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Education for Some? The Exploration of Inclusive Education in Trinidad and Tobago

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All children with disabilities have the right to education according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1994). This inalienable right exists in Trinidad and Tobago as a consequence of the country's accession to international treaties which specify this right and is fostered through inclusive education. In Trinidad and Tobago, the draft National Policy on Persons with Disabilities (NPPWD, 2018), defines inclusive education as “persons with and without disabilities learning together in pre-school provision, schools, colleges and universities, with the appropriate networks of support” (p. ix). It is important to recognize that although governments acknowledge the need for inclusion, the global implementation of the practice is far removed from reality (Forlin, 2012). While this right to education may exist theoretically, there are many barriers to the country's ratification and incorporation of this right for persons with disabilities. These barriers range from a lack of resources, lack of teacher preparation and training, negative teacher perceptions concerning disabilities, cultural stigma, and lack of prioritization of the government of the country. In the 1980s, Trinidad and Tobago tried to implement inclusion by enrolling children with disabilities in the regular classroom. Based on teachers' perceptions on inclusive education and due to the lack of trained special education teachers and limited supports, this attempt was futile (Lavia, 2007).

In this article, we examine the current state of inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago by analyzing the existing literature on this topic and the current national policy on persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. This piece is intended to bring the issue of accessibility to inclusive education and the rights of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago to the forefront. In doing so, it is our hope that researchers, policymakers, and the government of Trinidad and Tobago will understand the importance of inclusive education and as such, prioritize the special needs population in their research, allocation of funding, resources and legislation processes. There is a definitive discrepancy between what is required of the country with regard to education for persons with disabilities and the practical, realistic implementation of these mandates at a national level. As a result, it is imperative to analyze the national policies and determine what the literature postulates in this regard. But first, it is imperative to justify why the Trinidad and Tobago context is important and relevant in relation to inclusive education.

Why Trinidad and Tobago?

Trinidad and Tobago is the most southernmost Caribbean island located just off the coast of Venezuela. In the special education literature, the Caribbean region is often overlooked and the same is true of the Trinbagonian context. Regarding children with disabilities, the Census recorded approximately 3,302 children (i.e., persons aged 1-17) with a disability, which is equivalent to 6.3% of the population of persons with disabilities and 1% of the population of children (330 and 102 children, respectively) in Trinidad and Tobago. The NPPWD (2018) defines persons with disabilities as “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interac-

tion with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (p. ix). In this paper, we address all persons with disabilities in this context.

Scholarly research on inclusion has not been a priority in countries with developing economies like Trinidad and Tobago as seen in the limited existing literature on this region. Inclusive education, defined as “the integration and education of most students with disabilities in general education classrooms” (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002, p. 113), is critical to long-term academic outcomes (Friend, Bursuck, & Hutchinson, 1998). However, Trinidad and Tobago has one of the largest economies in the Caribbean region and, as such, retains a good prospect of successfully implementing inclusion in education throughout the country. Furthermore, a national policy on inclusion being implemented in Trinidad and Tobago can have a ripple effect for other countries within the Caribbean region and other nations with similar economies. Trinidad and Tobago can provide a prototype model for the entire region including Latin America as it pertains to inclusive education. As such, the relevant international treaties and the existing national legislation will be explored.

International Mandates and Agreements

With regard to the equality of all persons and the right to education, Trinidad and Tobago is party to the United Nations (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994).

The UDHR (United Nations, 1948) acknowledges that all persons, without distinction, are equal, including persons with disabilities. Article 26 of the UDHR further specifies that all persons have the right to education. Furthermore, Article 24 of the UNCRPD recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to education which includes the right not to be excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability.

The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education adopted at the World Conference on Special Needs Education united the world in a commitment to “give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve their educational systems to enable them to include all children regardless of individuals differences and difficulties” (UNESCO 1994: ix). As asserted in the Salamanca Statement, equal opportunities for children with disabilities is a fundamental right (UNESCO, 1994). This includes the right to an education and access to the same learning environment as peers without disabilities. “The fundamental principle of inclusive education is that all children should learn together, wherever possible, regardless of any difficulties and differences they may have” (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002, p. 113). However, the adoption of inclusive educational practices for children with disabilities has yet to be realized in many countries around the world, more specifically in Trinidad and Tobago, even though Trinidad and Tobago is part of the agreement to the Salamanca Statement.

Trinbagonian Laws

The Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago enshrines the equality of all persons and this equality is a fundamental right. However, the Equal Opportunities Act of Trinidad and Tobago (EOA, 2000) is the only national piece of legislation which references the rights of persons with disabilities (NPPWD, 2018). The EOA (2000), among other things, generally prohibits acts of discrimination and promotes the equality of all persons in Trinidad and Tobago including persons with disabilities. As it pertains to education, section 15 of the EOA prohibits discrimination by all educational establishments throughout the country. However, section 18A of the EOA provides an excep-

tion to section 15 which permits discrimination. The section states that it is not unlawful to refuse a person's application for admission as a student, if the student would require services or facilities that are not required by students who do not have a disability and the provision of which would impose unjustifiable hardship on the educational establishment. This section seems to contradict Trinidad and Tobago's treaty obligations under the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and the UNCPRPD.

The Education Act of Trinidad and Tobago (EA) requires children from ages 5 through 16 to attend an educational establishment. The EA places this obligation on parents to ensure that their children receive full time education (Section 77, EA). A recent survey on parents in Trinidad and Tobago indicated that 43% of parents of children with disabilities kept their child with disabilities out of school due to the lack of services available (Charran, 2016). Section 78 of the EA permits a parent to homeschool a child only if the Minister of Education is satisfied that the child is receiving satisfactory instructions at home. The 43% statistic is not surprising given the fact that the national legislation permits discrimination on the part of educational establishments, which leads to a lack of inclusive education nationally. The government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is aware of the discriminatory nature of the EOA and has indicated that it plans to rectify this issue (NPPWD, 2018).

Existing Policy for Persons with Disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago

In the existing draft of policy for persons with disabilities, it was stated that the government of Trinidad and Tobago will make certain that the appropriate legislation is enacted for students with disabilities to have access to a non-discriminatory educational experience in elementary, secondary, and college settings (NPPWD, 2018). Within this policy, it was also expressed that the Trinbagonian government will ensure “adequate allocation of the appropriate resources for physical and informational accessibility, funding and delivery of inclusive education”; will review and restructure “delivery of the national curriculum to ensure that it is inclusive for persons with disabilities”; will provide appropriate training programs for teachers to “meet the diverse learning needs of students with disabilities”; and will “provide access to a team of professionals with the ability to assess, recommend and provide required interventions for students with disabilities” (NPPWD, 2018, p. 20) in order to create more accessibility for inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago.

Having an understanding and insight into the current policy can help conceptualize the gap that needs to be addressed within the scopes of research, practice, and policy. To further put this into perspective, the current state of inclusive education in other developing economies will be discussed.

Inclusive Education in Developing Economies

While research on inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago is limited, research for countries with developing economies can provide vital information. Research on countries with developing economies indicated that the needs of persons with disabilities do not form a priority for the government, the national policies and the nation's expenditure (Brohier, 1995; Kisanji, 1995; McConkey & O'Toole, 1995). In several countries with developing economies, students with disabilities are not enrolled in schools, not even special education schools (Srivastava, de Boer, & Jan Pijl, 2015).

Mba (1995) noted that the factors which give rise to this perspective by the government include a lack of resources and the argument that the needs of persons without disabilities are prioritized over those of individuals with disabilities and a general lack of awareness of the abilities of per-

sons with disabilities. The cost of services for persons with disabilities is considered a waste of scarce funds in countries with developing economies and their potential to contribute to the nation's economy is considered low (Mba, 1995).

Srivastava, de Boer, and Jan Pijl (2015) stated "the debate on inclusive education in developing countries is not much more than a decade old" (p. 191), and, as such, developing economies are being propelled to move forward, faster based on international agreements and mandates. With this information in mind, it is apparent that Trinidad and Tobago's goal to inclusive education is similar to that of other countries with developing economies.

Barriers to Inclusive Education in Trinidad and Tobago

In the special education literature in Trinidad and Tobago, it is revealed that there are several barriers to achieving this goal of inclusive education for persons with disabilities. The literature highlighted that limited special education teacher training, lack of teacher preparation, limited special education resources, limited government supports, and limited understanding of disabilities are the main barriers to implementing inclusive education.

Limited Special Education Teacher Training

In Trinidad and Tobago, teacher training in special education is available but is limited. Armstrong, Armstrong, Lynch, and Severin (2005) and Tsang, Fryer, and Arevalo (2002) expressed that there was a significant need for special education teacher training, especially since the training currently available in Trinidad and Tobago are limited. The allocated resources are insufficient to accomplish real inclusive classrooms. Conrad et al. (2011) discovered that the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago did not adequately provide special education services to the schools.

Lack of Teacher Preparation

Each study on special education in Trinidad and Tobago revealed teachers are not properly prepared to teach students with disabilities in their classrooms (Armstrong et al., 2005; Johnstone, 2010; Myers, 2010; Tsang, Fryer & Arevalo, 2002). Further, in these studies, it is a common trend that teachers are aware of disabilities but, in general, are unclear about inclusive classrooms. Johnstone (2010) found that teachers with general education certifications in Trinidad and Tobago were not very knowledgeable about special education in terms of differentiated instruction for teaching students with disabilities. Furthermore, Blackman, Conrad, and Brown (2012) found that Trinidadian teachers lack understanding of disabilities and inclusion. This seems to be a consistent issue pervading the special education sector in Trinidad and Tobago. Additionally, teachers have limited preparation for teaching students with disabilities in terms of administering the available curriculum.

Limited Special Education Resources

From a national perspective, Trinidad and Tobago lack special education resources due to their developing economy (Armstrong et al., 2005; Pedro & Conrad, 2006; Tsang, Fryer & Arevalo, 2002). This lack of resources has filtered into teachers' perspectives (Conrad & Brown, 2011; Myers, 2010). Research has depicted that there are insufficient services and resources available. Furthermore, teacher training was insufficient for teachers working with students with disabilities (Myers, 2010).

Limited Government Supports

Studies indicated that there are limited government supports for inclusive practices in Trinidad and Tobago (Armstrong et al., 2005; Myers, 2010; Pedro & Conrad, 2006). This limitation is a serious one and arguably causes all the barriers to inclusion or, at the very least, exacerbates them. A lack of government support means that schools at a national level and teacher training are affected significantly. But more importantly, governments hold the power to help change the nation's cultural approach to persons with disabilities. The priority for the governments of Caribbean countries is not special education. This is so, even in light of the mandates from international agreements. At a national level, there are much larger concerns, such as general education rather than special education. As such, many governments choose to prioritize what they believe is most important for the country's present and future; to which special education is often secondary. Considering all of these barriers to inclusive education discussed above, there is a significant need for policy changes for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Need for Policy Changes in Trinidad and Tobago for Persons with Disabilities

The mere act of using the verbiage from international mandates in national policies without adhering to the basis of implementation in local and regional contexts will not ensure a valuable advancement towards inclusive education (Forlin, 2012). Forlin (2012) expressed that "policies for promoting inclusion are often difficult to enact in developing countries and may be unrealistic in their expectations if based on international creeds without due consideration for local contexts" (p. 27). The truth in this statement is directly related to the current state of inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago, as the current policy for persons with disabilities reflects the inconsistencies between the availability of resources and the expectations expressed in the existing policy for this demographic. It is important to consider adopting similar policies from international contexts, at least remotely compatible with the country's economic, cultural, linguistic, and racial/ethnic contexts (Forlin, 2012). Considering these factors in any modification of policies for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago is the first step into promoting attainable goals to inclusive education.

Conclusion

There are many barriers to inclusive education, all of which hamper the right to education of persons with disabilities. These barriers include limited teacher training and teacher preparation, limited human and material resources, and limited government support. These limitations are supported by discriminatory legislation, which is incongruent with international standards and mandates. In general, limited research pertaining to inclusive education in the Caribbean region exists. And as such, emphasis should be placed on scholarly research in Trinidad and Tobago, as there lies the potential for these countries to create an effective model for inclusive education for the Caribbean.

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