

# Learning Disabilities in Costa Rica: Challenges for an "Army of Teachers"

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## Abstract

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Special education services in the country of Costa Rica have been affected by factors that most developing countries confront: shortages of trained personnel, geographic isolation of a large sector of the population, and severe economic limitations. Despite these challenges, services for students with learning disabilities in Costa Rica have rapidly expanded in the last 15 years through the development of resource rooms, *recargo* classrooms, and itinerant teacher delivery systems. The history and evolution of special education services in Costa Rica are described, along with critical issues that impede the expansion of educational services to students with learning disabilities, particularly in rural areas.

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Costa Rica, located between the countries of Nicaragua and Panama in Central America, has no national army. Costa Ricans are fond of proclaiming, "We have more teachers than soldiers." Education is clearly paramount in this small democratic country. Approximately one third of the national budget is spent on public education (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1982; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 1991), and schools are constructed and staffed even in the most rural regions of the country. These efforts result in an estimated literacy rate of over 92% (ECLAC, 1991). Despite these impressive statistics, education in Costa Rica is affected by factors that most developing countries confront: a limited number of trained professionals, the geographic isolation of a large sector of the population, and severe economic limitations that make materials such as books and computers luxuries. In addition, the median age of the Costa Rican population is extremely young: Almost 50% of the 3 million inhabitants are under 17, which means that 20% of the country's total population is enrolled in

elementary schools or high schools (ECLAC, 1991). These factors severely strain Costa Rica's education budget, affecting both the development of special education programs in Costa Rica and how individuals with learning disabilities are served by those programs.

## Educational System Overview

Literacy and education came relatively late to Costa Rica. In 1821, when Costa Rica declared its independence from Spain, the city of Alajuela contained only six citizens who could read (Biesanz et al., 1982). Today, however, the general level of education has been transformed. Costa Rica has an extensive public education system that serves preschool, elementary, high school, and college-age students. Educational services are centralized under one governmental entity, the *Ministerio de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education), which administers and develops a nationalized curriculum. This curriculum is followed somewhat uniformly by schools across the country; however, teachers are permitted

to make adaptations to the curriculum so that it reflects the customs and culture of their region.

The Ministry of Public Education divides the country into educational district offices presently called *Direcciones Provinciales* (State Districts). Each *Dirección Provincial* contains several regional districts that are overseen by regional directors and are staffed by administrative personnel and a number of *asesores*. *Asesores* are curriculum specialists who are appointed to oversee specific educational programs, such as mathematics, Spanish, religion, sciences, social studies, nutrition, counseling, preschool education, and special education. These *asesores* plan inservice workshops for teachers and visit schools in the immediate surrounding area. However, because of extreme limitations in transportation and the inaccessibility of many villages during the rainy season, many *asesores* are unable to visit rural schools more than once or twice a year.

The Costa Rican educational system comprises three levels: primary, secondary, and postsecondary. The school day begins for most students at 7:00 a.m. This is not considered early: Daybreak

comes early in the tropics, and most Costa Ricans like to take advantage of the cool morning hours. Primary-school students generally attend class until 11:30 or 12:00, whereas high school classes are usually scheduled until 3:00 in the afternoon. In primary schools that are overcrowded, there is usually an afternoon session from 12:00 to 4:30 for a second group of children. A statewide nutrition program runs the school cafeterias; most primary schools serve at least one meal during the school day. This meal typically includes the nationally popular dish *gallo pinto*, a mixture of rice and beans, and a *fresco*, a fruit drink. All students attend classes from early March until November, when the rainy season in Central America ends and the coffee harvests begin.

Kindergarten is not mandatory in Costa Rica and is not available in most rural areas of the country; however, the Ministry of Health provides early childhood programs that target many of the poorest and most remote communities. The Ministry of Public Education also provides itinerant teachers to some of these areas. Children begin first grade in primary schools after the age of 6. Primary school continues for 6 years, until the sixth grade, after which adolescents go to either an academic or a vocational public high school.

Academic high school in Costa Rica lasts 5 years. Because high schools have been established only in the most largely populated towns, it is common for children from remote rural areas to leave their immediate families so that they can attend high school in these towns. However, approximately one third of all children, particularly girls and children who live in remote, agricultural villages, end their education after the sixth grade (ECLAC, 1991).

Vocational high schools are also entered directly after primary school and are attended for 6 years. Students who are enrolled in special education classrooms (with the exception of those with physical disabilities), as well as

those who prefer to study a trade in an area such as mechanics or agriculture, attend a vocational high school, while those who are interested in a post-secondary college or technical school attend the academic high school.

### History of Special Education

The formation of special education services in Costa Rica began in 1939. A group headed by a teacher named Fernando Centeno Güell was organized to address Costa Rica's special education needs (Asesoría General de Educación Especial, 1992). Four years later, the group established a small school to serve the needs of students with disabilities. Located in a suburb of the capital city of San José, the school originally served only children with mental retardation (Asesoría General de Educación Especial, 1992, 1993). The school became part of the public education system in 1940 and was named after Güell. In 1944, the school began serving children with auditory, visual, and language impairments.

The first national law protecting the educational rights of individuals with special needs came into existence in 1957. This law, compared with those that were in existence in the United States during that same period of time, was extremely progressive and is reflective of the value that Costa Ricans place on educating their children. The Fundamental Law of Education of 1957 declared that children had the right to a special education if so needed, and the right to special techniques and materials in their classrooms. Parents had the right to be informed and educated about how to care and further provide for their children (Ley Fundamental de Educación, 1957). Special education was defined in the Fundamental Law as "that which is given to children and adolescents whose physical, mental, or social characteristics are different than normal, with the goal of aiding the development of their capabilities and their incorporation as useful parts of society." Although this

was an advanced, inclusive piece of legislation, special education programs grew slowly in the following decade—for 7 years following its passage, the Fernando Centeno Güell school delivered the only public special education services available in the country.

Greater expansion of services, however, began in the latter half of the 1960s. Two additional special education schools were created in 1965 in cities near San José, and in 1968 the Ministry of Public Education created the first Department of Special Education. By 1968 there were 14 special education centers for children and adolescents with disabilities. Shortly thereafter, these programs rapidly expanded to include children with emotional and behavioral problems, health and psychosocial problems, and physical disabilities. By 1970 Costa Rica had 20 special education schools, with a total enrollment of 1,928 students (Bulgarelli, 1971).

During the 1970s, as a result of a movement to decentralize the Education Ministry, the educational system in Costa Rica became regionalized into *Direcciones Regionales* (Hidalgo & Barrantes, 1992), which were reorganized into *Direcciones Provinciales* in the early 1990s. The Ministry of Public Education also hired the first national specialists, *Asesores Nacionales*, in the areas of mental retardation and hearing/language in 1972, followed by the hiring of a specialist in learning disabilities in 1973. Also during 1973, several special education classrooms were established within general education schools. Previously, all special education classes had been held in segregated schools for those with disabilities. Costa Rican consultants were hired in 1973 to oversee the expanding special education programs that were being created. Whereas at one time these special education consultants had predominantly come from the United States or Spain, the University Regents of Costa Rica had become aware that localized university-level training in special education was needed.

The next 10 years saw the expansion of special education resources in the country and an increasing regionalization of those services. From 1975 to 1986, programs in speech therapy, visual impairments, emotional/behavioral problems, and talented/gifted became part of the Department of Special Education. Vocational training for high school students was established in 1978 (Asesoría General de Educación Especial, 1992, 1993). In the late 1980s, the Ministry of Public Education began an expansion of its resource rooms throughout the country, appointing teachers to work an additional half day exclusively with children having learning disabilities. By 1987, 11 special education schools, 140 special education classrooms, and 80 resource rooms were staffed and functioning in Costa Rica. At the same time, however, it was estimated by the National Council on Rehabilitation (Consejo Nacional de Rehabilitación, 1989) that only 14% of children with exceptionalities were receiving special education services. The need for special education services was particularly marked in rural areas, as is still true today (Villarreal, 1989).

In 1989, the Ministry of Public Education redefined special education as follows:

The integrated, coordinated, flexible and dynamic process that is obtained by its individualized application and with awareness of the different levels of the National Education System. Special Education is best begun in a preventive manner, to achieve the best development and results for the person with special needs, that involves the highest level possible of self-esteem, independence and the social and job integration. (Decreto Ejecutivo #19101-S-MEP-TSS-PLAN)

This mandate stated that "all people . . . [who] require, temporarily or permanently, special services of help, due to needs that are cognitive, social emotional, physical, or a combination of all of these" (Decreto Ejecutivo #19101-S-MEP-TSS-PLAN) were eligible for special education services.

Several aspects of this reorganization are of particular note. First, the Department of Special Education acknowledged the importance of the participation of parents, family, and the community in the organization, delivery, and evaluation of educational services. Detection, evaluation, and diagnosis of characteristics of disabilities were to include information from the family as well as from professionals. Second, it promoted the establishment of a national educational plan of prevention of disabilities that would involve several Costa Rican institutions. Finally, the Department of Special Education acknowledged the need for coordination with general education as well as other institutions in the country.

Presently, more than 20,000 children and adolescents with disabilities receive services through the Department of Special Education (Asesoría General de Educación Especial, 1992). The majority (70%) of this population is located in the center of the country, which is the most populated area. Most of these students (68%) receive services through resource rooms or are in general education classrooms. The remainder of those receiving services (32%) attend special education schools. The Department of Special Education espouses the principles of normalization, integration, the educability of every child, participation in the community, and involvement of the family in the educational process.

### Services for Students with Learning Disabilities

The focus on children with learning disabilities in Costa Rica began in the mid-1960s (Chacón, 1976). This attention was due in part to (a) the need to differentiate the problems of children with learning disabilities from those of children with mental retardation; (b) the quantity of children with learning problems in school who had been promoted without knowing how to read or write; and (c) the acknowledged

ment that learning disabilities, when appropriately diagnosed, could be remediated and improved via the application of a remedial plan (Chacón, 1976).

Children classified as learning disabled in Costa Rica (a) are of average or above-average intelligence; (b) display some deficit in learning (e.g., in language, audition, vision, motor, or a combination of these); and (3) present small alterations in their cerebral function (Hidalgo & Barrantes, 1992). After a child is referred from the educational system, psychological evaluations are administered at the discretion of an interdisciplinary team, which may include a psychiatrist, neurologist, clinical psychologist, social worker, and teacher. Assessments usually include a standardized test of intellectual functioning, a visual-discrimination test, a spatial-discrimination test, and a behavioral assessment (Hidalgo & Barrantes, 1992). Criteria for classification vary among evaluation teams, and only students who demonstrate deficiencies in the areas of reading, writing, or mathematics are classified as learning disabled (González Trejos, 1992).

Children and adolescents with learning disabilities did not begin to receive specialized education until 1977, when the first resource rooms were established. The objective of these resource rooms was to educate students using special education techniques and to facilitate their adaptation into the general education classroom (Asesoría General de Educación Especial, 1992, 1993). Before that date, children and adolescents were placed in general education classrooms. Students who could not keep up with their peers were usually retained. Some children with learning disabilities repeated the same grade not once but twice, three times, and even four times.

In 1978, special committees of teachers were established in each region in the country to assess children who seemed to have learning difficulties. These committees were also designed to consult with teachers of children with learning disabilities and to sug-



gest didactic methods that might be used in the classroom (Hidalgo & Barrantes, 1992). During 1978, 16 resource rooms were established in counties dispersed throughout Costa Rica. These classrooms were equipped with didactic materials designed for children with learning disabilities. Teachers placed in these rooms were specialists in learning disabilities, most of whom had received training from the University of Costa Rica or in the United States.

In 1985, the Ministry of Education targeted learning disabilities as a priority in the public education system. A major concern were those children who, upon failing the first or second grade, were held back repeatedly until they simply were deemed too old for elementary school and dropped out of school. In 1988, to address the growing need for services for children with learning disabilities, the Ministry of Education decided to allocate funds to establish 200 classrooms through the county for children with learning disabilities.

Currently, programs for students with learning disabilities are overseen at the local level by regional Special Education *asesores*. There are 23 special education *asesores*, who are located primarily in regional offices around the country. Among other services, these specialists provide consultation to teachers who are part of committees on learning disabilities at each school, imparting information about the detection and correction of learning disabilities. They are responsible for visiting resource rooms and special education classrooms in coordination with the district supervisor. They also provide information to parents and teachers about how to help children with learning disabilities.

Schools are particularly dependent on the local special education *asesor* for assessing and delivering services to students with learning disabilities. The *asesor* may work with the classroom teacher so that the child can remain in the general education classroom, providing consultation about

how to modify the curriculum to best suit the student's individual needs. In rural areas, however, travel is difficult and an *asesor* may be severely limited in the frequency with which he or she can visit an isolated classroom where there is a student with a learning disability.

*Asesores* are also responsible for referring students for educational assessments. Teachers who believe that a child needs to be referred for services that cannot be provided in the general education classroom begin the *diagnóstico en proceso* (diagnostic process). They fill out an information form about the child and give it to the special education *asesor*. The *asesor* reads the referral, visits the school to consult with the teacher, and briefly observes the child. Should he or she see the need, the *asesor* then sends information about the child to the nearest town with an assessment team, or to San José. The appointed date of the psychological evaluation is then communicated through the special education *asesor* back to the student's teacher. It is not uncommon for a child to wait for up to 6 months for an appointment. The parents are responsible for accompanying their child to the evaluation, and, given the scarcity of assessment teams in rural areas, this often entails making an overnight trip to San José. This psychological evaluation then becomes part of the diagnostic process, but it is not the only factor that professionals take into consideration when placing a student in a special education classroom. Often, children with learning disabilities remain in their general education classrooms while receiving supportive services.

Most of the services to students with learning disabilities are provided through classes that are *recargos* (extra teaching loads): Teachers hold class during the mornings then receive a supplemental salary for teaching students with learning disabilities in the afternoon. These *recargo* classrooms function similarly to resource rooms in the United States, where students are

sent for periods of 30 minutes to an hour during the school day. The resource teacher provides remedial instruction, works with the child on areas of concern expressed by the general education classroom teacher, and provides modified materials for use in the general classroom or at home.

The *recargo* teacher typically delivers instruction to students for 20 hours a week, using 1 hour each day for planning and consulting with general education teachers (Gonzales Trejos, 1992). A minimum of 35 students are usually seen weekly. In 1994, there were 601 resource rooms that functioned as *recargos*, whereas only 21 resource rooms functioned on a full-time basis. In this manner, more than 11,000 students with disabilities received special education services throughout the country.

Teachers who have some sort of training in special education are usually placed in *recargo* classrooms. Frequently, these are teachers who have received their specialist credentials in learning disabilities. In the 1980s and early 1990s, a collaborative program between the U.S. Peace Corps and the *Universidad Estatal a Distancia* (UNED) produced over 350 teachers certified as specialists in the area of learning disabilities (M. Tuñón, personal communication, July 15, 1993). These teachers completed 15 courses over five semesters in the theory, detection, and treatment of learning disabilities in the classroom. The program was originally designed to train general education teachers in how to educate students with learning problems within that classroom setting; however, when the need arose in the late 1980s for trained professionals to teach *recargo* classrooms, these teachers were preferentially assigned to the *recargo* classrooms (Stough, 1990). The program was discontinued in 1993, creating a void in special education teacher training in rural areas.

Recently, the Ministry of Public Education created itinerant teacher positions for specialists in learning disabilities. These itinerant teachers are

assigned to rural areas, where they visit several schools that have students who qualify for special education services. Although this method of service delivery clearly can provide rural children with much-needed special education services, the number of itinerant teachers is limited, and transportation to rural areas for these teachers continues to be difficult.

### Critical Issues in the Area of Learning Disabilities

It is critical to resolve several issues if Costa Rica is to continue its development of special education services in general, and those offered to students with learning disabilities in particular. First, there continues to be a critical need to train new teachers in the area of learning disabilities (Villarreal, 1989). This is especially the case in rural areas, where the percentage of children requiring special education services is high. Keeping trained special education faculty in rural areas is difficult: Life in the urban central valley is generally considered more attractive to Costa Ricans, and therefore most newly certified teachers choose to remain there after receiving advanced training, rather than returning to a rural area to teach. The recent discontinuation of the rural-based UNED/Peace Corps certification program exacerbated this problem, as there is now no longer a special education training program available in rural areas.

There also is a need for continuing training for teachers who are currently teaching special education classes. Although many teachers serving students in *recargo* classrooms have had training in learning disabilities, yearly training should be provided so that the teaching techniques they use in the classroom are kept current. Inservice training currently provided to teachers addresses general educational issues, and little specialized training is provided to special education teachers once they have obtained their cre-

dentials. In addition, many teachers in Costa Rica receive their placements due to political connections, and it is not unusual, once a new political party has gained power, for teachers who are members of that party to receive preferential placements, such as in *recargo* classrooms. Consequently, *recargo* or resource rooms are not always taught by the teachers who are best qualified for the positions.

Geography also influences student attendance in special education programs. Although the *recargo* model of serving students with learning disabilities is distributed widely throughout the country, attendance in these programs is not mandatory. Students who attend their general education classroom during the morning hours and then go home for lunch are particularly unlikely to return in the afternoon for an hour or so of resource room. This is most problematic in rural areas, where the distance between home and school can be several miles.

Finally, one of the Ministry of Public Education's requirements for establishing a resource room is that the school must have a population of at least 400 students. As a consequence, small rural schools or one-room schools may have students who need placement in a resource room but the schools do not qualify for this type of funding. Presently, the Ministerio plans to create a program that would place specialists in the area of learning disabilities in classrooms alongside of their general education classroom colleagues, similar to the consulting teacher model used in the United States. As yet, this is a pilot program that will be tested only in selected schools in the central valley.

### Conclusions

Current shortages of trained special education teachers, economic limitations, and the geographic isolation of a large sector of the population limit Costa Rica's ability to appropriately provide services to all students with

learning disabilities. Despite these challenges, Costa Rica has had considerable success in designing innovative and effective special education programs. Rural teacher training, *recargo* classrooms, and the development of a collaborative-teaching model have vastly expanded Costa Rica's ability to provide instruction to students with learning disabilities. These programs illustrate how Costa Rica, by financing an "army of teachers" rather than of soldiers, has developed the most progressive special education services in Central America.

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#### AUTHORS' NOTE

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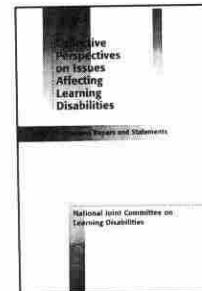
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