Facilitating successful inclusion at secondary schools in

Dominica: A study of teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

The introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Dominica some 15 years ago has given rise to inclusive education in the country's secondary school system.   Although there is no legislation to govern or regulate inclusive based practices, the Ministry of Education in Dominica is encouraging secondary school administrations to put measures in place to facilitate inclusion.   One of the major questions that remain is: Are schools prepared to meet the challenges of inclusion in the regular classroom? This survey seeks to answer this and other questions by eliciting teachers' perception on inclusive education practices in Dominica.

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Dominica is a small island state in the Caribbean, considered a third world developing state. The island comprises ten parishes which are divided into four education districts. One education officer is responsible for the 15 state-owned secondary schools presently on the island. Currently, there are about 524 secondary school teachers employed (131 males and 393 females); and 6365 students (1592 males and 4773 females) enrolled at secondary schools. The entry age at secondary school is 12 years and one is expected to complete secondary education at age 16. Each secondary school has five form levels (grade levels) with a similar curriculum offered at each school.

Although students at the primary school previously took the high stakes test (that is, Grade 6 National Assessment) at the end of the 6th grade for entry into secondary school, since 1996, all students have been guaranteed entry into secondary school through the introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE).

From the researcher's experience, many of the students now enrolled in secondary education have learning disabilities ranging from mild to significant. With USE, these students are placed in the general education classroom and are expected to follow the same curriculum, while being taught with the same instructional strategies as other children who are non-disabled.

Therefore the intent of this study is to investigate the procedures being implemented to facilitate successful inclusion at secondary schools in Dominica. To effectively research this topic, a web-based survey with the use of a questionnaire was administered to secondary school teachers. The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. collect information on national policies for special education, training, collaboration among stakeholders, and the legal aspects of special education in Dominica.

2. evaluate the effectiveness of inclusion in Dominica's secondary schools

3. make recommendations for facilitating successful inclusion at Dominica's secondary schools

Consistent with these objectives, the researcher asks the following questions: Is USE readily accepted by all stakeholders in the education system? Are educators being called upon to give their utmost to ensure students succeed? Has any review been done since the introduction of USE? Are teachers being trained to work with students who have disabilities?

Methods

Subjects

The study surveyed 24 secondary school teachers throughout the island of Dominica in an effort to elicit their views on inclusive education at the secondary schools on the island. The teachers came from government owned, government assisted and private secondary schools.

Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was used to gather data for the study. The majority of the questions required convergent answers with multiple answer choices provided and three required the respondents to explain briefly. One question was divergent allowing the respondents to respond freely.

The questionnaire was sent to five teachers in Dominica for field testing although only one of those teachers responded. Clarification was needed on item 16 for the option 'research'.

The questionnaire sought responses in the following areas: demographic data, teacher training in special education, teachers' perception on teaching students with special education needs, school based and national initiatives in special education, effects of inclusion, and teachers' perception on Universal Secondary Education (USE) in Dominica.

Procedures

The researcher used a web-based questionnaire to collect the necessary data from the teachers. The link to the questionnaire was sent to key persons in the education system in Dominica and they were asked to forward it to as many secondary school teachers that they were familiar with. The results were submitted to the site technician who made them available to the researcher. A total of 24 teachers' responses were received, approximately 4.6 per cent of the secondary school teachers in Dominica.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of questions 1 - 7 which asked respondents to complete information on gender, years of teaching experience, type of school and grade level presently teaching, professional status, highest level of education and subjects presently teaching. The results showed that the gender of the majority of teachers surveyed was female (62.5%). The majority of teachers (58.3%) have been teaching for 14 or more years. More than half (79%) of the teachers teach at government owned secondary schools. Additionally, 37.5% of the teachers are graduate trained with 50% having a bachelor's degree. Ten of the twenty-four teachers teach two subjects with eleven teachers teaching three or more classes.

Question 8 sought to obtain information on the respondents' training in Special Education (Table 2). Eight out of 24 respondents said yes whereas half of the teachers said they had no training

in that field. Another four teachers did not respond.   Part B of required the teachers to state the

type of training they had in special education: three received training from a college course, two

from a 1 week workshop, one from brief 1 day or less workshop and one from a college with a

Bachelor's degree in Special Education.

Table 3 asked respondents to identify the model that best typifies their school and say how well

that model is working. 45.8 % of the respondents said that students are placed in heterogeneous

groups for all lessons whereas another 37.5% identified their school as using the homogeneous

model and 8.3% of the teachers indicated that the students move to a resource room for special

education in some subjects.   8.3% of the teachers did not respond to the question.   When asked

how well the identified model was working the majority of the teachers (54.1%) rated it fair,

16% good, 4% very good, and 20.8% did not respond to the question.

Question 10 (Table 4) asked teachers to indicate if they have taught, or are teaching students

with special needs. More than half of the teachers (54.1%) said yes while only 16% of the

teachers said no and 29.1% of the teachers did not respond to the question. They also indicated

where these children were taught. 50% of the teachers said in the general education classroom;

while 4.1% said in a special classroom and pullout program respectively and 41.6% did not

respond to the question.   Question 11 asked teachers to indicate the areas of disability in the

students they are teaching or have taught. The greater majority (66.6%) of the teachers said

learning disability while 50% said behavioral disorder, 37.5 % emotional disorder, 25% both

dyslexia and physical disability, 12.5% visually impaired and 8.3% intellectual disability.

12.5% said they have not taught any students with disabilities.

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Table 5 consists of responses for question 12 that asked the respondents to rate their ability to teach students with various learning disabilities. Most teachers indicated that they had difficulties teaching students with learning disabilities by rating their ability as fair or poor in teaching students with disabilities.

Question 13 asked the teachers to indicate what was being done at their schools to help teachers work with students with special needs (Table 6).   Fifty-eight per cent of the teachers said that students are screened at the beginning of the academic year. Another 54.1% said staff development sessions are organized for teachers.   Team teaching and adaptations made to the curriculum are other areas that the teachers indicated. Interestingly, although these numbers indicate that students at the schools do have disabilities, none of the teachers were trained to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

In question 14, the survey sought teachers' responses on what was being done by the Ministry of Education to help teachers work with students with special needs (Table 7).   The most common response (41.6 % of the respondents) indicated that workshops are planned for the teachers on a national level. Twenty-five percent of the teachers said that students are screened before entry to secondary school. Only 8.3% said that special education courses are offered at the Teachers' Training College while 4.1% said that there is one special education teacher attached to each school. Finally, 20.8% of the teachers said nothing is being done by the MoE.

Question 15 (Table 8) had teachers indicate some of the changes in the schools since the introduction of Universal Secondary Education (USE).   The survey indicates that all but two of the changes are negative. More than half of the teachers believe that drop-out rates and conduct problems have been negatively affected as well as academic achievement and school culture.

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Few of the respondents indicated that the addition of technical/vocational subjects to the

curriculum and training opportunities for teachers can be attributed to the introduction of USE.

Question 16(Table 9) asked the respondents to indicate how the academic progress of students

with special needs was being assessed. An overwhelmingly 66.6% said written tests, 50% said

projects while 33.3% said oral tests, 12.5% said research and only 4.1% indicated both group

work and assistive technology respectively.

Questions 17 and 18 sought teachers' views on the use of the IEP, and parental involvement in

the development of the IEP. 70.8% of the teachers said that an IEP was not developed for

students with disabilities at their schools while 29.1% did not respond to the question. There was

no parental involvement as an IEP was not developed for the students.

Question 19 asked for the teachers' opinion on the review of USE in Dominica and the aspects in

need of reviewing. Seventy-five per cent of the teachers agreed that USE needs reviewing and

the other twenty-five per cent did not respond to the question. In terms of what aspects needed

reviewing, 75% believed that the curriculum offered at secondary schools needed reviewing,

62.5% indicated the entry requirements at secondary schools, 58.3% said the qualifications of

teachers at secondary schools and 20.8% the length of the school day.

Respondents were given the opportunity to express any other concerns that they have regarding

inclusion. Four major themes were identified among the responses. Firstly, there is the need

for a national policy on special education in Dominica. Secondly, in order for inclusion to be

successful, partnership is needed among the major stake holders. Also, the curriculum at

secondary schools needs reviewing to include technical/vocational subjects so as to cater

adequately for students with special needs and lastly, more school counselors are needed to work with students who require ongoing therapy.

Discussion

A number of pertinent issues surfaced from the findings of the survey conducted among secondary school teachers in Dominica.   The primary areas of concern are discussed below.

Firstly, while the majority of teachers surveyed have been teaching for fourteen or more years and are teacher trained, the majority of them have no training in Special Education.   It is imperative that teachers be adequately qualified in the field of special education to help work with the diverse population entering Dominica's secondary schools. Smith, Polloway, Patton and Dowdy (2012) alluded to that view by explaining that, because universal education is emphasized, all teachers should be qualified to serve that heterogeneous population.   The Ministry of Education in Dominica recognizes the need for training special needs teachers as in his address to the UNESCO Caribbean symposium Blaize (2007), noted that there are a few teachers trained special needs teachers but do not feel competent to meet the needs of students with disabilities. He further added that teachers have been trained in differentiated instruction but they lack specific training in learning difficulties.

Secondly, the introduction of USE resulted in increased training opportunities for teachers as well as the addition of technical/vocational subjects to the curriculum. Are these training opportunities in the field of special education and what happens after these persons are trained? Are they allowed to practice in the field that they were trained?   The results of the survey do not show the impact of the training on the academic achievement of students with disabilities in

secondary schools. It has been proven that the academic achievement of students with learning disabilities improves when they are exposed to evidence based instruction (Smith et al., 2012).

Moreover another striking finding is that most schools screen students upon entry to secondary schools and teachers are aware that the most common disability which exists among the students is learning disability. However an IEP is not prepared for these students. What measures are put in place to assist these students as most of them are taught in the general education classroom? Why students screened and what are is being done with the results of the screening tests? The use of an IEP for these students would certainly assist teachers in planning instruction tailored to meet their needs (Polloway, Patton & Serna, 2008). Gholam (2005) postulated that when children with disabilities are placed in general education classrooms, the environment should be least restrictive for them and the instruction should be tailored to meet the individual needs of the children.

Additionally, the majority of teachers stated that the model used at their school to teach students is heterogeneous and they believe that it is working fairly well. Can the training of the teachers in special education result in improved performance for the students and an improvement in the ability of the teachers to teach the students? The consensus among most teachers for teaching students with special needs is rated as fair. It can be implied that a limited knowledge of special education in terms of diagnosis and interventions could cause teachers to be less effective when teaching students with special needs. Consequently, some students may become frustrated in classes and begin to display disruptive behaviors which eventually result in drop out.

Also, the most popular form of assessment for these students is written. Students with learning disabilities usually struggle with reading and writing (Smith et al., 2012). Could this be the

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cause of a negative outcome in academic achievement and as a result an increase in conduct

problems and drop-out rates as indicated by the results of the survey?

Most teachers are of the view that USE in Dominica needs reviewing in terms of the entry

requirements of students to secondary school and the curriculum offered to these students. They

believe that the present curriculum does not cater adequately to the needs of students with special

needs. "Inclusive education has not featured prominently in Dominica's National Curriculum"

(Blaize, 2007, p.4). Despite the MoE's concern that inclusive education is growing in

Dominica, full implementation has been hindered by fear of inadequacy of resources to facilitate

the process.

Other concerns that teachers have are the need for a national policy on special education.

Teachers perceive that the absence of a national policy is an impediment to successful inclusion

as it allows schools too much leniency when making decisions on behalf of students who are

disabled.   Blaize (2007) alluded to the fact that the MoE has given schools the authority to

make modifications to their curriculum in order to facilitate students with special needs.   It can

therefore be implied that with such level of leniency, schools will do as they desire. Teachers

believe that the lack of collaboration among stakeholders also impedes inclusion.   It is

interesting to note that although there are laws to ensure that students with special needs are

catered for in the least restrictive environment and that an IEP is designed to meet the individual

needs of these students (Education Act 1997 cited in Blaize 2007) that none of the respondents

have prepared an IEP for any of the students with special needs that they have taught or are

teaching.

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Recommendations

In order to make inclusion successful at secondary schools in Dominica, this researcher proposes the following specific recommendations.   These are supported by current research findings and are seen as applicable to the Dominican context.

1. Teacher training in Special Education should be a compulsory subject at the Dominica State College-Education Campus. This will ensure that teachers receive basic training in special education in terms of diagnosis and intervention.   Additionally, it provides for teachers keeping updated to current developments in education and more specifically special education (Polloway et al., 2008).   Moreover, researchers (e.g. Avramadis & Kalyva, 2007; Buell, Hallam & Gamel-McCormick, 1999; Ching, Folin & Au, 2007) has shown that "teacher training has an important influence on teachers' attitudes towards including children with special education needs into general education"(Nonis &Jernice , 2011, p.3).

2. A national policy should be developed and enacted in order to standardize the educational opportunities and procedures for eligibility for students with special needs in Dominica. In the United States, inclusion has increased significantly since the introduction of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) as cited in Smith et al. (2012), which seeks to ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education which meets the needs of these students and help prepare them for "further education, employment and independent living" (p.8).   Prior to that act, the majority of children with disabilities were not educated in the public school system.   Conversely, while there is in fact legislation in Dominica to cater to the needs of students with special

needs schools continue to do as they see fit regarding these students.   Blaize (2007)

stated "inclusive education in Dominica has not been guided by a written policy" (p.2).

At present there is no national policy governing special education in Dominica and Blaize

(2007) stated that "addressing the issue of inclusion at the policy formulation and

implementation level requires an initial commitment of resources for implementation. He

continues by adding that the step towards inclusive education in Dominica provides an

excellent starting point for considering national legislation relating to inclusion."(p.3).

Therefore with a policy in place and the law enforced it will serve as a regulatory system

for schools and how they respond to students with disabilities. In this light, Polloway

(2002) stated that "we did not have to provide services before and now we have

mandates" (p.5). Additionally schools will be more accountable.

3. The entry requirements and curriculum offered at secondary schools should be reviewed.

The curricula offered at secondary schools should cater to the needs and interests of its

diverse population.   Additionally, differentiation of content and instruction is critical for

students to succeed. but that is not sufficient. Although teachers have been trained in

differentiation of instruction, they still do not feel competent to teach students with

special needs (Blaize, 2007).   Smith et al. (2012) postulated that the curricula of

secondary schools should seek to accommodate the individual needs and interests of

secondary school students with special needs.   They further stated that "the curriculum

for students with disabilities should be comprehensive in that it should be responsive to

the needs and interests of individual students; facilitate maximum integration; facilitate

socialization; and focus on students' transition to postsecondary settings"(p. 496).   While

Blaize (2007) asserted that the previous secondary school entry exam excluded several

students from attending secondary school, it must be noted that the teachers indicated that academic achievement has decreased since the introduction of USE.   Consequently while more students have been given the opportunity to access secondary education, there has been an overall drop in academic achievement. Hence the need for reviewing the entry requirements for secondary schools.

4. IEP teams should be made mandatory at each school and stakeholders trained to develop IEP for students with special needs.   Section 81 sub-section 3 of the 1997 Dominica Education Act cited by Blaize (2007, p.2)states that "a special education program may take the form of an individual education plan in that the plan is tailored to the specific or individual needs of the student". The ultimate goal of an IEP is to help individuals attain a certain level of self satisfaction as an adult (Smith et. al., 2012).   The role of stakeholders outside of the school is critical in the successful development and implementation of the IEP as a major aspect of the IEP is transition and transition services.   Opportunities must be provided to allow students to work towards not only academics but also technical and vocational interests.   It is in this regard that individuals and agencies outside of the school play a pivotal role in allowing students work experience in their field of interest.   Moreover, the development of an IEP "will direct teachers in planning instruction for their students, function as a basis for evaluation, and foster improved communication stakeholders" (Polloway et al., 2008, p. 116).

Generally the research reached the goals that it intended to achieve. However, one of the limitations to be noted is that a significantly small number of teachers responded to the survey in comparison to the number of secondary school teachers on the island.   The researcher believes that although the size of the population is small, the research should be considered valid as the

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responses represent the views of teachers from secondary schools across the island that are

directly involved with inclusion.   Also, the major findings of this survey are generally

consistent with the views expressed by the MoE (Blaize, 2007).   While the research sheds light

on facilitating successful inclusion at secondary schools in Dominica, future research should be

conducted with a larger population in order to obtain a broader perspective of secondary teachers

on the island.

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Table 1 Demographics

Question number	Description of Question	Total number/ Percentage
1	**Gender** male female NA	 4(16.7%) 15(62.5%) 5(20.8%)
2	**Years of teaching experience** 1 – 4 5-9 10 – 14 >14 NA	 1(4.2%) 2(8.3%) 4(16.7%) 14(58.3%) 3(12.5%)
3	**Type of school taught at** Government owned Government assisted Private NA	 19(79.2%) 1(4.2%) 1(4.2%) 3(12.5%)
4.	**Number of Form levels taught** (summarized) 0 1 2 3 or more	 5(20.8%) 4(16.7%) 4(16.7%) 11(45.8%)
5	**Professional status** Unqualified Qualified Graduate Graduate trained NA	 3(12.5%) 3(12.5%) 4(16.7%) 9(37.5%) 5(20.8%)
6	**Highest level of education** Certificate Associate Degree Bachelor's degree Master's degree Doctorate NA	 5(20.8%) 2(8.3%) 12(50%) 2(8.3%) 0(0%) 6(25%)

7	**Number of subjects taught per teacher** (summarized)	
	0	4(16.7%)
	1	4(16.7%)
	2	10(41.2%)
	3 or more	6(25%)
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NA – non respondents

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Table 2 Special Education training

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
8	**Training in special education** yes no NA **If yes, level of training** 1 day workshop 1 week workshop College course College BA degree in special education University master's degree in special education	 8(33.3%) 12(50%) 4(16.7%) 1(4.2%) 2(8.3%) 3(12.5%) 1(4.2%) 0(0%)

Table 3 Classroom models

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
9	**Model that typifies your school** homogeneous groups heterogeneous groups resource room **How well is it working** outstanding very good good fair poor NA	 9(37.5%) 11(45.8%) 2(8.3%) 0(0%) 1(4.2%) 4(16.6%) 13(54.1%) 0(0%) 5(20.8%)

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Table 4 Teaching children with special needs

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
10	**Do you teach/have you taught students with special needs** yes no NA	13(54.1%) 4(16.6%) 7(29.1%)
	If yes, where regular classroom special classroom special school pull out program NA	12(50%) 1(4.2%) 0(0%) 1(4.2%) 10(41.2%)
11.	**Areas of disabilities you have taught** Learning disability	16(66.6%)
	Dyslexia	6(25%)
	Emotional disorder	9(37.5%)
	Behavioral disorder	12(50%)
	Physically disabled	6(25%)
	Hearing impaired	0(0%)
	Visually impaired	3(12.5%)
	Intellectually disabled(formerly mentally retarded)	2(8.3%)
	Have not taught any student with disabilities	3(12.5%)

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Table 5   Respondents views on teaching students with the various disabilities

Question number	Question description	Rating 1	2	3	4	5
12	Learning disability	0	2	5	9	3
	Dyslexia	0	0	2	5	7
	Emotional disorder	0	2	4	6	3
	Behavioral disorder	0	4	3	6	3
	Physically disabled	0	5	3	1	5
	Hearing impaired	0	0	0	0	9
	Visually impaired	0	0	0	2	8
	Intellectually disabled(formerly mentally retarded)	0	0	0	1	10

Scale: 1 outstanding   2 very good   3 good   4 fair   5 poor

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Table 6   How schools assist teachers to work with students with special needs

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
13	Students are screened at the beginning of the school year	14(58.3%)
	Staff development sessions for teachers	14(58.3%)
	Adaptations are made to the curriculum	6(25%)
	Teachers are trained to develop Individualized Education Plan(IEP)	0(0%)
	Team teaching	9(37.5%()
	Other: Students are placed in special classrooms	1(4.2%)

Table 7   National initiatives by Ministry of Education to help teachers work with students with special needs

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
14	Special education courses are offered at the Teachers' Training College	2(8.3%)
	Workshops are planned for teachers on a national level	10(41.6%)

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	There is one special education teacher attached to each school	1(4.2%)
	Students are screened before entry to secondary school	6(25%)
	Other: nothing	1(4.2%)

Table 8 Respondents' views on changes since introduction of USE

Question number	Question description	Ratings				
		1	2	3	4	5
15	High school drop out	0	1	4	9	4
	Conduct problems	0	0	2	12	5
	Academic achievement	0	0	10	7	2
	School culture	1	1	5	9	4
	Adaptations to the curriculum	0	2	10	4	2
	Addition of technical/vocational subjects to the curriculum	1	6	2	6	2
	Training opportunities for teachers	0	6	8	1	3
	Improvement to the physical plant	0	4	8	4	2
	Classroom sizes	0	3	4	7	3

Scale: 1 very positive change   2 positive   3 neutral   4 negative   5 very negative change

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Table 9   Methods used to assess academic achievement of students with special needs

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
16	Written tests	16(66.6%)
	Oral tests	8(33.3%)
	Projects	12(50%)
	Research	3(12.5%)
	Assistive technology	1(4.2%)
	Other: Group work	1(4.2%)

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Table 10 Respondents' views on review of USE

Question number	Question description	Total number/ Percentage
19 a.	**Should USE in Dominica be reviewed?**	
	Yes	18(75%)
	No	0(0%)
	NA	6(25%)
19 b.	**Which aspects need reviewing?**	
	Entry requirements at secondary school	15(62.5%)
	Curriculum offered at secondary schools	17(70.8%)
	Qualifications of teachers at secondary schools	14(58.3%)
	Length of the school day	5(20.8%)
	Other: training offered to teachers	1(4.2%)
	Methods of assessment	1(4.2%)
	Development of the Junior Secondary Program to assist	2(8.3%)

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	poor academic achievers	

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