

Services for Special Education Need/Disability Learners Transferring from Nursery School to Primary School in Guyana

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September 17, 2019

Abstract

This article serves to highlight the need for policy to support the smooth transition of students with special education needs/disability from early childhood programmes to primary school education. It identifies what is and provides recommendations.

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to Primary School in Guyana**

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Abstract

Multiple barriers and challenges are involved when special education needs/disability (SEND) pupils transition from the nursery level to the primary level of formal education in Guyana. The purpose of this paper is to highlight services available in Guyana to support this transition process. This paper will present a background of nursery education in Guyana, examine the current situation as nursery educators attempt to meet the needs of SEND learners and finally provide recommendations to improve transition services for students with SEND moving from nursery level to primary.

Key words

Guyana, special education, transition, transition services, nursery, playschool

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Education is the means to improved quality of life for all individuals enabling them to initiate and sustain both themselves and contribute to their society. Quality education must be viewed as an innate right of each individual, a right particularly concentrated for marginalized groups such as children with special education need/disability (SEND). Ineke (2008) in presenting on the UN Secretary General's Report, posited increasing support for the notion that education in and for human rights is essential, with its potential to contribute to reducing both the reduction of human rights violations and the building of free and just societies.

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Heads of Government in 1997 described the ideal Caribbean Person as someone who is;

- *Imbued with a respect for human life since it is the foundation on which all other desires must rest.*
- *Is emotionally secure with a high level of self-confidence and self-esteem.*
- *Sees ethnic, religious and other diversity as a source of potential strength and richness and is aware of the importance of living in harmony with the environment*
- *Has a strong appreciation of family and kinship values, community cohesion, and moral issues including responsibility for and accountability to self and community*
- *Has an informed respect for our cultural heritage*
- *Demonstrates multiple literacies, independent and critical thinking, questions the beliefs and practices of past and present and brings this to bear on the innovative application of science and technology to problem solving*
- *Demonstrates a positive work ethic and displays the creative imagination in its various manifestations and nurtures its development in the economic and entrepreneurial spheres in other areas of life*
- *Has developed the capacity to create and take advantage of opportunities to control, improve, maintain and promote physical, mental, social and spiritual well-being and to contribute to the health and welfare of the community and country*
- *Nourishes in self and in others, the fullest development of each person's potential without gender stereotyping and embraces differences and similarities between females and males as a source of mutual strength*

Having viewed the aforementioned perspectives, the need for quality access to education is reinforced, even for persons with special education need/disability.” (CARICOM, 1997, pp. 14-15).

Concerning the perspectives of Oneke and CARICOM's ideal person makes clear and salient that education and supporting services are necessary for every individual regardless of their ability. If the "ideal" person is to exist in the Caribbean, free of human rights violations, that person must be supported from as early in life as possible. The curriculum must be adaptable for each individual from an early level in order to facilitate successful transition to each level thereafter. This relationship must be supported because the child and the curriculum must be able to interact (Dewey, 1938). The interaction needed for successful learning experiences is interrupted and negatively affected by poor transition from nursery to primary level which occurs at about age five.

Educational transitions occur throughout a child's schooling. A child moves from home to nursery school, then transitions to primary education and this continues to secondary, and may even progress to post-secondary education. These transitions are pivotal points in a child's learning experiences and socialization (Dockett and Perry 2004a, 2004b; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007 as cited in Shields, 2009; Kagan and Neuman 1998; Niesel and Griebel 2005; Pianta et al. 1999). Effective transitions provide significant chances for development, and interaction with the curriculum and socialization (Brooker, 2008). Ineffective transitions create negative learning experiences for learners and barriers for their development thus contributing to greater academic vulnerability and thus to risks of poor socialization experiences in the next level of education. These effects are typical for a significant number of Guyanese learners as they transition from nursery to primary schools. They, particularly, vulnerable group of learners with SEND in Guyana face formidable set of negatives such as lack of transportation, poor and or inadequate resources and materials, uninformed teachers, inadequate infrastructure etc.-without adequate support, complicating their already, disadvantaged situations.

Background of Guyanese Education System

The Co-operative Republic of Guyana, formerly British Guiana, like many of the Caribbean Countries has a rich history of colonial rule. Located on the northeast coast of South America, this nation has a population comprised primarily of six ethnic groups; East Indians, Amerindians, Africans, Portuguese, Chinese and Europeans. The diversity of Guyana's population has a history in slavery. The earliest plantation owners secured Africans to work land and when slavery was abolished in 1838 they secured indentured immigrants to continue plantation economy.

The earliest trace of education in Guyana began around the 1800's, with public schools were operated by religious organizations. In 1961, the education sector saw changes as the government assumed control of the education of its citizens and later in 1966, when Guyana gained its independence private schools were abolished and the new education system was somewhat aligned with that of Britain. Since then, citizens of Guyana have had to access free education. The nursery education programme has been developed for children ages three to five years. Attendance is not compulsory but it is available to all who meet the age requirement (<http://www.guyana.org/Handbook/educatio.html>). Haphazard transitioning from nursery to primary school may be attributed to nursery education being not compulsory in Guyana. Though under Ministry of Education supervision, it lacks universal the perceptions of its value; thus inherent transition of the child to primary education is not viewed with a collective conscience across Guyana.

According to Cheong, Kellems, Anderson and Steed (2018) Guyana over the last twenty years has made significant progress in improving the quality of life for persons with disabilities. However, in postcolonial Guyana learners with SEND still face many challenges to accessing quality education. Learners with SEND in postcolonial Guyana face many barriers to participating in mainstream education. These barriers are innate in the culture and the way in which learners with SEND are socialized (Lashley, 2017). These barriers and challenges are faced by nursery level learners throughout the nursery education programme and follow them as they transition to the

primary level without organized individual education programs or supports. This limits their hope of a rewarding education experience in primary school educational. It could be argued at this point that the poor levels of academic performance plaguing Guyana's primary schools can be connected to the ineffective transition experienced from nursery to primary.

This phenomenon of persons with disabilities facing challenges in accessing appropriate and adequate educational experiences is best captured in the National Commission on Disabilities' Survey Report, *Raising the Profile of Disability in Guyana*, as the author revealed that of the total number of respondents to their survey, an "alarming 15% of persons with disabilities never attended school, 26% attended nursery school, 29% attended primary school, 9% attended secondary school, while only 8% attended special school" (p.20). UNICEF (2011), posited that

Across all sectors, early childhood interventions should be strengthened. Studies have shown that gains in functional capacity can be largest when interventions occur early in a child's development. When barriers are removed earlier in life, the compounding effects of the multiple barriers faced by children with disabilities are lessened (p. 10).

If early intervention services for SEND are not adequately implemented a society must identify internal challenges that hinder service implementation; a large segment of individuals with SEND "has been disadvantaged in other ways that put disability as a low priority, including poverty" (Bean & Thornburn, 1995, p. 1)." These authors went on to identify how both traditional beliefs and community perceptions of disability can affect the level of support an individual receives. As an extension the traditional beliefs and practices which plague nursery to primary transition can compound issues for the general population of learners. These factors are not exclusive to Guyana; Stowe 1994 pointed out that "throughout two regions (Caribbean and Central America) there is a general absence of consistent policies and plans for early identification of children with disabilities as well as early intervention and stimulation programmes" (p. 13).

Current Situation in Guyana

According to Lashley (2017), experiences of SEND learners in Guyana are affected by school culture and mainstream teachers' perspectives and attitudes on SEND, which are directly influenced by their definition and understanding of SEND. As members of communities, teachers take their community perception of disability in schools. Bean and Thornburg (1995) posited in their work that community perception influences treatment of persons with SEND; perceptions include supernatural beliefs as well as misconceptions about behaviors and expectations of people with disabilities. Consciously and subconsciously teachers affect the school with these attitudes and perceptions with them. Blackman, Conrad and Brown (2012) considered the attitudes of teachers in Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago regarding integration of students with special education needs into mainstream schools and concluded:

in general, teachers' attitudes can best be described as ambivalent which suggest that while they are not necessarily opposed to the idea of integrating students with special needs they do have real concerns about the suitability of the general education setting for meeting the educational needs of these students (p. 164).

This ambivalence should be considered in examining attitudes and perceptions of teachers relevant to educating students with SEND including their role in facilitating transition across levels especially from nursery to primary. The dominance of the medical model of thinking around SEND maintains the traditional view that disabilities result from individual deficits influencing views of how children with disabilities should be transitioned from nursery to primary school. Inclusion consensus should move beyond individual deficits perspectives and consider the numerous other variables which may affect the learner (McDonald & Tufue-Dolgoy 2013; Rose, 2010; Sharma, Forlin, Marella, & Jitoko. 2017).

Since Guyana does not have a formal definition of special education/disability, teachers have vastly varying understanding of SEND and each individual school writes its own SEND framework, adopting varying definitions and perspectives. However, most schools adopt an

individual deficit model of disability in defining SEND. This model posits that an impairment creates a limitation in the individual which is considered a deficit that prevents full participation in learning and socialization (Oliver, 1990, 2013). Limited consideration has been shown for a social model of disability definition of SEND within mainstream schools across Guyana. According to the social model individuals are not disabled by their impairments but by the disabling barriers they face in society (Oliver, 1990, 2009, 2013). Educators defining SEND in terms of individual deficit hinders the successful transition of the learners from one level to the other.

In their paper on identifying individuals with cognitive impairments Luckasson and Reeve (2001) stressed the need for a good grasp of the concepts of naming, defining and classifying terms since individuals (organizations, governments) will view things differently for different purposes. The authors distinguished these terms clearly; “naming a term is assigned, defining the term is explained and classifying the group is divided into subgroups based on criteria” (p. 47). In relation to the Guyana situation, without a contextual definition, teachers and other members of societies will define special education need/disability by their own standards and by extension will thus create and or hinder the need for support services.

Special Education Need/Disability Policy in Guyana

In Guyana currently there is one document, the Disability Act of 2010 that has been approved that addresses the rights of persons with disabilities. The Act of 2010 speaks to the providing of accessible education for persons with disabilities but without operationalizing the steps (detailing). For example Laws of Guyana 39:01, Sub-Part II Education, Numbers 15 (1) and (2) speaks to the discourse of the Minister of Education “after consultation with the Commission (Disability), shall ensure that special requirements of persons with disabilities are addressed when formulating and implementing education policies and programmes.” The legislative piece continued affirming that the Minister of Education “shall encourage institutions to take into account the special needs of persons with disabilities”. For all good intent and purposes this legislative piece

lacks specificity in including what needs to be done and by further extension how the transition of learners with SEND from nursery to primary level should be facilitated effectively.

Prior to 2017, across its eleven educational districts, Guyana had seven special schools and three special units-a space within a mainstream school to house students with special education needs/disabilities (Cheong, Kellems, Anderson & Steed, 2018). Since then special units have been added. Of the all the special schools and units in Guyana currently, none has been designated as a space for nursery aged students. All fall under primary or secondary school guidelines and principles leaving a gap in the experiences and opportunities for early intervention services which include an effective transition from nursery to primary school in Guyana.

Transition Services From Nursery to Primary School

In Guyana, as in so many other Caribbean Countries, the concept of transition services is relatively new. Wright and Wright (2012) cited Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U. S. C. 701 et seq (37) in defining transition services-

“The term transition service means a coordinated set of activities for a student, designed within an outcome-oriented process, that promotes movement from school to post school activities, including post-secondary education, vocational training, integrated employment (including supported employment), continuing and adult education, adult services, independent living, or community participation. The coordinated set of activities shall be based upon the individual student’s needs, taking it into account the student’s preference and interests and shall include instruction, community experiences, the development of employment and other post school adult living objectives, and, when appropriate, acquisition of daily living skills and functional vocational evaluation” (p. 279)

Simply put, transition services are organized services implemented to support each student with a disability both at home and at school, following the individual into adulthood. So a student with a disability identified in early childhood range would be matched with services that support his learning and other needs, making the transition from nursery to primary school less troublesome in terms of the particular challenges he has faced in the nursery level due to his/her disability. For example a child with cerebral palsy might have his specific needs met in a neighborhood school that is equipped with a ramp, and washrooms designed for wheelchair access, with alternative and augmentative and alternative communication devices available as he needs them. As Dewey stated

in 1938, the interaction of the learner with the curriculum at every level is important for academic and social development at every level. This emphasizes the importance of effective transition from nursery to primary level laying the foundation for future effective interactions resulting in successful learning and socialization.

Recommendations

Providing for learners with SEND who are transitioning from the nursery to the primary level of education in mainstream schools remains a challenge in Guyana especially for those whose challenges and barriers are compounded as they struggle in their interactions with the curriculum and with their inclusion in their learning environment these challenges in transition will continue unless specific actions are under taken to address and alleviate problems that may be involved with the flawed structural organization, negative conscience of teachers, unwritten transitional frameworks etc. Some recommendations to support Guyana's education system in providing effective transition are explained in this section:

1. An addendum to the Disability Act 2010 should include transition services. A framework should be adopted that is flexible enough to allow school-level modification to facilitate transition and to support mainstream teachers in utilizing available resources and services to smooth learners transition between education levels, especially from nursery to primary school.
2. While the draft Inclusion policy is being operationalized and finalized a collective conscience must be accepted among district education officers, mainstream teachers and various levels, and local education stakeholders on the definition of SEND to be embraced in local mainstream schools. This collective understanding of SEND would be in the best interest of all, particularly those at the policy making levels. Luckasson and Reeve (2001) advocated for as a new definition of mental retardation was crafted.
3. Early intervention should involve collaboration across health, education and welfare sectors enabling easy flow of information. For example, the health sector could inform education

and welfare agencies of life circumstances affecting causality and effects of a student's disability including premature birth, troubled pregnancy, deficiencies during pregnancy, limited early socialization, domestic violence, abuse of any form etc. professionals involved in screening and assessment could train nursery teachers in entry-level screening, communicating results to and receiving primary schools to enable teachers to enact more informed planning and preparation for meeting individual students' transition needs. To further provide for the needs made apparent, transition packs and or kits for learners with SEND should be furnished to both nursery and primary schools across Guyana, and teachers must receive the additional resources and supports they need to update responses to the new challenges and diversities particular to incoming groups of transitioning learners.

4. Practicing teachers need opportunities to develop skills to facilitate effective transition across various levels of education, especially from nursery to primary, through continuous professional development sessions at both the University of Guyana and the National Centre for Education Resource Development. These CPD sessions should emphasize the reasonable adjustments, modifications and additional services needed for learners with SEND. An abstract theoretical emphasis would be inadequate; strong practice-based sessions in real settings to effectively facilitate transition instruction. Kretelow, Wood and Cook (2009) advised that the continuous professional development for teachers should have a coaching element.
5. Professional and academic training for mainstream teachers in Guyana should be upgraded to include two or three years at the University of Guyana, where they will be expected to conduct research in their schools and or education districts. Currently research seldom influences practices within the mainstream schools; teacher-researchers need experience informing their practice by research, in addition, SEN specialists and other researchers both the Ministry of Education and the University of Guyana have published empirical evidence

explicating current deficiencies and formulating recommendations to remedy these situations and reduce learners' barriers and teachers' challenges. Research and empirical evidence are seldom applied to inform practices, despite their ability to reflect the state of education in Guyana, especially related to the experience of learners with SEND.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors of this paper are passionate about improving the quality of life of individuals with SEND, beginning at the nursery education level; to do this requires that transition services be addressed and that nursery education be made mandatory. As previous discourse concludes, little exists in Guyana related to transitioning SEND learners from nursery to primary school. Providing a detailed transition policy and plan at the national level will guide and inform stakeholders of what is offered and how to access the services that can support the general development of the individual. The transition policy can validate the process while the plan can smooth flow and growth of individuals with SEND and their progress through the system.

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