack of collaboration with school staff and understanding of the school’s context. Most policies focus on ensuring that pupils meet national standards through providing additional support to pupils who lag behind their peers. The support provided reveals a medical approach of education where the deficiencies are perceived as arising from within pupils and the LDT is in charge of fixing those pupils to fit in the mainstream classroom. There is no language support for Omani and non-Omani pupils who do not speak Arabic or support for pupils with disabilities and chronic diseases, which reveals a lack of understanding at the national level about such differences. This lack of support generated negative attitudes towards pupils who are ‘different’ from the majority.

2- School initiatives

Regardless of the obvious impact of the national policies on schools’ policy and practices, it seems that there is some space left for schools’ initiatives to respond to pupils’ differences. The following are some examples.

**Parental involvement;** this is an initiative by the school to encourage parents’ involvement in supporting the learning of their children. Underlying the thinking of this initiative was again to raise standards. Actually, the school was informed that one of its grade 4 classrooms was to participate in the international examination TIMMS that year. Accordingly, school leaders said that it was important to ensure that grade 4 pupils do well as that is going to impact the whole school reputation.

Therefore, all grade 4 classroom teachers were asked to report the pupils who are facing difficulties in Arabic and Maths, following which a list of 60 pupils was handed to the school principal. It was then agreed to design a programme that will help boost pupils’ performance in Arabic. The school devised a plan to bring parents in once a week (Wednesdays at 9.00 am) to give them some strategies to help them support their children at home. The project was named ‘انا وامي نقرأ‘ (I read with my mother) (ana wa ommy naqraa).

Two Arabic classroom teachers volunteered to do the job out of interest. A spacious room was prepared with nice furniture to be used for the project. Formal letters were sent to parents explaining the project and asking them if they would like to participate. Eleven mothers showed interest and agreed to come; however it was clear
that the admin staff and the two classroom teachers were disappointed by the responses and the low number of parents who showed interest as they expected more to come. For example one teacher expressed her disappointment by saying:

'Even if we try to help, parents are not cooperative. They don’t care about their children'. (classroom teacher).

I managed to attend the first session where ten mothers and one father arrived. All were seated and snacks were served. It seemed that all mothers were from Baluchi backgrounds as they were speaking Baluchi among themselves. As neither teacher spoke Baluchi, they asked the mothers to use Arabic during the meeting (session). Mothers stated clearly that they cannot speak good Arabic and some were unable to understand what classroom teachers were saying; therefore some mothers who spoke broken Arabic translated for the rest.

During the first session of this programme and when mothers were asked to talk about their expectations, each mentioned a different aspect such as providing financial support, support to solve the complicated social problems their children were facing, and one talked about acquiring strategies to support the learning of her child (Amal’s mother).

As I attended the first meeting until the end, it was obvious that there was miscommunication between the two classroom teachers and the school administration with regard to the purpose of the programme; that was expressed by one of the said classroom teachers:

'I planned to teach them strategies to help their children at home and not to teach them Arabic. The administration didn’t discuss their Baluchi language issues or any of the social problems'. (classroom teacher).

The first session ended before classroom teachers could present the agreed upon content for the session which was prepared in a ‘classical Arabic’ and contained some learning strategies as it was obvious to both classroom teachers that real modification was needed to address the issues discussed by parents.

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9 It took place on 4/11/2014.
10 Mothers mentioned that students are unable to study because the family live in one room and the students do not find quiet place to study. Others mentioned that substance abuse of the fathers is negatively affecting the students where some were physically abusing the children.
11 Amal’s mother is a university graduate who is very concerned about the learning of her hearing-impaired girl who is in grade 4.
**Staff philanthropic initiative in providing financial support for the needy ones;**

where staff said that it is one of the school initiatives to help the poor pupils to buy some snacks during the break and to protect them from feeling ‘less able’ than their peers which could have a bad psychological impact on them. For example one said:

‘We have many poor pupils in this school and we can’t keep them without food when their peers are eating. We know some through classroom classroom teachers and others through their parents. Many parents came and asked us to help their children. We made a list of them and we try our best to help’. (school administrator).

All school staff agreed to sponsor those children where through paying part of their monthly salary to the school social worker who made a list of the needy pupils. Helping the needy is described by one school staff as ‘one main principle of Islam’:

‘Islam tells us to help the needy and whenever we can we will support the poor even if we pay from our pockets’. (classroom teacher).

The collected money is used to (1) buy school items like bags, notebooks, pens, etc, and (2) pay 200 Baiza\(^{12}\) to each pupil to spend during the school break. Each of the pupils in need will go to the social worker’s room and get the money on a daily basis. On some occasions, the ‘needy pupils’ come to collect the money accompanied with a friend or even two. Classroom teachers said that ‘needy pupils’ do not feel embarrassed or shy to come and collect the money.

**Safety of youngest children;** during the school break and while pupils (boys and girls) were crowding and fighting around the school canteen to buy some snacks, it was interesting to see grade 1 pupils sitting quietly in their classrooms waiting for the classroom teachers to bring the snacks to them. That was described by school administration as a school initiative to protect the young pupils and ensure their safety, because the crowding in the canteen area resulted in injuries especially for grade 1 pupils. This was explained by a school administrator who said:

‘We have noticed the difficulty grade 1 pupils face while going to the canteen during school break; therefore classroom teachers volunteered to take snacks to them in their classrooms. It’s based on our belief in the importance of ensuring their safety. The Ministry didn’t see that as good job or something that deserves appreciation but it’s okay with us. We know that we are doing our best’. (school administrator).

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\(^{12}\)Baiza is an Omani currency. One pound equals 200 Baiza.
School staff said that although they try to respond to various needs of the pupils, their initiatives are not appreciated by Ministry officials as the MoE’s main concern is pupils’ achievements and the international tests.

In summary, school staff had a few initiatives aiming at responding to pupil differences. The three initiatives identified are based on staff genuine willingness to support pupils, and their understandings of how to support them. Yet the dominance of the standards agenda with the national policy pressure in this regard is obvious in the reading programme as well as the lack of communication between various staff concerning the development process. It also reveals that staff lacks real knowledge about pupils’ homes and families.

Classroom practices

Having presented the school and classrooms contexts, as well as national and school policies, in what follows I describe what I learned about practices in Newtown School with regard to responding to pupil differences. Practice issues are examined by focusing on six pupils perceived as different and vulnerable to marginalization and described by classroom teachers as ‘hopeless’, ‘slow learners’, ‘low achievers’, ‘with problems’ and on some occasions as ‘stupid’.

Pupils

Table 1: The six pupils, all of whom are Omani unless otherwise stated

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hearing difficulties and limited speech</td>
<td>Using hearing aid</td>
<td>Described by classroom teachers as ‘hopeless’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Socio-economic problems</td>
<td>Father left family five years ago and never reappeared, overweight, bites fingers</td>
<td>Described by classroom teachers as a low achiever and a child with learning difficulties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faisal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Physical and emotional abuse</td>
<td>Father addicted to drugs</td>
<td>Described by classroom teachers as ‘hopeless’ and ‘a slow learner’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Orphanage</td>
<td>Unknown parents</td>
<td>High achiever, described as aggressive and difficult and lives with social stigma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fahad</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Socio-economic situation</td>
<td>Father blind, mother raising four children</td>
<td>Has an inflammation around nose and upper lips, not getting proper treatment, described by classroom teachers as ‘disgusting’ and ‘hopeless’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahmed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Pakistani nationality</td>
<td>Married to Pakistani cousin, widowed a month before school began</td>
<td>Does not speak or understand Arabic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In what follows I present the various practices adopted by classroom teachers and the impact of these practices on the six described pupils. The descriptions include planning, classroom arrangements, classroom routines and pupils’ participation, and teaching styles and instruction.

**Planning.** Classroom teachers are supposed to plan for each semester which varies between 12 and 13 weeks as well as daily planning which is written in the preparation note book. That note book is usually checked by the subject head classroom teachers, the school head teacher and the supervisors who go to schools on an annual basis. However, various classroom teachers said that they sometimes use the previous year’s preparation books because lessons are the same and why should they bother writing something else! Classroom teachers tended to plan separately and there were no forms of joint work in this regard. Some classroom teachers stated that they do not have time to sit together and plan while others said they are not supposed to discuss their plans except with their supervisors and the principal when required. These statements raise questions about classroom teachers’ training programmes and the messages they were given in this regard.

The plans are written in the Arabic language except for the English subject which has its own way of preparation and guidelines and everything is written in English. The MoE documents state that the Ministry provides classroom teachers with all resources and material needed to deliver lessons as stated in the classroom teachers’ guides (classroom teachers’ manuals). That, I argue, resulted in a standardised way of planning and teaching, as I describe below.

Although the MoE documents emphasise that teaching and learning is planned and designed to be ‘learner centred’, lesson plans were targeting the whole class and there were no modifications in the plans that target certain pupils or group of pupils. Classroom teachers believed that they were not expected to plan something ‘different’ for each pupil because:

‘...all pupils have to learn the same things and meet the national objectives’.
(classroom teacher)

Nevertheless, other classroom teachers said that they were not trained at the university to modify their planning or instruction. For example, one teacher said that she was trained to plan in a certain way, but after graduation her supervisor asked her to plan
differently and that caused her a lot of confusion and difficulty until she got used to what the MoE wants.

The same way of planning was noted with regard to the LDTs which is based on pull-out sessions for pupils from mainstream classrooms based on classroom teachers’ referrals. There was no form of communication or collaboration between LDT and classroom classroom teachers on how to plan the support. There was also no form of collaboration with parents or pupils; instead the entire responsibility is given to the LDT. Both LTDs stated that they are trained to plan in a specific way and other classroom teachers and parents cannot be involved in this process as they lack training and knowledge.

**Classroom arrangements.** In most classrooms, pupils were seated in groups or rows and the teacher is the only one who decides upon who sits where; that is based on pupils’ abilities, behaviours and classroom teachers’ expectations.

![Figure 8. Seating within one grade 4 classroom](image)

Classroom teachers tended to seat pupils who they perceive as ‘different’ in a specific way and place within classrooms. For example, Amal, Omar, and Faisal in grade 4 were seated in one group at the front of the classroom with three other pupils. Classroom teachers label this group ‘low achievers’, yet Amal, Omar and Faisal are specifically described as:

‘...the worst among all pupils in the classrooms’. (classroom teacher)
On various occasions classroom teachers described the three pupils as ‘hopeless and stupid’. The classroom teachers referred to Amal’s hearing problems and the other two pupils’ language issues as causing their difficulties and problems. This means difference is described in relation to pupils’ internal deficits and ‘lack of something’.

Based on knowing that these pupils are in need of support, classroom teachers claimed that they seated them in that specific way in order to respond to their differences and help them:

‘I decide on where they sit. I do it according to their abilities. For example I seat the low achievers in one group at the front of the class because I need to keep a close eye on them and help them’. (classroom teacher).

In contrast, Ali, who was known to all classroom teachers as ‘smart’ but ‘aggressive’ was seated near the classroom door and classroom teachers explained that this was a way to stop him from distracting other pupils.

![Diagram of seating arrangement]

**Figure 9. The seating of the four pupils in grade 4**

In grade one, pupils were also seated in groups of five to six, where boys and girls were mixed within groups. Classroom teachers decide upon the seating and that is also based on classroom teachers’ expectations about pupils’ abilities. For example, Ahmed who is Pakistani and who joined the school during the second week of the new academic year was seated alone away from the various groups.
Some classroom teachers justified seating him that way because he arrived late where other pupils were already seated in their groups and they could not fit him in with any group. Others said that he was seated that way because his language problems may distract the learning of other pupils. Therefore a decision was made to seat him alone at the back of the classroom until they found a way to support him. However, there was a consensus that he does not belong to the classroom, when one teacher said:

'Sending him to the Indian or Pakistani school is the best option because he will be able to speak his language and understand'. (classroom teacher).

These views with regard to who does/does not belong to the mainstream are common in the Omani school system where the same views were stated by senior policy makers (see chapter 6).

Unlike the other two classrooms, grade 3 pupils were seated in rows and classroom teachers justified that as a way ‘to control the class and avoid noise and group talk’ where the classroom classroom teachers believed that the noise increased when they work in groups and therefore pupils lose focus. However, the achievement and behaviours were not the only reasons behind classroom teachers’ decisions on where
to seat pupils where the physical appearance of Fahad was the reason for seating him in the front row, just near the door. This pupil, unlike others, was allowed freedom to leave the classroom whenever he wanted during all lessons without any comment from his classroom teachers and in many instances without being noticed. One of his classroom teachers justified seating him that way by saying:

‘All pupils feel disgusted by him and many complained. I therefore, seat him that way to avoid the complaints and allow him to leave whenever he wants without distracting the lesson’. (classroom teacher).

Figure 11. Seating in grade 3 and location of Fahad at the front row next to the classroom door

Classrooms’ routine. In most classrooms, classroom teachers were following a strict classroom routine with little space for pupils’ choice and freedom.

Once classroom teachers enter the classroom, they would stand rigidly at the front of the class and wait until all pupils stand. Once everyone is standing and all are silent, classroom teachers greet them in classical Arabic saying السلام عليكم ‘Alsalam Alaykum’ (peace be upon you) and all reply in loud voice وعليكم السلام ورحمة الله وبركاته ‘ wa alayikum alsalam’. After that all pupils sit in the allocated place within their group, open their books and wait for instructions. Pupils are not allowed to move from their desks without classroom teachers’ permission and in some occasions pupils were directed to fold their arms and face front to maintain regular focus on the teacher while the lesson was in progress.

Pupils can be punished for breaking the classroom routine. For example, in one of the grade 4 lessons, Ali moved from his allocated place just after the teacher greeted them and it seems that he was looking for something:

Teacher             Ali, I told you last time not to change your seat. Go back
Ali       Teacher, I wasn’t trying to change, I was just looking for my note book. Someone took it.

Teacher   I said sit down and don’t move otherwise I will send you to the principal.

Most lessons followed the same classroom routine where pupils were not allowed space to talk and classroom teachers were doing most of the talking and explaining as an authoritative figure where the teacher as the main source of knowledge was dominant in most classrooms and lessons. The dominance of classroom teachers in delivering lessons made some pupils passive during lessons and many were hesitant to ask a question even if they did not understand. For example, in one of the Arabic lessons, by the end of the Arabic lesson, the teacher asked grade 4 pupils if they have any questions. No one raised his/her hand although many seemed unable to understand or even answer the exercise in their books, particularly Amal, Omar and Faisal who were staring at each other for the whole lesson and were not participating.

While asking Amal, Faisal and Omar about this issue, they said that they were afraid of classroom teachers because they usually shout and get angry when pupils do not understand and therefore they avoid asking the classroom teachers questions:

‘Classroom teachers shout when we ask’. (Omar)

‘Classroom teachers are always shouting and they beat us’. (Ali)

Instead, pupils tended to ask each other about what they do not understand and that was usually done after the lessons, during the five minutes between lessons and on a few occasions during the school break.

In summary, classroom teachers seemed to be highly dependent on classroom teachers’ guides to plan their lessons which resulted in a standardised way of planning. The plans were targeting the whole class with no IPEs or modification to respond to pupils’ differences, as classroom teachers stated they were not trained to do that while others said it was not their responsibility to respond to pupils’ differences. Plans are developed on an individual basis with no form of collaboration between staff in this regard. Seating and grouping is based on classroom teachers’ decisions and that was mainly based on perceived pupils’ abilities and classroom teachers’ expectations and views about individual pupils.
Inside classrooms classroom teachers maintain a strict classroom routine where pupils are not allowed to speak or move before gaining permission from classroom teachers. That produced feelings of fear among some pupils and therefore made them passive inside classrooms.

**Instruction and pupils’ participation.** The centrally designed policies, curriculum, classroom teachers’ guides and resources which were targeting the ‘majority’ to meet the national standards, as well as the seating arrangements resulted in a standardised way of teaching and instruction which was unable to respond to pupils’ differences.

In most lessons, classroom teachers were relying on text books and classroom teachers’ guides to deliver lessons and it was rare that classroom teachers tried any innovative way of explaining lessons while pupils keep silent. The over-reliance on textbooks and classroom teachers’ guides resulted in the standardised way of teaching and instruction.

Classroom teachers tended to stand in front of the classroom, but on some occasions they would move around the groups while explaining the lessons. For example, the Islamic studies teacher entered grade 4, greeted pupils, and all were asked to open their books at a certain page; it a verses of the Qur’an. She read it loudly three times while pupils were asked to look at that page in their books and follow her. Then she asked them; who can read loudly?

The teacher picked a pupil; he read with several mistakes without interruption or correction from the teacher. Another pupil was asked to read and the same process went on with four pupils. The teacher then read the same verse of the Qur’an for the last time before she asked them to answer the questions in their books. No one from the front groups (Amal, Omar and Faisal) was asked to participate and Amal was looking at the wrong page while the teacher was reading. When pupils finished any task, classroom teachers used to go around the groups to check their work; or on some occasions they would sit at their table in front of the class and ask pupils to come to them to correct their notebooks or previous home work.

Similarly, during the Arabic lesson in grade 4, for example, the teacher entered the classroom, greeted the pupils and asked them to sit and open their text books. She started the lesson with a warm-up activity where she gave them some questions about the previous lesson. Pupils raised their hands to answer; she selected four pupils
randomly to answer. After the warm-up activity, the teacher asked all pupils to open their note books and started dictating to them, but told the pupils in the middle-front group (the seven pupils) not to write. The teacher justified that as follows:

'They can’t do the dictation like others as their writing is very poor. Some activities do not suit them especially Amal, Omar and Faisal’. (classroom teacher).

On a few occasions, those pupils tried to participate, like Omar who raised his hands to answer, but when he gave wrong answer that seemed to upset the teacher and it showed on her face where she gave the boy a look of contempt and moved to other 'good' pupils and proceeded with the lesson without commenting on Omar’s answer. To the teacher that was normal as:

'...the lesson should continue and if I stop and explain to each single pupil I will never finish my lesson’. (classroom teacher).

Another teacher justified excluding some pupils who were categorised as 'low achievers' from parts of the curriculum based on the difficulty and unsuitability of the curriculum:

'Some lessons are even difficult to me; what about the low achievers. I don’t know how designers thought when they put this content'. (classroom teacher).

Generally, classroom teachers were concentrating on the majority who can answer and participate and tended to exclude pupils described as ‘low achievers’ or who ‘have difficulties’. I believe that the centrally designed policies and senior policy makers’ views as well as lack of understanding resulted in these practices.

A few classroom teachers, however, used some resources to explain lessons including the maths classroom teachers who used resources like clay, sticks, straws and posters to explain the concepts. She also tended to give different tasks to various groups in some lessons based on pupils’ abilities. This strategy seemed to have a great impact on the participation of pupils including Amal, Omar and Faisal who were working actively with the rest of their group.

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13 This description is given by classroom teachers.
This teacher showed some understanding of the need to modify the content and teaching styles to respond to pupils’ differences yet stated that she is facing various challenges in this regard including the curriculum itself.

‘The curriculum is targeting the good pupils and the designers don’t have an idea about schools and the variety of abilities we teach. All supervisors care about is finishing the curriculum and they don’t provide support on how to meet pupils’ different abilities’. (classroom teacher).

As described in chapter 4, the MoE documents state that the BE is based on group work and collaborative learning; however in most lessons, pupils within groups tended to work individually, and were not discussing their answers before responding or going to the board to represent their group. This raises questions about the actual implementation and understanding of the national policies and the suitability of classroom teachers’ training to implement these policies which I refer to in the discussion chapter.
The same styles of organisation and teaching strategies were evident in grade 1 where Ahmed, the pupil from Pakistan, seemed to be offered a ‘space’ in the classroom, but not an opportunity to participate and learn. For example, the Arabic teacher was explaining the letters using charts, and pictures for illustration, yet Ahmed was unable to follow or participate as the teaching rhythm was quite fast and therefore Ahmed was spending his time eating his chips or sleeping at his desk. The lack of participation and engagement is described in literature as one main cause for boredom and passiveness in lessons (see chapter 3).

Although the Arabic teacher showed a lot of sympathy with Ahmed and said that she wanted to help him, she also stated that she does not know how to do that as she lacks the training to balance between Ahmed and the rest of her pupils:

‘I want to know how I can help Ahmed without ignoring the rest of the pupils because when I try to sit with him, the rest of the pupils keep on shouting and making noise’. (classroom teacher).

Notably, the language barrier prevented Ahmed from interacting with other pupils; also he was continuously asked by classroom teachers to return to his place whenever he tried to approach other pupils in front of him to start a conversation:

‘Look at him, he is distracting the other pupils and distracting me from teaching. Why should he be in my classroom?’ (classroom teacher)

Generally, all classroom classroom teachers blamed the school administration for allowing Ahmed access to their classroom and all believed that it would be better for him to go to the Indian school.

‘I feel pity for this child as he is not benefiting here and we feel hopeless as we can’t help him due to the curriculum and time constraints. He should go to the Pakistani school’. (classroom teacher).

Interestingly, few classroom teachers stated that they try to avoid giving the ‘low achiever’ different tasks because they did not want them to feel bad or ‘different’ from their classmates. Others said that supervisors will give them bad reports if they do things that are different from the guides while another one said that even the principal compared their teaching with the guides and therefore they stick to them.

These statements contradict with MoE documents which state that although guides show classroom teachers the way to plan for the ‘majority’, they are also requested to
differentiate instruction according to the differences and needs of their pupils (see chapter 4).

Accordingly, modifying the content to respond to pupils’ differences within the classroom was not a practice in the various lessons I observed. Classroom teachers stated that the classroom teachers’ guide includes steps on how to prepare for the whole class and does not show them how to do differentiate their planning or instruction to respond to differences. In addition, all classroom teachers believed that helping ‘low achievers and slow learners’ is the responsibility of someone ‘outside’ the classroom which in most cases they were referring to LDTs.

It seems that the purpose of the programme is interpreted at schools’ level to be ‘supporting whoever is different from the norm’. Various classroom teachers were saying that the MoE employed LDTs to help those who cannot understand in the mainstream lessons and therefore some expressed criticism of the LDT because they were not accepting all pupils categorised by classroom teachers as ‘different’, as I described in the policy section.

I argue here that the clarity of vision and purpose of this programme as well as the lack of collaboration between senior policy makers and schools staff at the design stage of this programme made it look like a way to segregate pupils and get rid of whoever classroom teachers believe is not able enough. In addition, the programme itself resulted in preventing the pupils from having the chance to learn in the same classroom environment as their peers. For example, Amal and Omar were involved in this programme in order to help them overcome their ‘low achievement’ in math and Arabic. On one occasion, the whole class was learning the subtraction of four-digit numbers. Amal was pulled out at the beginning of the lesson to go to the LD programme. There, she was seated and the LDT gave her a sheet of paper and asked her to work on it. The paper had questions about subtracting two-digit numbers.

The LDT explained that Amal cannot comprehend difficult equations and therefore she needs to solve simple exercises and she does not have to do what her peers are doing in the classroom. The LDT also stated that she does not sit with Amal’s teacher to plan or discuss what Amal needs to learn. The same was happening with regard to the literacy sessions.
Some implications for pupils’ lives and school experience

The exclusion technique used by some classroom teachers not only prevented pupils from participation and learning, but also caused embarrassment to some of them. For example, Amal’s mother said that the girl used to go home and cry for most of the day because she feels less able and different from her classmates when the Arabic or other classroom teachers do not ask her to contribute, or exclude her from participation in various classroom activities. The mother said that based on Amal’s hearing difficulty, classroom teachers were supposed to speak slowly to allow the girl to understand what they say and help her to respond. She also recommended seating her daughter with a ‘good pupil’ to help her improve her learning and speaking abilities as seating her in a group with other ‘low achievers’ who do not speak or participate for most of the day is negatively impacting her daughter’s learning because classroom teachers tend to ignore the whole group.

Seating Amal with ‘good’ pupils refers to the need to utilise the human resources within each classroom, an activity which was not adopted in various lessons although it is referenced as an effective technique to encourage the participation of all pupils. Amal’s mother said that her daughter was previously seated with ‘Muna’ (an outstanding girl in the classroom) when she was in grade 2 and through the assistance of that girl, the speaking and learning of Amal dramatically improved. However, the mother said that Amal’s learning and speaking deteriorated when she was prevented from receiving peer support.

The same sentiments were expressed by Omar’s mother who said that her son usually returns home crying and tells her that classroom teachers and other children do not like him because he is a low achiever and does not know to answer like others. She said that classroom teachers should help children instead of making them feel bad.

Based on their classroom experiences, Amal, Omar and Faisal took various photographs of their classroom and books and described them as things they ‘don’t like’.
The above practices and national strategies implemented in the school reveal their inability to respond to various differences and therefore raise questions about the ability of the system to prepare various pupils to cope with the demands of the cycle-two requirements (grades 5-10) where examinations become the main indicators for attainments, and where pupils’ ability to move to the upper grades is decided upon passing examination that are prepared in classical Arabic. This specific concern was made clear by parents. For example Omar’s mother said:

‘My son is continuously crying and worried about moving to cycle 2 (grades 5-10) and classroom teachers are not helping me to prepare him for that transition’.

And Amal’s mother said:

‘I am so worried about Amal as when she moves to grade 5 she will need to sit for exams and I know she will fail and that might result in her quitting school as she is very sensitive’.

Although most school staff stated that the low achievement of many pupils in the school was due to the language barriers they have, the teaching styles and classroom practices did not seem to address this issue where exclusion from tasks and even interaction with other pupils was the common strategy classroom teachers used in most classrooms.

In summary, based on my observation there was an over-reliance on textbooks and classroom teachers’ guides to deliver lessons and it was rare when classroom teachers tried any innovative way of explaining lessons. On a few occasions some classroom teachers used resources to produce interactive lessons; however, on most occasions
pupils were working individually even when they are seated in groups and there were very few occasions when classroom teachers involved pupils in group work. Classroom teachers tended to exclude whoever they perceived as ‘different’ including the pupil with a hearing aid and the pupils from non-Arabic backgrounds. Classroom teachers justified excluding various pupils in relation to the unsuitability of the curriculum, inability of pupils themselves to understand, the lack of training, and because they did not want them to feel bad when they cannot answer. However, the exclusion not just prevented pupils from participation and learning but also resulted in making some pupils feel depressed and bad, and created feelings of hate towards school.

**School culture**

In this section I focus on staff beliefs, leadership styles, staff relations, staff-pupil relations and parental and community involvement. These issues were described in literature as basic concepts that can indicate schools’ abilities to respond to pupils’ differences (see chapter 3).

**Staff beliefs.** Most staff surprisingly believed that they were employed to teach and deal with ‘normal pupils’ and therefore pupils ‘with problems’ and ‘different pupils’ were perceived as not belonging to the school. Interestingly, they said that education is provided for all, but not all can be educated. For example, school staff emphasised that pupils with disabilities should not attend government schools, even those pupils with physical disabilities. One administrator explained:

>'A few years back we had a girl with a physical disability and we all struggled with her; the buses refused to go and pick her as the bus was not prepared. Her father was bringing her daily. She was struggling with toilets as the doors are smaller than her chair and classroom teachers had to carry her out of her chair to enter the bathroom. It was very difficult. She stopped coming to school last year and that is her [wheel]chair. Can you see it?' (school administrator)

One failure with one pupil resulted in an over-generalization that ‘all pupils with disabilities can’t attend government schools’.

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14 She was pointing to a wheelchair next to the school reception.
Similar views were expressed by classroom classroom teachers who kept on emphasising the importance of referring the pupils with disabilities to special schools where one stated:

*I don’t know how the administration accepted Amal. She is doing nothing but copying from her mates. She needs a special education teacher and Al-Amal school is her place*. (classroom teacher).

Most of Amal’s classroom teachers highlighted that it is not their role to teach pupils with disabilities as they were trained to teach ‘ordinary’ pupils. One of Amal’s classroom classroom teachers said:

*The administration allowed this pupil to be in the school without thinking of how to teach her. She is not my responsibility. I was trained to teach ordinary pupils not pupils with disabilities*. (classroom teacher).

In addition, school staff regarded a pupil as suitable to be in mainstream classroom and school only if s/he was mentally capable. IQ tests were what they use to decide upon suitability of children to be accepted in the mainstream classroom. For example,

*We had a few children who were not able to cope academically and when they were referred to the diagnostic team, their IQ appeared to be very low. Therefore, they were transferred to integration classrooms*. (classroom teacher).

There is a strong relationship between classroom teachers’ perceptions of academic ability and IQ levels; when the LDT was interviewed she highlighted that classroom teachers keep on referring pupils to her while she cannot accept more than 15 each time. She said:

*Some pupils are slow learners or with low IQ and I can’t take them in the learning difficulty programme as I only take the ones with just numeracy or literacy problems and with IQ of 70 and above*.

Slow learners are defined by school classroom teachers and LDTs as ‘pupils who score below the 70 and who have academic problems in most of the subjects’. Those are pupils that classroom teachers consider ‘don’t fit in the mainstream classrooms’. School staff including the LD teacher, said that the school reported those pupils to the MoE and soon special classrooms will be opened for them.

*We asked the special education department to find a solution to the slow learners and they will open special classrooms with specialised classroom*

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15 She was talking about Amal; the student with hearing aid.
teachers who can respond to the needs of this group of pupils’. (classroom teacher).

The support provided to pupils with disabilities and pupils with low IQ levels was seen by school staff as voluntary work and they did it from a humanistic approach only. One said:

‘Our supervisors asked us to keep the slow learners in the LD programme as a help and on humanistic bases although they are not supposed to enter the programme’. (classroom teacher).

Although around 90% of pupils and classroom teachers use Baluchi as their mother tongue, most classroom teachers did not accept having children who cannot master Arabic in the school or their classrooms. That was justified by the difficulty of communicating with them when all schools are formally directed to use classical Arabic in classrooms even with grade 1 pupils. One of the grade 1 classroom teachers explained:

‘You saw Ahmed, they just brought him from Pakistan and he doesn’t speak or understand Arabic. We always face similar problems in this school and have informed the Ministry to find solutions, but no one replied to us or did anything. Ahmed is distracting other pupils and I have to send him to another class when my supervisors come. They will give me a bad report if they see him’. (classroom teacher).

Other classroom teachers reported that it is not their role to teach Arabic to pupils from non-Arabic backgrounds as they have curriculum content to finish by the end of the semester and pupils who do not speak Arabic should have special programmes, but not in mainstream classrooms. The idea of concentrating on the ‘majority’ was dominant where classroom teachers believed that it is worth concentrating on the pupils who ‘can’ instead of the ones who are ‘struggling’ or ‘having problems’. Pupils from ‘non-Arabic’ backgrounds seem to be ‘no one’s businesses’ as classroom teachers showed no interest in supporting them. That was justified by the inability of the school to help them when the whole educational system has no regulations and programmes in place for them.

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16 No formal records with regard to ethnicity but that is what school staff stated.
17 Classical Arabic is the mean of teaching and all schools are inspected with regard of that.
18 Ahmed is a student in grade 1 who came from Pakistan at the beginning of the academic year. He does not speak Arabic as Baluchi is his mother tongue. Father is Pakistani and mother is Omani from a Baluchi background, but got married to her cousin in Pakistan. When father died, the mother returned to Oman and brought Ahmed with her.
19 Several teachers stated that ‘those’ students are ‘not my business’.
Similar to the views of senior policy makers presented in chapter 6, various participant in this school justified their calls to move some pupils from the school by arguing that it would be ‘for their own good’: an administrator explained:

'It is for their benefit to be in a special school which has good resources and well trained classroom teachers. They are not benefiting here and when they move to upper levels they will end up leaving the school'. (school administrator).

Four participants highlighted that the infrastructure of government schools is not suitable for pupils with disabilities while others said that the large class size is preventing classroom teachers from responding to pupils’ differences. One teacher explained:

'I have 32 pupils, 7 of them with problems ranging between disabilities to social problems. How can I give them the attention they need when there are others who need attention'. (classroom teacher).

Lesson time, assessment and curriculum were also used to justify staff calls to exclude some pupils from the mainstream where some classroom teachers said that the amount of content (syllabus) they need to finish and cover by the end of each semester is one of the main obstacles facing how they deal with pupils with special needs. For example, one teacher said:

'We have a curriculum that needs to be covered in a specific time and if supervisors come and noticed a delay in that we will be in real trouble. How can I teach each one based on his/her ability if that is not part of the whole system'. (classroom teacher).

The centrally designed curriculum was frequently mentioned as a big challenge facing various pupils, particularly pupils with ‘low IQ’ with disabilities, as it has very difficult lessons that whatever classroom teachers do various pupils will not be able to comprehend them. However, various classroom teachers clearly stated that they lack the training to respond to pupils’ differences and they claimed that is because they lack these skills, it is better to send pupils with ‘problems’ to specialised schools where the staff are trained to deal with these differences:

'We haven’t received any training on how to deal with their differences. At university I haven’t studied anything about special needs and the in-service training it didn’t touch on any of these issues. It’s all about the subject and changes in curriculum'. (classroom teacher).
Various classroom teachers said that even when they tried to discuss the ‘second language’ issue with their supervisors, they gave them no advice and did not show interest in discussing it. Even school administrators clearly stated that the second language issues, chronic diseases and various problems they face at school level were not part of the discussions during the meetings they attend with officials at the MoE where most of the talks are about raising pupils’ achievements.

In summary, school staff held negative attitudes towards pupils with disabilities and pupils who do not speak Arabic as well as whoever is perceived different from the norm. Classroom classroom teachers said that although education is provided for all, not all can be educated or belong to the mainstream. There is a strong relationship between classroom teachers’ perceptions of academic ability and IQ levels and classroom teachers believed that they are employed and trained to teach ‘normal’ pupils who can meet the curriculum objectives. These views reflect the strong impact of the standards agenda and the national focus on attainment.

In addition, school staff mentioned the school infrastructure, the national curriculum, teaching time, lack of resources, lack of communication with the Ministry and lack of skills as challenges they face and which hinder them from responding to differences.

**Leadership styles.** The school principal was transferred to another school during the first week of the new academic year and was replaced by another principal who did not want to be in this school. The new principal said:

‘I just finished my MA and don’t think I can deal with a cycle-one school. I told them at the MoE to move me to a cycle-2 school (grades 5-10) and leave the current principal in her place, but no one listens to us’.

Similar statements were given by the current school principal who expressed her feelings of lack of appreciation and worth as well as humiliation:

‘No matter how hard we work or try to improve, any official at the MoE can transfer us anytime without even considering our opinions or needs’. (school principal).

Similar views were held by classroom teachers who expressed feelings of anger and frustration:

‘Classroom teachers and school staff are not respected and we have no value as people as the Ministry sees us as slaves who have no right even to talk or
object. This transfer issue could happen to any of us at any time. How do you expect us to perform in such an environment’. (classroom teacher)

I was told by the previous and new head classroom teachers that they both went to the people in charge at the MoE to stop the transfer decision, but their requests were rejected. That resulted in much discussion and many complaints about the value of school leaders and staff in general. The outgoing principal said that she had plans to work on, but when the implementation time came she was transferred to a new school where she will need to start from scratch.

Regardless of the frustrations that principals and school classroom teachers were facing because of the sudden transfer decisions, once the vice-principal came back from her leave, with the help of the social worker she took over the leadership and full control of the school.

Both seemed to have good relations with each other and were continuously discussing school issues that were more or less daily routine and maintenance issues including timetables, providing resources and on some occasions discussing absence, fixing of the broken chairs and desks of the pupils, fixing the school yard, following the expatriate workers who are working on the expansion project to ensure the safety of the pupils, and making sure that pupils receive their books on time. In contrast, there was no description of any professional development programmes, workshops or collaborative work to discuss the learning issues and differences of pupils except the reading programme I explained earlier.

When describing the national policy and regulations with regard to responding to differences, the vice-principal stated that schools and their staff are just implementers and even when they make recommendations or suggest improvement, the senior policy makers tend to ignore their suggestions. The administrators kept on describing the various suggestions they sent to the Ministry and the disappointment they face every year when their suggestions are neglected:

‘Look, the main focus of the Ministry is marks and other things are not important’. (school administrator).

Based on the focus of national policy, the administrators said that their school development plan of the year is targeting the low achievement levels of various pupils particularly pupils from Baluchi backgrounds. The administrators were referring to the reading programme I described in the policy section.
Although I frequently saw classroom teachers in the administration area and with the social workers and vice-principal, some classroom classroom teachers expressed that the vice-principal and social worker are not fair to all because they favour some classroom teachers and allow them to deliver fewer lessons and leave school earlier. Despite this, they were hesitant to give names or describe any specific occasions. It seemed that there was some tension between classroom teachers and the school administration.

In summary, the mobility of principals at the beginning of the academic year was based on central decisions from the MoE without any form of communication with staff. The transfer decision produced feelings of anger and humiliation. Although the vice-principal and social workers were in leadership positions, most of their work was on maintenance issues.

**Staff relations.** There was clear lack of collaboration among staff where most were working on an individual basis to finish their tasks which were mostly in relation to content delivery. As explained in the practices section, classroom teachers tended to plan and deliver content without any form of collaboration with each other. There were no joint discussions or classroom observations between classroom teachers and this contradicts the MoE documents which state that collaborative work between classroom teachers is essential in all BE schools (see chapter 4).

**Staff-pupils relations.** Data revealed that some pupils were facing a lack of respect based on their backgrounds where some staff tended to over-generalise pupils’ behaviours and have some stereotyping. For example, Ali, the pupil in grade 4 who was born from ‘unknown parents’ faced forms of exclusion and abuse because of his background where classroom teachers were on some occasions overreacting towards the pupils’ behaviours. For example, Ali was playing with two other boys from his classroom in the corridor (during the five-minute break between lessons), when a teacher saw him while coming to the class. She shouted at him in front of other pupils and sent him to the social worker while she asked the two other boys to sit in their groups.

One teacher said that Ali is a troublemaker and she tries to avoid him because he attacked a teacher last year and therefore she had an abortion. The exaggeration about
Ali’s aggressive behaviours was expressed by one of the school administrators who described the children from the orphanage as:

‘...future criminals and bombs that can explode at any time’.

That stereotyping about children in the orphanage affected Ali regardless of his high attainment in all subjects where was very focused and quiet in most lessons. He was also frequently answering classroom teachers’ questions and on several occasions I saw him explaining things to his group mates. In the photography activity Ali took several photographs of his books and the white board and described them as something he ‘likes’.

![Image of a book with text in Arabic]

**Figure 14. The science textbook. A photo by Ali as something he likes**

Me  So, you like science?

Ali  Yes, and Maths and English. All subjects. I am good in all of them

Me  Woow, that is excellent. Who studies with you at home?

Ali  I study alone and I help my brothers. You know, the three I live with. Not my real brothers.

Me  So, you love your school?
Ali No, I hate the school classroom teachers and want to go with my brothers in the other school.

His brothers are the other boys from the orphanage who were studying in a cycle-two school (grades 5-10) in the same area. Ali said that no one is protecting him in this school and all children have brothers and parents to care for them except him. I was not able to understand his ‘need of protection’ until I witnessed a critical incident during the photography activity. Although the photography activity was announced in the school assembly and all classroom teachers were informed about it, one of the classroom teachers thought he was playing with his own camera and shouted at him, grabbed the camera off him, and slapped him on his face in front of other pupils in the school\(^{20}\). When he reacted and asked her to respect him, she called him ‘animal’.

During the interview with Ali, he revealed his hate for that teacher and the school because they do not respect him:

\[ I \text{ don’t want anyone to insult me. She shouted and I replied. No one loves me. I hate her and hate this school because no one respects me’}. \]

Ali was well aware that he was treated that way because of his background and said that being a child from the orphanage made the other children bully him and classroom teachers hate him. Being aware of the troubles he faces because of his background made him take photographs of the orphanage bus and described it as something he ‘doesn’t like’. He said that when other children see him coming on this bus, they laugh at him and bully him because the bus has the orphanage logo.

\(^{20}\) This was reported by Ali and the social worker as well as two other students who witnessed the incident.
While discussing the critical incident with the school administrators, one of them told me:

'Most children from the orphanage face similar problems in other schools and the staff usually tell each other about such things. Everyone knows that those children are troublemakers because they don’t have parents to advise them or take care of their behaviours'.

Although the school staff knew about Ali’s worries and the bullying issues, they believed it was ‘not their businesses’. Surprisingly, some school classroom teachers suggested opening schools inside the orphanage to teach those children instead of spreading them in all schools. Such suggestions were given about each pupil who was perceived by school staff as ‘different’.

The exclusion Ali faced because of his background and classroom teachers’ behaviours towards him were also evident in the experience of Fahad, the pupil in grade 3 who had some nose inflammation. While attending the maths lesson in his classroom, Fahad was continuously moving from his desk, moved around the classroom, took the 21caps off his classmates’ heads, and then left the classroom. Surprisingly, classroom teachers never stopped him or even called him to get back to the classroom, but ignored the child’s behaviours as if he ‘didn’t exist’.

21 It is the hat that Omani people put on their heads and all male students have to put it on during the school day.
After the lesson, I asked the teacher,

Me: Is it normal to let pupils leave the classroom during the lesson?

Teacher: I can’t do anything to Fahad. He is hopeless and I can’t waste my time with him.

Me: Do you know where he goes when he leaves the classroom?

Teacher: Usually he sits in the reception or move in the corridors. He needs to be referred to a doctor because I think he has mental disabilities. He doesn’t look normal.

Similar statements were given by other classroom teachers and most of them believed that his IQ is very low and he is ‘not educable’ and needs to be referred to Alfekreyah School. Surprisingly, the child was known as ‘the boy with the runny nose’ and many classroom teachers and school administrators were using this title while talking about this pupil; on some occasions they used it in front of him. His physical appearance was frequently emphasised by staff, and classroom teachers told me that the boy tried several times to run out of school during the school day but was returned by the bus drivers or the school guard. I witnessed one of his attempts to escape while I was going to my car in front of the school gate, where he ran and hid for a long time in one of the narrow roads behind the school. At that time of the year, the heat reaches 45-47 degrees Celsius and it is very difficult for anyone to bear the heat without air conditioning and cold water. Yet, the boy spent more than one hour in that heat in his attempt to be away from the school.

Although the school guard was able to bring the boy back later that day, classroom teachers and school administrators said ‘it’s normal as he hates school’. He had tried to escape once before and failed and staff responded to that by requesting his mother to attend school and help sort out the 23 continuous problems of her son’. However, staff described the mother as ‘not supportive /not collaborative’, and who is spoiled the child and herself being a cause of his problems:

‘We don’t know what to do to help this boy. When we phoned his mother, she came and took him home. She refuses to sit and discuss her son’s issues. How can we force parents to cooperate!’ (a school administrator).

22 A special school for pupils described as having mental disabilities
23 Staff wording while telling me about the previous escape incidence
Parental and community involvement. The school seemed to be having an open door policy where I was frequently seeing parents in the school reception and visiting the social worker who was fluent in the Baluchi language. Yet, while interviewing parents most of them said that although they frequently visit the school and classroom teachers, they only get invitations to the school with regard to attainment issues and their children do not receive the required support. During the interview with Omar’s mother for example, she burst out crying and said:

'Does the school know about what my son is going through? Do they know what we all are going through? No one cares'.

She was referring to the emotional and economic problems the Omar was facing and which were affecting his learning, as the mother explained. She said that his father left them when Omar was six and has since disappeared. The boy is missing his father and continuously crying because of that. She also explained that the husband’s family threw her and her two children out of the house because they believed that she was the cause of their son’s drug abuse and escape. She had to look for a job which enabled her to rent a small room near the school.

When registering Omar in the school, she asked his classroom classroom teachers to support him and explained the situation to two of them, but according to her they just ignored their promises and left the boy to face his worries alone. While speaking to the social worker and the classroom classroom teachers, they said that they had no clue about his emotional and social problems and one teacher said:

'We are employed to teach not to take care and solve social problems'.

The rest of mothers gave similar statements and said that the school staff did not contact them to discuss any support plans or explain how parents can help the learning of the children. Amal’s mother, for example, said that although her girl has a hearing aid, there was no support provided to her and even the LDT refused to accept her in the programme until the mother begged her to accept Amal.

In summary, there was a clear lack of collaboration between staff where tasks were done individually. The school did not seem to have a welcoming environment, where pupils perceived as ‘different’ were facing forms of abuse by staff which resulted in pupils forming feelings of ‘not belonging’ and ‘hate’ towards school and classroom teachers.
There was little form of communication with parents which was limited to achievement and discipline issues. Parents expressed various feelings of dissatisfaction about school and how staff treat their children.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented data collected from the first case study; Newtown Primary School. I presented data describing the school policies, classroom practices and culture and focused on identifying the potential barriers to the inclusion of various pupils described as ‘different’. This analysis revealed that various barriers existed in the three levels on the analysis where the school was implementing national policies that were mainly focused on ensuring that all pupils meet national standards through providing national curriculum, classroom teachers’ guides, staff who are centrally trained, and the adult support which was also aimed at raising pupils’ attainment in maths and Arabic. These centrally designed policies were designed with no collaboration with school staff which produced various problems and made them creators of exclusion, particularly at the classroom level. Based on the centrally designed policies, classroom teachers adopted standardised ways of teaching with over-reliance on classroom teachers’ guides and textbooks. Therefore, classroom teachers were planning individually with no teamwork, collaboration with other classroom teachers or reflective teaching. Classroom teachers’ practices were targeting the whole class with no modification to respond to pupils’ differences. Accordingly, various pupils described as ‘different’ were excluded from participation and engagement.

What added to the exclusion of various pupils were the negative staff attitudes as almost all staff perceived pupils who do not speak Arabic, with disabilities, with chronic diseases and low achievers as not belonging to the mainstream and in need of something different somewhere else. Based on these negative attitudes they did not communicate with pupils’ parents to plan for support and they also did not seek support from other organisations outside the school which were capable of helping various pupils.
This analysis raised questions about the extent to which the described barriers exist in other primary schools which suggested the need for further exploration of schools’ contexts. This is achieved through presenting data from the second case study.
CHAPTER 8

CITY PRIMARY SCHOOL

Introduction

Chapter 8 presents the findings collected from City Primary School to answer the study questions and I used the same technique for data collection and presentation that I used for Newtown Primary School, in chapter 7. The four pupils who participated in the Participatory Photography (PP) are selected based on the same criteria explained in the previous chapter. However, in this school I also collected data about the practices in the integration classroom without asking any pupils from it to participate in the PP.

School context

City Primary School is located in an area which is part of the capital Muscat and around six kilometres away from the Ministry of Education main building. According to school staff, most school pupils are from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds and therefore the majority speak Baluchi and Swahili as well as some Urdu. Classroom teachers also stated that almost 80% of the pupils are from families of low economic and educational status.

The City School provides free education to 292 pupils, nine of whom are non-Omani (five Egyptian, two Jordanian, two Indian) and five are described as having intellectual disabilities (three with Down syndrome, and two with unknown diagnosis, but according to their teacher they have ‘intellectual’ disabilities) studying in the integration classroom which is a self-contained classroom within the government mainstream school for pupils with ‘mental disabilities’ (see chapter 4). School pupils are distributed between 11 classrooms where numbers of pupils in each classroom range between 26 and 29. Boys and girls study in the same classrooms.

The school was built in the early 1980s with a one-floor building surrounded by a medium height wall with two gates; one at the front as the main school entrance and connected to the guard’s room. The other gate is at the back of the school and is used as an entrance for the school buses. As most of the school pupils walk to school, there are few buses serving the school. The main gate leads to the school lobby where the head teacher, social worker, secretary and finance rooms are located. The lobby is
clean and empty of any chairs or sofas, unlike Newtown School. This lobby has a big glass door that leads to a shaded area (front yard) which is used for the assembly and the PE lessons and surrounded by classrooms in a U-shaped design. There is another shaded yard which is used for PE, particularly basketball, although I did not see it used during my stay.

![Figure 16. School assembly area surrounded by classrooms and the basketball area](image)

Opposite to the assembly area are located the classroom teachers’ room and next to it a well-equipped clinic with a new graduate nurse who has records of the medical issues of school pupils such as those with asthma, diabetes, and anemia.

Like all cycle-one Omani schools, there is a learning difficulty room with two LDTs; one for Arabic and the other for maths. The room is located opposite the grade 4 classrooms with coloured tables, chairs and cabinets. It also has an interactive board and educational materials and charts.

Toilets are located to one side of the U-shaped building, and divided into two separate areas (boys and girls). The drinking area is located just steps from the toilets with a door leading to a room that seemed to be used as the school canteen, but was converted to a room that male expatriate workers were using to rest and keep their cleaning stuff. I frequently saw the male workers chatting with children and on some occasions children were entering the room during breaks.

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24 Any non-Omani is described as ‘expatriate’. The workers in the school are from the Indian nationality according to school staff.
The canteen is located at the front corner of the school yard, just steps from the school main gate. It has a few windows and pupils from all grades crowd around it and fight during the break to reach the windows and buy snacks, as explained in chapter 7.

![School canteen with the narrow windows](image)

**Figure 17. School canteen with the narrow windows**

Classrooms are distributed around the U-shaped building and each grade level classroom is found at one side of the building. However, the integration classroom (self-contained classroom) is located at the far end of one of the school corridors where no other classrooms are next to it except the music room. There are several empty classrooms in one of the school corridors which (according to classroom teachers) used to be meeting rooms three years ago. All classrooms have four wide windows with nice curtains, two air-conditioning units, white boards and display boards at the back of each classroom.
There is a beautiful play area that was prepared by school administration and funded by the staff for the pupils and located next to grade 4 classrooms. Once it was ready, pupils were very excited and many were fighting to play during the five-minute breaks between lessons and during the lunch break.

One week later, though, the school staff decided to put a metal fence around the area to stop children from accessing it without classroom teachers’ permission.
The school-day timing and distribution of lessons follow the same routine described in the previous chapter as all government schools follow the same national regulations in this regard. The assembly starts at the same time as the previous school and follows the same routine.

![Image of school assembly with pupils’ formal school uniform](image)

**Figure 20. School assembly with pupils’ formal school uniform**

**Teaching staff and resources**

As described in chapter 7, all are based on national decision to meet the same objectives.

**School staff.** The school has 42 female teaching staff classroom teachers, three of whom are non-Omani. All classroom teachers hold Bachelor’s degrees in different educational specialties. The work experience of the staff varied between five to 30 years. They come from different backgrounds with some from Baluchi and Zanzibari origins. There are six admin staff (principal, vice-principal, social worker, secretary, IT specialist, finance coordinator). Similar to in the case described in Newtown School, the principal was working in another region, but following a decision from the MoE, she was moved to Muscat at the beginning of this academic year. She has mastered the Swahili language, the language spoken by many of the school pupils and their parents. The vice-principal is a Master’s holder and was on sick leave when I
arrived at school, but resumed her work two weeks later. She does not speak Baluchi or Swahili. The social worker is a fluent speaker of Baluchi as she is from a Baluchi background herself and familiar with the Baluchi culture.

Like the previous school, there are two LDTs to help pupils who are having numeracy or literacy difficulties. None of them speaks the Baluchi or Swahili languages. The referral to this programme follows the same procedures described in chapters 4 and 7. Moreover, there is one special education teacher who was a graduate from Jordan with a special education certificate and seven years working experience. She was working in the integration classroom and responsible for teaching the five children with intellectual disabilities (one boy and four girls).

**Textbooks and teaching materials.** Like the previous school, all pupils study the same subjects which are taught in Arabic except the English subject. Classroom teachers’ timetables varied between 18 and 25 lessons per week and like the previous school, classroom teachers were provided with centrally designed textbooks, classroom teachers’ manuals and resources. Statements presented in the previous chapter about the guides and the importance of following them to please the supervisors were again stated by classroom teachers in this school which reveals that there is common understanding about the usage of these guides and the typical understanding of how to please supervisors which was through following these guides.

Again, each subject group has a senior teacher and they are assigned by supervisors and supposed to do the tasks presented in chapter 7. Like the previous school, all classroom teachers said that they usually do not sit and discuss pupils’ difficulties or improvements, but the senior classroom teachers usually inform them if there are changes in the text book or the classroom teachers’ guides that they should follow. Therefore, there is no collaboration or reflective teaching practices in this regard.

With regard to the integration classroom, there were no text books or classroom teachers’ guide. The teacher had main objectives and she planned her lessons according to her knowledge about her pupils’ differences. There was no timetable and the teacher decided upon what to teach and when. She prepared for the whole day and no one checked her lesson plans or the achievement of the pupils. I could not see any of her preparation plans as she considered them ‘confidential’.
In summary, this school provides free education to boys and girls from different backgrounds including Baluchi and Zanzibari and non-Omani pupils. Like the previous school it is built on government land and both have very similar infrastructure, resources, staff and subjects, and follow the same daily timetable.

Unlike the rest of the school, the integration classroom is following an entirely different programme with no textbooks, teacher guide, timetable or resources besides the few that included crayons, clay and some charts. This makes it seem that there were two separate systems within the same boundary.

School policy

Having presented the school and classrooms context, I move now to describe the various policies implemented in the school. As described in chapter 7, all policies are decided centrally and the schools are the implementers. As I did in the previous chapter, I start by presenting staff views with regard to the same central government policies and then move to present the school initiatives that are in place, if any.

1- Central government policies

Pupils’ registration; Pupils are registered following the same national policy described in chapters 4 and 7. Therefore, there are no pupils with disabilities in any of the mainstream classrooms in this school. Yet there are five pupils described as having ‘intellectual’ disabilities in the integration classroom which is a special unit within the school.

Similar to senior policy makers’ statements and the views of the staff in the previous school, all staff in this school believed that pupils with disabilities do not belong to the mainstream school and classrooms. Therefore, all classroom classroom teachers were criticising the policy that allowed opening an integration classroom in the school. Although the four pupils were not mixing or attending any of the mainstream classrooms, staff was against allowing any pupil with disabilities access to the whole school. Various classroom teachers and some administrators said that it would be much better for such pupils to be sent to special schools as mainstream schools do not have the expertise to help them and being in the school is disruptive to others.

Grouping and placement (Mixed-ability approach); pupils are grouped and distributed among classrooms following the same procedure described in the previous
school (see chapter 7). Each grade consists of three to four classrooms with 28 or 29 pupils in each room. All interviewed classroom teachers stated that they wish pupils are grouped in classrooms according to abilities (streaming) some classroom teachers can focus on high achievers while others will help the low achievers or ‘pupils with difficulties’ in separate classrooms. Based on the same national policies described in chapters 4 and 7, most classrooms had Omani pupils from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds who do not speak Arabic, like Nasser, Hilal, Waleed and Muna in one of the grade 4 classrooms which I focused on during the classroom observation and who participated in the PP. Like the previous school, these pupils were allowed access, but were also left without any form of language support.

The views of classroom teachers about the grouping policy were similar to what classroom teachers said in the previous school where all believed that the Ministry needs to set a clear policy to send whoever does not speak Arabic to an international school. These views are similar to those expressed by classroom teachers in Newtown School, which reveals a common set of beliefs about pupils’ abilities and how to deal with them.

The integration classroom is the only special unit in the school; therefore the five pupils were placed in the same unit based on the decisions of the MoE and the head teacher stated that she was not included in the decision making in this regard. She explained that the special education teacher came to the school with a letter from the MoE stating that an integration classroom will be opened in the school. Therefore, the school administration has nothing to do with this unit besides offering an ‘empty classroom’. This reveals the lack of collaboration between various individuals and departments within the school system which I describe in following sections.

Most staff expressed opposition to the opening of this unit in the school and described the national policy in this regard as ‘blundered’ and not a well-studied decision because all believed that it is better for pupils with disabilities to be in an environment ‘with similar’ pupils.

**Grade repetition**; again this is similar to what I explained took place in the previous school. Staff views are also similar in this regard. For example, the school principal believed that this policy resulted in reducing the quality of education, and that pupils
and their parents became careless about school and homework as they know that the child will proceed to the upper grade regardless of his/her attainment or effort:

'I cannot control pupils now because there is no grade repetition and classroom teachers can’t fail who is careless and unable to meet the grade objectives'. (school principal)

Various classroom teachers mentioned the need to ensure that the pupil is capable to master the level objectives before moving to the next grade as they believed it is the only way to ensure quality and meet the government standards:

'It is useless to move them to upper grades without mastering the objective of the previous level. This will result in having low achievers in grade 5 where national examinations are applied'. (classroom teacher)

The above statements reveal the dominance of the standard objectives where marks and examinations are perceived as the only means to ensure pupils’ learning and success. Staff views in this regard match those expressed by senior policy makers when discussing quality, as I described in chapter 6.

**Pupils’ attendance:** checking pupils’ attendance is done through the same procedures adopted in the previous school.

The school social worker stated that the school was facing real problems with regard to pupil absence with regard to non-Omani pupils, especially from the Bangladesh nationality. She explained that their parents register them but their children suddenly do not show up. When contacting parents, they used to give various excuses including social and family problems or moving their current home address to another area which means they registered their children in other schools. The social worker said that there is no way to make sure of the accuracy of the stated information and she was unable to know if the pupils were studying or at home. She said that the formal policy does not give schools guidelines on how to act in such situations.

There is an Omani child law, however, which clearly requests school staff to inform authorities in such circumstances; yet the social worker was not informed about the whole law and this again reveals the lack of collaboration with various departments and school staff. Like staff in the previous school, the social worker as well as classroom teachers believed that this specific policy is confusing as it requires them to
cut marks when pupils are formally moving to upper grades regardless of their marks. This is considered by staff as:

‘...a lack of vision and miss match between what happens in schools and the policy documents'. (classroom teacher)

It is clear that the centrally designed policies, including the attendance policy, fail to consider schools’ contexts and their needs. It seems that the national policies perceive schools as the same and pupils within them also as similar; therefore fixed national policies will fit all schools and pupils. This lack of understanding of pupils' differences in top-down policies obviously created problems and limited schools’ abilities to respond to differences.

School development plan; again, this school is supposed to have a development plan as described in chapters 4 and 7. Similar to the previous school, there was no development plan and that was due to exactly the same reasons presented in the previous school including the transfer of the head, and the lack of understanding of the purpose of this policy where all staff described it as an extra paper-work activity that is not adding anything to their work. They also referred to the lack of collaboration.

The school principal stated that in order for the principal to critically analyse the needs and problems in the school and work with staff towards improving their actions, the principal needs to stay in the school and build deep knowledge about staff, pupils and the community. She explained that achieving the above is difficult in the light of frequent transfer of principals. She explained that during the last seven years she moved to different schools upon orders from the MoE and was not allowed even to discuss the decision:

‘How can the principals work on developing a plan like this when the Ministry keeps transferring us. Once we start to settle and know the school, they move us again. If they are really sincere about the development of the system, they need to consider our opinions as partners and not implementers’. (school administrator).

Nevertheless, the principal stated that although the centralised policies are difficult to implement as many are irrelevant to school needs, the school development plan that she and her staff are working on aims raise pupils’ achievements. Therefore, the principal said that it was decided to develop a ‘raising performance programme’
which will be implemented during the ‘zero lessons’ which is a lesson that starts
before the school assembly and requires pupils to come earlier to school. However, I
was not able to get a copy of the plan as I was told that it was not ready and staff are
still working on it. Most classroom teachers stated that they have no clue about the
plan and the principal had not asked them to participate in this process. These views
are similar to those been expressed by classroom teachers in the previous school
which reveals that lack of collaboration is common in schools’ culture.

**Learning difficulty programme and identification of needs;** this programme is the
same as the one implemented in the previous school and serves to achieve the same
objectives which are supporting pupils who have difficulties in numeracy and literacy.
Again, the referral to the programme is done in exactly the same way as described in
chapter 7. Accordingly, Hilal and Waleed from grade 4 and who were described by
their classroom teachers as ‘pupils with learning difficulties’ were attending the LD
programme three times a week: Hilal was attending the literacy sessions while
Waleed was attending numeracy and literacy sessions. Each session is 40 minutes
duration. I provide descriptions of the pupils’ backgrounds in the practices section.

Similar to the practices described in the previous school, LDTs were in charge of
developing the IEPs and that was done without discussion with classroom classroom
teachers or parents as the LDTs believe that they were trained to do the job and cannot
involve untrained people in their work. It is important to stress here that, like
Newtown School, these practices contradict with what is stated in the policy
documents where it is highlighted that LDT are developing IPEs in collaboration with
classroom classroom teachers (see chapter 4).

LDTs can reject pupils referred by classroom teachers either due to the big number of
pupils registered or because some pupils are categorised as ‘slow learners’ who do not
‘belong’ to the programme’. These practices and views are similar to what has been
observed and expressed by classroom teachers in the previous school. For example,
the LDT believed that Nasser did not fit or belong in the programme because his IQ
was less than 70% and they do not accept such pupils.

This information was confirmed by the LDTs who said that they have regulations
from the MoE and the Special Education Department and they have to stick to them.
These regulations state that pupils with second language, with low IQ levels and
disability do not belong to the programme. They believed that if they were to include all pupils with differences or problems, the Ministry should increase the number of LDTs in each school and prepare extra rooms and resources:

’Most pupils in this school have problems with language, how can two classroom teachers like us support all of them?! Classroom teachers want to get rid of difficult pupils and therefore describe all pupils as having LD and that is a problem’. (LDT 1)

It is important here to refer to the statements of the head of the Special Education Department (see chapter 6). She stressed that pupils who do not speak Arabic are the responsibility of parents and not the LDTs. Senior policy makers’ views and regulations are explaining staff views and practices and reflect the lack of vision with regard to responding to pupils’ differences.

With regard to the integration classroom, the five pupils were diagnosed by doctors at hospitals as well as by a diagnostic team at the Special Education Department. Based on their reports, they were placed in an integration classroom in a different school six years before conducting this study. Their classroom teachers said that when that classroom got crowded, the Special Education Department decided to split the pupils where five were moved to this school by the beginning of the academic year. As explained earlier, school staff, including the principal, were not involved in this decision-making process:

’We know nothing about this classroom and no supervisors from the MoE came to explain our role and responsibilities towards it and actually no one is following it up’. (school administrator)

As explained earlier, this classroom does not follow any of the school policies or regulations besides being located in the school.

In summary, the various described policies are similar to policies implemented in the previous school and aim at achieving the same objectives. Staff views are similar to those expressed in the previous school and reflect the clear lack of collaboration between the MoE officials and schools’ staff as well as the lack of collaboration between staff themselves.

The only difference between the schools is the integration classroom which is aiming at providing pupils described as having intellectual disabilities access to the mainstream school, but not to classrooms. The various school policies and
programmes do not apply to this classroom where it does not have textbooks, classroom teachers’ guides, or a timetable, and its pupils are not provided support from the LD programme.

2- School initiative

Unlike Newtown School, this school did not have initiatives that were implemented based on analysing pupils’ needs or trying collaboratively to find solutions to solve a problem. Although pupils were crowding around the canteen area and I have observed a lot of fights to reach the canteen and buy some snacks, there are no actions to sort out this problem. The only initiative implemented in this school was providing financial support to the poor pupils as described below,

Staff philanthropic initiative in providing financial support for the needy ones. A charity organization called ‘Dar Al-Ataa’ "دار العطاء" is financially sponsoring some pupils from poor families. This Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is well known in Oman and has approval from the MoE to sponsor poor pupils in various government schools. Therefore, it was not clear whether the staff did approach this organization or the opposite as the social worker did not have information; neither did the newly transferred principal.

Accordingly, the school social worker had a list from classroom teachers including pupils who were in need of money and they were given a voucher which equaled 200 Baiza (about one English pound) a day to buy from the school canteen. According to the school social worker, the same pupils were provided with new clothes and school equipment (bag, pencils, crayons and notebooks) at the beginning of the academic year. Despite this, Muna and Waleed were not on the list and the school social worker said that the classroom teachers had not informed her about the pupils and it was not her responsibility to go to each classroom and double check with classroom teachers or pupils.

In summary, school staff had one programme that aimed at providing financial support to the poor pupils. Although the programme was financed by an NGO, some pupils dropped out of the social worker’s list due to lack of communication between staff and with parents.
Classroom practices

Having presented the school and classrooms contexts, as well as national and school policies, in what follows I describe what I learned about practices in City School with regard to responding to pupil differences. This part is divided into two sections; the first section examines the practices in one of the grade 4 mainstream classrooms through focusing on four ‘pupils with problems’ who seemed to be facing forms of exclusion. I present some basic information about the pupils before I examine the practices. The second section describes the practices in the integration classroom which was the only integration classroom in the school. It had five pupils described as having intellectual disabilities. I also present some basic information about the five pupils before I start describing the practices in this classroom.

Practices in the mainstream classroom

Pupils

Table 2. The four pupils that I focused on in grade 4 classrooms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Pupils</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 4</td>
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Unlike the previous school, here I focus on the practices in one of the grade 4 classrooms only and describe their impact on the four described pupils. In what follows, I concentrate on providing evidence with regard to the following areas: planning, classroom arrangements, classroom routines and pupils’ participation, and teaching styles and instruction.

**Planning.** Similar to the previous school, each subject had its own national textbook and a teacher’s centrally designed guide. Classroom teachers were following their guides to plan for each lesson and the planning was written in Arabic except for the English subject. Practices in the regard to planning were similar to those in Newtown School, where various classroom teachers stated that they were planning individually, and no form of collaboration between them was noted or described by any of the classroom teachers including the LDT.

In addition, the planning was, like in the previous school, targeting the whole class with no modification to respond to pupils’ differences including the four pupils who do not speak Arabic and who are described by all classroom teachers as unable to understand various lessons. Classroom classroom teachers stated that they were not supposed to do something that is not stated in the guides and even if they were willing to do so, they lack the needed skills and knowledge:

‘We explain like what is required from us and we follow the guidance in our manuals. We are no trained to do something else’. (classroom teacher).

However, most classroom teachers said that doing something ‘different’ including the IPEs are the responsibility of the LDT who is trained and employed for that purpose. These statements are similar to what classroom teachers in the previous school said. However, the LDT said that they were not trained to support pupils who do not speak Arabic as they are not within the ‘categories’ the programme serves. It is clear that the objectives of the adult support are understood in both schools in the same way which is reinforced by the head of the Special Education Department, which raised questions about how various concepts are understood in the Omani context as it is clear that this understanding is impacting various practices.

With regard to resources they are like those in the other school, provided by the MoE, yet many classroom teachers said that the resources and materials mentioned in the
classroom teachers’ guides used to arrive at school late and that negatively impacted the lessons’ planning and delivery. For example a teacher gave a detailed explanation:

‘They require us to implement the cooperative learning and set specific way to deliver lessons using posters, visual and audio materials, yet we don’t have the materials they mention in classroom teachers guides. Even when we receive some, they come after we deliver the lessons and arrive a month before the end of the first semester’. (classroom teacher)

These statements, like those made in the other school, reveal the over-reliance on the classroom teachers’ guides and textbooks because classroom teachers stated that the delay in receiving resources happens every year; however, there was no plan to target this problem or think of alternative ways to help them illustrate their lessons.

Surprisingly, and unlike the other school, few classroom teachers said that classroom teachers’ guides are limiting their abilities and not giving them space of freedom to teach pupils according to their differences.

Like in previous school, the over-reliance on centrally designed textbooks and classroom teachers guides resulted in having a standard way of planning and that impacted the teaching styles as I show below.

Classroom arrangements. This grade 4 mainstream classroom has coloured desks and chairs with a back notice board where the timetable and list of pupils’ names were placed. The board has a big chart with pupils’ names and they call it the ‘reinforcement chart’. This board is used for reinforcement as well as punishment. For example, classroom teachers stick stars in front of the name of the children who answer questions, maintain classroom routine, and get high grades in the short tests applied by classroom teachers. In contrast, classroom teachers tended to remove stars or put sad faces in front of the names of pupils who make noise, do not answer questions, or get low marks as a way of punishment.
Thirty pupils in this classroom were seated in pairs and that was also like the other school, based on classroom teachers’ decision on the same basis stated by classroom teachers in the previous school. However, some classroom teachers were more flexible with regard to seating arrangements including the English and the social studies classroom teachers.

Most classroom teachers said that they preferred to seat the ‘low achiever’ with the ‘good pupil’ to help them improve through working together as well as to ensure that the low achievers concentrate:

“If I give the pupils the choice, the ‘low achievers’ will sit at the back and will keep on speaking and not paying attention to the lesson and classroom teachers’. (classroom teacher)

Others, like in the previous school, said that they prefer to seat pupils in pairs/rows to reduce the noise and control and manage the classroom. Among those pupils, Hilal, Waleed, Nasser and Muna who were described by all their classroom teachers as ‘low achievers’, ‘slow learner’, and in some occasions as ‘pupils with problems’ were seated in different rows within the classroom.
According to classroom classroom teachers, Muna and Waleed preferred to sit at the back of the classroom because both were shy and very quiet and did not like the front seats; therefore they were allowed to sit at the back rows of the classroom. Yet, it seems that pupils’ will was not actually considered because Waleed said that he did not like his place but classroom teachers did not allow him to move:

’I want to sit near the window where there is sun as this place is very cold and I hate it’.

He took several photographs of a desk near the window as a place he wanted to sit in. The desk was similar to the one he was sitting on except for its location where it was near Muna. I think Waleed wanted to sit near the girl who was speaking the same mother tongue, Swahili.
Nasser was regarded as a ‘slow learner’ who gets distracted easily, therefore they seated him at the front to be able to see whether he is on task or not and the same was true for Hilal.

Unlike all subjects, English teacher prefers to seat pupils in groups of five and she is deciding who should sit where. According to her:

‘I try to train them to work as a team where everyone has a role and the tasks are designed to be presented to groups and not individuals’.

Pupils know the rules, therefore they immediately move their tables into groups once the English lesson starts and they go back to the rows for the rest of lessons.

**Classroom routine.** Classroom teachers in this classroom, like in the previous school, followed a strict classroom routine. They used to enter, greet pupils and wait until all reply before allowing pupils to sit. All pupils needed to obtain classroom teachers’ permission before answering or moving from their places. Similar to the practices in the previous school, classroom teachers used to start their lessons by asking about the homework and pupils who had not done it, or who made noise, and broke the classroom routine were punished. However, unlike the previous school, some classroom teachers tended to punish pupils by beating them although corporal
punishment is not allowed, as described in chapter 4. For example, at the beginning of the fifth lesson, which is the lesson after the school lunch break, various pupils were making noise as some were still finishing their food while others were roaming around the class. The teacher entered the classroom and asked the pupils to keep silent and stop talking. It seemed that she lost patience and started shouting:

‘I said stop talking and stand in your place’.

Two boys were still moving, she asked them to go to her table, she got a stick, asked them to open their hands, and hit them on each hand. That happened in front of the whole class and in front of 25 me.

On other occasions, pupils were sent to the head teacher or vice-principal and on several occasions they were asked to stand at the back of the classroom. For example, during one of the Arabic lessons, the teacher entered and after greeting the pupils and before allowing them to sit, she asked about the homework:

Teacher         Who did not finish the homework?

Fifteen pupils raised their hands as an indication that they did not finish it. They were asked to stand at the back of the classroom for the whole lesson which lasted 40 minutes. The teacher started explaining a new lesson and interestingly the standing pupils were raising their hands to participate and answer, but were not chosen.

Hilal and Nasser were among the pupils standing at the back who did not finish the homework. After the lesson, Hilal came to me and explained that his dad was 26 drunk that night and was beating him, his brothers and sisters as well as their mother. The mother had to lock herself and her children in a room for the whole night as a way to protect herself and her children. Hilal did not tell or explain the situation to his teacher and therefore was standing for the whole of the lesson.

Me: Why did not you explain this to your teacher, she might have helped you.

Hilal: I’m afraid of talking to her. Classroom teachers shout and beat us with a stick.

25 I reported the incident to the social worker and the principal – but they did not take any action. I then reported the incident to the educational programmes department at the MoE where an investigation took place after I returned to the UK.
26 I reported this to the social worker, but when no action was taken I contacted personnel at the Child Protection Committee to follow up the abuse the child was facing at home.
It was obvious that teacher-pupil talk and communication was minimal as classroom teachers maintained an authoritarian position while negatively impacted responding to pupil differences.

In summary, in this mainstream classroom, the practices were similar to what was noticed in the previous school (chapter 7). There was an over-reliance on the textbook and classroom teachers’ guides for planning which was targeting the whole classroom and done on an individual teacher basis, and there was no form of collaboration between classroom teachers in this regard. Classroom teachers were following strict classroom routines where there were some forms of physical abuse.

**Instruction and pupil participation.** Practices in this classroom were similar to those I noticed in the previous school (chapter 7) where the over-reliance on text books and classroom teachers’ guides resulted in a standardised way of teaching and instruction. For example, in one of the social studies lessons, the teacher stood in front of the classroom, opened her book and asked pupils to open a certain page. She started explaining a lesson about seasons (summer, winter, spring and autumn). She gave pupils sentences and asked the whole class to repeat them several times, such as:

‘Winter is cold, there is a lot of rain and snow. Summer is hot, and there is no rain’.

Then, she moved to verbally explain the difference between the length of day time during winter and summer. Again she gave the pupils sentences and asked them to repeat. The whole lesson followed the same rhythm. By the end of the lesson, she asked pupils to finish a specific page for the homework. It seems that the teacher’s strategy failed to engage pupils where many were silent during the lesson including Hilal, Nasser, Waleed and Muna.

I believe it was difficult to visualise the winter and the change of day/night length in a country that has very hot weather and does not experience winter as described in the lesson. Here, relevance to pupil life is an issue that needs consideration, as well as the resources and the teaching techniques that are used to explain such concepts and lessons.
During interviews with the four pupils, feelings of intimidation and panic were reflected in their views. All of them said that they were scared of asking the teacher when they do not understand as classroom teachers shout at them when they ask:

‘The teacher gets angry when we don’t understand, we are afraid of asking her’. (Waleed)

In addition, pupils stated during the interview that they prefer to ask each other instead of asking classroom teachers because classroom teachers shout at them if they do not understand.

The same teaching style was adopted by the science teacher. In one lesson, she entered the classroom, greeted the pupils and asked them to open a certain page in their textbooks before she started to explain and ask questions about the lesson. The teacher did not use any resources besides the textbook and was frequently looking at the teacher guide to follow the stated steps. Various pupils who were described as ‘normal’ were asked to answer and participate, while Waleed and Hilal were looking at the wrong page and Nasser was hiding his face in the book while Muna was sleeping. Suddenly, the teacher asked Nasser to read a sentence within the page she was looking at. He raised his head, but did not know what she was pointing at. He stood up and kept on staring at the teacher; other pupils were laughing. The teacher asked another pupil to read while Nasser was standing, but still unable to know which page they were looking at. The teacher asked the two pupils to sit, continued the lesson and ended it by giving the class the homework which was a page within their text book.

While interviewing the teacher after the lesson, she was complaining about the pupils described as ‘low achievers’ and said:

‘It’s not classroom teachers’ role to deal with pupils who can’t master Arabic and with low IQ. The MoE should open special classrooms for them as they negatively impact the learning of ‘good pupils and distract classroom teachers and consume their time’” (classroom teacher)

She, like other classroom teachers in the school, stated that it is the role of the LDT to provide support to low achievers and pupils with low IQ. However, it was only Hilal who was attending the LD programme. Like the previous school, the LDT said that it
is not part of the programme responsibility to cater for the needs of pupils who do not speak Arabic and she was also not trained to do that.

These statements and practices are similar to what was noticed in the previous school and it seems that there is an agreement among senior policy makers as well as school staff with regard to who does/does not belong to the mainstream classroom and that obviously resulted in excluding those pupils from participation in various lessons.

Most lessons were following the same classroom routine where pupils were not allowed space to talk and classroom teachers were doing most of the talking and explaining as authoritative figures. However, and unlike the previous school, there were some intentions to respond to pupils’ differences and encourage the participation of ‘low achievers’. For example, the mathematics teacher entered the classroom, greeted the pupils and asked Hilal, Nasser and Waleed to move and sit in front of her table. She gave each of them a sheet and asked them to answer the questions. She sat between the three and kept on explaining to each and helping them answer their sheets.

However, and while she was busy with the three, the rest of the pupils were left without any attention. Accordingly they started making noise, talking to each other, moving around the classroom, and some were shouting. The teacher continued explaining and helping the three pupils until the end of the lesson while the rest continued doing nothing.

The classroom teachers stated that she wants to help everyone and ensure that they learn, but the curriculum is difficult for many particularly for the pupils who are not speaking Arabic. Therefore, she said that she tries her best and everything she does is based on her own willingness, but she needs proper training:

'We were trained to deliver content and teach normal pupils. I am teaching mathematics and all I was trained for is delivering my subject. I never received training on how to teach pupils who don’t speak the language of the instruction'. (classroom teacher)

In addition, some classroom teachers tried to target the pupils categorised as ‘low achievers’ through asking them simple questions during the warm-up activities or during the lesson itself. For example, the English teacher was explaining pronouns and asked pupils to go to the board and write sentences with pronouns. Nasser was asked to answer. He could not write the sentence, or even a full word. The teacher
gave him time and when he failed to write, she asked him to write a letter and praised him for that.

After the lesson she stated that she did not want them to feel bad when they were unable to answer; therefore she tried to give them the simplest task or just ‘anything’ to answer before going back to their seat. She also said that it was not the pupil’s mistake to be unable to answer as she believed that the curriculum did not suit all pupils;

‘Curriculum is designed to fit the ‘majority’, but not ‘all’ pupils’. 

Similarly, the Arabic teacher tended to encourage the participation of all pupils including the four described as ‘low achievers’, and ‘slow learners’. This teacher made sure that all pupils were looking at the correct page, and used to move around the groups while explaining the lessons. In most lessons, she used to ask questions randomly to both boys and girls and pupils were asked to answer either verbally or by going to the white board and writing the answer. For example in one of her lessons she was explaining a grammar topic which seemed to be a difficult lesson as most pupils failed to give the teacher correct answers to her questions. Yet, the teacher gave each pupil enough time to think and she tried encouraging the participation of all including Muna who was asked to write a sentence on the board. She failed to, but the teacher asked her to keep on trying and then asked another pupil to go to the board help Muna. The teacher then continued her explanation.

In these examples, we can see that there were some attempts from classroom teachers to respond to pupil differences and encourage them to participate, unlike the case in Newtown School. However, most classroom teachers mentioned the same challenges that were described by classroom teachers in the previous school (chapter 7) which were preventing them from responding to pupils’ differences. These barriers included the rigid system with its centrally designed curriculum that was not designed with all in mind, the time available for teaching and the lack of training and skills to modify that curriculum.

‘We are supposed to finish the curriculum in a specific time. If we spend extra time to simplify and give extra time to the ‘low achievers’ we will ignore the ‘majority’ and never be able to cover the content’. (classroom teacher)
Surprisingly, Muna and Waleed were actively participating in the English lesson and both looked very excited. The teacher told me that although all classroom teachers categories Muna as a ‘low achiever’, she was one of the best pupils in the English lessons and that might be due to the previous education Muna received before coming to Oman where she studied in Tanzania until grade 3 and the medium of instruction was English.

Both Muna and Waleed described the English lesson as ‘something they like at school’ and said that they understand English and Mathematics better than Arabic and other subjects.

![Figure 24. ‘English is easy and I love it’ (Waleed)](image)

They explained that they studied in English in Zanzibar, but not Arabic and that is why they do not participate in the Arabic and Islamic lessons. Both pupils said they wish classroom teachers spoke slowly:

‘Classroom teachers speak blab la bla ...they speak quickly ... I don’t understand what they say...I want them to speak slowly and I will understand everything’. (Waleed).

Muna, Nasser and Hilal said the same things and they all wanted classroom teachers to give them extra time to be able to understand and answer. Muna and Waleed said that they go to a private teacher after school who explains lesson to them and helps them finish their homework. As both of them are from different linguistic background (Muna from Zanzibari and Waleed from Baluchi) they said that the private teacher explains in Arabic, but they understand her because she speaks slowly and uses gestures to explain. Children said that they want their classroom teachers to do the same.
Unlike the main (core) subjects, the four pupils stated that they like the IT, music, art and PE lessons. Waleed took several photos of the art room and the crayons and said that he loves drawing.

![Image of art room and crayons](image)

**Figure 25. ‘I love drawing’ (Waleed)**

I knew about Waleed’s talent through his classmates who told me during the first week of my classroom observation:

*Teacher says Waleed doesn’t speak Arabic, but his drawings are very nice*. (a male classmate of Waleed).

Waleed was frequently drawing during even during the five-minute breaks between lessons and would use any piece of paper including the back of his books. He told me that he did not have a full drawing set because his father did not buy it. During the interview with the father he said that, due to their economic problems, he could not afford buying his son the items he needed for drawing and he wished the school could help him in that. He asked the school social worker to include his son’s name within the list of ‘poor pupils’ as the father said that he cannot even give his son money to buy anything during the school break. It was obvious that the school social worker did not have any records about the four pupils or their social problems:

*I have to deal with absence issues first and can’t cope with all of the financial and language problems in this school*. (school administrator).

Pupils also said that they love the PE lesson because it allows them to be out of the classroom. Muna said that she loves the PE lessons as it gave her the chance to sit and watch a large tree within the school yard. The same was stated by Waleed who said
that he wished they had gardening lessons because he loved gardening and both pupils kept on talking about their previous life in Zanzibar and Tanzania. Both described their farms and how they used to climb trees with their friends and the various fruits they used to grow in their farms. It was obvious that both were missing the places they had to leave by coming to Oman.

Figures 26 and 27. ‘I love trees and birds. We had a big farm in Zanzibar’ (Muna)

In summary, there was an over-reliance on textbooks and classroom teachers’ guides to deliver lessons; however there were several classroom teachers’ attempts to modify the tasks and simplify the concepts to ensure that all pupils are participating. However, all classroom teachers – as was the case in the previous school – described the rigid system, the unsuitability of the curriculum and lack of training as the main challenges they were facing which prevented them from responding to the differences of all. During the PP, the four pupils described the art, music and PE lessons as ‘good’ and ‘something they love’. Muna and Waleed seemed to be experiencing feelings of homesickness, which was negatively impacting their learning. There was no language support provided; neither was there support for those pupils during this transition stage.

Practices in the integration classroom

This section presents the practices applied in the integration classroom which is a self-contained classroom within this government school. This programme is formally described as ‘partial inclusion’ aiming at reducing the exclusion of pupils with disabilities from education through providing them ‘access’ to mainstream schools and opportunities to mix with other pupils in the mainstream (see chapter 4). The
classroom was opened at the beginning of the 2014 academic year. In the following section I give brief information about the pupils, classroom location and resources, staff and classroom arrangements, planning and instruction, and access to the school environment and learning.

The pupils

**Table 3. Pupils in the integration classroom**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>pupils</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salim</td>
<td>An 11-year-old pupil from a Baluchi background and low economic status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The father is an old Omani man who is married to a young Indian lady.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He was diagnosed from birth as having slight mental disability. He initially attended the intervention centre at kindergarten but was transferred to an integration centre when he was six, where he has been ever since, with the same teacher and classmates. He loves raising his rabbits and hens, but gets very angry, shouting and screaming, when anyone is derogatory about his animals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noora</td>
<td>Noora is 16 years old from a Zanzibari background. She had a car accident when she was in grade 2- (7 years old) resulting in ‘mild mental disability’. She was moved to the integration classroom after the accident. She loves cooking, sewing and colouring and usually looks after the other children in the same classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maha</td>
<td>A girl diagnosed as having Down Syndrome. I was not allowed to access any records about her or her family. The special education teacher said that Maha is having chest problems, yet there are no records on that and the school social worker and nurse do not have any records about the pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuha</td>
<td>A girl diagnosed as having Down Syndrome. I was not allowed to access any records about her or her family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huda</td>
<td>A girl diagnosed as having Down Syndrome. I was not allowed to access any information about this pupil. She seemed to be about 10 years old. She was frequently absent and attended twice during the observation period in the school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Classroom location and resources.** The five pupils were offered access to a room located away from the rest of mainstream classrooms as I explained in the context section. The classroom was not following any of the school policies or mainstream classroom practices. In addition, the pupils did not have textbooks or subjects to learn and, accordingly, they were not following the school timetable. Instead, the special education teacher was in full charge of that and decided upon what to teach and when.

The room, unlike the rest of the school mainstream classrooms, has old furniture but good lightening and conditions. The special education teacher said that the principal refused to give her good furniture although it was available in the school. The principal confirmed that this classroom is the responsibility of the Special Education Department and they are supposed to prepare it and provide resources before allowing pupils to come. The clear lack of collaboration between various staff of the MoE and
departments is very clear and the culture of blame that various senior policy makers described in their talks is evident here (see chapter 6).

This again makes me suggest that the formal separation of mainstream from the special education increased this lack of cooperation. It was also clear that the social approach of the integration programme described in the MoE documents (see chapter 4) was not existing in practice and that might be due to vague understanding of the meaning of the social approach itself.

**Staff and classroom arrangements.** The class had one special education teacher who is a graduate from Jordan and with six years’ experience. According to the teacher, she was teaching the same group of pupils for the last six years, but they were placed in another school. She said that she is following the same teaching style that she has used since her employment started.

The classroom also had a worker who was a lady in her 50s. Her duties were to bring the four pupils from home using the MoE bus, help in taking the pupils to the toilet (the same toilet of the school) and accompanying them during the breaks. She also helped with cleaning Maha as she had a continuous cold and needed some help in cleaning her face and using the toilet. However, Huda was always absent with no follow-up from the school social workers although she was following the absence of the mainstream pupils. Therefore, four pupils were attending in this classroom.

With regard to the classroom arrangements, the five pupils were seated in one group located at the middle of the room with broken cabinets at the back of the room and a white board at the front. Pupils’ work was displayed on the back notice board and the room was decorated with flags as it was the National Day period and celebrations.
Lesson Planning and instruction. Unlike the rest of the mainstream classroom teachers, the special education teacher in this classroom did not have text books or classroom teachers’ guide and was following some objectives provided by the Special Education Department. The objectives were aiming at providing the pupils with numeracy and literacy skills. Accordingly, she was supposed to prepare IPEs according to pupils’ differences, yet she refused to show any of her planning documents and no one was following her in this regard including the school principal.

“These pupils are special cases and not like the normal pupils you saw in other classrooms. I can’t give you any information before asking my supervisors”. (special education teacher).

The classroom was not following the school timetable and the special education teacher was in full charge of that and decides upon what to teach and when. Accordingly, the teaching followed a slow and static routine where the classroom teachers tended to do the same things following the same rhythm every single day. For example, during the first lesson of the first day of the week the four pupils—Salim, Noora, Maha and Nuha—entered the classroom with the helper after the school
assembly which they did not attend. The three girls sat at their allocated places within the group (one group) while Salim sat on the floor and refused to move.

The teacher asked Salim to go to his seat; the boy did not move and started crying. She ignored Salim and wrote ‘Arabic’ on the board which means that she was going to teach them Arabic during that period. She opened her note book, and started drawing lines on the board and asked Noora to go to the board and write a word: Noora did so. The teacher praised her by saying ‘شاطر’ ‘good’. Then she asked Maha to go to the board and write. Maha could not and the teacher spent more than three minutes holding the girl’s hand to help her write. While she was doing that, Salim was still crying on the floor and Nuha was putting her head on the desk and was playing with a small piece of clay. Noora was looking at her classmates and smiling.

The teacher then gave each of them a sheet and asked them to follow the dots to make the letter and then colour it. The teacher told Salim, ‘if you come and finish your task I will let you play with my IPad’. Salim got very excited and started colouring, but very slowly. Noora finished the task in no time; therefore the teacher asked her to help Salim. The other two girls were putting their heads on the table.

The practices in this classroom make me suggest that the classroom teachers was not aware of the interests, differences and capabilities of each pupil and because all had a medical report stating that they have a ‘mental’ disability, they were all expected to have the same abilities. In addition, it was clear that the teacher was unable to engage the pupils in any of her lessons and that resulted in making Salim shout, scream, run out of the classroom and on some occasions hit the teacher.

During another maths lesson, the teacher put some cards on the board (cards with shapes) and asked the pupils to match the shape with the word. Salim went to the board and answered correctly, then the teacher took Nuha to the board to answer and the pupil was not in the mood and refused to hold the pen. The teacher spent a lot of time with her while the other three pupils were doing nothing. Salim started screaming and ran out of the classroom. The teacher followed him and left the others with the helper and they were doing nothing. She returned him to the classroom and got a stick. She hit him on his hand and the pupils reacted by screaming and then moved to the teacher’s papers and started throwing them on the floor. Salim spent the
rest of the day on the floor and refused to do anything and the teacher continued working with others.

On another day and during the Arabic lesson, the teacher asked the pupils to write the letter (ص) (S), Salim did and then sat on the floor and started crying, Norra wrote correctly and quickly, while Nuha put her head on the table and played with the clay. The teacher gave them sheets of paper to colour including the letter and a shape representing it. Salim refused to work and started moving around the class and playing with the teacher’s papers. She shouted at him saying:

‘...if you don’t stop and sit I will bring a stick and beat you’.

The helper brought the stick, but the boy continued playing. The teacher tried to stop him, and when her attempts failed she started threatening and said that she would sell all his pigeons. Salim started screaming and hitting the teacher and then ran out of the classroom. She followed him while the rest were left with the helper. The teacher said that Salim loves birds and he had pigeons which he took care of and used to spend most of his day with them:

‘I don’t want to beat him because I know it’s not right and I told him that we will sell his birds because I know he loves them and it’s the most effective way to punish him’.

According to the teacher, Salim is ‘hyperactive’ and needs medication to calm him down. She said that she told his parents to take him to a doctor to prescribe those medications and they did. Salim had been taking them for more than a month but when his parents noticed that the boy was sleeping for most of the day they stopped the medication.

As I stressed in the previous chapter, corporal punishment is forbidden in all Omani schools and there are firm regulations in this regard; however the described forms of verbal and physical abuse Salim was facing is a stark reflection of the lack of teacher training and lack of collaboration among school staff. It was difficult for a single teacher to handle the five pupils with their range of differences for a full day without having the chance to relax or leave the classroom for a single moment. She was overloaded and stressed and that generated undesirable practices which were negatively impacting the pupils. This is again the result of the centralised decision about the integration programme and its implementation in schools. The head of the
Special Education Department actually referred to these challenges during the interview I had with her (see chapter 6).

**Access to school environment and learning.** The pupils in this classroom were unable to access the various school resources like other pupils in the mainstream classrooms including the services from the LD programme, services from the school nurse, and support from the school social workers as I highlight in the culture section. There were no forms of collaboration or joint work between the special education teacher and the rest of school staff. The special education teacher said that she was always left without support from the school administration and other classroom teachers as if she and her pupils do not belong to the school:

‘I had to take a leave for one day and asked the social worker in advance to arrange and ask other mainstream classroom teachers to help me and be with my pupils for that day. All classroom teachers refused and the social worker told me that it’s not her business and that always happen here. Therefore, my five pupils had to be absent and I told their parents that the helper will not go to bring the children that day. How do I leave them alone?’

Based on my insider experience, this is a common complaint from the integration classroom classroom teachers where the mainstream classroom teachers refuse to cover for them or enter their classes when they are absent for any reason. Therefore, it is common that the pupils in any integration classroom be absent whenever their classroom teachers are absent.

Generally, the four pupils spent most of their school days in the same classroom and rarely mixed with the rest of pupils in the school; and no mainstream classroom teachers or pupils entered their classroom except their special education teacher and the helper. This, of course, contradicts what is stated in the MoE formal documents which emphasise that the main focus of this programme is to move from the medical approach of learning to the social approach where through this programme pupils with disabilities are offered opportunities to learn with other pupils in the mainstream classrooms (see chapter 4).

In the formal MoE documents, it is stated clearly that the pupils in the integration classrooms do attend art, music and IT lessons with mainstream pupils. However, there was clear rejection from all mainstream classroom teachers to accept the four pupils in their classrooms and even on the few occasions when the special education
teacher took her pupils to these lessons, they were left alone and faced various forms of rejection.

For example, the special education teacher took the four pupils to the IT lesson for grade one which took place in the resource centre. The pupils were divided into two groups where half of the class was watching a movie and the other half was watching the IT teacher telling a story using puppets. Salim was seated to watch a movie while the three girls were seated to watch the puppet show and their teacher sat with them.

The three girls sat next to their teacher; the IT teacher did not ask them any question, and the rest of the children did not talk to them. Salim started shouting from the other side of the room and the IT teacher called the special education teacher to deal with him. Therefore, she left the girls and sat with Salim. No interactions between the four pupils and the IT teacher were observed. The stated philosophy of the integration needs to be discussed as I believe that the structure of the school as well as staff attitudes towards pupils with disabilities prevented the success of this philosophy and resulted in creating various rejection behaviours.

In addition, it seems that the four pupils faced some physical abuse by other mainstream pupils and were hurt and therefore the special education teacher asked the principal to help her protect these four pupils. Accordingly, the school principal announced during the school assembly that the pupils in the integration classroom are her children and if anyone upsets them she will punish him or her.

Accordingly, on another occasion the special education teacher took her four pupils to grade 2 classrooms. That was possible because their teacher was absent and instead of leaving them alone the school secretary agreed to let the special education teacher be with them, so she took the four pupils with her. Once she entered the mainstream classroom with her four pupils, she addressed the whole class saying:

*Today the integration pupils are with you. Do you know who are they?*. 

The whole classroom replied:

*They are the principal’s children*. 

Then the special education teacher started telling the names of the four pupils and the subjects they take. Then she said:
The integration pupils are here to study just like you, but do not study English because their IQ is less than yours. Who would like to be a friend for the integration pupils?'

Some pupils raised their hands while others were trying to touch Nuha and Huda as a way of exploring the ‘different person’ sitting next to them. Some turned to me and asked me:

‘what are these?'

‘do they speak?'

The special education teacher then gave each group a chart and asked them to work collaboratively to make a shape. She told the pupils to involve Salim, Noora, Nuha and Huda. Then she went around the groups to check work. Suddenly, she started shouting at the class as they were not involving her four pupils. She said:

'If you don’t let them work with you, I will send you to the principal and you know she will get angry'.

That resulted in a state of fear where all mainstream pupils were just pointing to the chart and directing the four pupils to finish the task.

What happened in this classroom reveals lack of clarity about the vision for inclusion and clear regulation on how to ensure that the pupils within it benefit from being in a mainstream school. It is also a clear impact of the top-down policies that decide on implementing programmes without preparing the needed infrastructure or training.

In summary, the integration classroom was located away from other mainstream classrooms. It had five pupils described as having intellectual disabilities. They had a special education teacher and a helper. The classroom teachers did not have textbooks or a classroom teachers’ guide like other classroom teachers in the school and therefore the pupils did not have a curriculum or a vision on how to proceed to upper grades.

The classroom was not following the school regulations including the school timetable and even attendance of the pupils was not checked by anyone in the school. It was poorly furnished and was following the same static routine with no clear plan on what they study for the whole period of time they spent in school. Forms of physical and verbal abuse were noticed, which contradicts with MoE policy that does not allow corporal punishment.
The pupils were simply offered a space in the school but not a learning experience and they were not able to access the school resources including an opportunity to mix with their peers in the mainstream classrooms. There were no forms of collaboration between the special education teacher and the rest of the staff. Instead the teacher and her five pupils were fully excluded from the whole school environment.

Various forms of rejection were noticed which reveals that when the classroom was opened the needed preparation of the environment including school staff and infrastructure did not take place and that negatively impacted the learning opportunities of the five pupils.

**School culture**

In this section I focus on the same items I described in Newtown School (chapter 7) which include staff beliefs, leadership styles, staff relations, staff-pupil relations and parental and community involvement. These issues were described in the literature as basic concepts that can indicate a school’s abilities to respond to pupils’ differences (see chapter 3). Within each section I include data about the integration classroom and the five pupils studying in it.

**Staff beliefs.** Like in the previous school (chapter 7), and similar to senior policy makers’ views (see chapter 6), all staff believed that some pupils do not belong to the mainstream including pupils described as having low IQ, slow learners, non-Arabic speakers, those with social problems and pupils with disabilities. The mainstream classroom teachers frequently stated that pupils who do not speak Arabic will not be able to learn or achieve as the basis for success is the mastery of language. Yet they all stated that it is not their role to ensure that, but the role of others:

> "We are have content to deliver and that is my role. I’m not here to teach Arabic. It’s either the Arabic teacher or the LD teacher although parents should stop talking to their children in any language besides Arabic."

(classroom teacher).

It was evident that the language issue is a major problem facing pupils and staff in this school as in most of the interviews classroom teachers were emphasising the need to find a solution for this problem. The lack of a clear policy in this regard is problematic and senior policy makers seemed to be detached from schools contexts when they stated that all Omani pupils should not be categorised based on language and they will learn in time.
With regard to slow learners and pupils described as having low IQ, there was an agreement among all staff that their mental abilities will not support them to understand the difficult curriculum:

*The curriculum is not suitable to all pupils as several units and tasks are targeting the average pupil and do not consider the slow learners. Therefore, they need to be provided with something else that suits their IQ level*. (classroom teacher)

The dominance of the standards agenda is clear in these views as many said that separating the low achievers, slow learners and the pupils with disabilities from the mainstream is the best option for the majority who can learn.

*When I concentrate on the low achievers and slow learners that negatively impacts the learning of the ‘normal pupils’ and that is unfair to them*. (a classroom teacher)

Although there were no pupils with disabilities in mainstream classrooms where the five pupils described as having intellectual disabilities were in a special unit, most staff showed a lot of opposition to having the pupils in the school. Most staff stated that the centralised decision about opening the integration classroom in the school was not well thought of. Various classroom classroom teachers said that their pupils feel scared when they see the five pupils with disabilities. Even the school principal showed a lot of anger about the centrally made decision about opening the integration classroom in her school and stated that mainstream schools are not the right place for pupils with disabilities:

*I don’t know why they are here? It’s better for them and us to put them in a special school where they can be with similar pupils*. (school administrator)

Generally, and like the previous school (chapter 7), most staff believed that their role was limited to teaching ‘normal’ pupils and it is not their business to respond to differences. Therefore, excluding some pupils from participation was not seen by classroom classroom teachers as their fault, but the fault of the national policy which allowed them access to the mainstream. For example, one classroom teacher said:

*When pupils coming from Zanzibar and Pakistan and who don’t speak or understand Arabic are allowed access to mainstream classroom that use Arabic as a mean of instruction, it’s not my job to teach those pupils Arabic. I am hired to teach a subject to pupils who speak Arabic and who can understand*. 

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However, we have seen that some classroom teachers made attempts to respond to pupils’ differences through giving them extra time to answer or even giving them simple tasks. Yet, it was interesting to hear various classroom teachers saying that they tried to respond to pupils’ differences because those pupils were ‘helpless’. So, it is the feelings of pity and mercy that urged them to try and support these pupils instead of an actual belief in the pupils’ rights and classroom teachers’ duty to respond to differences.

Like in the previous school, and similar to what senior policy makers have stated (chapters 6 and 7), all staff had great trust in the role of ‘specialisation’ and ‘professionalism’ where most classroom teachers frequently stated that they were not trained to do ‘something else or different’, but the special education classroom teachers and the LDTs were. The data suggest that the national policy - with its separation of the mainstream and special education - produced these views.

In summary, school staff were holding negative attitudes towards pupils with disabilities and pupils who do not speak Arabic, as well as towards anyone who is perceived different than the norm. There was an agreement that the school infrastructure, the curriculum, and the classroom teachers’ training are not suitable for the ‘different’ pupils as the system is planned to teach the ‘majority’ who can learn. Classroom teachers also believed that they were employed and trained to teach ‘normal’ pupils and not ‘others’ who are the business of parents, LDTs, the Arabic classroom teachers or special education classroom teachers.

**Leadership styles and staff relations.** As was the case in Newtown School; the principal was transferred to City School at the beginning of the school academic year, and was frequently off site attending meetings at the MoE. That left the school without leadership for most of the time as the vice-principal was also on sick leave for various days.

The principal stated that she did not choose to be in this school, but the senior policy makers did not consult her in such decisions and her views are not respected. The principal showed a lot of anger towards and criticism of national policy and described it as strange and vague:

*I really don’t know why the Ministry decides to transfer principals and keep moving them without clarifying the actual aims or benefits of such decisions.*
Principals are not respected and even the smallest employee at the Ministry can humiliate us.

While discussing the issues with regard to school improvements and preparing a school development plan which, as I described in the policies section, the principal said that in order for the principal to critically analyze the needs and problems in the school and work with staff towards improving their actions, she needed to stay in the school and build deep knowledge about staff, pupils and the community. She explained that achieving the above is difficult in the light of frequent transfer of principals. She explained that during the last seven years she moved to different schools upon orders from the MoE and was not allowed even to discuss the decision:

‘How can the staff build a development plan like this? The Ministry moves us and once we start to settle and know the school, they move us again. If they are really sincere about the development of the system, they need to consider our opinions as partners and not implementers’. (school administrator)

She talked about her previous school and staff saying that she made tremendous effort to improve that school and pupils’ performance, but was unable to see the results of her efforts because of the frequent transfer decisions. She said that she had to start from scratch in this school. She also stated that her ability to focus on improving practices is limited because she is fully occupied doing administrative and routine tasks like getting permission to paint the school, maintain the bathrooms, solve the parking issue and attend endless discussions with staff at the Ministry about various paper work. She needs permission for every single thing:

‘We have to seek permission for every single thing and if we try to implement any project without MoE permission, the principal and her classroom teachers will be in trouble. I want to prepare a lab for my school and although I have the needed money, I still need to wait for the permission from the Ministry’. (school administrator)

However, she said that regardless of the constraints and the lack of authority, she formed a committee at the school to plan for improvements and decide upon school priorities. She stressed that she involved many staff and parents in the discussions and decision-making process. She said that decision was made to implement the ‘zero lessons’ and ‘reading groups’ to improve pupils’ performance in math and reading.

The staff, however, gave conflicting information in this regard where many stated that they had no idea about that plan and they were not involved in any decision making:
‘I haven’t heard about the plan and wasn’t involved in any discussions. Listen, all the talk about the plan is fake and nothing in reality’. (classroom teacher)

Similar statements were given by the school social worker who highlighted that she was not involved in any process of developing any plan and the whole idea of the school development plan is not more than a ‘paper work’ exercise to please the supervisors and senior policy makers.

The above statements as well as observation reveals that the principal was adopting an authoritarian leadership style where she maintained limits with staff, pupils and parents. In the days where she was at school, she tended to be in her office where I rarely saw any classroom teachers entering her office and the administration area was rarely accessed by pupils, families and classroom teachers. Various classroom teachers stated that the principal does not welcome their views and many stated they fear to go to the administration area or talk to the principal as she could shout at them in front of their pupils. The leadership styles in this school differ from those in the previous one (see chapter 7) where the vice-principal and social worker showed more flexible style and had better communication with their staff, although there were some complaints from staff.

The principal’s views and the authoritarian leadership style she adopted limited her ability to build good communication. She rarely communicated with her classroom teachers or attended classroom observations and during one occasion of attending an observation lesson which was in grade 4 lessons, the principal sat at the back of the classroom and started writing notes in her notebook. While the teacher was explaining, the principal interrupted her in the middle of the lesson and suddenly stood at the front of the class. She told pupils that she will not allow any kind of misbehaviour and will punish anyone who does not respect the teacher and the school. The situation was strange and pupils kept on staring at each other and the principal without saying a word. Once she finished her talk, she left the classroom.

The whole situation was uncomfortable and it seems that it caused embarrassment to the classroom teacher who referred to the incident during the interview. She used this incident as an example of the lack of communication between staff, and of the strict leadership style they have:
‘Look, no one respects classroom teachers even the principal. Anyone can humiliate us as if we are maids and not classroom teachers’. (classroom teacher)

The principal was not only maintaining an authoritarian leadership style and lacking communication with staff, but it seems that her exclusion from the policy-making decisions as well as her negative attitudes towards pupils with disabilities produced rejecting and humiliating behaviours towards the five pupils and their teacher and supported the culture of rejection that already existed in this school towards the five pupils. For example, mainstream pupils tended to call the five pupils with disabilities ‘zombies’ when seeing them in the school corridors and that happened in front of the principal and other classroom teachers who pretended they did not hear it, and did not react.

On another occasion, the school principal entered the integration classroom during a maths lesson. When she entered, Salim started screaming and she looked at the pupil with facial gestures showing disgust;

Principal What’s wrong with him?
Teacher He acts like that when he sees new people
Principal Okay, I’m leaving then (started laughing)

In summary, the mobility of principals at the beginning of the academic year was based on a central decision from the MoE without any form of communication with staff. The transfer decision made the principal feel humiliated and angry and described these central decisions as it preventing her from making the required changes in the school. However, the principal’s characteristics and attitudes were what was problematic, not just the transfer decision. The principal was following an authoritarian leadership style with minimal communication with staff, parents and pupils and it was rare for her to enter classroom to observe. Her negative attitudes towards pupils with disabilities and anger of being excluded from the decision making with regard to opening the integration classroom contributed to creating a humiliating and exclusionary school culture.

**Staff relations.** Similar to the case in the previous school, there was clear lack of collaboration and communication among staff where classroom teachers were working individually to plan lessons and deliver content while school administrators
were handling other tasks including the maintenance, timetable, buses and routine tasks. Unlike the previous school, the tensions between classroom teachers and the principal were observed and these were also evident between the administrators themselves. This again can be linked to the leadership style practices in this school which negatively impacted various individuals and practices and created an unhealthy school environment.

**Staff - pupil relations.** Unlike the previous school, it was evident that classroom teachers were not maintaining a very strict classroom routine where some showed flexibility with regard to seating while others showed some sympathy towards pupils described as ‘low achievers and with difficulties’. However, various pupils stated that they fear their classroom teachers and can’t ask questions because classroom teachers shout.

During the group interview that I had with the four pupils in grade 4 who participated in the PP, they described various social and emotional issues that seemed to be highly impacting their learning experience and which needed the intervention of various organizations outside the school including the Child Protection Committees, but due to the lack of communication with pupils and parents, staff including the principal and the social worker were not aware of these issues.

As was the case in Newtown School, some pupils in City School were enduring a lack of respect based on their attainment and abilities. For example, Nasser, the pupil in grade 4 was frequently described by classroom teachers as ‘stupid’ and a ‘slow learner’ and these views impacted how pupils treated each other inside classrooms and how they felt about the school. Staff views also impacted parents’ views about their children’s abilities and differences. For example, and while talking about her son, Nasser’s mother said:

‘...he studies and open his books ,but he doesn’t understand. Maybe his head is not good’.

She was convinced that he cannot understand because something is ‘wrong with his head’ because staff asked her to take her son to a doctor to undertake an IQ test to decide whether he can continue in the mainstream classroom or whether he needed to be moved to a special classroom. The medical report stated that his IQ is less than 70%; accordingly the LDT refused to accept him in the LD programme and his
mother accepted that it is not the teacher’s mistake when he cannot understand or achieve.

The same forms of humiliations and disrespect were evident with regard to the five pupils with disabilities in the integration classroom. I have described the forms of physical and verbal abuse they faced from their own teacher, the principal and pupils in other mainstream classrooms who tended to laugh at the five pupils and call them ‘zombies’ whenever they saw them in the school corridors or the yard. As I was not offered enough information about the five pupils and not allowed to contact their parents or invite them for interviews, I did not know how such practices impacted their feelings and their home life.

**Parental and community involvement.** The strict leadership style also negatively impacted the relations with parents where the interviewed mothers said that the principal prevented them from entering the school:

> ’I was coming to see my son and ask his classroom teachers about his performance, but the school guard stopped me at the gate and told me that the principal doesn’t want any parent to enter without an invitation letter’. (a mother)

The principal explained that parents frequently come to school during lessons and that distracts her classroom teachers from doing their work. She believed that setting rules is necessary to improve practices and ensure that everyone is focusing on the learning process, not spending time chatting.

Accordingly, there was minimal communication with parents and that negatively impacted school ability to respond to differences. The conversation with parents emphasised this lack of communication where the three parents said that although the head classroom teachers did not allow them to go to school, they were not even advised on what they were supposed to do to help their children who were categorised as ‘slow learners and low achievers’:

> ’I don’t speak Arabic and I’m not educated. I always tell Nasser to study and I see him holding his books and studying, but he doesn’t understand and his marks are low. I don’t know what to do. Nasser is the only son I have and I pray to God that he will be better and can be successful and help me when he gets older as I don’t have a family here. He is the only one I have, but I don’t know what I am supposed to do’. (Nasser’s mother).
Nasser’s mother said that she will take him again to the hospital to make sure that he gets better. It seems that when Nasser sat for an IQ test, the mother thought that he would be treated to be able to understand and become like other ‘normal’ pupils. Therefore, she thought that was necessary to go once again to the doctor and ask him for further treatment for her son. Here, I need to refer to the impact of the standards policy and the huge reliance on diagnosis where pupils with differences are perceived as in need of a ‘cure’ to fit within the school routine and national objectives.

Hilal’s mother talked about more critical issues where she and her four children were facing real abuse from her husband. Unfortunately the staff did not have any idea about that, while Hilal’s classmates knew about their friend’s social problems as they used to tell me during the breaks how Hilal’s father was beating him and his mother in front of neighbours when he was drunk. The pupils also knew that Hilal was living with his family in one bedroom as the rain destroyed their house and they are waiting for the Ministry of Social Development to help them rebuild their old house.

Although there are formal Child Protection Committees in Oman which have the authority to protect any children who face abuse and that were capable of supporting and protecting Hilal, the lack of communication with pupils and their parents reduced the school’s ability to respond to pupils’ differences and protect them against abuse. Accordingly, children such as Hilal were failed by the system.

Similarly, the school nurse did not have any record or information about the five pupils described as having intellectual disabilities in the integration classroom. She said that the MoE and Ministry of Health (MoH) gave her a set of tasks to do at the school which did not include anything to do with the integration classrooms. Yet a supervisor from MoH visited the school during the observation period and saw Maha and Nuha in the school corridor and requested information about them. She was surprised that the school administration or Special Education Department had not informed the MoH about the five pupils as, according to her, the pupils must be included in the nurse’s list and receive the same medical checkups and immunizations. It was obvious that there was a real gap in information between the school and the other Ministries and service providers.

In summary, there was a clear lack of collaboration between staff where tasks were done individually. The school did not seem to have a welcoming environment as
pupils perceived as ‘different’ were facing forms of physical and verbal abuse by some staff – including the principal.

There was minimal communication with parents who were, by a decision from the principal, prevented from entering the school without invitation. Parents showed various feelings of dissatisfaction about school and how staff treat their children.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented data collected from the second case study - City School. Based on the government policies, the school was providing free access for pupils from various linguistic backgrounds, pupils with various abilities, and pupils with disability who were placed in a separate classroom called the integration classroom. Similar to Newtown School, City School was implementing national policies which were unable to respond to pupils’ differences and they seemed to be creating confusion and marginalisation due to their focus on raising pupils’ achievements to meet national objectives. These policies were centrally designed with almost no communication with schools and therefore seemed unable to consider the differences within school and the various issues they experience. With regard to mainstream classrooms, these national policies seemed to create standardised classroom practices with over-reliance on textbooks and classroom teachers’ guides and that left various pupils, mainly from non-Arabic backgrounds, unable to participate and engage.

In addition, the national policy with regard to the integration classroom which aimed at including pupils with disabilities in the mainstream school environment instead created an isolated unit which faced various forms of exclusion and was fully segregated from the whole school environment. The pupils within this unit were offered a space - *but not a learning experience* - and were physically and verbally abused. The whole school culture was not welcoming of ‘difference’ and there was almost no collaboration between any of the staff, with parents, or with the whole community.

Taking this analysis forward, the issues that emerged from the two schools are further analysed in the next chapter in addition to the issues that emerged from interviewing senior policy makers. This level of comparative analysis and data interpretation is
needed to identify barriers to responding to pupils’ differences in the Omani school system, as well as to identify any resources that need to be mobilised in order to address these barriers.
CHAPTER 9
RESPONDING TO PUPILS’ DIFFERENCES IN OMANI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Introduction

In this chapter, I compare, contrast and interpret the findings collected from both schools, as well as from the government level, in order to address my two research questions: how do Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences, and what are the challenges facing them in doing so?

The discussion in this chapter continues to take account of the signposts derived from my readings of relevant literature, which were guided by the thinking of the Index for Inclusion. Staying with this formulation, I have chosen to present my discussion of the findings around the policy, practice and culture dimensions adopted from the Index for Inclusion. In this way, the chapter looks at commonalities and differences between what I found in the two schools with regard to how they respond to pupils’ differences and the factors that impact on these ways of working.

A series of themes emerged from this analysis which led me to formulate a context-specific model that attempts to explain the barriers that are limiting the capacity of Omani schools to respond to differences. These barriers arise from three interconnected sets of factors – conceptual, structural and attitudinal. Specific points in relation to this formulation are highlighted throughout the discussion in this chapter. I summarise these points in the conclusion in order to guide the reader through the rationale for the model, which I will go on to explain in chapter 10.

Practice

As presented in chapters 7 and 8, school practices are simply “about what is learnt and taught and how it is learnt and taught” (Booth and Ainscow, 2011, p. 13). As such, they are believed to be a reflection of the school’s (organisation) conditions and beliefs (Rosenholtz and Wilson, 1980) and reflect how national policies are implemented. The evidence from Newtown School, City School, and from the government level highlighted that there were standardised ways of teaching; lack of pupils’ engagement and participation; limited teacher training; and lack of reflective teaching.
Standardised way of teaching

As I discussed in chapter 3, within some of the more recent literature there is an emphasis on strengthening the usual practices of classroom teachers in order to reach all members of a class through extending what is ordinarily available to all as opposed to doing something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ from that which is available to others. This requires a shift in thinking about teaching and learning from that which works for most learners along with something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for those who experience difficulties, to the creation of lessons and learning opportunities that enable all learners to participate in classroom life (Florian et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, in both schools, various individualised approaches that I described in chapter 3 were adopted including the seating arrangement and adapted classroom practices. The seating arrangements in both schools created unequal learning opportunities for some pupils who were excluded from participation based on their position in the classroom, including Amal, Omar and Faisal in Newtown School, and Nasser and Hilal in City School. The seating and exclusion from participation can be linked to classroom teachers’ expectations, intentions and perceptions about pupils’ abilities (Hastings and Schwieso, 1995; Marks et al., 1999). Classroom teachers’ statements presented in chapters 7 and 8 revealed that almost all classroom teachers had low expectations about some pupils and therefore they tended to exclude whoever they perceived as unable or needing something ‘different’. These expectation were also linked to classroom teachers’ lack of skills because when classroom teachers lack skills to respond to pupils’ differences, they tend to focus on managing the classroom environments including seating techniques (Marx et al., 1999; Wannarka and Ruhl, 2008).

Based on the lack of skills, classroom teachers in both school also tended to adopt an authoritative way of teaching instead of establishing the quality of the classroom environment (Meijer and Stevens, 1997), or knowing how to respect as well as respond to pupils’ differences. For example, I saw that classroom teachers in both schools were doing all the speaking and not allowing pupils to discuss or raise questions, and they excluded whoever they perceived as in need of something ‘extra’ or ‘different’ (see chapter 7 page 149 and chapter 8, page 188).
What added to the exclusion of some pupils from participation is the structure of the school system with its centrally designed textbooks and classroom teachers’ guides which resulted in producing static ways of teaching and limited classroom teachers’ willingness to apply something beyond the classroom teachers’ guides. Classroom teachers’ roles were limited to transmitting knowledge and the national curriculum which was targeting ‘majority pupils’ to ensure they achieve national objectives and which imposed content-centred teaching approaches. In most lessons, class time was spent on managing pupils’ behaviour and drill practice (Kutnick et al., 2005; Sukhnandan and Lee, 1998).

There was no systematic planning of curriculum or instruction to enable the needs of diverse pupils to be met as described by van Garderen and Whittaker (2006). Instead, classroom teachers in both schools were planning for the whole class; and they believed that it is not their role to do something different with pupils who they consider as not belonging to the mainstream:

'We explain like what is required from us and we follow the guidance in our manuals. We are not trained to do something else'. (a classroom teacher from City School)

The above justification is in line with the findings of the literature review presented by Tomlinson et al. (2003) where classroom teachers, in various countries, justify planning and teaching for the whole class instead of targeting the differences of all by saying that doing ‘different things’ will call attention to pupils’ differences; they felt it was not their job; they were unaware of learners’ differences; and they did not know how to modify the curriculum (see chapter 3). Therefore, literature suggests a need to examine the beliefs and practices related to teaching, learning, and the nature of young people as learners and this is an issue I discuss later in this chapter.

There were, however, a few attempts by City School classroom teachers to provide ‘pupils with difficulties’ tasks that were different from the rest of the class as well as giving them extra time to answer classroom teachers’ questions (see chapter 8 pages 188-189). The outcome of these attempts was that the rest of the pupils had nothing to do and created a lot of noise in the classroom. These attempts seemed grounded in a misunderstanding of the ‘differentiated instruction’ concept which is an issue that was frequently noticed throughout the data collection process. These misunderstandings
seem to be another major barrier to responding to pupils’ differences and seem to be the result of lack of communication and collaboration between senior policy makers and school staff during the policy-making decisions which results in classroom teachers applying practices according to their interpretation of national policies.

Herein, the centralised structure of the school system with its lack of collaboration between national policy and school staff as well as the misunderstanding of some concepts, I argue, are major barriers to responding to pupils’ differences in Oman. These top-down policies include the centralised curriculum, classroom teachers’ guides and classroom teachers’ training limited teacher’s abilities to question their current practices and look for alternatives to respond to the differences of their pupils.

With regard to the practices in the integration classroom in City School (chapter 8), every day was like the day before where the lack of a curriculum, adequate resources, and trained staff meant the five pupils did not have a real learning experience. Although the five pupils did not follow any curriculum, the teacher was still committed to following the few objectives provided by the special education department. Although it was evident that the few objectives and the teaching strategies the teacher used were not suited to the pupils, the teacher did not try to look for alternatives to respond to the differences of her pupils. This is again an example of the structural barriers in the school system that resulted in the marginalisation of the five pupils.

The structural barriers including the centralised policies, together with classroom teachers’ attitudes towards pupils who are perceived as ‘different’ were two of the major barriers to responding to pupils’ differences in the Omani school system identified in this study.

**Lack of pupil engagement and participation**

Black-Hawkins (2010) argues that reforming classroom practices in order to respond to diversity requires providing all pupils with opportunities to participate and achieve, and this means responding to all forms of diversity within a school. To ensure these opportunities are available, there is a need to go beyond merely access to education for all as described earlier. Rather, it implies learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared lessons (Booth, 2002). However, this was not
noticed in either school where the findings revealed that various pupils were offered access to classrooms, but not opportunities to participate and achieve including the pupils from non-Arabic backgrounds, the pupils with socio-economic problems and the pupils with disabilities in the integration classroom.

Classroom teachers orchestrated almost every activity during the lessons and pupils were not allowed to interrupt with questions or discussion. Examples presented in chapter 7 page 150 shows how the teacher shouted at Ali because he moved from his desk. Similarly, the photography data as well as observations revealed that some fear classroom teachers as they shout at them and on some occasions beat them. Besides the strict classroom routines which did not allow pupils the flexibility to move around or ask questions, the traditional ways of teaching and lack of differentiated instruction as well as classroom teachers’ attitudes about their role in the classroom resulted in some pupils being purposely excluded and others unable to participate in lessons.

The lack of participation and engagement negatively impacted the learning of various pupils in both schools and created cases of withdrawal from the classroom activities and feelings of a lack of belonging to the school environment (see chapter 7, pages 150-154 and chapter 8, page 192-195). In some instances pupils stated they hated school and either preferred to move to another school like what was stated by Ali in Newtown School (chapter 7, page 166), or preferred to stay at home like what was stated by Fahad after his escape incident (see chapter 7). The same was evident with regard to the integration classroom where the lack of participation led to Maha and Huha falling asleep in most lessons and drew undesirable behaviours from Salim where he tended to cry, shout and escape from the classroom whenever he was left alone doing nothing.

Coupled with that, some pupils were mocked or abused by classroom teachers and other pupils, in front of the class, and the uncomplimentary remarks which classroom teachers and other children made sometimes imbedded children from participating in the lessons. Evidence from both schools showed that pupils would laugh at each other, particularly when ‘low achievers’ gave wrong answers or were unable to answer (see chapter 7, page 156). In City School the same actions were present and pupils would laugh at their classmates who were unable to give correct answers. They described Nasser as ‘stupid’ and that there was ‘something wrong with his head’ because he could not answer like them. Therefore, several pupils including Waleed and Muna said
that they preferred to keep silent because they did not want their classroom teachers or peers to laugh at them which again resulted in their gradual withdrawal from participation.

Literature in chapter 3 highlights the impacts of disengagement and lack of participation as areas that need to be addressed when discussing inclusive classrooms practices (e.g., Corbett, 2001; Foreman et al., 2004; Florian et al., 2010; Fredricks et al., 2004; Norwich, 2012). My argument here is that the school structure and classroom routines are producing exclusionary pressures and resulting in producing various forms of inequalities in both schools.

I postulate here that one of the main problems in the classroom practices in both schools is the inability of the centrally designed curriculum and classroom teachers’ strategies to consider that each child learns in a particular way and therefore teaching cannot be one-size-fits all activity, drawing on information from a text book and maintaining a set style. This is a major misconception that exists in the Omani school system and is reinforced by senior policy makers. Therefore, in order to ensure the participation and achievement of all it is essential that school classroom teachers do take into consideration the learning profiles of their pupils – which is based on their interests, their school performance and the particular way they learn – when designing each teaching hour as the needs vary from lesson to lesson, even for the same child (Vassiliki et al., 2011). This might be difficult in the light of having a centralised school system with its centrally designed curriculum. Here, the challenges with the structure of the school system are evident and need careful analysis and consideration.

In this regard, international literature presented in chapter 3 suggests that there is a need for a fundamental shift in attitudes to teaching and learning from being an approach that works for most learners existing alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for those (some) who experience difficulties, towards one that involves the development of a rich learning community, characterised by learning opportunities that are sufficiently available for everyone, so that all learners are fully able to participate in classroom life (Florian and Linklater, 2010). To achieve this goal, teacher training is a major aspect that needs careful consideration as, in both schools, classroom teachers seemed to be lacking the required skills.
Limited teacher training

Florian (2008) describes teacher training as essential in preparing schools for inclusion; she believes that it is: ‘what classroom teachers do, rather than what they are called, that gives meaning to the concept of inclusive education’ (p. 202). However, one of the main problems that appeared to be hindering classroom teachers from responding to pupils’ differences is their lack of skill and knowledge, which was clearly stated by various classroom teachers in both schools (see chapter 7, page 154,161 and chapter 8 page 194-195). These statements contradict what is frequently stated in MoE documents, which emphasise that the government is giving great focus to the role of classroom teachers in ensuring schools’ effectiveness, and therefore various programmes are being introduced to provide classroom teachers with the training based on their needs (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012; 2014). The issue is that although the role of classroom teachers is recognised at the highest policy level in Oman and to ensure that they are well skilled, I contend that what matters is not the amount of training or where classroom teachers receive it, but the kind of training classroom teachers receives. This is because even with the establishment of this specialised centre based on direct directions from the Sultan (see chapter 4), classroom teachers are still receiving training based on the subject they teach and the groups and ages of children in their classrooms. The establishment of the specialised training centre continue to reflect the top-down policies of the MoE with its great focus on specialisation and professionalism in education.

Florian et al. (2010) describe this training as a reflection of the idea of ‘specialist knowledge’ which reflects the traditional assumptions that specific skills are required for working with certain pupils identified as ‘different’ in schools. This trust in professionalism in Oman is one of the factors for structuring the school system in Oman as a three-track system of mainstream, special education and international and private schools (see chapters 4 and 6). These views about the importance of professionalism were also stressed by various staff in both schools (see chapter 7, pages 150-154 and chapter 8 page 193,201,208).

According to this ‘specialist’ approach, classroom teachers’ identities have been reinforced in terms of who they are qualified to teach (Young, 2008). Florian and Linklater (2010) and Tomlinson et al. (2003) assert that some classroom teachers use
several statements of justifications for their inability to meet pupils’ instructional needs; these include ‘it is not part of their job’, ‘they are not aware of the needs of the learners’, and ‘they lack knowledge in modifying the curriculum’. This was evident in both schools and most classroom teachers said it was not their job to teach pupils with difficulties, low achievers, those from non-Arabic backgrounds or pupils with disabilities because they were trained to teach ‘normal’ pupils. Even in the few attempts when few classroom teachers tried to respond to the differences of all pupils, they faced challenges as I reported in chapter 8, page 189. Therefore, classroom teachers did what they were trained to do within the remit of what they understood as their role. These examples confirm the argument presented by Young (2008) that classroom teachers’ identities have been reinforced in terms of who they are qualified to teach.

These examples confirm my previous argument about the problems with the school structure and the national school policy in Oman which I suggest pose one of the main barriers to responding to pupils’ differences in the two schools under study.

In the literature, great emphasis is given to the importance of making changes to the classroom teachers’ training programme in order to ensure inclusive practices are applied. For example, Ainscow (1995) states that these programmes need to encourage classroom teachers to explore ways in which their practice might be developed in order to facilitate the learning of all their pupils, which implies redefining the role of classroom classroom teachers which requires new school organisation and structures, where classroom teachers are perceived not as solo performers, but as part of a team (Florian, 2008). This means that reflective teaching and team work are essential in this process.

**Lack of reflective teaching**

The specialised training and the structure of the school system have created a culture that lacks collaboration and reflective teaching. Yet, evidence from both schools reveals limits classroom teachers’ collaboration and reflective teaching which clearly limited classroom teachers’ abilities to respond to differences and therefore has resulted in creating various forms of exclusion in classrooms. The importance of reflective teaching is widely discussed in literature where Ainscow et al. (2006a)
state that the development of inclusive practice, in the main, is not concerned with adopting new technologies but rather involves social learning processes within a given workplace that influences people’s actions and the thinking that informs such actions. In such approaches of social learning processes, it is likely that staff will start to question the current discourse, values, and pre-existing assumptions and beliefs surrounding pupils and their abilities, in addition to the nature of educational provision that can be provided to them (Ainscow et al., 2004; Ainscow et al., 2006a; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Dyson, 2004).

The examples presented in chapters 7 and 8, however, show that classroom teachers in mainstream classrooms and in the integration classroom tend to work individually starting from planning to the delivery of content. Classroom teachers justified their tendency to work alone due to the lack of time to sit with others and have discussions about their practices (see chapter 7, page 144-146 and chapter 8, page 186-188). Others said that they are expected to follow the classroom teachers’ guide; therefore they do not need to discuss their plans with colleagues as everything is stated in their guides. As a result, classroom teachers in both schools were depending on classroom teachers’ handbooks to deliver lessons.

The great trust in ‘professionalism’, which I discussed in the previous sections, negatively impacted classroom teachers’ thinking and willingness to collaborate with others. Even when pupils categorised as ‘low achievers’ or ‘with problems’ were referred to the ‘specialised’ staff outside the classroom, there was no form of collaboration between classroom classroom teachers who referred the pupils and the LDT who is offering the ‘specialised ‘support. The LDT in Newtown School, for example, believed that she cannot involve classroom classroom teachers or parents in the development of the IEPs for her pupils as it was, according to her, a specialised task and involving ‘untrained’ people will distract her from doing her job. The same statements were given by the special education teacher in City School who strongly believed that no one in the school is knowledgeable about the needs of pupils with disabilities except her and the specialists in the Special Education Department. That resulted in isolating the LDT and special education classroom teachers and their pupils from the rest of school and, whenever they faced difficulties, they used to call the Special Education Department for advice.
The argument I make here is that the structure of the Omani school system with its centralised training, and negative attitudes has created a culture of lack of collaborating and team-work. Although, MoE documentation states that reflective teaching and collaborative work are strategies classroom teachers are trained to adopt in BE schools (see chapter4), the actual practices and the structure of the whole system make it difficult for them to implement this approach. I also highlight here that the misunderstanding of concepts and the tendency to adopt programmes that are developed by agencies that lack the knowledge about the context of countries construe a major barrier to building a culture of collaborative work and reflective teaching. The Basic Education system which is developed by a Canadian company was implemented, I argue, without preparing the culture, putting in place the needed infrastructure, and without preparing classroom teachers to implement its various aspects. That has resulted in undesirable practices, as explicated above.

Literature presented in chapter 3 suggests that to ensure that school practices respond to pupils’ differences, classroom teachers need to acquire team-working skills to be able to share the responsibilities of the classroom and to benefit from the expertise of others (Mitchell, 2008). They also need to be trained in how to address the barriers to education experienced by some learners, which are described by Ainscow (2007) as the ‘inclusive/reflective turn’. Staff need to question their current discourse, values, and practices and collaboratively think of ways to support all pupils (Ainscow, 1999; Ainscow et al., 2004; Ainscow et al., 2006a; Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Dyson, 2004).

In summary, although there is some flexibility and variance, practices in these two schools were typical, very standardised and were highly depending on national curriculum, and teacher’s guides. Classroom teachers were provided with ‘specialised’ in-service training according to the group and subject they teach. Classroom teachers’ practices proved to be unable to respond to pupils’ differences and created various forms of exclusion and marginalisation inside classrooms. The barriers identified here can be described in relation to the structure of the school system and the misunderstanding of some concepts as well as adopting programmes without examining their suitability to the school structure.
Therefore, the road takes us back to national policies which I believe are major creators of confusion and marginalisation at school level, as I discuss in the following section.

**Policy**

The international literature reviewed in chapter 3 suggests that efforts to change school practices and respond to differences of all pupils often fail when methods used to manage reform consist of autocratic or top-down policies (Burstein et al., 2004) and therefore suggest the inclusive school improvements as an approach that puts schools at the centre of change. The school improvement approaches focus on enhancing and democratising the potential that exists within schools through school-based initiatives. My accounts of the two Omani schools, however, illustrate a general lack of flexibility. Rather, what we see is a standardisation of responses that seem to suit some children but act as barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of others. This standardisation is created by a range of factors, most of which relate to the centralised policies and the dominance of the state over decision making. The evidence in this regard reveals that standardised and exclusionary practices within schools and classrooms result from a range of factors, including the limited understandings of diversity and inclusion at the national and school levels; the emphasis of the national agenda on raising standards; and lack of collaboration and communication. I consider each of these in turn, below.

**Limited understanding of various concepts**

My analysis of policy documents confirms my previous professional experience that the Omani school system is highly centralised, and this centralisation is stated as a way to ensure accountability (Oman MoE, 2012) which reveals that accountability is based upon state criteria and frameworks rather than located at local organisational level (schools). As I described in chapter 4, the Ministry of Education is in charge of setting school policies and legislation, including the ways in which pupils are registered and grouped. It is also in charge of building schools, designing the curriculum, developing classroom teachers’ guides, assessment, and evaluation. It is also in charge of classroom teachers’ employment, transfer and training. In the Omani school system, schools are required to implement these policies following the guidelines and the recommendations provided in MoE documents.
This centralisation and the top-down policies, I argue, are based on lack of understanding of various concepts and that resulted in producing policies that are limited in scope, full of contradictions, exclusionary in nature and not responsive to pupils’ differences, as described above. For example, Oman adopted the EFA agenda and committed to reform its educational system to meet the MDGs according to certain agreed-upon indicators (see chapters 2 and 4). However, I suggest here that Oman is still far from achieving inclusive EFA as discussed in chapter 2. Part of this challenge is because the EFA agenda is understood at the national policy level as aiming to guaranteeing access-oriented education of children more than ensuring their participation and achievement (UNESCO, 2000). That led to ensuring that learners would have to fit into an unchanged school infrastructure, culture, values, system and curricula (Apie, 2016). Therefore, schooling is seen as a place rather than an appropriate delivery of educational provisions for the children placed in the school (Peters, 2004). Therefore, the school system in Oman is structured as a three-track system where pupils are offered access, but to different provisions:

'We don’t prevent anyone from having a form of schooling, expatriates are offered the right to learn in their own schools, we also offer pupils with disabilities learning opportunities in special provisions. Even children with severe disabilities have services that are provided by Ministry of Social Development. Yet our main focus is on Omani citizens. They are who will build and develop the country’. (a senior policy maker).

The above statement reveals that part of the problem is also due to how senior policy makers understood diversity and difference and how they perceived the role of the government in responding to pupils’ differences. It is evident in chapters 4 and 6 that differences are understood by senior policy makers as arising from individuals and the source of difficulties is located within the characteristics of individuals (Dyson, 2001) and this was the first step that produced, as I contend, inequalities in the school system. Accordingly, some pupils are excluded from the mainstream based on their characteristics including pupils with disabilities.

Although the Omani pupils from non-Arabic backgrounds were not excluded from accessing the mainstream classrooms, they still faced forms of exclusion because they were left without any form of language support. This can be linked to how senior policy makers understand diversity and inclusion. For example, senior policy makers
believe that Omani pupils from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds do not need to be provided with any language support because that might lead to categorising them which is against the Oman law (see chapter 4). This understanding led to assimilating them to other pupils in the mainstream. Such tendency, however, has compounded the problem and, in so doing, deprived various Omani pupils within mainstream classrooms from getting the language support they needed. This dilemma of whether to identify and respond to or not identify was discussed by Norwich (2008), who stated that in various countries identification of ‘difference’ reflects lower status, less value and perpetuates inequalities and unfair treatment. Recognising difference can lead to stigmatising pupils, and therefore there is a national tendency in Oman to assimilate pupils. The national tendency to assimilate citizens was previously described by Peterson (2004), who states that the Omani government laws are aiming towards promoting integration of traditionally disparate sectors of the population (including tribes and tribal confederations divided by long-standing animosities) into a single, national community. However, it may at the same time create pressures to conform, or to eradicate or conceal community traditions and characteristics in order to "pass" as part of the mainstream. It needs to be understood that treating citizens as ‘equal’ should not contradict with recognising and accepting their differences, which takes me again to the importance of having a better understanding of essential concepts, such as ‘all’ and ‘diversity’.

In addition, I argue that the various forms of marginalisation I observed in both schools, have resulted from misunderstanding the concept of equity and inclusion which are discussed in literature as essential to ensure that the EFA agenda is really focused on all (see chapter 2). In this regard, senior policy makers believed that by forming a three-track system and excluding differences like disability and language from the mainstream, pupils within mainstream will be similar and can be supported to meet the requirements of the same sets of national standards and frameworks when provided with the same set of inputs. This means equity in the Omani school system is limited to in-put/out-put approach and this understanding was expressed by various senior policy makers are discussed in chapter 6 and various MoE documents as discussed in chapters 4 and 6.
Based on this understanding of equity, schools were built in all Omani regions; all schools are provided with similar infrastructure, human resources, same set of national curriculum, same classroom teachers’ guides which are also centrally designed, same policies for registration following presence, and other policies I described in chapters 7 and 8,

’All pupils in schools are provided with the same curriculum, same forms of assessments, same teacher-pupil ratio, same learning time and same facilities. All of that is done to ensure equity among all’ (a senior policy maker).

The problems with these policies and programmes were that they produced a rigid system that lacked the flexibility to address pupils’ differences within schools contexts. As I explicated in chapters 7 and 8, classroom teachers were expected to deliver a centrally designed curriculum which was not designed with all in mind. That resulted in the exclusion of various pupils from participation because they were unable to access that curriculum. Here I refer to Dyson’s (1990) argument that as long as educational provision is fixed and children are diverse in their characteristics, there always will be some for whom the provision offered is inappropriate; and that was the case in both schools.

With regard to inclusion, the concept was adopted as a synonym to integration (Oman MoE, 2006; 2008; 2012) which is also the case in other countries (Gaad, 2011; Meijer and Stevens, 1997; Singal, 2004). Actually, it seems that the main purpose of the integration programme was to increase the number of pupils who go to school without giving real consideration to the processes that happen within this programme or how to ensure that pupils are actively participating in the school. Accordingly, various forms of exclusion were observed in the integration classroom in City School (see chapter 8, page 201-206) where the five pupils within it were offered a ‘place’, but not a ‘learning experience’. These five were left without curriculum, assessment and resources unlike the rest of the school the classroom was operating within.

The various forms of exclusion produced by the integration programme can be linked to arguments presented by Miles and Singal (2009), Booth and Ainscow (1998), Pather and Nxumalo (2013), and Eliadou (2013) who state that various forms of marginalisation and inequalities can occur from implementation of international trends without preparing the required structure of engaging in a detailed discussions about the
suitability of these programmes to the context of each country. In addition, these inequalities can be linked to the centralisation of the system with its top-down, autocratic approaches to reform. Therefore, Moore (2009) states that when the decision is made to place pupils with various needs in mainstream settings, several aspects need to be reviewed and analysed, including the climate and culture of a school which can either hinder or move inclusion forward. However, the integration programme was introduced without having a clear vision, clear plans, infrastructure and resources and without restructuring schools in order to respond to the needs of all children.

The discussion in previous sections confirms the stance I adopted in chapter 3 that responding to the pupils’ differences in mainstream schools cannot be achieved through a narrowly defined view of inclusion that emphasises individualised approaches to children’s difficulties (Dyson, 1990), nor by implementing special education ideas and practices within mainstream settings (Ainscow, 1997), but through whole-school system reform where schools are based at the centre of this reform as discussed in chapter 3. That reform requires clarity of vision and purpose with regard to educational reform is essential to ensure responding to pupils differences (Ainscow, 2016).

Besides limited understanding of inclusion, diversity and the structural separation of mainstream from the special needs agenda, the strong national focus on standards and achievement is another barrier to schools’ abilities to respond to pupils’ differences as I describe in the following section.

**External influence and emphasis of the national agenda on raising standards**

Underpinning various processes of marginalisation observed in both schools is an external influence and limited understanding of quality which is imposed on the Omani school system through external agencies and experts, including the World Bank, UNESCO and CANADCOM as described in chapter 4.

As the Omani government is committed to achieving the previous MDGs and their associated targets and indicators which are used to determine progress across each target and goal (Fukuda-Parr and Greenstein, 2010) and thus to enable ‘comparable’
scores to be obtained from different countries, like other countries, Oman had to submit reports and data about the achievements of these MDG goals, including goal 6.

The problem was that the targets and indicators have the tendency to favour more measurable quantitative goals, over other issues and qualitative factors that are believed essential in achieving the stated goals (Clemens et al., 2007; King, 2007). Therefore, environment, pupils’ backgrounds and teaching processes were ignored and the success of individual educational achievement became limited to measuring it against a set of predetermined, norm-related standards. Accordingly, success and quality education, in this approach, are achieved through obtaining proficiency levels in academic subjects of reading and mathematics (Peters and Oliver, 2009) as well as through participating in international tests.

Finally, adopting this numeric approach of quality meant that relations between the inputs (the resources) and the school outputs (achievement), which are known as the ‘production function approach’ (Hanushek, 1995) became the main way to judge the overall effectiveness of educational policies; and therefore tests and marks were used to measure pupils’ learning. Based on adopting this approach, the success of individual educational achievement is measured against a set of predetermined, norm-related standards. Therefore, success and quality education, in this approach, are achieved through obtaining proficiency levels in academic subjects of reading and mathematics (Peters and Oliver, 2009) as well as through participating in international tests.

I contend here that this standards-based approach, with its limited understanding of quality and its narrow view of attainment, is a main source for various forms of inequalities (Rouse and Florian, 1996) and exclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006a) in schools as it focuses on categorising, selecting and grouping pupils based on notions of similarities and differences. It is also evident that this approach encouraged schools to welcome ‘high achievers’ and support them to stay in school and proceed to higher education whilst neglecting the ‘low achievers’ and their needs, where various classroom teachers in both schools said that pupils who cannot meet the national standards do not belong to the mainstream and need ‘different provision’. Therefore, the focus on standards approach resulted in ignoring the different environments and
their associated factors, such as the socio-economic status of pupils that might affect achievement (Kerr and Raffo, 2016).

Pupils’ differences are constructed through these categorisations and the focus on standards. With increased attention and focus on achievement several policy documents were released, and mechanisms on how to raise performance have been put in place to support schools to meet these national agendas (Dyson and Gallannaugh, 2007). The Basic Education system I discussed earlier is a clear example of the national policy focus on standards and identification of needs and the LD programme are part of the mechanisms that are implemented to ensure that all pupils meet the national standards.

The identification of needs is actually used as a judgement rather than to assess the progress made by the child in relation to their developmental age where schools started to categorise all children below the political targets as having difficulties, even if they did not (Squires et al., 2013). We have seen that classroom teachers in both schools tended to ignore the various social, medical and linguistic problems that pupils were facing, and referred on any pupil they believed was unable to meet the national objectives to the LD programme without trying to modify the teaching practices to respond to their differences. We also have seen that LDTs complain of the large number of pupils that, classroom classroom teachers refer on, and said that the numbers exceed the capacity of the programme.

Because the LDT is under the umbrella of the Special Education Department with its structural separation from the mainstream, this means that pupils in the programme receive support that is totally different from what happens inside the mainstream classroom as I described in previous sections. Another shortcoming of this programme resulted from the lack of collaboration between classroom classroom teachers and LDTs in planning the support that is provided to various pupils which resulted in minimising the benefits of this programme. Theoretically, IPEs are supposed to include areas of need, pupils’ strengths and views, targets to be achieved, and support to be provided by the school. Classroom teachers, parents, special education teams, and the pupils are supposed to be included in the development process of the IEPs (Cramerotti and Ianes, 2016), but this was not evident in either of the schools I observed.
I believe that, instead, this programme has helped to create a culture of blame and rejection in both schools where some classroom classroom teachers blamed the LD programme for not accepting and supporting all pupils described as not belonging to the mainstream, while the LDTs continued to reject many pupils, saying that they do not fit within the criteria of the programme. That excluded various pupils from participating in mainstream classrooms and from having access to the LD programme.

The shortcomings of the LD programme were described by Al-Ghafari, (2011) who argues that the LD programme in Omani schools is a source of segregation to various pupils and therefore there is a real need to consider the movements to programmes that support the learning of all (see chapter 4). I want to highlight here that although there are concerns expressed from the Omani school field about the unsuitability of various policies and programmes, there is clear neglect of these alerts. Such neglect reflects the extent to which the system is centralised where accountability and suitability of programmes are based on state criteria and frameworks rather than arising from close communication with schools and various stakeholders. Therefore, national policies are expected to be implemented in schools regardless of their suitability or worth. Such top-down policies leave little space for schools’ autonomy and therefore little space for schools to change and improve.

Therefore, there is a real need to adopt inclusive policies and values where all pupils, regardless of their differences, are supported to learn together. That requires moving from the medical model of disability where problems arise from the characteristics of individual pupils to the social model, which ‘does not deny the problem of disability but locates it squarely within society:

*It is not individual limitations, of whatever kind, which are the cause of the problem but society’s failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organisation* (Oliver, 1996, p. 32).

To achieve change and schools’ improvements, there is a need to have a national consensus and understanding about several concepts including inclusion, diversity and quality where schools policies and practices are moved to respond to pupils differences based on equity and justice. This requires collaboration and communication between various levels and members which is essential to move
educational systems towards inclusiveness, which proved to be largely absent in my study.

**Lack of collaboration and communication**

As noted in chapter 3, communication between various stakeholders within a particular context is described as vital in strengthening the capacity of education systems to respond to learner differences (e.g., Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). International research also shows that, through communication, a clear strategy and a set of guidelines for action can be achieved (Aldaihani, 2011; Eliadou, 2013; Singal, 2004).

As described in the previous section, the central government dominates decision making where various school policies were implemented based on decisions that did not involve various stakeholders including school staff, parents and pupils. Actually, through interviews with senior policy makers, it seems that national policies were developed without communication between various senior policy makers and departments. The data provided in chapter 6 reveal the great lack of communication and scattered efforts at the national level,

'**We don’t cascade it as team work…it is a top-down approach**'. (senior policy maker)

These scattered efforts and different interests and ideologies of senior policy makers resulted in the lack of clear vision, policy or strategy across the whole school system in Oman,

'**We don’t have a clear vision and our scattered projects and efforts are not helping in making real improvements in the system**'. (a senior policy maker)

Talking to senior policy makers about who participated in the discussion process while adopting the MDGs, the integration programme, and various other policies including the development of the current educational policy and strategy, several participants said it is based on decisions from ‘top authorities’ which usually refers to the Sultan or ministers who own power and leadership in absolute monarchies, like Oman (Common, 2011). It needs to be highlighted that during my fieldwork, the Educational Council was in the process of developing school educational policy and strategy. The pilot study I conducted included interviewing members of the Educational Council where several stated that they were not part of that discussion or policy-making
processes with regard to the adoption of the MDGs and did not know who was involved. Many also state that they do not know about the newly developed education policy and strategy. Several were blaming each other for the shortcomings of the system and the lack of effectiveness, and said that some policies were adopted without clear understanding of how they are going to benefit the school system in Oman. Interestingly, some were more open and stated that a few educational policies are adopted based on individuals’ interests. Such statements confirm what has been discussed with regard to leadership in Oman where Common (2011) argues that decision making in Oman is intuitive.

More specifically, one senior policy maker said:

‘I think the communication between various levels is missing … we don’t sit and discuss such issues’.

These statements confirm the argument by Plummer (2005) that: “people in Oman do not work in teams” (p.69) due to rigid hierarchical structures (Common, 2011). It seems that the great focus on specialisation and professionalism was one of the factors that created this culture and lack of collaboration. Members in each department at the MoE stated that they are specialised in their areas and it is difficult to involve others who are not specialised. For example, members at the Curriculum Directorate said that although they frequently try to involve classroom teachers, many of them proved to lack the skills and knowledge which in turn slowed the work and productivity of curriculum design committees. He clearly stated that ‘professionalism’ is required where ‘not everyone can be involved in curriculum design processes’. Similarly, officials at the Assessment Directorate stated that they have ‘experts’ who are well trained to develop assessment procedures for each group and age level of pupils. They argued that they try to involve schools, but also try to be selective as not all practitioners are capable.

This lack of teamwork resulted in policies and programmes that are limited in scope and lack cohesion as we saw with regard to the registration policies, the attendance policies, the school development plan, the LD programme, the national curriculum, classroom teachers’ training and the integration programme. This argument is in line with Fullan’s (2007) assertion that a lack of communication can be a real creator of confusion, which leads to marginalisation and limits schools’ and systems’ abilities to respond to differences. I therefore argue that this centralised system with its top-down
hierarchy in decision making is a great barrier to developing inclusive approaches to education in Oman. Accordingly, it is vital to consider the structural barriers within the Omani school system if movements towards inclusiveness are to be achieved. Within these structural issues that need real consideration in Oman is the organisational culture which proved to be a real barrier to responding to pupil differences, as I explicate below. The importance of considering the organisational factors in order to achieve inclusion was stressed by Dyson (2004) who highlight a number of factors that are essential to achieve inclusion; these are (1) the removal of structural barriers between different groups of pupils and staff, (2) achieving some degree of consensus amongst adults regarding values of respect for difference, (3) the commitment to offering all pupils equal opportunities for learning, and (4) encouraging a high level of staff collaboration and involvement with community around the school. These issues are discussed below.

Culture

Findings from the government level as well as from Newtown School and City School highlighted that pupils’ exclusion resulted from the taken-for-granted beliefs that inform the actions of those involved, limited role of principals, lack of parental involvement, and lack of communication between various levels.

Beliefs

When I describe school cultures and the sets of beliefs and understandings that shaped it, I discuss it in relation to societal culture and the sets of beliefs and understandings beyond the schools’ boundaries. That is not just because the school system in Oman is centralised, but also because school cultures usually reflect societal cultures (Mittler, 2000, p.1):

...schools and the education system do not function in isolation. What happens in schools is a reflection of the society in which schools function. A society’s values, beliefs and priorities will permeate the life and work of schools and do not stop at the school gates.

As shown in chapters 4, 6, 7, and 8 and as I have discussed in the policy section, a dominant group - senior policy makers - has structured the school system and defined the features of school culture that differentiate ‘those who can’ from ‘those who cannot’ (Gliedman et al., 1980).
When discussing staff attitudes towards responding to differences, I argue here that the structure of the system with its top-down hierarchy in decision making, the centrally designed policies that give great focus on standards, lack of collaboration and teamwork, lack of resources and the type of training classroom teachers in both schools received participated in creating negative attitudes towards some pupils and created school cultures that reject whoever seemed to be unable to meet the national standards and therefore limited schools’ abilities to respond to difference. For example, it was evident that various classroom teachers in both schools justified excluding some pupils because the curriculum was not suitable; because lesson time was short; because supervisors want them to finish content in specific time; and because they were not trained (see chapter 7, pages 158-162, and chapter 8, pages 207-210).

Similarly, classroom teachers in both schools received specialised training based on the subject and age group they teach and most stated that they did not receive training that can enable them respond to pupils’ differences. Even the LDTs who were qualified as special education classroom teachers were showing negative attitudes towards various pupils because they were not trained to respond to language differences or to support pupils with disabilities or socio-economic issues.

Besides the environmental factors, it was evident in both schools that some child-related variables impacted classroom teachers’ attitudes (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002) where classroom teachers in both schools showed extra rejection to pupils with disabilities and strongly believed that they do not belong to the mainstream classrooms, including Amal in Newtown School and the five pupils in the integration classroom in City School. These findings are similar to the findings of the literature review by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Alghazo and Gaad (2004) who found that classroom teachers were only cautiously accepting of including a child with cognitive disability and were more accepting of children with physical disabilities and children with medical conditions as they saw them as ‘easy to manage’.

I was actually surprised to find that classroom teachers’ attitudes were shaped by the child's social background which is an issue that I have never thought of before conducting this study. For example, the exclusion and discrimination that Ali faced in Newtown School was based on the fact that he was ‘born from unknown parents’ and
not in relation to his attainment. In Oman, adultery is perceived as one of the biggest sins a person can commit and children of such relations are culturally excluded and marginalised. Based on insider experience, most pupils from the orphanage face similar forms of exclusion in primary schools regardless of the government’s efforts to include them in social life and activities. I stated in chapter 7 page 163 that classroom teachers described pupils from the orphanage as ‘future criminals’. These statements reflect the stereotyping and overgeneralisation in this regard which negatively impacted classroom teachers’ behaviours as well as Ali’s reaction.

These attitudes shaped staff behaviours and influenced classroom practices (Gliedman et al., 1980); classroom teachers tended to exclude whoever they believed as ‘don’t belong’ to the classroom settings and thus considered them not their business. Therefore, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) argue that when discussing the issue of responding to pupils’ differences the above points need to be addressed in order to move schools towards inclusiveness. More importantly, the authors state that the process of implementing inclusion needs to be carefully planned where classroom teachers’ concerns need to be addressed. In addition, a significant re-structuring of mainstream schools is essential before pupils with disabilities and difficulties are included. Finally, the authors say that most of the studies they reviewed revealed the importance of the support classroom teachers receive in creating positive attitudes towards pupils including the encouragement and support of head classroom teachers as being instrumental in the creation of positive attitudes to inclusion. This is an issue I highlight in the following section.

Generally, to ensure that schools respond to pupils’ differences, it essential to consider classroom teachers’ attitudes because their beliefs, attitudes and actions create the school context in which pupils are supposed to learn (Ainscow and Miles, 2008) and therefore they are important variables in the success or failure of inclusive education and responding to differences (Ainscow and Miles, 2008; Avramidis and Norwich, 2002; Carrier, 1990; Dyson, 2004; Gerber, 1994).

**Limited role of principals**

Leadership is described in literature as holding a central role in fostering change within schools’ cultures and as a crucial element in gearing education systems towards
inclusive values and bringing about sustainable change (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010). To achieve change, school principals are expected to be focused and determined about improving their schools to become more effective organisations, and should clearly define and articulate a mission that incorporates the values of inclusion and inclusionary practices (Ainscow and Sandill, 2010; Ryan, 2006).

Such argument assumes that principals are recognised and given opportunities, authority, and resources to become active agents in the decision-making process. However, the data revealed that school principals were having a very limited role or actually no role in making changes and creating a welcoming school culture. Part of the problem was because in the Omani centralised system, recruitment, training and transfer of principals was made at the state level. Based on my insider knowledge, criteria for selecting principals did not include issues regarding responding to pupils’ differences, but with regard to principals’ abilities to ensure that their schools implement national frameworks and guidelines particularly with regard to standards. This argument is also based on the principals’ statements that are presented in chapter 7, page 163 and chapter 8, page 240.

Besides the recruitment issues, the transfer decisions of both principals that are made and central level and which I discussed in chapters 7 and 8 forced staff in both schools to go through massive turbulence and created the impression that schools are not more than buildings and that staff have very limited value or say. Here, I want to refer to the issue of power described by Common (2011) who argues that when a dominant group (senior policy makers) defines itself as superior (the case in Oman), it automatically defines the other as inferior and that shapes the patterns of interactions between both which restricts the inferior developments and potentials. Although Common’s paper concentrated on teacher-pupil relations, I found it directly applied to the senior policy maker-principal relations and accordingly shaped the teacher-pupil relations, as I expand on later. Besides the feeling of humiliation both schools principals felt when they were transferred without being consulted, they also found it difficult to clearly communicate their views with staff and on some occasions, their staff showed resistance to the new principals’ wishes. Macmillian (2000) argues that such behaviours are evident with the frequent headship change in various contexts.
Although some research argues that head classroom teachers’ rotation is used to support principals’ development and school improvement (Aquilia, 1989; Hart, 1993), there is also research demonstrating that such impacts are ambiguous because initiatives to improve schools usually need time to become institutionalised (Fullan, 2007) and principals need to be given sufficient time to succeed in their schools (Fink and Brayman, 2006). These statements were confirmed by both school principals who said that they were unable to articulate shared vision or even decide upon schools’ priorities and how best they can support pupils because of the transfer decisions. Instead they were spending most of their time ensuring that their schools implement the various programmes that come from the ‘top’ such as the school development plans, follow up the attendance and absence issues, and follow up the maintenance issues. Hargreaves and Hopkins (1991) describe this as the ‘maintenance/development dilemma’.

With regard to leadership styles, the principal in City School revealed very strict and authoritarian styles where she maintained limits and boundaries with her staff, who reported that she rarely involved classroom teachers in discussions about school policies or programmes. Most classroom teachers felt intimidated and afraid of the principal where several stated that they hesitate to go and talk to the principal because she can shout at them in front of their colleagues. She also prevented parents from entering the school as she believed that they were distracting her and the classroom teachers from their work (see chapter 7). This authoritative style of leadership confirms the argument presented by Common (2011) that organisational leadership in Oman is directive and authoritarian. I suggest that the principal in City School perceived herself as superior to classroom teachers and seemed to believe that she knows better and can decide upon the best for the school based on her experience and position. I posit that such views of superiority reflect the country’s culture with regard to leadership and power described in previous sections. Tremmel (2007) states that traditional organisational leadership in Oman is bureaucratic, while Budhwar et al. (2002) suggest that the main method of communication for Omani managers is through their immediate superiority. Under such an authoritative style of leadership, it was difficult to create an inclusive culture through which fair processes of change are discussed and planned by all staff and where schools emphasise the pooling of different professional expertise in collaborative processes (as highlighted in chapter
3). I suggest here that the structure of the system with its hierarchy in decision making makes it very difficult to create an inclusive culture where there are high levels of staff collaboration, commitment and problem-solving, as described by Ainscow (1999).

On the other hand, the two school administrators in Newtown School were showing a more flexible style of leadership where parents were welcomed and various pupils frequently visited the social worker office. Accordingly, I consider that there was more room for school initiatives and programmes to improve school effectiveness. The school initiatives described in chapter 7, pages 140-143 reveal that school staff were encouraged to think of solutions to challenges the school faces and that resulted in developing these initiatives. Although the initiatives were not effective in moving the school towards creating a welcoming culture, they can be enhanced and built on in the future.

Finally, I argue here that the focus on standards, as I described earlier, overlooked other school issues like mutual respect and celebration of differences and allowed space for staff to ignore direction with regard to such issues as they knew that the follow-up procedures in this regard are not strict. The negative attitudes of principals doubled the problem and created a culture of humiliation and abuse in both schools. Based on these negative attitudes, the principal in City School witnessed the verbal abuse of the five pupils in the integration classroom but did not take action to prevent it (see chapter 8, page 202-206 ) although the MoE forbids all forms of abuse (see chapter 4). Similarly, the school administrators in Newtown School witnessed the physical abuse Ali faced during the photography activity (see chapter 7, page 164), but instead of documenting the incident and opening a formal investigation (as directed by formal documents), they kept silent and asked the pupil to calm down and respect his classroom teachers.

Accordingly, I suggest that attention needs to be paid to all the interconnected issues discussed in this chapter; with specific consideration to providing specialised training to heads based on inclusive values to support leaders to ensure a fair process of change through involving all within school in the change process (Ainscow, 2012; Ainscow et al., 2006; Furman, 2012; Kugelmass and Ainscow, 2004; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2006).
In the following section I describe the relations with parents in both schools as creating a high level of cooperation with families. Riehl (2000) asserts that it is essential to take real steps to work with parents in moving schools’ practices towards inclusiveness and responding to pupils’ differences.

**Lack of parental and community involvement**

With regard to parental involvement, Lipsky and Gartner (1999) and Hornby and Witte (2010) argue that parental involvement is one of the main factors in ensuring effective and successful programmes for inclusive education. Similarly, Engelbrecht et al. (2006) report that the expectation of quality education for all pupils with various abilities requires the collaboration of all stakeholders and the involvement of parents and community. Believing in the major role of parental involvement in improving the learning experience of all pupils, the MoE regulations emphasise the importance of having regular meetings with parents, and each school is expected to have a parents’ council (see chapter 4). Yet data from both schools reveals the lack of real collaboration with parents. As discussed earlier, the principal in City School prevented parents from entering school without formal invitation because parents were perceived as ‘needless’ or ‘unable’ to support the learning of their children and that their visits distracted staff from doing their job (see chapter 8, page 209). Actually, although most interviewed parents were unable to speak Arabic because they were from Baluchi and Zanzibari backgrounds – which I consider as one of the main obstacles to Nasser, Hilal, Waleed and Muna’s academic inclusion – there were other issues that prevented the four pupils from participation and achieving. These issues included the physical and emotional abuse Hilal was facing on a daily basis at home, where his father would beat him and his mother when he was drunk as described in chapter 7. Similarly, Muna and Waleed were unable to concentrate because of their language difficulties and because they were feeling ‘homesick’ being away from Zanzibar and their old friends, while Waleed said that he was unable to focus in school because he was feeling very upset and sad because his mother could not join them from Zanzibar (chapter 8, page 198). The lack of communication with parents prevented staff from knowing certain information about pupils and their home lives, which were real barriers to responding to pupils’ differences. Instead, staff
concentrated on following the national policy where learning difficulty is linked to mental abilities and IQ, and socio-demographic factors are overlooked.

By contrast, Newtown School had an open-door policy with parents and the school reception area was nicely decorated to welcome them. I frequently saw parents visiting the social worker’s room and on some occasions sitting with the vice-principal. The social worker seemed to be supportive and her ability to speak Baluchi enabled her to have good communication with parents. Accordingly, I expected that staff are well informed about pupils’ backgrounds and home lives, and were having close discussions with parents regarding their children’s learning and achievement. However, it appeared that most parents’ visits were regarding pupils’ registration, pupils’ transfer, and completing pupils’ files like bringing certificates and other papers requested by staff.

Interviews with mothers revealed sensitive issues about pupils that school staff did not know about (see chapter 7, page 156-158). All interviewed parents in both schools said that the staff never discussed with them the progress of their children, although MoE regulations emphasise the need for frequent meeting with parents and involving them in the learning process of their children. Omar’s mother said that she approached classroom teachers several times to support her son, but they did nothing and continued to ignore his problems. Her frustration was clearly expressed in her sentences quoted in chapter 7, page 169. Similarly, Amal’s mother said that although she was trying to support the learning of her daughter through working closely with classroom teachers, she felt that school staff did not want her to visit the school on a frequent basis. This lack of parental involvement was a major issue that prevented the 15 described pupils from participating and achieving like their peers, and limited the schools’ ability to identify the barriers various pupils were facing. In turn, this constrained the schools’ abilities to respond to pupils’ differences. I refer here to the argument provided in the earlier sections that staff were largely implementers of national policies and their communication with parents did not exceed this role. Most communication with parents related to absence of pupils for the school records, meeting the requirement of the MoE for numeric data. The lack of good communication with parents limited schools’ abilities to support the presence, participation and achievement of various pupils.
Besides limited communication with parents, limited communication with community was also evident in both schools which increased schools’ inability to respond to differences. Research argues that schools can help pupils if what happens inside schools as well as outside schools (families and communities) changes in order to enrich pupils’ learning (Ainscow et al., 2013). In this regard, Dyson and Todd (2010) argue that it is vital to build relations with communities to achieve real changes in schools. Yet it was noted that both schools had limited relations and communication with agencies and ministries that were capable of providing support to pupils. For example, the information provided about the schools’ clinics and the nurses revealed that school staff were unaware of the amount of help that can be provided by those nurses. The serious lack of collaboration with agencies like the child rights protection committees and other child protection agencies left various pupils facing verbal and physical abuse when there were people in charge of their protection and support. Generally, several pupils were left without support that the government is already committed to provide because of weak utilisation of existed resources.

Therefore, the process of implementing inclusion needs to be carefully planned where classroom teachers’ concerns need to be addressed and overcome (Avramidis and Norwich, 2002). Also, there is a need for a significant re-structuring of mainstream schools to remove structural barriers between different groups of pupils and staff, achieving of some degree of consensus amongst adults regarding values of respect for difference and the commitment to offering all pupils with equal opportunities for learning, and encouraging a high level of staff collaboration and involvement with communities around the schools. These factors are all essential to achieve inclusion and develop an equitable response to difference (Dyson, 2004).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn together my findings from interviews with senior policy makers, and my data from Newtown and City Schools, in order to understand how Omani primary schools respond to pupils’ differences. This has led me to identify barriers that that are limiting the capacity of the system to ensure the participation and learning of all pupils.
This analysis, which has concentrated on exploring within-school issues, as well as taking account of beyond-school influences, was organised in relation to three dimensions: practices, policies, and cultures. It also related my research about what is happening in Oman with the recommendations of relevant international research literature, as discussed in chapter 4.

The analysis and the interpretation of data collected from the national, school and classroom levels suggests that the difficulties in the Omani school context in terms of responding to pupils’ differences can be summarised in relation to three interconnected themes: concepts, attitudes and structures. These emerging themes are summarised in the following table.
### Table 4. Summary of difficulties/barriers at national, school, and classroom levels

#### Issues to do with concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National level</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Classroom level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- There is limited understanding of all, diversity, difference, equity and inclusion.</td>
<td>- School policies translate national understandings of concepts and trends including the focus on standards.</td>
<td>- Not all pupils belong to mainstream classrooms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- National understanding of concepts is influenced by international trends and external agencies.</td>
<td>- Misunderstanding of national policies including the role of school development plans, IPEs, collaborative work and reflective teaching.</td>
<td>- Classroom teachers role is limited to teaching “normal pupils”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The national focus on standards participated in constructing pupils’ differences which are mainly around achievement.</td>
<td>- Limited understanding of parental role.</td>
<td>- Misunderstanding of national policies including pupils-centered teaching as appears in MoE documents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Pupils differences are perceived as arising from pupils internal characteristics</td>
<td>- Limited understanding of the role of school. Staff perceived their role as limited to teaching ‘normal’ pupils.</td>
<td>- Misunderstanding of IPEs, differentiated instruction, collaborative work, and reflective teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Role of mainstream schools is limited to implementing national policies and transmitting knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There is lack of unified vision for education and how to respond to pupils’ differences.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Issues to do with structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National policy level</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Classroom level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- The structure of the school system (three-track system of special needs, mainstream, and international and private education).</td>
<td>- Implementation of centralised programmes including staff recruitment and transfer, curriculum, classroom teachers’ guides, classroom teachers training and infrastructure.</td>
<td>- Standardised classroom teachers practices based on overreliance on classroom teachers guides and text-books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- There is no collaboration or unified vision for the three systems.</td>
<td>- LD programme and integration programmes are implemented without preparing needed structure including classroom teachers training, school environment, clear framework and vision.</td>
<td>- Seating and grouping are techniques used to exclude whoever is perceived as ‘different’ or unable to meet national standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Various centralised policies are developed by external agencies and experts including the current school system (BE) without examining the suitability of these policies and programmes to the context.</td>
<td>- Lack of collaboration and teamwork limited schools’ ability to respond to pupils’ differences.</td>
<td>- Learning Difficulty programme and identification of needs are used a judgmental techniques.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In mainstream, centralised and rigid are focusing on standards that are targeting the majority of pupils to meet the national standards.</td>
<td>- Various resources including the schools nurses, parents’ council, and government bodies including child-protection committees are not utilised.</td>
<td>- Lack of reflective teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Centralised curriculum, assessment, classroom teachers guides, classroom teachers training programmes, resources, and LD programme</td>
<td>- Authoritative leadership limited principal’s abilities to move the schools towards responding to pupils’ differences.</td>
<td>- Strict classroom routine with minimum pupils’ participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Movement of heads/instability.</td>
<td>- Principals didn’t have active role in responding to pupil’s differences where they used to focus on ‘routine’ issues including maintenance of the school.</td>
<td>- Limited teaching techniques to ensure that all are participating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Lack of follow-up mechanisms for various programmes, including the integration programme.</td>
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</table>

#### Issues to do with attitudes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National Policy level</th>
<th>School level</th>
<th>Classroom level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Senior policy makers believe those pupils’ differences are ‘because of internal deficits’.</td>
<td>- Senior policy makers negative attitudes about pupils with disabilities, with low IQ, and low achievers are echoed at schools level.</td>
<td>- Abuse culture (verbal and physical).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not all pupils belong to the mainstream.</td>
<td>- Staff negative attitudes were linked with low expectation.</td>
<td>- Classroom routines created fear among pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some pupils ‘with difficulties’ can hinder the learning of others.</td>
<td>- Staff believed that their role was limited to teaching “normal” pupils.</td>
<td>- Most classroom teachers believed that they are employed to teach ‘normal’ pupils.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some pupils need to be ‘fixed/treated’.</td>
<td>- Staff believed that parents had limited role in supporting the learning of their children.</td>
<td>- Classroom teachers believed that some pupils are the business of others outside the mainstream classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Fixing need to be done by specialists out of the mainstream classroom.</td>
<td>- Some staff tended to physical and verbally abuses some pupils.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Senior policy makers attitudes were linked to disability and IQ.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Senior policy makers believed that all pupils within the mainstream are of similar abilities and should meet national standards.</td>
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</table>
What I am proposing, therefore, is that the difficulties Omani schools face in responding to pupils’ differences relate to conceptual, structural and attitudinal barriers. Using these themes, in the next chapter I propose a context-specific model of barriers to responding to pupils’ differences within the Omani school system. This formulation can, I argue, be used to develop strategies for moving the education forward in a more inclusive direction.
CHAPTER 10
CONTRIBUTIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

This final chapter concludes the thesis by reflecting upon the study in order to define its contribution to knowledge, draw out the implications, and offer some recommendations for future actions. In so doing my primary focus is on how Omani primary schools respond to pupil differences. At the same time, I draw out possible implications for those in other countries who are addressing similar challenges, particularly those working in similar centralised policy contexts.

As I have explained, the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion was broadly adopted to guide the collection, organisation and discussion of the data. This helped me to explore aspects of schools’ policies, practices and cultures in order to develop a better understanding of the issues involved in responding to pupils’ differences. It also focused my attention more specifically on the barriers that prevent progress in addressing this issue, something that is also encouraged by the Index. This concern with barriers led me to look at national policies, something that was particularly necessary in the light of the very centralised school system in Oman.

In what follows, therefore, I start by summarising what has emerged from the study in terms of the barriers that limit the capacity of Omani schools to respond to pupils’ differences.

Contribution to knowledge

Having finally arrived at the end of my research journey, it is necessary to reflect on the relevant contribution that this study has for the field of inclusive education and practice in relation to responding to pupils’ differences in primary schools. In the following sections, I describe the contribution this study has made with regard to the specific Omani context, as well as to the wider educational context.

Contribution to the Omani context

The difficulties in the Omani school context in terms of responding to pupils’ differences are partly to do with confusion regarding key concepts and misunderstanding of international trends. Difficulties are also related to the unsuitable
structures which make it difficult to implement the centrally adopted trends and thinking throughout the system. All of that is driven by sets of attitudes and assumptions that influence the way policies are interpreted and implemented at the level of schools, some of which create barriers to the presence, participation and achievement of some pupils.

These arguments can be summarised in terms of a model that helps to show the interconnections between different factors (see the figure 33 below).

Figure 29. A model for explaining the barriers hindering the Omani school system from responding to pupils’ differences.

The model suggests that when discussing and theorising barriers to responding to pupils’ differences, it is important to look at the three sets of barriers as being interconnected. In what follows I reflect upon each of them in turn, showing their impact and connections to the other two sets of barriers.

**Conceptual barriers.** The study suggests that the development of the school system is influenced by international agencies, including UNESCO, UNICEF, The World Bank and many other external agencies and experts. As a result, EFA, quality education and inclusive education have become noteworthy parts of the government rhetoric. Yet, all of these concepts go through translation and interpretation processes which are shaped
by internal factors and pressures, including the beliefs and perceptions of stakeholders. So, for example, I have shown how the focus on ‘all’ in many international documents has resulted in a misconception that this means ‘some’. I have also explained how notions of quality are shaped by an in-put/out-put approach, resulting in the grouping of pupils according to their attainment. Meanwhile, the term ‘inclusion’ is considered new in the Omani context and understood as involving efforts to offer access to pupils with disabilities in units within government schools, based on a process of diagnosis and selection.

The limited and often confused understandings of these concepts, and the reliance on suggestions from external agencies, have, I argue, resulted in a policy process that lacks clarity of goals, meaningful frameworks for action, and a unified vision that could guide practice in the field. At the same time, some policies, such as the integration of the learning difficulty programme, seem to be themselves creators of discrimination and exclusion. Meanwhile, the lack of involvement of the various stakeholders, such as school staff, pupils, parents and community, in discussion about policy making compounds these difficulties. As a result, policies are unable to respond to the challenges faced within specific schools’ contexts.

**Structural barriers.** My professional experience as a member of the Ministry of Education was an important factor in the way I experienced and interpreted the data I collected in the two schools (see Chapter 4). In particular, it made it relatively easy for me to make sense of the hierarchy of decision making in the education system. On the other hand, it also presented a challenge in the sense that my familiarity with the system might lead me to find what I expected to find.

As I have also explained, policies are centrally designed, with the MoE in full control of building schools, recruitment and transfer of staff, designing the curriculum and assessment procedures, controlling budgets, and providing resources. Schools are expected to implement those policies and show commitment to various centralised programmes. In this policy context, school staff, including principals, are excluded from decision-making processes and various programmes are imposed on schools without communication with staff or the preparation of a necessary infrastructure to support their introduction. The senior policy makers I consulted at the national level
believed that this centralisation will ensure accountability, which is based upon state criteria and frameworks, rather than developed at the local level.

Within this highly centralised system, senior policy makers’ understandings of international trends have led to the structuring of the school system and the programmes within it through a three-track system of mainstream, special education, and international/private schools. There is a lack of a unified vision, goals and collaboration between the three separate tracks, including policies for teacher training, curriculum, assessment and resources. Based on this structure, pupils are grouped and placed in each system according to their characteristics or, in some instances, as a result of pressure from their parents.

In mainstream schools all pupils are expected to meet the same set of objectives and national standards. With this in mind, the same sets of textbooks, classroom teachers’ guides, resources and classroom teachers’ training is centrally decided and provided. As I have shown, these arrangements proved to be not designed to consider the various differences that can be found among pupils in mainstream classrooms. This suggests that the goal of the mainstream is to assimilate pupils into a standard set of experiences, rather than welcoming, responding to and celebrating their differences. More specifically, classroom teachers are not trained to respond to differences, the curriculum is not designed with all pupils in mind, and resources are often not suitable. Together these factors result in the inability of some pupils to access the curriculum and, therefore, to participate in lessons and achieve. Further, where children were seen to struggle, it was apparent that many of the classroom teachers I met were unable to provide appropriate support due to a lack of skills and knowledge as well as lack of willingness to do so.

Within this context, pupils who show an inability to meet the national standards are identified, categorised and labelled. Rather than modifying the curriculum, assessment and teaching strategies to respond to their differences, various programmes are introduced to modify and fit pupils within the same rigid system through the implementation of special education techniques. Booth and Ainscow (1998) describe such approaches as ‘assimilation techniques’, rather than the celebration or acceptance of diversity.
The influence of these various structural factors means that differences are, I argue, socially constructed within the Omani school system. Here I relate my argument to Ainscow et al. (2007) description of the English school system, where they say that a cluster of perceived differences around children’s attainments and capacities for learning have called forth a range of practices in schools and classrooms (sometimes directed by national policy); for example, streaming, seating by levels of attainment, grouping by homogeneous attainment, grouping by differential attainment, social grouping, withdrawing low achievers and providing adult support.

Within this rigid, centralised Omani system, classroom practices are standardised and classroom teachers rarely modify the content or their teaching strategies to respond to differences of various pupils. As I have shown, there is an over-reliance on the centrally devised classroom teachers’ guides. I have also illustrated a lack of skills amongst classroom teachers in how to devise lessons with pupil differences in mind, as well as negative attitudes about differences and pupils. Within the two schools, various classroom classroom teachers stated that they do not have to make any changes to their practices, as they believed that this is not their role, but rather the role of ‘professionals’ outside the mainstream classroom. In these ways, pupils were seen to be marginalised and, in some instances, even excluded from the curriculum and participation in learning. Nevertheless, some classroom teachers did show a willingness to make some modifications, but the complexities of the policy contexts as interpreted at the school level, plus the lack of training, made such changes difficult. As a result, the majority of classroom teachers within the study stated that some pupils do not fit in the mainstream and need to be transferred to special or segregated provisions, not least because they hinder the learning of ‘others’.

As I have explained, the segregated provisions referred to were mainly special schools or special units within the schools. The units allow access for pupils seen as having mental or hearing disabilities and are believed to be a form of inclusion. Unfortunately, the structure of and practices implemented within the units does not reduce the marginalisation of pupils within them. Instead, the pupils involved, and indeed, the classroom teachers, were largely separate and overlooked. As a result, pupils were totally excluded from having access to a wider learning experience, or even social contact with other pupils in mainstream classrooms.
All of this takes place within school contexts that lack a clear vision and framework for inclusion, and where the lack of co-operation between the mainstream and special education systems adds to the sense of separation, exclusion and marginalisation. In these contexts, it seems that the goals of inclusion were mainly understood in terms of social values, and raising awareness about disabilities, instead of offering all pupils equal learning opportunities.

Further barriers emerge from the centralisation of the system and hierarchy in decision making, which reduces schools’ abilities to respond to differences, particularly when the decisions of recruitment, transfer, training, curriculum modifications and assessment strategies are planned centrally. School staff, including principals, are required to ensure that their schools and pupils implement and follow the national policies, frameworks and programmes. Therefore, practitioners have little space to modify the national policies and programme, even though these were themselves identified as creators of problems and exclusion. Principals’ abilities as leaders of change were also hindered because of centrally made decisions with regard to their frequent transfer to other schools. As a result, they have little time to get to know their schools, and to build a culture of collaboration and acceptance of the sort that is such a strong feature of the international research literature on the promotion of inclusion and equity. In this way, central policies are seen to limit staff autonomy, creating an over-reliance on national guidelines and a culture of passiveness.

It is worth adding that the concepts of pupil and parental choice that is also a feature of some of the international research on ways of promoting more inclusive schools do not exist in the current Omani school system. Rather, pupils are centrally distributed amongst schools according to the catchment areas. At the same time, decisions about placement in special education programmes and units are made by professionals, based on diagnostic tests, and with little involvement of pupils and parents.

**Attitudinal barriers.** The way national policies were interpreted in the two schools seems to be influenced by strong sets of perceptions about differences amongst practitioners. As I have shown, the general view is that only some children with certain characteristics can be included in the mainstream. This again reflects the way in which perceptions of differences are socially constructed within particular contexts,
influenced by the national policies and programmes discussed above. The dominance of the medical model of disability is clearly evident in the whole context and plays a major role in the way differences are perceived.

Based on this set of perceptions, beliefs and understandings, policies – including how the system is structured – are designed and implemented. The standards agenda and the ideas about who can contribute to the sustainable development of the country as active members added another layer of complexity to this process, influencing the creation of a culture of rejection and exclusion of those who are perceived as being ‘unable’ or ‘below standard’.

As noted in chapter 8, this pattern of thinking is widely discussed in the literature. In particular, I referred to the literature review presented by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) who concluded that attitudes play a major role in the success and failure of movements towards inclusion. Although they stated that it is very difficult to draw conclusions regarding the way such negative attitudes are shaped, as most studies were based on questionnaires and the agree/disagree approach, they state that system and school structures play a major role in creating attitudes of rejection. The implication is that if systems are re-structured and better resources are allocated, that may help to change negative attitudes.

In summary, then, my study provides a formulation that could be used to inform such a restructuring process as far as Oman is concerned. It does so by revealing the barriers that make it difficult for schools to respond to learner differences. As I have explained, these relate to the interconnection of concepts, structures and attitudes. In this sense, the restructuring of the system refers to the interconnection of all the factors I have identified. This analysis points to the sorts of positive actions that would be needed in order to promote great inclusion within the system. In particular, it suggests a need for teacher education in relation to the development of more inclusive practices; the re-structuring of the curriculum to be more flexible and responsive to differences; and changes in schools’ infrastructure to welcome all.

The evidence I have presented reinforces the view that the process of responding to differences by identifying and addressing barriers is never a simple and
straightforward issue. Therefore, when planning change and improvements to create schools that are responsive to pupils’ differences, careful attention needs to be paid to the concepts, attitudes and the structure of the system.

**Contribution to the wider context**

I am not intending to draw or seek generalisations out of this research, as it has been context-specific. However, carrying out context-specific research has proved to be invaluable for looking in depth at factors affecting specific contexts at a given time. As a result, this research confirms claims, such as those of Rouse and Florian (1996), who state that addressing cultural and political contexts within educational research is highly relevant to studies of inclusive education. Context-specific research is therefore necessary for identifying how schools respond to pupils’ differences and what the issues are that can be identified to ensure that schools are capable of moving towards more inclusiveness.

The study is likely to be particularly relevant to those working in centralised education systems. It has shown the impact of this factor for educational reform in the Omani school system, where decisions are made by national government and senior policy makers, with clear lack of collaboration and involvement of schools, parents, and pupils in decision making. The reforms had relied on implementing and adopting policies, concepts and recommendation suggested by external agencies (mainly UN agencies) and experts who did not have a clear understanding about the social, cultural, political or social characteristics of the context. Therefore, various centralised policies proved to be limited in scope and creators of confusion and contradictions, and produced various forms of marginalisation at schools’ level.

Therefore, unless systems move towards at least some degree of decentralisation, where bridges of communication are built with various stakeholders, and unless schools are put at the centre of the reform and development initiatives, responding to pupils’ differences in schools is likely to continue to face challenges and reforms will not make the impacts they are intended to.

This argument confirms the findings from other research which suggests that impetus for change and the particular focus and direction of any changes in policy and practice introduced needs to come from within the particular context, and be generated by
practitioners’ own understanding (Dyson and Gallannaugh, 2007). Here, Dyson and Gallannaugh (2007) emphasises the role of school and its staff and rejects the idea of perceiving schools as victims of the contradiction between standards and inclusion:

> an account which sees schools simply as the victims of national policy contradictions overlooks the agency which schools and their classroom teachers are able to exercise and, therefore, the capacity they may have to make sense of contradictory imperatives (p. 475).

At this stage, it is important to note that this research goes beyond studying special educational needs to discuss broader concepts of responding to diversity and processes of inclusion and exclusion. This is unlike most literature about Middle East and Gulf countries, which is disability-oriented (Alborno, 2013; Aldaihani, 2010). Therefore, I believe that my findings connect to the arguments presented by Booth and Ainscow (1998), in which they state that research needs to move from discussion of special education as a separate construct to a broader discussion of inclusion and exclusion. In that book, the authors also discuss the significance of studying perspectives and showing their implications for understanding the processes of inclusion and exclusion in each context. Through presenting case studies from eight countries, they argued that: ‘there is no single perspective on inclusion or exclusion and practices cannot be generalized across countries without attention to local contexts and meanings’ (p.4). Therefore, they state that it is vital to have deep knowledge about national and regional policies, legislations, and cultural histories in order to construct a framework for a local understanding of inclusion and exclusion in any context.

As I have gathered data from micro and macro levels with an insider knowledge about the Omani context and shown the complexities and contradictions of the system without aiming to make any generalisations, I believe this research can contribute to the international understanding and debates with regard to inclusion and exclusion, and how these concepts can be studied.

Related to this point, my study has looked specifically at classroom practices through the experiences of 15 pupils, who I believed to be marginalised in their schools. Although the research is not ‘pupil voice’ research, it nevertheless has provided in-
depth information about classroom practices and the daily school experience of the pupils. Data revealed that those pupils were not included in any form of decision-making process. The practices were not responsive to their differences and that resulted in lack of engagement and participation, and low achievement. This leads me to argue that movements towards inclusion require a consideration of pupils’ experiences. This argument is in line with arguments presented by Rose and Shevlin (2004) who posited that movements towards change require listening to pupils, which then re-directs our actions in response to what we hear from them. Thinking about research in other countries, therefore, I endorse this recommendation.

The findings of the study have shown an absence of clear articulation of goals in the development of the school education system and clear lack of collaboration between various levels and members of the same level including senior policy makers themselves. As I have argued, the centralised policies with their top-down hierarchy in decision making resulted in the adoption of vague definitions of key concepts and created a great deal of confusion and contradiction in the whole system. The lack of collaboration also resulted in the implementation of policies that are not responsive to pupils’ differences. The scattered efforts and lack of unified vision was stated by various senior policy makers, and school staff. This confirms Plummer's (2005) argument that ‘people in Oman do not work in teams’ (p.69) due to rigid hierarchical structures (Common, 2011). Findings in this research are also in line with Fullan’s (2006) argument that a lack of communication can be a real creator of confusion, which in turn leads to marginalisation and limits the ability of schools and systems to respond to differences. Therefore, this research contributes to the discussions with regard to responding to diversity and the impact of centralisation and marketisation of education on hindering schools' abilities to respond to pupils’ differences.

The above arguments are in line with the findings of other studies that were conducted in similar centralised systems (Aldaihani, 2011; Constantinou, 2014; Eliadou, 2013) where the centralisation of school systems, lack of collaboration, lack of vision and misunderstanding of concepts were described as major barriers to responding to pupils’ differences and implementing inclusion. Therefore, this study confirms the need for movements towards decentralisation of the school systems, thereby creating better communication and dialogue between various stakeholders in order to stimulate
reflection on practice and to promote ideas of shared responsibility for the inclusion of all pupils. In addition, the findings in this study can offer a lens through which people in other centralised educational systems can address issues of inclusion/exclusion in their school systems.

Evident across all levels of the data was that pupil differences were actually constructed rather than described; that was done through policy texts, the government statistics, and dialogue between and among senior policy makers and staff, particularly classroom teachers. The whole school system was structured to be a three-track system based on senior policy makers’ beliefs and understanding of who belongs where, what differences are considered and need attention and what do not, and who can be assimilated in mainstream classrooms and who cannot. Such labels filtered down to schools through the centralised national policies and therefore, new labels appeared inside classrooms like low/high achievers, able/un able, above/below class level. In addition, classroom teachers’ and staff talk was full of labelling and categorisation including ‘stupid’, ‘the boy with runny nose’, ‘hopeless’ and ‘low achievers’. The ways the labelling seems to be presented introduced interventions and assimilated pupils to reach the national standards, but others were aiming to exclude rather than support pupils. According to the labelling, various policies, programmes and interventions are designed and planned, and various pupils were excluded. The above discussion strongly connects to the arguments presented by Ainscow et al. (2007) with regard to differences in primary schools. They suggest that: ‘differences in the primary school population are not so much identified as constructed; that these forms of difference are understood in particular ways and explained in particular ways; and that implications for policy and practice flow from these constructions’ (p.2). The same arguments were presented by Alves et al. (2016) who contend that pupils’ identities and differences are constructed through texts and teacher talk. Artiles and Dyson (2005) hold the same views; they assert that understandings of difference in primary education may change over time and vary between cultural contexts, whether that be at the national level or at the level of particular institutions (Artiles and Dyson, 2005; Raveaud, 2005, cited in Ainscow et al., 2007).

The above argument applies to other contexts, particularly those with similar centralised school systems. An example can be seen from the study conducted by
Aldaihani (2011) on inclusion of pupils described as having learning difficulties in Kuwait. She argues that the culture of each country, its beliefs, understandings (particularly those of senior policy makers) and the economic and political contexts shape how differences are perceived and described and that in turn shapes school practices. Therefore, and based on the information presented in this study, others in similar contexts can start questioning their contexts and raise questions about why pupils in their schools are categorised in certain ways, and for what purposes? Who is responsible for that categorisation and how can policies and practices in that regard be improved?

I need to mention here that any change with regard to policy responses to differences requires:

...recognition that inclusive and equitable responses to diversity necessarily involve classroom teachers working within their professional and institutional contexts to make sense of the complex situations they face. This in turn implies that the role of central policy is not to generate fixed categorisations and responses to those categorisations, but to support and facilitate responses that can be made at school and classroom level (Ainscow et al., 2007, p. 16).

**Methodological contributions.** Alongside its contributions regarding ways of responding to learner differences, particularly in centralised education systems, the study offers some ideas about research methods that may be relevant to other researchers. In particular, it shows the value of using qualitative research, where the case study approach made it possible to examine the complexities of the learning experiences of several pupils and see how primary schools respond to their differences. Here, I refer to Stake’s (1995) argument that agreeing with the ideas of the case investigates a contemporary phenomenon. Stake (1995) states that the case study approach allows for the investigation of real-life events by studying the particular cases within their contexts to develop a clearer meaning of the studied phenomenon. More specifically, this research confirms the suitability of using qualitative case studies in schools and falls in line with a similar argument provided by Ghesquière et al. (2004) who explained that qualitative case studies: ‘had enormous success in educational research because it allows researchers to unravel the complex school and classroom realities’ (p. 172). This research also confirms an argument presented by Cohen et al. (2007, p. 396) that observation permits the gathering of ‘live data’ from naturally occurring social situations. These views
enabled me to look into what was taking place in context rather than relying on second-hand accounts.

The study also offers a further set of experiences with regard to the use of the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011) in a new context. Although the Index was not used in this study as a tool to help the two case studies evaluate their movement towards inclusion, the material of the Index and related indicators expanded and enhanced my understanding of inclusive education. The indicators of the Index broadened my perspective of the new world of inclusive values, teaching practices, curriculum options, forms of involvement and relationships among stakeholders. In addition, the wealth of information provided by the Index informed the formulation of the interview questions, the observations, and consequently guided the data analysis process as well as the setting of future recommendations.

Yet, regardless of the described suitability of the Index to be used in various contexts as a tool to support schools to evaluate their performance with regard to their movement towards inclusion (Alborno, 2013; Black-Hawkins, 2010; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Heung, 2006; Smith, 2005), the Omani school context does not seem to be ready yet to adopt the Index, as the definition of inclusion provided by the Index is still very broad compared to what is employed in the Omani school system. It seems to be a very early stage to suggest the Index as a tool to support schools in evaluating their performance while the school system is still so centralised with its top-down hierarchy in decision making and the limited role of school to make changes or decisions with regard to improvements.

It is worth adding that the use of PP proved a very successful tool to encourage young pupils to express their feelings and discuss issues about their school experiences. Therefore, this study confirms the previous literature which argued that cameras are particularly beneficial when working with children with poor written or verbal literacy (Elliot, 1991; Prosser, 1998).

**Implications and recommendations**

I now feel more equipped to present a set of recommendations which can facilitate moving the Omani school system to be more responsive to pupils’ differences. It is important, though that I emphasise I am not presenting a ready-packaged set of
solutions to be implemented, but a set of suggestions to enhance thinking within the system.

Before moving to the recommendations, it is vital to state that the detailed account of both schools as well as the information from the national policy level reveal some positive system characteristics that should be enforced, such as (1) the great commitment of the government to EFA and the expansion of education as well as the real willingness to ensure its quality; (2) the availability of free schooling, books, transportation and resources to all pupils within schools; (3) the availability of classroom teachers as well as non-teaching staff in all schools to help reduce the load on classroom teachers and encourage them to focus on teaching and supporting pupils; (4) the fact that the MoE has made connections with other ministries that could support the safety and learning of pupils including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Development; (5) the government is allocating a big budget for classroom teachers’ training and enormous efforts are being made to provide them with the skills and expertise to meet the government standards; (6) some staff in both schools expressed a genuine willingness to support their pupils and some initiatives were described in this regard, although some were not fruitful due to the barriers mentioned earlier, and (7) with the implementation of the integration programme the door is opened for the movement towards the inclusion values including the acceptance of differences.

On the other hand, the study has identified various issues that acted as barriers to inclusion and responding to differences which were with regard to concepts, structure and attitudes. Therefore, the following section provides a set of recommendations to deal with conceptual, structural and attitudes barriers in the three levels of data collection – policy, school and classroom levels (see table 5).
Table 5. Matrix of recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Structural</th>
<th>Conceptual</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National policy level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The matrix is developed after the thematic analysis undertaken on the data collected from the national level as well as from both schools (their policies, cultures and classroom practices). At the early stages of the analysis process, I kept a record of the issues that seemed to be problematic in each level. I then collated the issues under themes which resulted in producing the typology.

In what follows I offer some recommendations of what, I think, needs to be considered in relation to my typology of barriers – concepts, structure, and attitudes. This final stage includes offering a set of suggestions to deal with the issues that seemed to be problematic under each level of the typology (conceptual barriers, structural and attitudes). Additionally, appendix 18 offers detailed recommendations for the policy level, school level and classroom level.

Recommendations with regard to the structures

Responding to pupils’ differences requires a move away from centralisation of the school system which views schools as implementers of national agendas towards a gradual decentralisation, which would allow more power to be distributed downstream to school principals, classroom teachers and pupils. The decentralisation will require paying extra attention to the voices of the staff relating to issues such as transfer, training, and development plans. This will increase the individual’s ability to engage in, be motivated by, take responsibility for and develop a positive response to new initiatives. Involving staff in policy-making decisions can increase staff confidence in the policy and will increase their self-esteem and value. National policies should also emphasise the voices of pupils and their parents and consider them as active participants in the development and learning process.
Decentralisation and considering staff voice would allow more room for innovation, reflection in practice, and collaboration. The collaboration will allow the developing of a unified vision for education, and would ensure that all involved members including schools are committed to the national policies and agendas. Accordingly, senior policy makers, educators, and school staff will be motivated to explore possible measures to eliminate disadvantages to education for groups of children who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation, particularly children with disabilities, children from non-Arabic backgrounds, and children with socio-economic problems. This can lead to a system that is responsive to differences and suitable to the Omani context.

It is essential at this stage to consider the structure of the current school system with its total separation of the mainstream, special education and international and private schools’ policies and programmes. Responding to differences requires the adoption of a comprehensive system that targets ‘all’ and therefore various national policies including the schools’ infrastructure, curriculum, assessment and resources need to modified to consider diversity and move away from objective-based agenda where all pupils must meet the same rigid objectives and agenda towards a flexible set of standards that are relevant to pupils’ lives and can ensure that all pupils regardless of their differences can actively participate and achieve.

In addition, national policies should emphasise the staff voice including transfer, training and development plans. Failure to do so will stifle the individual’s ability to engage in, be motivated by, take responsibility for and develop a positive response to new initiatives. Involving staff in policy-making decisions increases staff confidence in the policy and will increase their self-esteem and value. National policies should also emphasise the voices of the pupils and their parents and consider them as active participants in the development and learning process.

Finally, classroom teachers’ education programmes need to be amended to focus on providing highly motivated classroom teachers equipped with skills to respond to differences in the mainstream classrooms. To achieve this, extra collaboration between the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education is required which needs to be based on the national objectives of education and concepts of equity, justice, inclusion and quality. In addition, refresher courses and in-service
training programmes need to be based on the needs of classroom teachers and schools where practical instead of theoretical issues are covered. The training should include issues of attitudes and beliefs to ensure that positive attitudes towards all pupils are built, and to equip classroom teachers with enough knowledge and skills to be confident and capable of supporting a diverse range of children in mainstream schools. The training programmes should involve classroom teachers as well as special education teachers, as common knowledge and skills are necessary to ensure that all are capable of supporting pupils.

**Recommendations with regard to concepts**

I suggest that the school system needs to move away from importing and adopting external ideas and policies that are designed and tested in other contexts towards adopting a critical approach through which external agendas and ideas are critically analysed and decisions are made upon the priorities of the context and what suits it. The movement towards decentralisation that I suggested in the previous section will help in achieving this aim and will help in generating a clear understanding of various concepts and trends as they go through debate and discussion which can ensure that various concepts and trends are analysed and parties are involved in critical thinking and analysis. Such public debate and discussion will help in developing a unified vision for education which is currently missing in the Omani context. A unified vision will pave the way to the creation of unified objectives, development plans, and follow-up procedures for the mainstream and special education programmes. However, I need to stress here that public debate and discussion need to be based on values of equity and justice where ‘all’ pupils are perceived as having equal rights and capable of learning together, and where differences are celebrated and used as challenges and opportunities for improvements. Accordingly, the role of schools needs to be reconsidered and the focus on quality as an in-put/out-put approach needs to shift to viewing the broader aspects of schooling and education in general.

More importantly, inclusion needs to be a central concept in the newly designed educational philosophy and strategy which will enable the country to widen the opportunities and possibilities, not only for all children to be placed in school, but more importantly, to ensure they also participate fully and achieve at school.
Nevertheless, the movement towards implementing inclusion need to be gradual and based on collecting qualitative data about the system and schools to decide how better change can be adopted.

**Recommendation with regard to attitudes**

As it was evident that the various exclusionary policies and programmes were driven by sets of negative attitudes about differences, it is therefore vital to promote positive attitudes towards differences and consider that as a social challenge. This can be done through introducing an awareness-raising programme developed in collaboration with media, NGOs and individuals. The whole community including school staff and senior policy makers need to learn how to include individuals with differences not only within mainstream schools but in the community in general, such as individuals who are born from unknown parents. The media can play a major role in promoting social change and accepting and welcoming differences, and that should be based on Islamic values and human rights.

With regard to schools, changing school culture to be more welcoming of and responsive to differences requires “charismatic” leaders who can offer “transformative” responses to issues of inclusive education. School principals can request the Ministry of Social Development to hold workshops for school staff with regard to children’s rights and other legislations with regard to this issue. Through gaining knowledge, attitudes can change. School principals need to create a welcoming environment for all pupils and parents through modelling the values of justice and fairness. They need to hold high expectations about pupils, and take actions to ensure that all pupils and staff have mutual respect, trust and acceptance. By changing their attitudes and views, principals will be equipped to move classroom practices towards supporting all learners to participate and achieve instead of focusing on the limited views of grades and attainments.

**Research limitations and suggestions for future research**

Conducting this research with the use of case studies might raise issues regarding the generalisability of the findings. Here, I need to remind the reader that I clearly stated in chapter 5 that I am not intending generalisability or producing a pre-packaged inclusive educational policy to import into the Omani context. Therefore, the restricted generalisability is not considered a limitation here. That said, I *am* aspiring
for transferability of the findings and data provided in this research. People in other contexts can benefit from the detailed information provided and assess whether they apply to their situations. The possibility of transferability from case studies is discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), who postulate that it is possible to assess the typicality of a situation, the participants and settings to identify possible comparison groups and how the data can transfer to other settings and cultures.

Another limitation is the focus of this research on cycle-one schools (primary grades 1-4) where boys and girls study in the same classrooms, and where staff are female. Therefore, the research did not consider the gender differences that could impact the whole inclusion process. Accordingly, this could be a recommendation for future research to extend the scope of this study to explore the cycle-two and post-basic schools’ practices with regard to responding to pupils’ differences.

One main issue in this research is that it was conducted by myself, an insider, who has been employed by the Ministry of Education for 20 years ranging between teaching and being a policy maker at the Ministry. Various works criticise insider researchers for being subjective as they are the prime instrument in data collection (Merriam, 1988). In such an approach, all data are mediated primarily through the researcher and can be influenced by the researcher’s own experiences (Singal, 2004). In addition, I faced real challenges in accessing classrooms as various classroom teachers rejected allowing me access because they perceived me as a ‘spy’ who was aiming at picking out their mistakes.

Finally, this research only included one integration classroom – yet these are understood in Oman as a means of inclusion and which are being expanded in the country. The data from this study can provide a baseline for future studies of units - I believe it is vital at this stage to look in depth at the practices in the integration classrooms and how they impact the learning experience of various pupils. This highlights an important avenue of investigation for future research.

**Final thoughts**

My interest in conducting this research was driven by personal and professional reasons; yet my previous experience was based on the same set of limited understandings of concepts like inclusion and diversity. Inclusion, as we practiced it, at the Ministry of Education, was to do with efforts to ensure access for pupils with
disabilities in mainstream schools. Unfortunately I was totally unaware of the broad definitions of inclusion and the global debate in this area, and that resulted in participating in the development of various policies and programmes which I described in the analysis chapters as ‘creators of confusion and discrimination’.

The PhD journey has provided me with valuable opportunities to engage with and discuss a range of literature that shaped my understanding of inclusion and responding to differences, and the many issues embedded in these concepts. Being physically away from my work and my context helped me view my previous practices and the whole context in a different light. I hope that this research has extended the reader’s understanding and knowledge of the existing school’s practices and, by so doing, will inform the current developments taking place in Oman to improve the school system.
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Appendices

Appendix (1): The Index for Inclusion

The Index for Inclusion is a self-evaluation tool designed to support schools in analysing their practices, policies and cultures to identify barriers to inclusion and help moving them towards more inclusiveness (Booth and Ainscow, 2011). To support this, it offers a comprehensive set of materials based around three ‘dimensions’ (inclusive cultures, policies, and practices), 44 ‘indicators’ or statements of aspiration, and approximately 500 related ‘questions’.

The Index for Inclusion was first published in 2000 by the Centre for Studies in Inclusive Education (CSIE) in Bristol (UK) as a result of a collaborative work that included teachers, parents, governors, researchers and representatives of disability groups. The Index was piloted in UK schools and examined through action research process before it was formally recognised and adopted by the government. Free copies of the first edition were provided to all primary, secondary, special schools and local education authorities in England. Since then, the Index has been through a number of improvements and modifications based on feedback and comments regarding its use, as well as observations by practitioners and researchers (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). A second edition in 2002 was followed by adapted editions in 2004 and 2006 respectively for early years and child-care settings (Booth et al., 2006).

The Index has been translated into over 30 languages, including Arabic, and has been used in many school systems including those in Europe, Australia, Hong Kong (Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Corbett, 2001; Forlin, 2004; Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004) and countries elsewhere such as India, South Africa and Brazil, as well as the Middle East (Attfield and Williams, 2003).

The third edition of the Index was published in 2011, in response to the numerous suggestions based on the translation and adaptation of the previous editions for many countries around the world (Booth & Ainscow 2011). The current edition revolves around two main concepts: (1) putting inclusive values into action and drawing together various processes such as environmental sustainability, non-violence, health promotion and global citizenship into a single coherent school plan, (2) identifying and removing barriers to learning and participation through mobilising resources.
In addition, an innovative extension has been included with a set of indicators that could assist schools to develop curricula for all.

The Index was developed to ‘offer schools a supportive process of self-review and development, which draws on the views of staff, governors, students and parents/carers, as well as other members of the surrounding communities’ (p.1). It involves a detailed examination of barriers to learning to help schools analyse their practices in regard to inclusion and identify the various barriers that may result in exclusion and underachievement. It also emphasised the adoption of strategies that link the internal conditions of schools with efforts to improve local areas with great focus on contexts (Ainscow, 2012).

Ainscow et al. (2004), who conducted collaborative research in schools and who used the Index for Inclusion to analyse school culture, practices, and policies, stated that the use of the Index has proved to be an effective means of guiding the collection and analysis of school process and outcome data, as well as facilitating the establishment of priorities for development work and establishing an improvement strategy that has wide support within a school community. The Index involves processes that draw on evidence from two main bodies of knowledge: existing research evidence regarding strategies that are known to facilitate the participation of students who might previously have been excluded or marginalized and recent evidence about effective approaches to school improvement. It also provides a research-based agenda that can be used to plan, guide and monitor action research activities in schools and classrooms (p.128).

The suitability of using the Index for inclusion was described by Black-Hawkins et al. (2007) who considered it as an appropriate tool to be used by schools which intend to balance between quality, equity and inclusion, as the index calls for a broader restructuring of mainstream schools to ensure they are more responsive to student diversity. Hick (2005) described the experience of a group of educational psychologists who supported schools using the Index for Inclusion, by acting as critical friends, and stated that the use of the Index influenced the thinking of the participants on their underlying values and starting points which varied from being a child-centred classroom teacher, or from a commitment to resisting oppression, to the “reconstructing” educational psychology movement (p.119).
Although, the Index was developed in the UK, it has proved to be effective in other contexts such as New Zealand, where Smith (2005) used the Index for Inclusion to analyse his school’s performance in regard to inclusion and responding to diversity. He believed that the Index had strongly affirmed the culture of the school as an inclusive and welcoming place where children are well supported in their learning, and assessed them in responding to a number of issues raised by parents, and to give information and add to understanding about the school and its programmes. He also concluded that that the Index for Inclusion can be a valuable and effective tool for the New Zealand schools (p. 24). Yet, he stressed the importance of selecting the aspect of the Index that would be the most useful to each school and educational context.

The Index and the values aspect of inclusion have their limitations, as they were believed to focus on intentions rather than giving a clear action plan on how improvements should take place and do not touch upon pedagogy and the curriculum (Deppler and Harvey, 2004). They are also considered to concentrate on consequences of commitment to inclusive values, with little certainty about practice. Ainscow et al. (2006) stated that ‘Given our focus on values, rather than on practices and forms of provision, inclusion, we thought, could only be defined as the embodiment of those values in particular contexts’ (p. 26). This view of context and values was criticized for providing little certainty to the practices which might best embody inclusive principles and values which resulted in having a gap between the values rhetoric and the development of practice (Howes et al., 2009). Moreover, the idea of school self-evaluation proved to be ineffective, as some schools and cultures were not familiar with such ideas. In Hong Kong, for example, a version of the Index for Inclusion was adapted for local schools in 2004 and was named ‘Indicators for Inclusion’ where schools were advised to use the Hong Kong Indicators for Inclusion as a reference in setting targets and success criteria in their annual plan. In describing the impact of using those indicators (Heung, 2006) stated that schools were facing serious challenges in using the indicators including the acceptance of the idea of ‘self-evaluation’ which was not embedded in the culture (p.318). According to Booth and Black-Hawkins (2001), the Index should be introduced to schools in different contexts gradually, to allow for acceptance and successful integration by over-worked teachers.

In regard to the Middle East, the ‘Save the Children Organisation’ used material from the Index to implement an educational reform project in countries such as Lebanon,
Egypt, Morocco and Palestine (Occupied Territories). The Arabic language Index was developed based on the first edition of the Index with adaptations based on a research project by UNESCO ‘Developing an Index for the South’ and other research conducted in the Arab region (Kotrlik and Williams, 2003). According to Alborno, (2013) piloting the Index in the region had significant impact on the dynamics of the schools where they were introduced the concept of inclusion, although in a limited form of inclusion for children with disabilities only. It also gave children and parents the opportunity to participate in coordinating committees, resulting in challenging beliefs, attitudes and educational approaches, as well as identifying barriers to participation and learning (p.35).

However, the main challenge continues to be the apparent complexity of the material which can be intimidating for practitioners. A reflection of this challenge was highlighted in the Middle East region regarding the acceptance of the Index, where one observer maintained that “teachers are not used to reading, books or other documents, and the supposition that the Index will automatically be taken up is a mistake” (Kotrlik and Williams, 2003).

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that the index was proposed as a tool that has proved to be effective monitoring of schools change and movement towards responding to the diverse needs of all learners and in giving a baseline about schools' cultures, policies and practices that could work as barriers to inclusion. It is also essential to implement this process of identification of barriers into schools' development plans and not as an additional initiative or an alternative way of raising standards. Researchers are also encouraged to adapt and create their own ways of using the materials to achieve maximum benefits (Booth and Ainscow, 2002).

Although Arab countries have some similarities in regard to language and cultures, I believe that Gulf countries have more things in common such as culture, economic context, language and even history. Therefore, I was encouraged to use items of the Index for Inclusion based on the feedback provided by Alborno (2013), who used materials from the Arabic version of the Index in investigating the practices in three Emirati primary schools as they were implementing the new inclusive standards of ‘School for All’. Alborno stated that:
the use of materials from the index enhanced my understanding of inclusion, and helped in setting the framework for the study which guided the formulation of the interviews’ questions and the observations’ indicators at one stage, and consequently guided the data analysis process and setting future recommendations.

Alborno concluded that although she had tried to draft some guidelines that employ the Index’ concepts to be used as part of the school review and assessment process, that the Special Education Department in Dubai carries out on a yearly basis, it was revealed to be problematic. The problems were due to the difference in the views regarding inclusion between the Index and the ‘School for All’ documents and guidelines, which perceive inclusion as providing access for students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

Appendix (2): Educational indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>2011</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Education (Govt.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Schools</td>
<td>1,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>517000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>19000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teachers</td>
<td>52000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>366000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Educ. Schools</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>553</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Schools</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>71000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Schools</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>47000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix (3): Students registered in schools by gender, grades & nationality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality and Year</th>
<th>Basic Education</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Private Schools</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/12</td>
<td>366,273</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>71,274</td>
<td>588,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omani</td>
<td>357,386</td>
<td>553</td>
<td>64,952</td>
<td>571,534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expatriate</td>
<td>8,887</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6,322</td>
<td>17,346</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix (4): Number of pupils in the special education programmes within Basic Education Schools in 2012-2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integration classrooms</th>
<th>Number of schools implementing the programme</th>
<th>152</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of pupils attending the programme</td>
<td>1149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Difficulty Programme</th>
<th>Number of schools implementing the Programme</th>
<th>635</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of pupils attending the programme</td>
<td>11577</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix (5): Series of signposts used to support the data collection, organization, analysis and interpretation

These are based on the thinking behind the Index for Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), the literature with regard to responding to pupils differences, my insider knowledge about school education in Oman.

Policy signposts

- **National policy: is it inclusive policy?**
  - Role of international trends in with regard to the national school policies; the EFA agenda, standards, etc.
  - Is there any unified vision for education and responding to pupils’ differences?
  - Is policy developed with all in mind?
  - Various understandings of Inclusion, diversity, difference can result in producing national school policies that are creators of confusion and exclusion. So, how these concepts are understood in Oman?
  - What is the role of schools, pupils and parents in this regard?
- **School policy**
  - Role of national policies on schools policies and practices;
    - Registration policy
Identification of needs; how does it applied? How does it impact school pupils?

IPEs; how are they developed? Why? How are they applied and assessed?

Role of Learning Difficulty Programme in Omani schools (adult support)

Streaming, and grouping; how is it applied, why, who take this decision? Its impacts on responding to pupils’ differences

**Policy signposts adopted from the Index for Inclusion**

**Producing inclusive policies**

- **Developing the school for all**
  - Staff appointments and promotions are fair.
  - All new staff are helped to settle into the school.
  - The school seeks to admit all students from its locality.
  - The school makes its buildings physically accessible to all people.
  - All new students are helped to settle into the school.
  - The school arranges teaching groups so that all students are valued.

- **Organising support for diversity**
  - All forms of support are co-ordinated.
  - Staff development activities help staff to respond to student diversity.
  - 'Special educational needs' policies are inclusion policies (national policy).
  - Support for those learning English as an additional language is co-ordinated with learning support.
  - Pastoral and behaviour support policies are linked to curriculum development and learning support policies.
  - Pressures for disciplinary exclusion are decreased.
  - Barriers to attendance are reduced.
  - Bullying is minimised.

**Cultural signposts**

- Attitudes
  - Expectations
  - How differences are perceived?
- School environment
- Role of leaders
- Collaboration
  - Staff relations
  - Relation with parents
  - Relation with community
  - Relation with other schools

**Cultural Signposts adopted from the Index for Inclusion**

**Creating inclusive cultures**

- **Building community Indicators**
  - Everyone is made to feel welcome.
  - Students help each other.
  - Staff collaborate with each other.
  - Staff and students treat one another with respect.
  - There is a partnership between staff and parents/carers.
  - Staff and governors work well together.
  - All local communities are involved in the school.

- **Establishing inclusive values**
  - There are high expectations for all students.
  - Staff, governors, students and parents/carers share a philosophy of inclusion.
  - Students are equally valued.
  - Staff and students treat one another as human beings as well as occupants of a ‘role’.
  - Staff seek to remove barriers to learning and participation in all aspects of the school.
  - The school strives to minimise discriminatory practice

**Classroom signposts**

- Role of national policies on classroom practices
  - National curriculum
  - National classroom teachers’ guides
  - Role of supervisors
Role of classroom teachers pre/in-service training on shaping classroom teachers identities
Role of national focus on standards

- Classroom arrangements;
  - seating and grouping
  - Planning
- Engagement and participation;
  - Group/individual work
  - Engagement/dis-engagement
  - Teaching techniques and resources
  - Differentiated instruction
  - Teacher-pupils relations
- Collaboration and reflective teaching

Classroom signposts adopted from the Index for Inclusion

Evolving inclusive practices

- Orchestrating learning
  - Teaching is planned with the learning of all students in mind.
  - Lessons encourage the participation of all students.
  - Lessons develop an understanding of difference.
  - Students are actively involved in their own learning.
  - Students learn collaboratively.
  - Assessment contributes to the achievements of all students.
  - Classroom discipline is based on mutual respect.
  - Classroom teachers plan, teach and review in partnership.
  - Classroom teachers are concerned to support the learning and participation of all students.
  - Teaching assistants support the learning and participation of all students.
  - Homework contributes to the learning of all.
  - All students take part in activities outside the classroom.
- Mobilising resources
  - Student difference is used as a resource for teaching and learning.
  - Staff expertise is fully utilised.
  - Staff develop resources to support learning and participation.
- Community resources are known and drawn upon.
- School resources are distributed fairly so that they support
Appendix (6): Questions for senior policy makers

1. What are the government priorities with regard to educational policy?
2. Who participate in the development process? Why?
3. Do we have a unified vision? What is it?
4. Oman has ratified the United Nations Child Right Convention (CRC) in 2008 and adopted Dakar declaration of Education for All and considers the indicators as way to evaluate the government movements and success with regard meeting the MDGs.

   1) How relevant this agenda is to the government vision?
   2) How do you see the Government’s performance with regard to achieving EFA goals in general and Goal 2 specifically?
   3) What are the programmes that the government implemented to ensure that EFA means ‘all’?
   4) Who are the ‘all’ we are talking about? Why?
   5) Is anyone excluded from the school system? Why? How?
   6) Is there anything else you would like to add or tell me about this issue?

Thank you very much
Appendix (7): Some modified questions for senior policy makers

Head of special needs department;

Q1: What is special needs?

Q2: Who decides upon such problems?

Q3: How do you categories pupils?

Q4: Do you think all pupils can attend main stream classrooms? Why?

Q5: Who decides where children with SEN should be educated?

Q6: what kind of support does the department offer to SEN students and special education classroom teachers?

Q7: In some schools LD classroom teachers refuse to take the studens who are in real need for their support. Why?

Questions to Head classroom teachers:

1) Does the school accept all children from neighborhood? Why?
   - How is education conceptualised?
   - How ‘all’ is conceptualised.

2) What are the criteria for accepting the students?

3) Who puts those criteria?
   - How educational policy is developed?
   - Who participate in the development process? How? Why?
   - How relevant that policy to the school and society needs (does it go for public debate?)

4) How students are placed in classes? Why?

5) What resources are available in the school to ensure ‘All’ students are receiving ‘quality’ education?

6) How school and classroom teachers are evaluated?

7) What are the criteria?

8) Do parents participate in any schools activities?

9) Are parents involved in the learning and teaching process of their children?

10) How can you describe the relationship with parents?
Questions for classroom teachers:

1) Does the school accept all children from neighborhood? Why?
   - How is education conceptualised?
   - How ‘all’ is conceptualised.
2) What are the criteria for accepting the students?
3) Who puts those criteria?
4) How students are placed in classes? Why?
5) Do you think ‘all’ students are capable of learning? Why?
   - Classroom teachers expectation about students
   - How ‘quality’ is defined
6) How can you decide upon students’ abilities? What criteria?
   - Assessment
7) How can you assure that your teaching fits ‘all’ students?
   - Lesson plan
   - IEP
   - Group work/individual work
Appendix (8): Duration of data gathering in both schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Newtown School</th>
<th>City School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| General observation  | 31/8/2014 – 4/9/2014  
3 hours a day          
(15 hours)            | 12-13/11/2014  
(6 hours)             |
| Grade one & three    | 22-28/10/2014  
3 hours a day          
(15 hours)            | -             |
| Grade 4              | 7/9 – 7/10/2014  
25 days                
3 hours a day          
(75 hours)            | 16/11- 9/12    
Around 2 -3 hours a day 
(20 hours)            |
| Integration classroom| -              | 16/11- 7/12    
(1-2 hours a day )    
(10 hours)            |
| Total time spent in each school | 105 hours | 36 hours |
| Notes                | - There were several national holidays during the data gathering period.  
- I sometimes divided the day between the classes and I calculated the exact time I spent inside each classroom.  
Interviews and photography time was excluded from the mentioned time above. |
Appendix (9): School environment observation framework

Date:

Time:

Location:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical environment</td>
<td>School building is accessible to all students including ones with disabilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School facilities are kept in good order</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School resources are made available and accessible to all students(labs, resource rooms, clean water, playgrounds, transportation)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching groups are treated fairly with regard to access to school resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School culture in relation to students and parents</td>
<td>There are welcome signs on the walls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Induction week&quot;</td>
<td>Students and parents are advised about whom to see once they arrive at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students and parents are advised on whom to see when they experience difficulty. Give examples.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are enough staff to receive and welcome new students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff use welcoming language and call students with their names</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All students are helped to settle in the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When students are due to transfer from a school to another, staff from both schools communicates to ease the transfer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents are provided with full information on the school and the teaching process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents are encouraged to raise questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are adequate places inside the school that are allocated to meet with parents during the induction week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents are allowed to sit with their first grade students until they feel relaxed and settled (some new students usually cry for few days and feel stressed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All members work collaboratively to make the school more welcoming and friendly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School policies with regard to classroom teachers</td>
<td>All new staff is made to feel welcomed. How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School recognizes the difficulties that new staff may experience in the school. How? (this can be decided through schools meetings and classroom teachers room observation).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Longer serving staff avoids making new staff feel ’outsider’ by using ‘we &amp; us’.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New staff is provided will all information about the school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There are opportunities to all staff to share their</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School cultures</td>
<td>Staff treat each other with respect irrespective to their role, background, and social status.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff works in teams.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff fell comfortable in discussing their problems with head classroom teachers and each other.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff help each other without being angry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff engage in partnership teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff welcome comments from colleagues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff provide a model of collaboration to students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classroom teachers engage with others in joint problem-solving when it comes to students’ progress issues.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significant events such as illness, and death are given appropriate acknowledgments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students and staff are supported to express their feelings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff can express their negative feelings about students in a private place as a way of overcoming them.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Culture</th>
<th>Staff and parents respect each other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘Relations with parents’</td>
<td>There is a good communication between staff and parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parents are given chance to participate in school activities and plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff value the participation of parents involvement in the education of their children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The school involves community in their activities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix (10): Classroom observation framework

**Date:**

**Time:**

**Location:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical environment of the Classroom</td>
<td>Students seating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Light and air-conditioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White Board; are they clear and suitable for the age group? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is computers and Internet available and used during lessons?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Books are available for all students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The work of all students is displayed within the classroom? What criteria?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom culture</td>
<td>Everyone made to feel welcomed in the classroom? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘All’ students actively participating in the lesson? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students help each other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students working collaboratively? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students seek help from and offer help to each other when needed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students share rather than compete for friends.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disputes between students are dealt with fairly and effectively.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students can act as advocates for other students who they feel have been treated unfairly. ‘their voice is valued’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students feel ownership of their classroom? How?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students are willing to share their knowledge with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher practices</td>
<td>Teacher call students with their names</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher smile and treat students with respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher use different techniques and activities during the lesson to ensure the participation of all.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher gives all students the chance to participate and raise questions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher corrects the mistakes and gives enough explanation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All students are encouraged to have high aspiration about their learning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students are treated as if there is no ceiling for their achievements.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher helps each student equally? How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher avoid viewing students as having fixed abilities based on their current achievements (will be discussed during classroom teachers interview)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All students are encouraged to have pride on their own achievements. How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are encouraged to celebrate the achievement of others. How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher attempt to encounter negative views of students who are keen to attain highly in lessons. How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher attempt to encounter negative views of students who find lessons difficult. How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher attempts to encounter the derogatory use of labels of low achievements. How? Give examples.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are attempts to address the fear of failure of some students. How?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher avoids linking potential achievement of one students to those of a sibling or students from the same area and background.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix (11): Details about the Participatory Photography explained to pupils

- The PP in details and their role
- How to work in groups and the need to negotiate places
- The group interview they will participate in after the activity
- The ethical issues such as avoiding close-ups of faces and to take photos of things inside the school
- How to use the digital cameras I provided them with
- Gave them the assent forms and explained it to them
- Asked them to take the forms home and discuss their participation with their parents and asked them to sign the consent forms if they wanted to take part in the activity. To avoid putting pressure on students, I asked them forms were submitted to their classroom teachers as I wanted them to feel free to quit or refuse to participate if they wanted.
Appendix (12): Number of senior policy makers interviewed at government level and duration of interviews

_Government level_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>45 minutes per person</td>
<td>135 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>One hour per person</td>
<td>480 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>One hour and a half</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>705 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix (13): School level interviews and duration of interviews  (September – December 2014)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Head classroom teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One hour per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vice principals</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>One hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One hour per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom teachers</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>One hour each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education teacher (integration classroom)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>One hour each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning difficulty classroom teachers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>One hour and a half</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>45 minutes per person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group discussions with pupils</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>One hour and a half for each group (2 groups)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>33</td>
<td><strong>27 hours</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responding to pupil differences in Oman; a study of two primary schools

Participant Information Sheet

Senior policy makers

You are being invited to take part in this study as a part of my data gathering process to prepare for my Phd. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

Who will conduct the research?

The research will be conducted by Thuraya Alhosni who is a PhD student at University of Manchester.

Title of the Research

Responding to pupil differences in Oman; a study of two primary schools

What is the aim of the research?

I aim to explore a specific set of educational issues in Oman with regard to UN initiative known as Education for All and schools readiness to serve diverse groups of students.

Why have I been chosen?

You are a senior policy maker who is in charge of the development of educational policy in Oman and who is aware about the educational legislations and policies that
schools are implementing. Your knowledge, inputs, and experience of a high importance to the data I am looking at.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You are kindly asked to agree on participating in a face–to–face interview and answering an open ended questions about the educational system in Oman; its vision, objectives and how quality can be ensured to all students in our schools.

What happens to the data collected?

The data collected will be:

1- Audio recorded

2- Transcribed into word documents

3- The word document will be securely stored on an encrypted device.

4- Analysed through thematic analysis for the purpose of my PhD study.

5- The dataset will be archived by the University of Manchester for five years. It will also be retained by me for use in future studies.

How is confidentiality maintained?

All personal information will be confidential and no one except the researcher will have any access to them. All forms will be kept in a secure laptop and hard copies will be saved in a locked drawer. During the analysis stage and writing of any report or articles, names and titles will not be mentioned; instead pseudonyms of schools and participants will be used.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
Will I be paid for participating in the research?

No payments will be made for taking part of this research.

What is the duration of the research?

The interview will approximately take up to one hour.

Where will the research be conducted?

The interview will be arranged to take place in a suitable office at your place of work at a convenient time during the office hours.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

Yes, they will be used for my thesis and I will keep them for other future use and publications.

Contact for further information

You can contact me by email for any further clarifications. My email is: thuraya.alhosni@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

What if something goes wrong?

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with members of the research team, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL', by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
Responding to pupil differences in Oman; a study of two primary schools

CONSENT FORM

1. I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that the interviews will be audio-recorded

4. I agree to the use of anonymous quotes

5. I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals as well as future publications.

6. I agree that my data may be archived by the researcher on an encrypted device and used in future studies.

I agree to take part in the above project
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of person taking consent</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Signature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix (15): The amended Arabic version of the information iheet

الاستجابة لاختلافات الطلاب في سلطنة عمان: دراسة لمدرستين إبتدائيتين

لقد تم دعوتكم للمشاركة في هذا البحث كجزء من متطلبات دراستي للحصول على درجة الدكتوراه في التربية.

وقبل البدء هناك معلومات من المهم أن يتم إيضاحها لك حول هدف البحث واهتمامه قبل البدء في المقابلة. ارجو أن تتفضل بالإطلاع على البيانات أدناه والاستفسار عن أي جزئية منها من ثم تقرر إذا ما أحبت المشاركة في البحث أم لا.

من سيقوم بالبحث؟

سيقوم بالبحث ثريا بنت سيف الحوسني وهي طالبة دكتوراه بجامعة مانشستر بالمملكة المتحدة.

ما هو هدف البحث؟

يهدف البحث إلى التعرف على مجموعة من المواضيع المتعلقة بمبادرة التعليم للجميع والتي تبنتها الحكومة.

يعنى الهدف الأول إلى معرفة البرامج والسياسات والممارسات التي تقوم بها الوزارة والمدارس حول تلبية جميع احتياجات الطلاب وضمان حصولهم جميعا على فرص تعليمية مناسبة. ويتحول الهدف الثاني حول تحديد العوائق التي تقابل المدارس في هذا الشأن.

لماذا تم اختيارك للمشاركة في البحث؟

أنت أحد صناع القرار والذين على اطلاع بسياسات الدولة وتوجهاتها فيما يخص سياسات التعليم عموما المسؤول عن سياسات التقييم بوجه خاص. المعلومات التي ستمدني بها ستكون في غاية الاهمية بالنسبة لهذا البحث.

ما هو المتوقع مني إن قررت المشاركة في البحث؟

سيطلب منك التفضيل بالموافقة على إجراء مقابلة شخصية مسجلة صوتيا لمدة لا تتجاوز الساعه ومن خلالها ستتم مناقشة مجموعة من النقاط المتعلقة بموضوع البحث.

ماذا سيحدث للبيانات التي أدلى بها؟

- ستتصل صوتيا
- تسححل الى بيانات مكتوبة
- سيتم الاحتفاظ بالبيانات المكتوبة في جهاز خاص له رقم سري
- سيتم تحليل البيانات لاستخدامها في البحث
- سيتم تخزين البيانات في جامعة مانشستر لمدة خمس سنوات قادمة وقد استخدم بعضها لاحقا بغرض النشر.

كيف ستتضمن سرية البيانات؟
لن يطلع على البيانات أي شخص سوى الباحث وسيتم الحفاظ عليها في جهاز حاسب يتألف خاص بالبحث. لن يتم الإشارة إلى الاسماء والمناصب أثناء الكتابة وانما سباعي عنا بالرموز والارقام.

ماذا سيحدث إن لم أرغب في المشاركة أو قررت الانسحاب لاحقاً؟

لك الحرية المطلقة في اتخاذ القرار وفي حالة الموافقة على المشاركة سيطلب منك التوقيع على الاستمارة الخاصة بالمشاركة والمرفقة بهذه الاستمارة.

هل سيتم دفع مبالغ مالية نظير المشاركة؟

لا، وانما ستكون المشاركة تطوعية.

كم هي مدة المقالة؟

ستغرق المقالة حدود الساعة

أين سيتم إجراء المقابلة؟

سيتم اجراءها في احد المكاتب او الاماكن التي تقررها بمبنى الوزارة خلال ساعات الدوام الرسمي.

هل سيتم نشر نتائج البحث؟

نعم، ستستخدم نتائج البحث لكتابة رسالة الدكتوراة الخاصة بي وقد تستخدم اجزاء منها للنشر في مجلات علمية متخصصة.

ماهي آلية التواصل في المستقبل؟

تستطيع التواصل معى من خلال البريد الالكتروني الخاص بي وهو:
thuraya.alhosni@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

ماذا اعمل اذا ما حصل اي طاريء؟

إذا ما احببت مناقشة اية مسألة أخرى تتعلق بالبحث أو احببت معرفة مزيد من التفاصيل من خلال فريق البحث بجامعة مانشستر، يرجى التواصل مع:
The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie 'Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL’, by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk, or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093
أوافق على المشاركة في البحث المحدد في الأعلى

أُمضى المشارك ..........................
التاريخ ..............................
التوقيع ...............................
Appendix (16): Student assent form

You are asked to take part in a PhD study about responding to pupils’ differences in Oman: A study of two primary schools.

Why you???
What do I want you to do?

Take photos of places you like or dislike in your school

You will work in pairs (with another student from your class)

Don’t take photos of faces

Then What?
We will sit in a group and talk about your photos

The discussion group will be in the classroom or resource room

THE DISCUSSION WILL BE AUDIO-RECORDED
What are my rights?

You don’t have to take part if you don’t want – even if your parents say you can

If you want to work with me, you will be asked to sign a form
If you are upset
Or
Unhappy

You can leave the research at any time

What will happen to the information?
They will be used for my PhD thesis and other publications

Your name and school will not appear in my writings

No payments for participation
Think and talk to your parents and if you want to work with me tell your teacher after tomorrow.
Appendix (17): Coding the Arabic versions of transcribed data
Appendix (18): Study recommendations

Recommendation with regard to the national policy

Concepts

1- I suggest that the school system need to move away from exporting and adopting external ideas and policies that are designed and tested in other contexts towards adopting a critical approach through which external agendas and ideas are critically analyzed and decisions are made upon the priorities of the context and what suits it. Although it could be still important to create opportunities for global initiatives to update the local context, but that should be through collaboration with schools, community, Omani researchers instead of depending on foreign researchers alone, who may lack local knowledge. This collaborative research will avoid misinterpretations such as those observed when quality, Basic Education, Learning Difficulty program, and Integration programs were adopted based on suggestions from external agencies and experts. In here, I need to remind the reader of the argument presented by (Donn & Al-Manthri, 2013) who argued that the shortcomings of various programs in the Omani school system resulted from adopting programs that were designed and tested somewhere else without context-based evaluation.

2- There is a need to have a unified vision and objectives for the whole school system. This policy need to be developed through public debate and away from categorizing pupils and services. This will imply the need to have a unified vision, objective, development plans, follow up procedures for the mainstream and special education programs. Accordingly, the separation of the need to be reconsidered and adoption of comprehensive system that target ‘all’ is necessary. The scattered efforts of both system without any form of collaboration and coordination created confusion in both schools and created passiveness and culture of blame and rejection.

3- There is a need to avoid assimilating pupils, instead diversity need to be welcomed and used to improve practices. For example, it needs to be considered that excluding disability and non-Omani who don’t speak Arabic from the mainstream classroom doesn’t make all other pupils in mainstream classrooms ‘similar’. Therefore, there is an urgent need to gain clear understanding of various concepts that are shaping the policies. That understanding can be enhanced
through involving various stakeholders including school staff, parents and pupils in public debate and discussion. This analysis and re-thinking need to be based on values of equity and justice where ‘all’ pupils perceived as of equal rights and capable of learning together and differences are celebrated and used as challenge and opportunities for improvements.

4- There is a need for careful consideration of the purposes of schools and what children should achieve in their 12 years of schooling and beyond. In here I follow the argument of Black-Hawkins et al. (2008) who stated that: ‘Skills in literacy and numeracy are undoubtedly important, but so too are other achievements which may be more intangible but not necessarily less valuable; these might include, for example, developing self-esteem, self-efficacy, resilience, social skills, creativity, tolerance and empathy’ (p. 3). This requires the need to shift the focus of the national policy from limited understanding of quality as outcome-based where numeric data are collected as indicators of system effectiveness and pupils’ achievement towards broader understanding of quality where the aim of the system should be providing all learners with opportunities to actively participate and achieve.

5- Inclusion need to be central in the newly designed educational philosophy and strategy which will enable the country widen the opportunities and possibilities, not only for all children to be placed in school, but more importantly, ensure they also participate and achieve at school. Pijl et al. (1997) suggest: ‘...a well-formulated policy statement for inclusion, making it clear to everyone involved what the goals for the education community are. Local policy-makers, school principals and classroom teachers will then know what the government expects them to do. A clear policy statement on inclusion may act as a push for changing the attitudes of regular and special school personnel. Yet, the movement towards implementing inclusion need to be gradual and based on collecting qualitative data about the system and schools to decide how better change can be adopted.

6- All members of the system as well as community need to be informed about the vision and objectives of the school system to ensure the commitment of all members. This can be done through workshops, media, and conferences,
1- Responding to pupils’ differences require moving away from centralization of the school system which views schools as implementers of national agendas to gradual decentralization and allowing more power to be distributed down to school head-classroom teachers, classroom teachers and students. This would allow more room for innovation and reflection in practice.

2- The movement toward decentralization make the issue of job descriptions a priority as data from schools revealed that various staff were unclear about what is their role including the social workers and psychologists. Several issues and problems in schools were not tackled because members of the school were blaming each other and various stated that that responding to differences is not part of their duties although none of them had clear list of duties. Therefore, it is real need for all school staff to have job description based on the inclusive policy and where collaborative and reflective work is promoted.

3- There is an urgent need for increasing collaboration and negotiation between various levels in order to form a unified vision for education and its priorities which is cornerstone to reform education. The collaboration will ensure that all involved members including schools are committed to the national policies and agendas. Accordingly, policymakers, educators, and schools will start to explore possible measures to eliminate disadvantages to education for groups of children who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation, especially children with disabilities, children from non-Arabic backgrounds, and children with socio-economic problems.

4- National policies should emphasis staff voice including transfer, training, and development plans. This will stifles the individual’s ability to engage in, be motivated by, take responsibility for and develop a positive response to new initiatives. Involving staff in policy-making decisions increase staff confidence in the policy and will increase their self-esteem and value. National policies should also emphasize pupils and parents voice and consider them as active participants in the development and learning process.

5- There is a need for moving away from implementing especial education programs in government schools like Learning Difficulty program and integration
classrooms which proved to be segregating several pupils within the mainstream schools. Schools need to be supported to welcome all pupils and support all of them to participate and achieve and that require providing all necessary facilities to schools. This will be achieved through forming a unified vision and objectives for education.

6- Various national policies including the curriculum need to modified to consider diversity and move away from objective based where all pupils must meet the same rigid objectives and agenda towards a flexible set of standards that are relevant to pupils’ life and can ensure that all pupils regardless of their differences can connect to the content and transfer skills gained in the classroom to their actual life. This will require involving school staff, pupils, parents and members from Sultan Qaboos University in the development process. Schools should be given flexibility to modify, and change according to schools contexts.

7- School evaluation processes need modification where instead of focusing on pupils attainment and implementation of national standards, the focus need to be shifted towards encouraging collaboration, team-work, leadership skills, communication with parents and community, and responding to differences are included in evaluating schools progress. This will require involving supervisors and senior policy makers as well as school staff into round table-discussions to decide upon this procedure and how schools can be awarded. Involving school staff will create understanding and commitment towards policy procedures. The current school development department and school evaluation system is depending on distributing questionnaires that are neglected by school staff and actually not achieving their stated objectives as described in chapters 6&7.

8- Leadership is vital in moving schools towards responding to differences. Pre-service and in-service training of leaders need to consider informing principals about the deeper moral purposes of leadership like social justice where schools must do their part in contributing to a world that is fair for everyone (Blackmore, 1999; Marshall, 2004; Ryan, 2006).

9- Classroom teachers’ education programs need to be amended to focus on providing highly motivated classroom teachers equipped with skills to respond to
differences in the mainstream classrooms. To reach that, extra collaboration between ministry of higher education and ministry of education is required which need to be based on the national objectives of education and concepts of equity, justice, inclusion and quality. In addition, refresher courses and in-service training programs need to be based on classroom teachers and school needs where practical instead of theoretical issues are covered. The training should include issues of attitudes, and beliefs to ensure building positive attitude towards all pupils and to equip classroom teachers with enough knowledge and skills to be confident and capable of supporting a diverse range of children in mainstream schools. The training programs should involve classroom classroom teachers as well as special education classroom teachers as common knowledge and skills are necessary to ensure that all are capable of supporting pupils.

10- The teacher-pupils relations need to be highlighted during teacher training programs and in-service training as well as during inspection visits to help classroom teachers and schools respond to pupils’ differences, create learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone so that all learners are able to participate in classroom life. In addition, classroom teachers need to be trained on extending what is ordinarily available for all learners (creating a rich learning community), as opposed to using teaching and learning strategies that are suitable for only most students alongside something ‘additional’ or ‘different’ for some who experience difficulties; and focusing on what is to be taught (and how), rather than who is to learn it (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007).

11- The physical built and infrastructure of government schools has to be designed to enable them respond to pupils’ differences where ramps, steps and handrails, and classroom equipment should have adjustable seats and interactive boards for the children. This will enhance school enrolment, attendance of children and flexible seating organisation in the classrooms.

12- As the language of instruction in primary schools is Arabic, there is an urgent need to provide some sort of language support for several pupils from are non-Arabic backgrounds like Baluchi and Zanzibari. This support can maximize the classroom participation of several pupils and increase their feeling of belonging and confidence to have dialogues communication with classroom teachers and
peers at lessons in ways that are beneficial to them. In addition, this language support can help some pupils to smoothly transit from their homes to school and to gradually learn to understand Arabic as it is the official language of instruction. The government commitment to ensure equity and treat all citizens on similar basis shouldn’t neglect the specific traits and characteristics of various groups and the current tendency to assimilate people need to be reconsidered where the wealth of cultures and language in Oman need to be celebrated and protected.

**Attitudes**

1. Promoting positive attitudes towards differences and consider that as a social challenge and this can be catalysed by action plans from the government to promote and educate school staff and community in general on changing their perspectives and taking a new attitude to accepting individual with various differences and not just individuals with disabilities. The whole community including school staff and senior policy makers need to learn how to include individuals with differences not only within mainstream schools but in the community in general such as individuals who are born for unknown parents. The media can play a major role in promoting social change and accepting and welcoming differences and that should be based on Islamic values and human rights. To promote positive attitudes, a wide awareness-raising programme covering the government, schools and society is needed.

2. The Ministry of Social Development (MoSD) and through child rights committees need to have active role in creating awareness about Child Rights Convention and the try to accordingly change the regulations with regard to individuals with disabilities which are currently adopting the medical model for defining disability. This law is actually is producing a charitable views and attitudes towards all individuals with disabilities which is strongly affecting the decision making with regard to education.

**Recommendations with regard to School**

School change approaches and movement towards inclusiveness suggest that change can happen through enhancing the potentials that exist from within schools through school-based initiatives and policy frameworks (Fullan, 2005) as well as collaborative
inquiry (Ainscow and West, 2006). Although the system is top-down with a hierarchy in decision making where schools are expected to implement national policies, there are still some flexibility that need to be utilized and school principals can play major role towards moving their schools to become more effective organisations (Stein and Nelson, 2003). In the following I present the suggestion with regard to concepts, structure, and attitudes;

**Concepts**

1- Although the school system is very centralised, I consider Dyson and Gallannaugh (2010) argument here as very essential for moving schools towards responding to pupils differences. They said that the role of school and its staff is vital in moving towards change and staff should stop considering themselves as victims of the national policies with their contradiction between standards and inclusion. Therefore, real organizational change occur when individuals inside and outside the school construct new understanding about what change mean (Reihl, 2000, p. 60). Therefore, staff, parents, pupils and the community around the school need to engage in discussions regarding their role, the meaning of education, issues with regard to equity and quality, and what need to be changed in their school and their practices.

2- I suggest here that principals need to focus on highlighting and discussing the concept of participation, mutual trust, and collaboration. The impact and consequences of such concepts need to made clear and everyone should understand that he/she has an active role in the school life and therefore all need to be involved in discussions and critical thinking process regarding their actual practices and how to change them.

**Structures**

1- Responding to pupils differences require collaboration and reflective thinking among the whole staff. It also requires participation of all in the decision making process where everyone should have active role. Therefore, school principals need to move away from the authoritarian styles of leadership to ‘transformative developments’ that result in enhancing and encouraging the sense-making of their staff and reflective thinking through promoting democratic discourse and practices,
and accordingly building positive relationships inside and outside of school. This can be done through holding frequent round-table discussions with staff to decide upon the school plan, how to do it, what staff need, what is available, how it can be utilised. I need to stress here that there are various policies that can enhance school improvements if school leaders take real steps towards utilizing them including the school development plan.

2- School principals need to raise staff awareness about the school regulations and pupils’ affaire policy to protect pupils from abuse and harm. The Ministry of Education regulations prevent verbal and physical abuse and there are very strict regulations in this regard yet these regulations are not well adopted in schools and various classroom teachers were not informed about them.

3- The democratic leadership involves allowing students and parents to participate in the school decision-making process, which requires building trust between all members of the school and the community around it. In here, I suggest that parents’ councils need to be utilized through holding frequent meetings with parents and involve them in developing the school development plan.

4- Social workers and psychologists need to be active members in strengthening school relations with parents and community. Their job descriptions need to be clearer as there is clear overlap and inspection visits should concentrate on supporting them to have joint plans and programs.

5- Schools need to build collaboration and communication bridges with community and the various agencies and ministries that exist in the country who can support school ability to respond to pupils’ differences and provide various services to pupils and staff. For example, schools need to be aware of the various programs and services provided by Ministry of Social Development including the child protection committees and the financial support services. Schools also need utilise the resources provided by Ministry of Health like the school nurse and the medical support that they can provide pupils with even inside schools as those services are ensured by Omani law.

6- School principal can utilize the knowledge of his/her staff as well as parents and agencies around the school to provide training courses for the staff in areas that can support them responding to differences. Actually, the school national policies is offering school budgets (small one) for such in-school training. Yet, it is not well utilized.
**Attitudes**

1- Changing schools cultures to be more welcoming of differences and responsive to them require “charismatic” leaders who can offer “transformative” responses to issues of inclusive education. School principals can request the Ministry of Social development to give workshops to school staff with regard to child right and other legislations with regard to this issue. Through gaining knowledge, attitudes can change.

2- School principals need to create a welcoming environment to all pupils and parents through modelling the valued of justice and fairness. They need to hold high expectations about pupils, take actions to ensure that all pupils and staff have mutual respect, trust and all acceptance.

3- Principal classroom visits need to shift from looking at classroom teachers preparation book to teacher-pupils relations, pupils relations, classroom teachers talks and how pupils are labelled. The can create a system or incentives to reward mutual respect behaviours and teamwork. Classroom teachers need to know that principals will focus on such things during their classroom visits.

**Recommendations with regard to classrooms**

**Concepts**

1- It is important that classroom teachers introducing and explaining to their pupils concepts like respect, collaboration, participation, acceptance, and teamwork through their lessons. That can be done during the warm-up activities, through the various examples of lessons and exercises.

2- Acceptance and respect as well as other values need to be practiced throughout the lessons and modeled by classroom teachers. Instead of giving pupils the small gifts and stars upon giving correct answers for questions, various incentives and encouragement need to be directed towards encouraging teamwork, collaboration and respect.

3- Classroom teachers need to make clear classroom policies and regulations, and guidelines based on mutual trust, and respect. These policies need to be developed in collaboration with pupils to ensure their commitment and understanding. These policies and guidelines should be written and then
hanged on that classroom display wall and explained to all pupils. Classroom teachers and their pupils can re-visit these guidelines monthly to modify, and update.

Structure

1- Classroom practices require adaptation of instructional procedures to be able to reach out to all pupils. The first step to do that is through knowing pupils and their differences and not just their attainment. This require classroom teachers to build mutual trust and respect with their pupils to allow them speak and seek classroom teachers support without fear.

2- Classroom practices need to focus on identifying and acknowledging the differences of all pupils and not just the pupils who can meet the national standards. Classroom teachers need to be gain knowledge to develop instructional objectives, materials and procedures that reduce exclusion in classrooms and the learning process.

3- There is the need for collaboration among classroom teachers and pupils to support one another through group reflections, criticisms, peer coaching and to build positive relationships.

4- Classroom teachers need to work collaboratively and this is very possible as in the current Omani system, most classroom teachers have more than 3 free lessons per day (around 2-3 hours). So, classroom teachers can agree on a specific time to sit and experiment how things could be done differently, with attention focused on the overlooked possibilities for moving practice. Currently, classroom teachers tend to work individually although MoE emphasise on the need for reflective thinking and collaborative work, yet it is not applied as there are no follow up procedures or proper training on how to apply it.

5- Classroom teachers can participate in what Ainscow ( ) described as ‘lesson study’ and described it as ‘a systematic procedure’ for the development of teaching. Ainscow described the process as follows:

The content of this process is the planned lesson, which is then used as the basis of gathering data on the quality of experience that students receive. These lessons are called ‘study lessons’ and are used to examine the classroom teachers’ practices and the responsiveness of the students to the
planned activities. Members of the group work together to design the lesson plan, which is then implemented by each teacher. Observations and post-lesson conferences are arranged to facilitate the improvement of the research lesson between each trial (p. 6).

6- Classroom teachers need to focus on what pupils can do rather than what they cannot do. They should enhance the participation and achievement of all pupils through innovative thinking and using available resources, including pupils themselves. This is possible through adopting peer-tutoring techniques which has been suggested in some national commentaries (Aggarwal, 2001).

7- Classroom teachers need to use a variety of grouping strategies to support everyone’s learning rather than seating pupils according to their achievements.

8- Classroom teachers need to move away from the rigid, and standardized daily routine through using various activities including storytelling, games, videos, and interactive examples. Most lessons are presented in a serious and boring styles which made various pupils feel asleep or loos engagement.

Attitudes

I- Classroom teachers need to encourage pupils to accept and respect each other and storytelling can be very effective technique to do that in primary schools.