

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326135013>

The Education of Individuals With Disabilities in Guyana: An Overview

Article in *Intervention in School and Clinic* · July 2018

DOI: 10.1177/1053451218782435

CITATIONS

5

READS

10,556

4 authors, including:



Keon Cheong

University of New Mexico

4 PUBLICATIONS 6 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Ryan O Kellems

Brigham Young University - Provo Main Campus

56 PUBLICATIONS 1,045 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

The Education of Individuals With Disabilities in Guyana: An Overview

Keon A. Cheong, MA¹, Ryan O. Kellems, PhD²,
Margaret M. Andersen, BS³, and Katie Steed, MS²

Abstract

Over the past 20 years, the education system in Guyana has significantly improved. Despite this improvement, students with disabilities in Guyana still face higher rates of poverty, lack of access to schools, and a lack of teachers who are trained in how to best meet their needs. Guyana has tried to address these problems with the drafting of legislation and policies such as the Persons With Disabilities Act of 2010 and the SEN Inclusion Policy. While progress has been made, there is still a need for additional efforts related to the education of individuals with disabilities in Guyana before their full potential is realized. This column presents a brief historical background and summary of current practices related to the identification, educational placements, and provision of educational services and supports for students with disabilities in Guyana. Additional needs and future recommendations are also included.

Keywords

Guyana, international special education, South America, education, multicultural, diversity, Caribbean

The Cooperative Republic of Guyana is a developing country in South America, bordering Suriname, Venezuela, and Brazil. However, because of its strong cultural ties, Guyana is more associated with Caribbean countries than Latin America and is usually considered part of the Caribbean area. As of 2015, Guyana's population was 767,085 (UNESCO, 2015). About 48,419 people in Guyana, 6.4% of the total population, live with some form of disability. Of these individuals with disabilities, 30.1% were found to have visual impairments, 16.4% had mobility impairments, 10.2% had body movement problems, 9.1% had hearing impairments, and 8.3% had mental impairments (Beaie & Phil, 2007). In addition, according to a survey of 1,500 individuals with disabilities conducted by the National Commission on Disability (Mitchell, 2005), 15% of those surveyed had never attended school. Among children with disabilities under 16 years old, 42% had never attended school (Mitchell, 2005). Research on families who have members with disabilities in developing countries such as Guyana has documented they are more likely to live in poverty (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; International Monetary Fund, 2005). One of the factors leading to a high

rate of poverty among individuals with disabilities in Guyana is that the unemployment rate for individuals with disabilities is 67% (Mitchell, 2005). One way to help improve the lives of individuals with disabilities is to improve their educational opportunities (Buntinx & Schalock, 2010; Winzer & Mazurek, 2012).

Guyanese law requires that school-aged children attend school. However, the country has struggled to meet the educational needs of its school-aged children with disabilities. In an effort to address the needs of these children, Guyana has taken steps to increase school accessibility and quality of education for diverse learners. In 2010, Guyana's Parliament passed the Persons With Disabilities Act

¹Ministry of Education, Guyana, Georgetown, Guyana

²Counseling Psychology & Special Education, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

³School Psychology, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, PA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Ryan O. Kellems, Counseling Psychology & Special Education, Brigham Young University, 340-B MCKB, Provo, UT 84602, USA.
Email: rkellems@byu.edu

(Parliament of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, 2012). This act increased access to high-quality education services for individuals with disabilities living in the country. The Guyanan Ministry of Education has also drafted a Special Education Needs Inclusion Policy in an attempt to identify and address gaps and resources required to educate children with disabilities (Lockwood, 2010). Although Guyana is attempting to address the needs of its young students with disabilities, it still faces several challenges regarding adequate teacher training, student access to appropriate facilities and resources, and discriminatory practices by administrators and educators.

The Persons With Disabilities Act of 2010

This act aims to provide students with disabilities with access to education and mandate that in-service and preservice teachers receive instruction in special education and are trained to educate children with disabilities. The language specifically states,

- (a) Individuals with disabilities are not excluded from free access to the country's compulsory general education because of their disability, . . . (b) training programs are developed and implemented for teachers working with students who have disabilities, . . . and (c) special education is a required aspect of teachers' training. (p. 13)

In addition, the act encourages increased integration of students with disabilities into mainstream schools, special schools, and vocational training within special schools. The act also calls for the development of stronger support services for students with disabilities within schools. Under this act, enhanced special education services are called for, including special education classes that teach braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes of communication, and mobility and orientation skills.

The Guyanan Educational System and Children with Disabilities

Guyana gained independence from Britain in 1966 and became a cooperative republic in 1970. As a cooperative republic, Guyana has three branches of government: executive, judicial, and parliamentary. The elected president of the republic appoints the prime minister and other ministers, including the minister of education. The Ministry of Education was created in 1953 to better organize Guyana's education system, leading to the country's recognition of secondary schools and to the efforts to increase teacher competence and training (Cameron, 1964).

Under Guyana's executive structure, the National Centre for Educational Resource Development (NCERD) serves as

the education hub of the Ministry of Education and is staffed mainly with subject specialists to provide continuous professional development training in particular subjects and/or fields to both trained and untrained teachers from both special and mainstream schools. The training seeks to provide teachers that have graduated from the teachers' college with current, relevant information and best practices, while exposing the untrained teachers to coping skills and techniques necessary to effectively deliver the content. The subject specialists are spread across the different units: math, language, science, social studies, information and communication technology (ICT), and special education needs (SEN), to name a few. Each unit has an educational strategic plan (ESP) that guides its work for the common good of the ministry as a whole.

The SEN Unit Plan (Guyana Ministry of Education, 2014) outlines six broad principles that were highlighted at the end of the previous plan to guide the work of the subject specialists of the unit. These principles are (a) access to basic vocational skills for life and work, (b) teaching/learning processes and environment, (c) national database for students with special education needs, (d) management of special education services, (e) alliances with partners in education, and (f) access to educational opportunities (pp. 52–56).

As a direct result of the ESP 2014–2018, the SEN unit has established new priorities. For example, attention to assessment procedures has increased, as the Ministry of Education has recently received assessment materials and related training. These materials are now being used on a limited level to assess and place students who may have special education needs. In addition, the SEN Unit works closely with the Ministry of Education's School Health Unit in hearing and vision screening of Nursery Year 2 and Grade 1 students.

A primary goal of the Ministry of Education is to promote learning by providing students access to schools capable of meeting their learning needs. As part of this goal, the ministry is trying to ensure that each educational district has a special school, unit, or space for students of all ability levels (Guyana Ministry of Education, 2014).

Guyana currently maintains 11 special schools; however, of the 11 education districts, only 5 districts have a special school available to students with disabilities. Six of the special schools are located in the Georgetown area; the other 5 are spread across the rest of the country. Some of these special schools serve specific populations. For example, the Harold B. Davis special school predominantly serves students with orthopedic impairments, the Resource Unit for the Blind and Visually Impaired serves students with visual disabilities, and Open Door specifically serves populations in need of technical and vocational skills. Most special schools do not have an area of focus because most of the students attending these schools do not have an official diagnosis. Often times, students are placed in the special

schools based on teacher and administer recommendations as opposed to meeting a specific set of criteria.

In addition to creating more special schools and educational opportunities for children and youth with disabilities, the SEN Unit has also been charged with attempting to find children with disabilities who do not presently receive education services that meet their needs (Guyana Ministry of Education, 2014). This type of child find is necessary because Guyana does not yet have a contextual definition of *disability* specific to education (Ajodhia-Andrews, 2007). It is possible that some individuals who experience learning impairments or disabilities that interfere with education may go unreported and therefore unserved. The accurate identification of student with disabilities in low-income countries has been acknowledged as an important step in improving the educational and employment options for those with disabilities (Croft, 2013; Katsui, Lehtomaki, Malle, & Chalklen, 2016; Le Fanu, 2014). Guyana also lacks a recognized official list of categories of disabilities. Because of this lack of categorization, individuals with disabilities such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, specific learning disabilities, emotional behavioral disorders, or autism may go unidentified and unrecognized in the current system (Rehfuß & Quillin, 2005).

The Ministry of Education's Special Education Needs unit plans to address this identification barrier by conducting a child find survey to identify those children who may have special educational needs, or disabilities, who are not known to the ministry, so that appropriate education services can be provided. The survey will also seek to locate and assist students in Guyana with disabilities who may be shut-ins, those not attending any school, and spend a majority of their time at home due to their disability.

Burstein, Sears, Wilcoxon, Cabello, and Spagna (2004) found that successful inclusion is heavily influenced by the number of properly trained teachers who are ready and willing to work with students with disabilities. Teachers in Guyana are hired by the Ministry of Education rather than individual school districts; however, many teachers do not receive adequate training to work with populations with any disability, and some teachers opt not to work at special schools. In fact, paraprofessionals often do the majority of the teaching in special schools (UNESCO, 2015). Currently the Cyril Potter College of Education is the only institution in Guyana that offers teacher preparation. At this time, there is no program where teachers can major in special education in Guyana (Fraser, 2014).

The Special Education Inclusion Policy, a document drafted by the Ministry of Education aims to "Improve the quality of teaching, by ensuring teachers have the necessary skills and knowledge to teach all students" (Lockwood, 2010). It suggests establishing a 5-year program for training teachers how to effectively teach students with disabilities. However, this document is in draft stage and has yet to be

implemented. In fact, the report itself states, "There have been a number of projects working with special schools and mainstream schools to help teachers learn new strategies to work with, and involve, children with special needs. However, there is no evidence of coordination between the courses provided. It would appear that much of the good work is done in isolation." (Lockwood, 2010, p. 12).

Recommendations for Improving Access and Services

Guyana appears to be dedicated to improving educational conditions and opportunities for its students with disabilities. To assist Guyana in improving the lives of individuals with disabilities the following recommendations are being made based on existing research. First, the Ministry of Education must decide whether to use the terms *special education* and *disability*. If the ministry decides to utilize these terms, they must then contextually define them to accurately identify students needing services. Clear definitions understood and accepted in Guyana will allow children and youth with various disabilities to be recognized and classified to receive appropriate resources and educational supports (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010). A systematic way to identify students with disabilities is essential, including understanding of supports they need to improve their quality of life (Croft, 2013).

Currently none of the 11 special schools in Guyana have teachers trained in the area of special education. While at the teachers college and university there are courses offered in the area of special education, there is no concentration of special education or disability studies (Fraser, 2014). Graduates of the teachers college and untrained teachers access continuous professional development (CPD) in the area of special education in limited areas from the SEN Unit. In 2015, 322 teachers, and in 2016, 591 teachers benefitted from SEN CPD (e.g., trained and untrained, from mainstream and special schools).

To improve educational resources for students with disabilities, more teachers need to be trained in the field of special education (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010; Fraser, 2014). Certified special education programs should be made available at the teachers college, other universities, or NCERD. With increased training, teachers will better understand the importance of modification and adaptation in the classroom (Westbrook & Croft, 2015).

Teacher training should include how to perform some assessments, screening procedures and developing individualized education programs (IEPs) so that teachers can more effectively support the diverse and unique needs of students. More widespread training on assessment and screening will also aid in the process of inclusion and transitioning students with disabilities from special schools to mainstream schools by allowing educators to assess whether

a student with a disability has learned the skills necessary to perform well at a mainstream school (Mitchell, 2005). Before transitioning can take place, a clearly documented system must be established to assess and prepare students for this change (Westbrook & Croft, 2015).

More special education facilities are also needed in Guyana (Ajuwon, 2008). Special schools with specialized teachers are not available in every region of Guyana. At this time, some students in Guyana who have disabilities do not have access to adequate transportation for health care or related services (e.g., physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech-language pathology). Many must go to geographically distant facilities to access these services. Including health care services in special schools would provide students with disabilities convenient access to the care they need (Gayle & Palmer, 2005).

Students should be given more access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices to supplement or replace speech or writing for those with language or writing impairments (Muttiah, McNaughton, & Drager, 2016).

Better interagency coordination is needed across transition services including schools, health care, and adult group homes. Individuals with disabilities who live in particularly remote locations do not have access to the same services that they could receive in the main city of Georgetown. Therefore, greater strides must be made to meet the needs of individuals in remote communities (Morley & Croft, 2011). Community-based rehabilitation (CBR) is one strategy that could be reengaged. In CBR, the community itself is responsible for providing rehabilitative resources for community members with disabilities. CBR is implemented by trained community members and seeks to use existing organizations and infrastructure to support and provide services to members of the community (O'Toole & McConkey, 1995).

Furthermore, the Guyanan government needs to create and implement more policies to guide and uphold the education of persons with disabilities requiring special education (Ajuwon, 2008). Students should receive equal access to education. The responsible ministry should legally proscribe discrimination against individuals with disabilities in education or any other area. Building additional structure into the SEN Unit by creating an upper management position for someone who is familiar with and can represent special education policies in Guyana and advocate on their behalf to the Ministry would also be beneficial (Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010, Guyana Ministry of Education, 2014).

Conclusion

It can be argued that over the past 20 years the education system in Guyana has significantly improved in relation to students with disabilities. Despite this improvement, students with disabilities in Guyana still face higher rates of

poverty, lack of access to schools, and teachers who are not trained in how to best meet their needs. Guyana has tried to address these problems with the drafting of legislation and policies such as the Persons With Disabilities Act of 2010 and the SEN Inclusion Policy. While progress has been made there is still a need for additional efforts related to the education of individuals with disabilities in Guyana before their full potential is realized. This renewed focus would assist Guyana to achieve the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Ryan O. Kellems  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7091-4487>

References

- Ajodhia-Andrews, A. D. (2007). *Inclusive education in Guyana: Perspectives of policy makers, teachers, and parents of children with special needs* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from Ryerson University Digital Commons. (Paper 446)
- Ajodhia-Andrews, A., & Frankel, E. (2010). Inclusive education in Guyana: A call for change. *International Journal of Special Education*, 25, 126–144.
- Ajuwon, P. M. (2008). Inclusive education for students with disabilities in Nigeria: Benefits, challenges and policy implications. *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(3), 11–16.
- Baie, S. T., & Phil, M. (2007). *The Co-operative Republic of Guyana population and housing census 2002: National census report*. Georgetown: Bureau of Statistics Guyana. Retrieved from <http://catalog.ihns.org/index.php/catalog/4297/download/56289>
- Buntinx, W. H., & Schalock, R. L. (2010). Models of disability, quality of life, and individualized supports: Implications for professional practice in intellectual disability. *Journal of Policy and Practice in Intellectual Disabilities*, 7, 283–294.
- Burstein, N., Sears, S., Wilcoxon, A., Cabello, B., & Spagna, M. (2004). Moving toward inclusive practices. *Remedial and Special Education*, 25(2), 104–116.
- Cameron, N. E. (1964). *150 years of education in Guyana: 1808–1957*. Georgetown: Autoprint Guyana.
- Croft, A. (2013). Promoting access to education for disabled children in low-income countries: Do we need to know how many disabled children there are? *International Journal of Educational Development*, 33, 233–243.
- Fraser, S. (2014). Removing the hurdles: A brief highlight of inclusion challenges in Guyana. *Journal of the International Association of Special Education*, 15(2), 48–55.

- Gayle, A., & Palmer, D. (2005). The activism of persons with disabilities in Jamaica: An evaluation of the impact. *Social and Economic Studies*, 54, 122–142.
- Guyana Ministry of Education. (2014). *Ministry of Education SEN Action Plan (2014–2018)*. Georgetown, Guyana: Author.
- International Monetary Fund. (2005). *Guyana: Poverty reduction strategy paper—Progress report—Joint staff advisory note (No. 6-364)*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Katsui, H., Lehtomaki, E., Malle, A. Y., & Chalklen, S. (2016). Questioning human rights: The case of education for children and youth with disabilities in Ethiopia. In S. Grech & K. Soldatic (Eds.), *Disability in the Global South* (pp. 187–198). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Le Fanu, G. (2014). International development, disability, and education: Towards a capabilities-focused discourse and praxis. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 38, 69–79.
- Lockwood, B. (2010). *Inclusion policy for Guyana. Report prepared for the National Centre for Resource Development*. Georgetown, Guyana: Author.
- Mitchell, H. (2005). *Raising the profile of disability in Guyana: An agenda for action*. Georgetown, Guyana: National Commission on Disability. Retrieved from http://www.statisticsguyana.gov.gy/pubs/Disability_Guyana.pdf
- Morley, L., & Croft, A. (2011). Agency and advocacy: Disabled students in higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 6, 383–399.
- Muttiah, N. A., McNaughton, D., & Drager, K. D. (2016). Providing instructional support for AAC service delivery in low-and middle-income (LAMI) countries. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 18, 341–353.
- O'Toole, B., & McConkey, R. (1995). Development of training materials for community based rehabilitation workers in Guyana. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 42, 33–40.
- Parliament of the Co-operative Republic of Guyana. (2012). *Laws of Guyana: Persons with Disabilities Act chapter 36:05 (Act 11 of 2010)*. Retrieved from http://parliament.gov.gy/documents/acts/3135-cap._3605_person_with_disabilities.pdf
- Reh fuss, M. C., & Quillin, A. B. (2005). Connecting students with hidden disabilities to resources. *NACADA Journal*, 25, 47–50.
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for sustainable development policy*, Guyana. Retrieved from <http://education.gov.gy/web/index.php/policies/education-for-sustainable-development#gsc.tab=0>
- Westbrook, J., & Croft, A. (2015). Beginning to teach inclusively: An analysis of newly-qualified teacher pedagogy in lower primary classes in Tanzania. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 51, 38–46.
- Winzer, M., & Mazurek, K. (2012). Analyzing inclusive schooling for students with disabilities in international contexts: Outline of a model. *Journal of the International Special Needs Education*, 15, 12–23.