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Special and inclusive education in the Eastern Caribbean: policy practice and provision

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The countries of the Eastern Caribbean have for more than a decade been committed to the implementation of a common educational reform strategy. At the heart of this strategy has been the policy of 'education for all', which includes establishing educational support services for children with special educational needs. In the past, many disabled children and children with learning difficulties have been excluded from the education system in these countries. For many more children, attendance at school has not given meaningful access to educational opportunities. This article discusses research carried out by the authors and reports on the implementation of the Reform Strategy and on the barriers to inclusive education that persist in the region.

Introduction

This article reports research on the development of special education policy and practices in the countries of the Eastern Caribbean, in the context of their common Education Reform Strategy. The six countries participating in the research were Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Each of these countries was a former colony of the UK with political independence being gained only within the last 25 years. All became members of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) on 18 June 1981. The OECS Reform Strategy identified the 'greatest challenge' at the primary level to be that of 'making adequate and appropriate provisions for children handicapped by various disabilities' and has emphasized the importance of an 'inclusive' special educational practice which recognizes the needs of all children who are experiencing

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problems with learning. In consequence, a central objective of the Educational Reform Strategy has been to

Establish support services in respect of children with special needs ... [which] ... would include screening and testing for disabilities, the establishment of special units in some primary schools, and periodic surveys to determine the incidence of various disabilities in society. (Education Reform Working Group, 1991)

Our research arose out of collaboration between the School of Education at the University of Sheffield and staff of the Research Unit of the Sir Arthur Lewis community College, St Lucia. It focused upon the implementation of this regional Education Reform Strategy and in particular considered its impact upon the education of children with disabilities and special education needs. The research was divided into two phases. Phase one of the study included a review of educational policy at regional and national levels within the Eastern Caribbean together with key informant interviews with OECS personnel, national policy-makers and administrators, representatives of special education organizations, and members of disabled people's organizations. In phase two, a survey was undertaken involving 205 primary and secondary school teachers together with case studies which explored the ways in which regional and national policy objectives are being interpreted, supported and realized on the ground in schools. The case studies included classroom observation, review of identification, assessment and intervention strategies, and scrutiny of organizational practices for managing and delivering support, together with focus groups and individual interviews with professionals, parents and children.

This article begins with a discussion of the Reform Strategy and its relation to broader international debates and policy ambitions around special and inclusive education. It then considers two key areas driving and impacting upon implementation: first, funding and its relationship to strategic planning; and second, the extent to which the current conditions of service and training of the teaching profession in the region equip teachers with the skills to manage the provision of learning support. Despite many problems being identified in both the above-mentioned respects, our study did reveal evidence of a commitment on the part of many teachers to provide effective learning support for children with special educational needs. Finally, a case study of one school is discussed which highlights the positive impact teachers can have in enacting progressive policy in the face of the difficulties and constraints imposed by the global politics of educational funding.

Education for all within an Eastern Caribbean strategy for educational reform

Individuals who are disabled and/or perceived as having learning difficulties have historically been marginalized in the societies of the Eastern Caribbean, viewed as having deficits which made them incapable of educational or social participation alongside their peers. Often ridiculed and seen as burdens to the society at large, many, especially from the rural areas, were excluded from recreational and educational

activities as well as employment opportunities. While most survived as best they could within their families and communities, some were institutionalized when they became aged and their families were no longer able, or were unwilling, to care for them. Before the 1960s, education for children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties was not provided in any formal or systematic way by the education system in the OECS Countries. Special schools were initially established by voluntary groups which were often backed by charitable non-profit organizations.

Within the last decade governments in the OECS countries, building upon an international impetus in support of policies of education for all (UNESCO, 1990, 2000, 2001), have begun to rethink their education policies to include persons with disabilities and/or learning difficulties (Caribbean Education Task Force, 2000; Miller, 2000). However, developments in the area of special education have not followed a straightforward linear progress along clearly defined pathways. The political, social, economic and demographic dimensions of the region have undergone tremendous change within the last 30 years as most of the OECS countries moved towards political independence. As such, it is important to understand the development of special educational services and provision within the more general context of the education systems within these islands. It is also necessary to take into consideration the various cultures and sub-cultures which exist within the region. Added to this already complex situation there are the rapid technological advances of the 21st century, the globalization of economic markets and the penetration of 'first world' knowledge and policy solutions into the developing world. These factors have given rise to debates about special education being located within the context of more general concerns around the themes of 'social inclusion' and 'education for all', in significant part arising from the 'development' policies of first world states.

These new policy agendas are evident, for instance, in the international development targets for education set out in the UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities which state that:

States should recognize the principle of equal primary, secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for children, youth and adults with disabilities, in integrated settings. They should ensure that the education of persons with disabilities is an integral part of the educational system. (United Nations, 1993, Rule 6)

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), recognizing the uniqueness of each child and their fundamental human right to education, declared that '[i]nclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the exercise and enjoyment of human rights' (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, 2002). The Statement is supported by a Framework for Action which strongly supports schools having a child-centred pedagogy supporting all children. This Framework suggests that education systems must become inclusive by catering for diversity and special needs, thus creating opportunities for genuine equalization of opportunity. It begins with the premise that differences are a normal part of life and therefore learning should be adapted to cater to those differences, rather than trying to insist that children fit into a perceived 'norm'. As such, Governments have been asked to improve their education systems

as a priority by adopting laws and policies which support the principles of inclusivity. The Salamanca Statement strongly advocates that:

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost effectiveness of the entire education system. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 3)

However, other considerations may have an equal if not greater bearing upon policy formulation and implementation in practice. For example, the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 1993, 'Rule 6 of 22') recognizes that special schools may have to be considered where ordinary schools have not been able to make adequate provisions. By contrast, the World Bank, which works in conjunction with the United Nations to provide loans to developing countries, has argued in favour of inclusion, justifying this position thus:

If segregated special education is to be provided for all children with special educational needs, the cost will be enormous and prohibitive for all developing countries. If integrated in-class provision with a support teacher system is envisaged for the vast majority of children with special educational needs, then the additional costs can be marginal, if not negligible. (Lynch, 1994)

In practice, there are a large number of children with special educational needs already included into the public education systems in almost every country in the Caribbean. It is not only disabled people who are to be included in this category (Des Santos, 2001). For the most part, these are children who are experiencing difficulties with learning, rather than children with physical, sensory or learning impairments.

Yet, increasingly in the Caribbean, the discourse of special education is being drawn upon to frame discussions and policy concerning educational failure. This illustrates a dilemma, not restricted to developing countries, but acutely experienced in these settings. On the one hand, the need for improved and targeted learning support coupled with the training of teachers, particularly in the mainstream sector, to work effectively with children with a range of special educational needs is very evident. On the other hand, the language of special education can itself impede an analysis of more deep seated problems in respect of both funding and policy for improving the quality of education for all children. The reality is that the goals of equity and equality of opportunity remain distant for the majority of Caribbean people. For example, those stricken by poverty often experience academic deceleration and acquire special educational needs as they pass through the school system, leading to their eventual exclusion from those sections of the school system that offer the greatest prospects for upward social mobility (UNESCO, 1996).

In forging a regional strategy for education, the countries of the OECS were, of course, well aware of the constraints that operate upon education systems at the national level. Through a regional strategy it was intended that there would be both a sharing of policy and expertise towards a common purpose together with protection

against the impact of global financial and political pressures upon the achievement of those shared objectives. Thus it was argued

The OECS countries cannot afford to be too inward looking. Nor can they afford to open themselves up indiscriminately to sundry influences. ... In the process of choosing a path and shaping a vision education is critical. (Education Reform Working Group, 1991, p. 9)

In 1992 the OECS member states approved a common Education Reform Strategy and this action led to the establishment of an Office of the Education Reform Unit (OERU) based in St Lucia. It was intended that this initiative would support

A unified, harmonized and standardized system of education throughout the region which shared common names and terms, structures, curricula and examinations. (Education Reform Working Group, 1991, p. 50)

This strategy was also expected to 'permit the economies of scale required to ensure affective and sustainable change' (Education Reform Working Group, 1991, p. 3).

There have been major positive outcomes from the OECS Education Reform Strategy. The strategy itself demonstrates a commitment to regional transformation based on collective goodwill and support among the member countries. This common policy has been translated into different educational areas through a model Education Bill which recognizes the common interests and common concerns of the various member countries whilst also acknowledging the diversity within the region and differences in national imperatives and priorities arising from the particular historical economic and cultural situations of member countries. The political rhetoric of collective regional support stands out. The decision to establish a central administrative structure to support the implementation of the strategy across the member countries demonstrates that the strategy goes beyond mere words. Moreover, the OERU has made a significant contribution to the development and implementation of the strategy and in particular in relation both to needs assessment and to initiatives in support of teacher education and curriculum development.

At the time of the research, five of the participating six countries were in the process of developing education plans which included policies to support children with special needs. In the case of St. Lucia, for instance, the Ministry responsible for Education is actively implementing the Plan which they produced in February 2000 for the period 2000–2005. In St. Kitts, a Special Education Unit supported by trained special educators has been established. Significantly, this unit is set in the compound of a mainstream primary school which allows children from both schools to join together in a variety of shared activities, both social and educational.

For the most part in the Caribbean, however, the curriculum for children with disabilities is related to functionality and there is a heavy bias toward the development of vocational skills (such as sewing, crochet, laundry, basic wood-work, cooking, gardening and craft) for those who are not seen to be academically able. Yet, the support system for an integrated vocational education programme is not readily available. A few schools might enlist the support of local craft persons but these practices are not widespread. Again, funding is not available to sustain such interventions even when they are initiated. One education officer explained the position by saying:

We are continuing to push to see how we can help to make changes and not only to make those changes but that they are sustained, because sometimes you think you have gotten somewhere and then there is a change—whether it is the technocrats or politician, then people forget and we start all over again, and we don't have the resources, we don't have the wherewithal to be always starting over again. You have to build from what you have, you know ...

In an OECS review of the implementation of its strategy (OECS Education, 2000, pp. 28–29) it is argued that

Primary education should be designed to meet the basic learning needs of students. These comprise both essential learning tools (such as literacy, oral expression, numeracy and problem solving) and the basic learning content (such as knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) required by human beings to be able to survive, to develop their capacities, to live and work in dignity, to participate fully in development, to improve the quality of their lives, to make informed decisions and to continue learning. Every child should have access to primary education and should master the basic functional standards set for this level of education.

For the head of the OERU, ten years after the introduction of the strategy, achievement of this objective in its broadest sense was still the greatest challenge:

... how to make education relevant to the needs of our countries ... to the needs of our community and to our personal needs. I think that a lot of learning is done in our education system that is in a vacuum. I don't think children know why we do certain things. The whole exam syndrome makes you think the Caribbean has never really understood the joy of learning. From slave times it was forced learning and then you went into work learning. There is cramming for exams and children will boast that since they've been in school they've never read a book. So we have failed in the learning process. We perpetuate that. There is this attitude thing: you're only to do academic learning and using your hands is somehow lesser.

Yet the achievement of the objective of education for all is seriously undermined by the very narrow focus of education in the region around academic attainment:

I feel that at the moment our education system in the Caribbean is in crisis. I think we are heading full speed in the opposite direction. We have historically inherited systems and our whole attitude is towards producing academic persons. Now that we have the information explosion it is not so important for us to pass on all this knowledge at primary school. The important thing is how we make this knowledge applicable. What is useful knowledge? How can we make students productive and self-reliant citizens? But this business of getting nine 'O' levels is not the correct thing at all. (Head of the OERU)

Nowhere is this tension between the role of education for academic achievement and the role of education for citizenship more pronounced than in the area of special and inclusive education. In the OECS (2000) strategy review, *Pillars for partnership and progress*, this issue is discussed under the broader heading of 'Strategies for Reforming Primary Education'. Strategy 29 identifies the need to 'Establish support services in respect of children with special needs' as an objective of primary education reform.

The support services would include screening and testing for disabilities, providing special education units in some primary schools and periodic surveys to determine the incidence of various disabilities in the child population. In addition they would provide for the

instructional needs of special children and for the social welfare of children in need.
(OECS, 2000, p. 30)

Theoretically, therefore, as the head of the OERU pointed out, ‘all children need to be included in the learning process’ at the primary level. In practice, however, because ‘it is very difficult to ask Ministries to put more money in education ... it never comes up as a priority from the Ministries ... It will probably take a lobby of parents to bring it to Ministries’. Also, as a senior curriculum officer at the OERU argued:

Special education is very expensive. Countries try the best they can with the resources they have. Countries that don’t have the money tend to go for the inclusive kind of situation, not because it may be successful but because it may seem cheaper.

Thus, the financial pressures mean that integration of children with disabilities and/or learning difficulties into the mainstream is often a more viable option than establishing separate specialist facilities and schools. This approach has implications both for the curriculum and for teacher education. In respect of curriculum reform, according to its curriculum officer the OERU has put a lot of effort into

... writing the curriculum in such a way that it can take care of children with special needs [developing] a set of core learning outcomes for the entire primary school in math and language arts.

However,

teachers have to be educated in such a way that the curriculum is implemented. It’s not because we have written it that it will be done.

There is also a downside to the expansion of specialist ‘special’ educators in the region. On the one hand, these teachers cannot possibly address the needs of all students with special needs in the system. On the other hand, the ‘professionalization’ of this field of teaching can in practice lead to a deskilling of ordinary teachers who legitimate their own lack of skills by reference to the existence of specialists. The dangers of this separation off of ‘specialist’ skills from the skills of the ordinary teacher were recognized by the OERU Curriculum Officer who argued that it was like creating a new profession within the profession:

... you define the situation [to] justify the existence of a specialist area in the curriculum [then] you may tend to fight for separation using the argument that these children need special attention. Now if you are not a specialist you cannot refute the argument because you don’t know.

Funding and strategic planning

Many of the constraints that operate in relation to full implementation of the OECS Education Reform Strategy emanate from the economics of the situation. While recognizing that the strategy has had some success in specific areas, as acknowledged by the review of the Education Reform Strategy (OECS, 2000), many of its objectives have not been met within the timeframe initially set out. The development and implementation of such a comprehensive reform strategy necessarily takes place within a

complex setting of competing and sometimes contradictory political and economic priorities both between and within individual member states.

The countries of the Eastern Caribbean simply do not have the resources to fund such a comprehensive and long-term set of reforms and rely heavily on the involvement and support of external donors. In practice this means that the detail of any strategy has to be negotiated with these agencies, yet the goals of the latter are determined independently of national strategic planning. Sometimes friction exists between the policies advocated by international donors and those defined regionally by the Education Reform Strategy and locally by the Ministries of Education in individual countries. This can lead to a distortion in terms of the prioritization of outputs and can create tensions in relation to the overall cohesion of the programme of reform across the different countries. In the context of the severe financial constraints which the OECS countries are currently experiencing, there is a danger of the education sector being driven by un-coordinated externally funded projects that can lead to the wastage of scarce resources through needless duplication and/or misplaced priorities, which writers on small states have cautioned against (Bray, 1992; Bray & Packer, 1993).

Strategy 59 of the OECS 'Foundations for the Future' strategy document had emphasized that member states should control external borrowing for education. It states that:

... external borrowing for education should be restricted to developmental projects for which repayment is assured and where conditions for borrowing do not seek to alter the reform process.

In practice, this perfectly rational principle has been a hard one to follow. The agencies which support the OERU include the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, the European Union, the British Development Division in the Caribbean and the Eastern Caribbean Education Reform Project (ECERP). Loans for projects are provided by the World Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank. One of the features of these funding arrangements is that different donors have taken responsibility for funding different elements of the strategy. Thus CIDA funds the administration of the OERU together with projects in quality education, the British have provided funding to support primary teachers' education, the European Union has funded tertiary human resource development and the Germans have funded initiatives around technical and vocational education. The diversity of funding for the Reform Strategy has, in practice, created its own tensions, possibly leading to distorted priorities in particular cases and limiting the leeway that countries have to design particular initiatives. The Reform Unit's Curriculum Specialist emphasized this point in our interview with him when he argued that 'decisions may depend on where funding is coming from ... and the particular philosophy of the agent that is going to provide the funding'. The head of the OERU similarly expressed her exasperation:

One of the frustrating things with the OERU is that I am not the OERU. You have so many bosses there because the donors have to approve that this is their area, the Ministries have

to approve that this is their priority area, the Secretariat has to approve that we are doing what the donors and the Ministers want. So, for instance, at one point the donors highlighted poverty reduction (although I never know what that means; I know what poverty eradication means), another time they would say it is gender, you know that we should highlight gender. Another time they will come with something else and our greatest concern is that we do not hold any first rings at all, so we are serving those who dictate the policies to us.

Thus, the 'solution' that is applied may merely amplify the problem that it is intended to solve. The harsh reality of life in the Eastern Caribbean States is that there are few resources and many demands upon them. The fact that special education features as a priority in the regional Reform Strategy does not mean that this is necessarily translated into specific national priorities. Priorities are more likely to be driven by external priorities and the availability of funding for particular projects (see, for example, World Bank, 1995). Indeed, the perverse effect of international funding upon national priorities can be increases in capital expenditure to match fund loans at a time when overall educational expenditure is being cut. The budget heads that are most commonly cut are minor equipment accounts; cuts which have the most serious impact upon the maintenance of classroom resources (Namsoo & Armstrong, 1999).

Whilst education for all may be the goal, the lack of cohesion in educational planning and distortion of priorities due to reliance on external funding is a significant factor limiting the implementation of strategic objectives for special and inclusive education. Where educational priorities are driven in significant ways by funding arrangements it is perhaps not surprising that political rivalries are at times played out in ways that undermine long-term strategy and planning. There is little commitment from one regime to another in respect of the continuation of existing policies and programmes. Although programme conditionalities imposed by funding agencies may demand the completion of a project within a specific time-frame, there can be significant changes or even total closure of a project when a new government wishes to renegotiate existing loans or funding agencies are unwilling to support newly defined national priorities.

Even within governments, problems arise from the absence of harmonization between the activities of different government ministries (e.g. Health, Transport, Social Services, Information) in support of facilities and for special and inclusive education. The need for cohesion among the established ministries becomes an urgent issue in relation to small economies and their response to special needs and inclusion. The present approach of multi-sectorial planning could ensure the maximum use of resources for all sectors in the various territories but there is a need for Ministries of Health, Social Services, Education, Planning and Finance to work in closer collaboration to reduce duplication, and increase benefits to the populations they serve.

A further problem was revealed in our study by the absence of readily available documentation explaining development programmes and other initiatives. Members of non-governmental organization and parents felt that they wanted to understand what sorts of programmes were coming on stream and felt that they needed to be

included in the wider debate on what was possible and appropriate for the children. There is need for a dissemination strategy in each country to inform the public and help to change their attitudes to education and inclusive practice. The OERU has worked hard to achieve good dissemination practice and with some success but this is not always translated into the national areas. The head of the OERU highlighted this point when she argued that

...we had to establish a stakeholder awareness project to enable the man in the street to become more aware. We got a video connection called 'set me free' that was shown on our TV and so on ... We have tried video production in several things and then we had a series of radio interviews. But I still find it depends on which country you go to. You may hear very little of it according to which area you're going to.

Even within the education services of the OECS countries most middle managers were unaware of the OECS reforms that were being implemented, or of what reforms had been given priority over others. Not surprisingly, therefore, the average teacher had very little knowledge of the OECS Education Reform. After policy decisions have been taken at Ministerial and/or at Senior Civil Servant level, the information rarely went much further down the hierarchy.

The teaching profession: conditions of service and teacher education

The Minister of Education in St Lucia expressed his concern about the trend for teachers to opt for early retirement. The rapid turnover of teachers was likewise perceived by senior officials in Dominica as a challenge to the achievement of a policy of objective of 'education for all'. In Antigua, teachers were expecting a decrease in their monthly earnings as a result of the conditionalities being imposed by international funding agencies, and there was felt to be little likelihood of new opportunities opening up in that country's education system in the foreseeable future.

These factors were of major significance for the teachers we talked to who felt themselves undervalued within their education systems and having little involvement in the development of policy and in decisions about the nature of the curriculum, assessment practices and the funding of schools. As Barton (2001) has argued, where teachers lack participation in the development of policies, and become, instead, implementers of decisions made by external bodies this speaks directly against any meaningful inclusive educational policies and practice.

Generally within the region, it is felt that there is a new trend towards young persons entering the teaching profession as a stop-gap measure until they can gain better employment elsewhere. Teachers' salaries are not perceived to be attractive and so young ambitious persons only accept the position temporarily because it is a profession that is easy to get into with minimal qualifications. Young men, especially, do not remain in the profession if they can earn a better salary elsewhere. This attrition within the teaching service spread demotivation among teachers and undermined stability within the school system.

While the majority of teachers at the primary level have the required teaching qualifications that are acceptable in the region (an undergraduate Teachers' Diploma), concerns remain about the quality and appropriateness of training. This is recognized by those responsible for administration of the education systems but as UNESCO (1995, p. 10), has indicated

...some developing countries continue to employ teachers with minimal qualifications and training for teaching ... in fact persons are recruited out of necessity.

This inevitably reflects the low salaries paid to teachers within the region and in the absence of enhancements to the professional standing of teachers, this problem will not be resolved.

Evidence from all countries involved in the study points to serious problems in respect of teacher education and pedagogy within the schools in the OECS. While some teachers' colleges are operating at a more advanced level than others in terms of the quality of the educational opportunities provided, the majority need a major rethinking of their teacher training strategy. The research indicates that very often the teacher training strategy was not linked to any national education reform and that the colleges were entities which operated autonomously. Approximately 80% of teachers we interviewed felt that they did not have the necessary training to work with children who have special educational needs. Teachers felt that their training at the Teachers' Colleges did not adequately prepare them for teaching in the education system. The training they had received was said to be mostly centred upon theories which had to be regurgitated for examination purposes. In many instances, the teaching practice component was not realistic and pedagogy was largely ignored.

Developing programmes of learning support

Progress is being made in the region toward provision of learning support in mainstream schools. However, many teachers are not supportive of disabled children and children with learning difficulties. As one teacher put it: 'I have enough problems trying to teach those who look normal'. This is a particularly serious cause for concern in the Caribbean where problems have been identified not only in respect of learning but also in teaching methods in the fields of literacy and mathematics (Jules & Pannefleck, 2000). For those children with more complex learning needs, although they may be accepted within the classroom, in the main, the teachers we spoke with do not believe that they have the knowledge and skills required for teaching 'those sorts of children'.

One of the main challenges for inclusive practice is teacher resistance, mostly because of lack of proper planning, insufficient support in the mainstream classroom and inadequate skills. Interviews with teachers suggest that as a group they feel helpless in situations where they are already teaching thirty-five to forty children in small, cramped, hot classrooms where at least half of the children have difficulties in reading and mathematics, unless they are in the 'A' stream.

Strategy 29 of *Pillars for partnership and progress* (OECS, 2000, p. 30) reiterates the recommendation of the earlier *Foundations for the future report* (Education Reform Working Group, 1991) when it states that there is a need to

Establish support services in respect of children with special needs ... These support services would include screening and testing for disabilities, providing special educational units in some primary schools and periodic surveys to determine the incidence of various disabilities in the child population. In addition, they would provide for the instructional needs of special children and for the social welfare of children in need.

Our research has identified some progress towards meeting this objective in a number of interesting innovations, particularly at school level. Although comparatively rare, there is evidence of attempts to develop inclusive educational practice in the region, despite the constraints imposed by limited resources and inadequate training. Such initiatives as do exist do reveal tensions and contradictions over the meaning of inclusive schooling, yet they offer important illustrations of the ways in which particular schools and teachers attempt to engage constructively with the ambitions of inclusive education. One example is the Bocage Combined School in St Lucia.

Bocage is a primary school with 220 pupils and nine teachers. The student population has a wide range of abilities and interests and although the school does not currently have any students with severe learning disabilities on its roll the principal indicated that she would support the parents of such children where they wished to enrol their children in the school. Given the variety in student abilities, the principal has felt it necessary to set up a special education programme to meet the needs of the students. This programme has been in existence for two years and caters to students who are operating below their grade level and also, significantly, for advanced learners, whose learning needs are also seen as challenging for the school. The programme, which is operated by a teacher who is qualified in the area of special education, has an enrolment of 35 students. Once students have been identified by their class teacher as students who could possibly benefit from the programme, the special education teacher and a Peace Corps Volunteer carry out a series of tests to determine the grade level at which the student is working. On the basis of the results of these tests, she then prepares a plan and a schedule of sessions for each student. What follows is a limited programme of withdrawal from the ordinary classroom. The value of this as an 'inclusive' practice may be questioned but it is undertaken partly to allay the fears of the ordinary class teachers in the school that they lack the skills to support inclusion and partly to form a bridge between those children who are failing in the ordinary classroom and their classroom teachers which will facilitate the participation of these children in the ordinary classroom. The sessions are held in a resource room and each student has three sessions per week, with each session lasting for about thirty minutes. The students are placed into groups of between three and six students all of whom are performing at similar levels. The advanced learners are given an enrichment programme that consists of additional work related to the topics they are following in their classes and extra homework. The special education teacher guides those students who are performing below their grade level through a series of activities that

are designed to bring them up to grade level. The programme tries to be reactive to the children's different needs. The special education teacher explains her strategy:

For Kindergarten children, I concentrate on having them acquire the pre-requisite skills, since the problem is often no more than this. For the other children, I use the regular syllabus at one grade level below the child's level. I collect activities and develop my own to meet specific needs.

The students work at their own pace and exit the programme once they reach their grade level and show evidence that they can keep up with their regular class work.

Dialogue between the special education teacher and the class teachers links the work that the students are doing in the programme and that done in their regular classrooms. The special education teacher obtains information on the topics that are being covered in the students' classes and uses these topics as the basis of some of her activities with the students. She provides the class teachers with information on the students' individualized plan, so that the class teachers know how to help the students in their regular work. Additionally, the special education teacher visits the classes to work with the students during their regular classes.

The class teachers' work in the classroom complements the special education teacher's efforts. As one class teacher indicated:

I use social grouping more often. I try to attend to all students, spending more time with the slower ones, teaching them concepts, helping them to understand text and instructions, how to use their textbooks and workbooks. (Teacher interview)

While the weaker students tend to have more interaction with their class teacher focusing on the development of concepts and skills, the more advanced students spend more time on their own working on 'extra exercises at a higher level than what the other students are doing, but on the same topic or concept' (teacher interview).

All participants in the study indicated that the programme was successful. Perhaps the best indicators of success are the comments of current and past students of the programme.

Students who are following the programme are very proud to do so and did not feel stigmatized. '[other students] think I am doing better than them, because they see a lot of correct in my books' (Carlyle); 'I wanted to remain in the programme, because it helps me to read' (Maria). It also has found parental support. Erneil stated, 'my mother wished that I could stay (in the programme), because I am learning a lot of things'. A number of students wanted to continue working with the special education teacher, because 'she talks slowly' and believed that the support they were receiving helped them to 'keep up with the work in class'.

The teachers determine the success of the programme by observing the progress that the students make. No matter how small the improvement, it is seen as a sign of success. This is evident in one teacher's comments:

I am satisfied with some of the things they've done. I am seeing signs of improvement, the students are progressing. I have one boy who during the first term just wasn't there. In the second term, I saw an improvement. Now he is keeping up. By the end of the third term, he may be out of the programme. I have five students in the programme. I'm seeing light

in what she [the special education teacher] is doing. Those that are lagging behind are still improving. (Teacher interview)

In addition to the quality of the students' work, class participation is also considered as a criterion of success. One teacher indicated that she also observed improvement in the way that students respond to questions. Changes in the overall development of the students were also noted by the special education teacher.

In general they are happier in themselves. They have more self-confidence. They express themselves better. They are less shy and work harder.

Another indicator of success is the number of students who have been able to move on out of the programme.

I have had four major successes over the two years, where regular teachers recognize the child's progress and come to suggest that he/she no longer needs to come for special help. (Special education teacher)

Importantly, one student who went through the programme was successful at the Common Entrance Examination (which leads to entry to secondary education).

The success of the special education programme needs to be viewed within the wider context of the schooling system. The success of the special education programme may have been achieved at a cost. In order to have the special education teacher function in that capacity without responsibility for a regular class, the principal has had to combine two classes at the Grade 6 level. The resulting class is therefore large. The principal was of the opinion that this class size might have affected the school's overall outcomes in the Common Entrance Examination last year.

The principal's concern about the Common Entrance Examination results is based on the fact that generally, these results are used as indicators of school success. She recognizes the limitations of these indicators within the local context of the school and therefore adopts far more wide ranging measures to evaluate the progress and success of her students. Nonetheless, in the context of a highly competitive and hierarchical education system examination results have significant implications for individual schools both in terms of their standing amongst local parents and in terms of the reputation of teachers within the wider educational community.

Conclusion

The experience of teachers and pupils at the Bocage school gives a flavour of how teachers there have attempted to engage with policies of inclusion and education for all. Other examples could have been provided that in their different ways would have illustrated the commitment of teachers to inclusive schooling and provision of a quality education for all children. Importantly, however, what is happening in Bocage also highlights the difficulties and constraints which exist in turning the grand words of educational policy documents emanating from international, regional and national agencies into a meaningful inclusive practice.

This point has not been lost on the countries of the OECS who have attempted to take greater control of their own education systems by developing collective policy, by sharing expertise, and by building solidarity with the aim of translating these into an effective counter strategy to the often haphazard and sometimes damaging priorities of international agencies and donors. Yet, it is clear that the strategy has had variable success and that the extent of its success has been constrained not only by the activities of international agencies but also by the varying national priorities and circumstances of member states.

Similarly, teachers in the region are mostly ill-equipped to manage the very diverse learning needs that they encounter in the school system. The majority of teachers felt that teaching children with special educational needs was not their job and this has to be understood in the context of widespread educational failure for large numbers of Caribbean children, particularly in the areas of numeracy and literacy. Class size tends to be large and resources for learning support limited. In addition, training for teachers is often inadequate. Where inclusive educational policies are introduced within schools these may not be unproblematic. The partial withdrawal programme at Bocage School illustrates some of these tensions as well as some success in promoting inclusion. However, it should be acknowledged that such programmes do represent a serious effort on the part of these teachers to advance a more inclusive educational agenda for their pupils within the constraints faced. These constraints are located both in the shortage of resources to advance international, regional and national policy objectives and in the inadequate training that teachers have had to support inclusion.

The policies advanced by the OECS Reform Strategy are undoubtedly progressive and they do appear to be backed by a serious commitment at the political level as well as by the OERU Secretariat and the Ministries of Education in the member countries. However, at the point of delivery there is very little awareness of either the broad strategy of reform or of the particular national priorities that are being pursued, which suggest not only poor communication of policy but also limited involvement among teachers and others in its development. For instance, it was not uncommon to encounter different interpretations of 'special educational needs' and of 'inclusion' at every level of the system. Many practitioners had not even heard of the terms 'inclusion' and 'education for all'.

Perhaps more importantly, however, there are particular issues in the region related to inconsistency between policies of inclusion and the colonial heritage which is continued through educational selectivity, hierarchy and uneven allocation of resources. For instance, while policy-makers recognized that more than one half of the student population of the region is experiencing educational 'failure', there was little evidence of serious consideration being given at the policy level to the barriers created to 'education for all' by the strong and exclusive academic orientation of the system, which privileges those sections of society which have traditionally benefited in such a system.

Many of the issues which have been identified in this research have arisen as a result of a legacy of the economic inequalities which developing countries have to manage

in providing educational services. These inequalities are located in the colonial heritage of developing countries and in their continuing economic subordination to the interests of the first world nations. More recently, there have been international attempts to raise the profile of inclusive inclusion as a policy priority but the reality for developing countries is often one in which the international rhetoric of inclusion is experienced, ironically, as reinforcing the exclusion of entire peoples from economic and social opportunities. This contradiction emphasizes the important observation by Len Barton (2001, pp. 10–11) that:

... inclusive education is not an end in itself, but a means to an end, that of the realization of an inclusive society. Thus, those who claim to a commitment to inclusive education are always implicated in challenging discriminatory, exclusionary barriers and contributing to the struggles for an inclusive society.

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