Think Tank Summary

Executive Summary

The Think Tank on Disability, Integration and Development was held at the JFK Auditorium of the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus from the 18th to the 20th May, 2004. The aim of the Think Tank was to discuss ideas and strategies that would facilitate the successful integration of persons with disabilities into the arena of education and ultimately into all areas of society. Throughout the three day event it was noted by several persons that although various International Human Rights Conventions have accounted for and provided accommodation for persons with disabilities it has been a common practice for institutions in the Caribbean to ignore these recommendations. Several persons spoke during the course of the event and gave insightful comments and recommendations. The key persons and their contributions are highlighted below.

Day Two

Opening Ceremony

Mrs. Arlene Mc Comie, Permanent Secretary, Office of the Prime Minister (Social Services Delivery)

Mrs. Mc Comie acknowledged the critical role of education in ensuring that persons with disabilities not only survive but maintain their position. She proposed that an adequate educational foundation can assist in leveling the playing field as persons with disabilities enter the labour force. She also commented that the main barriers to full inclusion of persons with disabilities are not to be found in the infrastructure but rather in the mind of the general population in the form of discrimination.

Ms. Maria Thomas, Special Schools Supervisor, Ministry of Education

Ms. Thomas stated that the broader vision of the Ministry of Education is to ensure that all the children of the nation are able to exit the school process in a manner that will
allow the children to access quality employment. In a direct response to the current situation the Ministry of Education in Trinidad and Tobago has embarked on a programme the aim of which is to remedy this defect in the education system. One aspect that was worthy of mention was the inclusion of the Early Childhood Care and Education module. This aspect of the education process will facilitate the early identification of children with disabilities so that early correction and/or assistance can take place. This will play a major role in determining the chances of future success for children with disabilities. The Ministry of Education has also taken the necessary steps to encourage screening for all persons in the education system at the early ages. This too will aid in identifying those children who may have learning disabilities.

Ms. Mary Mitchell – Keynote Speaker and Chairperson of Disabled Peoples International the Caribbean Chapter

Ms. Mitchell sought to outline the inconsistencies that exist in the Caribbean region in terms of the preservation of human rights for all persons. The Declaration of Human Rights affords provisions yet in the Caribbean she noted persons with disabilities are frequently denied ‘access’.

Ms. Mitchell noted that in the Caribbean there is still discrimination in the form of access to buildings, negative stereotyping and a sense of helplessness among the disabled community.

She said if anyone were to consider the term ‘access’ six things come to mind:

- Education
- Health care
- Housing
- Employment
- Transportation
- Recreation

She also noted that when the disabled have reached this level of actualization there would be equal access to everyone.

She then highlighted some positive changes that have occurred in the Caribbean, for example, in St. Lucia there is a very good system of integration of persons with disabilities into the regular school system and in Jamaica similar movements have begun. There was also mention of Special Education Units in many Caribbean countries and it
was observed that through this medium that younger children have been able to sit and pass the equivalency exam that will allow them to be mainstreamed, that is, placed in regular schools. These measures however are still not enough for full access to be attained.

Ms. Mitchell noted that integration is the best way to test a disabled child and prepare him for life in the ‘real world’. She observed that many disabled persons in the Caribbean were not successful nor were they given the benefit of tertiary education because of limited access to buildings and the lack of assistive technology. She insisted that there must be the use of interpreters who will be able to assist those students who can perform well in the mainstream.

Some of the common problems that are encountered by the disabled are lack of respect from the general public, unemployment and underemployment. Even though this is the case there are regional conferences that are always held to discuss measures to integrate them and overcome these problems. However, Ms. Mitchell observed that the presentations at these conferences seem to suggest that the disabled community is fully taken care of in this region and this is far from the reality.

Ms. Mitchell ended by saying that Caribbean governments were recognizing that persons with disabilities are a viable part of the electorate and it is a duty of those who have such disabilities to ensure that recent policies such as those outlined above would not be put to rest but come to fruition.

**Day Two**

**Morning Session**

Session One:

The first session for the day consisted of two lectures by Dr. Marva Ribeiro and Mrs. Kathleen Anderson the highlights of which are as follows:-
Dr. Marva Ribeiro – Overview of the Status of Disability in Education in Trinidad and Tobago

Dr. Ribeiro began her address by stating that the Ministry of Education’s plan is to craft a programme that will foster the holistic development of ‘all’ children but she was unable to fully agree that this was being done with all children in mind particular those that are categorized as impaired.

She made reference to the terms that are used to categorize children in education in Trinidad and Tobago.

- There are children who are sensory impaired as well as those who possess special talents.
- There are children who do not currently have a disability but are at risk of developing such from birth or from the school environment.
- There are children with special needs. These children have greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children at that particular age. The focus should be on what the child needs to learn in education and how best he can access the curriculum.
- There is also reference to categorical and non-categorical approaches to educating children with exceptionalities. These categories can change according to the text that is used but they are important so that each group of children can be treated with individually.

Dr. Ribeiro proceeded to outline an area of great concern, that is, the fact that very little research had been collected in Trinidad and Tobago on the extent of the population of persons with disabilities. Two such surveys had been conducted and their results were questionable in terms of their validity and reliability.

1. 1984 – A major National Survey was conducted which was the first initiative to try to collect data about persons with disabilities. With the data that was sourced an estimate of 16.1% of the children 3 to 16 years old fell into one of seven categories of disability.
2. 2000: Universal Secondary Education – when the programme of secondary education for all was employed, all persons who sat the Common Entrance Examination and obtained a score of less than or equal to 30% were deemed to have had a disability.

Dr. Ribeiro was willing to recognize that the education system in Trinidad and Tobago was lacking in many areas in terms of the way it provided for persons with disabilities. Some of the areas of deficiency are:

- Policy in education that deals with exceptional children
- Legislation for the Disabled that supports the policy
- Enforcement of said legislation
- Accountability is insisted upon
- Parental involvement by all interested persons
- Advocacy by parents and other groups
- Choice

The speaker ended her discussion by saying that if the education system was to attempt a policy of inclusion the following must be considered:

- Teacher Education
- Issues of Accessibility to important buildings, transport, jobs, schools, loans and funding
- Poverty and its impact on children with special needs
- Health care
- New Technologies in Education
- School to work transition for the child with special needs

Mrs. Kathleen Anderson – The St. Augustine Girls High School Experience

The St. Augustine Girls High School is located in Trinidad and has had a rich history of students with disabilities that have been successful in their academic pursuits. Mrs. Anderson noted that the success for the students with disabilities at this school is not the norm since in many schools persons with disabilities do not assimilate that well. She also acknowledged that even though most of the girls with disabilities were able to succeed there were constraints and challenges. Some of the challenges experienced were:
Lack of knowledge and training; the students were placed at the school with no support or training from the Ministry of Education

No special facilities and infrastructure were provided

No special personnel were provided to augment the needs of the children

Mrs. Anderson outlined some of the critical factors that are needed to help persons with disabilities to succeed in all schools:

- Legislation and enforcement
- Correct school culture
- Teachers willing to make the extra effort
- Parental support
- Financial support

Session Two:
The second session of the day consisted of a panel discussion by various speakers on the types of disabilities in the field of education. The highlights of each segment are presented below:

**Dr. Peter Poon King – Physical Disabilities**

Dr. Poon King is a medical doctor and he outlined the common physical disabilities that are faced by the children in Trinidad and Tobago:

- Cerebral palsy
- Epilepsy
- Asthma/allergy
- Intestinal colic
- Club Foot
- Muscular Dystrophy
- Arthritis
- Growing Pains
- Scoliosis
- Sickle Cell
- Gynaecomastia

Dr. Poon King concluded by stating that community based healthcare is needed to augment institutionalized care if persons with disabilities are to be adequately provided for.
Ms. Marsha Williams – Visual and Hearing Impairments

Ms. Williams began her presentation by stating that her focus would be finding ways to integrate the visual and hearing impaired into the education system from an assessment point of view. Ms. Williams informed all present that there are two main types of tests available in Trinidad and Tobago: screening and diagnostic testing. These tests provide information on the basic skills like reading and mathematics but they also assess behaviour.

The methods used to collect the information are:

- Observation
- Interviews
- Collection of school records and cards
- Evaluation results
- Medical history

Ms. Williams said that the information that is collected from these tests assists teachers and professionals in setting appropriate goals and determining if the student achieved individual requirements. She alluded to the fact that for the system to work there must be commitment and consistency on the part of all.

The speaker noted that there must be cooperation with the necessary institutions such as the Trinidad and Tobago Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired and with parents for the system to be of maximum effect. It would mean:

- All persons would have to be willing to work together and share information in the interest of the child.
- Tests have to be valid and reliable if they are to be of any worth.
- There have to be proper records to ensure that the child’s progress is correctly marked. There must be honesty and integrity on the part of all personnel as well as the teachers must be willing to open themselves to scrutiny to allow those who are assessing to see if the child is able to learn according to the particular teacher’s style.
Ms. Williams ended by reminding all that the system of continuous assessment in practice is a thorough system that if implemented properly and in its entirety is supposed to work in the interest of the child.

**Dr. Esla Lynch – The Learning Disabled**

Dr. Lynch began by stating her firm belief that it is important that in preparing documentation for the disabled those that have hidden disabilities are not excluded. She noted that the learning disabled are often very intelligent but have difficulties in some areas of learning.

She outlined the different categories of learning disabilities as follows:

- Visual perceptual disabilities
- Auditory processing difficulties
- Language learning disability
- Perceptual Motor Difficulties
- Attention Deficit Disorders
- Hyperactive
- Impulsive
- Non Verbal Learning Disability
- Hyplexia – an unusual language disorder.

Dr. Lynch spoke separately about behavioural and emotional disabilities. She presented some practical issues that would have to be addressed if there is to be effective treatment of each of these groups of children:-

- Teachers need to be trained in how to use inventories properly.
- Teachers must not only be able to screen but to do error analysis.
- There is a dire need for trained psychologists, speech therapists and other sub-professionals.
- Resources can be used to buy the services of professionals who are already in the system.
- Assessment needs to be supplemented by treatment.
Dr. Harrinath Maharaj – Disabilities through Chronic Diseases including Psychological Diseases.

Dr. Maharaj began his presentation by outlining the various models that are used to categorize or rationalize the term ‘disability’. The three models are as follows:

- **Social Model** – it is the social construction of restriction, oppression and discrimination and disadvantage.
- **Medical Model** – the person’s impairment is the sole cause for his disadvantage
- **The Individual Model** – it is an individualized problem and a personal tragedy rather than a public issue.

Each of these models has a philosophical underpinning that determines how programmes are developed and how persons with disabilities are treated.

He then went on to outline the model that should be used for integration and to state the benefits of integration. The proposed model for integration says that there should be two children with disabilities to every twenty children who are without disabilities. He stated that children with disabilities should be integrated into the school as this will have many benefits, such as:

- The students will be close to the home
- The closer proximity will encourage family involvement
- The move will enlist and foster understanding and acceptance.

**Afternoon Session**

Session One:
The first session was a lecture on the concept of reasonable accommodation the main points of which are outlined as follows:-

**Dr. Neil Singh – Reasonable Accommodation**

Dr. Singh began by outlining the following ways in which discrimination in education occurs -
• Unlawful Direct Discrimination – this may occur if a deaf person is refused entry to a course because he is unable to hear or if a student is visually impaired and is told he cannot do a science course because he is a risk to other students.

• Unlawful Indirect Discrimination – this may occur as the result of lack of access to a lecture theatre or in the case of accessible course material or if a person is disadvantaged by default.

A reasonable accommodation is a modification of a course that will allow equal access to instructional opportunities. This means academic staff has to make adjustments to ensure all persons are able to participate in the course. He stressed the need for policy to ensure that the persons with disabilities are not placed in a disadvantageous position but they should not be given an unfair advantage either.

Dr. Singh outlined the needs of the University of the West Indies to fully effect reasonable accommodation as follows:

• There is the need for a student office for those with disabilities
• There is need for early registration so the disabled do not have to go through the lengthy process and wait in long lines
• There is need for tools such as note takers, interpreters, escorts, adaptive technology such as JAWS software, special computer services in the library, and liaisons with lecturers
• There should the adjustment of time tables to accommodate students who need more time
• The Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) should have the ability to recommend adjustments in timetables and course work to assist students who need extra time.

Dr. Singh’s presentation was followed by two personal testimonies of students with disabilities. The first was by Mr. Kern Tyson who attained up to ‘A’ Level and is currently gainfully employed and the second was by Ms. Mysty Thongs who at the time of the conference was pursuing her Undergraduate Degree in geological Science and Engineering at Cornel University in the United States of America.
Session Two:
This segment consisted of one presentation and a question and answer segment the highlights of this segment are outlined below:

Mr. Darnley Gittens – The Role of Disability Service Professionals and Support Specialists

Mr. Gittens began by reminding all present that the White Paper on Education in Trinidad and Tobago (1993 to 2003) states that all persons have a right to education and the Ministry of Education builds on this assumption. He then outlined the provisions made by the Special Education Unit. The Special Education Policy was first brought to the fore in 1995. It looked at the learning environment and opportunities for the disabled that were found in the developed countries abroad.

It focuses on:

- Legislation
- Early identification
- Personnel
- Support
- Information on a policy of inclusion
- Sensitization of the nation and community
- Equalization of employment opportunities.
- Support for families of persons with disabilities.

Mr. Gittens noticed that an integral part of such a policy is the idea of inclusion which says that persons with special needs should have the opportunity to participate in all parts of society.

Mr. Gittens outlined what he believes are some of the issues that have to be addressed before an effective system of inclusion can be implemented:

1. Commitment from the government. The government is elected by the people and so they have to be encouraged to do things that benefit all members of the population.

2. There needs to be a proper system of integration set in place.

3. Planning - There must be adequate planning for the right training of teachers and other personnel. Service providers must also be a part of this process.
4. Provision of programmes for the public and all concerned parties to be made aware of the necessary changes.

Session Three:
This segment took the format of a panel discussion on Care Giving for persons with disabilities by four presenters. The main points of each presentation are as follows:

Ms. Sandra Cartey – Home Care for Persons with Disabilities
Ms. Cartey defined the term home care as a situation that occurs when persons who are ill or immobile hire someone to come into their homes and give individual care. She was able to highlight the current challenges in Trinidad.

- There is an absence of standards in Trinidad; many persons open schools and say that they are trained to teach home care but these individuals are not approved by any examining body or board.
- There is no means of checking whether these ‘professionals’ are legitimate.
- Recruitment and selection of persons who are genuinely interested in the job.
- People who are immobile are left as victims for the unscrupulous to prey upon.
- Lack of community care and activities for the disabled.
- Lack of awareness of the services that are needed.
- Insurance companies that do not have home care as a part of the health care policy coverage.

Mr. and Mrs. William Naranjit – The Education System: A Parent’s Point of View
Mr. and Mrs. Naranjit shared this presentation that gave their personal experiences of having a son with a disability and the challenges that they faced to have him placed in the main stream education system. They indicated that one of their challenges has been that the entire family was affected in one way or the other by the disability; everyone had to bear some of the additional challenges. The early school experience was very traumatic as the children and teachers in their son’s schools were not very understanding and appreciative of his challenges. As a secondary school student however he was assimilated into a main stream school and the students were very cooperative and the principal and
teachers made the necessary adjustments to assist him in getting the same attention as everyone else.

They spoke of many sacrifices that they had to make as a family to ensure that their son was comfortable and able to achieve all of his goals. They ended on a somber note by saying that the greatest challenge was yet to come as they hoped their son would be able to find meaningful employment.

**Mr. Louis Johnson- Care Giving: An Institutional Perspective**

Mr. Louis Johnson is the main physiotherapist at the Lady Hochoy Home in Trinidad. This is the primary institutional facility that gives care to the mentally and physically challenged.

**The Duties of the Care Giver**

According to Mr. Johnson care givers need to:

- Be surrogate parents
- Provide nurturing
- Provide recreation.
- Ensure safety and security

He then outlined some of the challenges faced by the home at present:

**Challenges**

- Transportation since some of the persons are non ambulatory
- The difficulties experienced in trying to get access to public services or premium care
- More services are needed: medical, dental and social
- School nurses
- Trained Teachers
- Teacher’s Aids

Mr. Johnson suggested that the following needs must be met to effectively treat with the needs of the mentally and physically challenged.

**The Needs**

- Community Based Programmes
- Vocational schools
- The need to remove the belief that these residents can be made ‘normal’ but rather that they can be effectively integrated.
Day Three

The third day was divided into five sessions; three morning sessions and two afternoon sessions. After each session there was a question and answer segment.

Session One:
The first session was a lecture on assistive technologies for persons with disabilities the main points are outlined below:

Ms. Kathleen Patrice – New Technologies in Education for Persons with Disabilities:
“Closing the Gap”

Ms. Patrice began her presentation by listing a number of assistive technologies that exist in the wider world.

She continued by listing the new technologies that are available in Trinidad and made the point that they are sourced from abroad and are also very limited

- Alternative key boards
- Touch windows
- Track ball mouse
- JAWS
- Via Voice
- Scan and read

Ms. Patrice outlined all of the facilities that needed to be bought in Trinidad for there to be successful integration of those who are differently-able.

She concluded by outlining what is needed for the education system in Trinidad at present to facilitate integration:

- Equity in computer access for all students with disabilities
- Provisions for assistive technology services; any service that directly assist an individual with selection and or use that is needed for education
- Assistive technology labs of three types:
  - Assessment
  - Demonstration training
  - Professional
Session Two:
This segment of the day was a discussion on the importance of research. It was discussed by two main persons and was followed by a question and answer segment.

Mr. Anton La Fond – Research and Data Collection for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities in Education
Mr. La Fond spent most of his session highlighting the benefits of conducting research and the type of information that can be procured from such an exercise. The main points are as follows:

Mr. La Fond said that research will determine:

- The type of disabilities that are prevalent
- Race of the disabled
- Gender of the disabled persons
- Geographical spread of the disabled

Persons with disabilities should be a part of the data collection exercise since it is of principal concern to them.

Ms. Asha Kambon – The Role of Research and Data Collection in Development
Ms. Kambon centered her discussion on development in education. Her main argument was that true research in education should have an agenda. The agenda should be to ensure that all persons have a right to receive an education of quality that enhances their conditions of equality in public and private affairs. This would bring about certain demands, these are:

- There needs to be qualitative research to find out the difficulties experienced by persons with disabilities. We need to discover their difficulties, concerns and needs.
- The teachers also need to be spoken to in order to find out their concerns as well.
- Research needs to be done to discover the other methods of quality teaching that are available to persons who want to be able to integrate or choose other methods of

Session Three:
This was the final session for the morning and it consisted of two presentations on policy development for persons with disabilities. The main issues are as follows:
Dr. Innette Cambridge – Policy Development for the Integration of Persons with Disabilities into the Education System

Dr. Cambridge began her discussion by defining the term ‘policy’ and emphasizing the role it plays in assisting integration. She very briefly outlined some of the possible issues that prevented full integration of persons with disabilities into the education system.

• Inaccessibility
• Lack of support
• Lack of teacher preparedness

Dr. Cambridge concluded her discussion by drawing attention to the policy needs for integration to become a reality:

• Policy of all the various kinds, fiscal measures, supports and services
• Commitment of resources to the structural changes that need to make it to work.
• The social rights of all individuals in the Caribbean need to be highlighted. The civic and political rights of persons are firmly entrenched and spoken of but the social rights need to be highlighted.

Ms. Sandra Tamby – Integration Disability Policy Development

Ms. Tamby began her discussion by noting the major hindrances to total integration as systemic factors that block those persons who are termed ‘disabled’ from full participation in the education system.

In her discussion she drew attention to the policy needs for persons with disabilities who are a part of the main stream education system. These were:

1. Extra time for examinations
2. Provisions where the children are located
3. Teacher training
She also mentioned the areas under consideration in the Draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities:

- Parental support
- Technical Support
- Supervision and mode of Curriculum
- Provision of specialized Educational Equipment
- Itinerant support
Afternoon Session

This segment comprised two presentations on the institutional and legal framework surrounding the process of integration which was followed by a series of workshops.

Session One:

Dr. Kenneth Niles – the Institutional Framework

Dr. Niles outlined in his discussion the various issues that would have to be addressed in the government, community, home environment and system of education for the process of integration to be complete. The main points are as follows:

In order to orchestrate institutional arrangements these areas must be addressed.

**Government:**
- There are not enough facilities in Trinidad and Tobago at present.
- Persons who have the authority to make the change do not often have the heart or commitment to evoke the change. This points to the need for immediate sensitization of all persons in office or in authority.
- The state must enforce the proposed legislation and policy that comes out of the Think Tank.

**Community:**
- By and large the wider population is not trained about the services that are needed to attend to the primary needs of the society.
- The community must be willing to assist in integrating persons with disabilities. The child can not grow physically and mentally but be excluded from social growth.
- Support groups will also be important tools in sharing resources and information; there is an abundance of support within hands’ reach.
- Those who are able bodied must work to diffuse the bias and make persons with disabilities feel integrated.

**Home:**
- Parents must be encouraged to plan for the child’s life rather than his death.
• Each family needs to have access to public sponsored services to give them guidance. This will help to alleviate some of the fears and the stigmas that are attached to disabilities.

**Education:**

• Conferring with persons from other disciplines can assist as well in providing the caregivers respite care to avoid caregiver burn out.

• Teacher preparation needs to be examined. The question was raised about whether the teachers are ready and able to deal with the differently-able students. All teachers should be exposed to Special Education to assist them in this preparation.

• Curriculum that will provide opportunities for gainful employment needs to be developed. The matriculation should be the same for all persons but there should be consideration given for diversity.

**Dr. Emmanuel Hosein – The Legal Framework**

Dr. Hosein examined the present provisions in the law for persons with disabilities and examined the shortcomings of these provisions. Dr. Hosein proposed that it is past the time to try to haggle over the rights of the disabled. What he suggested was a Disabilities Act.

This Act will ensure that the persons who do not have the necessary accommodations, such as access to their buildings for persons with disabilities, can be prosecuted for the omission. This removes the onus from the disabled to prove that they were discriminated against since it would be stipulated in the law and non-compliance would result in prosecution.

**Workshops**

The workshops gave the participants the opportunity to discuss the suggestions they would give to the relevant bodies to encourage and assist in the full integration of persons with disabilities in the field of education and the wider society. The discussions were held in the areas of:

- Training
- Administration
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