**ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS**

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*Special Education is organically part and parcel of Islamic Education/Scholarship. This paper takes the Islamic perspective to explore the theoretical framework and historical backgrounds of special education in Islam. The theoretical framework is established based on the general principle of the Islamic conception of knowledge and education, particularly according to the Qur’an and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him). The historical foundation are traceable to the time of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) up to the time when many Muslim Universities (e.g. Al-Azhar) established the course (based on Islamic guidelines). All these exposition are a clear indication that Special Education (a new discipline in Western scholarship) is not new in Islamic Education. Unfortunately, Muslims are today backward in the field. In view of this, the paper throws a challenge to the generality of Muslims to reconsider and uphold this, not only important, but indispensable heritage.*

1. **Introduction**

Special Education as the name implies is an aspect of education that is specifically concerned with evolving and developing certain educational (instructional) activities or services meant to cater for the needs of persons with special psycho-physical traits and characteristics that make them deviate either behaviourally or physically from normal persons. According to Kolo (1994), it is tailored to meet the unique needs of individuals who are exceptional.

From the above definition, it could be seen that, ‘exceptional persons’ are the central focus in special education. In the words of Heward and Orlansky (1984), exceptionality is an “all inclusive term that refers to any child whose performance deviates from the norm, either below or above, to such an extent that special education programming is required indicated”. Succinctly, Kirk and Gallagher (1989) defined an exceptional child as, “the child who deviates from the average or normal child in mental characteristics, sensory abilities, neuro-motor and physical characteristics, social behavior, communication abilities or in multiple handicaps. Such deviation must be of such an extent that, the child requires a modification of school practices, or special educational services, to develop to maximum capacity”.

Special education initially started as an aspect of Educational Psychology. At the beginning, the concern was the individual himself and his peculiar educational problems. Later, there came to be a shift, in scope and focus such that the exceptional child is seen in complex interaction with his environment, an approach that is called the ecological model. In its present form therefore, Special Education involves various professionals like medical experts (doctors & nurses), psychologists, guidance counselors, curriculum and instruction experts, regular teachers, special teachers, social workers, etc. In the most recent trend, Special Education has metamorphosed into an independent, fast growing discipline, extending its spheres of interest to embrace even community based rehabilitation services outside the confines of the school or rather enclosed educational settings.

In its present form and dispensation, Special Education is relatively a new discipline in the realm of western educational studies and institutions. According to Kirk and Gallagher (1989), the entire concept of educating each child to the limits of his her ability is relatively new. Its emergence was a consequence of informal concerns by teachers and education workers, for the need to take care of the special interests and needs of exceptional children with a view to making them become useful to themselves and the society. This had come to be accepted by the government of different countries and had since been backed up by official national/state policies. The emergence of different humanitarian concerns, movements and organizations, especially pertaining to disabled/handicapped (physically challenged) persons, could be counted as one important factor that galvanized the present developments and advancements in Special Education.

In the history and general principles of Islamic Education and scholarship, the idea, and even the practice of special education and rehabilitation services are nothing new or strange. In this paper, an attempt has been made to give the theoretical foundations of special education and present some concrete historical background of Special Education practices in Islam. In view of the objectives of this paper, a synthetic approach has been adopted. This essentially involves a conscious study of various Qur’anic verses and traditions of the Holy Prophet (Peace be upon him) which provide basic educational/scholastic principles and have general implications for the same endeavour.

* 1. **Theoretical Background of Special Education in Islam**

Islam is a religion that has its own distinctive world view. The Islamic world-view is based on the belief in Allah as the Originator of life, the Sole Creator, Sustainer, Nourisher, and the Sovereign and Supreme Governor and Controller of all the affairs of the universe. Life depends on Him, and its purpose is to worship Him alone based on His injunctions. There is going to be a Divine life after this earthly life which will come after death. This makes this earthly life a testing ground. Man is Allah’s vicegerent on earth and has been given divine guidance, endowed with freewill, honoured above all creatures and everything has been subjected to him and therefore he alone has been charged with the responsibility of leading life in this world (Abdu’ Ali. 1978: Wan Daud, 1989 and Shehu, 1995).

For the purpose of discharging his unique duty man has been endowed with a superb intellect and knowledge of all sorts (Shehu, 1995). He has been shown the path of goodness and evil. With the free-will, intellect and knowledge given to him, he has been given the ability to choose to do right or wrong. This makes him to be responsible for his actions. In this regard, nobody has been exempted except the insane/lunatic. Exceptional or physically challenged people, who are sane, are therefore part and parcel of the general dictates of this worldview.

This brief description of the Islamic worldview presents Islam as a comprehensive, sublime and at the same time a unique way of life. Its comprehensiveness and sublimity is what explains the *tremendous* importance it attaches to knowledge. The theoretical foundations of Special Education in Islam can only therefore, be extracted and expounded from the general scheme of the Islamic conception of knowledge and education. This has been outlined in the following sub-headings.

**1.1 (a) Attitude of Islam towards Knowledge and Education**

Nothing can be an overstatement or over-emphasis with regards to the importance and position of knowledge in Islam (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1993, Alao, 1993, Shehu, 1995 and Al-Qardawi). This is because, in Islam sound faith, based on conviction is only obtainable and possible through sound knowledge (Shehu, 1995). Allah attests to this in the Qur’an saying “…*Those (who) truly fear Allah among His servants are those who have knowledge” (Qur’an 35:28).* The same attestation is implied in Qur’an 3:18 and 34:6.

The practical confirmation of the above attestation is, first of all, the episode of the first revelation in which the question of knowledge was centrally and fundamentally addressed. This was a categorical and clarion proclamation to the world that Islam is a religion of knowledge, and that any sound knowledge which leads to true faith is synonymous with Islam (Shehu, 1996). This again is also affirmed by Allah in the Qur’an when He says: “But those who had been granted (true) knowledge…”, referring to those who have faith (Iman) (Qur’an, 28:80). The same synonymity between Islam, Iman and knowledge has been implied in several other verses (e.g. 16:27, 30:56 etc.). Indeed, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) himself was never directly enjoined in the Qur’an to seek increase in anything except knowledge (Qur’an, 20:114). The inference that can be made with regard to this is that, he was not even directly commanded to seek increase in Iman and guidance (the ultimate goal of acquiring knowledge in Islam) because it can only be obtained through sound knowledge and righteous deeds. Ibnul-Qayyim (1993), has explained that stages of virtue, bliss, exaltation and honour (darajat) have been ascribed to knowledge (men of knowledge) in the Qur’an four times in four different chapters (e.g. 12:76, 58:11, etc.). Infact, one can say that the Islamic concern with knowledge is even greater that Jihad (striving in the cause of Allah) to which this (darajat) was ascribed only once.

In line with the Quranic evidences about the importance of knowledge as explained above, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has made a number of injunctions and exhortations towards seeking knowledge. In a very popular Hadith, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon Him) said: (Reported by Don-Majah) “The Search for knowledge is an obligatory duty on every Muslims (male or female)”. This is with regards to the search and acquisition of knowledge. But regarding its dissemination, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon Him) has charged Muslims to disseminate it and warned them against hoarding/hiding it. In an Hadith, he said, “Whoever is asked about a certain knowledge and he hides it he shall be pulled to the hellfire with a bridle made of fire”. Regarding the virtues of disseminating knowledge, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon Him) has taught that if a person dies, all his deeds shall cut off except three things. One of these three is knowledge.

Having seen the attitude of Islam towards knowledge, it is pertinent to examine its general implication to Special Education. There is no doubt that, the sure faith which Muslims have been exhorted to yearn for and acquire applies also to the exceptional persons (with the only possible exclusion of those that may be profoundly mentally retarded, who may not understand anything after all). If this was the case, injunction to seek knowledge and disseminate it also applies to the disabled, the handicapped and the impaired (the physically challenged). It is therefore, unthinkable that Islam would be in different to Special Education. This point can further be affirmed by the historical evidences of the practice of Special Education in Islam, to be discussed later.

Education is the overall means of transformation of knowledge, and also the principal means of transmitting and sustaining civilization and culture (Islamic civilization not an exception). The celebrated nature of the position of knowledge in Islam is the fundamental factor that explains Muslims’ concern with education throughout history. The aims of education in Islam are broad based and comprehensive being concomitant to and in accordance with the Islamic worldview. They are not only restricted to achieving worldly happiness and prosperity but they encompass even the achievement of endless bliss and prosperity of the Hereafter (Al-Kailani, 1997). This fact is clearly established in the final statement and resolutions of the First International Conference on Islamic Education (1997) which took place in Makkah (1977). The statement has given a very precise and concise definition of the aims of Islamic Education. This has been cited by Galadanci (1993) and it reads as follows:

“The aims of Islamic education is to form persons who will be good, and worship God as He deserves to be worshipped, who will use the knowledge to enjoin people on earth (to do good) and utilize it is accordance with God’s law in the service of belief and in accordance to its scheme”

Thus, according to Galadanci the system of Islamic education must realize three things; namely:

1. A Muslim must acquire religious knowledge so as to know his Creator, obey His laws as revealed to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), worship Him and fulfill all the religious obligations as stipulated.
2. He must also learn how to cultivate the earth and benefit from what God has created.
3. He must learn to be a responsible and useful citizen capable of performing his duties in the best interest of the community he lives in.

These three major goals of Islamic education especially the last one stated above have very relevant implication for special education. To make a person to be responsible and useful to himself and his society, and not to be completely dependent or indolent (a social stigma) is a fundamental goal of special education. However, the central point in the aims of Islamic Education cited above – “to worship God as He deserves to be worshipped” – leads to another realm of discussion. That is with regards to the general principles which underly religious obligations and duties in Islam, and their implications for special education.

**1.1 (b) Basic Principles of Religious Obligations and Duties in Islam and their Implication for Special Education.**

In Islam, all religious obligations and duties are based on certain principles or conditions. These are maturity, ability and sanity. Maturity means that all religious obligations and duties do not obligatorily and compulsorily apply to a person until he attains maturity (puberty). The minor who is immature is encouraged to perform those obligations and duties only on supererogatory basis. Sanity means that, insane people will not be held responsible for their deeds/actions by God. This rule has been established in an Hadith of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon Him) which reads: “The pen (which records deeds) is suspended (from recording deeds) against the minor child until he attains maturity; the insane until he regains sanity; and the sleeper until he wakes up”. Ability on the other hand means that one should perform his/her religious obligations as far as he/she can bear. In other words, religious obligation applies to each person to the extent that he/she can be able to undertake it. Allah says: “on no soul doth Allah place a burden greater than it can bear...” (65:7); and, “so fear Allah as far as you can …” (64:16).

From the above principle/conditions a number of points which have implications for Special Education can be deduced as follows:

1. These principles indicate that disabled/handicapped (physically challenged) persons have never been exempted from religious obligations. Since such obligations are only considered valid if they are based on knowledge of their rules, just as observing them is obligatory upon even the exceptional persons, in equally the same way, seeking the knowledge is obligatory upon them. This provides inter alia, a necessary background for Special Education in Islam.
2. Individual differences have been recognized in the principle of ability as explained above. Every person is obliged to observe such religious obligation in accordance to his/her peculiar rate of capability. The special or rather exceptional peculiarities and perhaps short comings of the disabled/handicapped have effectively been taken care of. It should also be born in mind that, since the seeking of knowledge is itself a religious obligation, such exceptional persons are still, therefore, expected to acquire knowledge as far as they can, based on their specific abilities, as may be dictated by their exceptional conditions. In this regard, every person is treated on the basis of his exceptional needs, and this is the fundamental idea behind special education. It could also be inferred here that even if in social or communal obligations or duties the physically challenged is expected to contribute his quota to the extent that he can render. This gives an insight to the fact that Islam recognizes the usefulness and worthiness of each and every individual in the society. Nobody should be abandoned or ostracized on account of his exceptionality.
3. In all religious obligations that require the use of intellect the physically challenged (all categories) have never been exempted. They have only been clearly exempted from obligations that are prone to physically active participation and have great vulnerability to physical hazards. This specifically applies to Jihad (physical striving in the cause of Allah in the battlefield). The phrase “in the battlefield” has been used to exclude other forms of Jihad like intellectual or monetary (all sorts of wealth) Jihads. In several verses, Allah clearly stated this exemption. For example, He says: “Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) except those who are disabled. And those who strive and fight in the cause of Allah with their persons…” (Qur’an 4:96) Qur’anic exegetics explained that the initial revelation of this verse did not contain the exception clause. The clause came down (revealed) after a complaint by a blind man, “What about we who stay at home on account of our disabilities?” Then, Allah revealed “except those who are disabled.” In another verse, the exemption order came with specific mentioning of the categories of the physically challenged persons exempted. It reads:

“There is no blame on those who are infirm, or ill, or who find no resources to spend (on the cause), if they are sincere (in duty) to Allah and His Messenger: No ground (of complaint) can there be against such as do right; and Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Qur’an, 9:91).

1. Although the physically challenged have been exempted from physical Jihad, the same cannot be said of the mentally retarded pertaining to intellectual pursuit. For although he is mentally handicapped, he can still be grouped under minors. Just as small children are taught various aspects of knowledge to prepare them for both religious and worldly life when they get matured, the mentally retarded should equally be treated, to prepare him for life at least to the maximum level of his functional abilities.

**1.1 (c) Aspects of Exceptionalities Described/Mentioned in the Qur’an**

Still in an attempt at formulating the theoretical framework for Islamic perspective of special education, it is pertinent to present some categories of exceptionalities mentioned in the Qur’an. This is with a view to establishing the fact that Islam has since recognized exceptional persons (both the mentally and physically challenged), and has provided in some ways how to care of them. Some few of these are hereby presented:

1. **Mental Retardation:**

This has been alluded to in several verses like the followings:

“… if the party liable is mentally deficient or weak, or unable himself to dictate, let his guardian dictate faithfully…” (Qur’an, 2:282).

This is a portion of a verse in which Allah enjoins the recording of contracts pertaining to debts. That is why He said, if the party that is liable is mentally deficient and cannot dictate the terms of the contract on account of his mental retardation, then his guardian should do so. In this verse, the idea of integrating the mentally retarded into mainstream social and even economic functions and activities has been implied. The verse also alludes to the fact that with minimum support and assistance (in some cases) the mentally retarded can be made to be useful to himself.

“To those weak of understanding give not your property which Allah has assigned to you to manage, but feed and clothe them therewith, and speak to them words of kindness and justice”. (Qur’an 4:5)

Although the phrase, “those weak of understanding” has been interpreted by Ibn-Abbas and others to refer to young orphans, some interpreters maintain the view that, it connotes a general meaning. Ali (1981 p.207) for example says: “This applies to orphans, but the wording is perfectly general…” The verse even went further to suggest practical assistance which should be rendered to them for the purpose of rehabilitating them.

1. **Blindness, Physical Infirmity, Illness:**

“It is no fault in the blind nor in one born lame, nor in one afflicted with illness, nor in yourselves, that ye should eat in your houses…”

This verse clearly refers to the categories of exceptional mentioned above. The world illness can comprise all sorts of illness including deafness, etc, and even psychological illness like psychosis, obsessive impulsive neurosis, etc. Further comments shall be made later on this same verse.

1. **Speech Impairment:**

“My breast will be strained. And my tongue will not speak (plainly): so sent unto Aaron” (Qur’an, 26:13)

In another verse Allah says:

“And my brother Aaron is more eloquent, in speech than I: so send him with me as a helper to confirm (and strengthen) me (Qur’an, 28:34)

In these two verses Allah is reporting to us the complaint of Moses (peace be upon him) when He was appointed as a Messenger and sent to Pharaoh and his people. He had some problem on his tongue which used to impair his speech. So, he prayed that his bother Haroon (peace be upon him) should be sent with him to assist him.

**1.1 (d) Islamic Approach to Individual and Group (Social) Integration and Rehabilitation of Exceptional Persons**

The issue of de-institutionalization, less restricted environment and integration of the exceptional children and youth, for the purpose of facilitating a more positively enhanced social adjustment and integration in them, is the latest and newest trend in special education. It is presently accepted all over the world as being much more helpful and beneficial to them if they are to be trained in terms of adjustment and integration. Rehabilitation services are associated with the issue of integration. It means giving a reorientation and some other special services in order to improve the lots of some people who otherwise, could almost be social misfits and the like.

In Islam, this is never a new thing. Islam has a very comprehensive system of taking care of all sorts of destitute and or indigents. At the same time, Muslims have been enjoined in many verses in the Qur’an to integrate all persons in the Muslim community in the spirit of Islamic brotherhood, compassion and kindness. In this section, verses and Hadith concerning rehabilitation of the disabled and destitute and the integration of exceptional persons will be examined.

**A. Rehabilitation of the Individual or Group**

As it has been said, there is a comprehensive system of taking care of destitutes in Islam. This is embodied first and foremost in the Zakat Institution. Zakat is the third pillar of Islam. It is a compulsory alm which rich men must give on yearly basis to the poor, the needy and the destitute. It is not a matter of choice, but a fundamental obligation in Islam. In fact the Qur’an has forcefully and emphatically described it (Zakat) as the due right of the poor on the wealthy or rich ones. The Qur’an says: “And in their wealth is a due share for the beggar and the deprived.” (Qur’an, 51:19). This is also repeated in Qur’an 70:24-25 where Allah says: “And those in whose wealth is a recognized right. For the needy who asks and he who is deprived (for some reason from asking)”.

Eight categories of people to whom the compulsory alm should be given have been specifically mentioned in chapter 9 verse 60 of the Qur’an. Of these eight categories of people, there are ‘poor’ and the ‘needy’. Islamic jurists and Qur’anic interpreters have given various interpretations of the two terms. Whatever the case may be, there is a consensus on the fact that both of the terms signify a condition of destitution of all sorts. That is why Al-Qardawi (1986) maintains that the poor and the needy both mean two types of people. In his words, he said: “The ‘poor’ and the ‘needy’ are (both of two categories. One category is the one who is able to work and earn a living for himself and by himself like a jobber (***Sani***), a trader, a farmer, etc, but he has no tools with which to carry out his job, or he has no capital with which to trade… What is necessary for persons of this category is to be given a Zakat wealth or share, sufficient enough to afford him a lifelong livelihood, in such a way that he would no longer need anything like Zakat. In our modern age, this can be executed by means of setting up industries and various forms of investments from Zakat wealth so that destitute who can work will be employed in such industries.

The second category is that of the disabled who have been handicapped from earning a living by themselves because of some sorts of lifelong illness(es), or the blind, senile old aged persons, widows, infants, and the likes of them. For these types of people, they need to be given what would be sufficient for them, for one full year, or somebody should be employed specifically to take care of distributing such wealth to them (on routine basis), say every year, or every month…” (p.92).

This is undoubtedly a well established system of social rehabilitation. Beside the Zakat institution which is compulsory, Muslims have been enjoined in very many verses in the Qur’an and many sayings of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) to undertake charitable donations and or services of all sorts, and to different categories of peoples that are in difficulties. These charitable donations are to be voluntarily done, and for compassion, kindness, generosity and altruism. Let us consider some few verses and Hadith here.

**a) Rehabilitation of the Orphan, the Needy and the one in a State of Captivity.**

Allah describes His righteous servants as people who rehabilitate and take care of the above categories of destitute in many verses. For example, He says:

“And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan and the captive, (saying), “We feed you for the sake of Allah alone: No reward do we desire from you, nor thanks” (Qur’an, 76:8-9).

Other verses which equally exhort Muslims to these forms of charitable gesture are (2:177; 89:14-18; 90:16-17; 92: 5-11; 93:9-11 and 107:2-3).

**b) Rehabilitation of People who are in a State of Difficulty (all sorts e.g. the diseased, the disabled or handicapped, the poor etc)**

Many Hadiths have enjoined Muslims to rehabilitate people who have found themselves in a state of difficulty. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“Whoever removes any grieve (sadness) of the grieves of this world for a believer, Allah will in return remove for him, a grieve of the grieves (he shall encounter) on the Day of Resurrection. And whosoever makes things easy for he who is in difficulty, Allah shall equally make things easy for him in this world and the Hereafter. Whosoever clothes a Muslim Allah will clothe him in this world and in the Hereafter. Allah never ceases to assist His servant, so long as that servant assists his fellow brother …” (Reported by Muslim).

**c) Assisting and Rehabilitating the Novice and or the Retarded; and Self Rehabilitation**

The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked by Abu Dharral-Ghirafi saying: O Messenger of Allah! “What deeds is most virtuous and meritorious he said: “To believe in Allah and to undertake Jihad in His cause” I said: “What type of slave is more virtuous to free? He said: “That who is most expensive in the eyes of his/her masters”. I said: What if I cannot do all these?” He said: “You assist the wretched or you help make (whatever) for the novice” (Reported by Bukhari and Muslim). Imam Nawawi said a novice means he that cannot do what he wants to do in a good and proper way.

Another Hadith reads thus:

Abu-Musa (may God bless him) reported that the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) once said: “Sadaqah (charity) is upon every Muslim”. He was asked: “What if he does not get what to give? He replied: “Let him work with his hands to benefit himself and give some part thereof in charity”. He was asked again, “what if he cannot do that? He answered saying: “Then let him help one who I in need of assistance (poor, needy, cripples, disabled, etc) (reported by Bukhari and Muslim)

**d) General Amnesty and Compassion to the Disadvantaged, the Ill, the Aggrieved, the Destitute, etc.**

i) The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Allah has mercy only upon those of His servants who are merciful”.

ii) The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) also said: “Show mercy and compassion upon those on earth, He that is in the heaven shall have mercy and compassion upon you.

iii) The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Allah is not merciful to him who is not so to mankind”

iv) The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked: “What actions are most excellent” He replied saying: “To gladden the heart of human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, and to remove the wrong of the injured”

**B) Social Integration of Exceptional Persons in Islam**

The Muslim Ummah right from its inception at the times of The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has always been a composition of people of various types and categories – the poor and the rich, the exalted and the lowly, the normal and the physically challenged, the black and the white, the Arab and the non-Arab, etc. All these were fully integrated as a single indivisible Ummah by the spirit of Islmaic brotherhood and also on the basis of the equality of mankind as declared in the Qur’an, 49:13. No section of the community was stigmatized, ostracized or out-casted on any grounds. Islam therefore, has laid down principles of social integration especially of the disadvantaged people of the community. Since the major concern in this paper is the integration of exceptional people (the disabled and handicapped), verses and sayings of the Prophet pertaining to what will be examined here in the following ways:

1. **General Principle/rule on the Integration of the Indigent and the Destitute**

At the beginning of Islam, some arrogant people of Makkah wanted to join the faith. But they felt there were some lowly people who had already accepted Islam, and as far as they were concerned, it would be a ‘class suicide’ to sit together with such people. They therefore, told the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) to either send away such lowly people from around him, or give separate times of sitting/meeting with the two groups (the destitute and the affluent). That only if this was done would they accept Islam. At this instance, a general rule regarding the integration of the community irrespective of personal disposition was revealed. For example Allah says:

“Send not away those who call on their Lord morning and evening, seeking His Face. In naught art thou accountable for them, and in naught are they accountable for thee, that thou should turn them away, and thus be (one) of the unjust” (Qur’an, 6:52).

1. **Social Integration of the Disabled/Handicapped**

Allah has ordained that Muslims should try to integrate the disabled people in their midst as far as possible in all social affairs. The Qur’an gave an example of this integration in terms of having meals together (normal people and exceptional ones), Allah says:

“it is no fault in the blind nor in ne born lame, nor in one afflicted with illness, nor in yourselves, that ye should eat in your houses, or those of your fathers, or your mothers, or your brothers, or your sisters, or your father’s brothers, or your father’s sisters, or your mother’s brothers, or your mothers sisters, on in houses of which the keys are in your possession, or in the house of a sincere friend of yours: there is no blame on you, whether ye eat in company or separately. But if ye enter houses, salute each other – a greeting of blessing and purity as from Allah. Thus does Allah make clear the signs to you: that ye may understand” (Qur’an, 24:61)

Commenting on this verse, Ali (1981) says:

“There were various Arab superstitions and fancies which are combated and rejected here; (1) The blind, or the halt, or those afflicted with serious disease were supposed to be objects of divine displeasure, and as such not fit to be associated with us in meals in our houses: we are not to entertain such a thought, as we are not judges of the causes of people’s misfortunes, which deserve our sympathy and kindness” (p.1028)

1. **Integration of Exceptional Persons in Lessons (Teaching)**

One time, at the early days of Islam, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was busy explaining Islam to some leading Quraish men when a blind man (Abdullahi ibn Ummi Maktum) came saying: “teach me of that which Allah has taught you” The Holy Prophet’s (peace be upon him) attention was concentrated on the Quraish leading personalities and did not therefore pay much attention to the blind man. At this instance, Allah revealed the following verses:

“{The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him)} frowned and turned away: Because there came to him the blind man (interrupting); but what could tell thee but that perchance he might grow in purity? Or that might receive Admonition, and the Reminder Might Profit him? As to one who regards Himself as self-sufficient; To him dost thou attend; Though it is no blame on thee if he grows not in purity; But as to him who came to thee striving earnestly; And with fear (in his heart); Of him was thou unmindful; By no means (should it be so)! For it is indeed a Message of remembrance; Therefore, let those who will keep it in remembrance” (Qur’an, 8: 1-12)

These verses have very relevant and significant implications for special education. The most glaring of these implications is that, the teacher should not frown and turn away from those who are blind, lame or exceptional in some way. They teach us that, as teachers, we should not attend only to those who are normal and or more intelligent at the expense of physically challenged children or youths. We should give exceptional persons special attention and care.

After such a long discussion on the theoretical backgrounds of Special Education in Islam, it is now pertinent to turn to the second section of this paper. This is the historical backgrounds of Special Education in Islam. The historical instances that are presented here establish to us the fact that the idea of educating exceptional people in an integrated system is never new to Islam.

**1.2 Historical Backgrounds of Special Education is the Muslim World**

**a) Special Education in Early Islamic History**

The historical background of teaching of exceptional people in Islam is traceable to the first educational institute set up by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) at Makkah, even before his Hijra (migration) to Madina. This is the Darul-Arqam. It was a house of one of his companions in which they used to gather. Therein, the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) used to teach them the basics of Islam, and the verses revealed to him. One of the disciples then was a blind man who used to receive his lessons, along with all other disciples. This blind man was Abdullahi ibn Ummi Maktum to whom reference was made earlier in this paper (in respect of 80: 1-12). He was not discriminated on account of his exceptionality.

What is most interesting and also instructive is that, the same blind man was one of the first two teachers appointed and sent to teach Qur’an at Madina by the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) before his Hijra. The other person with whom he was sent was Mus’ab Ibn Umair. When they arrived Madina, they found that already a school had been established by the few people who accepted Islam then, the very people they were sent to teach. The school was called Darul-Qurra. They took over the school and Mus’ab headed it while Abdullahi ibn Ummi Maktum (The Blind) was deputising. This is the first Quranic school set up in Islamic history (Alkali, 1996).

This has shown us the extent to which exceptional persons were taken care of intellectually and otherwise in Islam. Ibn Ummi Maktum was even much fully integrated into the community. Not only being one of the two most prominent Muadh-dhins (callers to prayer) of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him), he was at certain times even appointed to deputize the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) at Madina when he was travelling. He therefore led people in prayers at several occasions. This has been how Islam takes care of exceptional persons in all aspects of life throughout history.

**b) Special Education in the University of Al-Azhar**

In the ages of Muslim intellectual and civilization glory, when learning and scholarship reached their peak, the concern for the education of exceptional persons became much more formalized. Over twelve centuries ago, Muslims had established great universities where advanced scholarship in various disciplines used to take place. This was at a time when Europe was in its dark ages. One of such universities is Al-Azhar which exists up to this day.

Since about a thousand years ago, Al-Azhar had fully become a cosmopolitan centre of scholarship with people of different races and nationalities. The university was since then divided into different sections which can be likened to faculties or halls as we have them today. According to Al-Wali (1988), each hall was designated to a people that come from the same region of the world. Each hall was taken care of (financially) by the respective regions of the people occupying the hall. It is important here to note that one of such halls was exclusively occupied by people from Borno (in present day Nigeria) and was designated – ***Ruwaq al Borno*** (meaning Borno Hall) which was sponsored by the leaders of the then Kanem-Bornu empire (Al-Wali, 1988 p.490).

One of the halls/faculties that existed was that of blind students. It was called ***Ruwaqu Umyan*** (meaning Hall/Faculty of the Blind). This hall was exclusively designated for physically challenged persons – the blind in particular. The sponsors/financiers (for the upkeep) of the hall/faculty laid down a condition that the teacher of the hall/faculty should also be a blind person (Al-Wali, 1988). Thus, the faculty was made of blind men exclusively - the teachers and those taught. The sponsors of the hall took care of everything pertaining to the hall – teachers’ and students’ welfare and teaching and learning facilities. This is just a glimpse of how exceptional people were educated throughout Muslim’s educational history. Since then, up to present days, a number of handicapped Muslim scholars (especially blind) have always been produced. They are too numerous to be mentioned.

**1.3 Conclusion**

The theoretical and historical backgrounds of Islamic perspective of Special Education presented in this paper has established the fact that, even though Special Education appears to be a new discipline today, it is in no way as such in Islam. This fact however, poses a great challenge to Muslims. Although Muslims, more than any set of people have inherited a very rich and voluminous legacy about special education, they (Muslims) are the most backward today in this endeavour. Indeed in the whole educational endeavour in the World Muslims are backward in spite of the importance attached to knowledge in Islam. With the facts presented in this paper, it is hoped that Muslim educationists will be motivated towards a positive action in respect of special education. Thousands of children in the Northern region of Nigeria are left at the mercy of street begging, and some other forms of social vices, in most cases for worse ends-indolence, life-long begging, pimpering, thuggery, touting, stealing, etc. This challenge can be faced squarely and effectively if recourse is made to the principles of special education in Islam and also the Islamic legacy on special education as presented here.

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