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Inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago: A Dream in Progress

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Equal opportunities for all people around the world, including those with physical, visual, hearing, intellectual, and learning disabilities, have been emphasized in all aspects of research and policy. Specifically, ensuring that persons with disabilities are given the same accessibility and options as those without disabilities in countries with underdeveloped and developing economies has been a challenge. Unfortunately, the circumstances that these nations face stem from the limited availability of resources and facilities, thus rendering this pursuit of inclusion difficult. Globally, it has been the goal of nations to create a more inclusive environment for persons with disabilities in school and job settings. However, in the Caribbean region, addressing equality and the needs of this population has seemed to be on the backburner and, as such, is not viewed as a priority in research as seen in the lack of existing literature in this topic.

Although the right to education for all exists throughout the world, many barriers to achieving inclusion persist. Ainscow and Sandhill (2010) explained that implementing inclusion in schools have been a major global difficulty for education systems. For countries with developing economies, specifically in the Caribbean, limitations and frustrations may be more prevalent regarding the adoption of inclusive practices (Tsang, Fryer & Arevalo, 2002). One of the most significant challenges educational systems face worldwide is implementing inclusive educational practices (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010). Inclusion supports all students learning in regular classrooms with all the essential supports assessable to them (Bergsma, 2000).

Educational and employment policies can adequately acknowledge the challenges persons with disabilities face. National policies can ensure that all teachers are mandatorily trained in special education teaching practices and resources are allocated and made available to students with and without disabilities. Within the context of inclusive employment, national policies can allow for more job opportunities available for people with all different types and severities of disabilities. In order to address the issue of accessibility to inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago, this country should consider incorporating stipulations such as accommodations based on the diverse needs of employees and standardized equal expectations into their policies.

A plethora of research has been conducted regarding inclusive education and inclusive employment, especially in countries with developed economies, such as the United States (e.g. Tanner, Linscott, Deborah, & Galis, 1996; Lavani, 2013; Grynova & Kalinichenko, 2018). In the existing literature, however, research on the barriers to inclusion for persons with disabilities is limited in the Caribbean context. In fact, there is a scant amount of research generally concerning the state of inclusion in the Caribbean and by extension, Trinidad and Tobago (Armstrong, Armstrong, Lynch, & Severin, 2005; Pedro & Conrad, 2006; Blackman, Conrad & Brown, 2012; Charran, 2016; Johnstone, 2010). This poses a significant issue because the current research that exists does not account for the cornucopia of barriers which the Caribbean faces. Therefore, any implementation of strategies and proposed frameworks are wholly inadequate for such countries with developing economies.

The intent of this critical forum of the *Texas Education Review* is to contribute to the special education literature on inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago. Understanding the reality of the inclusivity of persons with disabilities in a country that is a part of a region which is often overlooked in the literature is a significant aspect of this conversation. In fact, examining the extent to which the broader principle of education for all students is upheld, as well as the degree of inclusive employ-

ment in Trinidad and Tobago can pave the way for more research and changes in policy. The pieces in this critical forum focus on the inclusivity of persons with disabilities in the education and employment sectors in Trinidad and Tobago. In this particular piece, I will provide an overview of the issue of inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago and discuss the relevance of this literature and policy issue in which this country faces. Therefore, this paper and the other pieces in this forum can provide new insight into the barriers that schools in the Trinidad and Tobago face in creating and sustaining inclusive practices in the general education classroom. Further, this paper and one of the pieces in this critical forum will highlight the limitations and lack of opportunities which exist to employ persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago.

Equity for Persons with Disabilities

Armstrong et al. (2005) expressed that having equal opportunities available for many Caribbean citizens is a faraway reality due to several constraints such as funding and poverty. However, given the challenges the Caribbean experiences with achieving equality, we are compelled to explore the issue of access to inclusive education and employment for persons with disabilities. Paterson et al. (2012) stated that schools that promote inclusion are those that are equitable in their response to learners' needs. Inclusion of students with disabilities in schools is indicative of the opportunity to attend schools with typically-developing students, thus creating more opportunities for socialization as well as encouraging comradery. "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).

Inclusive education, defined as "the integration and education of most students with disabilities in general education classrooms" (Eleweke & Rodda, 2002, p. 113; Friend et al., 1998), is critical to long-term academic outcomes. Inclusion is also related to the accessibility of an educational curriculum that is used for all students but has the necessary accommodations and modifications in place, and having the appropriate supports available to assist in these students' learning process such as teaching aides and availability of any physical accommodations to learning. In Trinidad and Tobago, although the importance of inclusion of persons with disabilities is recognized, the implementation of its practice has been minimal. Policies addressing inclusion stress equity and equality for all people. In spite of this, the existing research has identified challenges to inclusion such as insufficient resources, facilities, and lack of teachers with special education training (Bergsma, 2000; Pedro & Conrad, 2006).

Future Directions for Inclusion in Trinidad and Tobago

In the three pieces that follow in this critical issue of the *Texas Education Review*, inclusion of persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago is explored through the lens of education and employment. In the first piece, authors Chelseaia Charran and Kavish Seetahal focus on the current scope of inclusive education in Trinidad and Tobago as it aligns to the international agreements and documents to which this country is signatory as well as the current policy and legislation that exists regarding persons with disabilities. In the second piece, author Chelseaia Charran highlights relevant findings of an empirical study on the extent of special education services available to students with disabilities. The third piece, authored by Kavish Seetahal and Chelseaia Charran, examines the existence of employment opportunities for persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago and explores whether non-discriminatory practices are upheld in this country based on the current legislation, policy, and international mandates. The intent of these pieces is to raise awareness of the inclusion of

persons with disabilities in the education and employment sector with the hope to encourage advancement in policies and legislation in Trinidad and Tobago.

Chelseia Charran, M.A., is a doctoral candidate at The University of Texas at Austin studying Equity and Diversity in Special Education. She is from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Her current research interests are related to inclusive education, and international and comparative special education, primarily in the Caribbean. In 2016, she completed her Master of Arts degree in Early Childhood Special Education at The University of Texas at Austin. Prior to her graduate studies, Chelseia graduated from The University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 2015 with two Bachelor degrees: Bachelor of Science in Special Education and Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. Chelseia is passionate about making lasting change to the educational system in Trinidad and Tobago and influencing national education policies based on international contemporary practices. Upon completion of her doctorate projected 2019, Chelseia desires to join the collaborative efforts of the community of people who aspire to shape the future of her nation.

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