

Conductive Education School Kuwait: a paradigm of reality

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Abstract

In 1996 all Kuwaiti children with special educational needs were granted official funding. In 2002 the author was invited to help create a two-year strategic plan to set up Conductive Education services in Kuwait. Following this preliminary work she arrived in Kuwait in May 2003, staff were recruited and the building completed. The new school opened in the September with four classes of pupils and by September 2005 it served 132 children, with motor disorders and other disabilities, in 23 classes. Children with motor disorders learn in CE classes, those with other neurological difficulties in classes with conductive input. The school is established under government regulations for private education and subject to independent inspection on a British model, earning strong approval for the quality of its service.

'Two roads diverged in a wood, and ... I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.' -
Robert Frost (1916)'

Preface

Was it the book entitled *The 1001 Arabian Nights* I read when I was a little girl? Or was it the dream I had five years ago in which I saw myself teaching children in the desert which lead me to the Middle East? I cannot be sure, but as I look back at my life, the events, that at the time appeared to be *ad-hoc* happenings, became more obviously recognisable parts of the puzzle in the tapestry of my life.

Brief insight about Kuwaitis

Kuwaitis have always been free to manage their affairs among themselves therefore they have developed their unique cultural characteristics in their own way. They have a highly developed social organisation based on respect for the family and the tribe. This provides them with the necessary economic and political support for growth. Kuwaitis give unquestioning service and loyalty to their group and have an extremely strong

network based on social relations. They serve and protect older family members and they view their own personal success as the success of the family and the group. Kuwaitis are well known for their hospitality, pride, honour, courage and endurance.

Provision for special needs in Kuwait does not have a long history. Due to cultural beliefs these children were kept at home having limited access to formal education. It was a big step forward and a historical change when funding was granted for all Kuwaiti children with special educational needs in 1996.

The journey so far

I first met Dr. Essa Al-Saadi, the Chairman and Dr. Ahmad Al-Houly, the Vice President of AFAQ Educational during our autumn conference in 2002 at Southampton University in England. These two significant academics had identified a gap in the

Poem called *The road taken* by Robert Frost (1874-1963) Published in *Mountain Interval*, 1916

support and provision available for children and adults with neurological (and related) conditions in Kuwait. They were to be the major force behind creating the opportunity to establish Conductive Education in Kuwait. The process began with the blessing of Dr. Abdul Rahman Saleh Al-Muhailan, (former health minister) Chairman and CEO of EDU, the Educational Holding Group.

It was May 2003 when my plane first landed in Kuwait. The trip had been delayed due to the Invasion of Iraq as Kuwait at that time had been declared as a potential war zone. Dr. Essa Al-Saadi the visionary for special needs services, waited for me at the airport. I hardly recognised him as he was dressed in traditional Kuwaiti clothing known as *Deshdasha*. When he realised my surprise, he smiled and said: 'Sorry, I should have warned you that this is what we wear here in Kuwait'. I did not mind at all as he looked like an angel dressed all in white apart from his *Ogal* (a black band surrounding the top of his head to hold the *Gutra*, his white head-cover, in place). As we left the air-conditioned airport building we stepped into an incredible dry heat. I could not help but take a deep breath. I imagine that it must be similar as we take our first deep breath at birth.

The vision becomes reality

Following a number of meetings and visits to already existing facilities in Kuwait, our task at Conductive Education Support Services Limited was to design a two-year strategic plan to set up Conductive Education services in Kuwait. It was so exciting. I still remember it clearly; we moved into this different dimension where our total focus was to put down literally on a 'clean sheet of paper,' whatever we believed was possible to create. Amanda Elliott (one of the first Conductor graduates of the Foundation for Conductive Education, my colleague and our co-ordinator at Conductive Education Support Services Limited) and I worked day and night on the plan. It was a huge responsibility, as we had to come up with a plan, which was workable, realistic and able to stand up for the real needs

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of individuals and their families in Kuwait. Once the Board of Directors in Kuwait had approved the plan, we started an incredible journey into the unknown. I knew that it was not going to be an easy challenge but it was one that I knew could work if like-minded forward-thinking individuals pulled together towards the vision.

The Conductive Education School Kuwait²

The project was to take place in the grounds of an empty school in Farwaniya. After we had sent all necessary plans and recommendations for extensive building work, alterations, equipment, resources and staff to be recruited during the spring of 2003, the project was to open its doors for the first pupils in September 2003. The lead-up to that time was extremely intense and keeping deadlines would have been impossible without the invaluable organisation, leadership and management skills of Dr Ahmad Al-Houly who worked tirelessly.

In September 2003, we started with just four classrooms, by May 2005 we had 16 classes and today we have 23 classrooms along with an outdoor sheltered playground and a swimming pool. The school now occupies about 6000 square metres of the original school grounds. Most of the Conductive Education furniture and equipment was carefully handmade in Kuwait and other educational resource materials were bought in Kuwait or imported from abroad.

Aims and objectives

Conductive Education School Kuwait was set up to provide rehabilitation/education services to enable individuals who have significant disabilities to function more independently in the home, in an educational environment, at work, and in community environments, thereby reducing dependency in essential everyday activities and making constructive steps towards integration into society. The aim was to establish a school of excellence to provide complete educational/rehabilitation packages for children and

adults with neurological and related conditions, and to provide a service to train personnel to support/guide/teach children and adults with severe to mild neurological and related conditions. Our mission was to identify and meet the needs of individuals with different disabilities and to provide individualised, flexible, consistent services to cater for children who were not yet accessing any kind of intervention. Our endeavour was to provide the highest quality of Conductive Education services to support individuals' multi-dimensional needs in a rounded, dignified and humane manner, utilising and nurturing each individual's potential, gifts and qualities.

The programmes at Conductive Education School Kuwait incorporate self-development, active learning, independence, problem-solving and age appropriate social and academic skills. The whole day's curriculum is designed to teach and facilitate the learning of motor skills and the building of orthofunctional habits that will enable children to participate actively in their everyday lives. This unique intervention prepares children for an active, more independent life. The development and maintenance of orthofunctional motor skills carry equal importance with the academic curriculum in the teaching programmes at Conductive Education School Kuwait. As the project developed we had to make many changes to the strategic plan. Conductive Education School Kuwait has grown into a large special school (by September 2005, 132 children were full-time attendees). The school is registered with the Ministry of Private Education and fulfils the Ministerial Decree No. 99/122 concerning terms of opening schools and classrooms attached to private schools for rendering services to disabled students in the sector of Private Education. A committee from the Kuwaiti Ministry of Private Education regularly visits the school to ensure that standards are being maintained and that aims and objectives are being followed through.

The school supports children with:

- cerebral palsy (mild - moderate - severe, monoplegia, quadriplegia, hemiplegia, diplegia, paraplegia, athetosis, ataxia);
- spina bifida;
- head injuries;

- muscular dystrophy;
- Down's syndrome;
- autistic tendencies;
- attention deficit and hyperactive disorders;
- global development delay.

All children are grouped according to their learning needs, children with physical disabilities are placed into Conductive Education classes whilst the children with other neurological conditions are placed in classes with conductive input and following structured daily routines, academic lessons, and using the essence of conductive philosophy to guide learning.

Children who participated in the conductive programme performed better, projecting an established higher level in their cognitive abilities and functional performance, and were able to learn new skills more competently, compared to children who never received Conductive Education. In February 2005, Conductive Education School Kuwait was awarded an inclusive Quality Mark Accreditation from Special and Inclusive Services UK. This inspection was conducted by a team functioning as an independent, external inspection team utilising the appropriate OFSTED Inspection Framework, Kuwait Standards and the Accreditation Standards for the UK National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools.

Quotations from the inspection report

The Conductive Education School Kuwait ensures that students with special needs can access the curriculum through a Conductive Education approach. Students are grouped to ensure that conductive education is appropriately differentiated to meet their needs and the ethos and philosophy of developing the students' 'problem solving' personalities permeate throughout the school day. (Introduction)

The Conductive Education School has achieved an enormous amount within a very short period of time. Since its opening in 2003 students have benefited greatly from provision

on offer at the school. They make clearly evident progress and they demonstrate potential for further development of their skills and abilities. The school has made an appropriately strong and professional response to the Kuwait Government's provision of financial support for children with special needs and it has quickly established itself as an institution of quality.

There is a potential for this good school to achieve the status of excellence and to be an educational "trail blazer" providing a unique specialist conductive system differentiated to meet students' individual special needs. This system of education is not only successful with students with physical disabilities but highly successful with students who have other form of brain damage or special needs.

The Conductive Education School Kuwait could act as a training centre, an advice and resource provision and a model of good provision of special education in Kuwait, for others to replicate and follow. (Executive summary)

From the scrutiny of documentation, reports and photographic evidence and from discussion with staff and parents, it is evident that students are making good progress.

This is particularly evident with regard to students' physical progress, progress in students' behaviour and students' study skills, e.g. concentration, working in groups, turn taking etc.

Students demonstrate a willingness and motivation to learn. Parents during interviews noted obvious pleasure the progress in their children's physical and mobility skills and in their use and understanding of English.

Consistently excellent relationships were observed between students and all staff both in formal and informal settings.

There is enthusiasm and commitment from the staff team and a clear sense of purpose and

³ Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (1926-2004), psychiatrist. Reproduced here with the kind permission of the EKR Foundation, www.elisabethkublerro.is.com, www.ekrfoundation.org

direction given from the Board. (Outcomes of the current review)

Summary

I understand that it is extremely hard for conductors to leave the safety of the Peto Institute and come and live and work in a different country, with an entirely different cultural set-up, but I can honestly say that each and every one of them does a terrific job and works tremendously hard. I am extremely grateful to each and every person who made Conductive Education School Kuwait possible. There is still ample room for improvement as in every developing educational provision. We are still a very young school. The Board of Directors has a clear vision and understanding what needs to be done and this is reflected in its next five year strategic plan.

Early mornings as the sun appears on the horizon, we all wake from the calling of the Holy Mosques *Allah Akbar* and set out for the new day to make a difference in the life of the children who previously had no or very little formal education, who started their lives without a real sense of belonging, purpose and direction. Some of them had never held a pencil, never expected to achieve, but their spirit burns with the desire to live a dignified and independent life. This is their birthright and we are ordained to support them with all the gifts, knowledge and experience we are blessed with during our lifetime.

It is only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up that we will begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it were the only one we had. (Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross)³

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