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**Programs and Social Supports for Adults with a Learning Disability in Trinidad:
Policy Review and Analysis**

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Abstract

Ten stakeholder groups were interviewed regarding programs and policies implemented by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in light of its *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*, and being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Collectively, the Policy and Convention symbolise a shift in how learning disabilities are dealt with within the public and private sectors in Trinidad and Tobago.

The result of the ten in-field interviews revealed that adults with a learning disability are not afforded equal opportunity in achieving educational and vocational goals as their non-disabled peers. As a result of this marginalisation, adults with a learning disability experience continuous exclusion in their economic, social and political lives.

This research shows that political will must further manifest into enacted legislation. Legislation that protects and advocates for the rights of persons with disabilities would empower community organizations, practitioners, caregivers/support workers of persons with disabilities, and more importantly adults with a learning disability. Legislation would provide a robust framework upon which public policy can underpin sustainable social programs. This would allow for social inclusion, special education accommodations, and ultimately effect positive outcomes in the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability.

Keywords

Trinidad and Tobago, learning disability, Caribbean

Programs and Social Supports for Adults with a Learning Disability in Trinidad:

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Learning disabilities can no longer be confined to a bio-medical deficit. Learning disabilities extend into the social, cultural and political spheres (Goodley, 2001, pp. 210-211).

The purpose of this research, which was undertaken in June 2012, was to evaluate the programs and policies implemented for adults with a learning disability in Trinidad. This research tried to gain insight into the mechanisms that were implemented in Trinidad and Tobago in the aftermath of being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and its 2005 *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*. In being a signatory to the Convention and developing a formal policy roadmap would cohesively aid in helping persons with disabilities in Trinidad and Tobago. Essentially, it would be the foundation upon which legislation would be enacted and programs developed that would facilitate a seamless transition from childhood into adulthood for persons with a disability in Trinidad and Tobago. Furthermore this research examined the role government and civil society played in the enactment of legislation, and the development of any social support programs for adults with a learning disability.

Disability issues were on the agenda of governments globally since 1945 (UN Enable, 2014). Disability discourse as put forward by academic scholars frames the way in which the state, non-governmental organizations and civil society interact with persons with a disability. The inclusion and integration discourses form the foundation upon which we construct social, economic, political and cultural engagement with disability. The medical, economic and socio-

political models of disability further entrench normative conceptions of persons with disabilities, which can ostracize and disenfranchise adults with a learning disability.

In focussing on the Caribbean region and in particular Trinidad, it is important to recognize two notable achievements within the socio-political model of disability. The first being, in 2007 Trinidad and Tobago became a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The second is that in 2005 the Government of Trinidad and Tobago developed a *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* after public consultations. These achievements reflect a political will to adopt an inclusive approach in addressing disability issues. In adopting an inclusive approach, it demonstrates a shift away from the exclusion in the lived experiences of persons with a disability. It ensures that persons with a disability can now have special accommodations made in the workplace, in schools and even receive income supports.

Geo-political Background

Disability is not a modern phenomenon within the Caribbean. Williams (1962) stated, "the Caribbean was considered an experimental playground and 'workshop' for colonialism (Lavia, 2007, 191). Within the Caribbean, "historically ... the disabled have been marginalized, ridiculed and considered as burdens to society" (Lavia, 2007, p. 190 as cited from Armstrong, Armstrong and Lynch, 2004). In examining post-colonial attributes of colonialism in Trinidad and Tobago, the education, judicial and parliamentary systems are modelled after its European coloniser - Great Britain. Post-colonialism, attributes of imperialism still permeate the education, judicial and parliamentary systems to where "disabled people were isolated, not tolerated or given the opportunity to participate in educational and economic activities (Lavia, 2007, p. 190).

Within Trinidad and Tobago, policy changes post-1980 have served to create inclusive education systems for children with special needs. Some of these policy changes include public funding of non-governmental organizations and creation of 'special schools' for children with 'special needs' (Lavia, 2007, pp. 190-192). Albeit these policy changes are commendable, the "systematic patterns of exclusion" still persist today as the historical definition of disability was woven into the very fabric of society (Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 328). Within the disability discourse, researchers and practitioners discuss three frameworks - medical, economic and socio-political. The aforementioned frameworks are discussed below.

The medical framework primarily focussed on physical and intellectual limitations of a person with a disability (Hahn, 1985, p. 88). The disadvantage of the medical definition is that it places an emphasis on the physical or intellectual limitations of the person, instead of the limitations of the built environment and society (Hahn, 1985, p. 89). This framework demands the individual with a disability conform to his or her surroundings, with no special accommodation(s) (Hahn, 1985, p. 89). Within the medical framework, the onus is on the individual rather than on society. Similar to the medical framework, the economic framework limits the extent a person with a disability can participate in society.

The economic framework "focuses on the 'roles and tasks' associated with work" with limited consideration given to "accommodating the needs and skills of disabled employees" (Hahn, 1985, p. 92). This framework can prove to be disadvantageous to individuals with a disability in that it limits "the amount of work or kind of work that can be performed," and does not take into consideration the use of assistive technology as a means of helping adults with a disability (Hahn, 1985, p. 90 as cited from Berkowitz, Johnson, and Murphy, 1976, pp. 7-8). Essentially, the economic framework sees a person with a disability as not profitable to an

organization or corporation. Similar to the medical framework, within the economic framework the onus is on the individual with a disability to conform to the demands and requirements of the workplace.

Within the socio-political framework, the "emphasis is shifted from the individual to the broader social, cultural, economic and political environment" (Hahn, 1985, p. 93). This framework advocates for a change in the "conventional 'expectations'" to the creation and adoption of new and inclusive social values (Hahn, 1985, p. 93). Furthermore this framework looks to government policy as the determinant in shaping all aspects of the social environment (Hahn, 1985, p. 102). This framework moves the onus from the individual with a disability and into a universal discourse. It looks at a holistic perspective to accommodate the special needs of persons with a disability within society; whether it is in the workplace, education or as participatory citizens.

The medical, economic and socio-political frameworks illustrate how environmental factors can ostracise individuals with a disability from being participatory citizens. These frameworks transfer the disability discourse from a subjective perspective of marginalization (that is, onus on the individual) to an objective framework of inclusion and special accommodation (that is, onus on society).

Disability studies have "important political, social, and economic implications for society as a whole, including both disabled and non-disabled people" (Wolbring et al., 2013, p. 4155). The disabled population continues to increase with each decade (Clark, 2006, p. 309). Individuals with a disability, which would include adults with a learning disability, share a similar history, are often deemed to be socially unacceptable and experience marginalization by society (Yuen, 2003, p. 7). Adults with a learning disability continue to face challenges in

obtaining social equality and progressively participating within society (Pedlar, 2014, p. 1; Clark, 2006, p. 311). Learning disabilities, when viewed through the socio-political lens can have negative outcomes on an individual's self-esteem, vocation, social interactions and educational experiences (Martínez-Marrero and Estrada-Hernández, 2008).

Within our globalized world, advocacy groups have vocalised the need to include persons with disabilities as participatory citizens within society. Think-tanks, researchers and practitioners have published numerous policy papers and scholarly reports on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities. A global policy shift in this area was demonstrated when nation-states ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities compels nation-states to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Article 3 of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol* (2008) speaks to eight principles ranging from autonomy, societal inclusion, respect, equal opportunity and accessibility for persons with disabilities (5). Trinidad and Tobago became a signatory on September 2007 to this Convention (UN Enable, 2014).

In December 2005, The Government of Trinidad and Tobago approved a *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*. This document adopts the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health definition of disability "as an umbrella for impairment, activity limitations and participation restrictions" of an individual in relation to his or her "health condition" and "environmental and personal factors" (*National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*, Preamble). The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health definition recognize "disability as a complex phenomenon" and thus require varying degrees of "intervention ranging from the medical to the socio-political"

(Shakespeare, 2013, p. 221). Finally, in 1999 The Disability Affairs Unit was created within the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of the People and Social Development. This Unit would be central to "co-ordinating and monitoring the *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*" (Ministry of the People and Social Development, 2013).

Scholarly research has proven that disability studies is an interdisciplinary field (Watson, Thomas and Roulstone, 2012, p. 8). Disability Studies cannot be relegated to the medical realm as the "contemporary debates about special education in the Caribbean are located within a discourse of inclusion" (Watson, Thomas & Roulstone, 2012, p. 12; Lavia, 2007, p. 189). Within the Caribbean, and in particular Trinidad and Tobago it is important to analyze what strides, if any, have been made post-implementation of the *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* and ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Thus, it necessitates that in-field research be conducted in Trinidad to ascertain the foundation and framework that exists for adults with a learning disability.

Research Study

The objective of this research was to ascertain and analyze the programs developed and policies enacted for adults with a learning disability in Trinidad and Tobago. Participation in this independent research was voluntary. Stakeholders, who included non-governmental organizations, a government organization, professionals who develop programs and/or conduct psycho-educational assessments and adults with a learning disability voluntarily agreed to participate in the in-field interviews. Stakeholders in Tobago declined to participate in the in-field interviews. Therefore interviews were only conducted in Trinidad.

The stakeholder research group included: one government organization; three non-governmental organizations (pseudonyms, NGO1, NGO2 and NGO3); one social worker who works with NGO1; and two clinical psychologists, one works with NGO1 and one was referred by NGO3. The three focus-group interviews consisted of 18 adults with a learning disability. A total of 26 participants volunteered for this research.

The small sample size in this qualitative study, while limiting the analysis of the data pool, is a reliable source on the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability in Trinidad, and their network of advocates. Preliminary research of non-governmental organizations, government organizations and support networks for adults with a disability in Trinidad yielded few results. Several government organizations were informed of the research; however they recommended one specific government organization as it best aligned with the research project's objectives. Furthermore the small sample size can also be attributed to all stakeholders in Tobago, which included government organizations, non-governmental organizations and practitioners lack of consent to participate in this research.

In order to obtain a comprehensive perspective of the foundation and framework, questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were designed for specific stakeholder groups: government organization, non-governmental organizations and adults with a learning disability. All participants were provided with the questionnaires prior to the in-field interviews, as this would facilitate a more informed discussion. All participants signed a Consent Form, and focus-group participants signed a Confidentiality Agreement.

All research participants were required to meet *one* of the three requirements:

1. An adult who is the legal age of majority in Trinidad and Tobago (18 years old) with a learning disability.

2. A representative within a government organization in Trinidad and Tobago whose responsibilities contribute to the development and administration of policies and programs for adults with a learning disability.
3. A representative within a non-governmental organization in Trinidad and Tobago who develops and administers support programs for adults with a learning disability.

A total of ten (10) interviews were conducted within five business days. This qualitative research relied solely on in-field interviews and focus-groups. Focus-group interviews were conducted at non-governmental organizations, and all other interviews were conducted at the participant's place-of-employment. All participants in the focus-group interviews signed a confidentiality agreement, consenting to non-disclosure of any discussions within and pertaining to the focus-group and the research. Within the focus-group interviews, each question was read and explained to participants to bring forth responses and stimulate discussion.

The principal researcher and a research assistant transcribed all interviews. Both the principal researcher and the research assistant reviewed and analyzed the transcripts for similarities in responses. Participant responses were categorised based on themes or key findings, such as education, vocation, legislation. The interviews were coded according to themes to analyze and discuss the impact of policies and programs for adults with a learning disability in Trinidad. Coding the interviews based on themes allowed for comparative analysis. Using the constant comparative method enabled data to be "broken-down, examined, compared, conceptualized and categorized", while validating relationships in the data (Cohen and Crabtree, 2006).

Methodological limitations included sample size, lack of prior research and self-reporting data. A larger sample could not be obtained (for example, snowball sampling) due to time

constraints. There was a lack of available data and/or scholarly published research specifically in the area of adults with a learning disability in Trinidad. Furthermore there were no readily available published white papers from international organizations and reports from think-tanks on research in Trinidad and Tobago as it pertains to programs and social supports for adults with a learning disability. Therefore the information obtained in this research relied in part on the experiences of adults with a learning disability.

Research limitations included lack of access and longitudinal effects. Geographical distance was a significant factor in accessing information, networking with prospective stakeholders, and facilitating face-to-face meetings with stakeholders and/or participants. The research relied primarily on technology (email, telephone and video conferencing) to facilitate meetings, share research documents, and obtain stakeholder consent to participate in this project. A significant amount of time could not be allocated for extensive research due to budgetary constraints.

To address the methodological and research limitation, supplementary and future research studies must be conducted in-field for a longer period. This would ensure a larger stakeholder group and significantly more focus-group participants. Collectively a larger sample size would facilitate case studies, whether it is individual or composite.

Several key themes emerged when the social and political models of disability were applied within the context of this qualitative research. Participants in the focus-group interviews spoke of limited educational and vocational opportunities. Other participants stated that more emphasis was placed on programs and policies for children with a 'special needs'. These aforementioned key findings align with the social model of disability. This research found that there was no legal framework and/or implemented policies for adults with a disability, which

would include adults with a learning disability. All participants expressed ambiguity in programs and service supports available for adults with a learning disability. Furthermore, participants spoke of ineffective government consultations and follow-through with government initiatives in this area. The political model of disability is demonstrated through a non-existent legal framework, ambiguity in programs and service supports, and ineffective stakeholder consultations.

The information acquired from all volunteer participants provides some insight into the experiences of adults with a learning disability. The qualitative data also highlights the work undertaken by public and private sectors to promote and advocate for the rights of persons with a disability in Trinidad.

Analytical Framework

The social model of disability as coined by Mike Oliver in 1983 speaks to the "social oppression and exclusion" experienced by individuals with a disability (Davis, 2013, pp. 215 and 217). This model allocates the burden on society to remove barriers that prohibit persons with disabilities from participating within society (Shakespeare, 2013, p. 217). The social model of disability is based on societal reproduction of the "construct of the disabled figure" as a means of marginalizing individuals with a disability, and hindering them from being afforded equal opportunities (Bilken, 2000, p. 339 as cited from Thomson, 2007; Trani et al. 2010, p. 146). The 'disabled figure' is a societal construct based on "emotions of fear, pity and disgust," which "contribute to the social distance between disabled and non-disabled people" (Watson, Thomas and Roulstone, 2012, p. 6). Essentially, the social model of disability underscores society's

failure to take into consideration the needs of individuals with a disability (Kimberlin, 2009, p. 28 as cited from Oliver, 1990).

The political model of disability is constructed on the values of dominant social groups, and allows more opportunities for non-disabled persons to engage and contribute to society (Gilson and DePoy, 2000, 208). This model looks to the role of government in shaping public policies that impact on the lived experiences of individuals with a disability (Putnam, 2005, p. 193). In looking at the social and political environments, Hahn (1994) points to public policy as a reflection of the dominant values and attitudes of society (Putnam, 2005, p. 189). Hahn (1994) viewed public policy as the foundation to "help rectify inequality and address discrimination for" individuals with a disability, which would include adults with a learning disability (Putnam, 2005, p. 189). Lavia (2007) in her research on special education in the Caribbean concurs that the lived experiences of individuals with a disability are ultimately shaped by local, national and international policies (p. 195).

Particularly, interesting in analysing the models of disability is Hahn's research that included the political factor in the disability equation as a means of conceptualising disability (Putnam, 2005, p. 189). Hahn (1994) underscored the correlation between networks of state actors and politics, which can influence public policy to address the causes and solutions of inequality for persons with disabilities (Putnam, 2005, p. 189). Stienstra (2002) argues that the barriers faced by individuals with a disability can be attributed to a lack of understanding on how to create, promote and sustain inclusivity (p. 116). Barriers include, but are not limited to, stereotypes of persons with disabilities, pejorative comments, limited vocational and educational opportunities, and lack of support services (Gilson and Depoy, 2000, p. 208 as cited in Barnes and Mercer 1998; Gilson and DePoy, 2002, p. 156).

The body of research in the area of adults with learning disabilities provides insight on the changing landscape of needs and support required post-adolescent. Gerber et al. (1990) expounded on learning disabilities as being life-long, and not limited to childhood and adolescent (Shessel and Reiff, 1999, 305 and 314). Gerber's (1994) research confirmed that adults with learning disabilities would require different service supports and programs, as learning disabilities may intensify throughout the lifespan of an adult (pp. 6 and 8). Learning disabilities cannot be confined to a medical diagnosis only. It needs to be examined within the social, political and cultural spheres that shape a society (Goodley, 2001, p. 212 as cited from Morris, 1969; Korbin, 1986).

Findings

The key findings collectively bring the disability discourse into the realm of politics and citizenship by focussing on the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability in Trinidad. It moves the discussion into the mainstream so that the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability "can highlight the other sides to life that are often ignored by dominant institutions and practices" (Goodley, 2001, p. 218 as cited from Gillman et al., 1997). Furthermore the key findings underscore how "political actions or inaction contributed to the disadvantaged position of people with disabilities" in Trinidad (Hahn, 1985, p. 96).

The key findings of this qualitative research provide an introspective and preliminary understanding of the policies and programs for adults with a learning disability in Trinidad. Although the sample size is relatively small, the questions as outlined in Appendix 1 can be used as a framework for undertaking supplementary research on an important issue. Based on the key findings, as discussed in-depth below, it is imperative that public, private and para-public sectors

collaborate on tangible solutions. The longer it takes to action this social issue, the greater the risk more human capital is squandered, thereby resulting in unexploited potential within the citizenry.

Limited Vocational and Educational Opportunities

Critical to autonomy and empowerment of adults with a learning disability are vocational and educational opportunities. Limited vocational and educational opportunities hinder adults with a learning disability from sustainable economic livelihood and continuing academic pursuits. These limitations exclude adults with a learning disability from actively participating, and contributing positively to society.

One of the most recurring views of the focus-group interviewees was that adults with learning disabilities were not given the same vocational opportunities as their non-disabled peers. Although participants were capable and possessed the skill to perform the job, "businesses viewed them as a risk and did not want to take the chance" of hiring them (NGO2 focus-group interview, 2012). Participants stated that if they did not disclose their disability, they would "get through quicker" (NGO2 focus-group interview, 2012). Self-disclosure of a learning disability is complicated and presents risks for those involved (Price and Shaw, 2000 as cited from Greenbaum, Graham and Scales, 1996; Kuykendall, 1994; Payne, 1997; Ryan and Price, 1992).

Some representatives from non-governmental organizations took the initiative to foster partnerships with community businesses. In partnering with local businesses, adults with a learning disability can obtain much needed work experience, earn a stipend and enhance their skills. Most jobs centred on the service industry (for example, sewing, welding, cabinetry). Non-governmental organizations encouraged their personnel to promote the skills of students and/or

clients to local businesses to enable students to obtain work experience and possibly long-term employment (NGO2 stakeholder interview, 2012). However, there were only limited vocational opportunities for the number of adults with a learning disability. Some non-governmental organizations have recruited adults with a learning disability, who are enrolled at their organization to complete administrative work (NGO1 stakeholder interview, 2012).

Representatives of non-governmental organizations who develop programs for adults with a learning disability indicated that their students or clients had Individualized Education Plans. However, Individualized Education Plans did not adhere to a specific curriculum (NGO2 stakeholder interview, 2012; NGO1 stakeholder interview, 2012). Instead their education framework focused on basic reading, writing and arithmetic. Focus-group interviewees advocated for special accommodations to be made within 'special schools' so adults with a learning disability can write their examinations outside of the formal school-setting (NGO1 focus-group interview, 2012; NGO2 focus-group interview, 2012; NGO3 focus-group interview, 2012). Participants in the focus-group interviews stated that formal examinations (for example, Cambridge Examinations Council's Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate) could be written in 'special schools' that have the "CXC curriculum" so that special accommodations can be made for individuals with learning disabilities (NGO3 focus-group interview, 2012). Participants stated that without any "CXC passes, you don't have nothing" because most employers preferred academic success prior to hiring (NGO3 focus-group interview, 2012). Lavia (2007) explains "... what plagues the Caribbean is the persistence of examination-driven systems which measure success on the basis of academic achievement" (p. 193 as cited from Armstrong, Armstrong and Lynch, 2005, p. 74).

Based on the information provided by participants, vocational attainment and academic success are interdependent. A lack of secondary scholastic achievement hinders adults with a learning disability from obtaining gainful employment and/or job advancement. Adults with a learning disability can contribute positively within their respective communities, and ultimately society if special accommodation practices are implemented within the workplace and tertiary institutions (Nota et al., 2010, p. 1 as cited from Richardson 1993 and Brown & Brown, 2005; Kirsh et al., 2009; Nota, Soresi, & Perry, 2006; Schalock, 2004). Fuchs et al. (2005) in their research acknowledged the challenges for educators in standardized tests, and advocated for special accommodations including changing testing locations, no time constraints, adapting the testing format to suit the learner, and the use of assistive technology (p. 1).

Assistive Technology can be easily incorporated into educational and vocational areas based on the needs of the adult with a disability (Raskind, 1993, p. 187; Martínez-Marrero and Estrada-Hernández, 2008). Raskind's research promoted the use of technology (for example, word processing, speech recognition, spell checking, listening aids) based on the learner's needs and learning outcome (1993, p. 187). Assistive Technology is not the panacea for everything as it pertains to adults with a learning disability. However, it should be used in conjunction with Individualized Learning Plans to match the needs of the adult with a learning disability, and the intended outcome(s).

No Legal Framework

Preliminary online research of the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education indicated educational support is available to children with disabilities. The goals of the Student Support Services Division within the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education include specialized

services and support for students with special educational needs (Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education, 2014). These educational supports extend to children with mild to severe learning disabilities.

Children with a learning disability will enter adulthood having a learning disability. Representatives of non-governmental organizations and clinical psychologists spoke of a greater focus on children with a learning disability. These participants stated that there was no subsequent planning for services and programs for when these children become adults.

According to one participant, common perception is:

... these are disorders of childhood and adolescence, but not really understanding that it is a diagnosis that is going to follow throughout your entire life [...] a child at six with a learning disability in a special education classroom is still going to be struggling at twenty-six ... (Clinical psychologist stakeholder interview, 2012)

Research has proven that learning disabilities persist throughout an individual's life (Smith et al., 1997, p. 258 cited in Price and Shaw, 2000; Gerber et al., 1990; Gerber 1994). The limited focus on services and programs is indicative of society's lack of adjustment towards adults with a learning disability (Trani et al., 2010, p. 146). Developing, promoting and implementing services and programs to support adults with a learning disability are tangible proof of a commitment to helping and influencing the lives of this marginalized group within society (Pedlar, 2013, p. 3).

Preliminary online research revealed there were no enacted legislation and regulation that speaks to disabilities, which would include special accommodations for persons with disabilities. A non-existent legal framework restrains adults with a learning disability from actively participating and positively contributing to society. It allows for adults with a learning disability to be non-participatory citizens within society. It curtails how much community organizations can advocate for social support programs and services. All participants in this research discussed

the need for legislation and regulation pertaining to disabilities, which would include adults with a learning disability.

Representatives from a government organization referred to the *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* (2005) as being the "precursor to legislation" as the Policy would "inform and guide the development of legislation which is soon to come" and "of course will be enforced" (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). The proposed legislation incorporated feedback from numerous consultations, which would include non-governmental organizations that represent "persons with disabilities" and thus it "really reflects their words" (Government organization interview, 2012). Representatives from a government organization stated that the proposed legislation "will get to the Parliament by the end of the year at least ... by the end of 2012 the first draft should be within the Parliament for debate" (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012).

In retrospect, the *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* (2005) Policy's Action Plan allocated a five to seven year timeline for the "implementation and enforcement of legislation" as well as the "monitoring and evaluation of legislation" (*National Policy on Persons with Disabilities*, 2005, p. 22). Although the Policy identified the need for legislation "to protect the rights, promote the equalization of opportunities and thereby enhance the quality of life of persons with disabilities," no ratified legislation has been implemented as of March 2014 (2005, II. General Principles). A significant lack of legislation has a stark and dim reality for adults with a learning disability in Trinidad.

According to a clinical psychologist, "... adults [with a learning disability] don't get the help they need. They just fall through the cracks ... they figure out how to get through with underachieving in their lives" (Clinical psychologist stakeholder interview, 2012). This

commentary succinctly encapsulates the feedback from research participants, including adults with a learning disability. This acute sense of disillusionment can be attributed to a lack of political will and highlights a significant error within the system (Pedlar, 2013, p. 13). The mere fact that this problem has persisted irrespective of the creation of a *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* (2005) speaks to an unchallenged system that fosters dependency (Pedlar, 2013, p. 13 as cited from Rioux and Richler, 1995).

The enactment and implementation "of governmental laws and regulations that legally protect disabled people" is symptomatic of a society's growth (Clark, 2006, p. 309). Laws that protect and advocate for the rights of persons with a disability would empower adults with a learning disability and community organizations. Legislation would be instrumental in capacity building. Capacity building advocates for self-determination and allows "individuals to grow and enjoy the rewards of participation in the community" (Pedlar, 2013, p. 19 as cited from Bradley, 1994; Hutchison & McGill, 1998; Meyer, Peck & Brown, 1991; Racino, 1992). A legislative framework must prohibit all forms of discrimination and require institutions have an annual action plan which includes the question of transition for young adults with disabilities (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Thus a public policy framework would serve to empower adults with a learning disability, and their community support network.

Ambiguity in Programs and Service Supports

Hatzes and McGuire (1998) stated "families and students with learning disabilities can be suspended in a sort of 'disability limbo' where they are unable to figure out who to contact or where to turn for assistance" (Price and Shaw, 2000, p. 192). A lack of awareness of programs

and service supports for adults with a learning disability can limit their involvement within society compared to their non-disabled peers. Without established supports, adults with a learning disability are relegated to an inferior role within society. They may not have the necessary support to engage in community activities. Furthermore families or caregivers of adults with a learning disability would not be cognizant of the support that exists in this area. Programs and service supports can include adult literacy organizations, independent support networks and disability support funding.

Participants in the focus-group interviews stated they were not aware of any programs and services in the areas of learning disability, physical disability or mental disability (NGO1 focus-group interviews, 2012; NGO2 focus-group interviews, 2012; NGO3 focus-group interviews, 2012). Stakeholder interviews also corroborated this information. There were no government programs that specifically supported adults with a disability, which would include adults with a learning disability (NGO1 stakeholder interview, 2012; NGO2 stakeholder interview, 2012; Clinical psychologist stakeholder interview, 2012). To alleviate confusion in this area, stakeholder groups stated "sensitizing the public and also the practitioners on what exists in this area is necessary" (Clinical psychologist stakeholder interview, 2012).

Another facet of program and service supports by government can be found in funding to non-government organizations that develop and implement programs and services to help adults with a learning disability. Service supports from government to non-government organizations are done as financial assistance in the form of subventions or one-time grants. A subvention is a form of a grant that can span two to three years, and must be approved by Cabinet (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). Annual subventions can be renewed on the basis that the recipient non-government organization fulfills certain conditions (Government organization

stakeholder interview, 2012). According to representatives from a government organization, non-government organizations "come to us with their projects and proposals and we partner with them and we provide them with funding" (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). Government funding is used by non-government organizations to pay operational and capital expenditures. Government funding is used to pay for program expenses (for example, horticulture and information technology devices such as computers) incurred by a non-government organization.

While service supports to non-government organizations is laudable and necessary, participants expressed concerns with government funding. For instance non-government organizations wanted to meet the growing needs of adults with a disability; however, this was hampered by a lack of government funding (Social worker stakeholder interview, 2012). Other research participants stated the funding process was "lengthy" and cumbersome as each funding application had to be vetted by officials in different ministries (NGO1 stakeholder interview, 2012). Ultimately, the process from application to approval or decline can range from "three months to over a year" (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). This timeline depends on several factors, such as "the need for information; ... how quickly the non-government organization provides additional information; and ... the pace at which the application moves along in the bureaucratic process" (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). Most non-government organizations rely on some type of government funding to implement necessary programs based on the needs of students/clients. The significant decision-making delay can impact negatively on the work undertaken by non-government organizations. For instance, it can delay prospective projects indefinitely and/or void an existing

program arbitrarily. Adult learners and/or clients of non-government organizations would be greatly impacted from delays and cancellations of programs.

The stark, lived reality of persons with disabilities is that without ‘special schools’ and non-governmental organizations to help them they “would be doing nothing ... and going nowhere” (NGO2 focus-group interview, 2012). Participants in the focus-group interviews advocated for efficient collaboration between government and non-government organizations to ensure programs are sustainable (NGO1 focus-group interview, 2012). Programs and service supports are indicative of a commitment to provide resources continually to benefit and empower adults with a learning disability (Pedlar, 2013, pp. 2-4). Support systems have the capability of empowering adults with a learning disability to where they can participate in their communities and exercise autonomy in their life-decisions (Pedlar, 2013, p. 14).

Ineffective Consultations with Stakeholders

Public consultation is a common, democratic and regulatory process that involves government and networks of state actors. Public consultations permit government to obtain feedback on policies, services and programs at any stage during the policy lifecycle. The core purpose of a consultation is to use the feedback to improve existing policies and programs, or create new ones based on demand and need, or cancel existing programs.

Representatives from a government ministry echoed the importance of stakeholder consultations. For instance, Trinidad and Tobago’s *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* “came from consultations with the community of persons with disabilities” and “reflects their words” (Government organization stakeholder interview, 2012). This research uncovered two

major concerns with the public consultation process as it pertains to adults with a learning disability: (1) a lack of public consultations; and (2) a lack of follow-through post-consultations.

In 2007, two committees were formed for the purposes of finalizing and implementing a *National Reading Policy*. The two committees consisted of representatives from government and non-government organizations. One stakeholder stated,

... there was supposed to be a national policy on reading, a national policy on literacy [...] I did sit on that committee for about a year. I’ve never seen the final policy. It’s supposed to have been completed and that would have had some elements in it that addressed issues of that if people had any kinds of special needs ... I haven’t seen the final if it was actually finalized and it certainly hasn’t been implemented. (NGO3 stakeholder interview, 2012)

Adults with a learning disability who participated in the focus-group interviews expressed their interest in telling government their experiences as adults with learning disabilities, and what changes they wanted to see with respect to programs and services. These changes included, but are not limited to, lack of transport for adults with learning and physical disabilities, limited vocational opportunities, and special academic accommodations during examinations (NGO2 focus-group interview, 2012; NGO1 focus-group interview, 2012; NGO3 focus-group interview, 2012).

The consultation process, while objective and democratic does not extend to individuals with a disability, which includes adults with a learning disability. Government’s intention to consult with non-government organizations and the broader public is a step in the right direction. A representative from a government organization echoed the need for collaboration with non-government organizations. The representative stated that non-government organizations, civil society organizations and faith-based organizations “... are familiar with the people in the communities” and as such “broad spanning” ensures “we generally work collaboratively with them” as “this is the philosophy of the organization” (Government organization interview, 2012).

This comment alludes to the democratic nature of public consultations.

Public consultations allow all citizens the right to participate, and have an equal say in all decisions that affect their lives. However, the consultation process can be deemed ineffective if there is no feedback on whether prospective policies and programs are to be implemented or relegated to a future date. Within the political model of disability, adults with a learning disability are not afforded the privilege to participate in the consultation process, and thus remain marginalized within society (Gilson and DePoy, 2000, p. 208 and 211). Adults with learning disabilities need to be included within the social, education, health, and other services available to non-disabled citizens (Bersgma, 2000, p. 16).

Conclusion

Learning disabilities are not constrained to the bio-medical framework. According to Goodley (2001), "disability remains a social problem to be eradicated by societal change" (p. 208). Disability issues extend to the historical, cultural, social and political discourses (Goodley, 2001, p. 210). The shared experiences of adults with a learning disability, non-governmental organizations, social worker, clinical psychologists and government organization contribute to an engaged discussion of change and political reform (Shakespeare and Watson, 2001, p. 562 as cited in Putnam, 2005, p. 195). Adults with a learning disability experience stigma, exclusion from society and face discrimination (Putnam, 2005, p. 189 as cited from Wertlieb, 1995; Fine & Asch, 1988; Susman, 1994). Important to the removal of marginalization and stigmatization of adults with a learning disability is a change in the political will of government (Davis, 2013, p. 157).

This research conducted in Trinidad analyzed the programs developed and policies enacted for adults with a learning disability. In applying the social and political models of disability, this research revealed that adults with a learning disability are not afforded equal opportunity, and experience societal exclusion in comparison to their contemporaries. The social model of disability is demonstrated through limited vocational and educational opportunities; and a greater focus on children with a learning disability. The political model of disability is demonstrated through lack of a legal framework; ambiguity in programs and service supports available; and ineffective consultations with stakeholder groups. These key findings collectively bring the disability discourse into the realm of politics and citizenship by focussing on the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability in Trinidad.

In addressing the limited vocational and educational opportunities, this research recommends special educational accommodations be implemented for standardized testing (for example, secondary school entrance examinations). The use of assistive technology can be incorporated into both the educational and vocational environments based on the individual's needs and task/activity. Developing and implementing programs and service supports would enable adults with a learning disability to make decisions on how they want to participate in their communities, thus facilitating self-determination.

This research recommends a legal framework and inclusive policies to be drafted, ratified by Parliament and most importantly implemented throughout Trinidad and Tobago. A legal framework coupled with inclusive policies that are geared towards persons with a disability, speaks to capacity building and is indicative of societal growth. This research discussed the need for effective stakeholder consultations as part of the policy framework. In order for policies to be effective and sustainable, government must maintain and sustain continuing dialogue with

stakeholders. The iterative policy process, which can be deemed to be progressive elaboration, can be used to evaluate existing policies and/or programs. Thus it necessitates government to provide timely feedback post-consultation with stakeholders – non-governmental organizations, professionals, social workers, persons with a disability.

Trinidad and Tobago's *National Policy on Persons with Disabilities* (2005) is a foundation for the equality of persons with disabilities, which would include adults with a learning disability. Based on the information acquired from voluntary participants, Trinidad does not fulfil Article 3 of the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and Optional Protocol* (2008). This Protocol speaks to eight principles ranging from autonomy, societal inclusion, respect, equal opportunity and accessibility for persons with disabilities (5). The social and political models of disability marginalize adults with a learning disability, and exclude them from the privileges afforded to their non-disabled peers.

Within the public policy discourse, legislation must be enacted and policies implemented to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, which would include adults with a learning disability. The successful creation and implementation of disability policy alternatives would "acknowledge the significant role public policies play in shaping the experience of living with disability," as well as provide "greater social inclusion and reduced marginalization" for adults with a learning disability (Putnam, 2005, pp. 193-194). By incorporating special services within the social, education and health frameworks, adults with learning disabilities would "be seen as citizens who have rights within society" (Bergsma, 2000, p. 16). Political will can manifest into legislation being implemented and policies enacted that protects the rights of individuals with a disability. These regulatory instruments can be the foundation whereby community organizations can embark on creating inclusive programs for adults with a learning disability.

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Appendix 1

Non-Governmental Organization Questionnaire

1. If an individual who has a learning disability wants to obtain assistance and support from programmes offered by your organization, what criteria does this individual need to meet to participate in the programmes?
2. What are the recent government programmes and policies that s/he is aware of that are available to adults who have a learning disability?
3. In your opinion, what programmes and policies are effective, and what programme(s) and policies are ineffective (i.e. cost-benefit analysis, outreach to communities, public-private partnerships)?
4. What partnerships exist between your organization and government (e.g. delivery of specific programmes)?
5. What programmes, policies and procedures exist within your organization for adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability (e.g. educational and vocational)?
6. What future developments are slated for any of the existing programmes, policies and procedures within your organization?
7. For educational programmes within your organization, what are the educational (individualized) learning plans available?
8. For vocational programmes, is employment provided within the organization, or do partnerships exist between your organization and the public and/or private sectors?
9. Within your organization, what human resource/volunteers are available to support adults who have a learning disability (educational and vocational)?
10. What methods are used to make these programmes known and available to adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability (e.g. marketing techniques, community outreach)?
11. If an individual needs to be assessed, what is the process and costs involved (e.g. does the organization have an in-house psychologist or is the individual referred to a specific Ministry or private psychologist)?
12. What was the annual budget for the last five years to support the programmes offered by the organization? Please describe any significant changes for these programmes and the reason for these changes.
13. What percentage or portion of the annual budget is government-funded (e.g. grants)?
14. How accessible are government funds (e.g. conditional or unconditional grants)?
15. What information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used by your organization in the delivery of these programmes to adults who have a learning disability?
16. Over the last 5 years and presently, what is the number of adults who have a learning disability in Trinidad and Tobago enrolled/registered with the organization?
17. What methods are used to obtain feedback on the organization's programmes?
18. How is the feedback incorporated into any of the programmes and policies?

19. Are there any additional comments/observations that you would like to add to help inform our study?

Ministry Questionnaire

1. What are the existing programmes and policies within your specific Ministry that are available to adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability (e.g. educational and vocational)?
2. Is there any future development slated for the existing programmes and policies mentioned in Question 1?
3. Are new programmes and policies being developed within your specific Ministry that will be available to adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability? If so, please provide additional information regarding the new proposed programmes and policies.
4. What collaborative programmes exist and/or are being developed (e.g. public-private partnerships or philanthropic relationships, linkages with other Ministries for adults who are suspected of having a learning disability to be assessed)?
5. Does the Ministry make programmes available to adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability, in order to ensure full access to these programmes (e.g. dedicated Unit, online, telephone)?
6. What was the annual budget for the last five years for these programmes? Please describe any significant changes for these programmes and the reason for these changes.
7. What human resources are available within the respective Ministry to administer these programmes?
8. What information and communication technologies (ICTs) are used in the delivery of these programmes to adults who have a learning disability?
9. How is statistical information acquired to determine the number of adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability (e.g. census)?
10. What methods are used to obtain feedback from adults who have a learning disability on government programmes and policies (e.g. survey)?
11. How is the feedback incorporated in programme evaluations?
12. How do you create awareness of your programmes?
13. Are they (programmes) available and accessible across the country?
14. Are there any additional comments/observations that you would like to add to help inform our study?

Participant (focus-group) Questionnaire

1. What government programmes and policies are you aware of that are available to assist or support adults who have a learning disability?
2. What programmes and policies exist within the community that you are aware of for adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability (e.g. educational and vocational)?

3. Have you experienced any physical or financial barriers involved with accessing information or participating in these government and non-government based programmes?
4. How effective are government and non-government (community-based) programmes (i.e. job placement, education programmes)?
5. Is a greater awareness needed in respect of the programmes that are available to adults in Trinidad and Tobago who have a learning disability?
 - a. Explain what you think can be done to make the public aware of programmes available to adults who have a learning disability.
6. Are there barriers within society that marginalize adults who have a learning disability?
 - a. If yes, what types of barriers do you encounter or have you encountered (e.g. non-income support from government, lack of education and vocation opportunities)?
7. Can these barriers be removed from society?
 - a. If yes, what recommendations would you make to government to remove these barriers?
8. Can non-government organizations deliver programmes that will benefit adults who have a learning disability?
 - a. What limitations exist that prevents non-government organizations from delivering effective programmes.
9. How did you learn about what government and non-government (community-based) programmes were available to you?
10. Are there any additional comments/observations that you would like to add to help inform our study?