

# Come Get These Students: An Exploration of Teachers' and Administrators' Experiences in an Inclusive Secondary School Setting in Urban Jamaica

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of teachers and administrators within an inclusive secondary school setting in urban Jamaica. The study presented here is part of a larger qualitative case study focusing on six teachers and four administrators, all working in an inclusive setting. Participants were selected using purposive, convenient, and unique sampling. Semi-structured interviews and an observation were conducted. The findings revealed that the inclusive classroom is fraught with many challenges; effective inclusion is hindered due to various factors; teachers within the inclusive classroom respond negatively and need professional development in order to meet the varying needs of special educational needs (SEN) students. It is recommended that greater sensitization, mentorship, and ongoing professional development be provided for teachers; while administrators need to invest fully in inclusion and help to foster a culture of inclusion in principle and in practice.

**Keywords:** inclusive classroom, differentiation, special educational needs

## Introduction

The topic of inclusive education has evolved over the years and has occupied the attention of many within the education sector. Consequently, there has been an increasing demand for inclusivity in educational practices, this however, has concomitant challenges. This study is part of a larger study focusing on the experiences of administrators and teachers with inclusive education in an urban secondary school in Jamaica.

According to Ainscow and César (2006), inclusive education is the biggest challenge facing schools worldwide. The challenge is multifaceted and according to Ainscow and César (2006) it is compounded by the fact that there are different perspectives worldwide on what an inclusive education looks like.

The term "inclusive education" has multiple definitions, foremost of which is the education of all students regardless of factors such as disability, race, age, and ethnicity (Blackman et al., 2019). However, for the purpose of this research the definition that will be used is that proposed by Leatherman (2007), inclusive education allows for the full-time placement of learners with special educational needs within mainstream classes with their typically developing peers.

Special educational needs in this study therefore refers specifically to students with diagnosed intellectual disabilities such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, autism, anxiety disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Task Force on Educational Reform, 2004).

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Inclusive schools typically provide support for SEN students as they function within the general classroom setting alongside their peers. Specialist teachers trained in special educational needs work alongside the general classroom teachers to provide support for students with varying needs. Additionally, students with special needs are expected to have Individualized Education Plans which are usually created from the special needs department and activated through the general education teacher supported by the special education teacher. The type of support needed could include accommodations ranging from allowing extra time to complete a task, providing a scribe, or modifying the tasks students are to complete, particularly for assessment purposes. Modifying the tasks for students could include adjusting the level of challenge that is expected of the student.

Inclusive education within Caribbean regions such as Jamaica cannot be divorced from a colonial past which enforced a culture of exclusion based on race and status (Blackman et al., 2019; Brissett, 2019). Peters (2004), as cited in Brissett (2019), notes that students with intellectual disabilities in early post-colonial Jamaica were described as “ineducable” and were taught in separate institutions as a form of charity. Nationally and internationally there is a focus on the educational and human rights of children to be maintained. These rights include the right to receive an education and more so without prejudice. In light of the current focus on the educational and human rights of children with special needs, there has been a thrust for Jamaica to fulfil its obligation to international human rights advocates such as the World Declaration on Education for All at the Jomtien 1990 World Conference (UNESCO, 1991); the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2015), and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2017). Jamaica’s Task Force on Educational Reform (2004) stipulates that “all children, young people and adults have the human right to benefit from an education that will meet their basic learning needs in the best and fullest sense of the term” (p. 11). In fulfilling its obligations, Jamaica has

published documents and created structures such as the special education unit within the Ministry of Education, tasked with providing support for schools and parents with children who have special needs as well as the students themselves. Additionally, the Disabilities Act of 2014 seeks to outline ways to support persons with disabilities. More recently, the draft Special Education Policy proposed in 2016 focuses on the promotion of inclusive education; access to, and equity in education for all students with special educational needs (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2022; Williams, 2019).

A recommendation from the Task Force of 2004 on Jamaica’s education system urged the inclusion of “special needs students in the regular classroom setting with the appropriate support services and instructional materials for the different groups of learners including resource rooms where necessary” (Task Force on Educational Reform, 2004, p. 124). Subsequently, the “Patterson Report” of 2021, which provided a comprehensive analysis of Jamaica’s education system nearly two decades later, endorsed the inclusion of children with special needs in regular classrooms where possible and the incorporation of inclusive education in teacher training institutions (The Jamaica Education Transformation Commission, 2021).

Moreover, Jamaica’s National Education Strategic Plan 2011–2020 had as an objective the promotion of inclusive education for all school-aged children in Jamaica, particularly those with special needs who were classified as underserved in the education system (Ministry of Education, 2012). However, the plans proposed in the National Education Strategic Plan have not yet materialised. This is compounded by the fact that Jamaica has no formal definition of inclusive education in policy and legislature, as noted by Gayle-Geddes (2020). Nevertheless, the Special Educational Policy, though still in its draft stage, can be considered progressive in its attempt to provide legislative support for the amendment of Jamaica’s Education Act and Disabilities Act (Ministry of Education and Youth, 2022). There is also progress in the policy’s aims to provide special needs coordinators; student support

teams (to include educational psychologists, learning materials, and shadows); examination accommodations; and teacher training (Gayle-Geddes, 2020).

Notwithstanding the progressive steps towards implementing inclusive education, a recent study from Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr (2017) indicated that there were approximately 102,000 SEN students in Jamaican public schools, with insufficient specialist teachers to aid students in optimising their full potential. More recent data from the Ministry of Education for the academic year 2018/2019 indicate that there were 10,063 children with disabilities from the pre-primary to secondary level in Jamaica, with 4,746 of these being children with intellectual and learning disabilities—there being only 6 inclusive schools islandwide to serve these students (Gayle-Geddes, 2020).

Jamaican teachers and administrators are familiar with the language of inclusion, but the difficult task of moving from talk to action, from paper to practice, has not been entirely accomplished. Jamaican teachers with SEN students therefore end up “teaching to the middle” primarily because, as Tomalin (2019) asserts, Jamaican teachers (typically those recently graduated from teachers’ colleges) feel ill-prepared to teach SEN students in an inclusive setting. According to Hertberg-Davis and Brighton (2006), administrators are critical to the successful implementation of strategies within inclusive classrooms, as teachers rely on them for resources and emotional support when employing inclusive strategies such as differentiation.

This study explores the experiences of teachers and administrators within an inclusive secondary school setting in urban Jamaica. The study aims to develop a critical understanding of how teachers respond to teaching students with diagnosed special educational needs such as dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in an inclusive setting, and how administrators see their roles and responsibilities as leaders within this setting. The research sought to address the questions:

1. How do teachers and administrators describe inclusive education?
2. What are teachers’ views about teaching in an inclusive classroom?
3. How do administrators describe their roles and responsibilities in an inclusive setting?

## Literature Review

Inclusive education is a response to educational reforms worldwide which place significant emphasis on equity and access for all. These tenets are reinforced by Sustainable Development Goal number 4 (SDG 4) which calls for “inclusive and equitable quality education” while “promot(ing) lifelong learning opportunities for all” (UNESCO, 2015, p. 7). It is within this context that the ensuing discussion examines four themes emerging from a review of the literature on inclusive education.

## Culture and Context

Culture and context are significant factors in determining how humans generally behave. Gregory (2018) postulated that a country’s historical, political, and economic context determines the extent to which it is successful at inclusion. The experience of colonialism has affected how Caribbean countries view and approach education—and by extension, inclusion (Blackman et al., 2019; Quamina-Aiyejina, 2000). Its colonial past has left the Caribbean with a segregated education system derived from the separation of state and religion (Blackman et al., 2019). Hierarchical in its structure, this system privileges those of higher social class and status over those of lower social class (Ibrahim-Joseph & Lavia, 2019; Blackman et al., 2019). This has resulted in schools that are deemed prestigious or “choice schools”, a notion that goes to the very root of disparity and inequality. It is against the backdrop of this colonial legacy of division and segregation that inclusive education is to be established. Quamina-Aiyejina (2000) painted a dismal picture by suggesting that in the case of Jamaica and Trinidad, “inclusive special needs education appears to be impossible to achieve”

(p. 17) and that the “Caribbean needs to find other ways and means to come closer to the aims and objectives of inclusive education” (p. 17).

Moreover, according to Ibrahim-Joseph and Lavia (2019), for inclusion to become a reality in Trinidad and Tobago (a Caribbean island with a colonial past and education system similar to Jamaica), the vestiges of the colonial past will have to be removed so that the relationship between teacher and student can be less colonial (where the teacher is superior and the student inferior), and one where there is mutual respect and shared power between the teacher and student. The authors posit that the sustained success of inclusion depends on shifts in pedagogical practices and an awareness that teachers’ cultural identity is as important and relevant as their professional identity (Ibrahim-Joseph & Lavia, 2019). The culture of a country (like that of a school) is important in determining how well new reforms are accepted and integrated with educational reforms such as that of inclusive education. Avramidis and Norwich (2002) noted that school culture is significant in determining how teachers respond to inclusion practices and the level of success that can be achieved. In responding to inclusive practices, teachers’ perceptions of inclusive education are of significance.

### **Teachers’ Perceptions of Inclusive Education**

Central to the literature on inclusive education is the perception of teachers about inclusion. Teachers’ perceptions are particularly critical, as they sit at the seat of power within the inclusive classroom as implementers of the written curriculum from which students are taught. Teachers’ perceptions of inclusion determine the success of inclusive practices within the inclusive classroom (Barco, 2007; Cambridge-Johnson et al., 2014; Rajovic & Jovanovic, 2013). Positive perceptions are predicated on many factors, including teachers having had active experiences with inclusion; professional development (generally and from university-based programmes); limitations in funding; and administrative support (Avramidis et al., 2000; Cambridge-Johnson et al., 2014; Gregory, 2018).

Specific to the Caribbean, Tomalin (2019) revealed in her small-scale quantitative study on Jamaican teachers that teachers’ positive perceptions were attributed to having hands-on experiences with inclusion and through modelling with a co-teacher. Additionally, Blackman (2017) found that Barbadian teachers generally had positive perceptions of inclusive education though they noted the challenges in teaching and managing children with special needs.

While the literature reveals teachers’ positive perceptions towards inclusive education, the predominant perception is negative. Glasgow-Charles et al. (2017) found that teachers in Trinidad and Tobago had negative perceptions towards inclusive education because professionally, they felt ill-prepared; lacked training in special education; and had limited knowledge about disability. Additionally, according to Glasgow-Charles et al. (2017), the teachers had personal reasons for their negative perceptions, such as increased workload; concerns about the school’s image, and about the severity of the students’ special needs. Similarly, in their qualitative study on Trinidadian teachers, Conrad et al. (2019) revealed that the teachers felt compelled to teach to the test to ensure that students were placed in prestigious or choice schools. In their opinion, inclusive education affected overall scores, especially since their worth as teachers was dependent on the outcome of their students. Tomalin (2019) on the other hand, found that among Jamaican teachers a negative social climate resulted in negative perceptions about inclusion. Nevertheless, many of the perceptions that teachers held towards inclusive education were based on the leadership of their schools.

### **Leadership and Inclusion**

The merit of an inclusive school system is largely dependent on the leadership of the schools. Leadership within schools refers to “those with pedagogical, resource allocation, and decision-making abilities and responsibilities” (Conrad et al., 2019, p. 41) who make inclusive education possible and effective. In reference to the Barbadian education system, Marshall (2017) posited that inclusive education is systematic in nature and therefore requires an

instructional leader to drive the process. This is problematic from an operational perspective because it includes the preparation of the principal and teacher, and the perception of stakeholders. The operationally problematic nature of inclusive education requires principal training to dispel the narrow and restrictive view of inclusion that leaders typically have (Marshall, 2017). Furthermore, Marshall (2017) posited that there needed to be a paradigm shift in how principals approach inclusive education.

Similarly, Conrad et al. (2019) also noted in their qualitative study on primary schools in Trinidad that teachers felt “frustrated that instructional, support, and administrative leaders did not see the disconnect between limited resources, training, and a mission for equitable education in facilitating effective inclusive education” (p. 42). Furthermore Brissett, as cited in Blackman et al. (2019), noted that principals’ “understanding of inclusion influences their practices, attitudes, beliefs, policies, and support for this approach” (p. 249). Blackman et al. (2019) discovered that there was a disconnect between the support teachers perceived that they received from their principals to implement inclusion and the support the principals perceived that they provided. The principals believed that they were offering valuable support by overseeing the administrative aspect of paperwork and scheduling meetings, while the teachers’ perception was that they received little to no support. This sense of disconnect between the perceptions of teachers and principals explains the challenges to inclusive education among teachers and educators. It is through the leadership of schools that support for teachers within inclusive schools can be achieved. One chief support that administrators can provide for teachers in inclusive educational institutions is professional development.

### **Professional Development**

The need for professional development by way of in-service training features heavily in the literature on inclusive education. Collins (2015) noted that professional development was needed to ensure that teachers were equipped with the capacity to adequately embrace inclusion. This

concept was endorsed by Tomalin (2019) who conducted a 2-week training session with five Jamaican teachers aided by an experienced inclusive teacher and mentor. This training session resulted in an improvement in teacher self-efficacy. Arguably, inclusion has forced teachers to recognise and accept responsibility for every child in their care (Gregory, 2018). These responsibilities may have been ignored in traditional classrooms, but with inclusion, teachers have to learn and relearn the skills needed to effectively use inclusion strategies within inclusive settings.

Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr (2017) noted that within the Caribbean region governments have sought to use legislation, laws, and policies to protect the SEN population and to transform the education system so that it can offer support to the SEN populations across the region. The support needed to transform the education system noted by Spencer-Ernandez and Edwards-Kerr (2017) is the training of SEN teachers through professional development and pre-service training. The authors noted that in 2017 Jamaica needed 167 trained SEN teachers in order to meet the growing specialist teacher demand. Additionally, “the data for all countries indicate that there is an overwhelming need for the provision of additional (SEN) teachers to provide the services necessary for students to maximize their potential in an inclusive education setting” (Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2017, p. 8).

### **Summary**

The inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms reflects a fundamental shift in traditional ways of educating students with special needs by honouring their human right to access quality education in an equitable manner consistent with their peers. Consequently, many scholars have conducted studies and have written extensively on the topic. The literature presented here highlights that culture and context are significant to the practice of inclusion in schools; there are both positive and negative perceptions of inclusive education; leadership is significant in

inclusive schools; and, professional development is needed for teachers within these settings.

The literature outlines several features of the inclusive classroom, but there is limited research on inclusive education in secondary schools; the focus being mainly on primary and elementary schools. Additionally, most research was found to be focused on public or government-owned schools and not on the experiences of independent or private school teachers. This study fills these gaps by highlighting the experiences of teachers at the secondary level. This is critical as students at this level are typically being groomed to enter the workforce and SEN students in an inclusive setting need to be equipped with the requisite skills to become functional citizens. This research on the experiences of teachers and administrators in a private/independent educational institution provides a point of reference when comparing how resources are used in meeting the needs of inclusive classrooms.

## Methodology

The research was conducted using the qualitative research paradigm, which is exploratory in nature and focuses on deepening the understanding of human interactions. It is also a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2014), thereby facilitating deeper meaning-making which allows for the exploration and construction of meanings from participants' own experiences. In the case of this research, the multiple perspectives of the teachers and administrators with inclusive education were explored, as afforded through the qualitative paradigm.

Qualitative research procedures "seek to understand social action through a more complex, nuanced and subtle set of interpretive categories" (Feagin et al., 1991, p. 17). These interpretive categories were applied to this research as they provided rigour and gave credence to the multifaceted nature of life and humanity. Moreover, qualitative research usually "brings us closer to the real human beings and everyday life" (Feagin et al., 1991, p. 23). It is this connection to the real world of teachers and administrators in an inclusive setting that

this research sought to explore. Finally, it is the "richness and subtle nuances of the social world that matter and that the qualitative researcher wishes to answer" (Feagin et al., 1991, p. 23). The richness that emerged from the data allowed for greater meaning making and exploration, in addition to the subtleties that were unearthed through the process of this research.

Case Study was used as the research design which, according to Saldana (2011), is a study focused on a single unit and as such enables in-depth and comprehensive study of the phenomenon being researched. Similarly, Feagin et al. (1991) define case study as an "in-depth, multi-faceted investigation, using qualitative research methods of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted with great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources" (p. 2). Additionally, the phenomenon in question can vary from an organization to a city and perhaps an entire group (Feagin et al., 1991). The aim therefore of this research was to focus on the administrators and teachers as a unit from an organization which enabled me to focus on the areas relevant to the study. Through this approach, a deeper understanding of the experiences of teachers and administrators in an inclusive setting was achieved. This is especially applicable, as a case study typically "seeks to capture people as they experience their natural, everyday circumstances" (Feagin et al., 1991, p. 2), thereby offering insights and perspectives for exploring the phenomenon in question.

## Site

The site of the research was a privately-owned school in urban Jamaica with a population of approximately 700 students. The school provided an inclusive setting which catered to the needs of learners from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with different diagnosed special educational needs ranging from less acute to mild. There was an Enrichment Department/ Special Educational Needs Department with approximately six teachers trained in special educational needs. The population of SEN students was a growing one which accounted for approximately 20% of the school's population.

The SEN students were taught alongside students in the regular education or mainstream classrooms. The teachers in the Enrichment Department provided support to regular education teachers and SEN students in different ways. The Enrichment Department used the IEP for each child to provide support to the general classroom teacher. The specialist teachers either supported students during scheduled subject classes (depending on the stipulations of the IEP) or had students meet in “pull out” sessions where students are taken from among the general population of students to be taught separately in the Enrichment Department. The department ensured that the individualized needs of the students were catered to based on the IEP (e.g. modification of assessments, providing extra time, providing a reader or scribe).

### Sample Selection

Approximately six teachers and three administrative members were used in total, with one participant interviewed as both teacher and administrator. The sample size was kept small, in keeping with Creswell’s notion that “overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes with the addition of each new individual” (Creswell, 2014, p. 209). The aim, therefore, was to keep the sample size small and manageable (under 20 participants), as recommended by Crouch and McKenzie (2006). Purposive sampling was used, and of the nine participants, four administrators were purposively sampled in order to gain their perspectives on inclusion. One administrator was interviewed first as a subject teacher and then as a follow-up in his capacity as programme administrator. Purposive sampling also applied to the mathematics teacher and the modern languages teacher in order to gain multiple perspectives from a core subject (mathematics) and a second language perspective. Convenient sampling was used which, according to Merriam (1998), aligns with the emergent nature of qualitative study as one does not know at the start all the persons who will be interviewed. The geography teacher, the English teacher, and the mathematics SEN specialist teacher were all conveniently sampled,

as other prospective participants did not follow through with the process for various reasons. Unique sampling was employed in the case of the English SEN specialist. Her insights were useful in providing different perspectives on the topic, especially because she had previously taught in the United States of America as well as in Jamaica—therefore enabling different perspectives.

**Table 1**

*Information on Teachers who Participated in the Study*

| Teachers     | Subject                      | # of Years Teaching | # of Years at the Inclusive Site |
|--------------|------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| Ms. Janet    | SEN Specialist (English)     | 8                   | 4                                |
| Ms. Molly    | SEN Specialist (Mathematics) | 7                   | 7                                |
| Ms. Margaret | French Teacher               | 7                   | 2                                |
| Ms. Amy      | Mathematics                  | 14                  | 7                                |
| Mr. Leroy    | Geography                    | 6                   | 2                                |
| Ms. Fiona    | English                      | 37                  | 14                               |

**Table 2**

*Information on Administrators who Participated in the Study*

| Administrators | Role                  | # of Years in Education | # of Years at the Inclusive Site in Current Role |
|----------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Mr. Leroy      | Programme Coordinator | 6                       | 8 months                                         |
| Mr. Lennox     | Principal             | Over 20 years           | 10 years (4 years as principal)                  |
| Ms. Sally      | Programme Coordinator | 20                      | 11                                               |
| Ms. Lucy       | Programme Coordinator | 5                       | 2                                                |

## Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary source of data collection. Data were collected from ten semi-structured interviews with teachers and administrators, in keeping with the emergent nature of qualitative research (Merriam, 1998). The interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes, and were conducted in person and through the virtual conferencing platforms, Zoom and Google Meet.

One in-person observation was conducted using a Grade 7 session of one of the English SEN specialist support sessions. Only one observation was conducted, as the data collection period occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when teachers were instructed to conduct online classes and provide asynchronous instructions. During the observation, I assumed the role of observer as participant in the observation which lasted for approximately 30 minutes. In my role as observer as participant, I was able to observe the participant in her natural setting while she offered support to the lead/regular education teacher with the SEN students present.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The process of data analysis began with me preparing the interview transcripts, ensuring that the recordings were accurately transcribed, removing all identifying features, and numbering each line. Similarly, the field notes were reviewed for readability while removing all identifying features of students, teachers, and the site. Field notes and transcripts were read over iteratively and simultaneously as a part of the coding process. I adopted the concept of memoing from the work of Kalpokaite and Radivojevic (2019). Memoing and coding were done simultaneously as the data were analysed.

The coding process was done manually. Inductive reasoning was applied in the act of constructing meaning from the data. The initial coding process created several leads for further analysis. The coding process was an ongoing one which involved repeated reading and coding iteratively, while simultaneously checking all data collected. Codes were grouped into clusters and then categorized based on similar characteristics

to note emerging patterns (Saldana, 2011). After coding the data, four themes and accompanying assertions emerged.

Themes and assertions were inductively drawn from the codes and categories created. Meaning was constructed and reconstructed in line with the constructivist philosophy inherent in qualitative research. The findings are presented here through thick descriptions.

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was achieved using Reflexivity and Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility was assured through triangulation across the interviews and the observation conducted. The variety of persons interviewed allowed for triangulation to occur as data were corroborated across interviews and with the one observation. Transferability was assured through the use of a detailed account of my findings in the form of thick descriptions. Member checking was used as each interviewee read the transcript of their interviews and confirmed the accuracy of information that was presented.

Reflexivity was employed in the form of notes and reflective journal entries about the research process. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the overall research process, source citing was used for the literature where studies previously conducted were used to corroborate my findings.

## Ethics

Ethical considerations were observed by firstly seeking permission to gain access to the site through the principal of the school. Informed consent forms were distributed to teachers and administrators and signed copies were returned and retrieved via email or in person, expressing permission for participants to participate in the study. Participants were informed through the informed consent forms and during the interviews that their information would be used only for the purposes of the study and that their identity would be kept confidential. Additionally, they were informed that pseudonyms would be used to refer to them in any report that would be produced about the study. They were informed that they had the right to withdraw at any time

if they felt the need to do so. This was done in order to preserve the integrity of the process of data collection and ultimately the credibility of the findings.

## Findings

The findings from the data collected in the semi-structured interviews and observation for this study are presented in four assertions. The assertions are: the inclusive classroom is fraught with challenges for both SEN students and teachers; teachers within inclusive classrooms respond negatively to inclusion; teachers within an inclusive setting need professional development in order to meet the varying needs of SEN students; and, effective inclusion is hindered due to various factors on the part of the teachers and the school administration.

### **The inclusive classroom is fraught with challenges for both SEN students and teachers**

Challenges with inclusive education vary, manifesting in many ways for teachers and for students. Students experience academic and emotional challenges, while teachers experience the challenge of using differentiation in planning and delivery to cater to the needs of their SEN students.

Students with SEN experience challenges with their own academic disability, which affects the quality and quantity of the work they produce. According to Collins (2015) children take into the classroom different experiences, different expectations, and challenges that can prevent them from learning. These challenges are sometimes compounded in the inclusive classroom especially for the SEN students with their own unique challenges, including difficulty with their ability to function due to poor executive function, where the brain does not function well cognitively and also in the area of memory retention (Zelazo et al., 2017). This impacts children with certain learning challenges (such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, autism, anxiety disorder, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), which may manifest in their academic performance and even their behaviour (Zelazo et al., 2017).

According to Miss Janet, the English specialist support teacher, SEN students struggle because of their own acute awareness of the academic challenges which affect the learning experiences for them. Miss Janet noted that

"they already know that they're coming from behind...because they know that some of these teachers know their weaknesses...they're trying their best not to shut down...but they're already in there fighting".

The struggle with academic disability was evidenced also in an encounter shared by Miss Janet:

Again, the regular ed teacher is up there, but I saw that the student was struggling, and I went over and I said, you know, "What's going on?" And he was like, "I hear what she's saying, but I'm not getting what she's saying". And so I said, okay. And I heard the catch in his voice.

She noted that for these students, their challenges were directly related to their disability. This notion was supported by Miss Molly who explained that "there's this term called executive dysfunction, where you are just literally unable to organize yourself in a way to serve your own self, to thrive". This executive dysfunction limits SEN students' ability to support their own academic goals and was evidenced in an observation of a Grade 7 class where Miss Janet was offering support as the specialist. A SEN student, Lue, seemed to have been struggling to organize himself:

Lue walks to the front of the classroom and he stoops over the electrical outlet with a laptop charger in his hands. He stands there for a few seconds before bending over. He seems to be fumbling with the electrical outlet to plug in the laptop charger. He walks back to his seat. The specialist motions to him and he shrugs his shoulders. She points to a spot to the left side of the classroom close to the back where there seems to be an electrical charging outlet. He goes back up to the front of the room and takes the charger. He goes to the spot where the specialist had pointed and plugs in his laptop. The specialist teacher assists him in getting a chair to place his laptop. He goes back to his seat and sits with his head down. He has a phone in his lap. He bends over, apparently typing on it. (Observation, 30.11.2020)

Janet recounted that “they already know that they’re coming from behind...because they know that some of these teachers know their weaknesses. They’re trying their best not to shut down...but they’re already in there fighting”.

Likewise, Leroy highlighted similar challenges experienced by SEN students in stating that “many of them would give up halfway into doing the task...they feel left behind all the time. Feeling left behind, they get overwhelmed, they shut down and just do not do any work at all”.

Students with SEN experience challenges with their own academic disability, which affects the quality and quantity of the work they produce and also affects their emotional state. Additionally, participants noted challenges as teachers within the inclusive space, specifically with the use of differentiation. Lucy shared that:

It is a lot of work and our teachers, continuously, you know, just lament the amount of stress and the amount of labour and work. It is tough to differentiate. Differentiation is great in theory, and there’s so many theory books on it. I don’t think that many, many teachers have gotten the practical of how to really implement that fully in their classroom. And so when you have a classroom of 25 students, and you talking about differentiation and inclusion, there may be a problem there.

The SEN students are also affected emotionally, and this creates a personal challenge for them as they feel out of place—which can affect the work that they produce, their self-worth, and even their behaviour. According to Nurgul et al. (2018) students with special educational needs encounter a number of factors, including anxiety and stress that impact their behaviour. Moreover, there is a mismatch in priorities and opportunities in the teaching of these students which increases their level of anxiety consequently affecting their overall psycho-emotional state (Nurgul et al., 2018).

Miss Margaret noted how out of place some SEN students felt and how this feeling can sometimes manifest in negative talk and behaviour.

I know that sometimes they feel as if they’re different, as if they’re not smart enough... So even today I was talking to a student, and he was saying, “Oh, Miss I don’t do Spanish”. I was saying, but everyone has to do Spanish. And he says, “no, I don’t because I’m *special*”. And this is a student who I know acts out a lot. I myself have had lots of problems with him when I was teaching him. But I can tell that he’s very confident, very secure and everything, but I can tell that on some levels deep down, he feels a little insecure about his learning needs and can be withdrawn from everyone else.

SEN students’ emotional instability can exhibit itself in self-conscious actions which affect their peer interactions and their learning experiences. During the observation of Miss Janet’s session referenced earlier, SEN student Lue seemed self-conscious and somewhat distanced from his peers. Lue, “goes to the door of the classroom. SEN specialist goes over to the lead teacher and whispers while Lue is by the door with his back facing the class” (Observation, 30.11.2020). Lue turned his back to his peers and did not make eye contact with them throughout the observation. In fact he only seemed to be interacting with the lead/regular education teacher and Miss Janet.

The major challenge for teachers is planning for SEN students, particularly using differentiation. Differentiation is to inclusion what water is to the body; it is so essential that it is the main staple of the inclusive classroom. The theory and practice of differentiation emerged in a response to the growing diverse population within a mixed ability classroom<sup>1</sup> (an inclusive classroom<sup>2</sup>) in order to meet the unique needs of each child individually (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017). Additionally, according to Collins (2015), differentiation is not a new concept, but it is more critical than ever before in ensuring that all students within an inclusive setting meet high academic standards. As noted by Mr. Leroy it is through differentiation that “every student is able to produce at their highest ... and that means that differentiation has to be fundamental and foundational in that approach”.

<sup>1</sup> The mixed ability classroom refers to students operating at different levels or ability to include the advanced student, average student, low performing student, and the SEN student being placed in the same classroom.

<sup>2</sup> The inclusive classroom refers to students with diagnosed special education needs being placed with students who do not have diagnosed special educational needs in the same classroom.

However, despite the necessity of differentiation in an inclusive setting to meet the needs of SEN students, it is challenging and “adopting differentiation in everyday practice is not an easy task” (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017, p. 124). Additionally, though differentiation has merits, its challenges and complexities create a struggle for teachers in everyday practice, as many struggle to move from the theory of differentiation to its practice (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017). Teachers and administrators who participated in the research admitted to the challenge that differentiation poses in the classroom. Administrator, Miss Lucy noted that:

it is tough to differentiate for the needs of all students in a class. It is a lot of work and our teachers, continuously, you know, just lament the amount of stress and the amount of labour and work. It is tough to differentiate. Differentiation is great in theory, and there’s so many theory books on it. I don’t think that many, many teachers have gotten the practical of how to really implement that fully in their classroom. And so when you have a classroom of 25 students, and you talking about differentiation and inclusion there may be a problem there.

Though difficult, differentiation is the main recommendation proffered to effectively meet the needs of SEN students in an inclusive setting. Therefore, according to Miss Molly, failure to differentiate results in an overall failure in these classrooms. “I know that differentiation requires a lot of work, but ultimately we’re here for students. So if we’re not meeting students’ needs, we are failing”.

### **Teachers in Inclusive Classrooms Respond Negatively to Inclusion**

Cambridge-Johnson et al. (2014) noted that effective inclusion is dependent on how teachers respond to inclusion. They cited that teachers have both positive and negative attitudes to inclusion and these attitudes were due to many variables (Cambridge-Johnson et al., 2014).

Teachers who respond negatively to SEN students tend to feel as though these students

do not necessarily belong in the classroom—either because they feel ill-equipped to meet their varying needs or because they believe that the gifted students can be overlooked. According to Miss Janet, some teachers have the mindset that, “this is not my problem, because that’s not why I’m here. I’m here to teach this, this, this, and yes, that student is in there, but, come get the students or something”. Similarly, according to Miss. Lucy:

You also have teachers who will come to you and will lay out their hearts on why is this student in my class? Are we a special needs school and what do you expect me to do? What wizardry do you expect me to perform?

While some teachers’ negative response may be due to the perception that SEN students are not their problem, there are those who are concerned for the gifted students who may be overlooked when all attention is focused on the SEN students. Miss Amy noted, “I think we focus so much on the kids who have a lot of difficulties, you know, the disabilities if you want to call it that. And so, the gifted kids tend to just, I guess, get overlooked.”

A generally negative response to SEN students is also a negative response to inclusion as a model. Piten et al. (2018) noted that there are many reasons for teachers’ negative response to SEN students, stemming mainly from them feeling ill-equipped to deal with SEN students, especially those with severe learning challenges.

### **Teachers in an Inclusive Setting Need Professional Development in order to meet the Varying Needs of SEN Students**

Professional development is critical to meeting the needs of SEN students within an inclusive setting. Rajovic and Jovanovic (2013) cited inadequate professional development of teachers as a barrier to effective inclusion. Teachers in the study noted feeling ill-equipped to meet the challenges of the inclusive classroom because they did not believe they had the

requisite skills to truly cater to the needs of SEN students. Mr. Leroy admitted that, "I don't feel I have the requisite skill sets to deal with students with special educational needs. There are persons who go to school for 3-4 years just to target and to focus on dealing with special education needs". Additionally, Miss Amy also shared the perception of Mr. Leroy. According to her, "as much as I am a teacher, as much as they would tell us that we are special needs teachers, I wouldn't consider myself a specialist and because of that sometimes I do feel a little ill-prepared to teach SENs".

Moreover, the lack of preparedness and skills can manifest in situations that are potentially dangerous for both teachers and students; and with the appropriate skills these moments can be minimized. Miss Lucy recounted an incident where an SEN student created an uproar and both teachers and students were scared until the head of the specialist unit arrived.

And one day someone made him upset and he said, "I want to blow off all your heads with a shotgun." And everyone was afraid. The enrichment head came in, had a conversation with them and said absolutely nothing like that is in his actual will to do. "You guys are fine." And she was confident and it was true, you know, and she was able to say that it's in his report. He says these types of things all the time, but teachers and students were on edge. And so I think as administration, you know, those things caught teachers by surprise. That was scary.

It is this feeling of being ill-prepared or ill-equipped to meet the needs of SEN students within an inclusive setting that highlights the need for teacher professional development. In this regard, Mr. Lennox sees his role as principal to be important in "respond(ing) to the needs of the students, whether that is professional development training" or otherwise. Similarly, administrator Miss Lucy noted that as administrators they needed to "think about what are the professional development sessions that we may need to have". It is this upskilling that Mr. Leroy considered to be paramount to meeting the needs of SEN students in an inclusive setting:

It becomes very important that the teachers are upskilled in these areas, whether it means you're going to provide scholarship opportunities for them to pursue studies, to understand the needs of special education students, or you're going to send them on certain mini-training sessions, whatever the case may be. But once a needs assessment has been done, you realize that a large proportion of your population has special educational needs, and 90% of your teaching staff are not equipped to deliver a special educational needs curriculum.

Professional development is an important part of building the capacity of teachers to meet the needs of SEN students, while also enhancing their skills and confidence to truly meet the needs of SEN students in the inclusive classroom. Collins (2015) postulated that professional development is a requirement for supporting inclusive professional practices.

### **Effective inclusion is hindered due to various factors such as time constraints and the availability of resources**

Teachers and administrators in an inclusive setting contend with a number of challenges to effective inclusion which can compound the issues teachers have with applying inclusive practices.

Teachers are often constrained by time factors which affect how effective they can be in meeting the needs of SEN students. Teachers find it difficult to cover the content while balancing the slower pace that is required for some SEN students to grasp the concepts being taught. Valeo (2008) noted teachers' frustration related not only to curriculum issues within an inclusive setting but also to issues related to time constraints. Miss Janet noted that as educators within this setting "we're not able to do all that we can based on the time limit that we have". Additionally, Miss Margaret noted that her challenge is making time to allow SEN students to fully grasp the concepts being taught.

I don't always get the time to pinpoint. And sometimes we don't have the time because if I call and I know that so-and-so is going to struggle, but I still have to, and I have to wait for him and re-explain and go on and on.

The literature on inclusive education cites lack of resources as a significant barrier to inclusive education. Mentz and Barrett (2011) noted that in Jamaica lack of funding has affected the availability of resources to meet the needs of inclusion in publicly-funded schools. Miss Janet made a comparison between the specialized resources in the United States where she worked and the site of the study which, though a privately-funded school with many resources for students, resources are lacking for the SEN students.

When I taught overseas, say for instance, in reading, we would have levelled books and stuff like that. And we'd have these reading groups and again, it was mixed. So John would have the same say, it was the *Three Little Pigs*, but we would find these levelled books. And so John would have a level, then Mary Sue would have a level you know, and they all, because the cover of that book would have the same thing, but if you flip it open...

In her role as administrator Miss Sally acknowledged that unavailability of resources does affect the efficacy of inclusive education, especially as SEN support is not a financial priority. She noted that "approaches to teaching and learning of SEN students can be expensive as teachers will need training, resources will be needed, and so the amount of investment (human resources or otherwise) is not a priority".

The increase in the number of SEN students has impacted the availability of resources, which in turn has affected the efficacy of the inclusion being offered to SEN students. According to Miss Lucy, "SEN students have been neglected and shortchanged. That's a big conversation that we've been having as our SEN students increase. And so, budget-wise, at our last coordinators' meeting, they spoke about the need to have actual SEN support".

Similarly, Mr. Leroy acknowledged that from an administrative viewpoint, human resources were lacking, which prevented true inclusion as "quite a number of our teachers do not necessarily have the skill-set and the resources that are required to effectively model an inclusive classroom, and I think that's a fundamental challenge that administrators are facing".

The lack of human resources is evident in the Special Needs Department itself according to Mr. Leroy, "they (the Special Needs Department) have already recognized that that team cannot manage the gamut of special education needs and the challenges that come with it."

Effective inclusion can be hampered if the factors that promote inclusion are not in place and are not activated to meet the varying needs of SEN students.

## Discussion

### Challenges to Inclusion

The findings show that on the administrative level there are effective practices being employed to meet the needs of SEN students within the inclusive setting. These practices include collaboration and tracking of SEN students. Collaboration among administrators is useful in fostering teamwork, thereby creating a strong support system for teachers to rely on. Tracking of SEN students' progress is also an effective strategy noted by McLeskey et al. (2012) as one of the successful criteria for inclusive schools. Tracking allows for anomalies to be identified in students' academic performance as soon as they arise, so that appropriate interventions can be taken.

The findings also point to inefficiencies in relation to the allocation of resources to meet the needs of the inclusive school. The lack of human and material resources affects the efficiency of the inclusive programme, as with more personnel to support regular teachers there would be less instances of negative responses. Funding was also lacking in the area of professional development, specifically for training in the area of special educational needs.

The findings indicated that inclusion was not being practised holistically within all departments, as the Mathematics Department practiced streaming of students, which was contrary to the principle of inclusion and contradicted the claim of being an inclusive school. Inclusion has to be practiced holistically and understood as such by all teachers for success to be achieved (McLeskey et al., 2012). This need for streaming mathematics

students could be linked to the traditional mindset of administrators, whereby high grades are indicative of success. Evans (2001) noted that in Jamaican schools, streaming or tracking students according to their academic ability was a major feature of the education system. According to Evans (2001), so commonplace was streaming that neither teachers nor parents thought critically about this academic grouping of students according to ability.

Jamaica's social and historical educational context perpetuates a sense of exclusion. This is evidenced in early post-independent Jamaica where special needs students were excluded from receiving formal education as they were considered "ineducable" (Peters, 2004, as cited in Brissett, 2019) and the hierarchical structure of the Jamaican education system. Quamina-Aiyejina (2000) noted that with Jamaica's colonial legacy, inclusion of special needs in education may be impossible to achieve if there are no attempts to commit to the aims and objectives of inclusive education. These socio-historical realities highlight the need for inclusive practices to be more than rhetoric, but to be actively practised.

### **Challenges Faced by SEN Students**

The findings are significant in understanding the academic and emotional challenges faced by SEN students. Academically, many SEN students are challenged by executive dysfunction, which can manifest in poor academic performance and poor behavioural conduct. Emotionally, SEN students feel out of place and as such do not always exert confidence and may even be self-conscious. Although a few will own and accept their challenges, not all do so in an emotionally healthy way—isolating themselves, not interacting, or displaying disruptive behaviours.

The negative responses to inclusion, demonstrated by teachers as well as members of the wider society, compound the challenges experienced by SEN students. A negative perception of inclusion is a common feature of inclusive education. Tomalin (2019) noted the social climate as being the source of the negative attitudes towards inclusion in Jamaica.

The inclusive school setting used in this research indicated that some teachers felt that their SEN students did not belong in their classroom and should be removed. Swinton (2012) purports that the need for belonging is greater than the incorporation of inclusive practices generally and even legislatively. If one accepts Swinton's views, inclusive schools should go beyond the day-to-day practice of inclusion as expected in policy and focus on the students' emotional needs so that they feel as though they belong. According to Swinton (2012), this feeling of belonging requires a change of heart on the part of teachers to meet the emotional needs of their SEN students.

### **Professional Development**

Teachers did seem challenged with differentiation and could benefit from professional development in this area. The feeling of being ill-prepared to meet the demands of the inclusive classroom requires attention if both teachers and students are to thrive in this environment. The findings also indicate that while the IEPs are used by specialist teachers and administrators, the recommendations are not consistently used by teachers in noting the accommodations needed to meet the needs of SEN students. The culture of support for SEN students through the Special Educational Department is evident, but this does not prevent teachers from feeling overwhelmed by their SEN students; thus the need for consistent upskilling through professional development.

Teachers were mainly challenged with differentiation and professional development would help them to use it in their lesson delivery. Despite the necessity of differentiation in an inclusive setting to meet the needs of SEN students, it is challenging and "adopting differentiation in everyday practice is not an easy task" (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017, p. 124). Additionally, though differentiation has its merits, teachers struggle to move from the theory to the practice (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017), therefore resulting in its limited or inaccurate use.

Professional development is a distinct

need in the inclusive classroom, as teachers complain of feeling ill-equipped to meet the needs of SEN students. This feeling is also connected to some of the negative perceptions that teachers have towards inclusion. Though professional development is needed to improve the practice of teachers in meeting the needs of SEN students (Mukhopadhyay, 2012; Piten et al., 2018; Spencer-Ernandez & Edwards-Kerr, 2017), limited resources allocated for training hinder its implementation (Cambridge-Johnson et al., 2014).

## **Recommendations**

### **Sensitization**

In order to encourage a greater appreciation for inclusion in its true sense there needs to be sensitization of teachers on the legal and professional obligations of inclusion, especially in light of the implications of Sustainable Development Goal #4. Teachers need to understand that failure to embrace inclusion or to incorporate inclusive strategies is an infringement of the human rights of the child and a forfeit of the SDG #4 goal for inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all.

### **Mentorship/Collaboration**

Teachers who find inclusion and differentiation difficult and are frustrated with their students' special educational needs should be provided with mentorship from colleagues who are evidently coping well so they can pass on best practices to the teachers who are evidently challenged and provide scaffolding support for teachers in differentiation.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development in the areas of inclusion and differentiation should be ongoing—at least once per term. A known challenge of implementing inclusion is moving from theory to practice (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2017). With reinforcement, hands-on experiences will be gained that can only benefit teachers (Tomalin, 2019).

## **Practice Inclusion in all Subjects**

Streaming for mathematics should be discontinued so that true inclusion can be practiced in all subject areas; this can only lead to success. As noted by McLeskey et al. (2012), a welcoming and supportive environment for all students that encourages high levels of achievement for all without exclusion is critical for successful inclusion.

## **Culture of Inclusion**

A culture of inclusion should be fostered among all stakeholders. The shared understanding that everyone belongs in the classroom should minimize teacher resistance or thoughts of removing SEN students from classes.

Negative labels should be removed and a greater appreciation of students as individuals with needs like everyone else should be fostered. According to McLeskey et al. (2012), this is one factor that leads to success of inclusion. Additionally, the sense of belonging that is critical to inclusion (Swinton, 2012) will also be cultured.

This should lead to the normalization of adoption of the recommendations in the IEP, not just by the Special Educational Needs Department, but at the individual teacher level. Resources for inclusion should also be prioritized, thereby fostering an ethos of inclusion in all aspects of school life.

## **Conclusion**

Inclusive classrooms are designed to cater to the needs of SEN students who are typically placed at a disadvantage in other spaces. It is the recommended environment to ensure that the needs of all students are met and to foster equitable educational experiences for all. Jamaica's Ministry of Youth and Education's slogan, "every child can learn, every child must learn" represents its commitment to inclusion, which is also articulated in its mission statement of providing quality education in inclusive environments. However, despite the rhetoric of inclusion, this study (which focused on the experiences of teachers and administrators within an inclusive setting in urban Jamaica) revealed

some of the challenges surrounding inclusion of students with special educational needs. Mutual acknowledgement of these challenges from administrators and teachers is crucial, alongside a well-coordinated effort to ensure that inclusion of SENs is evidenced in the collective daily practices of teachers and administrators.

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