

# **LEBANESE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY**

## **WEBSITE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION**

By

**RAZAN ABDUL KADER RAKHA**

A project

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### Project Approval Form

Student Name: Razan Rakha I.D. #: 199608700  
Project Title: Special Education Website  
Program: Master of Arts in Education. Emphasis: Special Education  
Department: Education  
School: School of Arts and Sciences

Approved by: Ahmad Owen  
Project Advisor: Ahmad Owen Signature :

Member : Dr. Iman Osta Signature

Member : \_\_\_\_\_ Signature : \_\_\_\_\_

Date : 2-2-2011

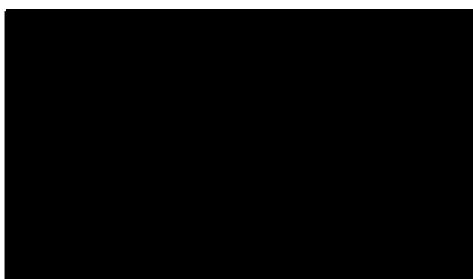
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Thank you all

To my loving family

# Special Education Website

Razane Abed El Kader Rakha

## Abstract

This study proposes a website dedicated to parents, educators, professionals, and anyone else interested in being informed on special education, in an effort to raise awareness of the special education field in Lebanon and the Arab world. This study presents various research related to online support groups. It also emphasizes the importance of support to parents of children with special needs, along with the role of special education teachers. Finally, an overview of the status of Internet use and special education in the Arab world is presented. This website is unique in its format and content; it offers the database of various Arab professionals in the special education field and a great deal of information about different Arab professionals who work in this field. It also includes a free online professional advice offered by specialists in the special education field and support groups for parents, teachers, children with special needs and all interested visitors. It gets its financial support from ads posted on the front page. It is now available at [www.special-need-education.org](http://www.special-need-education.org)

### **Keywords:**

Support Group, Online Support Group, Special Need, Learning Disability, Special Education Website.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Overview**

Cyberspace has become a major information source, by December 31 2009, the Internet users in North America have reached 76.2% of the population compared to those in the Middle East who have reached 28.3% of the population. Though the percentage of users in the Middle East (28.3%) is less than that in North America (76.2%), studies have indicated that the percentage of users is constantly on the rise. Indeed, between 2000 and 2009 the percentage increase in the Middle East has reached a significant number of 1,675.1 % while in North America the rate of growth is only 140.1% According to these data the Arab World is swiftly moving toward the internet age. New surveys show that the percentage of the use of the Internet in the Middle East is higher than the world average by 2.7%.

People have become more reliant on getting information from the Internet for different subjects, thanks to the ease of access and availability of information. Search engines such as Google and Yahoo have provided the infrastructure to search for various types of information at a push of a button. Considering the current use and the expected growth in the use of Internet technology, it is imperative to have websites that provide information about special education in the Arab word, and address the needs of special students, their parents, and special educators or teachers who are concerned with the special education field. The content should be based on Arab culture and draw on local and regional resources and expertise.

## **1.2 Purpose of the project**

The purpose of the project is to develop a website called “Special Needs Education”. It is intended to be an online guide that presents information about different types of special needs includes a database that lists different institutions and specialists working in this field over the Arab world. Moreover this website gives the chance to the users to ask questions and interact with professionals in forums.

## **1.3 Target Audience**

The intended website is directed to parents of special children, special educators and teachers. It presents a wealth of information and resources.

## **1.4 Rationale and significance of the project**

The pain and isolation that surround parents of children with special needs seem to be a major challenge that people face, especially in the Arab World (Alghazo, Dodeen, Algaryouti, 2003). Therefore, the resources and the help remain scarce for both parents and educators. So this website is intended to fill a big gap through guiding providing relief helping, and listening to parents and teachers dealing with a child or adolescent having a special need. Parents of children with special needs live in continual stress at home and in society. They have a lot of questions to ask and an enormous burden (Margalit& Raskind, 2009).

Therefore there is a need to have parental mediated groups in order to provide support (Wright, 1999). These groups help participants develop a sense of relatedness and empathy toward each other (Baum, 2004). This kind of communication enhances expressive story telling about personal experiences, advice giving and positive reinforcement (Beder, 2005).

Finally it allocates sharing celebrations and success stories (Dominick, Beauchamp, Seeley, Hoeksema, and Doka & Banana 2009).

Research pointed out that insightful disclosure within computer-mediated network improves the emotional status of the participant and reduces their negative mood (Aitkin, 2008). The web is considered as an important source of information It provides new suggestions for unit plans and class activities (Kim, & Morningstar, 2007; Patel & Khamis-Dakwar, 2005).

### **1.5 Procedure**

Bringing the website to life is a simple technical production that requires a number of basic steps (Schrock, 1999). First, a review of literature is conducted in order to identify successful website, learn about factor's that contribute to a website's effectiveness and avoid the pitfalls that undermine such a website, from design to content.

In fact, links to websites, organizations, governmental or non-governmental parties concerned with special education should be part of this prospective database. The ministries of education in different Arab countries were contacted to identify the institutions working in the field of special education and collect the names and addresses of all the professionals working in this domain in the respective countries.

Once data is compiled and organized, the authors of the website will need to build the website's credibility; a group of professors working in special education, psychology and education will be invited to form the website's Board of Trustees.

On the other hand, the author will need to use the experience of a website designer and a graphic designer to finalize the design of the website .The website designer will help in realizing the technical part of the website. The graphic designer on the other hand will be responsible for designing the website's logo, formatting pictures and coordinating colors and

layouts. Finally, once the website has taken its final shape, all what remains to be done is to host it on the web, making it available to the public at large.

Moreover, several presentations will be conducted to students and parents in schools to introduce them to the website and its services.

The audience consists of three groups:

1. Parents
2. Teachers and special educators
3. Students with special needs.

All of these groups will benefit from this website.

**A. Parents:**

Parents of disabled children will be given the chance to read and collect accurate scientific and research-based information. This will help them be educated about their children's special needs, get free advice and online consultation from an elite group of special educators and professionals, and communicate and share their problems with other parents having the same problems through their forum.

Furthermore, they will be updated about all the activities and events related to special education in the Arab world.

Then they will be able to use the website as a sourcebook to search for special educators, speech therapists and other professionals.

**B. Teachers:**

- Teachers can also use this website as a source of information to get acquainted with issues related to special education.
- They will get professional advice concerning various cases in their classes or school.

- They will share teaching ideas with other instructors and discuss issues in forums and groups.
- Teachers will communicate with the parents and respond to their needs.
- Teacher will discover and search for new teaching strategies and commercial programs through the advertisements posted on the website.

C. Special Education students:

- The special education students will have access to the website in order to play online educational games.
- They will chat with peers through a supervised forum.
- Special needs students will benefit from this website because it will help them to learn more about their learning problems and concerns.
- They will be given a chance to ask various professionals about inquiries.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

The following literature review chapter sheds light on four major themes related to websites for special needs. First, it deals with the status and the use of the internet by Arab parents and teachers. Second, it focuses on the current state of special education in the Arab world. Third, clarifies the importance and the role of online support groups in relation to special education. Finally, it describes with the use of technology by special needs children.

The literature review has three main purposes: First, to investigate what has been written on the subject of websites that are dedicated to special needs in the Arab world.; second, to provide a theoretical framework for supporting the main purpose of the study; and third, to demonstrate the need and feasibility of a special needs website that would provide information and support for parents and teachers in the Arab countries. Following is the outline of the literature review:

- Current practices of special education in the States and the Arab world
- Internet use internationally and in the Arab world.
- Online support groups.
- The role of support groups for parents of special needs children.
- The internet as a valuable resource in teaching.
- The role of support groups for the special education teachers.
- Limitations of special education websites

## 2.2 History of Special Education in the United State

Since the beginning of the Nineteenth Century, the U.S constitution has guaranteed equal educational opportunities for all students. However, in practice, it was not the case. The first school for deaf children in the United States was established in 1817 and was offensively called *the American Asylum for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb*. Similarly, the first school for children with visual impairment founded in 1832 was named the *New England Asylum for the Blind* (Stewart & Kluwin, 2000).

In fact, students with disabilities did not secure their rights for an appropriate education until the 1970's and 1980's (Murdick, Gartin, & Crabtree, 2007). In 1970, only 20 percent of all children with disabilities were served in public school programs (U.S Department of education, 2006). The only resources available for children with disabilities were private educational programs or programs for handicapped students. Most of the time, students with disabilities stayed at home without any formal education (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley 2001).

Starting mid seventies, schools have become equipped with resource rooms, which marked the ending of the **relative isolation phase** ended and the dawning of the **integration phase** (Polloway, Patton, Serna, 2005). In fact, a real collaboration between special education and general classroom teachers was in vigor (U.S. department of education, 2003).

In the mid eighties, the **inclusion phase** began whereby students with special needs became fully included in all school programs and activities. More recently, the fourth phase of services started, the **empowerment and self determination phase** which prepares students for the highest degree of independence possible (Lee, Palmer, Turnbull, & wehmeyer, 2006).

### 2.3 Students with Special Needs

Thirty years ago, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA, Public Law 94-142 ) now referred to as The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** authorized funds to all states to assist in the development of special education programs and to ensure the rights of children with disabilities (Polloway, Patton, Serna, 2005) . IDEA defines students with disabilities as those who exhibit one of several specific conditions that result in their need for special education and related services. These specific conditions are defined and recognized by IDEA (Polloway, Patton, Serna, 2005) as follows:

- Mental retardation
- Learning disabilities
- Emotional disturbance
- Hearing impairment
- Visual impairments
- Orthopedic impairments
- Other health impairments (ADD,ADHD, epilepsy, asthma , diabetes ,etc)
- Autism
- Traumatic brain injury
- Speech or language impairments

### 2.4 Special Education in the Arab World

It was not until the past ten years that the issue of special education started to receive attention in the Arab world at the academic, social, and governmental levels (Gaad, 2001).

Various studies were conducted in the Arab countries to determine the effectiveness of the special education programs and teaching methods. For instance, Alghazo (2005)

indicated that teachers in the United Arab Emirates are still not effective in teaching special needs students. Moreover, the more these teachers had work experience and in-service training, the more they showed a higher level of proficiency in working with special needs students.

Jordan, officially recognized persons with disabilities in the 1930's when the first school for individuals with disabilities began providing services to their students in 1938-1939 (Algharer, 1995).

According to the document of the ministry of education, the handicapped law of 1993 in Jordan was the first step towards officially recognizing the rights for people with disabilities. This law emphasized that individuals with disabilities are entitled to appropriate education, training, work, and care (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003).

On the other hand, in the United Arab Emirates, there are still no laws for persons with disabilities. Yet, in the United Arab Emirates constitution, there are several sections that address the needs of people with disabilities. Section 16, for example, emphasizes, rehabilitating and caring for persons with disabilities. Section 25 also dictates that all individuals are equal. In addition, the law of the Ministry of Labor calls for the establishment of centers and institutions for those affected by disabilities (Alghazo, Dodeen, & Algaryouti, 2003).

Gaad (2001) maintained that a critical change took place in the perception of schooling and teaching in the Arab world. The universities and the work market were also directed in a way to ensure the education and work of different kinds of learners (Gaad, 2001). This led to the establishment of many official special education centers and organizations that support these students to help meet their needs and protect their rights.

## 2.5 Special education in Lebanon

The latest revision of the Lebanese curriculum in 1995 mandate catering for students with special needs (NCERD 1995). Accordingly, support services and remedial classes should be offered to students with learning disabilities (Sarouphim, 2010). Public Law 220 approved by the Lebanese Parliament in May 2000 created a legislative framework for people with disabilities and Article 59 of the Law guarantees the right to equal educational and learning opportunities for all people with disabilities (Wehbi, 2006). Article 60 maintains that a disability should not restrict access to any educational institution or setting in Lebanon (Wehbi, 2006).

On the other hand, El Zein (2009) explained that, although the Lebanese educational hierarchy has been modified to meet with recent trends including technology, the section that involves exceptional students remains neglected. In fact, inclusion in Lebanon is still at its formative stage, especially in the absence of legislation regarding inclusion of special needs students into regular classrooms, with the exception of some limited initiatives by a small number of private schools and non – governmental organizations (Ismail, 2004). In 1991, in collaboration with UNESCO, some Arab countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, signed an agreement, Education for All that mandates the adoption of the basic principles of special education and inclusion for children with special needs(Yacoub, 2000). Consequently, the Arab states developed programs and methods to ensure teacher training to equip educators in the field of special education (Yacoub, 2000).

Lebanon is still not as developed as some the other Arab countries in the field of special education and inclusion of children with learning disabilities (El Zein, 2009).

## 2.6 Special Education in Egypt

In the past, special education schools in Egypt provided services only for students with visual impairment, hearing impairment, and mental retardation in isolated settings. An important initiative, the Education for All (EFA), gave a chance to a great number of children to join general education or special education governmental schools (Ministry of Education, 2007). In 2006, the number of school- aged children with disabilities was approximately 2 million , but the number of schools ready to receive them are still limited (Ministry of Education, 2007). In addition, many parents refuse to send their children with severe disability to school and prefer to educate them at home (El – Ashry, 2009).

Inclusion of students with disabilities in general classroom settings in Egypt is still considered a new trend. In fact, during the academic year 2004- 2005, the Ministry of Education and some non-governmental organizations worked to include a limited number of children with disabilities in general education classrooms (El – Ashry, 2009). However, special education schools remain the predominant model for educating students with special needs in the country (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In order to fill this gap, the Ministry of Education prepared a five-year strategic plan starting in 2007 until 2012 to achieve two main goals. First, including an additional 10% of students with mild disabilities in regular classrooms. Second, providing these students with educational services for a smooth transition into inclusive classrooms, such as preparing resource rooms, teacher training programs, curriculum modifications, and establishing a special evaluation system (Ministry of Education, 2007).

## **2.7 Internet Use around the World:**

The Internet is a worldwide computer networks linked by high-speed communication channels. It is considered to a highly sophisticated means of communication with access to different types of information.

The number of internet users is increasing at a very fast rate (Hock, 2008). People of different ages, gender, ethnicity and academic background are using the Internet for different purposes (Alghazo, 2005). Moreover, Hill and Argyle (2003) found that 83% of people of both genders spend an average of 7.9 hours per week online. In 2005, statistics show that more than 50% of Americans access the Internet daily from home with a high-speed connection and more than 200,000,000 IP is hosted on the Internet (Hock, 2008).

Randolph Hock (2008) stated in his book *“The Extreme Searcher’s Internet Handbook”* that the Internet is “the result of many technologies and many visionaries and great technical thinkers coming together over a period of a few decades,”(p 75) since 1957 . In fact, in the past, the Internet was perceived as a simple communication channel that allowed easy transfer of simple information. By the beginning of the new decade, it started being perceived as a main tool for communication and media (Hock, 2008).

## **2.8 Internet Use in the Arab World**

According to Abdullah (2008), out of the 1.09 billion worldwide internet users, 21 million users represent less than 2 % of the world figure are Arab users. He argues that recent developments in the information technological sectors of Arab countries led to a significant growth in accessing and using the internet. These growth rates were considerable in Kuwait (26.6%), Bahrain (21%), Qatar (20.7%), Lebanon (15%), Morocco (15%), Saudi Arabia (10%), and Oman (10%). However, it was lower in other Arabian countries such as, Iraq (0.2

%), Sudan (1.6%), Egypt (7%), and Algeria (5.8). In addition, the author asserts that the Arab governments are also promoting the growth of the Internet because it became the primary growth factor in telecommunication and media. Nowadays, Internet connections are being provided in houses, schools and offices in the Arab world. During the last ten years, a telecommunication revolution invaded the Arab world and was empowered by the telecommunications companies who were directed by foreign shareholders. This high technological revolution had an important impact on people's lifestyles. (Abdullah 2008).

## **2.9 Support Groups: Importance and Role**

All of the above-mentioned factors contributed to the reshaping of Arab society and in turn changing social relationships (Abdullah 2008). Beder (2005) coined a new term related to the internet and the social relationship "Cybersolace", which he defines in his article as "the interaction between and among individuals that is focused on offering solace such as caring, consolation and emotional support, using various electronic technologies" (p.10). The author added that the use of online support groups is an important factor that encourages people and affects them positively on the emotional and personal levels. In fact, people learn from and are influenced by the personal experiences of the others (Cudney & Weinert, 2000). This would normalize their situation and help them face their weaknesses with a lot of determination (Beder, 2005; Cudney & Weinert, 2000).

Researchers showed that online support groups are one of many forms of computer-mediated interaction systems that offer social support to both students with special needs and educators. These systems help both parties to interact and react with the outside world to detect their strengths and weaknesses (Beder, 2005; Cudney & Weinert, 2000).



## **2.10 Website for Special Education**

In his paper, Beder (2005) explained that the internet has opened the door for millions of people to access information about special needs such as those about the nature of disabilities, causes, symptoms, and treatment.

These online support groups gave the chance for people to share their ideas and thoughts and express their feelings through virtual forums.

Moreover, electronic communication, such as email has permitted friends and families to help and support those people facing difficult times.

In their research about online support groups, Kirby, Edwards & Hughes (2008) argued that one of the most common goals and reasons for using the internet by the parents of children with special needs was for accessing information and getting advice through online forums, communities and message boards. They explained that people would benefit from participating in an online community because they feel free to express their feelings and ideas to someone who does not know their real identity. In fact, they would feel secure because they can avoid face to face interactions and judgmental opinions.

Generally, parents of children with disabilities may feel isolated and rejected. Here, the researchers maintained that the message centers and boards provide free communication and interaction among users. These online forums may offer virtual communities of support and encouragement to the parents while allowing them to seek solutions to their problems. Margalit & Raskind (2009) described different types of online community help that can be provided to parents of children with LD and ADHD, in the form of information and emotional support. Moreover, Konard (2007) discussed the importance of the relationships and the interactions between the professionals and the families of children with developmental disabilities and behavioral problems.

The author indicated that the main advantages of online support groups are parent-to-parent communication and mentorship (Konard 2007).

### **2.11 Internet as a Valuable Resource in Teaching**

Research indicated that 62% of teachers were self-motivated to use the Internet as a tool to enrich their knowledge and collect information (Kim & Morningstar, 2007). .

Teachers, students and parents can access the internet at home, school, work and even at internet coffee shops. In her research, Alghazo (2005) pointed out that 40 % of females and about 48% of males have access to the internet at schools in the Arab world. She added that teachers have a positive perception concerning the value of the internet, since educators and learners use it in order to obtain information related to their courses and research. Moreover, teachers use it to get new ideas, resources and references to improve their teaching. New research studies investigated the use of the Internet in various educational setting. Gibson and Oberg (1997) explored the use of the Internet as an educational tool and found that this virtual tool was mostly used for professional development activities such as taking on-line courses, searching for new educational materials and communicating with other professionals.

### **2.12 Importance of Support Groups for Special Education Teachers**

Teachers need to be constantly engaged in professional development to acquaint themselves with new trends and issues and to update their information (Kim & Morningstar, 2007). This lifelong learning process develops the teachers' competencies and skills and encourages them to deal with families and parents of children with special needs. The authors proposed that online training can be an effective method for the teachers to increase their knowledge about teaching children with special needs. Online support groups keep teachers well informed and well connected with various educators and professionals (Kim &

Morningstar, 2007). Blackburn & Read (2005); King & Morggi (2007) and Sarkadi & Bremberg (2005) asserted that the use of e-networks to support individuals with health problems and parents of children with disability has been growing for the past ten years. In fact, four major types of social support have been identified: companionship, emotional support, material help, and information (Dunst et al, 1988).

### **2.13 Limitations of special education websites**

The internet is an important communication tool that facilitates the interaction in a virtual world. This tool has unlimited benefits and some limitations that could potentially adversely impact its users. These limitations were summarized by Jacobson & Cohen, (1996) as follows:

- Fear of potential misuse and presentation of various misleading information. Some resources are not reliable because anyone is given a free chance to create a website or a blog and to post any information on it whose credibility is not always verified.
- The messages on these sites are posted in an open access internet site and can be potentially viewed by anyone for any reason.

Baum (2004) added to the list of shortcomings that internet includes untrained people who may offer therapy or untested products to people .Kim and Morningstar (2007) warned that online training modules, in which there are no instructor involvements, may not be adequate to train teachers.

### **2.14 Conclusion**

Nowadays in the Arab world, a large number of people access the internet (Abdullah, 2008), including parents and teachers who both may be dealing with children with special needs (Alghazo 2000). These users consider the internet a major source of knowledge, information, advice and emotional support (Kirby, Edwards, Hughes, 2008; Margalit &

Raskind, 2009; Baum, 2004; Konard, 2007). In short, the internet has demonstrated its ability to provide virtual support groups that go beyond national borders (Dominick, 2009).

Accordingly, the development of a website dealing with special needs issues and hosting online groups for parents and teachers may offer an important interaction between parents and the professionals. The above literature review provides a theoretical framework for the proposed website that would deal with special needs issues and help parents and teachers in the Arab world cope more proficiently with their concerns.

## CHAPTER THREE

### III. CRITIQUING COMPARABLE WEBSITES

Several Arab websites dealing with the issues of special education will be critiqued in this chapter , to develop a more informed structure of the proposed website . The websites reviewed will be divided into two categories: those that promote organizations dealing with special needs and those that provide information about nature of special needs.

#### 3.1 Promotional Websites

A review of educational websites showed that several websites were promoting organizations (schools unit, rehab centers, diagnostic centers) dealing with special education in Arab countries such as Lebanon, Kuwait Jordan and Saudi Arabia. These organizations offer classes, activities and services to special needs students. However, these sites do not provide any information about special needs students or tips to assist them in their regular classrooms and familial contexts and do not promote any form of support groups for teachers or parents. In brief, these websites do not offer any added value to the special needs community, that is, parents, teachers and students combined.

What follows are the links to these websites:

- <http://www.shafallah.org.qa/index.html>
- <http://www.zayedhicare.ae/adrsn/index.htm>
- <http://www.fista.org/index.shtml>
- <http://www.blessedschool.org/>
- Center for Child Evaluation and Teaching, Kuwait (<http://ccetkuwait.org/>)
- Kuwait Dyslexia Association, Kuwait ([www.q8da.com/kda/en/](http://www.q8da.com/kda/en/))

- Lebanese Autism Society, Lebanon (<http://www.autismlebanon.org>)
- Dubaï Autisme Center, UAE (<http://www.dcsneeds.ae/index.htm>)
- EDRAK: <http://www.edrakjo.com/english/>

### 3.2 Website Evaluation Criteria

The evaluation of the selected websites will follow a number of guidelines culled from the literature , based on content, target audience, accuracy , authority, objectivity, currency, coverage technical and visual aspects of the website .

1. Content of the website refers to the material displayed on the webpage. This content is usually multimodal , including text, pictures and graphs. It is therefore, “the subject or ideas contained in something written, said or represented” (Cambridge University Press, 2001) (p.34).In addition, the content should match the academic level of the target audience. According to ED’s Oasis (1997) in Ed’s Oasis website, the reading level of the content must be adapted to the reader’s level and phrased in lay person’s terms. Therefore, content should be evaluated based on level of difficulty and the quality of information.
2. Target Audience refers to the group of people who use the website, and to whom the information presented is addressed.
3. Accuracy refers to the authenticity of the information listed on the website. Therefore the information presented on the website will be constantly edited for content and style.
4. Authority refers to the website’s authors and their contact information, such as his or her name, email address or phone number. This promotes confidence in using the website’s information and encourages users to use and communicate through the site

(Schrock, 1995). Moreover, some credentials or expertise should also be mentioned to ensure an added value to the website (Jacobson & Cohen 1996).

5. Objectivity reflects that the material posted by the website is free of any commercial, political, gender, or racial bias. According to Schrock (1995) “Biased sites contain words that try to persuade rather than inform. Some of these words include overgeneralization and simplifications” (p. 23).
6. Currency of a website is the frequency of update, revision, and addition of information to the website. It is important to sustain the currency of the content to allow users to receive the most recent information, this including the date of its publication, its updated date and duration, and the content that was lately updated. (Oregon Public Educational network, 1997)
7. Coverage of information specifies how much the content of a website would cover the designated subjects. It also points out to what extent and from which perspectives it synthesizes the aspects of each subject (Jacobson & Cohen, 1996) .The user will “determine if the content covers a specific time period or aspect of the topic, or strives to be comprehensive” (p.87)
8. Technical and visual aspects of the website: This term refers to the processes that control the person’s ability to access the content, to understand and interact with it.

#### ***a-Aesthetic & Visual Appeal***

One of the main characteristics of a website is the aesthetic or the visual appeal. A visually appealing website is one that “uses colors and graphics to enhance the impact of the information” (ED’s Oasis, 1997) (p.12).

### ***b- Navigation***

Navigation refers to the ease in which the user can move around within the website .The starting point of the navigation is always the home page which contains some direct links to all of the other sections of the website (Schrock, 1995).

Each section should be clearly labeled with titles. Its content should be designed for specific users. In such types of educational websites, the navigation should be friendly so the useful content is no more than three clicks away from the main page (Oregon Public Education Network, 1997-2001).

### ***c- Accessibility***

The website should be accessible and useable on all computer systems and settings without referring to special software or programs. This is assured by the fact that “it is very important that you do not turn off your target audience because your pages have software requirements that are beyond that capability of the viewer or their browsers” (Tillman, 1996, p.201).

## **3.3 Critiquing Comparable Websites**

Four websites were selected for evaluation; as there are in align with the project’s main objectives. These websites are:

- Emirates Special Needs Website: (<http://www.emiratesspecialneeds.com/>)
- Lebanese Autism Society, Lebanon: (<http://www.autismlebanon.org>)
- Dubai Autism Center, UAE : (<http://www.dcsneeds.ae/index.htm>)
- EDRAK: <http://www.edrakjo.com/english/>



### 3.4 Emirates' Special Needs Website



Figure 1- www.emiratesspecialneeds.com Home Page

This special needs website provides information about different physical and mental health problems. It advertises the programs and products to acquaint the website users. It also connects parents of special children with specialists, professionals, and other parents for consultations, inquiry, encouragement and support. This shows that this website does not only address children with special needs, but also their families, educators and the community as a whole. This website will be described and evaluated in detail based on the previously discussed evaluation criteria.



Figure 2- www.emiratesspecialneeds.com Practical Content

### 3.4.1 Content

The content of this website is technical but practical. In fact, a large number of terms and concepts are used without any further explanation. Even the explanation of some terms remains cryptic and inaccessible to the target audience. Figure 2 illustrates the above argument.

### 3.4.2 Authority

This website is managed by *Jennifer King* who founded *the Future Center Special Needs' School and Rehabilitation*. In fact Jennifer is a specialist in the special education field, the credibility criterion in this website is met.

Though the website has no relation to any governmental entity, it refers to Emirat officials who are the founders of the Future Center Special Needs' School and Rehabilitation Center (see figure 3)

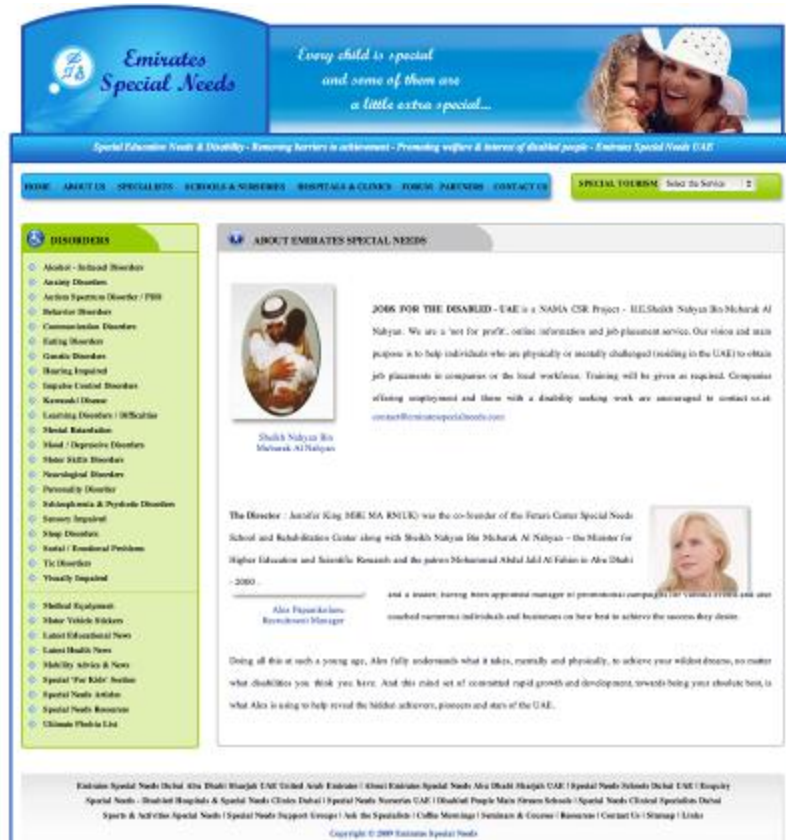


Figure 3 –www.emiratesspecialneeds.com Web Director and Sponsors

### 3.4.3 Accuracy of Information

The information presented in this website is accurate and detailed but its sources are not mentioned. In fact, there are no given references that permit the users to identify its sources (see figure 4)



Figure 4 – www.emiratesspecialneeds.com Objective Content

### 3.4.4 Objectivity

Regarding the objectivity of the information in the website, this cannot be verified because there are no references related to the posted information. Therefore the lack of references undermines the reliability of the information on this website this is clear in (figure 4.)In fact, there is no indication of the existence of a professional review board that works on this website. On the other hand, the Emirates Special Needs' is a new website growing day by day. The posted pictures and the information in each section are continuously updated.

### 3.4.5 Coverage of the Information

This website covers a broad range of information concerning special education, psychological and mental illnesses. For instance, the discussed topics are not only limited to

children with special needs, but also tackle different subjects such as alcohol abuse, drug addiction and many other problems.

In order to fulfill the needs of the parents and to achieve the goals of the website, the website connects the parents and tutors of children with special needs. This is done by promoting seminars and courses about special education, in addition to organizing sports events and activities that both parents and children can join.



Figure 5 – www.emiratesspecialneeds.com Events

### 3.4.6 Visual Aids

The visual aids in this website such as pictures, fonts and logos are not always relevant to the subject, to the audience or to the users of the site. In fact, children and parents presented in the website are blond with mostly European features. These pictures do not correspond to the Gulf population. Moreover, there are no pictures for the various activities,

classes, schools, or centers promoted on the website. Finally, it does not have font enlargement facility to help visually impaired users browse through the site.

### **3.4.7 The Navigation Accessibility**

In this website, navigation is smooth and easy to the users who can effortlessly find the needed information.

This website is totally accessible to all users. In fact, no special software program is required to be downloaded in order to access it. To detect this feature, the mentioned link provides an example of what has been preceded:

<http://www.emiratesspecialneeds.com/mental-retardation.asp>

### 3.5 Dubai Autism Center



Figure 6 - www.dcsneeds.ae Front Page

#### 3.5.1 Content

This website presents an autism center in Dubai that handles children with special needs, especially autistic children. The objectives of the Dubai special needs' center, its mission statement and goals, an overview of the services and activities is presented to assist special learners. The content of this website is not only presented through written information, but also has a photo gallery and several multimedia films that show the daily life and activities of the center. These videos and photos represent a backbone that consolidates the content of the website.

### **3.5.2 Audience**

The target audience of this website consists of parents of autistic children, and various professionals and educators. Such as special education teachers and therapists who are connected to this disability. In addition, this site addresses people who are interested in getting information about topics related to autism in the Emirates.

### **3.5.3 Accuracy**

The available information in this website is clear and accurate based on various scientific studies. All of the presented information has clear references.

Sentence structure, vocabulary, and spelling are clear and well detected. The following link provides an example of what has been preceded:

<http://www.dubaiautismcenter.ae/>

This in turn reflects reliability and objectivity of the posted information. Thus, it leaves users with a feeling of openness and acceptance to what is offered to them.

### **3.5.4 Authority of the Website**

In terms of authority, the website specifies the director of the center and the board of governance. The site lists the names of the governance board members and their professional background as well as their contact information, emails and phone numbers. To detect this feature, this link provides an example of what has been preceded:

<http://www.dubaiautismcenter.ae/structure.htm>



### 3.5.5 Objectivity

The points of view reflected in this website are objective. This is clear through the posted pictures, the used language, and comments. All of the articles are referenced. Thus information presented is credible.

### 3.5.6 Currency

The site is frequently updated and renovated in terms of dates, events, photos, and information, but also format.

This shows that the website is closely and regularly monitored by the site managers. To detect this feature, this link provides an example of what has been preceded: For example: <http://www.dubaiatmcenter.ae/DACNews.htm>



Figure 7 - www.dcsneeds.ae Events

### 3.5.7 Coverage of Information

The website covers exactly the information that is supposed to be covered, with no redundant information about any other subject. This site covers all of the subjects related to

autism in the Emirates. It also posts different advertisements that are related to autism and related events and activities.

To detect this feature, this link provides an example of what has been preceded:

<http://www.dubaiautismcenter.ae/autism-Whatis.htm>



Figure 8 -www.dcsneeds.ae Terms definition

### 3.5.8 Technical and Visual Aspects

In this website the technical and visual aspects are very rich, sophisticated and advanced. This is evident on two levels: visual level and auditory level. Here, the visitors can read the information and hear it as well when they log into the website. This shows that the creator of the website took into consideration the various needs of the users, their learning styles, and preferences.

### 3.5.9 The Navigation and Accessibility

This website includes a navigation map that is clear, smooth and simple. The navigation is easy to manage by various types of users and viewers. This map is made of a top menu that expands into a drop lists so as the user would choose by clicking on them. Then this would allow the various users to switch between pages and links at their convenience.

This website is fully accessible by all users without any need to download any special software program making it efficient and practical.

### 3.6 Lebanese Autism Society

#### 3.6.1 Content

The content of this website is simple, direct and clear. Its home page provides the readers with a clear definition and description of autism. On another page, information is presented in a question and answer format that summarizes the main issues related to autism, thus, allowing visitors to have good idea about the whole subject.

The language used in this website is easily understood by parents and nonprofessionals. This moderate amount of information is presented in two languages: Arabic and English, to serve the various needs of the readers.



Figure 9 - www.autismlebanon.org Terms definition

### **3.6.2 Audience**

This website mainly targets an adult audience such as parents, teachers, professionals and any other person concerned with the subject of autism. The level of difficulty of the language used is appropriate to this category of readers.

### **3.6.3 Accuracy**

Regarding the accuracy of the subject, it is evident that the content is correct. However, there are no references for any of the cited information which undermines the reliability of the posted data.

### **3.6.4 Authority of the website**

The contact numbers, addresses and emails are presented in *the Contact Us* page. The *About Us* section traces the history of the association . It also presents the board of members and lists their phone numbers and their emails. This section also projects an image of transparency. But it does not reflect that the posted information is approved by the board or website review committee.

### **3.6.5 Objectivity**

The information on this website is objective and scientific oriented. There is no existence of any biased vocabulary, terms, or any negative sentences that denigrate any group of people.

### 3.6.6 Currency of the Website

Based on the newsletters and the events posted on the website, it is clear that the site is always updated and revised for new information, news and events. This makes it an active website that readers can refer to continuously.



Figure 10 – www.autismlebanon.org Events

### 3.6.7 The coverage of information

This website covers a very narrow aspect of information related to the association that created it. In fact, no information is given about any other condition related to children other than autism, and, no other associations or specialists dealing with these problems are mentioned. Furthermore, the website does not provide any links to other sites dealing with the same subject.

### **3.6.8 Technical and Visual Aspects**

The aesthetic & visual aspects of this website are very special. First the colors used (light, green and blue) are soft, relaxing and soothing and help attract readers' attention. Second, the pictures occupy and cover one area in the webpage; they rotate continuously, encouraging the readers to look at them. These pictures are real and full of life and joy. Third, the font used and the repartition of the text are clear, simple and easy to follow. The displayed paragraphs are not condensed, making reading easy to the visitors and readers.

### **3.6.9 The Navigation**

The navigation in this website is quite difficult. Pages are not clearly organized and links need to be followed to be able to move from one page to another. Then the user will discover the content accordingly and he has to navigate the entire website to find the link or the information needed. In addition, the headers do not reveal the content of the pages and there are no breadcrumbs that may be used to tell the browser where it is relative to the home page.

### **3.6.10 Accessibility**

This website is totally accessible by all users. In fact, there is no special program that is required to be downloaded in order to access it.

The previous critique of the websites showed several common features. First, it is clear that all the websites present valuable and reliable source of information about different and disabilities. Second, the four websites present advanced visual and aesthetic characteristics, which may attract the attention of the audience and validate the communicated message. Third, these websites are continuously updated, so new events and pictures are always posted.

### 3.7 EDRAK



Figure 11 - EDRAK Cover page

#### 3.7.1 Content

The content of this website is simple, direct and clear for any user. Its home page provides the readers with a clear definition and description of children with various disabilities. On a different page, we find information presented in a bullet form that summarizes the diagnostic procedure and follow up. The language used in this website is easily understood by parents and lay people. This moderate amount of information is presented in two languages: Arabic and English, to serve the various needs of the readers. The philosophy and goals of the organization are clearly defined and posted on separate web pages. The methodology of work and the targeted population segment are clearly mentioned and explained as well.

### 3.7.2 Authority

The name and the contact number of the director of the center are only mentioned in this website. However, there are no sponsors or board for this web site mentioned.

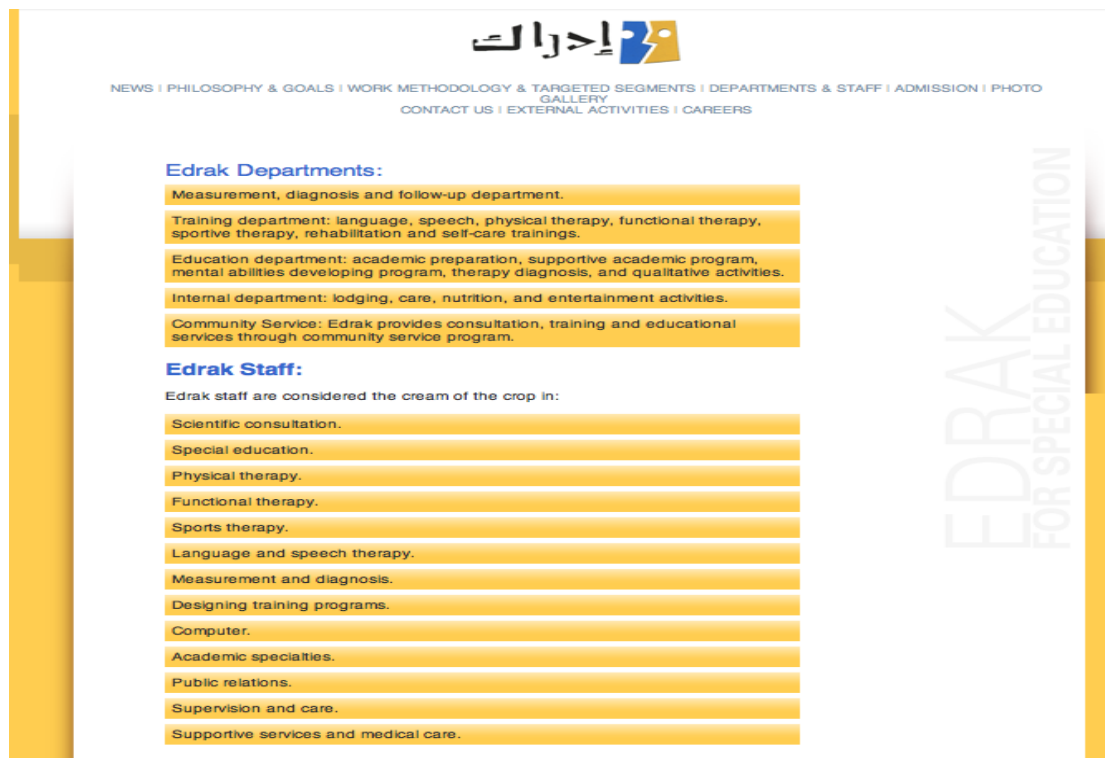


Figure 12 - EDRAK Staff members

### 3.7.3 Audience

This website mainly targets an adult audience such as parents, teachers, professionals and any other person concerned with the subject of special education.

The level of difficulty of the language used (sentence structure and terms) is appropriate for this category of readers who are concerned about special education.





Figure 13 - EDRAK Objectives and Target

### 3.7.4 Currency of the Website

It is clear that the site is not updated for new information and events, nor its contents revised.

For example, the last update for the news page was in 2009.

### 3.7.5 Accuracy and Objectivity of Information

The objectivity of information in the website cannot be verified because there are no references related to the posted information. Accordingly, the absence of references questions the validity of the information on this website.

Further there is no indication of the existence of a professional review board that works on this website.

### **3.7.6 Coverage of the Information**

This website covers a very narrow scope of information mostly related to its host association. Thus, no facts are given about the nature of children with learning disabilities, and no other associations or specialists dealing with learning disabilities are mentioned. Furthermore, the website does not provide any links to other sites dealing with the same subject.

### **3.7.7 Visual Aids**

In this website, the main colors are yellow and blue, thus giving an impression of freshness and brightness to the reader. There are two photo galleries: the first is dedicated to special events, and the second, to external activities. The front page is animated with rotating pictures depicting the main events organized in the center. Navigation is easy and the outline of the website is simple and clear.

### **3.7.8 Accessibility and Navigation**

The website is accessible to the public at large and it is operational with most common software packages. The time of download needed for this website is relatively short.

## **3.8 Conclusion**

For the four websites, several facts should be considered such as the redundancy in the presented information about the various disabilities. Another issue is that there is a lot of advertising in the website that are not related to educational disabilities. Finally, the posted pictures in some of the websites are not relevant to the discussed topics. All of the strengths of the websites discussed before will be adopted in formulating the proposed website. Which are:

## CHAPTER FOUR

### IV. SPECIAL EDUCATION WEBSITE

#### 4.1 Introduction

The literature review and the websites' critique will be considered as the basic guidelines for designing the proposed "Special Needs Education" website. It will have the following link:

[www.special-need-education.org](http://www.special-need-education.org)

#### 4.2 Structure and Design

This website is structured using several headings and subheadings. It has a front page followed by subject pages. The front page serves as a directory to guide users through the site.

The website has the following organizational sitemap:

- Special Needs Education Front Page
  - About Us
    - Mission
    - Message from the Board
    - The Board
      - Biography and profile
    - Sponsors
  - Children's Section
    - Educational Games
    - Study Tips
  - Parents' Corner
    - Journal Articles concerning parenting
    - Support Groups
  - Teachers' Corner
    - Lesson Plans

- Group Discussion Forum
- Resources
- Activities
- Behavior Disorders
- Learning Disorders / Difficulties
- Developmental Disabilities
- Motor Skills Disorder
- Autism Spectrum Disorder / PDD
  - Experts Database
    - Speech therapist
    - Physical therapists
    - Occupational therapists
    - Psychiatrists/neurologists/pediatricians
- FAQ
- Contact Us



Figure 14 - Site Map

### 4.3 Front Page (Main page)

Every website has a front page that attracts the audience and arouses its interest. This front page is a facade for the whole website; it leads the visitors throughout the web into a virtual journey. The front page reflects the name, logo and mission. It is designed to address its target audience from children, parents to teachers and practitioners. In addition, it provides links to the main page through the use of the proposed menus. This page also has a welcome note addressed to the viewers. The welcome note explains *the mission statement* of the website.



Figure 15 - Website Mission Statement

#### 4.4 About us

The “About us” page includes goals and objectives of the website and consists of two sub pages: The Board and Sponsors.

The board sub page has another subsection dedicated to the biography of the board members formed by physicians and specialists in special education. Their main responsibility focuses on reviewing articles and information posted on the website along with answering various questions posted in the forum. The biography section has brief resumes of the board members, their photos and contact information.

The second sub page is dedicated to sponsors. It introduces them and acknowledges their contribution.

The purpose of the “About Us” page is to give transparency and credibility to the website as well as inviting more sponsors.



Figure 16 - Website Board Members

## 4.5 Children's Section

This page is designed mainly to address children and has two sub pages: The first sub page is dedicated to educational games and the second one contains study tips

### 4.5.1 Games

Since playing serves as a tool to teach students with special needs, the children's page has a sub page dedicated to games hosted on the website. This section contains math, concentration, and language games. Children can log on and play any game that is specially designed to develop their skills.

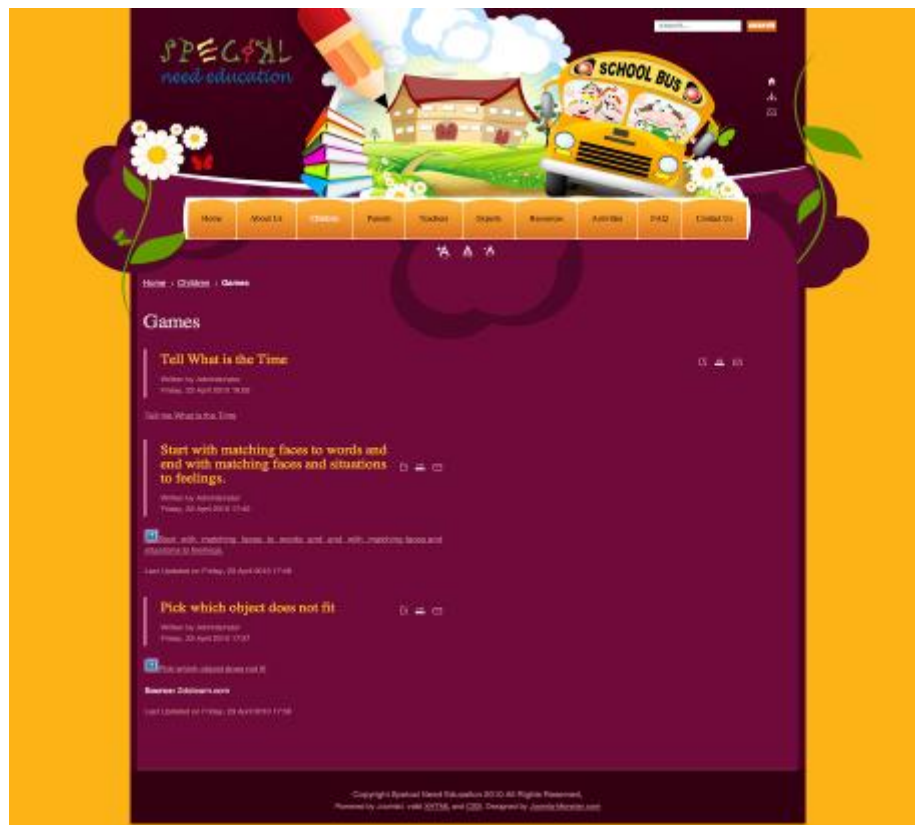


Figure 17 - Website Games

#### 4.5.2 Study Tips

This section posts some general study tips for students with special needs to help them achieve academic success such as: goal-setting, time management, memory strategies, and test-taking, etc.

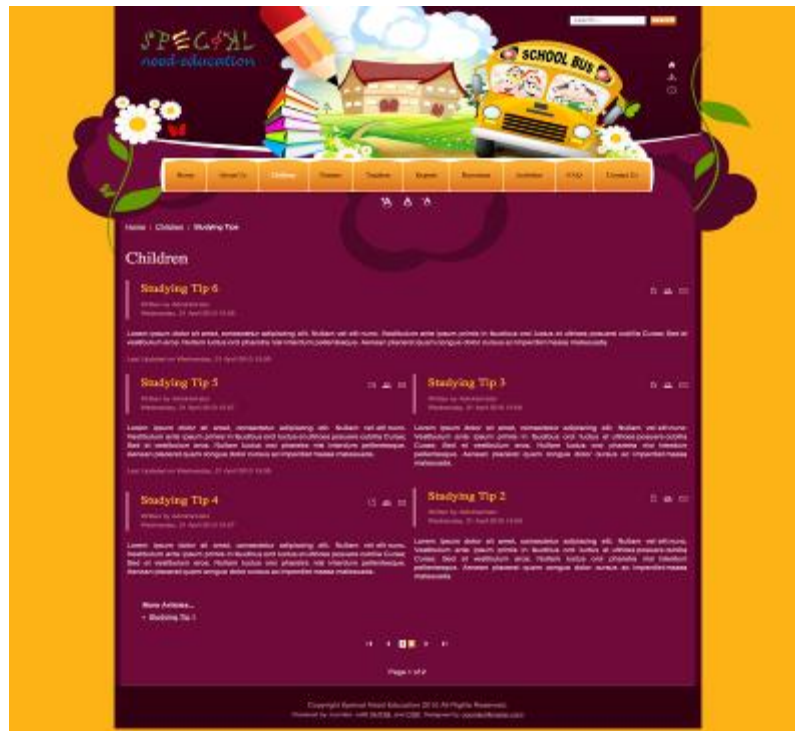


Figure 18 - Website Study Tips

## 4.6 Parents' Corner

Parents' section, as its title indicates, mainly targets parents in need of help and support when facing educational problems with their kids. This section is designed to answer their questions and inquiries about their children and network with other parents and professionals. It is also considered a useful resource for anyone else who has inquiries about special needs, from diagnosis to intervention. Parents' section is divided into the following subsections:

### 4.6.1 Articles

This section has several articles focusing on more effective parenting skills and support techniques for their children with special needs. Articles are written by experts and reviewed by the website board before being posted.





Figure 19 - Website Articles

#### 4.6.2 Support Groups

The Support Group helps parents connect online to discuss their concerns, problems, and experiences, and share stories about their children. The main goal is to provide a support network where parents can express themselves freely and communicate with each other so they become more empowered and educated on issues related to special needs. This support group section is designed as an interactive forum where all the discussions can be posted, answered, and archived. The parenting questions section in the forum allows parents to post their questions and communicate with professionals.

All of these questions and answers are compiled and sorted to form a valuable and readily accessible reference to other visitors. The forum has a mentor from the website board who oversees the content of the forum and directs discussions to the right channels.



Figure 20 - Website Support Groups

## 4.7 Teacher's Section

This section is dedicated to teachers who deal with special needs students. It has a sub page for lesson plans and another sub page for the discussion forum.

### 4.7.1 Lesson Plans

This section is created by teachers who post and share success stories helpful activities, and effective lesson plans to be implemented in the classroom. This subsection is animated with artistic and quality pictures and enriched by printable materials. The materials will be reviewed by the website board before being posted.



Figure 21 - Website Lesson Plans

#### 4.7.2 Discussion Forum

The forum subsection is created for teachers to meet online and discuss the concerns of their special needs students. The main goal of this forum is to share information, ideas, and experiences. The forum has a mentor selected from the board to guide the discussions.



Figure 22 - Website Teacher's Forum

#### 4.8 Resources

As previously mentioned, seeking information about a specific issue is the main reason for parents and teachers to browse the Internet and search the web pages. The resources subsection includes all the special education references such as articles, books, and other relevant websites.

#### 4.9 Activities

One of the goals of this website is to connect parents and teachers dealing with special needs children. Then they create a virtual and a real supportive community that may be considered a safety net for all who need emotional support and guidance. The activities subsection includes all of the up-to-date news, research and activities of social, educational, artistic and athletic nature. This can provide a great incentive for all parties concerned to actively use the website, stay abreast of all the news and events, and hopefully participate in them.

#### **4.10 Key Concepts**

The Key Concepts section provides definitions and basic information on the various types of learning, physical and medical disorders. It has a navigation list to guide the visitors to the subject of interest. Moreover, the displayed information is scientific, up-to-date, clear, simple and accurate. The disorders in question are as follows

- Learning Disorders / Difficulties
- Behavior Disorders
- Motor Skills Disorder
- Autism Spectrum Disorder / PDD

#### **4.11 Experts Data Base**

The experts' database section is a directory for the special needs education specialists. It includes various experts in the special education field from various countries in the Arab world. The directory provides the contact details of those experts. The website's board has the responsibility of carefully screening the experts and updating the list as they deem appropriate.

These experts belong to different areas of specialization, including:

- Speech therapists
- Physical therapists
- Occupational therapists
- Psychiatrist/neurologists/pediatricians



Figure 23 - Website Experts Database

#### 4.12 Contact Us

The “Contact Us” page is an essential component of the website. It intends to connect with its visitors and facilitates a two-way communication between the visitors and the website’s resources and experts. Contact details are developed in an automated form, so the visitors can post their questions directly on the board so inquiries can be easily screened and channeled to the right party.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **V. CONCLUSION**

Several special education websites were reviewed and essential criteria for an effective educational website were identified. Based on this information a comprehensive special needs education website was proposed. This website is intended to be one of a kind; it relies on providing useful data and presenting unique services in the special education field in the Arab world. It draws on a wealth of research, resources, contacts, and events and intends to connect a large community of parents and teachers around the Arab world who deal with children with special needs.

Indeed, a project like this one does not only require careful content and format planning to insure its success and continuity, but it also expects a strong commitment from the authors, the participating professionals, teachers and involved parents. As a non-profit project, this website needs to get its financing from advertisement, sponsorships, donations and mainly governmental support to sustain continuity and realize its full potential. It also contributes to society's educational, medical and social enhancement. Finally, the main supervisor of this project closely monitors the process of the on-going activity in the website to keep the flow of information accurate, up-to-date and ethical, and protect visitors' privacy and confidentiality, thus preserving the greatest asset of this project and assuring its integrity and credibility.

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