

## Comparing and Contrasting Special Education Services in the United States and Jamaica

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### Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to define, compare and contrast special education services in the United States and Jamaica. Both the United States and Jamaica seeks to provide special education services and resources to students with disabilities. However, protective laws, training, and special services provided for citizens with disabilities range drastically between the countries. This thesis will define disabilities prevalent in the classroom and the services offered for the protection and provision of equal opportunity to all students. Recent laws and requirements for public schools have influenced the trajectory of special education in both countries. As this thesis progresses, the stride toward equal educational opportunities for all people in the United States and Jamaica will be evident.

*Keywords:* special education, United States, Jamaica, special services, equal opportunity

### Comparing and Contrasting Special Education in the United States and Jamaica

In the spring of 2018, I had the opportunity to travel to May Pen, Jamaica with the Liberty University School of Education, where I taught and observed in a primary and secondary school. Specifically, I was in the special education unit at the primary school and a resource classroom at the secondary school. I was surprised by the similarities and the differences between the two Jamaican schools and the public schools I have observed in the United States. Based on my experiences, I was prompted to further research the execution of special education services in both the United States (US) and Jamaica in order to reflect on how these two nations value the education of all citizens no matter their disability or exceptionality.

#### **Definitions**

Today, special education is defined in the United States by a vital law called the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*. This act states that special education is instruction that is specifically centered around the individual needs of a student with disability(ies) (IDEA, 2004). This instruction is not limited to a classroom setting but can also be provided at home, in a hospital setting and in other institutions. It is offered for free to the student. The US Department of Education has budgeted the monetary resources to fund special education; however, this definition of special education and the laws that outline and protect its implementation have only been established in the past forty years (IDEA, 2004). Understanding the definition of special education in the US is necessary to evaluate the laws and acts that provide funding, intervention services and resources and most importantly, equal opportunity.

In Jamaica, special education refers to the “tailoring of the education program to suit the needs of students in a way that accommodates the students’ individual needs and differences” (DiGJamaica, 2010 p. 1). Needs and differences are defined as physical, mental, and intellectual disabilities or challenges. Students who receive special education are to be given more individualized instruction and resources that accommodate their specific needs. Special education in Jamaica is often executed separately from the general educational classroom so that students can be supplied with the additional resources, specialized instruction and accommodations that are necessary to succeed and eventually become self-sufficient (DiGJamaica, 2010).

### **Special Education Laws in the United States**

In the US, the execution and accountability of special education is heavily mandated and protected by federal laws that are continuing to change and evolve over time. Before laws regarding special education were instituted in the early 1970s, students with both mental and physical disabilities were excluded from public schools (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). According to Johnson (1966), various examples of children with disabilities were perceived as a burden to teachers and disruptive to the class. These examples eventually led to monumental court cases. Some teachers did not believe that students with intellectual disabilities would even benefit from attending school because they were not able to understand or perform the skills necessary to academically excel (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2014). However, the performance of students with disabilities was compared to students without disabilities. This simply was not fair to the students with disabilities or their families. Many families filed lawsuits with various school boards across the country due to their children being denied the right

to an education. One influential court case that eventually led to all students with disabilities being accepted into public schools was *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* in 1972. This lawsuit was filed when seven students were denied an education from their school in DC. because they were perceived as having either intellectual disabilities, emotional disturbances, or hyperactivity. When this case reached the Board of Education in DC, the court referred back to *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), which ruled that no child should be discriminated against in school based on race or ethnicity. Following this monumental court case, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended discrimination and segregation in public schools. Public schools could not refuse students an education simply because of the lack of resources to accommodate disabilities. Appropriate funds had to be budgeted to provide all students with the help they need to succeed. The court required the school to not only identify the disabilities of students but also propose a detailed plan of how they will approach and accommodate the needs of each student. Public schools also needed to document students' progress and make necessary changes to the plan. Parents had the right to review this plan, and if they did not agree with the plan, they could demand revisions (Mead, n.d). This Supreme Court decision would lead to the establishment of several acts that would transform special education services across public schools in the United States.

### **Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act**

The protection of any student with a disability from denial of educational services is defined in Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act. Students are provided with the

resources and training to accommodate the most severe of disabilities. In 1973, section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act was passed and stated:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705(20), shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance (29 U.S. Code § 794, p. 264)

This act identifies a disability as “an impairment, physical or mental, that substantially limits a major life activity” (42 U.S. Code § 12102, p. 1). Under this act, the federal government granted state vocational rehabilitation programs for students with disabilities, thus protecting their right to receive the proper educational resources to succeed.

### **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

Shortly after the Rehabilitation Act was passed, the *Education for all Handicapped Children Act* of 1975 was mandated to give all students an equal opportunity education through the public school system. Every citizen of the United States had been given unalienable rights and cannot be discriminated against based on any kind of disability. This act declared:

a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs, to assure that the rights of handicapped children and their parents or guardians are protected, to assist States and localities to provide for the education of all handicapped children, and to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate handicapped children.

(Public Law 94-142-Nov. 29, 1975)

Therefore, additional funding would be provided to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Since 1975, this act has been amended several times and has been renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA), as it was amended in 1997 (Rhodes, Fisher & Adelstein, 2007). IDEA outlined four key parts. Part A discussed the provisions for appropriate education to all students. Part B defined the procedures that a school must follow for students ages three to twenty-one who qualify for special services. Part C included the guidelines for early intervention services for infants and toddlers two and under. Finally, Part D discussed the national responsibility to provide funding and granted special educational services to public schools (IDEA 1997). Since 1997, IDEA has been amended several times as research based methods and studies on disabilities continue to change.

In 2004, Congress reauthorized IDEA by adding amended principles to better serve students with disabilities and their families. One of the principles required students to be given non-discriminatory testing on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, or gender. Testing had to be given in the student's native language. Multiple testing measures were given before determining a student's disability, severity and limitations and how this disability would affect students in the general classroom setting (IDEA 2004). Another principle added was the right of the parents to have due process (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2014). These principles of IDEA are still followed today. The parents or guardians of the students had the right to be included in the planning of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which determines the placement decision. Parental involvement in determining the procedures and accommodations for their student was crucial, and thus, parents were included in the IEP team and had to sign this document before the plan could be



administered (Gibb & Dykes, 2016). By giving students with disabilities the rights to receive special education, students could develop skills to prepare them for their future employment and even living on their own. However, not all students who received special education services were able to achieve employment or independent living. Yet, under IDEA part B, every qualifying student could receive special educational services until they were twenty-one. In regards to part B of IDEA, every state had to follow specific guidelines to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities were protected. The states were responsible to provide free and appropriate public education to all students, to properly evaluate students who had a disability, to establish an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students who were identified with a disability, and to ensure the student was placed in the least restrictive environment and establish procedural safeguards (IDEA 1997, 2004).

In 2007, IDEA included thirteen categories to identify specific disabilities in students who were tested for special education services. These categories are still used today for placement. The categories are: autism, blindness, deafness, blind and deaf, emotional disturbances, hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairments, other health impairments, and specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, traumatic brain injury, visual impairments including blindness (IDEA, 2007). Children who are ages three to nine are identified with developmental delays if they have any “physical, cognitive, communication, social, emotional or adaptive development” (IDEA, 2007). Students who have a disability that fall under one of the thirteen categories in IDEA were protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and were able to receive the necessary services for accommodation. A

student with a physical disability may not require academic intervention but still needed special modifications, such as a student who is not able to walk and uses a wheel-chair. IDEA 2007 protected the student by ensuring that there were easily accessible ramps all across school, so that the student had access to every necessary building.

Since 2007, there have been a few changes to IDEA. The federal government continued to improve the evaluation process of ensuring each state's implementation of IDEA to meet the requirements of the amended principles. In 2014, the federal government realized the performance of students under IDEA needed to be tracked each year. Therefore, they required that each state submit a State Performance Plan (SPP) and an Annual Performance Report (APR). This fact meant that each state had to give a detailed description of how they planned to implement IDEA in public schools and reported the results and progress that they had observed in the student body. The SPP included measurable goals based on IDEA, and the APR reported whether or not these measurable goals had been met. Consequently, the state submitted the SPP and the APR to the Secretary of Education, who then determined whether the state had met the requirements and where improvements needed to be made. Accountability was kept based on whether or not the state successfully implemented the requirements of IDEA. Previously, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 maintained accountability by requiring report cards to keep track of student achievement for both the state and school districts (NCLB, 2002). Students who were falling behind were given special services such as free after-school tutoring (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). In comparison, the SPP and the APR provided a higher level of accountability to ensure that all students were receiving equal educational opportunities. The Secretary evaluated each state based on

the requirements of IDEA and placed them into one of four categories as follows: “meets the requirements and purpose of IDEA, needs assistance, needs intervention, or substantial intervention” in implementing the requirements of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p.1) If a state identified a need for intervention services for three consecutive years, they needed to submit an action plan to the Department of Education.

Since 2014, a new change has been made in the way that the states are evaluated for meeting IDEA implementation requirements in Part B, and in Part C. Presently, the Department of Education uses compliance and results data to determine if a state meets the requirements. The Department of Education seeks Results Driven Accountability (RDA) from the states. The focus is to protect the rights of students with disabilities by ensuring that there are measurable outcomes for the student’s level of knowledge and skill set after the particular requirements of IDEA have been implemented (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). IDEA seeks to give students with disabilities equal opportunities in school so that they may gain the functional skills and knowledge to prepare them for future job employment, independent living and ultimately self-sufficiency.

### **Americans with Disabilities Act**

Another important protective act for people with disabilities was the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), signed in 1990. The Americans with Disabilities Act provided additional protection for people with disabilities from discrimination in the workforce, and also ensured they were equipped with the accommodations necessary to perform their job with equal opportunity. This act required employers to provide “reasonable accommodations” to their employees with a disability. This law was related

to IDEA and students with disabilities because the ADA also protected students if they choose to attend college. The passing of this law shows that the US was a nation that offered equal opportunity to all people no matter their disability. It reflected the values of the founding fathers that “all men were created equal” and with unalienable rights that would be protected by law (U.S. Declaration of Independence, Paragraph 2, 1776).

### **Special Education Laws and Organizations in Jamaica**

#### **Rights of Persons with Disabilities**

In Jamaica, citizens with disabilities have equal rights protected by law. Jamaica signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2007. The CRPD was formed by the United Nations with eight guiding principles that included independence, non-discrimination, accessibility, equal opportunity, inclusion in society, equality between men and women, respect for differences, and finally, “respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the rights of children with disabilities to preserve their identities” (Guiding Principles of the Convention, 2006, p. 1). The interpretation of the last principle is especially important to understand how Jamaica implemented these rights to provide equal opportunity of education to children with disabilities.

In 2006, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reported that there were more than 37,000 children with disabilities in the Caribbean country of Jamaica alone and only ten percent of these children were attending a government-funded school (Nelson, 2011). While the country seemed to be making positive strides towards providing health and education to all of its citizens at the time of this report, only ten percent of children with disabilities ages five to fourteen were

enrolled in a government funded school (Nelson, 2011). Even though Jamaica signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the progress towards giving equal opportunities to those with disabilities has been slow since then. Yet, there are several government and non-profit organizations which are dedicated to executing what has been signed as law.

### **Jamaican Council for Persons with Disabilities**

The Jamaican Council for Persons with Disabilities (JCPD) is committed to providing vocational training, equal employment opportunities, and rehabilitation services under the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. Although the Jamaican government has previously established policies and provision to guarantee equal opportunities, a recent UNICEF study reveals that not many citizens with disabilities are being served. Christine Hendricks, who is the executive director of the JCPD, reported that of the 580,000 persons in Jamaica who register themselves as disabled, only 30,000 have sought the resources provided by JCPD (JCPD Partners with UNICEF and Digicel Foundation to Help PWDs, 2017). In terms of children with disabilities, only 5,000 students are being served by JCPD. Hendricks believes that the Jamaican society as a whole will see the value and purpose of people with disabilities when they notice children with disabilities being served in school. Efforts to raise awareness about JCPD services are promoted through the media in partnership with the Jamaica Empowerment Partnership for People with Disabilities (JEPP) and the Digicel Jamaican Foundation.

### **Digicel Foundation**

As of March 2017, there were eleven ramps in schools across the island of Jamaica built by the Digicel Foundation. The Digicel Foundation plans to continue its efforts to

aide those with special needs and disabilities. In addition, the organization has trained over 280 teachers and caregivers to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. Jamaican schools have been able to apply for a grant to receive the services of the Digicel Foundation (Digicel Jamaica Foundation, 2017). UNICEF has helped advocate for the education of students with disabilities. Education specialist, Rebecca Tortello, has implemented skill training in the classroom so that students with disabilities can be prepared for the work force. This shows the nation as a whole that those with disabilities can have a purpose (Sheil, 2017). For example, a social enterprise, “Deaf Can! Coffee” began at the Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf in Kingston, Jamaica. After a group of male students took a field trip to visit a deaf coffee roaster, these students wanted to learn how to roast and make their own coffee. In 2015, the students launched a small business in their school to not only sell coffee but also train students to grow and roast coffee. The goal was to open a full time shop one day (Dawes, Richards & Green, 2017). This is a worthy story to be broadcasted to all people throughout Jamaica. Disabilities do not result in an inability to attend school. Students with disabilities can gain knowledge and skills to apply to the work force. With all of the government policies, laws, funding, grant money and organizations dedicated to advocating for and providing services to those with disabilities, the next step is implementing the action plan in Jamaica.

### **Training Special Education Teachers**

#### **United States**

According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics’ *Occupational Outlook Handbook 2016-2017 Edition*, public school special education teachers must be certified or licensed in the state in which they are teaching. They must also have a bachelor’s

degree in Special Education K-12 from a university or college. Most schools require a prior internship experience in both or either a primary or secondary before a teacher is hired. Under the supervision and mentorship of a host teacher, the student teacher plans lessons and then teaches the assigned class. Most states prefer special education teachers to have the knowledge and prior experience in a variety of special disabilities including autism, down syndrome, developmental and cognitive delays, etc. Not only should a special education teacher demonstrate their knowledge and application skills on certification exams, but they should also receive recommendations from their host teachers during student teaching.

### **Jamaica**

Similarly, Jamaica offers bachelors and master degrees in Special Education. The top school for training in Special Education is the Micro University College. The university offers an accredited degree in Special Education that can lead to degrees in occupational therapy (OTD) or physical therapy (DPT), Speech and Language Pathology or other related fields. One can earn a bachelor degree in a four-year program and specialize in “moderate and severe disabilities, educational assessment and instructional planning, mild and moderate disabilities, blindness and visual impairments “(The Micro University College, 2015, p.1). The Child Assessment and Research for Education (C.A.R.E.) center also seeks to also train teachers in the Special Educations units through training workshops and conferences (McGraham, 2014). The clinicians of this organization admit that there is a great need for improving the training and increasing the qualification standards of teachers in Jamaica and the Caribbean as a whole. Specifically,

in the realm of special education, teachers are not fully equipped to meet the high learning needs of students with exceptionalities.

Public schools across Jamaica are lacking special education teachers and special services for students with disabilities. However, Reverend Ronald Thwaites, Minister of Education, announced in February of 2016 that his goal was for every school across Jamaica to have access to at least one special education teacher by the start of the 2018 school year (Lewis, 2016). Through a partnership with the Rockhouse Foundation, specialists from abroad are committed to training local Jamaican teachers to be proficient in executing services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, and developmental skills training for students with disabilities. The Minister of Education in Jamaica is beginning to act on his word to provide equal opportunities for all children to learn (Special Needs School, n.d.).

### **Early Intervention in the United States**

Under part C of the IDEA, early intervention services are provided for infants and toddlers with disabilities and funded by the federal government. Identification of a potential disability as early as infancy determines the specific services necessary to intervene. Early intervention proves to be effective for a child's physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Intervention may include occupational therapy, learning to walk, developing fine motor skills, learning social cues, acquiring language and even academic skills through tutoring. Another intervention is training parents to understand how to support their child's development through meaningful interactions Siegel (1999) confirms that the experiences created by the primary caregiver develop a toddler's interpersonal skills. A young child should see their parents as a source of care



and security. Parents who are involved with their child's development help foster secure attachment. (Derrington, Shapiro & Smith, 1999).

### **Early Intervention in Jamaica**

The Ministry of Labor and Social Security in Jamaica provides early intervention through the Early Stimulation Program. This program serves children ages infant to six who have disabilities or could be at risk for disabilities. Pre-schoolers are assessed. Then, specific intervention measures are determined and discussed with the parents. The hope is that the parent will administer the care suggested by the evaluator. The Denver II Developmental Screening Test (DDST) and physical and psychomotor assessments test children in their "cognition, self-help, language, motor and socialization" (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, 2006, p. 1). Vision, hearing and neurological impairment tests are also given to students in Jamaica at risk for these specific disabilities. The parents are invited to observe the assessment. Afterwards, the child is assigned a Child Development Officer who conducts home visits once per week for 45 minutes to an hour in order to guide the parents in teaching their child basic motor skills. The officer will document progress and report to a supervisor each week and make changes to the intervention where necessary (Ministry of Labour and Social Security 2006).

The groundbreaking of an early childhood educational institution in Savanna-la-Mar, Westmoreland, is evidence that the country seeks non-profit aid to achieve its stated goals. The Rockhouse Foundation has donated \$45 million for building this center, dedicated to welcoming children with special needs and their families. This foundation is committed to providing families with the support they desire to walk through the process of early intervention and transition. It is often difficult for parents to assess their child's

disability and determine the best practices for intervention. The parents of these children are informed of interventions they can put into practice at home as they are educated about their child's disability or developmental delay. At this facility, children receive early intervention based on the assessments given to identify their specific needs. Then, they are better prepared for the eventual transition into the general education classroom. The early learning center is managed and executed by the Rockhouse Foundation while the Ministry of Education provides for the nutritional needs and well-being of the students and staff (Lewis, 2016).

### **Inclusion Model in US Public Schools**

One important piece of the IDEA is ensuring that students are placed in the least restrictive environment. This means that a student should be included in the general education classroom as much as possible. The severity of the disability in prohibiting the ability to learn in the classroom will determine the amount of time the student spends in the general education classroom. Blankenship (1981) saw the need to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom for a positive experience for both types of students (Blankenship & Lily, 1981). Mainstreaming is a term that refers to placing students with disabilities in the general education classroom if they demonstrated they are able to succeed in this environment. However, the inclusion model was later implemented and provided paraprofessionals, special education teachers and resource room time to students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). All students are instructed by the general education teacher. Yet, this teacher works with the other specialists in the classroom to accommodate and adjust the curriculum, home-work, assessments, and more to each student with a disability. Of

course, the student's IEP guides the decisions made in the classroom. Sometimes, certain students might be pulled out for a block of time to go to a resource room or another intervention service, such as school counseling. The purpose is to include all students in the same classroom as much as possible. Separation of students with disabilities from their peers can often delay their social development. Therefore, the inclusion model facilitates a unity of learning amongst all students, teachers and specialists.

### **Inclusion Model in Jamaican Schools**

The very first special needs school to follow an inclusion model is being opened in the Spring of 2017 by the Rockhouse Foundation. This school is an early learning center for children with special needs and disabilities, as well as children with developmental delays. This school appeals to families whose local public schools may not provide special care and resources for students with disabilities. The Rockhouse Foundation has budgeted funding to build this special school where both students with special needs as well as students on a general education track will receive the early intervention services for future integration to their own public primary schools. Treatment and training will be provided by a dynamic group of “teachers, caregivers, therapists and healthcare professionals” (Special Needs School, n.d.). This model of approaching special education is similar to the United States in that multiple professionals are working together to intervene and improve the care and instruction given to students with disabilities and exceptionalities. Although the Ministry of Education might not be able to establish a diverse group of specialists in every school, they are partnering with non-profit organizations like the Rockhouse Foundation to make

every effort to achieve the vision of “every child should learn” (Special Needs School, n.d.).

### **Identification of a Disability in the United States**

#### **Response to Intervention (RTI)**

Children with disabilities that are evident from birth or infancy are referred by their parents or guardian to receive special services or accommodations at school. However, once a teacher notices a student not performing at the developmentally appropriate rate in school, intervention is provided. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a tiered system of instruction and services to meet the diverse needs of all students. The first level applies to the general classroom where all students receive the same level of instruction. Students whose educational needs to achieve are not being met at the first level are referred to the second level, which is small group instruction. Then, if the teacher recognizes the student is still struggling at the second level of intervention, the student can be referred to receive an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The disability identified must hinder the student in some way from progressing in the general education curriculum or classroom. The teacher must gather the necessary evidence from the first two tiers of intervention to reveal the need for more “intensive individualized instruction” (Gibb & Dyches, 2016, pp. 5-6).

#### **Individualized Education Plan (IEP)**

The Individualized Education Plan is a legal document with two key parts: defining the yearly goals for the student in terms of what is appropriate education and the specific accommodations, resources and services the student will receive to achieve the goals. Parents are involved in the planning of the IEP as well as the general education

teacher, the special education teacher, other specialists related to interpreting the student's specific disability, a school administrator and if necessary, the student (Gibb & Dyches, 2016). As the IEP is formed, it should include the student's information, the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP), special factors, measurable annual goals, related services required to progress in the general education classroom, participation in state and district assessment, the time spent in the regular curriculum, extracurricular and nonacademic activity each day, accommodations and modifications, special requirements and even transition planning when the student is older (Gibb & Dyches, 2016). Indeed, the IEP is a very lengthy, detailed document to plan, but it is absolutely necessary for students with disabilities as it impacts the student's academic progress. The IEP is updated each year by the IEP team, and progress is documented and interpreted to guide the next yearly goals. The free and appropriate education of all students with disabilities who attend a public school in the United States will be advocated by their IEP.

### **Identification of a Disability in Jamaica**

The Micro University College in Jamaica is dedicated to identifying and treating students with disabilities. The Child Assessment and Research in Education (C.A.R.E.) Centre associated with this college offers the only testing services in the Caribbean to determine if a child has a disability that may affect him or her in the classroom. The C.A.R.E. Centre mission is to provide the highest quality diagnostics and intervention services for students as well as educating and supporting fellow educators and families. Early identification of a disability helps determine the necessary intervention services. This is especially important in providing opportunities for students with exceptionalities

to develop academically, mentally and socially. The organization has partnered with the Minister of Education in Jamaica to achieve the vision that, “Every child can learn; every child must learn” (Hibbert, 2015, p. 1). Even though the Minister of Education says that all children can and must learn, the C.A.R.E. center and other researchers have seen no execution of an action plan nor the available resources to accomplish it. Currently, there is not a specific plan of action for each individual student with a disability. Yet, public schools across Jamaica, such as Vere Technical High School, are in the process of working with the C.A.R.E. Centre to develop something similar to an IEP in the United States (Anne Gooden, personal communication, August 21, 2017).

Students are given a literacy assessment instrument, the Micro Diagnostic Reading Test, by the government at the beginning of the year. This assessment consists of a pre- and post-test that evaluates the student’s present reading level. In addition, teachers are able to use their own observations of students based on the Conner’s Teachers Rating Scale, which is an assessment tool to identify ADHD. Based on the results of both of these assessments, the school makes the decision to contact the child’s parents for a conference. Then, the parents can agree to have their child assessed by the C.A.R.E. Centre where there is further diagnostics from trained clinicians who will identify exceptionalities or disabilities and plan for treatment and intervention (Anne Gooden, personal communication, August 21, 2017).

The Centre informs the parents, teachers and school regarding the diagnosis and provides them with the suggested plan to accommodate their learning needs. At the C.A.R.E. Centre, students are first assessed based on a referral form or medical form that may be completed by the teacher. On the referral form for children ages four to twelve,

personal information is recorded as well as family contacts. Then, the main concerns of the child are listed and checked off. The concerns can range from academic, behavioral, emotional, physical, or other cares that could be hindering a student's progress. Then, the teacher can address the specific problem, state the frequency and duration of the observed concern, and list the steps that have been made to intervene. The referral form also asks if the student has seen any other specialists such as hearing, vision or speech specialist or psychologist. Next, the form asks specific observation questions about the student's speech, gross motor skills, fine motor skills, behavior and emotions. The teacher will circle yes or no for each question. Finally, at the end of the form, the parent or guardian will sign, indicating approval for the C.A.R.E. Centre to release the results of the evaluation to the school, doctor or other specialist. Furthermore, the Centre provides a school questionnaire for the principal to fill out. All relevant information about the child and the child's family involvement is taken into account. An inventory records the student's academic performance, social relationships, behavioral problems, handwriting, speech, fine motor skills, vision, hearing and attention. The student being evaluated is asked to write a simple sentence and draw shapes. Each section on this questionnaire seeks to obtain the details of the child's present level of performance in each skill set (Micro University College Child Assessment and Research in Education (CARE) Centre).

The principal of the student's school is also asked to rate the child's grade level of performance in each subject area from math, reading, spelling, etc. Vere Technical High School established a partnership with the Micro University College's C.A.R.E. Centre according to Mrs. Anne Gooden, a special education teacher at the high school. Special

educators and clinical psychologists come to the school and test students who were referred by teachers. Based on the testing results and diagnosis, the students categorized as more severe are recommended for full house assessment. In full house assessments, students spend a week at the C.A.R.E. Centre to be further tested for specific disabilities. At the end of the week, the results are disclosed to the parents (Anne Gooden, personal communication, August 21, 2017).

Currently, the C.A.R.E. Centre focuses on the overall population of students with disabilities in the school, instead of the individual. When the C.A.R.E. Centre sends professionals to observe, they focus on providing remedial interventions for students, by pulling a group of students out of the general education class for 90-120 minutes per day (Anne Gooden, personal communication, August 21, 2017). However, the students who attend the week of full house assessment will receive an individualized plan for intervention that is disclosed to the parents, teacher and school.

### **Reflection from Personal Experience in Jamaica**

As I traveled to Jamaica during Spring break of 2017, I learned about special education through hands-on experiences. I completed a week-long practicum in two different schools and was even able to interview a teacher of special education at the secondary school. As I arrived at Hazard Primary School the first day, all the children were lined up for an assembly. Every Monday morning the whole school, including the Special Education unit students and teachers all come together for a prayer and announcements. I was impressed by the unity the assembly created. However, I was sad to see that all of the students categorized with an exceptionality were separated in a different building.



The Special Education unit stood alone towards the backside of the school property. The unit was divided into four classes ranging from the lowest functioning students to the highest functioning students. The first two days, I was placed in classroom three, which included mostly high functioning students who had ADHD. Out of the fourteen students, there were four girls and ten boys ranging in age from ten to fourteen. When I walked in the classroom, all of the students stood up to greet me out of respect. I noticed that the teacher had grouped the class into four sections. I had prepared to teach two lessons that day. However, the teacher asked me to take over the class all day. Even though I was not anticipating this, I have learned as an educator to be prepared for the unexpected. As quickly as I began my lesson, I knew I would have to bring lots of energy and engagement. These students were easily distracted by each other and the groups did not seem to be effective. There was one group of all boys that picked on each other, hit each other or yelled during the whole lesson. Although I was flustered, I knew that this experience would sharpen me not only as an educator, but also broaden my understanding of the execution of special education practices and effective methods in Jamaica.

The teacher sat and observed as I taught the lessons I had prepared. I was solely on my own in managing the behavior of the students. During the first morning break, I sought the advice of my host teacher and asked her how to best engage her unique class. She believed in being firm and authoritative in delivery. She explained that the students enjoyed learning songs to memorize material. Although the students were considered to be in fourth and fifth grade, they were taught first grade level material. There was a curriculum book provided for the teacher, but most of the student books were falling apart. When the students came back from their break, I asked them to sing me their

favorite song. It was about the days of the week. Based on their enthusiasm as a whole class, I realized the importance of differentiated instruction and methods to effectively communicate concepts to students with exceptionalities.

One contrasting factor apparent at Hazard Primary in comparison to public school classrooms in the United States is not having the access to technological resources. In fact, many of the teachers used their own personal phones or electronics to play music, games, or audio books for their students. The third day, I was placed in a second classroom in the Special Education unit, which consisted of lower functioning students. One student had cerebral palsy and was in a wheelchair. I was surprised to notice how this student's classmates took care of her. They would assist her in writing or coloring and would include her in all activities. One time, she tried walking out of her wheelchair, and a group of her classmates held her up to ensure she did not fall. Even though this class contained lower functioning students as a whole the students were more engaged with what I was communicating in my lessons to them. Their teacher was phenomenal. She utilized the limited resources she had to connect with her students and provide as much differentiated instruction to meet the diverse needs of the students. For example, the students enjoyed reading basic early readers. However, there were not enough copies of the same reader for every student. So, the teacher downloaded the audio book addition on her personal phone for all of the students to listen to as the physical book was being passed around. She had purchased speakers for the classroom so that they could listen to audio books, videos and music throughout the day. This teacher understood the concept of differentiation even though she had received little classroom training. Experience with students in the special education unit gave her insight into evaluating the individual

exceptionalities and needs of every student. The teacher did not allow limited resources or lack of technology to inhibit her from reaching her students. She was determined to go above and beyond for all students.

I noticed that the special education unit operated like its own independent school. The four teachers were very unified. Communication throughout the day occurred during break times. The more experienced teachers supported the newer teachers. A few times throughout the day, I noticed the head teacher of the special education unit would check up on the other teachers. She would greet the students as well as ask the teacher if there was anything she needed. There was evident accountability between the teachers. They saw each other as equals and sought support.

The students in the special education unit participated in extracurricular times such as physical education. However, their PE. Time was still separate from the rest of the students at Hazard Primary. The separation of the students with exceptionalities from the general education student was noticed both physically and academically. I was informed that the placement of students in the special education unit was based on the recommendation of the general education teachers. Students who habitually misbehave and disrupt the class, as well as students who academically perform below grade level are placed in the special education unit. Also, students with physical disabilities, are placed in this unit.

### **Teacher Interviews**

To gain insight from personal experiences of current special education teachers, I interviewed two educators. The first teacher, Mrs. Jeannie Ramsey, is a special education consultant in the United States at Desmond T. Doss Christian School. She previously

taught in a public high-school in Virginia for three years before becoming a special education consultant for the past eighteen years. Mrs. Gooden, teaches literacy to ninth graders with exceptionalities at Vere Technical High School in May Pen, Jamaica and has over twenty-three years of teaching experience. Interviewing both of these teachers reflected the differences in their training, available resources, support, but also revealed their similar passion for teaching all students in all ways no matter their disability.

#### **US Teacher Interview: Ms. Ramsey**

Ms. Ramsey received a four-year bachelor's degree in Severe Profound Special Education from Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Virginia. Ms. Ramsey said that her educational training did not adequately prepare her for her role as a special education teacher since she primarily taught students with learning disabilities. She remarked that the degree she received was too specialized, and she was not able to find a job in the specific field. However, she had a mentor teacher who greatly assisted her during her first years as a teacher. Ms. Ramsey recognizes the importance of teachers working together as a team. Ms. Ramsey did not have assistant teachers in their classrooms yet she was able to observe and seek advice from the other teachers around them. Ms. Ramsey remarked that after twenty years, she still utilizes phonological assessments and resources today that she received from her first mentor teacher (Jeannie Ramsey, personal communication, September 10, 2017).

When asked about the perceptions students and teachers have towards students with disabilities, Ms. Ramsey shared that many general education teachers are afraid they are not adequately trained to support these students. Ms. Ramsey's role as a special educator was to not only teach students who were pulled out of the general education classroom,

but also support the students who were included in the regular classroom with disabilities. For example, Ms. Ramsey's students were included in history and science classes with their peers who were in the general curriculum. In these classes, Ms. Ramsey strived to create a family group atmosphere for all students and teachers. However, she explained that several students were bullied and not accepted by their peers. Special education teachers and general education teachers must set the example to the students by working together in the classroom. Ms. Ramsey shared that her greatest challenge was classroom management. She faced difficulties her first few years earning student's respect. Ms. Ramsey shared about the difficult behaviors of her students. However, she shared that her greatest motivation for continuing to teach was the passion and love for her students and the profession. It is love that ignites her to persevere and continue to do what she loves to do day in and day out. Despite the hardest of days, it is the students' transformation after several challenging years that maintains her determination to advocate for the teaching of all students.

#### **Jamaican Teacher Interview: Mrs. Gooden**

Mrs. Gooden has been a teacher for over twenty-three years. She taught in the Turks and Caicos Islands for four years and Jamaican public schools for the other nineteen years. Although Mrs. Gooden has little formal training in Special Education, she has much experience teaching students with exceptionalities. She shared that she was educated to be a counselor and literacy specialist. Despite her limited preparation to teach students with exceptionalities, Mrs. Gooden has read much from the internet about the best practices and methods used globally to instruct her students. Learning through trial and error, she has experimented with various interventions and researched-based methods

to determine what is effective to reach her students. She said she has also attended annual workshops that have better equipped her as a special educator. I was surprised to discover that most special educators are not placed in public high schools to teach students. Rather, they are usually sent to primary special education units. Whenever I taught in Mrs. Gooden's classroom, I noticed that she was the only instructor in all of her classes. She did not have any additional assistance. Mrs. Gooden explained that each class was taught by one teacher, but she does seek the advice of other colleagues who specialize in various departments in the high school. All of the teachers must work closely together to strategize and share effective methods they have from their own research, training, observations, and experience.

At Vere Technical High School, the students classified with learning exceptionalities were on a different curriculum track than students in the general education classes. They were grouped together based on their grade as opposed to their level of functioning like the students at Hazard Primary. Even though the students with exceptionalities were not included in the general education classes at the high school, they still followed the same rotation schedule from class to class. Mrs. Gooden informed me that her students still participated in extracurricular activities and were not discriminated against. They enjoy participating in sports and drama with their peers. When I asked her to share the perceptions of the staff and students towards those with disabilities, she informed me that some faculty are not even willing to teach students with disabilities because they do not feel equipped to address the high needs of these students. Often, students with disabilities are bullied and stigmatized by their fellow peers.

I had the opportunity to teach my lessons in one of her literacy classes. These

students were very receptive and actively participated in the activities I prepared. They were separated into groups at their own tables. I was impressed with their active engagement. Since I had experience in the special education classes at Hazard Primary the previous three days, I was better prepared to differentiate my lesson to accommodate the different learners that I would be teaching. Like the special education classes of Hazard primary, there was a significantly larger amount of male students than females. However, the behavior of these fourteen and fifteen year olds was respectful.

Technology is one wonderful resource to utilize in education, especially in special education. Yet, the implementation of technology is lacking in schools across Jamaica. Mrs. Gooden shared that her school is limited in the technology it provides for students. Primarily, the SRA lab has been utilized by Vere Technical in the past five years and offers differentiation in the instruction and practice of content in core subjects. This technology provides science computer games that improve a student's science vocabulary and aides their understanding of experiments conducted in class. This technology also helps teachers keep track of their student's progress. For students who might have hearing or vision impairments, being able to put on headphones and sit closely to a computer increases their ability to comprehend the material covered. Yet, Mrs. Gooden raised concerns about there being little modern technology at their school. The teachers simply rely on free online resources to differentiate instruction and create adaptations for students with disabilities to the best of their ability. It is evident that Mrs. Gooden is dedicated to her profession as she utilizes the resources she has been given and attends any training workshops that might sharpen the special skills and practices to teach special education students.

To conclude the interview, I asked Mrs. Gooden about some of the challenges she faces as a teacher of special education. One challenge Mrs. Gooden faces as a special education teacher is not feeling adequately trained or experienced in her field. What has helped Mrs. Gooden become an effective special education teacher is her determination to soak in all of the training she receives from annual workshops, online free resources and articles about methods for teaching students with learning disabilities or other exceptionalities. Other challenges she faces are the lack of sensitivity and understanding towards educating students with disabilities and others failure to recognize the capabilities of these students. Poor planning on the scheduling and lack of time these students spend with different teachers and specialists throughout the day is another hurdle Mrs. Gooden faces. Yet, she is driven by her passion to recognize the transformation evident in each student's individual accomplishments at the end of his or her five-year time at Vere Technical High School.

### **Conclusion**

After comparing and contrasting the definitions, laws and services pertaining to special education in the United States and Jamaica, it is evident that these two countries are dedicated to providing for the special needs of their citizens. Teaching and observing special education classrooms in both the US and Jamaica confirmed the information I gathered through research regarding laws, resources, and teacher training. The US has more detailed laws and acts established to protect the education of students with disabilities than the country of Jamaica. However, the Ministry of Jamaica is making strides to provide more special education teachers and resources in public schools across the country as Mrs. Gooden shared about the service of C.A.R.E. Centre. By partnering



with organizations and non-profits who provide the resources to build special classrooms and train teachers through workshops, Jamaica is taking the action needed to support the Ministry of Education's slogan: "Every child can learn, every child must learn" (Hibbert, 2015, p. 1). Jamaica is not as fortunate as the US to have the resources and funds the federal, state and local government provide such as technology, IEPs, and certified special education teachers as I observed at Hazard Primary. Special education teachers in the US and Jamaica both face challenges as Ms. Ramsey and Mrs. Gooden shared. Whether it be limited help and training or negative mindsets of student abilities, these special education teachers continue to persevere. The greatest reward is watching students with disabilities progress and develop even in the smallest of ways through the years. Both teachers demonstrated that special education is centered around the needs of the student as Ms. Ramsey mentioned the IEPs she must follow as a guideline of instruction for her students with disabilities. US and Jamaica governments must continue to fight for the equal educational opportunities and rights of all of its citizens no matter the challenges they face. As a future special education teacher, I must continue advocating for the equal educational opportunities of all students.

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