

# Inclusion at Al-Ahliah School: Varying Degrees of Success

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Al-Ahliah School, established by Mary Kassab in 1916, was certainly a pioneer in implementing inclusion. Al-Ahliah's attempts at various forms of inclusion started at the beginning of the sixties, and are still going on, with varying levels of success, for a variety of special needs of a physical and mental nature.

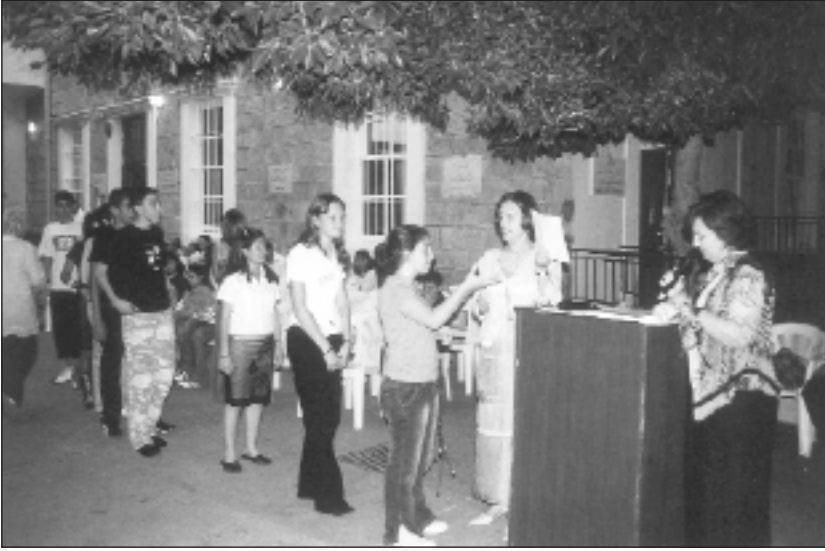
That inclusion should take place at Al-Ahliah was very natural and even inevitable since its mission has always stressed the value of humanity, the equal rights of all, and the importance of encouragement and of the nurturing of self-worth. It is an institution that strongly believes in giving each individual the opportunity to lead a dignified, fulfilled and productive life.

Al-Ahliah heralded several changes in society, including harboring on its campus the launching of the Lebanese Academy for Art and the teaching of law in Arabic for the first time in Lebanon. Besides, Al-Ahliah fearlessly and energetically embraced change with its pioneering work on inclusion, long before the government and other private institutions recognized the need to do something for people with learning disabilities.

Al-Ahliah's various attempts at inclusion catered to the following groups of needy students:

### Blind Students

At the beginning of the sixties, Al-Ahliah Girls' College, as it was called then, took in, at the intermediate level, two blind students: Shams Inati (now a full Professor at the University of Pennsylvania) and Mohammad Hassan. Since enrollment of boys beyond the elementary level was not practiced at that time at Al-Ahliah, an exception was made for Mohammad's sake by the principal, Wadad Al-Makdisi Cortas. Cortas was known for upholding humane targets over and above abiding by the rules. At that time, the only other school in the area that accepted blind students was the British Lebanese Training College (BLTC) of the English Mission. Braille was not available, and students had to learn outside the classroom only by means of other students reading to them or writing down what they dictated, whether it was homework, an essay or an exam. Leila Fawwaz described to me how Shams, who was also a boarder at the school used to solve problems in geometry. She used to ask Ms. Fawwaz to draw the required figure, then bisect a line, or whatever the need may be, according to the specific problem, until she would reach the solution. Ms. Fawwaz told me how Shams once calculated mentally the square root of a number in a shorter interval than it took the teacher to calculate on the blackboard!



Dr. Najla Hamadeh, Principal of Al-Ahliah School distributing degree during a graduation ceremony

Since the sixties, Al-Ahliah has continued to accept blind students in its classes. In 2003, it had eleven such students, and in 2004 five of Al-Ahliah's students who passed the government exams were blind. Three of them matriculated in the Baccalaureate and two in the Brevets degrees. The Lebanese government started accommodating the blind in official exams since 1974, for the Brevets, and since 1981 for the Baccalaureate. Thus, Al-Ahliah's attempts to accommodate blind students and attend to their educational needs predates that of the Lebanese government by a decade and a half.

In taking care of the special needs of blind students at the intermediate and secondary levels, Al-Ahliah has been cooperating, since 1960, with the Lebanese School for the Blind and Deaf at Baabda. Moreover in 1998 Al-Ahliah started cooperating with the Youth Association for the Blind in order to accommodate younger blind students. The Baabda School and the Youth Association help by typing textbooks in Braille and by holding workshops to instruct teachers on methods needed for the inclusion of the blind in the classroom. For example, the teachers are instructed to articulate clearly and are asked to say out loud everything they write on the board. The school at Baabda also provides evening classes to drill higher level blind students in math and science. The regular student-body of Al-Ahliah shows great willingness and even eagerness to help their blind colleagues; and friendship between seeing and blind students seems to be spontaneous and natural. Generally, blind students at Al-Ahliah are very independent. Some of them are as fast and at ease as other students in going up and down the numerous staircases of the school. Several of them are honors students.

This year, Al-Ahliah acquired, through a donation by USAID – Lebanon, a Braille lite machine and printer. This machine will enable the blind students to access the internet and download Braille-typed material that they can read. Moreover, the students can have the material read to them by means of the voice system of the machine.

#### **Physical Handicaps, other than Blindness**

In 2005 Al-Ahliah added ramps and an elevator to accommodate for students and teachers with motor handicaps. Currently one teacher is in need, and we hope that eventually we will have a success story with physically disabled students, alongside the one we are very proud of where blind students are concerned.

#### **Psychotic Students**

In the mid-sixties, Dr. Manoukian, the head of the main mental hospital of Lebanon (Asfourieh) at the time, suggested to the Principal, Mrs. Cortas, that some psychotic patients who were of an age and disposition to learn be admitted to Al-Ahliah. She readily accepted. The number of these students was very limited. Ms. Fawwaz remembers administering the prescribed daily medication to a beautiful Iranian girl, who was an exceptionally gifted student. The girl behaved and interacted with others as a normal student. Her only out of the ordinary behavior was her being inordinately unhappy, weeping and sulking whenever she got less than perfect grades!

More recent attempts at the inclusion of students who turned out to be psychotic or severely neurotic were far from successful. The toll on those who work at Al-Ahliah and on other students was too heavy for the school to bear. Hence, Al-Ahliah no longer accepts such students.

#### **Mentally Retarded Students**

In the eighties, the Lebanese School for the Mentally Retarded (now renamed The School for Special Education), asked to have some of its students and teachers use Al-Ahliah campus, so that these students may get to interact with regular students during recess and in physical education classes, as well as during trips and other activities. In harmony with Al-Ahliah's policy in support of inclusion, the request was granted.

This form of inclusion was only mildly successful, allowing regular and retarded students to interact: They sometimes played basket ball together or held conversations in

the courtyard. However, the presence of these children was also problematic for Al-Ahliah, especially due to the values and attitudes that prevail in Lebanese society.

This experience taught us that children require to have their social and humane awareness raised, at home and in school to a high level, before they may become willing to have the patience and tolerance to befriend, or interact with, children much slower mentally than themselves. In Lebanon, people are often encouraged to be aggressive and selfish. They are rarely taught to be considerate of others, especially those with needs different than their own. This is clearly seen in attitudes in driving as well as in the maltreatment of foreign domestic workers.

Some regular students and many parents did not like the presence of the retarded students at the same school as themselves or their children. Some parents of very young children considered the presence of retarded children to constitute a threat to the safety of their children. One family removed its children from school for this reason.

In the spring of 2005, the Board of Trustees of Al-Ahliah School voted to stop this attempt at inclusion, especially since space allocated on campus was needed after Al-Ahliah lost its preschool building to Solidere.

### Students with Special Needs

In 2000, Al-Ahliah started a Special Needs Department to service students with dyslexia or with attention deficit and/or hyper-activity and other such characteristics that pose learning problems. At the outset, it accepted some students with Down Syndrome or below average IQ. By 2003, it became clear that only mild special needs of those who are not below average intelligence are being tolerated by the school society and significantly helped by the program. Today, Al-Ahliah accepts students with special learning needs provided they are not below average intelligence; and it does not accept more than two such students in every class.

Most of the students with special learning needs are included within the regular classes most of the time, with a special-needs teacher helping them within the classroom. Often the special needs program modifies the lesson of such students, shortening the assignments or simplifying the concepts. Sometimes, the student is taken out of class to be given private lessons tailored to his/her needs. Also often these students take their exams in the Resource Room, with a teacher supervising every student, to help them focus and, sometimes, to explain the questions and directions.

The outcome of this program to accommodate students with special learning needs has been very encouraging, educationally and otherwise. Many students who were

unable to read or to do math overcame their difficulties and became good students. In two cases, students with severe dyslexia, who will never learn to read and write, are found to have higher than average comprehension capability. They are absorbing the information that other students are getting, only in their case the learning relies on oral rather than written instruction.

The only problem with the program is the high financial cost, which is a big drain on the school budget. We are in the process of raising the fees of students with special needs to cut down the losses. But often we have the problem of needy children whose parents are unable to meet the cost.

### Conclusion

Al-Ahliah's extensive experience with various forms of inclusion indicates that inclusion is hardest in the cases of mentally retarded and extremely hyperactive individuals. Mental slowness and physical over-activity seem to be obstacles to interaction with other students, since the latter seem to be unwilling to be patient enough or tolerant enough to deal with people different from themselves.

Physical handicaps and special learning needs that do not interfere with the ability of comprehension or with social behavior do not seem to cause any discouraging problems. Where social integration of the blind is concerned, Al-Ahliah's experience has been very encouraging. It has succeeded in providing blind students with the chance to get educated within regular environment and hence in preparing them for living in society and in dispelling any anxiety they may have concerning facing the outside world. It has also succeeded in enhancing and accelerating maturity and sympathy towards others in regular students. This experience has been a dose of humanity, wisdom and joy for all concerned.

Like everything having to do with human behavior, inclusion depends to a large extent on the individuals concerned, whether they are the ones with special needs or the ones who have to learn to cater to, tolerate or befriend them. A retarded child endowed with some charm and possessing relatively adequate social skills is easier to include among regular children. People who have compassion, patience and a sense of duty are more likely to spend time and effort in dealing with colleagues with special needs. Last but not least, a society that values care and compassion more than selfishness and success by the fastest or any means is more likely to succeed at attempts of inclusion. In so far as competition and personal and material success rule the Lebanese scene, Lebanon does not seem to be especially equipped for inclusion. Maybe the remnants of village, tribal as well as religious values are capable of providing some basis for successful inclusion. In post-modern societies, it is the civic and humanitarian values that are on the side of inclusion.