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## **Commonwealth Caribbean Disability Access Policies: Access to Educational Institutions and Libraries**

### **Abstract**

Disability Acts are aimed at providing disabled students with both physical and intellectual access to education. The research takes into account UNESCO's mission and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that education as a fundamental human right lies at the heart of equal access. The document analysis approach was used to select six Caribbean countries' disability Acts to examine the kind of access indicated for educational institutions and libraries. The roles of the stakeholders who are expected to implement the Acts were also examined. Additionally, document analysis was used to determine if what was seen in these Acts were actually being implemented. The disability Acts selected were those from a Commonwealth Caribbean country that developed national policies or acts on disability and that the Acts had specific articles on access to education for disabled persons. It was discovered that the clauses with regards to access and stakeholders' role in implementing the Acts were very limited. There is also a significant gap between what is written in the Acts and what is actually taking place. One recommendation that was suggested was that each country treat their Act as a priority as equal access is a human right as emphasized by UNESCO.

**Keywords:** disability acts, Caribbean, UNESCO

### **Introduction**

“Education as a fundamental human right lies at the heart of UNESCO's mission and is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and many other international human rights instruments” (UNESCO, 2021, para. 1). In furtherance of this bold declaration, it would be true to say that access to education is not a privilege but a human right; therefore, every relevant stakeholder in every country has the fundamental duty to ensure that every person gets equal access to education. This can only be ensured if there are written policies to guide the relevant stakeholders and administrators to enforce the laws should there be an attempt to divert from the policy.

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In this research, both the medical and the social models of disability are used to distinguish persons with disabilities. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy explains that:

The medical model understands disability as a physical or mental impairment of the individual and its personal and social consequences. It regards the limitations faced by people with disabilities as resulting primarily, or solely, from their impairments. In contrast, the social model understands disability as a relation between an individual and [their] social environment: the exclusion of people with certain physical and mental characteristics from major domains of social life” (Wasserman et al., 2016, para. 13).

It is further pointed out that the exclusion of these people with disabilities is seen not only in deliberate segregation, but in a built environment and organized social activity that exclude or restrict their participation.

### **Purpose and significance of the study**

The overall purpose of the research is to provide an analytical view of the content of selected disability policies within the Caribbean in an effort to explore the type of access to educational institutions and information units for students. This research is of significance because it seeks to highlight and bring to attention the issues of inclusiveness for students with disabilities in the Caribbean to the relevant stakeholders. This research will help to fill the vast gap in this type of research in the region, especially since Huggins (2009) mentioned this paucity of information about disability in developing countries has resulted in difficulty to draw any conclusion on the overall trends of disability in the region. Although the Caribbean countries selected have disability policies, the provision of, “gender-equitable access to quality education from early childhood to adolescence, including for children with disabilities, marginalized children and those living in humanitarian and emergency settings” as mandated by UNICEF (n.d.) is not evident in the articles of the Acts. The findings of this research can be a factor that will lead the relevant stakeholders to improve the content of these policies to include more clauses of action for disabled people as well as become actively involved in implementing the policy.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework that is used to guide this research is inclusive education which is defined by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights OHCHR (2021) as, a process intended to respond to students’ diversity by increasing their participation and reducing exclusion within and from education. The OHCHR further explains that this is related to the “attendance, participation and achievement of all students, especially those who, due to different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized” (13). This research focused on the attendance (access) section of UNESCO’s education agenda which refers to access and continuation in school or other non-formal settings. This was done as the researchers

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examined the policies to find out how access to schools for disabled students are facilitated as well as access to libraries which are considered non-formal settings where individuals' informational needs can be met.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Studies around the world have shown that students with disabilities are less likely to have access to education and information units. Policymakers have been taking action by including clauses relating to disabled students accessing education, however, there are research findings that show that despite the inclusion of how students with diversity should be treated, there is evidence that some policies make no mention of physical access to information units within these schools and very few make mention of access to information. In addition, although the policies are written, in some cases implementation does not take place.

### **Literature review**

#### **The level of inclusiveness for student in accessing educational facilities**

##### ***Low level of access to educational facilities***

A research titled “*Access and Inclusion in the Jamaican Education System for Persons with Disabilities*” was conducted by The Centre of Disability Studies at The University of the West Indies in 43 high schools and 41 primary schools. The findings show that there was a significantly high percentage of disabled students who did not have full access to education. Among 84 primary and secondary schools participating in the survey, 85.7 percent of them believed that education should be inclusive and accessible for all persons (without any distinction). Sixty-three point one (63.1 percent) had registered a student with a disability but there were 70.2 percent of schools that had not been equipped with ramps to accommodate handicapped students; 83.3 percent of schools did not have bathroom facilities designed to accommodate students with physical disabilities; and almost 100 percent of schools did not have the necessary adaptive technologies to accommodate students with visual impairment.

Additionally, 83.3 percent of local schools had no modified bathroom facilities to accommodate them, making it even more difficult for these schools to admit students with disabilities. However, the literature has shown that over the years there has been steady progress in making access to physical facilities more inclusive (Morris, 2011).

In 2018, the then Minister of Education Youth and Information, Jamaica, in his commitment following the installation of a wheelchair ramp at a school to strengthen inclusive education, mentioned that the ministry would not stop at the ramps but was going to ensure that bathroom facilities are constructed to meet the needs of the physically disabled. Further to this, the Situational Analysis of Persons with Disabilities in Jamaica I AM ABLE, Report mentioned that, “the Government of Jamaica through the Jamaica Council for Persons with Disabilities (JCPD) of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MLSS)... seeks to promote the implementation of the Disabilities Act, 2014, as an intrinsic step towards ensuring Jamaica becomes a more inclusive, equitable and prosperous society” (Wilson-Scott, 2018, p. viii).

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### ***Lower level of access for girls and children***

The Human Rights Watch and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) conducted research on discrimination and lack of accessibility for people with disabilities in Iran, between June 2016 and July 2018. The report indicated that the researchers conducted 37 interviews with people living in Iran and in addition, 14 parents of children with different disabilities, and 4 children with disabilities all above 12 years old, 9 teachers; 7 disability rights advocates, and 3 officials of the Special Education Organization, responsible for the education of students with disabilities. The findings identified numerous barriers for children with disabilities to access a quality, inclusive education. In general, it was discovered that girls with disabilities, children with intellectual disabilities and autism, and children in remote or rural areas are most likely to be excluded (CHRI, 2019).

### ***Support to increase level of access***

The Report on the Situational Analysis of Children with Disabilities in Jamaica (2018), mentioned that not much exists at the regional level that firmly establishes and evidences the Caribbean's unified response to addressing the rights of people with disabilities. However, this seems to be changing as The Commonwealth reported that the second 'I Am Able' Conference was held in Antigua and Barbuda in 2019 to promote practical steps which countries can make to improve prospects of education, employment, health and mobility for persons with disabilities. The 120 delegates from governments, charities, donor agencies and disabled people's organisations from the eastern Caribbean implored the governments to, "make education accessible for all and to invest in the necessary support such as training school staff, providing transport services and introducing a school to work transition scheme. They suggested that assistive technology should be adopted in schools to make learning easier and to improve learning outcomes" (Caribbean, 2020, para. 13).

### **The extent to which policies make provision for access to school libraries by disabled children.**

#### ***United Nation standard rules to ensure high levels of access***

The *Situational analysis of persons with disabilities in Jamaica report (2018)* mentions that the, "United Nations System (UN) can be considered the key initiator in the drive towards the global inclusion and empowerment of PWDs in mainstream society" (p. 19). As such, over time it has produced, implemented and encouraged policies intended to improve the lives of people with disabilities. The UN standard rules on opportunities for equal access for persons with disabilities is seen as offering a useful framework to guide Governments' development of national policies. These laws and policies are occasionally reviewed to ensure current and relevance in adequately protecting and promoting the rights of citizens of any country. In Jamaica, the National

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Disabilities Act was passed in the Senate in October 2014, which finally translated into law the equalization of the rights and opportunities of people with disabilities in Jamaica. This strengthens the intent of the government, as the Act provides clear guidelines on the protection of the rights and interests of people in all its forms such as access to buildings and education for people with disabilities (Wilson-Scott, 2018).

Jones and Serieux-Lubin (2017) in the article, *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean* (ECLAC) posited that a number of other countries in the Caribbean such as Guyana, Cayman Islands, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago have developed comprehensive policies and subsequently legislation for persons with disabilities to ensure that there is a high level of access to education for children with disabilities in regular or special school. In ensuring access to qualified teachers, these policies ensure the training of teachers in special education. In the case of Guyana and the Bahamas there are more stringent measure put in place; in which, the Commission may request the Attorney-General to take appropriate legal action in cases of discrimination or rights infringements.

#### ***Shortcomings in policy result in low level of access***

Jones and Serieux-Lubin (2018) conducted a situational analysis of persons with disability in the Caribbean. Their paper titled, “Disability, human rights and public policy in the Caribbean” highlighted a number of shortcomings in the Caribbean that would affect the daily life and the exercise of rights by citizens, including children. They indicated that across the Caribbean, many buildings, including schools and libraries were poorly designed for access and present possible safety hazards to persons with disabilities. This included a lack of ramps, wheelchair accessible entrances, doors, elevators and emergency exits, accessible toilets, or reserved parking. To address this situation, they recommended that universal designs be adopted to create a more suitable environment for PWD and national building codes with minimum specifications be adopted. These codes would “provide minimum specifications such as the maximum gradient and width of ramps; the width, space and other accessibility requirements for entrances, elevators and emergency exits; requirements for signage; a minimum number of places for wheelchair users, for example in cinemas or stadiums; a minimum number of accessible parking bays” (36). They were however quick to point out that building codes must have proper legal or Government policy status, which will require construction firms to adhere to and implement the code to ensure enforcement mechanisms.

#### ***Policy implementation and access to libraries and information units by students***

According to Pivik et al. (2002), children with disabilities represent the most vulnerable class of citizens worldwide and special laws and policies have been in place for more than 25 years, geared towards their full participation and integration into society. However, findings from Huggins (2009) research on disabled students in the Caribbean indicate that students with disabilities were more susceptible to the reality of not going to school when compared to their

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non-disabled counterparts. The World Health Organization (WHO) has researched, documented and provided substantiated evidence of the disparity that exists globally on equal access to education and other basic human rights.

Blackman et al. (2017) conducted a retrospective qualitative research utilizing ecological systems theory and content analysis to explore the pre-university experiences and barriers to participation faced by students with disabilities in Barbados and Trinidad. In their study, policies and practices that imposed barriers were identified as major challenges to participation. The library was only mentioned twice and on both occasions it was to highlight the difficulties students faced in being marginalized. For example, one student relayed that the teacher was in a bad mood and this led to her (the student) exclusion from the classroom when she was sent to the library.

### ***Librarians' role in policy development and implementation***

Subramaniam, Oxley, and Hig (2012), study on school librarians as ambassadors of inclusive information access for students with disabilities, identified a number of specialized policy guidelines that should be implemented by school librarians to empower students with disability. Among the mentioned specific policy actions were specialized selection policies, circulation periods, and accessibility to electronic and Web resources. They also identified student-specific services such as extended lending periods and alternate methods of access like home delivery. Additionally, they recommended that school librarians should verify that the library staff is trained to address the diverse needs of students with disabilities, in order to ensure their participation. They concluded however, that postgraduate school library programs do not adequately prepare librarians to be aware of and fully understand national disability legislations and policy. It was also concluded that the ability of school librarians, to function as ambassadors of accessibility, can be achieved if adequate pre-service and in-service training is provided and the needed support is received from outside and inside of school.

### **Major stakeholders' role in implementing the disability policies**

#### ***The role of government***

Thomas mentioned that disability issues should concern all government departments and ministries but, in many countries, the leading ministry is often the Ministry of Health and/or the Ministry of Social Affairs. It is further explained in this document that in regards to the Ministry of Health, focus is more on the staff involved in the health care while rehabilitation is the main task of the Ministry of Social Affairs. However, when considering the promotion of inclusion of persons with disability in society, it is clear that other Ministries such as education, employment, transport, finance and planning are included.

The 2018 Situational Analysis of Persons with Disabilities in Jamaica was a joint initiative conducted by the Digicel Foundation, Jamaica, the Jamaica Council for Persons with Disabilities

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(JCPD) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The project's main purpose was to prepare a situational analysis of the current status of PWDs, with particular focus on children with special needs. The project utilized a qualitative design aimed at assessing stakeholders’ awareness of the provisions of the Disabilities Act, 2014 and perceived relevance or implications for State responsibility through key government ministries. Based on the findings of the study:

The Office of the Prime Minister was seen to have key responsibility in ensuring existing and developing policies and legislation are complementary to the Act, whilst leading the public sensitization process on the Act. The Ministry of Labour and Social Security, through the JCPD was expected to have direct oversight of the gazetting and effective implementation of the Act, holding the Government accountable whilst ensuring that PWDs along with the wider public are kept abreast of developments (Wilson-Scott, 2018, p. 39).

### ***The role of the education ministry***

The Ministry of Education and Human Resources in Mauritius, in response to the educational needs of all students with special educational needs, initiated an outreach exercise in 2010. This exercise included making contact with parents and principals to facilitate the registration of special education needs children. They further included the Non-Governmental Organization in tracking children with special education needs with the intent to admit them in schools. Other measures were taken to admit children with mild disabilities. This resulted in the schools taking on the responsibility to improve and equip 148 schools with ramps. All secondary schools (30) were provided with adapted toilets for children with disabilities and links between building blocks were constructed to ease access to children with wheelchairs. The stakeholders also included among its strategic goals, the inclusion of facilities such as music room, library, science laboratory, computer labs on the ground floor of primary schools, and the arrangements to move all classes having children with disabilities to the ground floor. Apart from physical access, students with disabilities benefitted from extra time for the Certificate of Primary Education examinations, enlarged print school books/manuals and question papers were produced and provided without charge, for children suffering from visual impairment. Additionally, Mauritian Sign Language was developed to improve communication for children who have hearing impairments (Government of Mauritius, n.d.).

### ***The role of the schools***

Subramaniam et al. (2012) emphasised that in addition to the various ministries, the school library policy should reflect the disability policies of the Ministries. This should include, “prescriptions for providing a space that is physically accessible, information that is intellectually accessible, specialized instruction that meets the needs of each individual student and other requirements” (p. 4). Farmer (2009) was cited by Subramaniam et al. (2012) as explaining that school librarians need to also include in their library service policies, a flexible policy that addresses circulation such as extended lending periods and alternate methods of

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access such as home delivery and this should be written into the policy, be transparent and shared with stakeholders. Subramaniam et al. (2012) also cited Burgstahler (2011) suggestion that school librarians should, “verify that the library staff is trained to address the diverse needs of students with a wide array of backgrounds and conditions, and should also take measures to ensure all students are able to attend and participate in events in school libraries” (p. 4). Again, Farmer (2009) was cited by Subramaniam et al. (2012) indicating that one of the roles of special educators can be to assist the school librarian in designing policies and school library environments that meet the guidelines of the ministries responsible for setting policies for disabled persons.

### **The role of non-government organizations**

An example of this is evident in the Commonwealth of the Bahamas where the government through its Ministries, Departments and Agencies, partners with several non-government organizations (NGOs) for assistance in the delivery of support services to persons with disabilities. Quite a number of ministries are engaged as the “Ministry of Social Services and Community Development provides annual grants to 18 NGOs who provide support and services to persons with disabilities. In addition to grants, technical support is also provided by various Ministries including Ministries responsible for Social Services, Health, Works, Youth and Education” (Disabilities Affairs, 2016, p. 5). Additionally, the literature has shown that in the Disabilities Affairs Division, Ministry of Social Services, Commonwealth of The Bahamas (2016) the government of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, extended its role to include a, “number of adults with disabilities who are members or staff of disability-related NGOs, Schools or Centres which offer services, and who are involved at various levels, in the design, planning, implementation and evaluation of the support services that their respective organizations provide” (Disabilities Affairs, 2016, p. 4).

### **Research objectives:**

- Determine the level of inclusiveness for students in accessing educational facilities.
- Find out the extent to which the policies make provision for access to school libraries.
- Ascertain the major stakeholders’ role in implementing the disability policies.

### **Methodology**

This is qualitative research that used the document analysis approach to collect data from a sample of Caribbean countries’ disability policies that were located online. The sections that dealt with access to education were examined to find out the kind of access that was stated for education and libraries and the major stakeholders’ role in the governance of the disability policies were examined. Six disability policies from the Caribbean were selected. The criteria used to select these policies were: (1) from Commonwealth Caribbean countries that developed as national policies or acts on disability; (2) had a specific article on access to education for disabled persons. These six met the criteria: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Cayman, Guyana,



Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago. Several other Caribbean countries were identified but could not be included as they did not currently have a structured developed policy on disability and therefore did not meet the criteria outlined. Document analysis will also be used to determine if what is written in the disability Acts is actually taking place in terms of these countries' present level of inclusiveness, the extent to which the policies are active and the action that the stakeholders are presently taking in supporting inclusiveness.

The following chart (Table 1) represents the policies that made or did not make reference to access to libraries and information centres for disabled children,

**Table 1**

*Brief overview of policy references to educational institutions and libraries*

Country	Document	Access to educational institutions	Reference to libraries	Stakeholders' role
Antigua and Barbuda	Disabilities and Equal Opportunities Bill, 2017	<p>“The right to education and training.”</p> <p>“Provisions should be made for disabled individuals sitting exams.”</p>	No mention of libraries/library facilities	The Antigua and Barbuda Council of and for Persons with Disabilities, advises the Minister with responsibility for social welfare on all matters relating to persons with disabilities and formulates a national policy that ensures that services are provided to all persons with disabilities.

The Bahamas	Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities) Bill, 2014	<p>“Integration of students with disabilities into all schools and learning institutions.”</p> <p>“Special education classes in schools and facilitate learning in subject areas including Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, orientation and mobility skills.”</p>	“The Minister responsible for Education shall establish braille and record libraries or sections within existing national libraries throughout The Bahamas”	The Minister responsible for Education establishes braille and record libraries or sections within existing national libraries throughout The Bahamas
Cayman	Cayman Islands Disability Policy 2014 -2033	“Ensure persons with disabilities have a quality education in the most appropriate inclusive setting, and access to lifelong learning.”	“Ensuring that libraries...provide information and materials in an accessible format to persons with disabilities.”	Cayman Islands Government promotes legislation that will make provision for a National Council for Persons with Disabilities (NCPWD), which will act as a “watchdog” on disability and related matters.
Guyana	Laws of Guyana: Persons with Disabilities Act, 2010		“The Minister responsible for Education shall establish braille and record libraries or sections within existing national libraries throughout The Bahamas.”	The Minister responsible for Education establishes Braille and record libraries or sections within existing national libraries throughout Guyana

Jamaica	The Disabilities Act of 2014	“An educational institution does not have the right to deny education to individuals.”	No mention of libraries/library facilities	The Government of Jamaica has a responsibility to liaise on with educational institution.  “Training institutions should provide the necessary support for disabled individuals”
Trinidad and Tobago	National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, 2018	“Create a social, economic, political, and physical environment.”	“The National Library Service (NALIS) has provided service and technological access through the introduction of assistive devices and screen reading software.”	The Minister of Social Development and Family Services, publishes a National Policy on Persons with Disabilities to: give greater visibility to disability issues and ensure that the intent of the the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is reflected in the development and implementation of public policy and legislation.

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## **Findings**

### **Physical and intellectual access**

The data in Table 1 shows that the disability Acts were written between 2010 and 2018 with one showing that this Act will be enforced up to 2030. Of the six disability acts examined three countries (50%) (Bahamas, Cayman and Guyana made reference to physical access to libraries and information units with two of these countries (Antigua and Barbuda and Jamaica) indicating that this is a right to education. One country, (Cayman) noted that physical access should be appropriate and inclusive. The Bahamas is the only country that mentioned that these students should be integrated in all schools with special education classes. Guyana disability Act made no mention of physical or intellectual access to students with disability.

In terms of intellectual access, one country's, (Cayman) disability act made specific mention of efforts to make materials and information accessible in libraries. Additionally, one country (Bahamas) mentioned the provision of Braille and alternative scripts, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, orientation and mobility skills. Antigua and Barbuda Act includes that there should be special provision for students sitting examinations.

### **Reference to libraries/information units**

Four of the six countries had a clause that referred to libraries. The countries with reference to libraries were The Bahamas, Cayman, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago. These clauses noted that Braille and other accessible formats to access information should be made available at libraries, including national libraries. One country, (Trinidad and Tobago) specifically cited technological access through the introduction of assistive devices and screen reading software.

### **Stakeholders' responsibilities**

Among the main stakeholders mentioned in the policies were Government and Government agencies. In Antigua and Barbuda, it was the Minister with responsibility for social welfare, in Bahamas; the Minister responsible for education, In Cayman; the National Council for Persons with Disabilities through the Government of Cayman, In Guyana; the Minister responsible for Education, in Jamaica; the Government of Jamaica and in Trinidad and Tobago; the Minister of Social Development and Family Services. It should be noted however, that the documents mentioned the contribution of other stakeholders. For example, the Cayman Islands Disability Policy 2014-2033 stated that a number of stakeholders contributed toward developing the Policy. These included persons with disabilities and their families who provided valuable insights, otherwise unobtainable. In the Trinidad and Tobago's National Policy on Persons with Disabilities, it acknowledges the invaluable contributions made to the National Policy on Persons with Disabilities by the various stakeholders including "persons with disabilities, members of civil society, participants in the national consultations, the Division of Health, Wellness and

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Family Development (Tobago House of Assembly), the Review Committee, staff of the Ministry of Social Development and Family services and all other Ministries” (p. v).

## **Discussion on the findings**

### **Level of physical and intellectual access**

Although there were clauses in the disability Acts that specifically addressed physical and intellectual access, in reality, there seems to be significant gaps in the written policies as it pertains to access to libraries and library facilities indicated in the findings of The Centre of Disability Studies at The University of the West Indies. Also, the fact that in 2018, the Ministry of Education Youth and Information in Jamaica was still making a commitment to install wheelchair ramps in schools and promising to install bathroom facilities in schools for disabled students. Although the disability Act of Jamaica (2014) under Part V education and training stipulates that an educational institution does not have the right to deny education to individuals based on grounds of disability, there are schools that have not made any structural accessible provision for students with physical disabilities. As indicated by Thomas (2005) the Government of Jamaica has a responsibility to liaise with educational institutions to ensure that the necessary arrangements are made to facilitate students with disability. In addition, at the Caribbean disability conference held in Antigua and Barbuda in 2019, the Minister of Social Transformation declaring that, there is room to do so much more for the disabled and the Governor General stating that it requires all stakeholders to do more to build a more inclusive society.

In April 2021, The Cayman Compass reported that at a meeting at the Inclusion Cayman office on 25 March, 2021, parents of children with special needs told incumbent and prospective members of parliament of the many challenges they face. One parent told the prospective member of parliament that, “We’re asking that the government needs to define the law whereby all students have access to inclusive education” (para. 4). This is clear evidence of the gap between the Act and reality. Trinidad and Tobago’s 2018 Persons with Disabilities Situational Analysis report written by Persons (2018) cited that, “the majority of children with disabilities attend special schools because there is no requirement for mainstreaming that would require schools to accept students with disabilities and because many schools are not accessible—these schools often do not provide the same quality of education” (p. 6). This means that students with disabilities were not integrated with other students which could be the cause for the negative attitude towards persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago which is mentioned in this report. It is also reported in this document that persons with disabilities had less digital access than other members of society. Again, this is providing less intellectual access for the people who would need them most for education, entertainment and social interaction.

It is evident that the government of Trinidad and Tobago was aware that this segregation is not ideal as the article cited Longpre’s (2016) comment that, “education adversely affects the preparation of students for integration into the broader society” (p. 6) as well as Beckles and

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Hanson (2016) statement that, “Too many children with disabilities fall through the cracks of the education system and emerge from primary or secondary institutions unable to read, write and demonstrate essential life skills. Yet they are expected to earn their own living in the same job market as persons without disabilities who have not suffered for access to quality education suitable to their needs.” (cited in Persons, 2018, p. 6).

Cheong, Kellems, Andersen & Steed (2018) research finding on *The Education of Individuals with Disabilities in Guyana: An Overview*, revealed that “Guyana currently maintains 11 special schools; however, of the 11 education districts, only 5 districts have a special school available to students with disabilities. Six of the special schools are located in the Georgetown area; the other 5 are spread across the rest of the country” (p. 2). It is obvious that physical access was likely to be a problem with the spread of the 5 schools across the rest of the country. Added to this is that the findings also show that most special schools did not have an area of focus because most of the students who attended these schools did not have an official diagnosis. In many instances, students were placed in the special schools based on teacher and administer recommendations as opposed to meeting a specific set of criteria. This was compounded by the finding that at the time the research was being conducted, none of the 11 special schools in Guyana had teachers trained in the area of special education. While at the teacher’s college and university there were courses offered in the area of special education, but there were no concentrations of special education or disability studies. These findings generate concern for physical and intellectual access as students might not be able to travel easily to the school nearest to them and might be short changed in their intellectual ability.

The research findings on research conducted by Cambridge-Johnson Hunter-Johnson, and Newton (2014), is an indication that physical and intellectual access for the disabled in The Bahamas was still a problem. It was discovered that teachers who had favourable views of inclusive classrooms emphasized the need to address the structural problems and limited resources to facilitate effective implementation of inclusive education. The findings further show that advocacy groups had been dauntless in their efforts to garner additional support and assistance for children with special needs because the majority of them who received appropriate educational experiences was isolated in separate educational facilities, never interacting with or engaging in academic communities with their typically developing peers.

### **The extent to which the policies make provision for access to school libraries.**

School libraries and their services are vital to the development of a literate population that is able to participate fully in a thriving society, democracy, culture, and economy. The school library provides information and ideas that are fundamental to functioning successfully in today's information and knowledge-based society. The school library equips students with life-long

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learning skills and develops the imagination, enabling them to live as responsible citizens (IFLA/UNESCO, 1999, cited in Singh, 2021).

Again, UNESCO'S conceptual framework looks at the fact that:

Social inclusion is necessarily, although not exclusively, linked to more inclusive practices in education, that is, to the development of schools or learning environments that cater for the needs of all the individuals of a community and respond to the diversity of learning needs, regardless of their social origin, culture or individual characteristics (Acedo et al., 2009, p. 11).

Interestingly most of the policies reviewed vaguely represented in any substantial way access to libraries and information centres by disabled children. However, those that did had some commonality in regards to Government involvement and responsibility to disabled children and the consultative role that these Government agencies play in relation to the community and citizens social life.

There seems to be significant gaps in the written policies as it pertains to access to libraries and library facilities. It should be noted however, that those policies that made provisions mentioned specifically support the use of braille and braille readers.

### **The major stakeholders' role in implementing the disability policies.**

Fatria and Sardi (2020) in their study on Indonesian Government Policy, stated that the role of government is through policies. Government's responsibility and that of the society governs the policy documents of most countries and efforts to create equal opportunities in education for disabled individuals' presents itself as an underlying and recurring theme. For example, the Guyana Persons with Disability Act, specifies the Minister's role and responsibility in ensuring that the facilitation of alternative methods of teaching for disabled students is supported by various educational institutions. These methodologies include alternative assisted use of braille learning in schools and libraries for disabled. In this instance, research conducted by Cheong, Kellems, Andersen and Steed (2018) revealed that for the Ministry of Education, the main stakeholder, has been actively working up to 2014, drafting Special Education Needs Inclusion Policy in an attempt to identify and address gaps and resources required to educate children with disabilities, however, there are several challenges regarding adequate teacher training, student access to appropriate facilities and resources, and discriminatory practices by administrators and educators.

The Parliament of Bahamas Persons with Disabilities (equal opportunities) Bill, 2014-part v indicates that the Minister responsible for Education, should take into account the special requirements of persons with disabilities. The document outlines the important role of the Government in ensuring integration of persons with disabilities in schools and the maintenance of integrated special education for these children. However, the findings of the research by

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Cambridge-Johnson Hunter-Johnson, & Newton (2018) show that it was the perception of the teachers that the Ministry of Education which was the major stakeholder had not adequately supported teachers in ensuring inclusive education because there were no courses in inclusive education and no proper tools in place so that teachers would feel more confident in teaching and experience success in an inclusive environment.

The role of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda is similar to that of The Bahamas as outlined in their Disabilities and equal opportunities Bill, (2017) which also highlights their responsibility in providing the necessary support to institutions that cater for disabled individuals. Antigua and Barbuda 2018 human rights report included information to confirm that the government and its stakeholders for disability is providing the support documented in the Act as it indicated that in 2018 the government passed the Disabilities and Equal Opportunities Act that, prohibits any form of discrimination based on disability. The law carries a penalty of \$10,000 XCD (\$3,700) or two years imprisonment and there has been improved access to workplaces for persons with disabilities because of the revision of building codes and the inclusion of disabled persons in youth education programmes.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the importance of other stakeholders outside of Government. Hall (2020) asserts that there is a perception that policy making is a technical exercise and that people with mental health problems lack cognitive capacity to assist. They however pointed out that participation in the mental health system strengthened by people with mental health problems and their families was a cornerstone of people-centred mental health care. The success of this level of participation is evident in policies such as the Cayman Islands Disability Policy 2014-2033, Trinidad and Tobago's National Policy on Persons with Disabilities as well as the Bahamas Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities) Bill, 2014.

Information in the Persons with Disabilities in Trinidad & Tobago: A Situational Analysis (2018) shows that the government of Trinidad and Tobago was still actively involved in executing the disability Act as its disability programmes were sometimes oversubscribed as the demand outpaces supply. In addition, a number of initiatives designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities were implemented and a number of programmes for disabled persons were funded by the government of Trinidad & Tobago. The governments Cayman Islands and Trinidad and Tobago were actively carrying out their roles as stakeholders as they attended meetings supporting persons with disabilities in the Caribbean subregion. They participated in drafting a study titled "Disability, Human Rights and Public Policy" which was aimed to take stock of the situation of persons with disabilities in the Caribbean under the themes of health, accessibility of public buildings and transportation, inclusive education, and employment. Likewise, Guyana stakeholder, the Ministry of Education has since the inception of the Act been promoting learning of disabled children by providing students with access to schools capable of meeting their learning needs. A part of this goal was to ensure that each educational district had a special



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school, unit, or space for students of all ability levels (Cheong, Kellems, Andersen & Steed (2018).

### **Implications and Conclusions**

Education enables individuals to interpret things and prepare them for life. For this reason, every child, including those with disabilities, should be given the opportunity to receive an education, as education is a fundamental human right (Jaarsveld, 2021, p. 53). The issues of discrimination as it pertains to the concept of inclusive education and access to education by children remain as a significant problem in the countries under study. Although the disability Act of Jamaica (2014) under Part V Education and Training stipulates that an educational institution does not have the right to deny education to individuals based on grounds of disability, there are schools that have not made any structural accessible provision for students with physical disabilities. As indicated by Thomas (2005) the Government of Jamaica has a responsibility to liaise with educational institutions to ensure that the necessary arrangements are made to facilitate students with disabilities.

“Education quality and equality are unresolved matters even in those countries with high schooling rates. There are large disparities among and within countries as regards the access to the different educational levels and the distribution of knowledge” (Acedo, Amadio, & Operti, 2009, p. 12). The issue of equality for disabled children to education and educational assistance is addressed in a number of policy documents. These documents bring to the forefront of society the fact that persons with disabilities face on a daily basis, discrimination and barriers to social inclusive areas of society such as education and have therefore sought to provide guidelines embedded in law to restrict such discrimination. To this end, within UNESCO Conceptual Framework of Inclusive Education, this is defined as “a process intended to respond to students’ diversity by increasing their participation and reducing exclusion within and from education. It is related to the attendance, participation and achievement of all students, especially those who, due to different reasons, are excluded or at risk of being marginalized” (Acedo et al., 2009, p. 13).

The Antigua and Barbuda: Disabilities and Equal Opportunities Bill, 2017-part V outlines the right to education and training for persons with a disability. These rights include providing the necessary personnel to accommodate children with disabilities. On the basis of equal opportunity, the document speaks to access to education and training, no person should be placed at a disadvantage because of their disability. Additionally, provisions should be made for disabled individuals sitting exams including alternative communication formats and language interpreters. The role of the Government is also highlighted in providing the necessary support to institutions that cater for disabled individuals. The Guyana Persons with Disabilities Act (2010) looks at the implementation of a national education programme so as to eliminate exclusion of children with disabilities from achieving an education at the primary and secondary level; again, it emphasizes the fact that education is compulsory.

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As postulated by Huggins (2009), it has been difficult to draw any conclusions on overall trends in disability in the Caribbean because of the paucity of literature on the topic. The six disability policies reviewed by the researchers provided empirical evidence on the extent of access to education and information units by disabled students in Commonwealth Caribbean Countries. Efforts to create equal opportunities in education for disabled individuals presented itself as an underlying and recurring theme within the six disability policy documents. Interestingly, most of the policies reviewed, vaguely represented in any substantial way, access to libraries and information centres by disabled students. However, those that did had some commonality in regards to Government involvement and responsibility to disabled children and the consultative role that Government agencies play in relation to the community and citizens social life. In hindsight, “overcoming the main barriers to education inclusion must include Governments’ efforts in improving early identification of children with disabilities and strengthening data on school accessibility” (Hincapié, Duryea & Hincapié, 2019, para. 1). This must be coupled with the proactive efforts of major stakeholders such as library associations and library networks in advocating equal access to library and library facilities for all.

There seems to be significant gaps in the written policies as it pertains to access to libraries and library facilities and intellectual access. The opportunity to readily and easily access buildings that are geared towards educational pursuits should be had by all citizens within their respective country. Yet, across the Caribbean, many buildings (for example schools, offices, shops, police stations, libraries) present serious obstacles to persons with disabilities because they were not designed and built to be easily accessible. For many of these buildings common features of accessibility are usually non-existent. For the disabled, these features include special modes of entrance and exit, ramps for wheelchair entrances, access to toilets and other facilities that are of common usage to the general public. Such absence of necessary facilities and structures creates an environment of unevenness and bias towards children and people in general who are disabled (Jones and Serieux-Lubin, 2017).

### **Recommendations**

The researchers recommend that each government should revise and update their disability Act to represent inclusiveness as set out by international organizations such as UNESCO, UNICEF, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

That each country treats the Act as a priority as equal access is a human right as emphasized by UNESCO.

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