

Current Situation of Inclusive Education in the Dominican Republic

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Executive Summary

This document chronicles the current situation in the Dominican Republic regarding inclusive education. Through a brief exploratory study of public education and public governmental entities, an emerging, though gradual, change is depicted in the education system, affecting students with disabilities or special needs. The manuscript also documents the contributions of the Dominican government to aid and provide support to families and children with special needs both in and out of the educational system.

In order to change and develop the frequency in which the Dominican Republic is responding to a rapidly evolving world demanding social and educational acceptance and inclusion, it is crucial for strategic planning of modifications to be made in the way students with disabilities are receiving an education. An important need for policy and practice to go hand in hand is vastly expressed. When appropriate integration of policies follows into a seamless practice, the combination can create exceptionally positive outcomes. Specific recommendations are provided to particular governmental institutions to propose changes in the Dominican schooling system. Extended future research in the area of disabilities and educational inclusion in the Dominican Republic are highly encouraged.

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Current Situation of Inclusive Education in the Dominican Republic

Introduction to the Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic is the largest country in the island of Hispaniola, shared with the Republic of Haiti. It is located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. It is a third-world developing country facing many struggles and lacking some basic resources to offer its citizens, one of these being education. According to Álvarez (2004), the economic crisis in the early 1990s particularly affected the educational sector, which had been experiencing a continuous decline due to the cutback in public investment. A big drop in teachers' wages resulted in an increase of teacher attrition. It is estimated that between 1989 and 1990 3853 teachers, 7% of the total of educators in the country, left the field.

Although awareness of disability and special education in the Dominican Republic dates back to the 1990s, an increase in terms of public understanding and consciousness has developed. Although there has been an increase in public and private institutions targeting this population and providing support to families, a more visible progress or evolution of the situation remains to be seen. As stated by Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (CLADE), Muñoz, and Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (CEJIL) (2009), the inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools presents significant psychological advantages, as well as intellectual, social and emotional needs through the regular interaction of children to a more diverse group of students. Inclusion also helps combat stereotypes and promotes awareness of the capability of individuals with disabilities, allowing them to attend all education levels.

The Dominican Constitution states in Article 63 (these are my translations from Spanish to English): Everyone is entitled to an integral education of quality, with equal opportunities; therefore students with diverse backgrounds and different abilities should be allowed the opportunity to participate in mainstream schooling courses. There is currently

little research exploring the status of the Dominican Republic in terms of its readiness to offer inclusive education and proper schooling for this population. The lack of statistical information available concerning disability and education for the individuals living with a disability does not allow scholars and experts in the topic to uncover gaps and data missing in the country.

The purpose of this document is to understand and analyze the current situation of inclusive education in the Dominican Republic. In it are presented existing procedures and policies carried out by the governmental institutions, as well as by private institutions, to help ensure an improved and more fair quality of life regarding education for individuals with special needs. Limited data on this particular population are presented and discussed. Challenges and limitations in the country that inhibit or hinder a positive course of action in the field are also mentioned. Several recommendations are presented to propose changes in the Dominican system, as well as to encourage and guide extended future research in the area of disabilities and inclusion in the Dominican Republic.

Disability Statistics in the Dominican Republic

In 2013, the population of the Dominican Republic was estimated to be approximately 10,349,741 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2014; The World Bank, n.d.). Accurate census data on the percentage of individuals with disabilities in this country and the situation they face is practically inexistent. However, limited information has been gathered regarding the topic of disability through precise investigations and national census, which included variables addressing the issue. The collection of data regarding disabilities not only stems from the need to create, evaluate, and implement policies but also to properly ensure the attainment of those rights (Stang Alva, 2011).

In 2006, for a collection of statistical information in the country, the Oficina Nacional de Estadística (ONE) followed-up with the survey *Encuesta Nacional de Hogares de*

Propósitos Múltiples (ENHOGAR), oriented to periodically gather social, economic, and environmental information relating different topics. Three questionnaires were used and developed jointly with UNICEF and other representatives of institutions aiming for children's prosperity. The surveys were validated by a focus group and a pilot test (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2008).

In the survey, 16 questions were included regarding disabilities where individuals were allowed to answer "yes," "no," or "don't know," with the exception of one blank for "other" in which a particular impairment not mentioned in the survey was expressed. Ten codes were also used to specify the cause of the disability. The codes were the following:

1. Born that way
2. Developed during growth
3. Violence or abuse
4. Bicycle/Motorcycle accident
5. Accident from another motor vehicle
6. Workplace accident
7. Other accident non-work related
8. Lost bullets
9. Other (specify)
10. Doesn't know

The questions asked to participants are presented next: "Does (name) have one of the following problems?"

- Blind in one eye
- Blind in both eyes
- Difficulty seeing, during the day or at night
- Deaf

- Listens with difficulty, to hear uses headsets
- Compared to other children he or she is not clear enough to be understood by people other than the close family
- Has permanent limitation to move hands or forearms
- Has permanent limitation to move one of the arms
- When spoken to, he/she seems to understand what has been said
- Sometimes he/she has attacks, become stiff or loses consciousness
- Learns to do things like other children of the same age
- Compared to other children of his/her same age, seems to have some kind of mental retardation or appears slower [The term “mental retardation” is written as a direct translation of the document; its terminology might be regarded as dated or otherwise inappropriate in other countries.]
- Autism
- Cerebral Palsy
- Other limitation (specify)

In ENHOGAR 2006 it was stated that 4.5% of children two to nine years old in the country were reported to have a disability. However, it is of great importance to recognize that 60% of those cases were due to parents stating people outside the family were unable to understand the child. Another element that also brings with it concerns is that 90% of the cases reported corresponded to the statement, “compared with other children of his age, the child seems to have mental retardation or is slower.” Three additional questions were asked afterwards relating to the kind of assistance, if any, needed by these children in their day-to-day activities, if they had ever attended a special school, or if they currently assist one due to their condition.

In 2010, the National Census concluded that 12.3% of the Dominican population claimed to have a disability. The census included 12 questions regarding certain incapacities with the objective of reporting a basic interpretation of the disabled population in the Dominican Republic, as well as to identify the major needs in research for future investigations. The 12 questions targeting disability requested from participants in the 2010 National Census were the following: “Does (name) have permanent difficulty . . . ” (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2012):

- To see, even with glasses?
- To hear, even with earphones?
- To walk or go up stairs?
- To move one or both arms?
- To move one or both legs?
- To recall or concentrate?
- To grab objects and/or open containers with his hands?
- To speak?
- Is he or she mute?
- Does he have mental problems?
- Is he missing one or both legs?
- Is he missing one or both arms?

The only possible answers were “yes” and “no”. At the time, with a population of 9,445,281 the most frequent impairment detected was related to low visibility (8.33%), followed by difficulty walking or going up stairs (3.46%), and difficulty recalling information or concentrating (2.83%). However, as stated by Consejo Nacional de Discapacidad (CONADIS) (2010), the small number of questions looking to examine the situation is a great limitation of the survey as a reliable source of information. One question

is hardly enough to give insight into the elements of the population with disabilities.

However, the CONADIS (2010) information seems credible because the prevalence of disability of countries in the region is estimated to be around 15%.

According to the ONE (2014a), the Dominican Republic embraced the recommendation of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to integrate a module targeting disability in the survey ENHOGAR-2013. Very similar questions were asked in order to compile data on the matter. Through this assessment, recent and more accurate information has been collected, such as, 7% of the population has a disability with a total of 705,597 people included in a population estimated to be 10,177,077. Approximately 60.4% of individuals with disabilities reached the primary level of schooling. The percentage of individuals with disabilities lowers drastically as the educational level rises, with a 15.3% in middle school and a 6.2% and 0.4% in graduate and postgraduate levels. The most common reported disability was regarding motor skills (32.3%) preventing them to walk, followed by 23.4% of individuals reporting a permanent condition to stand up. Roughly 21.2% claimed an intellectual disability, and 19% declared incapacity regarding their arms. The lowest disabilities stated are concerning feet (14.4%) and visual and auditory limitations both with 13.8%.

A correlation between intellectual disability and people who did not achieve any level of scholarship is apparent. Out of the total amount of individuals who did not attain any educational level, 41.6% had an intellectual disability, 34.8% were unable to walk, and 31.2% had a disability related to speech impairment (ONE, 2014a). Living with a disability should not be a cause for not pursuing or receiving an education. It is possible that individuals in this condition are unaware of their right of attaining instruction. It might also be that there are no institutions prepared to provide instruction to people with different capacities. As shown in ENHOGAR-2013, 53% of women in urban residential areas, with

some form of disability, received no education at all. Forty-seven percent of men found themselves in the same situation. In rural areas, the figures are similar as well, with men at a 57.1% and women at a 42.9%.

Universal Right to Education

Education is a controversial topic for individuals with disabilities. Although it is a universal right for children with disabilities to have access to an education, as stated by the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) and mentioned in several meaningful, internationally favored statements including the *World Declaration for Education for All* (1990), the *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disability* (1993), the *UNESCO Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (1994), and the *Dakar Framework for Action* (2000), (as cited in UNESCO, n.d.), situations have arisen in which children are refused or denied the right to attend school in different countries solely based on their condition regarding disability (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Mental Disability Advocacy Center, 2014; Nguyen, Villareal, Paredes, & Nious, 2013). The Dominican Republic has not been an exception.

Gautreaux (n.d.) stated many children and adolescents with physical or motor disorders in the Dominican Republic are denied the right to receive quality education and schooling in inclusive settings. She claimed Consejo Nacional de Discapacidad (CONADIS), the Ministry of Health, and the Pan American Health Organization carried out an investigation which showed 50% of individuals with disability living close to the border with Haiti don't know how to read or write, and approximately as little as 30% completed primary schooling (the original investigation was not found). This goes to show the level of exclusion within this population, often due to attitudinal or environmental factors, as stated in the study.

It is important to discuss some negative aspects of the information collected through the national census. Jiménez Sandoval (2006) mentioned four disadvantages: (a) Cultural

aspects pertaining to the geographical region often “tends to hide people with disability or negate their existence” (p. 40). Therefore, although questions are asked pertaining to the subject of disability, sometimes this will not be enough to determine whether there is or there is not, in fact, a person with a disability in the home. This should encourage those performing the interviews to “take into account prejudices, roles, and cultural stereotypes with relation to disability to design the instruments that they use” (p. 40). (b) Many questions included in the census questionnaires are poorly constructed, or with “traces that respond to the same social prejudices existing in the region” (p. 40). (c) The absence of application of standardized protocols cannot guarantee that the examiners have not contaminated the data collected. Accidental errors can occur due to differences, mayor or minor, in the way the interviewers collect the information. (d) The staff in charge of collecting data is usually not trained and can, in many cases, be unfamiliar with certain words and different themes mentioned in the instrument they are applying. If asked to clarify or further explain a question by interviewees, different answers may obtain different results, thus affecting the validity and reliability of the information gathered.

Inclusive Education

An inclusive education system is one that, above any other characteristic, prohibits discriminatory practices, promotes the appreciation of individuality and diversity, and welcomes and guarantees equality of opportunity. An inclusive educational setting not only guarantees access to individuals of different abilities, but is also adaptive to responding to their particular, individual needs and circumstances. As Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (CLADE), Muñoz, and Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (CEJIL) (2009) stated, despite numerous international references that prohibit discrimination in general, as well as discrimination particularly in the field of education, people with disabilities are one of the most discriminated groups today. Historically, people

with multiple disabilities are restricted to the home or, at best, segregated institutions that have been collectively calling themselves “special education” straightforwardly violating the inalienable right of compulsory, free public education in regular institutions.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children Services and Skills (2000), (as cited by Armstrong, Armstrong, & Spandagou, 2011) stated that an inclusive educational setting is one where the teaching and learning, accomplishments, and state of every individual matters. Individuals are treated appreciating every learner’s differences, and depending on their particular needs, taking into account their specific situations.

The situation of inclusive education in Latin America is currently changing with time and is transforming the educational system. Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (CEPAL) (2012), stated public and political concern regarding disabilities is reflected through the emerging governmental programs that offer support to families and caretakers of individuals with disabilities. Many governments are also enforcing economic and social rights of individuals with disabilities by providing access to inclusive education programs and appropriate employment opportunities.

Inclusive Education in the Dominican Republic

Stang Alva (2011) stated the topic of disability has gained more attention from the community, international entities, and governments since the 1990s. The Dominican Republic is a developing country with numerous struggles. The great majority of the country can be considered a vulnerable population. According to the World Health Organization (2011), disability affects vulnerable populations in a different manner. The prevalence of disability is higher in low-income countries than in higher income countries. People in the humblest quintile, as well as women and more mature individuals, also have a higher prevalence of disability. People with low income, unemployed or with little formal education, have a higher risk of disability. Also, children from poorer families and those

belonging to ethnic minority groups have a significantly higher risk of disability than other children.

One of the principles embraced by the Dominican Ministry of Education is “Justice and Equity.” It is defined as offering equal conditions and opportunities in an environment that guarantees an increase in talent and creative capacity for everyone to become independent despite race, belief, physical, intellectual and social conditions. Incorporating children with disabilities in conventional schools seems to follow the approach mentioned by the Ministry of Education. It should be enforced and a plan should be created and delegated to a specific organization to ensure the implementation of equal access and conditions for the student population with disabilities.

Legislation on inclusive education. The notion of inclusive education can be inferred since the very beginning the term education was used in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on December 10, 1948. Article 26 proclaimed, “Everyone has the right to education”; “higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit” (United Nations, 2008, p. 7). The same article also stated the following:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (p. 7).

The current perspective on social and educational inclusion is not only limited to the field of disability. The historical boundaries in this field are slowly being overcome and more focus is being put on building an education encompassing all, in an open and accepting society. The United Nations (1989) revealed in Article 22 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, “States Parties recognize that a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy

a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child's active participation in the community” (p. 7). Special care and access to resources and assistance is also recognized, as well as the right to an education “on the basis of equal opportunity” (p. 8) exposed in Article 28.

In 2006, the United Nations approved the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol* and on March 2007 it was opened for signature. Forty-four signatories were gathered on the opening day, a high record number for a United Nations' Convention. According to United Nations (2007), the Convention's formation originated due to the Government of Mexico, who proposed to the General Assembly of the United Nations to establish an Ad Hoc Committee on convention to protect and promote the rights of persons with disabilities. This Convention did not introduce any new laws but pledges for the equality in conditions of all human rights for individuals with disabilities.

Article 24 addressed education; it indicated an inclusive setting that ensures “the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity” (p. 16). The Convention also mentioned individual distinctions and the importance of developing mental and physical abilities to reach student's fullest potential in general educational environments while receiving the support they need. The element of social inclusion in institutions is also addressed in order to allow these students proper integration to a free society (Dávila Balsera, Naya Germendia, & Lauzurika Arrondo, 2010).

A Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) was formed since the Convention. All countries are expected to present reports every four years indicating the measures taken to ensure the implementation of these rights, as stated in the Convention. Noticing the lack of procedures being put into practice, the Committee makes recommendations of strategies and implementations directly to the country to end

discrimination. Specifically for the Dominican Republic, the Committee recommended strengthening efforts against ongoing discrimination (Dávila Balsera, Naya Germendia, & Lauzurika Arrondo, 2010; United Nations, n.d.).

Inclusion in education is becoming increasingly popular due to human rights advocacy and to the creation of international policies. Despite the increased visibility in the public agenda and the development in actions taken toward disabilities, the situation in Latin America is characterized by profound inequality that should be addressed by strong political resolve (Stang Alva, 2011). In Latin America, the type of disability impacts individual's opportunities to receive an education. However, there is huge disparity between countries in the region. In El Salvador, students with a mental disability ranging from 13 to 18 years of age have a 17% access rate, while 100% of students with a hearing impairment in Bermuda and those with verbal impairment in Cayman Islands (CEPAL, 2012) are in school. It is becoming more common for Latin American and Caribbean countries to have governments developing and implementing programs for integral and inclusive education for children with disabilities.

Because many of the statistics presented in this document are from national census data, it is important to mention CEPAL (2012) stated there may be possible defects in data collected in Latin America due to difficulties in the assessment of disabilities in different countries, specifically in the type of disability and the severity of people's limitations. The main source of data collection is through national census data but since there is no standardized way of doing so, results may be considered unreliable. According to information gathered through this method, visual and motor limitations are the most common disabilities in Latin America and Caribbean nations. In Latin America alone, auditory and communication disabilities are particularly common. In Caribbean countries, the most prevalent disabilities are mental and dexterity-related issues. In the same area, individuals

with cognitive deficiencies and less-autonomous students have the most difficulty integrating in social activities as well as accessing education and employment, whereas individuals with visual and motor impairments have the fewest obstacles participating in school and employment opportunities.

Kelly (2002) stated (as cited in Dávila Balsera, Naya Germendia, & Lauzurika Arrondo, 2010), children with disabilities continue to face a position that favors their segregation and ostracism in the education system. Only 2% of children with disabilities in developing countries have access to an education system. Although receiving instruction, it usually takes place in “special” separated schools, in which students often do not enjoy the same range of academic and recreational activities as children in mainstream schools. Therefore, the main purpose of the educational right for individuals with disabilities should not be merely to obtain schooling but, most importantly, to ensure student’s development, regardless of distinctive capabilities, in an inclusive setting.

Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs

Education and Framework for Action. The Salamanca Statement may be the most important international policy document targeting inclusive education. Organized by the Government of Spain and UNESCO, a World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality took place from the 7th to 10th of June 1994 to contemplate essential modifications in education and to promote the approach of inclusion for educational institutions to offer services to all children. The purpose in uniting 92 governments and 25 organizations was because, as stated in the preface of The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, “Special needs education—an issue of equal concern to countries of the North and of the South—cannot advance in isolation. It has to form part of an overall educational strategy and, indeed, of new social and economic policies. It calls for major reform of the ordinary school” (p. 2).

The *Salamanca Statement* and the *Framework for Action* are two separate documents but they are printed together in one publication. The *Salamanca Statement* is a set of declarations with principles and policies of the ideal situation concerning inclusive settings in education. The purpose of the *Framework for Action* “is to inform policy and guide action by governments, international organizations, national aid agencies, non-governmental organizations and other bodies in implementing the *Salamanca Statement on Principles, Policy and Practice in Special Needs Education*” (Ministry of Education and Science, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 1994, p. 5).

Although the document first mentions children with special needs as a target population, “most of the required changes do not relate exclusively to children with special educational needs” (p. 21). The document aimed to reform and improve educational quality for all students. This document changed the course of education encouraging governments to incorporate inclusive education in their educational system. Official documents and national policies have been modified post-Salamanca and this document’s legacy has gained global attraction.

Legislation on inclusive education in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic has joined other countries in a large-scale effort to promote equal and active participation of all peoples with disability, following the approval and ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in Latin America in 2006. The Dominican Republic ratified the Convention in August 2007. Although Dávila Balsera, Naya Germendia, and Lauzurika Arrondo (2010) clearly stated there is no mention in the document of inclusive education for individuals with disabilities, or indication of social inclusion, the embracing of this convention can still be considered an advance in the country. It actually reflects the growing interest in the rights of persons with disabilities.

Population groups with greater socioeconomic vulnerabilities are more prone to develop higher rates of disability due to negligence and lack of financial sustenance or access to support (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe--CEPAL, 2012).

Therefore, policies addressing the majority of the population with special needs and limited income are desperately required primarily in countries characterized by monetary discrepancies like the Dominican Republic.

According to the monitoring report of the Millennium Development Goals 2010 (as cited by Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2014a), it is demonstrated that education has a positive impact on poverty reduction, productivity, health conditions, improvement of employment, and in all factors related to human development. As stated by the Dominican Ministry of Economic Planning and Development (2014), concerning the objectives of the Millennium Goals in the country, the current efforts of Dominican society to improve the quality in education are evident and essential for the development of a more equitable and cohesive nation. The document recognizes government efforts led by President Danilo Medina to improve the quality of education in the country. It also acknowledges significant improvements under his administration, such as, the construction of gender equity in access to education, which should also credit his determination for inclusion in education.

The acceptance and nondiscrimination of children with disabilities is well recognized and acknowledged in the country's legal framework. However, when it concerns its application, the progress does not seem as extensive. Although the sector has experienced a significant level of progress in recent years, investigative studies concerning inclusion in the country still indicate that much remains to be done.

The *General Law of Disability* in the Dominican Republic, enacted the 30th of June, 2000, was created by taking into consideration numerous national and international famous documents, such as (a) the *Salamanca Statement* (1994), (b) the *Declaration of Human*

Rights (1948), (c) *Dominican Constitution*, (d) the *Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities* (1993), as well as many others. The main objective of the law was to recognize persons with disabilities, as individuals with equal human, constitutional, and civil rights as other individuals without the disabled condition. It was also a goal of the law to support the idea that this population should reach the highest levels of impartiality and appreciation, and to achieve the duties inherent to them, without receiving any special treatment because of their condition but protecting them from all discriminatory acts and processes (Congreso Nacional, 2000).

Centro de Atención Integral para la Discapacidad (CAID). Recently, the Dominican Government, specifically the First Lady, Cándida Montilla de Medina, planned and helped develop the first Centro de Atención Integral para la Discapacidad (CAID) in Santo Domingo (Salazar, 2013). Two other CAID units across different provinces in the country have started to be built and another one remains to be constructed further on. The First Lady accomplished this idea in support of the President's public policies in favor of social inclusion. The primary purpose of the center was to provide a place where care, education, and rehabilitation were offered to children of different abilities. CAID centers offer multidisciplinary services to children 0 to 10 years old who have been diagnosed with a disability (autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, and intellectual disabilities, etc.) and seek to further develop their potentials. A fundamental pillar of the center was to include the family of the child in the process (Despacho de la Primera Dama, 2015).

The First Lady signed a consulting agreement with the Ann Sullivan Center in Lima, Peru, a model educational, training, and research initiative regarding people with disabilities. The purpose of this alliance is to help the progress of CAID centers through the expertise and working model for individuals with disabilities at Ann Sullivan (Centro de Información y

Comunicación, 2013). At the same time, Irina Bokova, General Director of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), visited CAID in late January 2013. She was moved by the accomplishments of the center and by the President's plan to promote social inclusion in the most disadvantaged communities of the country in order to improve the quality of life of this population (UNESCO La Habana, 2015; Presidencia República Dominicana, 2015).

Consejo Nacional de Discapacidad (CONADIS). As stated by the National Council on Disability (CONADIS) (2015b), the first governing body regarding disability in the Dominican Republic was Prevención, Rehabilitación, Educación e Integración de las Personas con Minusvalía (CONAPREM), and was created in September 5, 1991 after the law 21-91 was enacted and recognized the rights of individuals with physical, sensory, and mental limitations. For nine years this law became the benchmark to encourage any action taken on the rights of persons with disabilities, until June 29, 2000 when the *General Law on Disability* was passed in the country. Jointly, CONADIS was created as a state institution.

It is directly ascribed to the Presidency of the Republic, under the supervision of Gustavo Montalvo, the Minister of the Presidency. It is an autonomous institution responsible for establishing and coordinating policies concerning disability in the country. The main objective of the organization is to ensure and promote equal rights and equal opportunities for individuals living with a disability and eliminating all forms of discrimination towards this population. The institution wishes to achieve full inclusion of those with disabilities in Dominican society.

Currently, it is responsible for coordinating the construction and assessment of public policies to ensure the full inclusion of the targeted population. They wish to become an organization recognized as the coordinating entity regarding disabilities, from a legislative perspective. On January 15, 2013 the *Organic Law on Equal Rights of Persons with*

Disabilities, which approves CONADIS as an autonomous, decentralized institution with legal status, administrative, financial, and technical independence, and lead agency on disability policies was enacted (Consejo Nacional de Discapacidad, 2015b).

Centros de Atención a la Diversidad (CAD). Resource Centers for Attention to Diversity is a strategy that has been created to provide support to schools on the task of addressing students with disabilities. The first center opened in 2005 in Santo Domingo in order to promote and strengthen the development of inclusive education in the country. It was created by the Board of Special Education of the Ministry of Education, with the aim to promote and strengthen the development of inclusive education. Creating a culture of assessment in educational institutions that promotes innovation and development of an environment better suited to teaching and learning in order to transform their ideas and practices to guide schools in the correct way of becoming accepting settings, is essential to pave the way for inclusion.

According to Pérez Jiménez (2008), the CAD generated a new experience within the Dominican education system, which serves as a national reference support and monitoring system for students who require special educational needs in school. She stated that the main responsibilities of the CAD are to help elementary and middle schools carry out inclusive educational practices, introduce substantial changes in schools' procedures and pedagogical proposals, and respond to the educational needs of children in a way that they are all successful in their learning and are treated equally. The CAD also has a referral function, serving as a filter between the teachers and students of the center to avoid direct referrals.

Pérez Jiménez (2008) and Secretaría de Estado de Educación (2006) mentioned CAD provide information for the education community for teachers to have access to resources and psychological monitoring offered directly to schools to promote the personal growth of each student. Secretaría de Estado de Educación (2006) additionally stated the CAD provides

teacher training so teachers can respond accurately to student's needs and concerns.

According to them, the CAD should become a driving force for teachers' training, identifying teachers' needs and responding to them, either directly or in coordination with other agencies.

CAD does not, at least yet, have a website, which diminishes the chances of families, teachers, and academics to have access to updated information. There are currently eight centers open around the country. No data were found regarding the coverage of the centers, positive results of their programs, and fundamental information as to where their offices are located.

Ministerio de Educación (MINERD). The Ministry of Education (2014) stated three principles as the fundamentals of the curriculum: significance of learning, functionality of learning, and integration of knowledge. This last one mentioned an inclusive perspective focusing attention on diversity in the student body with special needs and a disability condition. In 2014, a national pact for an educational reform was started in the country. The commitments in this contract are all aimed at achieving an education that allows all Dominicans to develop their full potential both as individuals, and as members of a society that recognizes and acknowledges them with the freedom to live with equal opportunities. Proper educational infrastructure for convenient accessibility and an editorial policy of teaching resources, including textbooks, that caters to students with special needs are taken into account in the pact (Palacio Nacional, 2014).

The Ministry of Education receives aid from United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in regard to inclusive education. Its goal is to promote inclusion in school to reduce dropout rates and increase the number of students who stay in the education system and finish primary and secondary school while reducing barriers and obstacles that prevent children and adolescents excluded integrate and remain in the education system. The Ministry of Education supported the development of new, high-quality educational programs

that target inclusion by creating specific rules of access to education for children with special needs (UNICEF, 2013).

Challenges of Inclusive Education in the Dominican Republic

It would be easy to think that legislation in itself has created an environment that can accommodate the educational needs of students with disabilities in the Dominican Republic; but there is still much room for improvement, including the careful and full implementation of all legislation. Educational laws for students with disabilities need to be enforced in every country. Most of the qualified students with special needs are found in the regular education system and they are not always being provided with adequate educational support.

Moreover, the lack of adherence to the rules or effective employment of the rules by most public and private educational organizations has created a gap between the framework of the law and the provision of services, resulting in a lack of special education services for most students with disabilities demanding support. Educational and general policy leaders in the Dominican Republic are aware of this gap. They are beginning to act on the premise that the laws and regulations should be put into effect in order to ensure implementation and should be treated with the importance they deserve.

Perhaps the most pressing problem in the Dominican Republic concerning disability is that the actual number of individuals requiring special education or special needs is unknown. An accurate screening and identification process for all these individuals is essential in the country to offer suitable interventions. Standardized assessment tools are used, at times, to diagnose and to gather information on individuals with and without special needs. Nonetheless, very few of these tools and psychometric tests have been standardized and validated in the country, in the population it is being applied to. However, some standardized assessment tools have been modified and validated, creating benchmarks, for them to be applied in the country, such as *Estandarización y validación del Inventario de*

Situaciones y Respuestas de Ansiedad (ISRA) en la población de República Dominicana
(García Batista & Cano Vindel, 2014).

Although the rights of persons with disabilities are recognized in various documents nationwide, the most important element is to guarantee the implementation of these rights on an equal basis. For this to be successful, all forms of direct and indirect discrimination need to be eliminated. It is imperative to remove all barriers impeding the complete enjoyment of human rights. There is a desperate need to break away from the invisibility cape and start the implementation of inclusive approaches to involve individuals with a disability in social and education environments. Exclusion practices can be seen in the rejection of children in primary education because they live with a disability, the lack of physical and structural designs to accommodate disabled persons in public and private social and educational buildings, the very reduced number of teachers that master sign language, and the fact that the Braille system is barely implemented.

The lack of indicators and statistical data in the country suggest that there is poor communication between the different programs and commitments that the Dominican state has created. The fact that few profound studies on the population with disabilities have been carried out limits professionals interested in contributing to the field, as well as researchers because there is little reliable information on which to base future investigations. The scarcity of studies providing indicators, updated demographic data on the disabled population, and most importantly, the current problems and struggles the population faces, reflects the indifference to find a starting point for the planning of public policies directed towards the improvement of the quality of life of this group and their families.

A plan of action should be put into practice to ensure the implementation of the legal rights and privileges for this population. Improving the questionnaire included in the national census is also of great importance because it is an instrument already used nationally to

gather knowledge on this particular population. Other indicators can be included such as their living situation, the circumstances they face, where they are located, and a countless number of other elements.

As mentioned by Asociación de Personas con Discapacidad Físico-Motora, Centro Pedro Francisco Bonó, Círculo de Mujeres con Discapacidad, and Fundación Dominicana de Ciegos (n.d.), the country also struggles with limited facilities outside of the main metropolitan cities, high poverty rates and resistance to change long-standing traditions. Many attempts to develop and improve special education provisions in the Dominican Republic appear to be delayed for a variety of reasons. For instance, similar to other countries in the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic has greatly suffered from regional instability and struggles that come with it. For many decades, the country has worried about its economic development, educational restructuring, primary health care improvement, and social development. As a result, problems and needs of people with special needs did not represent priority concerns. However, with time, Dominicans' perceptions and views on disabilities are slowly changing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In order to change, improve, and increase the rate in which the Dominican Republic is responding to inclusion in education, it is imperative that transformations be made to the way education of learners with disabilities are addressed and served.

Overcoming stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities is the starting point for the Dominican population, specifically for newer generations, to fully enjoy their rights, including the right to an education, more specifically from a perspective of inclusion. For this to happen, the acknowledgement that persons with disabilities have the same entitlements and opportunities as other people is desperately needed for these individuals to feel accepted, appreciated and capable of adjusting to society. Society should embrace the

idea that our differences make us neither superior nor inferior to one another. As mentioned by Campaña Latinoamericana por el Derecho a la Educación (CLADE), Muñoz, and Centro por la Justicia y el Derecho Internacional (CEJIL) (2009), countries that signed the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* are expected to help promote the awareness of disabilities and help foster respect for the rights and the dignity of this population. The Convention established two strategies to be used by the countries that signed and ratified the document, in order to increase their commitment for the implementation of the cause.

The first strategy suggested was to develop public awareness campaigns to encourage empathy and receptiveness towards the rights of persons with disabilities, as well as to promote positive perceptions and greater social awareness towards this population. The recognition of the skills, merits, and abilities of persons with disabilities and their contributions to society are also to be supported. In the Dominican Republic, this plan can be considered put into action by governmental institutions, more specifically by the Dominican National Council of Disability (CONADIS). As stated by CONADIS (2015a), the American Department of State, a representative of the United State's Embassy, and a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Inclusive Development Specialist visited the center because they were interested in knowing the status of inclusion of people with disabilities. In that gathering, Magino Corporán Lorenzo, the director of CONADIS, pointed out the main area of work in the country is accessibility as the doorway to the enjoyment of all rights. He emphasized the ongoing progress in the course of cultural transformation towards people with disabilities in the country.

The second strategy proposed by the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* is fostering a respectful attitude towards the rights of people with disabilities in all levels of the education system. This approach, combined with a committed education and

the promotion of human right's values is crucial to achieve the appropriate course education should take in the continent. In 1984, the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights (IHR) conducted a study to include the teaching of human rights into the curriculum of secondary education. This investigation was the first step for the creation of a program dedicated to Human Rights Education (HRE). In the 1990s, IHR developed another program called Human Rights Education Associates to promote the role of education in supporting the international human rights movement, and to help teachers incorporate the topic of human rights in their lesson plans.

The Dominican Republic did not mention or give credit to the establishment of HRE in the *General Law of Disability* in 1990; however, in 2003, explicit references to HRE are mentioned in national plans and education programs (Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, 2009). The document also mentions that the Dominican Republic has an Office of the Ombudsman (Defensoría del Pueblo), that was created in 2001, under Law 19-01. According to Defensor del Pueblo (2014), Zoila Violeta Martínez Guante was chosen to be Ombudsman in the country on May 15, 2013. The Ombudsman is in charge of the promotion, implementation, and defense of human rights in the country; however, as stated in newspaper *Listín Diario* (2013), in August the Ombudsman had not yet started functioning at full capacity since she had yet to find a physical working office. She claimed that one of the main obstacles to renting an office is that owners were reluctant to lease to them because they were unaware of the institution's existence because it was new. Although it may seem strange that more than a decade went by after the office was created until the moment of the nomination of a candidate to fill the position, and months later the responsibilities of the position had not yet been specified, it is an interesting succession of events that depict the difficulties moving forward. At the same time it demonstrates that individuals and news organizations share commitments to the goals and to making progress, albeit slowly.

In the Dominican Republic there is a conflict, or lack of relationship between laws and the general population's behavior towards these norms. There seems to be much disparity and little synchronization between agencies' employment of the laws and the law itself. At times, there appears to be incomplete alignment between the structures of organizations charged with addressing persons with disabilities and the regulations themselves. Well-intended professionals and administrators can, in such circumstances, feel helpless to ring about the objectives of the laws and regulations. The ambiguity that exists in the implementation of laws creates numerous barriers that impede progress in the country and leads to impunity due to people's lack of hesitation when averting the law since it is well known that laws are sometimes not enforced. There is a popular saying, "*la letra de la ley es muerta*," which literally translates to "the letter of the law is dead," for it is not applied. A common deficit, specifically in educational policies, is the lack of economic incentives aimed at children with disabilities, shortage of support services, and social protection for children with disabilities and their families.

Poor coordination of services, insufficient staffing, and lack of expertise on the part of persons responsible to deal with the issue, may affect the quality, accessibility and appropriateness of services for people with disabilities. According to the World Health Organization (2011), people with disabilities are more than twice as likely to consider assistance providers lacked adequate power to meet their needs; four times more likely to be treated badly, and three times more likely to be denied necessary health care. Many caregivers are poorly paid and have inadequate training because the disabled population is not a priority in a country that is lacking so many resources for the general population. By creating incentives for caregivers and other professionals in the field, either monetary or by the reception of other benefits, the government can more likely ensure the continuance of motivated workers performing their tasks appropriately.

Future action research in the area of disability and inclusion should be highly encouraged and supported by governmental entities in order to get a better understanding of the situation in the country and to provide more satisfactory support to those who need it. The lack of thorough and comparable data on disability and absence of objective evidence on programs that work in the country prevent future, more suitable action. Knowing the number of people with disabilities and their circumstances is fundamental to improve efforts to remove disabling barriers and provide services that allow the participation of people with disabilities.

Recently, more public and private institutions have arisen to aid the disabled but plans are still insufficient, mostly due to lack of effective funding. The lack of effective funding is a major obstacle to the sustainability of services. On the other hand, erroneous beliefs and prejudices are also barriers to education, employment, health care and social participation for this population. For example, the attitudes of teachers, school administrators, other children, and even families, influence the inclusion of children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Misconceptions of employers that people with disabilities are less productive than their counterparts without disabilities, along with the lack of available settings to reach agreements and limited employment opportunities are a daily struggle. However, Dominicans are increasingly becoming more conscious and are more actively protesting against the lack of progress, demanding transparency and justice from the government. The awakening of a population that does not want to have to silently wait longer in line for children's and adults' basic needs to be addressed, or to be assumed to be ignorant of these issues, and to be ridiculed by some, can have a direct impact on education in the country. For example, according to Internacional de la Educación para América Latina (2011), for the 2012 presidential elections, after a few years of campaigns and protests demanding compliance with current legislation attributing 4% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for public

education, because a total of only 1.2% was then ascribed to education, all presidential candidates signed a document assuming responsibility to enforce the law requiring the state to invest 4% of GDP in public education the following year. By joining forces and becoming one voice, the Dominican population was victorious in emphasizing the importance of state spending for educational purposes. After all, education is the best agent for social and economic improvement in a society (McMahon, 2010; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2010).

Implications: Action Points for Consideration by Government Agencies

Ministerio de Educación (MINERD)

Education Curriculum. The Ministry of Education (MINERD) should design and ensure the implementation of a national policy requiring all higher education institutions to offer mandatory courses in special and inclusive education. The majority of the public and private educational facilities in the country do not offer courses relating to the topic of disability and diverse learners, either mandatory or as electives. Although some institutions are currently offering postgraduate programs on inclusive education, preservice teachers are joining the workforce without any knowledge or experience working with this population.

The availability of technical degrees in specialized education should also be considered an asset and should be offered in public colleges and universities to provide a fast-track option for individuals who have limited resources and are looking for a practical hands-on experience that will allow them to receive concentrated training on areas that require employment. Cultivating a population designed to work with people with special needs is crucial due to the scarcity of trained and motivated personnel.

Loreman (2010) mentioned some difficulties drawn by teachers' experiences regarding inclusive education. A common struggle described is that of preservice teacher preparation. He indicated seven major areas recognized in the literature as important for preservice teachers' success in an inclusive classroom: (a) acceptance of inclusion and

respect for diversity, (b) cooperation among parents, students, and colleagues' outcomes, (c) promotion of a positive social climate, (d) teaching styles favorable to inclusion, (e) taking on inclusive instructional scheduling, (f) engaging in significant assessment, and (g) becoming involved in lifelong learning.

Although the study conducted by Loreman (2010) was targeting outcomes to be used pertaining to the context of Alberta, Canada, he also stated the results could be easily transferred to different settings, possibly needing modification. A study exploring the current education curriculum of public and private institutions in the country and a comparison between pre-service teacher's who took courses on inclusive education and those that didn't could reveal interesting results.

For student's curriculum, MINERD could design lesson plans incorporating human rights to promote diversity and the history and current advocacies supporting human rights movements. Cross-curricular activities focusing on human-rights advocacy could also be designed in order to tackle the problem from its roots and involve the children in real world situations. By helping students develop skills, knowledge, and understanding that will enable them to engage effectively with other students with different backgrounds and capabilities, the process of transforming the youngest generations of the country to believe in social and educational inclusion will become a more flowing transition.

Teacher Evaluation. Teacher candidates should demonstrate competence not only in the content knowledge of the subjects they will be imparting, but also in the needs of the diverse populations they will serve. Preservice teachers should be evaluated before becoming teachers and throughout their years providing service to ensure an appropriate supervision. The MINERD can appoint a specific office with the duty of ensuring current teachers are successfully following the curriculum and challenging their students, as well as providing the assistance they need, in an orderly way.

Teaching strategies and material should be evaluated for the improvement of practice and of overall student academic development. An external program evaluator can help with curriculum development and modifications as well as providing an account of the teacher's value by using observational measures and a performance checklist. With a collaborative approach between the school administration and a specialist hired by the Ministry of Education, positive outcomes can be expected and constructive feedback provided to teachers and additional staff in the facility. The program evaluator can also aid teachers by creating a plan for the future taking into account budget and time constraints, as well as prioritizing the student's needs and providing support and guidance to the school.

Public Campaigns for Awareness and Acceptance of Disabilities

Promoting disabilities and educating the public by raising awareness about this population's capabilities and contributions to society can help eliminate stigmas and discrimination and ensure equity for their rights and social inclusion. By creating a number of Disability Fairs or a Disability Week organized by CONADIS, citizens can start learning more about disabilities, their background, causes, distinctive characteristics, and some success stories of several individuals with a disability and hopefully creating an empathetic relationship with the idea.

In schools, planning for roundtables or trimonthly activities surrounding the topic of disability by MINERD and CONADIS could positively help shape young minds. Encouraging children to actively participate in such activities will help change their perception of disabilities. For younger children, growing up in an environment that demonstrates prejudice against this population can result in terrible consequences and because children's mind are more susceptible to follow the footsteps of those around them, it is wise to start educating them the youngest possible. Disability education allows normally developing students to understand the circumstances of others, have compassion and be

accepting of their situation. Students should learn to embrace diversity. Families, teachers, and school staff can also form part of this school activity.

Instituto Nacional de Formación Técnico Profesional (INFOTEP)

The Instituto Nacional de Formación Técnico Profesional (INFOTEP) is the governing body of the national system of vocational technical training in the Dominican Republic. This governmental entity has two main objectives. The first is to organize and administer the national system of technical and vocational training with joint effort of the State, seeking the full development of human resources and increasing productivity of all organizations. The second goal of this establishment is to promote the social integration of workers through comprehensive training to make responsible citizens, holders of moral values (INFOTEP, 2015).

INFOTEP designs its services to efficiently meet the needs of the Dominican society and promote excellence in training workers while improving productivity in several economic sectors. Although there is an obvious need and workforce demand for specialized professionals with knowledge in the area of disability, more specifically in the area of special and inclusive education, INFOTEP has not in the past, nor presently, offered courses regarding these needed topics. By working jointly with MINERD, appropriate courses can be developed specifically for teachers who already form part of the workforce. By designing annual plans to impart a few two-hour courses throughout public schools nationwide, gaps in the educational system can be filled in a simple and inexpensive manner, either replacing some of the less essential courses in INFOTEP's programs, such as how to apply appropriate make-up in the workplace, or by training volunteers to expand teacher's knowledge base. Investing in personnel training is most important for programs to advance.

Centro de Atención Integral para la Discapacidad (CAID) and Centros de Atención a la Diversidad (CAD)

Currently, the institutions providing services for the children with disabilities in the country have limited coverage, constraining many families from seeking for help and acquiring amenities for their children. There is currently one CAID center located in the capital, Santo Domingo. Although another is in the process of being built and two others will soon be in construction in other provinces, there will still be a big portion of the population who will have to travel great distances to receive support. The same applies to CAD centers. Although there are eight centers across the country, there are a large number of teachers, students, and families requiring support.

In the current CAID and CAD centers, with support from the National Council on Disability (CONADIS), courses could be facilitated to train university students to work as external employees and use outreach vehicles to provide assistance and programed visits at least twice a year for CAID and CAD. By forming supervised mobile teams, a group of enthusiastic individuals can travel to areas that currently have little or no coverage by the main headquarters and provide initial screening for children who will later continue receiving assistance from the main offices if required. Similar creative approaches have been carried out such as the Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) (Post, 2007) and the Community Health Care Van (CHCV) (Liebman, Lamberti, & Altice, 2002).

Oficina Nacional de Estadística (ONE)

The National Office of Statistics in the country is in charge of producing and disseminating official statistical information with quality and transparency for decision-making in public policy and national development (Oficina Nacional de Estadística, 2014b). Research in the area of education, particularly in the area of special and inclusive education is highly needed in order for further modifications to be made where changes are required.

Encouraging research in the country promotes growth and development and allows policy makers to prioritize what is needed most based on facts. The past national census data concerning disability are not reliable and research cooperation from more developed countries in the area of disability and inclusion would benefit the nation. The actual number of individuals requiring special education or special needs is unknown and, with the absence of this fundamental detail, it is hard to rate the efficiency of how the Dominican state is addressing the problem, and especially to gauge progress in this domain.

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