

Transforming Learning

Transforming Learning:

International Perspectives

Edited by

Babalola J. Ogunkola
and Stacey Blackman

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INTRODUCTION

BABALOLA J. OGUNKOLA
AND STACEY BLACKMAN

'If teachers are to help learners who begin and proceed differently to reach similar outcomes, they will need to be able to engage in disciplined experimentation, incisive interpretations of complex events, and rigorous reflections to adjust their teaching based on student outcomes.'

—Linda Darling-Hammond, 2006

We live in an environment that is characterised by change, complexity and paradox. It is therefore not surprising that internationally, educators, psychologists and educational researchers are stressing the need for us to change and employ a new array of innovative and interactive pedagogic methodologies so as to transform learning, leading to required changes for the acquisition of 21st century skills among learners at all levels of education. This is a call for us to break away from traditional paradigms and plunge into more innovative, productive and relevant methodologies that are capable of harnessing the resources inherent in learners in order to address prevailing practical learning challenges.

Moreover, the technological progress made so far has led to greater interconnectedness globally and has generated more opportunities for exchange, cooperation and even synergy among disciplines. These changes have sparked the emergence of a new global context for learning that has implications for education; hence this book contains international perspectives in terms of the contexts in which the investigations reported in this book were situated.

Although many books have presented many approaches to transforming learning in different contexts, there is still a dearth of research-based approaches coming out of investigations in classrooms. This book aims at filling this gap. Therefore, we feel this work is timely and provides a much-needed transformatory approach to learning. For instance, the eight chapters are mainly a compendium of materials on using poetry pedagogy in English Literature classrooms, music and movement for improving social skills and emotional growth of children, 'calypso' pedagogy,

universal design for learning to mitigate disproportionality in special education, questioning feedback and formative assessment.

Evidently, this book provides a bridge over the gap between state-of-the-art research and classroom practice. The fact that the contributors are from different disciplines including science education, inclusive education, language arts, early childhood education, etc. shows the multi-disciplinary nature of the perspectives in the book. The contributors drew clear connections between the theory, research and instructional application in each of the chapters. The ultimate goal of the researchers is to have teachers try their hands at the transformative approaches in their classes, hence the quotation at the beginning of this introduction.

In a nutshell, this book is a valuable contribution to education internationally. Education Institutes or Schools in Universities, Teacher Training Colleges and education professional development agents will find this book a great companion.

CHAPTER ONE

INCLUSION: A PRACTICAL REALITY OR A UTOPIAN STANCE

TRACEY LITTLE

Over the years, there have been many children with special needs entering classrooms in Trinidad and Tobago. This situation has sparked much controversy from parents and teachers alike because of the lack of preparedness or the perceived unwillingness of teachers to accommodate them. These stakeholders have called for appropriate teacher education, improved culturally responsive pedagogy, greater student and parent centred school cultures, and more authentic assessments. These modifications are all proposed as a means to make inclusive practices for students with disabilities more effective and sustainable; and to contribute to educational transformation.

Purpose

This paper seeks to explore whether or not inclusion is a practical reality or utopian stance in the island of Trinidad and Tobago. In this chapter I argue that inclusion for children with disabilities remains a utopian ideal due to systemic challenges that include: teacher attitudes toward including children with disabilities, teacher efficacy, teacher professionalism, the employment of traditional pedagogy and curriculum practices and a bureaucratic system that prioritizes its distribution of wealth. These challenges make inclusion difficult to achieve in reality.

I share my perspectives as learner, teacher, and parent. I inform my perspective as an experiential learner and researcher through the opinions of other practicing teachers and students regarding the impact of inclusion on their lives.

I acknowledge that the local education system has fostered a climate of competitiveness and cognitive complexity, which marginalized many students, particularly those with disabilities or who were at risk of failure because of these and other socioeconomic factors. Recently, in Trinidad and Tobago, there has been the inclusion of arts-related and other non-academic activities that could possibly enable a student with learning and other developmental challenges to develop academically through a personal system of metacognition, where students are able to understand how they learn, to apply this knowledge to their learning, and so, improve performance.

The questions that prompted this inquiry are: (1) How do these activities balance off with the more academic subject-specific curricula and what impact would this have on children at-risk for failure? (2) What does transformation in our educational climate truly mean and how does the reality of inclusion epitomize this background?

The Context

For many years, education in Trinidad and Tobago, while celebrated for its output of scholars globally, has been a bedrock of elitism and relatively intolerant of children who did not learn in the traditional way and at an acceptable pace. For the most part, its education system has perpetuated a structure of exclusion from its years of Exhibition to the Common Entrance Examination and on to the Secondary Entrance Examination. Exclusion in the sense that schools and classrooms were not designed or prepared for the “other” learner in the classrooms, teachers were not trained to facilitate the capabilities of the “other” learner and classroom management practices did not reflect the knowledge of non-academic learners. Exclusion creates an imbalance in the system to the point where some students are locked out of the learning context because of an incapacity to support their special needs. Research by Booth and Ainscow (2002, p. 3) explores means of reducing the barriers to participation and achieving inclusion by examining the approaches to teaching and learning, building and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and parents, making infrastructural changes to playgrounds and classrooms and developing the whole person.

In Trinidad and Tobago teachers still rely on traditional approaches to teaching and learning which do not truly involve students in their own learning process. Several other dynamics, such as the student’s home and community environment outside of the control of schools, are likely to impede the development of a transformative education system.

However, strides have recently been taken by the Government to assume a position in favour of inclusion. These positions were taken subsequent to the United Nations Rights of the Child, Education for All, and the Caribbean Symposium on Inclusive Education.

The Problem

Despite the rhetoric, a modest amount of policy, and even fewer systems and practice, inclusive education as it applies to 'differently-abled' learners seems to be handicapped. A major indicator seems to be a lack of political will to make the hard economic decisions that provide all schools and communities with the human and physical resources necessary to facilitate and sustain such transformational change. Many students with disabilities, and others considered to be at risk due to a culture of pervasive failure, are frustrated. The politicizing of educational reform, failing bureaucracy, inflexible curricula, along with the unpreparedness of many teachers, and the underutilization of available expertise when available, are all implicated. Consequently, these students may demonstrate self-destructive tendencies or retaliatory behaviour towards situations and to others. Citizens and educators cannot afford to be passive in the light of such educational inequity and discrimination.

Framing the Challenges

Inclusion

There are myriad interpretations of inclusion that all generally cover the same tenets, as they each seek to expose the concept of this innovative philosophy. The importance of supporting policies, a transformational theoretical framework in favour of inclusion and an understanding that a special needs system does not constitute inclusion, must be considered when defining this controversial topic. The definitions, however, range from the very simple to the most complex. When I think about transformation, I see a riveting move from the rigidity of the classroom space and structure with which I am familiar, to a more routine and dynamic one that engages every child. I ponder my experiences as an educator and the extent to which I can successfully infuse new research, technology and classroom management techniques into the standard operating procedures of my classroom and still achieve the completion of the school curriculum, without compromising the learning capacity of any child. Along this vein, I view transformation as a paradigm shift from the

known into the unknown and from the traditional into something novel and contemporary that can elevate me as an educator, all of my students as effective thinkers and learners, and my environment. It further means that I have to very carefully analyse these opposing sentiments or extremes in order to plan for these transformative changes. Inclusion is ideal for schools in Trinidad and Tobago given the increase in number of the students at-risk for failure in schools.

Inclusion is defined by Buffum et al (2009, p. 208) as “the policy of placing students with special needs in general education classes for the majority of the school day.” While I concur with this definition, I would expand on it by stating that not only should it be the policy of placing students but also the practice of embracing their needs in the mainstream classroom through transforming curricula, teacher and student attitudes and vision. Cipkin & Rizza (2009) interpreted inclusion as, “a term that expresses commitment to educate each child to the maximum extent appropriate, in the school or the classroom, he would otherwise attend if he did not have a special need.” (p.1). This view of inclusion was echoed by Rogers (1993) cited in Bouck (2006). Rogers articulated that “rather than take the child to the services, bring the support services to the child and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class.” (p. 1). Essentially, educating a child with special needs in a regular classroom ensures that he is provided with quality education that supports his specific learning needs, even though he is a student in the mainstream. This raises the question of the factors that determine quality in the inclusive classroom and the extent to which they are detectable in local classrooms. Conrad et al (2010) view inclusion as involving the reduction of exclusionary practices in education by creating and sustaining welcoming school communities.

External factors such as the environment from which the children come can have a negative impact on the student with learning challenges. Bronfenbrenner (1975) developed the socio-ecological model, which demonstrates the harrowing effects of a child’s environment on his holistic development. Although not a perfect and foolproof system, one must admit that there are those teachers who put measures in place to give their time and expertise, albeit not specialized, to facilitating the needs of some of the children who are considered to be at-risk.

There is, therefore, a direct correlation between Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model and successful inclusion. Based upon this theory, one may conclude that there are factors that militate against inclusion and others that facilitate it, outside of the classroom context. The interrelationship between the school and the student’s environment heavily

impacts upon inclusive systems since the values and norms that are reflected in his environment may build tensions within an inclusive ideology that schools may be attempting to construct.

Barriers to Inclusion in Trinidad & Tobago

There have been recognizable attempts by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the MOE, to create a culture of inclusion in schools. However, as mentioned previously, there are factors that hinder its becoming a practical reality. Always, the ethos of competition and rigidity of local education systems raises arguments against inclusion becoming a practical reality.

The Anti-Inclusion Argument. As previously mentioned, debate exists over inclusion. Anti-inclusion arguments by Tornillo (1994) involve concern over how inclusion will change the learning environment for mainstream students, as demands are placed on teachers to attend to special needs, while simultaneously attempting to teach regular classes. In “Inclusion in the Classroom,” the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities lists “fear that general education classrooms will be disrupted if students with disabilities are included” as a barrier to inclusion. Conversely, the research is conclusive that children in the mainstream are not negatively affected and that arguments against inclusion are often entrenched in attitudes that are prejudicial.

Bureaucracy

Trinidad and Tobago’s Vision 2020 (2007-2010) was the Government’s vehicle to steer the country towards developing nation status by the year 2020. It was based on five pillars: competitive business, caring society, innovative people, effective government and sound infrastructure and environment. Drawn out of these pillars were the following objectives: (1) excellence in innovation (2) a seamless, self-renewing high quality education system (3) a highly skilled, talented and knowledgeable workforce (4) to channel our culture so it becomes a fundamental tool for innovation and creativity. While, the Government saw this plan as economic transformation, one might argue that it has also been a means towards educational transformation. The empowerment of the workforce to increase productivity has its genesis in a quality education system and consequently, this Vision 2020 sought to strengthen early childhood, primary and secondary education.

Educational Initiatives

Several educational initiatives were established in order to elicit evidence that would support the implementation of inclusive policies and practices in schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago. They may be considered as steps towards inclusion becoming a practical reality.

Teachers influence the successful implementation of inclusionary practices in the classroom. Their perspectives and perceptions are reflected in their behaviour towards the children who are at-risk for failure. Consequently, they trigger reactions from their contemporaries, and we will have a look at some of these feedbacks.

With the growing knowledge about learning challenges, teachers are becoming more aware of and more vigilant in identifying children who may be at-risk for failure. However, many feel that they are ill-equipped to manage children with learning challenges in their mainstream classrooms.

Student Support Services. Approximately ten years ago, the Student Support Services (SSS) was created by the MOE to advocate for students with perceived learning disabilities. It was previously known as the Guidance Unit, but expanded the services to include diagnostic specialists and behavioural and clinical psychologists. The SSS arm of the MOE was set up as an intervention unit and the facilitators were dispatched to schools where they assessed children who had been earmarked for having hidden challenges. Notwithstanding its importance, the SSS Unit is significantly understaffed, which means that to every facilitator there are several schools. The contention here is that this creates a draining effect on the individuals, which is likely to present itself as a demoralizing factor on the psyche. Naturally, any teacher who feels drained and demoralized will experience decreased output in performance, thus as the dominoes continue to fall, the students become adversely affected.

Seamless Education. In 2008, there was the creation of the Trinidad and Tobago Seamless Education System Project: Early Childhood Care and Education Study. In this report, it was indicated that many children with disabilities, although at school age, are at home rather than at school. It was emphasized that “integrating children with disabilities in regular classroom settings has many benefits for the child and society as a whole” (p. 60). The study goes on to state that collaboration between Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) and Primary School stakeholders “can share knowledge and resources and conduct early screening and identification efforts together” (p. 60). In 2007, such a project (outlined in subsequent paragraph) was started, in order to determine the next steps for early intervention strategies for children who were deemed at-risk in certain developmental areas.

The ICAN Project. In 2007, the Ministry of Health, in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Hearing Impaired, NOVA (a Canadian Group) and the Rotary Club of Trinidad and Tobago, embarked on a project that was to provide screening and assessment services for children in eight (8) primary and (8) ECCE centres. The screening encompassed the auditory, vision and neuro-developmental elements with a view to the formulation and implementation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This Project was managed by the International Children's Academy for Neurodevelopment (ICAN). The programme was launched in 2007, and in 2015 the results of the efficacy of the screening that took place are still outstanding.

Teachers' Perceptions, Perspectives and the Curricula

Ainscow (1998) posits that inclusive education is really a social process of growth, where people inquire into their own context to see how it can be developed. Inclusion, he affirms, engages people in making sense of their experience and exploring ways to move forward.

Teachers then need to challenge themselves, their thoughts and ideas in order to transform themselves as agents of change. In my opinion teaching, being the vocation that it is, requires all teachers to go the extra mile to ensure that no child in their mainstream classrooms is left behind or is left feeling demoralized by the system.

To be truly appreciative of inclusive ideology, it is imperative that we listen to the overt and also underlying stories of teachers' experiences with inclusion. Reyes (1996) identified that many teachers remain and teach in their zone of comfort in the absence of adequate training to interact with the "other" child in their mainstream classrooms. (cited in Speece & Keogh, 1996, p.129). If teachers, in general, would discard the abstraction of "other," the healing of some of the pre-conditioned ideologies could begin and a way charted towards true inclusion and transformation could commence. From the moment the notion of "other" enters the mainstream classroom, it injects the opposing idea of "exclusion" which is a direct barrier to the success of inclusion and the creation of an inclusive culture. This is in contrast to Hobgood and Ormsby's appeal that teachers must balance the high-stakes accountability without failing the needs of diverse learners in the classrooms (Hobgood & Ormsby, 2010).

Inclusionary practices depend in part on the beliefs of teachers about the nature of disability, along with their roles and responsibilities in working with students (Jordan et al, 2009). The role of the educators in schools is vast and embraces that of effective transmitter of knowledge

and instructional leader. However, this begs the question of the degree to which the perceptions about inclusive practices impact their interactions with these students.

A Responsive Curricula. A view of inclusion and transformation in education in Trinidad and Tobago cannot be given in isolation of the current educational climate and structure, because it is against this background that we may determine the extent to which full or even partial inclusion may be achieved in local schools. The educational climate is one of competition and, having been not only in the early childhood sector, but also in the primary school sector, I have seen the harmful effects of high-stakes tests. DeLisle (2012) states that this process of selection for secondary schools, although a legacy, was used as a “guise for reform” (p.109) the same standardized test called by a different name. Initially, the Common Entrance Examination (CEE) was introduced in the 1960’s at standard 5 placement, the success of which determined the secondary school that the student would attend. This standardized test comprised multiple-choice questions in Mathematics, Language Arts, Science and Social Studies. However, to many it was perceived as a badge of success and failure. The schools of choice were Junior Secondary Schools, Government Secondary Schools, prestigious Convents and Colleges and then there was “no pass.” The fear of not passing or attaining the Junior Secondary status was a daunting one for all students because of the level of education. The negative psychological impact on the students (for instance, fear, increased pressure to be successful, illness) paved the way for the creation of the Continuous Assessment Programme (CAP). With the introduction of CAP, the transition took place from the CEE to the Secondary Entrance Assessment (SEA), also at standard 5 placement and which served the same purpose as the CEE. I have seen an otherwise high achieving child, excelling in classroom tests, endure a complete “shut-down” during the SEA examination and fail according to self-imposed standards. It stands to reason, therefore, that any child with learning challenges is doubly at-risk for failure in school. In avoidance of this, there needs to be a paradigm shift in the traditional pedagogy of teaching, learning and assessment that is still so prevalent in our schools. It is not enough to say that we want to establish inclusive schools if we are not prepared to go the distance.

Who am I?

Using an experiential approach (Kolb, 2014) to this chapter, warrants that I reflect upon my personal experiences, in order to truly demonstrate

from where and how my position on inclusion has emerged. I share these through the lenses of student, teacher, and remedial specialist. I describe myself as an assimilationist experiential learner. This means that I develop my knowledge and meaning from reflection and the testing of these concepts through logic, new experiences, and theories (Kolb).

As a teenaged student of St. Joseph's Convent, Port-of-Spain, I was surrounded by many girls who were very quick thinkers. Unlike some of them, I always had to study and give myself time to process information so that I got it just right. I had an English teacher who was very good at the art of teaching, but merciless on her students. She wrote in my notebook one day, in the presence of my classmates and in huge, red letters, "**YOU ARE DISOBEDIENT.**" This, because she taught a new topic mere minutes prior and gave an exercise that she wanted to grade immediately after, based on a skill that was just taught.

Was I the only one who did not get it right the first time? I do not know because I was too busy being sucked into my moment of sheer humiliation. What were the effects on me and on my subsequent performance? I became withdrawn in her class and would study and work at home. I stopped working for her in class and began working towards the CXC Examinations. What deterred me was my English teacher's impatience, arrogance and her demoralizing words, particularly in a public forum, and what comforted me was the support that was given to me by my peers. This single experience left an indelible impression on my mind, to the point where not only did I wish to dedicate my choice of profession to working with young children, but also to children who were at-risk for failure in school.

I think that not many of my classmates recognized that each of us learned at different paces and in different ways. After all, we each had to have demonstrated a certain ability in order to be there within that prestigious institution. Perhaps, I, too, was guilty of the same attitude until this happened to me. In retrospect, had this not been my experience, I may not have developed this passion and sensitivity for inclusive education.

As an adult and still a learner, I believe that we have evolved too far in the realm of education, for the inclusion of students who experience learning challenges to still be presented as problematic. As societal norms would have it, these students should be in special schools and not in the regular classrooms. It is my philosophy that every child can learn, albeit at his own pace. However, to keep them "bottled-up" together and not have them interact with the average student and experience the quality of learning that is offered in the mainstream classroom, essentially robs them of the opportunity to maximize their fullest potentials.

The field of education is a dynamic and ever-changing one that requires one to be consistently apprised of advancements in the discipline, open-minded about all of the contemporary possibilities in education and willing to be transformational leaders in education despite the challenges. Moreover, it means having to use that new knowledge to assist all students, and to enhance professional development.

My Experience

As an Early Childhood Educator, my priority is to ensure that my services reach every child. To accomplish this, I signed up for the Private, Public Partnership because it subsidizes the school fees for families. In January of 2014, I signed up one six-year old, Theresa, who was diagnosed with a hearing impairment in November of 2014. I signed her up for the third term of the academic year in April of 2015 and was told that she would not be accommodated at 6 (six) years of age. I argued the point that it was the completion of the academic year and that she was signed up and subsidized in the second term, when she had turned 6 (six) years of age. Why is it different now? I was told that the Cabinet had taken the decision that they would not be engaging children with special needs, let alone 6 (six) year olds. The Student Payment Claim Form asks for specific information in terms of numbers of children at the ages 3 (three), 4 (four) and 5+ (5 plus) years. What does “5+” mean, no specifications were given. At a mandatory Provider’s meeting at the Learning Resource Centre in 2014, the question arose as to why a six- year old would still be attending preschool and the response was “Yes, if the child has a special need.” A special need does not vanish in three months. Living in an impoverished state does not typically change overnight. Where is the consistency to the system and why the change in policy during an academic year? How is this little girl, whose first time at a pre-school was September, 2014 and who does not have all of the requisite skills to enter into the primary school system, to receive a quality education? The Salamanca Statement asked that Governments adopt a policy of inclusive education, enrolling all children in regular schools, unless there are compelling reasons for doing otherwise. Can Theresa’s case not be a convincing one? To register her for Primary school will compromise her learning and to place her in a special school is likely to further stunt her development.

The Holistic Primary School in Trinidad is a fully inclusive school, which enjoys the support of both the parents and the teachers who understand the inclusive ideology of the institution. From inception, the

administration of the school and teachers practice integration at all levels. The teacher/student ratio is 9 to 1 for most of the classes and the highest is 12 to 1 (as opposed to the government schools where the student numbers are significantly higher), a paradise group for any teacher. As an educator and remedial specialist, I have seen inclusion work for children who have either perceived or diagnosed learning challenges. One may argue that this may not be the case for all of these students and this will remain an area of contention, since there are arguments both for and against inclusion. In these situations all of the stakeholders work together to achieve the desired outcomes of the process. The thoughts and actions of these teachers are what propelled them towards working with the children, as well as alongside their specialized aides. It is noteworthy that this is a private school that is funded through fees and fundraising. Teacher training is both on-going and holistic.

Methodology

For the purposes of this paper, I use an experiential approach (Kolb, 2014), combined with sequential mixed methodology (Ivankova, Creswell & Stick, 2006). I acknowledge that I am a novice using a mixed methodology sequential approach, and struggled to determine the procedure for deciding on the various phases and choice of respective respondents. Using the survey and interview process provided a rich basis for my conclusions.

I considered my experiences in conjunction with the opinions of other respondents, through information collected by a survey of 22 teachers, qualitative interviews of 18 teachers, and a focus group interview of 10 students. The approach involved an iterative process, collecting information through survey method and then through qualitative interviewing. The strategy facilitated more information to confirm or negate my perspectives, initial findings from the earlier phase, as well as to verify and generalize findings (Creswell & Plano Clark 2007).

The first phase of data collection involved a survey of 22 teachers. In the second phase, I used a focus group interview of ten students and their parents from my remedial class. The questions were intended to explore their general perspectives on the expectations and challenges regarding inclusion and pertinent changes in the curriculum. I obtained consent from all of the parents. It was primarily a matter of including the children's voices (Clough, 2000; Lundy, 2007).

In seeking to explore the perspectives of these teachers and students regarding their experience of inclusion, I have three guiding questions: (1)

What is the overall view of teachers about their readiness for inclusion? (2) How do the students feel about their inclusive experience and, more specifically, the curriculum regarding the Continuous Assessment Programme (CAP): and (3) What is the way forward for inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago?

Question one was answered through a survey of 19 close ended questions and the qualitative interviewing of eighteen teachers. Question two was answered using a focus group comprising of ten students and their parents. Their responses to nine sub-questions formed the basis of the argument.

Analysis

Through Constant Comparative Method, the transcripts of the focus group interviews of ten students were analysed for emergent themes. This method of analysis provides the researcher with key information and facilitates emergent themes even from the start of the data collection process.

Audio recordings and transcripts were developed and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy of the transcriptions. Member checking to verify information was also utilized for the purpose of accuracy. Results of emergent themes were then scrutinized to see if there was any relationship or verification with the survey results, narrative analysis, and my experiences.

Findings

The subsequent findings from the survey and interviews are presented here.

The Survey

Results from the survey of 22 teacher responses revealed a high level of resistance to inclusion. Participants considered it unfair for politicians and school administrators to expect that teachers in mainstream classrooms would be able to appropriately intervene with students presenting learning challenges in the classroom. Yanoff (2007) affirms this by stating that “the classroom teacher cannot and should not be expected to be a specialist in each area of special education nor should the parents or administrators demand it.” (p. 3). Forty-six percent of the respondents felt that they were ill-equipped primarily because this was not their area of expertise, neither

was it an area of interest for them. It was found that among the teachers who participated in the survey, 55% were very willing to facilitate the needs of the students with learning challenges in their mainstream classrooms.

Of significance, 18% of the teachers did not believe that inclusion was possible in mainstream schools. They taught to texts and stipulated curricula because of the depth of the content in each area. There was little or no time left to truly individualize instruction or build into the teaching plan so that every student could be attended to in the classroom. For them, concerns stemmed from issues of time management and curriculum completion.

Of the twenty-two teachers who participated in the survey, only one [4.5%] reported that the SSS made its presence felt in the schools. Further, eighty-two percent of respondents claimed that while they may know of the SSS, the services appear to reach some schools and not others, particularly those in depressed areas or those with high rates of crime.

The bureaucratic process of applying to the SSS was both an arduous and fruitless one. It was their understanding that the process for requesting these services began with the written request from the school's principal. The parent must then take the letter to the Unit and make an appointment to bring the student in to be assessed.

Interviews

In face-to-face interviews with eighteen teachers, there was unanimity that the inclusion of children with learning challenges and other special needs is possible in the regular classroom. However, all respondents also emphasized that the level of training provided to teachers is inadequate.

We do not feel prepared because while it provides some information, it does not give the level of expertise that allows us to remediate our charges. The training is not specialized enough [T6].

Another teacher [T14] admitted that the Government Early Childhood Care and Education Centre (ECCE) where she works does not have the "challenge of inclusion" so that specialized training is not a significant issue. She shared that this is so because:

the Administrator turns away parents whose children exhibit learning and other developmental deficiencies because "they are too much trouble."

Several teachers admitted to avoiding responsibilities for teaching such students. For example:

Once a student has been deemed learning challenged, I would refer him to a special school so that his 'need' may be addressed [T11].

This strategy has its consequences, as shared by another [T1] notes:

It would be difficult to re-integrate a child back into the mainstream classroom once he has been taken out and sent to a special school. This is mainly because he would not have been exposed to the level and rate of work or content that the other students would have been engaging in.

In [T1's] point of view, such a student will likely keep falling behind and is liable to always be at-risk for failure.

An inclusive policy framework, encompassing teacher training and professional development, is created to accommodate these children and when not embraced by all of the pertinent stakeholders, its efficacy is likely to be diminished. Forlin (2001) suggested that many teachers may not possess the necessary knowledge, dispositions and skills to support inclusion in their classrooms, which presents a barrier to the development of inclusion and inclusive ideology. Inadequate training then compromises the quality of teaching and learning that are afforded these students, teacher confidence and teacher professionalism. Teacher professionalism here, in no way questions the integrity and competence of the teacher who supports the view that special needs students are better fitted to special schools. As it relates to inclusion, Pantic and Florian (2015) advocated that teachers need to become agents of change "who challenge the status quo" and work collaboratively with colleagues and families to support the development and learning of all their students.

Focus Group Interview

Ten students, monitored by parents, were involved in a focus group interview. The students were selected because they all demonstrated significant learning challenges in the classroom and were impacted by the government's expanding curriculum. Asked about their thoughts on the introduction of the subjects, the students echoed much frustration. For S13, new subjects were not optional.

"They are adding new subjects so this is a lot of work and even more revision. That's real stress."

S8 also experienced increased anxiety, despite parental support.

My first thought was how I was going to make this work, with all of my home-work and other studies and then I have remedial. But I had to make it work because it was for marks [S8].

Another student shared,

“I felt relieved that I was getting an opportunity for extra marks but I felt the stress because there was a lot of work.” [S6]

On one hand, the diversification of the curriculum sought to address the challenges for students who were at-risk for failure, while, in reality, students were faced with a sense of overload and anxiety to what they considered to be “an already challenging school day” [S13].

Beyond the added curricula, and in preparation for its implementation, the Ministry of Education (MOE) had designed a CAC Information for Parents Handbook (2010) that included planned outcomes. Essentially the added curricula and handbook were aimed at happy and motivated learners, improved academic performance, and stakeholder satisfaction.

The focus group interview brought attention to evaluation. One of the students [S5] shared that at his school, the teachers

“added ten marks (points) to their essay-grades to ensure that they obtain the bare passing mark for the ELA”.

While on one hand, he admitted that it was a dishonest practice, he was conversely accepting of it. “It wasn’t right, but we would fail if she didn’t do that” [S5].

The focus group interview underscored the importance of soliciting student and parent input. For instance, another common view that arose from them was, had they been introduced to the subjects earlier than Standard 4 and 5 placements, they would have been better prepared to achieve success. This positive perspective was evidenced, despite the many academic challenges they faced, which had propelled their parents in the direction of remediation. Their sentiments were echoed by 92% of the respondents who participated in the questionnaire [Q12].

The English Language Arts (ELA) Component of the CAC was an area of anxiety for the students. They recounted the lengthy process of planning their essays, writing them, highlighting the errors, rewriting the passage correctly and editing for mistakes. If there were any, the sentences needed to be manipulated so that they read precisely. This was done not for one, but for several essays. For them it was an extraordinarily lengthy process and there was not enough time to complete the tasks. These students were primarily those who encountered challenges with reading, writing and

comprehending. Incidentally, they were the same students who would have benefitted from the Pilot Programme that was to be launched subsequent to the teachers being trained by the Dyslexia Association.

Discussion

Three themes emerged from the survey of 22 teachers and interviews of 18 teachers. These can be identified as, resistance by teachers and the need for responsiveness by the Ministry of Education. Teacher resistance was associated with a sense of un-readiness because of inadequate professional preparation. This was also reinforced by their view that they were not being afforded adequate support from personnel; and that the SSS were less responsive than expected. The focus group portrayed resistance from students who felt stressed and unconvinced about the purpose of extending the curricula and a need for more comprehensive program evaluation of the government's initiatives.

The findings reveal that while attempting to practice inclusion, exclusionary practices are still quite evident, for instance, the continued standardized testing trajectory. Perhaps this is primarily because local culture still promotes an elitist educational society and education system, which contradicts the promises made to the United Nations, regarding the promotion of inclusion and inclusive ideology in education.

There is also a need for a clear set of policies and guidelines to evaluate student performance and best practice by teachers. This commitment must ensure that the realities (infrastructural and educational) are put in place to facilitate this transformational process and must include the parents in the decision-making progression. Ekins and Grimes (2009) postulate, "if schools do not seek actively to create an inclusive culture, there is no point trying to develop inclusive policies" (p.133).

The overarching issue seems to be that the Government and the other related ministries have not truly identified the major challenges in the system as they relate to including the students who learn differently, into the mainstream classroom. The first factor is the timeliness of the release of programmes which the findings revealed to be introduced at Standard Four when it should be implemented much earlier. It takes into account the period during which the programmes are released to the students and the likelihood that the content would be rushed in order to be completed within a given time frame. Inevitably, this would compromise student output in terms of the quality of work that is produced. It would also impact the ability of all students to absorb this new information and apply it successfully under stressful situations. Buffum et al (2009) stated that

“allowing sufficient time is critical to student learning. We know that virtually every student can learn if we provide him with targeted instruction and sufficient time to learn” (p. 63).

A lack of effective and consistent training of teachers is also a critical factor that impedes the success of inclusion of students with learning challenges in the classroom. According to Rieser (2013), “for inclusion to be effective for all children, teacher training should be informed by the paradigm shift underlying the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with disabilities. This includes modifications to learning programmes, curricula and assessments”. Drawing on the findings, many teachers are not trained to manage the curriculum, which often has to be modified to accommodate students who learn differently. With the introduction of the CAC subjects, practically speaking, the teachers are trained for a period of three months, where years of training is the prerequisite for most of the content. In other words, the student’s success in these fields may now be at the mercy of objectivity versus subjectivity. Additionally, having untrained teachers mark or grade music and art projects can equally problematic if it is perceived as dependent on the personal interpretation of the teachers. The demographic data related to the teachers’ level of training indicated that 94% had no background in either music or art. [5%] were qualified in music and “found that those without backgrounds in the arts would be challenged to teach it.”

The next factor is the lack of programme monitoring which puts the success of programmes created by the MOE at-risk for failure. Although it may appear that there is an attempt to put measures in place to ensure that inclusion works, the challenges with teachers implementing these, create a barrier. With monitoring systems in place, documentation of the effects of its implementation could be drawn upon and used when its evaluation for effectiveness is in question. Findings from the interviews with the students revealed that the manner in which the CAC subject activities were delivered prevented the development of creativity because they are told what to do. The effect of such only stifles the potential of students who learn best through music and art, for instance.

Conclusion and Implications

While in many countries, inclusion is linked to law, policy, and rigorous evaluation, Trinidad and Tobago appear uncertain as to its way forward towards achieving inclusion. Inclusion is a feat to be considered and can work once the specialized teachers are utilized to attend to the needs of the students at-risk for failure in the mainstream classroom.

Inclusion is workable and can become a practical reality, however, programmes must to be restructured and simplified to the levels of the students.

The distribution of wealth and of the country's resources has to be taken into consideration when determining what the financial setbacks are, if any, to creating inclusive school communities. It is clear that there must be an established teacher/student ratio in order for inclusion to be successful. As it stands, in many local classrooms there are between 30 to 40 children to just one teacher and in some cases one teacher trainee or no other support system. The controversial slant is that teacher trainees are a cheaper alternative to placing an additional trained or specialized teacher in the classrooms. Alternatively, in the private school system, the school principals allow trained and specialized aides to work alongside children who encounter academic challenges. It should be noted that the respective parent sources the individual and pays for the service.

A clearer understanding of inclusion can be realized by considering the culture of the local education system and the history behind its development. From colonial days to present, our system of schooling has been based upon prestige, merit, race and religion. It is uncertain as to whether or not we would ever be freed of these chains that bind us so tightly to exclusion regardless of the measures that are put in place. Unless these yardsticks are fully discarded, inclusion will always be a challenge to fulfill. One of the ways in which this rejection of exclusionary practices can occur is by enforcing the education laws and policies for registering and integrating children into schools. This I believe is the beginning, since this adherence to policies would foster a shared vision of inclusion, and a developing mindset for a transformative inclusive culture.

It is difficult to say how long it would take us to adopt inclusion as a mandatory practice in schools throughout Trinidad and Tobago. The hope is that the Government, the Ministry of Education and the teachers overcome the challenges that have been presented throughout this paper in order for full inclusion to become a reality.

To introduce visual and arts related subjects into the curriculum should mean that students are taught concepts through these media and be assessed accordingly. In view of this sentiment, visual and arts based subjects should not be offered completely in isolation of academic subject-matter. In this way there is a clear connection between the curriculum and children's holistic abilities. The MOE's aim was to present the children with an avenue for favourable outcomes at school with the introduction of the CAC programme. The scope for high exemplification of same was compromised still by the fact that the student had to compete for marks.