The Path to Inclusion for Children with Learning Disabilities in Guyana: Challenges and Future Considerations

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Abstract

One of the major challenges facing special and general education teachers and parents in Guyana is the current educational move towards inclusion. This move has been characterized by the changing political and economic systems which have resulted in inclusion gaining increased momentum in many circles including major organizations, institutions, and even among members of civil society. Inclusion has also been touted as the prelude to meaningful political, economic, social, educational, religious, and cultural engagement in governance and other decision making processes in Guyana. The concept hinges on the right to participate and become involved in various activities regardless of ability or disability. The Jomtien Declaration (1990) which was adopted by the World Conference on Education for All in Thailand in March 1990, mandates the removal of barriers to education for all children. The declaration also affirms the right to education for every individual as well as equal access for all categories of persons with disabilities (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1990). While the main pillar of the declaration is the right to education, it also mandates the removal of barriers that would prevent equal learning opportunities for vulnerable and marginalized groups (UNESCO, 1990). This paper examines issues relevant to inclusion and the education of children with learning disabilities in Guyana. The author gives an account of the political system, inclusive education, and legislation for persons with disabilities, and highlights the challenges faced by teachers in educating children with learning disabilities in Guyana.

Key Words: Challenges, Discrimination, Education, Guyana, Inclusion, Learning Disabilities, Legislation

Inclusion is a concept that has received a great deal of philosophical and linguistic analysis by proponents such as Booth and Ainscrow (1998), Clark, Dyson and Millward (1995) and Clough and Corbett (2000). This analysis is due to an increase in the number of research and available evidence on the subject. For instance, research conducted by Booth (1999), Farrell (2000) and Hegarty (2001) have helped to unravel some of the philosophical underpinnings behind inclusion and the importance of quality education. Further, Booth and Ainscrow (1998), Clark, Dyson, and Millward (1995), and Clough and Corbett (2000), have argued that inclusion is a goal still to be achieved and this may be difficult due to the different struggles, beliefs and

exclusive practices which still form a large part of the society. However, more recent studies on inclusion conducted by Aylward and Bruce (2014), Ford, Stuart and Vakil, (2014), Muwana and Ostrosky (2014), Zion and Sobel, (2014) remind us that the main thrust of inclusion is equitable access to education for all. For example, Alyward and Bruce (2014) state that in Canada, citizens are aware that education is a right and not a privilege and there should be no discrimination against children based on their mental or physical disability.

Even though the thrust of the matter is the notion of achieving quality education for all learners, attention has

also been centered on the way children are viewed, treated, and educated globally. This global importance of the care, treatment and education of children have seen vital changes to their fundamental rights. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child mandates that every child has the right to free compulsory primary education (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1989). The convention also mandates states to take appropriate measures for the introduction of different forms of secondary education (UNESCO, 1989). Equally important is the fact that there should be no discrimination, and that every child has the right to an education that is void of discrimination on the grounds of disability, religion, language, ethnicity, gender and individual capabilities (UNESCO, 1989). In Guyana, there are similar legislative provisions that outline equal access to services and facilities for all citizens. For example, the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010 confers responsibility on the Minister of Education to establish special education classes in schools in an effort to promote learning. Alternatively, children who need special education would benefit from programs such as Braille, alternative script and mobility skills among others (Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010, 2012).

The Act also stipulates that funds should be made available by Parliament for the national implementation of facilities for special education (Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010, 2012). However, teachers within the school system in Guyana face many challenges due in part to the failure of policymakers to implement provision for special education and individuals with disabilities. As such, this paper examines the education of children with disabilities in Guyana and highlights the issues and challenges arising from the provisions of such education. The first part of the paper will give a brief description of the political system in Guyana and addresses general issues on inclusion. In addition, this section discusses early attempts at inclusion, the education system in Guyana and legal provisions for persons with disabilities. The second part of the paper examines the major challenges faced by teachers in educating children with learning disabilities as well as highlights future considerations necessary for the development of special and inclusive education in Guyana.

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

Guyana has a political system which is based on proportional representation (United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and labor, 2002). Proportional representation is an electoral system that determines the composition of parliament by allocating seats based on the number of votes received by each contesting party (Electoral Reform Society, 2016). In Guyana, this process allows members to be elected to the country's sixty-five member unicameral parliament (United States Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human

Rights and Labor, 2002). However, despite commitments to transparency, democracy and strengthening the constitution from successive governments, the country's political system has been and continues to be a concern for major stakeholders.

Interestingly, after four decades of a winner take all system at national elections and a one party domination of the government, citizens have experienced a new dispensation when a unity government was elected after national and regional elections held on May 11, 2015 (Wilburg, 2015). This historic election effectively ended twenty- three years of continuous rule by the People's Progressive Party/ Civic administration. What is striking is the fact that the results of both the 2011 and 2015 general and regional elections have shown that the Guyanese people need a system of inclusionary democracy (Sanders, 2015). This sentiment is vividly expressed in Article 13 of the Constitution of Guyana, which states that the principal objective of the political system of the state is to establish an inclusionary democracy (Henry, 2015). Further, this inclusionary democracy should provide increase opportunities for the participation of citizens and their organizations in the management and decision making processes of the State, with particular emphasis on those areas of decision making that directly affects their wellbeing (Henry, 2015). One such area that affects the well-being of citizens particularly those with disabilities is inclusive education.

Inclusive education is an approach, which aims at addressing the needs of children and adults who are often excluded from activities beneficial to their educational, social, economic and cultural development. Research has shown that the effectiveness of inclusive education for individuals with disabilities is influenced by factors such as policy initiatives, legislation, district and teacher support among others (Forlin, 2013). Forlin (2013) and Nonis as well as Jernice (2011) specifically identified several types of support needed for successful inclusion. These include national and state policies that encourage inclusion, strong leadership, qualified personnel, funding and the availability of resources within schools. However, one of the major impacts regarding implementation of inclusive education directly relates to the challenges facing developing countries in providing basic education for all learners. Therefore, educating children with disabilities is a non-negotiable right which has drawn international attention among state and non-state actors, thereby keeping the flames burning on the inclusion debate.

Seemingly, the inclusion debate may have illuminated with positive effects when the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs Education (1994) adopted the principles of inclusive education (UNESCO), 1994). These principles were later reaffirmed at the Dakar World Education Forum (2000) and the recent Incheon Declaration (2015). The Salamanca Statement and Framework

for Action (1994) were the fruit of collective efforts of more than three hundred participants and twenty-five international organizations who met in Salamanca, Spain, in June, 1994, to further accelerate the objectives of education for all (UNESCO, 1994). This document has outlined the fundamental right to education for all, regardless of race, colour or creed (Fraser, 2014). For instance, it has highlighted the need for inclusive schools and inclusive quality education, which is fundamental to the attainment of human, economic and social development. In addition, the document highlighted the fact that the intellectual, social, physical, emotional, and linguistic conditions should not restrict the accommodation of children in schools. Some notable examples include children with disabilities, gifted children and children from indigenous populations, as well as those from ethnic and cultural minorities.

The Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) resulted from the meeting of ministers, heads of multilateral and bilateral organizations, representatives of civil society, teachers, youth and the private sector who met in Incheon, South Korea, in May, 2015, at the World Education Forum. The Incheon Declaration reaffirmed the commitment of education for all, while at the same time recognizing the challenges in meeting targets for global educational outcomes.

THE EARLY ATTEMPTS AT INCLUSION

The humanitarian philosophy of helping individuals who are vulnerable and at risk has bolstered inclusion. Winzer (2007), in recognizing this view, alluded to the increased responsibility of society to ameliorate the lives of individuals with disabilities. This corporate social responsibility has resulted in the introduction of compulsory education in the late 19th century and the emergence of several systems to provide education for a population considered dissimilar in its learning needs (Abawi & Oliver, 2013). The same can be said from accounts in Guyana where the quest to provide quality education has its genesis in the introduction of the compulsory denominational educational bill in British Guiana in 1876. Woolford (1989) notes that there were several factors responsible for the introduction of the bill which included irregular attendance at school, unqualified teachers, and idleness among the young population. Additionally, the high rate of absenteeism in school during the second half of the 19th century in British Guiana led the inspector of schools at the time to call for a system of compulsory education (Woolford, 1989).

On one hand, the passage of the bill led to the establishment of elementary schools. On the other hand, there was the emergence of compulsory education and provisions for children with disabilities. However, a public enlightenment on the issues of discrimination in the late 1960s witnessed challenges to the system (Hardman, Drew,

& Egan, 2011). These challenges, while legal in nature, attacked the exclusionary practices of educating children with disabilities and ushered in support for equal rights (Foreman, 2011; Heward, 2013). Seemingly, this led to significant policy changes, such as, legislations for teaching children with disabilities, and major provisions for inclusion, which were boosted with early legislations (Clough & Corbett, 2000). For example, in the United Kingdom, the Warnock report on Special Education created new opportunities for the passage of legislation to deal with the education of children with disabilities. This report led to changes in perceptions and beliefs about individuals with disabilities (Clough & Corbett, 2000).

The Warnock report was the result of an official enquiry into special education in the UK, established by the British government in 1978 and chaired by Baroness Mary Warnock (Clough & Corbett, 2000). In the development of inclusion, the Warnock report was evolutionary for two specific reasons. First, it led to changes in the perceptions of children with special education needs. For example, a focus approach was developed for children with special needs whereby their specific educational challenges were identified and provisions were made to deal with such challenges. Second, the report led to policy changes in the education system in the UK through the enactment of the 1981 Education Act, thereby providing a springboard for the special education movement.

What is significant is that almost three decades later, the Warnock report created opportunities for the passage of legislation for persons with disabilities in Guyana. One notable example of inclusionary legislation is the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) (Fraser, 2014). The passage of this legislation paved the way for equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Another important connection between the Warnock report and the development of special education needs in Guyana lies in the recommendations for specialist provision regarding children with disabilities. Therefore, it is important to note that the Warnock report provided a base for the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010). Besides this, policy changes were also evident in the United States and Australia (Foreman, 2011). For example, the legislation leading to what is now known as Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed in the United States in 1975. In Australia, policy development took root from the Warnock Report and one of the earliest initiatives was mainstreaming (Foreman, 2011). The policy of mainstreaming has influenced the provision of support for children with special needs in regular classrooms (Foreman, 2011). However, this mainstreaming policy sought to integrate children who were able to adapt to regular school environments, while those unable to adapt to the regular environments have remained in segregated schools (Foreman, 2011; Heward, 2011).

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN GUYANA

The education system in Guyana is made up of institutions of various levels and types and these institutions include pre-school or nursery, primary, secondary and post-secondary levels (Ministry of Education, 2013). The sector also includes technical and vocational education, teacher training, university education and a center for continuing education, which is provided through the Adult Education Association (AEA) as well as the Institute of Distance and Continuing Education (IDCE) (Ministry of Education, 2013). The latter is an arm of the University of Guyana and offers courses in several areas including Early Childhood Development and Social Work (Ministry of Education, 2013). Collectively, these institutions help to fulfill the mandate of the Ministry of Education in providing education to all citizens. Fraser (2014) notes that the Ministry of Education while being the largest ministry in terms of scope of operations also regulates the provision of education in special schools in Guyana. In addition, the delivery of special education is done through special schools and these are located in three major towns namely Georgetown, New Amsterdam, and Linden (Fraser 2014). In addition, there is also one special school on the East Bank of Demerara, and several resource centers, which are funded by the government (Lockwood, 2010). Statistics indicate that for 2010 there was only one privately owned special school and this institution received limited funding from the Ministry of Education (Lockwood, 2010).

More recently, there are two new privately owned special schools which receive external funding and cater to the needs of children with Autism and Intellectual Disabilities. Current statistics indicate that there is 85% enrollment of students at the nursery level, which is consider as one of the best in the developing world (Mohabir, 2015a). In addition, the figures indicate that 90% of special education students at the primary level gain access to secondary schools (Mohabir, 2015a). Seemingly, these strides in the education system have resulted in an attempt to achieve universal primary education and the fulfillment of a critical aspect of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals established in 2000 (Mohabir, 2015b).

LEGAL PROVISIONS FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

In the United States, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provides legal framework for increased accountability and shared responsibilities for the education of children with disabilities (Turnbull, Huerta & Stowe, 2006). The Act, among other things, provides for the use of funds to execute state level activities, schedule programs for students with disabilities, requirements for qualifications of special education teachers, performance goals and indicators of children with disabil-

ities in various states and the reporting of progress (United States Department of Education, 2016). As a civil rights and welfare law, IDEA makes provisions for several important tenets, which include independent living, self-sufficiency and full participation in society (Turnbull, Huerta & Stowe, 2006).

The Act, is closely aligned to the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), and it has three fundamental tenets: First, it authorizes the spending of federal funds. Second, students and parents benefit from various rights under this Act (Turnbull, Huerta & Stowe, 2006). Third, it regulates the relationship between students and their parents with local and state educational agencies (Turnbull, Huerta & Stowe, 2006). Essentially, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) have many similarities. For example, the provision of free appropriate public education and related services for children with disabilities in order to meet their needs, while at the same time ensuring that adequate preparations are in place for further education, employment and independent living. Further, the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) have similar regulations governing individualized education programs, funding, and discipline. However, a striking difference between the two legislations is the variety of high interest topics covered by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act.

In Guyana, the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) also makes several important provisions for children with disabilities and confers special powers on the Minister of Education to facilitate the implementation of the provisions of the Act. One of the major highlights of the Act is the stipulation regarding funding for special education (Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010, 2012). Fraser (2014) points out that while special schools and resource centers in Guyana are funded by the Government, there is still considerable need for adequate resources for educating children with disabilities. The Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) outlines several key provisions regarding persons with disabilities. Some of the provisions include: The implementation of national education programs to ensure that persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system as a result of disability.

- The regulation that children with disabilities should not be excluded from free primary and secondary education on the basis of disabilities.
- The development and implementation of training programs for teachers specializing in disabilities.
- Providing trained personnel for children with disabilities in special schools and mainstream schools.
- The institution of special education as a compulsory component of the teachers' training curriculum.

- Vocational training, skills development and training programs for persons with disabilities to enable gainful employment.
- Equal opportunities for employment.

In addition, the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) makes provisions for the establishment of special schools by the government and the private sector for individuals in need of special education. Further, the Act stipulates that the delivery of special education may be necessary to provide access to education for children with disabilities in any part of Guyana (Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010, 2012). This provision of access to education, particularly in rural and remote areas of the country is illustrated in the Education for All Fast Track Initiative (EFA/FTI) which is high on the Ministry of Education agenda (Fraser, 2014). The EFA/FTI is a project that focuses on primary education, particularly among indigenous populations which face challenges in accessing basic education (Fraser, 2014).

Fraser (2014) states that the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) also makes provision for the promotion and protection of rights and their enforcement in an effort to prevent the discrimination of persons with disabilities. This concept is further reinforced by Article 149 of the Constitution of Guyana, which gives citizens protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, political origin, age, color, creed and disability among others (The Guyana Constitution, 1980). On the other hand, provisions for health, water, sports, recreation, communication, accessibility and above all voting rights are also stated in the act (Persons with Disabilities Act of 2010, 2012). Another important stipulation outlined in the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) is the integration of persons with disabilities in the school system and assistance in the form of grants, loans, and scholarships.

Giving added impetus to the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) is the Prevention of Discrimination Act (1997). This act, among other things, provides regulations for the prevention of discrimination on the grounds of disability (Prevention of Discrimination Act, 1997). The Prevention of Discrimination Act (1997) specifically states that there should be no discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, religion, color, ethnic origin, social origin, political opinion, and, above all, disability. One of the highpoints of this Act lies in the protection outlined for persons with disabilities and their right to complain (Prevention of Discrimination Act, 1997). This is of extreme importance since the Act applies to employees and employers both in public and private sectors and includes agencies such as vocational training bodies and employment agencies (Prevention of Discrimination Act, 1997). Seemingly, the right of individuals with disabilities to participate in nation building through social, economic, educational, political, cultural and religious processes has been given legitimacy through these legal frameworks.

Challenges to Inclusion in Guyana

Research has shown that most Southern African countries face problems with fiscal resources allocated to education and a reduction in expenditure. For instance, research conducted by Chitiyo and Chitiyo (2007) indicates that the public expenditure of at least six out of seven countries in the Southern African region was reduced between 1990 and 2002. Chitiyo and Chitiyo (2007) further note that the lack of fiscal resources allocated to education coupled with the lack of legislative support has hindered the development of education in many Southern African countries. The result of this financial deficit is the heavy dependence on charitable organizations and donations to sustain the work of special schools. Unlike those countries in the Southern African region, the Government of Guyana has made significant investments in the education sector with budgetary allocations in 2014 reaching 32.3 billion dollars (Narine, 2014). Fraser (2014) states that this huge spending reflects the growing importance of education to the development of the economy. Reports also indicate that the rate of children dropping out of school at the general secondary level has declined from 75% to below 10% in the last 20 years (Ganesh-Ally, 2015). Under the People's Progressive Party/ Civic administration, the education sector benefitted from 15% of the national budget (Ganesh-Ally, 2015). In 2009, the sum allocated to education was 20.4 billion dollars; in 2010 it was 21.4 billion dollars; in 2011 it was 24.3 billion dollars; in 2012 it was 26.5 billion dollars; and in 2013 it was 28 billion dollars (Mohabir, 2015b). Additionally, the fiscal expenditure on education amounts to approximately 5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (Mohabir, 2015b). According to Mohabir (2015b) this huge fiscal expenditure on education has led to improvements in the infrastructural landscapes of education facilities including school buildings and school dormitories. However, despite this huge spending in the education sector, there are still many issues and challenges for special education teachers in educating children with disabilities. Some of the issues are as follows:

- Lack of resources both human and physical – there is a limited number of specialist teachers in the area of special education. In many special schools, there are general education teachers delivering the curriculum to students with disabilities.
- There is also a shortage of education and medical personnel to conduct appropriate diagnosis for children with disabilities.
- Medical diagnosis is often difficult due in part to the lack or general absence of specialists in this field.
- Negative parental attitudes towards the education of children with disabilities also pose a challenge. Even though, some parents are integrally involved in the education of their children, there are still many who

prefer to keep their children at home due in part to the negative attitudes and perceptions of the society towards people with disabilities.

- There is a lack of effective pedagogical methods as well as information technology resources and this hinders the effective performance of teachers in the classroom.
- Large teacher/student ratios in many schools is a hindrance to inclusive practices. In many instances there are large class sizes which do not auger well for teaching and learning both in special and mainstream schools.
- The curriculum is inflexible and provides little scope for change. This is compounded by rigid homework and examination system which provides limited opportunities for skill and capacity building on the part of students.

Teacher support for inclusion of children with disabilities primarily in the context of mainstream education in Guyana remains a huge challenge for the Education Ministry. Muwana and Ostrosky (2014) posit that inclusion is affected by several factors, and one of the most important factors is teacher support for children with disabilities. Greater currency is given to this issue from research conducted by Forlin (2013) and Nonis and Jernice (2011). Forlin (2013) and Nonis as well as Jernice (2011) confirm that successful and effective inclusion requires the following: qualified personnel, funding, availability of resources within schools, and national and state policies that promotes strong leadership. Essentially, while these issues are pivotal to the inclusion process in Guyana, they remain unattainable. Similarly, in many Caribbean Community (CARICOM) states, teachers' support for inclusion remains a challenge. For instance, in a qualitative study on Bahamian teachers' perceptions of inclusion as a foundational platform for adult education programs, Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson and Cambridge (2014) outlined five factors that influenced teachers' perception of inclusive education. These factors include: lack of training, insufficient resources, administrative support, teachers' attitudes and inadequate /misconception of information regarding inclusive education (Newton, Hinter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, & Cambridge, 2014). The study also revealed that teachers' displayed negative attitudes towards the implementation of inclusive education within primary schools, and highlighted the lack of administrative support for inclusive education from administrators at the school and district level (Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, & Cambridge, 2014). Further, teachers believe that inclusive education is difficult to achieve due in part to numerous deficiencies in the public education system in the Bahamas (Hunter-Johnson, Newton, & Cambridge, 2014). However, willingness to support all children in the mainstream classroom, including children with special needs, depends on consistent administrative support for inclusive education (Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, & Cambridge, 2014). In Guyana, teachers face an uphill task in garnering support and building relationships with parents. The lack of support has stymied the effective teaching of children with disabilities. For example, many of the problems faced by teachers relate to an attitude of resistance of citizens towards children with disabilities. Fraser (2014) notes that this attitude of resistance, which pervades the Guyanese society, often reflects exclusive tendencies resulting in marginalization and exclusion.

Research conducted by Blackman, Conrad, and Brown (2012) on the attitudes of Barbadian, and Trinidadian teachers to integration concur that teacher resistance along with public opinion are important factors in supporting or subverting the process of inclusion. According to results from their study, significant differences were reported in the attitudes of teachers in Barbados, and their counterparts in Trinidad, on their perceived ability to teach children with disabilities. In general, studies by Newton, Hunter-Johnson, Gardiner-Farquharson, and Cambridge (2014), Fraser (2014), and Blackman, Conrad, and Brown (2012) suggest that in the Caribbean, teachers' attitudes toward educating children with disabilities, primarily in mainstream educational settings remain a real concern because of the negative perceptions of teaching children with disabilities. In contrast, Ali, Mustapha, and Jelas (2006) observe that teachers in Malaysia generally hold positive attitudes towards inclusive education. This is so because they believe that social interaction can be enhanced through inclusive education, thereby reducing negative stereotypes on special needs students.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Despite ongoing efforts to address issues and improve access to appropriate education for all students, urgent attention is needed in the area of special education and inclusion. Hence, an understanding of the influence of teachers' perception on personal practice is essential for greater inclusion within the school system. The issues outlined in this paper as future considerations for policy makers in Guyana are derived from observation, field visits to schools and education agencies. The following should be considered by policymakers within the Ministry of Education and are organized into several thematic areas: Legislative Protection and Disability Rights, Policy and Administration, Teaching Approaches, Teacher Training, Transition to Post-Secondary Education and School Resources.

Legislative Protection and Disability Rights

The Government of Guyana should give urgent consideration of becoming a signatory to the Organization of American States Inter-American Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Organization of American States, 1999).

In addition, the government should establish a task force to examine ways in which effective measures can be developed to respond to the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1993). Further, amendments should be made to Bill 9 of 2003 to ensure that it becomes more responsive to the current needs of persons with disabilities. There should also be greater legislative oversight and implementation of laws to protect individuals with disabilities, since Guyana is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006). The convention recognizes the right of children with disabilities to full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children.

Policy and Administration

There should be greater implementation of the Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) and a more focus approach primarily on the establishment of special schools in rural districts in Guyana. This is likely to create a reduction in the number of children with disabilities remaining at home, while at the same time providing greater access to education for all. In addition, the database on statistics for children with disabilities in Guyana needs to be more broad-based. This must take into consideration children with learning impairments, including visual impairments and blindness, hearing impairments, physical impairments, and learning difficulties. The database must also include statistics for learners enrolled in mainstream classes with impairments that impact their educational experiences such as intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral difficulties, specific learning difficulties, health impairments, and language and communication difficulties.

Further there should be the introduction of a national program for detection of disability at the early childhood level. This program must be fully funded by the Government of Guyana through the Ministry of Public Health and must be implemented in all ten administrative regions. The National Commission on Disability should be given the task of developing a comprehensive strategic plan to deal with this issue. The commission should also establish annual action plans to monitor, evaluate and effectively implement measures to address identification, diagnosis, and treatment of cases related to children with disabilities. More importantly, teaching children with disabilities also require a national approach. The implementation of a national strategic plan as well as changes to the state's programs and policy response will be a step in the right direction.

In recent years, the Government of Guyana has made efforts to increase the access to buildings for children with disabilities. However, this access is still not adequate, and many of these children are often kept out of school by their families, or are excluded by the inaccessibility of school buildings. This issue is further compounded by the absence of a national policy to facilitate access to buildings for all children. As such, application of the concept of universal design to all buildings, including school buildings, will facilitate greater access and participation of citizens including persons with disabilities. One way to achieve this goal is through a revision of the building code, collaboration with architects, and building engineers in Guyana to ensure that all buildings meet the standard design.

There is also need for the development of a national behavior management strategy for the education sector to tackle issues of school violence, behavior disorders and other behavioral issues. This should be done in collaboration with specialists in the field of behavior management, school counsellors, welfare officers, school administrators, teachers and parents. It is also important to note that in Guyana, teacher / student ratios are not in accordance with international standards. As such, the Government of Guyana must consider reducing the teacher / student ratio. This would increase the flexibility in class size, thereby leading to improvement in the teaching and learning outcomes for students with disabilities.

There is urgent need for the development of a networking system for Head teachers and teachers in special schools in Guyana, since both head teachers and teachers will benefit from this initiative. This system will benefit head teachers through the sharing of information on management strategies, curriculum issues, and students' welfare. Teachers will receive support on the use of resources, effective teaching strategies, and best practices in other special schools in Guyana. In addition, special education teachers and practitioners should have greater voices in the decision- making processes. A national transportation strategy for special schools in Guyana should be implemented to help with mobility issues for children with disabilities. This is extremely important due to the high transportation costs for persons with disabilities. In addition, the development of a national transportation strategy will enable access to vital social services for persons with disabilities. It will also facilitate greater attendance at school, particularly for children in remote and hinterland regions. Further, there should be collaboration between the government and the private sector in the development and implementation of this strategy in order to provide public transport that is wheelchair accessible. Currently, public mini buses, which provide transportation, are not designed for persons with disabilities. In cases where individuals cannot access the bus, they must resort to the use of taxis. The use of taxis require the disassembly of the wheelchair for storage purposes, and in many instances physical assistance from others. Moreover, the use of taxis create additional financial burden for persons with disabilities.

Teaching Approaches

The development of a system of telepractice for students requiring special education services should also be considered. Telepractice is a system of offering advice on assessment, intervention and therapy to clients /patients through the use of telephones (American Speech language and Hearing Association, 1997). This relatively new concept would overcome issues of geography in Guyana, particularly for the rural and hinterland students who may require special education services. In addition, there is need for the design and implementation of an integrated curriculum with specific focus on vocational skills, and the use of technology in teaching children with disabilities. The development of vocational skills and the use of technology should go beyond the level of basic training currently offer by the Open Door Centre, a private institution in Georgetown, that provides vocational training for persons aged 17-45 years. There is also a need for greater training of children with disabilities in the performing arts, as well as more enrichment programs.

Teacher Training

Special education programs including programs on disabilities for students at the Cyril Potter College of Education (CPCE) and the University of Guyana (UG) as major specializations should be implemented. In the case of the Cyril Potter College of Education, an Associate Degree in special education should be introduced, while at the University of Guyana, there should be certificates, diplomas, postgraduate and higher research degree programs in special education and disability education. In addition, there should be greater capacity building for all teachers in order to facilitate the effective identification of children with disabilities in their classrooms. Further, there is urgent need for a referral centre where greater analysis of the issues identified in the classrooms can be addressed.

Regular training and professional development sessions for teachers at special schools should be planned. Both local and overseas training programs are necessary in an effort to develop the human capital. These programs should focus on areas such as Braille, and Intellectual Disabilities, speech therapy, and behavior disorders because there is a lack of specialists in these areas in the school system. In addition, training should also focus on sign language since there are many instances where public officers cannot interpret basic signs. This makes communication difficult for persons with disabilities.

Transition to Post Secondary Education

Clear pathways must be developed for students with disabilities in order for a smooth transition to adulthood. These pathways must consider salient issues such as self-sufficiency and elf-determination. Enrolment in post-secondary educational programs is one notable area in achieving the pathways to adulthood for children with disabilities. This view is amplified by Bruce (2011), Hibbs and Pothier (2006), Stodden and Whelly, (2004), and Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza and Levine (2005) who recognize that post-secondary education is a necessary good for students with disabilities. In addition to the development of clear pathways for students with disabilities, there is urgent need for a nationally coordinated skills training program for people with disabilities. This system should be a shift away from the regular ad hoc programs and must be structured. Moreover, this training should address areas such as self-employment, small business management, leadership skills, self-esteem and advocacy. A structured approach to training will complement existing initiatives in areas such as food preparation, cake making, floral decoration, handicraft and cosmetology.

School Resources

There must be provision of greater resources for special schools and more child –friendly spaces or children with disabilities. Policy makers should urgently address the need for speech programs and related resources since this will significantly reduce the high costs of speech programs. Resources are also needed for all other specialized areas to assist children with disabilities. The acquisition of greater assistive devices and technology is essential for all classrooms and this would provide a tremendous boost in the execution of educational programs. Priorities should be given to schools that are in urgent need of resources, which may help to solve some of the equity issues in the school system. This view is supported by Bos, Cabrol, and Randon (2012) with reference to the Finish education system. Bos, Cabrol, and Randon (2012) argue that resources directed to schools that need the most, would result in greater improvement for students who are struggling to receive support necessary for success in their education. Finland has adopted this approach and the country's performance in all international assessments has now surpassed all other countries by becoming the best performing nation in international assessments (OECD, 2007).

There is need for greater allocation of resources to families and caregivers for persons with disabilities. In addition, public programs should be established to integrate, rehabilitate and educate families with severe, profound or multiple disabilities. In sum, the transformation of the special education landscape in Guyana will depend on the rate at which policy makers adopt measures to implement the considerations outlined in this paper.

CONCLUSION

In summary, inclusion is an issue of national and international importance not only for those with special education needs but the wider society. Therefore, educating children with learning disabilities remains an important goal for many nations. In Guyana, while there has been a

great deal of progress, significant work is needed in order to improve the quality of education in inclusive classrooms. For this purpose, achieving full inclusion may require strong commitments by all agencies and organizations involved in the quest for equitable access to education for children, particularly those with disabilities and other groups who are at risk of marginalization and exclusion. In large measure, more involvement of special education teachers in decision-making is important in the realization of inclusive education, and the teaching of children with disabilities. However, one major concern relates to the fact that while a substantial amount of fiscal resources are allocated to education, the country still face challenges in educating children with learning disabilities. In addition, the support for inclusion particularly in the context of mainstream education also remains a challenge for teachers, parents and even policy makers. To this end, overcoming the challenges of educating children with learning disabilities in Guyana may require a collaborative approach by teachers, parents, the officials of the Ministry of Education, and other stakeholders. It also requires a major change in the attitudes and beliefs about children with disabilities.

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