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Examining Inclusive Practices in Nicaraguan Schools

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EXAMINING INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN NICARAGUAN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine Nicaraguan teachers' efficacy for inclusive practices and current teaching practices in Nicaraguan schools as the first step in developing a special education training program. Sixty-one teachers in 15 schools completed the Teacher Efficacy of Inclusive Practice (TEIP) survey to determine their confidence in inclusive practices, collaboration and dealing with disruptive behaviors. Classroom observations were also completed to examine the environment, teaching/ learning strategies, student behaviors, learning materials, and time distribution in the classroom. Results from the TEIP indicated Nicaraguan teachers were highly efficacious in inclusive practices. The survey and observation data collected provided a baseline to develop goals and objectives for a two-year special education training.

Key words: Nicaragua, inclusive practices, teacher efficacy.

Special Education Teacher Training Needs Assessment in Nicaragua

It has been nearly 65 years since the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On December 10, 1948, the long road to inclusive education as a human right began on paper while the implementation in practice continues to develop throughout the world (Reiser, 2012). It was not until 1990 that the Jomtien Declaration was passed with "Education for All" (EFA) emphasizing the inherent right of every child to an education that is diverse and meets the individual needs of primary school children. Nicaragua was one of 138 nations that signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that was adopted in December 2006 (Reiser, 2012).

Nicaraguan Law 202 protects the rights of individuals with disabilities but the statutes are not well known and not enforced (International Disability Network, 2003). Nicaraguan policies have been established for students to attend schools and for accommodations to be provided for inclusive education (International Disability Network, 2004; Martinez Garcia, 2011). Therefore, it is imperative that both pre-service and in-service teachers receive training on inclusive teaching practices and universal access to education for all students (Peters, 2003).

The Ministerio de Educación Pública, Cultura y Deporte, Ministry of Public Education, Culture and Sport (MECD) is responsible for Nicaraguan education nationwide (Education

International, 2010). The Central American Governance Institute estimates indicate that of all countries in the region, Nicaragua spends the least on education – an average of 42 dollars per pupil per year (Laguna, 2005). The MECD estimates that 75% of public schools lack the basic conditions for teaching with only 37% having drinking water and 30% having consistent access to electricity (Laguna, 2005). Fifteen percent of children5-14 years of age are involved in child labor, which directly impacts a child's ability to attend school (Laguna, 2005; UNICEF, 2013).

The MECD has also begun to promote the integration of students with disabilities into the mainstream school with approximately 30% of students with disabilities being placed in general education settings (Martinez Garcia, 2011). However, there is little funding to support this integration. For individuals with disabilities, an average of 4.3 years is spent in formal education contributing to the 44% illiteracy rate (Martinez Garcia, 2011). Access to higher levels of education is extremely limited for individuals with disabilities.

In Nicaragua, the severity of a disability is assessed by how much difficulty the disability causes in daily activities, such as mobility, communication, self-care and domestic life (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, 2004). The categories are "mild" which is seen as less than 25% decrease in daily functioning. "Moderate" is 25-50% and "severe" results in a decreased capacity of 50 to 95%. "Profound" is seen as 95-99% decrease in ability with "Complete" being 100% disabled. For individuals six years of age and older, 6% are in the mild category, 11% moderate, 37% severe and 31% profound (Education International, 2010; Martinez Garcia, 2011).

Besides overseeing the schools, the MECD is also responsible for training teachers and administrators. However, in 2006 approximately 27% of teachers had no training and that number has continued to rise (Visser-Valfrey, Jané, Wilde, & Escobar, 2010). One teacher commented on the importance of applying the Ministry of Education (MINED) accessibility standards to create inclusive environments in schools but the importance of training teachers is paramount (Martinez Garcia, 2011, p. 21).

Educational & Cultural Considerations for Students with Disabilities

Developing countries such as Nicaragua experience such immense economic distress that providing access to education for students with disabilities is not a primary concern (Education International, 2010). Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere: 44% of people live on less than a U.S. dollar per day and 75% on less than two U.S. dollars per day (Bradshaw & Linneker, 2003). This level of poverty is often cited as the reason why 43% of children do not attend pre-school and 50% of adolescents are not in secondary school (UNICEF, 2013). For the 10.7% of the population with a disability, the percentage of youth not attending school is even higher (Mont, 2007; UNICEF, 2013). Economics, out of necessity, must dictate the formation of policy and this policy must be practical. Finances, poverty, discrimination, severity of disability and family supports are all factors in impacting special education change but with the multiple layers of complexities, the basic human right of education for all will not be a simple fix (Hill, 2013; Navarro & Verdisco, 2000; Sanyal, 2009; Thomas, 2012).

Teachers

A critical factor for students' academic success in the school system is teacher performance (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Goldhaber & Brewer 1997). In Nicaragua, there is an extreme shortage of teachers (Martinez Garcia, 2011). This shortage may be attributed to a complexity of issues including wages of less than $100 a month, low prestige of teachers as portrayed by the government, privatizing schools for profit, and the educational policies

set by the government (Education International, 2010; Thomas, 2010). A large majority of individuals choosing to become teachers are from rural areas with low income levels, who were not able to get into other university degree programs. Moreover, they are allowed to study at a teachers college for as few as six months as long as they have completed the ninth grade (Education International, 2010).

Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) emphasizes the need to develop effective inclusive education in schools instead of merely integrating students with disabilities. The UN Special Rapporteur made specific recommendations and steps toward building inclusive education systems including policies, legislation and financial frameworks. Teacher training was specifically identified as a focal area. The report recommended training both pre-service and in-service teachers in techniques such as differentiated instruction and cooperative learning so these teachers could then train other teachers (Reiser, 2012).

Given the multitude of weaknesses in teacher training in Nicaragua, the teachers' union has made several recommendations for change. One of the foundational necessities includes requiring teachers to agree to ongoing and quality training before beginning their teaching career and continuing this process throughout their years of educating young Nicaraguans. The union is working to ensure both quality and accountability at all levels of educational policy and updated teacher training for making curriculum current and relevant (Education International, 2010; Martinez Garcia, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The **purpose** of this study was *to conduct a special education needs assessment in Nicaraguan schools as the first step in developing a training program for teachers related to special education.* The needs assessment identified areas upon which to build the goals and objectives of the two-year training course in special education. The teaching objectives and necessary materials will be developed based on the results of the needs assessment (Bosher & Smalkowski, 2002; Brown, 1995). The main **objective** was *gather background information about the teachers and identify current knowledge, skills and attitudes and what they need to acquire to educate children with disabilities*.

Methods
Participants and Setting

Participants included 61 teachers (female = 56, male = 5) from 15 schools in the departments of León and Chinandega, Nicaragua. The average age was 38.87 years (range 25-53 years) with 15.73 years of teaching experience (range 1-33 years). Twenty-seven participants had an elementary education teacher license, 22 had a Bachelor's degree (7 indicated a discipline other than education), 3 had a Master's degree, and 2 had a post-graduate degree. Thirty-five participants indicated that they had received additional training in an area of education (range 1 hour-6 months), 22 had no additional training, and 4 participants did not respond to this item. Of the 35 participants who had completed additional training, 18 had training in an area of special education. Eight participants had training in sensory disabilities and ten had additional training specific to inclusive practices or general methods in special education. The majority of the respondents taught elementary age students ($N = 32$) with preschool ($N = 8$), and secondary ($N = 5$) teachers also responding to the survey. Eight respondents were working as a counselor, physical therapist or as a school director and 8 respondents did not indicate the level that they were teaching. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information for Study Participants

	n	Percent	Mean	SD
Gender	5	8		
Male	56	92		
Female				
Degree earned				
Bachelors	22	36.06		
Masters	3	4.91		
Post-graduate	2	3.27		
Elementary education certificate	27	44.26		
Additional training				
Yes	35	57.38		
No	22	36.07		
No response	4	6.56		
Level currently teaching				
Elementary	32	52.45		
Preschool	8	13.11		
Secondary	5	8.19		
Other	8	13.11		
No response	8	13.11		
Age			38.87	8.05
Age started teaching			23.09	4.86
Years of teaching experience			15.73	9.06

Instrumentation

All materials were translated to Spanish by a university faculty member from León who had also spent a semester studying special education in the United States and therefore was familiar with the terminology. All translated documents were provided to the participants who were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the study.

Demographic Questionnaire. A 22- item demographic questionnaire was developed by the researchers to better understand the teachers' background. The demographic questionnaire asked participants their age, degree earned, number of years teaching, additional training completed and current and previous teaching assignments.

Survey. The Teacher Efficacy of Inclusive Practices scale (TEIP, Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2011) was utilized to survey the participants. The TEIP is an 18-item Likert-scale survey that was developed with 607 pre-service teachers in four countries. A factor analysis was used to determine the three factors of the scale: 1) efficacy in inclusive practices, 2) efficacy in collaboration and 3) efficacy in dealing with disruptive behaviors. The reliability coefficient for the scale is .89.

Classroom Observation Form. The Classroom Observation Tool created by Ray Chesterfield, as part of the U.S. Agency for International Development, was modified by the researchers to meet the specific needs of this project and provide a systematic way of observing basic classroom procedures. The "Improving Educational Quality Project" was conducted from 1991-1997 in five different countries in order to systematically observe a wide variety of classrooms (Chesterfield, 1997). Observations focused on the classroom environment, teaching/learning strategies, student behaviors, learning materials, classroom management and time distribution in the classroom. The researchers also noted the number and gender of students and adults in the classroom. The observation form examined the physical classroom layout, the materials available, and the procedures being utilized in the classroom.

Procedures. The research team included two English faculty members and a Social Work graduate student from a Nicaraguan university and four researchers from the United States. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the district administrator prior to visiting the schools. The research team travelled to 15 schools where the Nicaraguan university representatives reviewed the consent forms and administered the demographics questionnaire and survey with the participants. The researchers from the United States spent between 15-45 minutes in each of the 45 classrooms and completed the observation forms over a five-day period.

Results

Survey

The results from the TEIP survey are summarized in Table 2. Examining the three factors, participants rated themselves as highest in the area of efficacy in inclusive instruction ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 0.72$), efficacy in collaboration was the second highest factor ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 0.83$), and efficacy in dealing with disruptive behavior ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 0.91$), was the lowest factor. Items that were rated the highest were providing alternate explanations, having students work collaboratively and assisting families of students with disabilities. Items rated the lowest were making clear expectations for students, preventing disruptive behavior in the classroom, and collaborating with other professionals in designing educational plans for students with disabilities.

Table 2. Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practice Scale (TEIP) Results by Factors

	Mean	SD
Efficacy in Inclusive Instruction	**5.14**	**0.72**
5. I can accurately gauge student comprehension of what I have taught.	5.15	0.78
6. I can provide appropriate challenges for very capable students.	5.12	0.75
10. I am confident in designing learning tasks so the individual needs of students with disabilities are accommodated.	5.04	0.76
14. I am confident in my ability to get students to work together in pairs or in small groups.	5.27	0.63
15. I can use a variety of assessment strategies (e.g., portfolio assessment, modified tests, performance-based assessment)	5.21	0.81
18. I am able to provide an alternate explanation or example when students are confused.	5.27	0.58
Efficacy in Collaboration	**5.04**	**0.83**
3. I can make parents feel comfortable coming to school.	5.18	0.70
4. I can assist families in helping their children do well in school.	5.24	0.78
9. I am confident in my ability to get parents involved in school activities of their children with disabilities.	4.98	0.84
12. I can collaborate with other professionals in designing educational plans for students with disabilities.	4.83	1.06
13. I am able to work jointly with other professionals and staff (e.g., aides, other teachers) to teach students with disabilities in the classroom.	5.0	0.85
16. I am confident in informing others who know little about laws and policies relating to the inclusion of students with disabilities.	4.95	0.70

Efficacy in Problem Behavior	**4.90**	**0.91**
1. I can make my expectations clear about student behavior.	4.79	1.15
2. I am able to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy.	5.05	0.69
7. I am confident in my ability to prevent disruptive behavior in the classroom before it occurs.	4.77	0.80
8. I can control disruptive behavior in the classroom.	5.03	0.69
1. I am able to get children to follow classroom rules.	5.0	0.69
17. I am confident when dealing with students who are physically aggressive.	4.85	1.27
Mean of All Survey Items	**5.05**	**0.50**

Classroom Observation

Based on the classroom observations, there was an average of 14.23 students per classroom (range 2-28) with an average of 1.13 adults in the classroom (range 1-2).The majority of the students observed (N = 40; 89%) had adequate seating and writing surfaces and 69% (N = 31) of the teachers had a designated desk area. The majority of the classrooms were arranged in rows (N = 22; 49%) with other classrooms arranged in a circle (N = 14; 31%) or in groups (N = 6; 13%).

In the area of teaching and learning strategies, the most frequently noted strategy used was talking with individual students (N = 30; 67%) with the following strategies also observed: dictating to the class (N = 27; 60%); teacher writing notes or diagrams on the board (N = 23; 51%); asking questions (N = 20; 44%), marking books/papers at desk (N = 6; 13%) and teacher demonstrating experiments (N = 2; 4%).

Student behaviors noted during the observations included the following: answering teacher's questions (N = 29; 64%), giving choral answers (N = 24; 53%), writing (N = 23; 51%), asking the teacher questions (N = 12; 27%), misbehaving (N = 9; 20%), working with other students (N = 8; 18%), drawing (N = 7; 16%), completing math problems (N = 4; 9%), reading out loud (N = 2; 4%), and reading silently (N = 2; 4%). The classroom management strategy noted most frequently was complimenting and praising students (N = 23; range 1-15 times in a classroom) and quietly reminding the child who is misbehaving about the rules in the classroom (N = 12; range 1–17 times in a classroom). Yelling at the child who is misbehaving was noted in 6 classrooms.

Discussion

When examining the TEIP, the results indicate that Nicaraguan teachers have a high sense of efficacy for inclusive practices based on the high overall mean (5.05 on a 6 point Likert scale). This finding is interesting since the IDN (2004) indicated that the majority of people in Nicaragua are unaware that Law 202, which protects the rights of individuals with disabilities, exists. Research indicates that one might be highly efficacious about one's own ability because they may be unaware of what they do not know, which could be the case for these teachers. Similarly, American preservice teachers often rate their efficacy in teaching high prior to student teaching (Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990), but following the student teaching experience, their efficacy drops because the reality of the complex task of teaching was underestimated. According to Visser-Valfrey, Jané, Wilde, & Escobar (2010), approximately 27 percent of Nicaraguan teachers enter the classroom with no preparation, which contributes to the lack of knowledge needed to understand the complexities of teaching, especially when working with students with disabilities. Eighteen percent of teachers in Nicaragua have only a

primary education and as few as 14 percent have a university diploma (Di Gropello & Marshal, 2005). Hill (2013) states, "The greatest obstacle is the lack of prepared teachers within the schools themselves" (p. 5).

In Nicaragua, the typical primary teacher's entire educational experience averages 12 years, therefore most Nicaraguan teachers would not have the additional knowledge and training related to children with disabilities and the types of accommodations and modifications that are necessary for the environment to be conducive for learning (Laguna, 2005). Nicaraguan law guarantees a teaching position to all normal school graduates but only requires a primary school education to become a teacher (Reiser, 2012). With these low levels of education for the teachers, the urgency to define ways to improve level of skills for faculty in Nicaragua is compelling.

Teacher performance evaluation has been introduced and teachers view it as one more pressure that may lead to losing their much needed jobs. Therefore, efforts to attract, motivate, and retain quality teachers have been, and will continue to be, necessary to improve the quality of education (Education International, 2010). In her 2011 article, Vaillant makes three recommendations related to education in Nicaragua and all three relate to training teachers: 1) the need to recruit the most competent students, 2) provide quality pre-service education and 3) emphasize the importance of continuing education. One of the most interesting findings of the current study was that some responses on the survey did not correlate with what was noted during the classroom observations, which may be related to the fear of losing their jobs.

On the TEIP the teachers rated themselves the highest on the factor, Efficacy in Inclusive Instruction, but the researchers did not observe inclusive instruction in the classroom. The questions on inclusive instruction addressed using small group instruction, providing alternate explanations and using a variety of assessments. The classroom observations data showed that typically the classroom environment was set up in rows (49%) compared to only 13% arranged in groups. This indicates that the classroom environment is not set up for student interaction, which decreases the likelihood of small group instruction and active participation of all students. Addressing room arrangement is a necessary instructional decision that should be based on lesson objectives and student strengths and weaknesses, so teachers can begin to foster the most effective learning environment for all students (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsam, 2012). Effective room arrangement is one area that could be addressed in future trainings to help the teachers understand the impact on academic goals and behavior management.

The factor, Efficacy in Problem Behavior, was rated lowest by the teachers. The items for preventing disruptive behavior in the classroom, making expectations clear and dealing with students who are physically aggressive were ranked the lowest. Disruptive and problem behaviors were documented in the classroom observations conducted by the researchers. Since lecture/dictation to class (60%) was observed in the majority of the classrooms and used as the sole way to deliver content, it could contribute to the struggle of current behavioral issues and the prevention of future classroom behaviors. Research indicates that lecture style is the least effective for students with attention, language and/or memory problems (Childre, Sands, & Pope, 2009; McCoy, 2005; Wolery, 2012), yet these classrooms employed that teaching style the majority of the time.

Many times teachers are reactive versus proactive in response to behavior, which means quickly reacting to the behavior at that time, but not analyzing what happened prior to the behavior or the consequences following the behavior (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Wilks, 1996). Teachers may also be focusing on the negative or inappropriate behaviors versus the positive, appropriate behaviors wanted in the classroom. It is important to have a behavior management plan that is well thought out and allows prevention of behavior issues in the classroom. Since this was the lowest ranked area, training in behavior management would be very beneficial for the teachers in this study.

The teachers rated the factor, Efficacy in Collaboration, moderately high. The questions in this section addressed working with families and other professionals to facilitate student success in school. One of the lowest ranked questions in this section focused on collaborating with others to design educational plans for students with disabilities. In order to best serve children with disabilities in the educational environment, collaboration is necessary. If a child has specific learning and/or behavioral needs, it is imperative that all teachers, teacher assistants and parents are aware of those needs and incorporate consistent strategies in school and home environments. In Nicaragua there are additional factors such as finances, poverty and family support that contribute to the lack of meaningful collaboration for inclusive practices for students with disabilities (Sanyal, 2009).

There are a few plausible reasons why some discrepancy might be seen in two sources of data:1) The teachers viewed the survey as a tool to determine if they were doing their job and feared that they might lose their job if they responded that they were not knowledgeable. 2) They wanted to seem competent so they would be chosen for the training in special education that the researchers will provide over the course of the two years. 3) There may have been some misunderstanding of survey items. 4) Teachers may focus attention on children/youth with more significant disabilities (i.e., intellectual disabilities, deafness, blindness) due to current practices in Nicaraguan schools.

Limitations

The potential concern by the participants that results from the survey may have an impact on their jobs needs to be considered when interpreting the information. Teachers may have rated items higher on the Likert scale in order to appear more competent in their ability to teach students with disabilities. Another potential limitation is the possible misunderstanding of the definition of students with disabilities, as teachers may have focused responses on students with more severe disabilities. While the researchers observed 45 different classrooms, each of the observations was limited to an average of 20 minutes. Conducting multiple observations at different times of the day may yield more reliable results.

Conclusions

Quality of education is a problem experienced by the majority of students in the developing world. In Nicaragua, finding qualified teachers and creating a rigorous curriculum must be seen in light of a severe shortage of materials for students and adequate school facilities. Raising educational levels has an immediate impact on society. Without effective basic education, individuals, families and even entire communities become vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, learning tools are crucial for acquiring new knowledge and for productive daily functioning.

A teacher may feel highly efficacious about providing an inclusive environment for students with disabilities, but creating an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all learners is a much more difficult task. In order to make lasting change in Nicaraguan schools, intentional training must be provided to address systematic change in preparing effective teachers for inclusive practices. This indicates the need for a supportive environment that encourages changes in daily practices for students with disabilities and for meaningful collaboration among all stakeholders. Teachers must be trained to shape the future of Nicaragua.

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Summary

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It has been about 65 years since the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On December 10, 1948, the long road to inclusive education as a human right began on paper while the implementation in practice continues to develop throughout the world (Reiser, 2012). It was not until 1990 that the Jomtien Declaration was passed with "Education for All" (EFA) emphasizing the inherent right of every child to an education that is diverse and meets the individual needs of primary school children. Nicaragua was one of 138 nations that signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) that was adopted in December 2006 (Reiser, 2012).

The purpose of the study that is presented in the article was to examine Nicaraguan teachers' efficacy for inclusive practices and current teaching practices in Nicaraguan schools as the first step in developing a special education training program. The main **objective** was *gather background information about the teachers and identify current knowledge, skills and attitudes and what they need to acquire to educate children with disabilities*. Sixty-one teachers in 15 schools completed the Teacher Efficacy of Inclusive Practice (TEIP) survey to determine their confidence in inclusive practices, collaboration and dealing with disruptive behaviors. Classroom observations were also completed to examine the environment, teaching/learning strategies, student behaviors, learning materials, and time distribution in the classroom. Also Demographic Questionnaire was included. A 22- item demographic questionnaire was developed by the researchers to better understand the teachers' background. The demographic questionnaire asked participants their age, degree earned, number of years teaching, additional training completed and current and previous teaching assignments.

Empirical data shows that quality of education is a problem experienced by the majority of students in the developing world. In Nicaragua, finding qualified teachers and creating a rigorous curriculum must be seen in light of a severe shortage of materials for students and adequate school facilities. Raising educational levels has an immediate impact on society. Without effective basic education, individuals, families and even entire communities become vulnerable to exploitation. Therefore, learning tools are crucial for acquiring new knowledge and for productive daily functioning.

Results from the TEIP indicated a teacher may feel highly efficacious about providing an inclusive environment for students with disabilities, but creating an inclusive environment that meets the needs of all learners is a much more difficult task. In order to make lasting change in Nicaraguan schools, intentional training must be provided to address systematic change in preparing effective teachers for inclusive practices. This indicates the need for a supportive environment that encourages changes in daily practices for students with disabilities and for meaningful collaboration among all stakeholders. Teachers must be trained to shape the future of Nicaragua.

The survey and observation data collected provided a baseline to develop goals and objectives for a two-year special education training.