

## Abstract

This exploratory study looked at the barriers, opportunities and experiences of Jamaican students with disabilities in their pursuit of personal excellence. Pursuit of personal excellence was viewed in terms of the individual's perception of his/her goal of achieving academic competence, as well as self confidence, and a sense of empowerment, control and choice.

The fundamental issue examined in Chapter One was the inadequate educational preparation of persons with disabilities at both the Primary and High School levels and the resultant low registration in tertiary level education. Negative attitudes to disability issues also seemed to underlie many of the problems faced by persons with disabilities, although it was noted that those individuals, who had gained access to higher education, demonstrated academic capabilities and were impacting significantly and positively on society. Factors relevant to the theoretical framework of the research, as well as the development of educational provisions for the disabled internationally, as well as nationally, were dealt with in Chapter Two.

The study is largely qualitative in nature. The main method of analysis was the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) of Glaser and Strauss (1967), Strauss (1987).

Four thematic foci, namely psycho-social, academic, physical and policy emerged from this analytic approach. Triangulation, as a research strategy, was used for verification, analysis and confirmation of the results. The research sample comprised students with disabilities at both secondary and tertiary levels of the educational system, although the major focus was tertiary level students.

### **Results and Main Findings**

The psycho-social dimension emerged as the most critical theme and it captured the quintessence of the stories told by the informants.

The findings in this focus also concurred with theoretical analyses of developmental stages, pointing to the fact that, whether students are disabled, or non-disabled, their psycho-social needs are equally apparent and robust.

Findings at the high school level revealed that inclusion/mainstreaming served to make each individual more aware of others with differences and made them willing to share and work together. Inclusion, however, tended to be restricted to academic interaction. At the UWI, students found the attitudes of staff and students more positive than those which guided the experiences they had at the lower levels, although there were instances of insensitivity by some staff members, as well as negative experiences with non-disabled students during Orientation practices. In response to such negative behaviour, however, certain orientation practices were

subsequently banned. Social integration again tended to be limited to academic involvement although there was obvious respect shown by the non-disabled students for the abilities and achievements of students with disabilities. All the students struggled with feelings of isolation and the need to establish feelings of self efficacy and self worth. This was difficult in the face of obvious negative attitudes and insensitivity from a variety of sources. This again reinforced the notion of sharing in an inclusive environment.

A close relationship emerged between psycho-social and academic dimensions. The accounts of informants, at both levels, regarding their needs/issues, comprised a mix of emotions, evidence of an inadequate knowledge of equity considerations, especially at the high school level, and a desire for immediate change and improvement where possible. It was also confirmed that, while students with disabilities continued to succeed academically, they were "the exception, rather than the rule" and were driven by sheer determination to achieve personal excellence.

On the matter of the physical environment, the following points were deduced:

- Problems and potential hazards encountered by students with visual and orthopaedic disabilities existed at both environments, although to a lesser extent at the Mona Campus.
- Financial constraints have resulted in a lack of appropriate facilities and amenities but it was felt that certain critical issues and areas could still be addressed within the context of available funds. Evidence of such inclusion has already begun at the UWI where the administration had begun to make efforts at positive change.

Policy related factors were derived from interviews with administrators at both levels of the educational system and the main results which emerged indicated that:

- The underlying factors creating barriers for the achievement of personal excellence of students with disabilities seemed to have been the lack of awareness and sensitivity, on the part of some administrators.

The findings have implications for national, as well as institutional policy, for the operations of Home/School/Community; and Offices of Student Services in Tertiary Institutions. Recommendations offered target these areas and also addressed the needs for Orientation and Training; Counselling Services and attention to Environmental and Architectural Issues. Special

recommendations were also offered to students with disabilities. The study also suggested areas for further research exploration.

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