

## COSTA RICA, SPECIAL EDUCATION IN

Costa Rica has the strongest public education system in Central America. The 1869 constitution mandated a free, obligatory, and state-supported educational system, making Costa Rica one of the first countries in the world to pass such legislation (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999; Creedman, 1991). Approximately 23% of the national budget is dedicated to education (UNESCO, 2011) and schools can be found even in the most isolated regions of the country. As a result, Costa Rica's literacy rate of 96% is one of the highest in Latin America and high school graduation rates are effectively equal for girls and boys (UNESCO, 2011).

Costa Rica is equally progressive in educating children with disabilities. Special education services were first established in 1940 when the Fernando Centeno Güell School was created near the capital city of San José (Centeno, 1941). The founding of the school, which initially provided services for students with intellectual disabilities, was a significant educational milestone for the country (Dengo Obregón, 2000). Costa Rica passed one of the first pieces of special education legislation in the world in 1957, the Fundamental Law of Education. The Fundamental Law of Education established the constitutional right of students with disabilities to receive a special education, including special didactic techniques and materials, and the right of parents to receive information on assisting their child with special educational needs. Today in Costa Rica, special education services are functioning throughout the country under the direction of the Department of Special Education within a nationally centralized Ministry of Public Education.

Special education in Costa Rica has become increasingly inclusive. Through the 1960s, students with disabilities in Costa Rica typically received instruction at one of 20 segregated special education campuses (Bulgarelli, 1971). Beginning in the early 1970s, however, special education professionals trained in Europe and the U.S. embraced inclusionary theory and pedagogy that fundamentally changed special education service delivery (Meléndez, 2000). The Ministry of Education began to place special education classrooms on regular education campuses in 1974 when the need for special education was increasing at a rate disproportionate to what services were available at the time (Meléndez, 2000). By 1984, 118 special education classrooms were in existence on general education campuses in Costa Rica (Stough, 1990). The Ministry of Education rapidly expanded the number of resource rooms during the 1980s by hiring teachers to instruct recargo, or an extra shift, each day (Stough & Aguirre-Roy, 1997). Special education students, especially those with learning disabilities, attended school for additional instructional hours in the afternoon and were taught by trained recargo teachers. By 1988, the recargo classroom was the predominant special education service delivery

model with over 600 elementary classrooms staffed across the country.

Costa Rica changed from a diagnostic model for determining eligibility for services to a needs-based model in 1990. This shift in philosophical approach emphasized the type of instructional modifications required by a student rather than using categorical diagnoses to drive educational diagnosis and service delivery (Stough, 2003). The Ministry of Public Education now uses three categories to describe modifications required by students: (1) modifications of access, which include adaptations such as ramps, sign language, or braille required to access the general education system; (2) nonsignificant modifications, which involve modifications to didactic methods such as calculators or assistive devices that do not affect the level of academic expectation; and (3) significant modifications, which require changes in objectives, methodology, or evaluation that clearly differentiate students in terms of expectations (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2010a). During the 2009 school year, of the 170,859 students enrolled in Costa Rica's public education system, 1.7% (11,178) received an accommodation of access, 12.0% (113,027) received non-significant modifications, while 1.6% (12,237) received some type of significant instructional modification (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2010a). The Ministry of Education has divided Costa Rica into 23 educational service regions, each of which is served by a Regional Special Education Advisor and a Regional Itinerant Team. Eligibility for special education services is determined through local Educational Assistance Committees, in coordination with Regional Special Education Advisor and Regional Itinerant Team (Stough, 2003).

Costa Rica has a diverse educational service system that delivers special education through teaching hospitals, home schooling, special education centers, integrated classrooms, resource rooms, instructional aides, consulting teachers, and co-teaching (Meléndez, 2005). Children with disabilities are eligible to receive educational services beginning at birth and these services continue through age 18, which is the age at which most Costa Ricans finish high school. Early stimulation classes are provided for children who have disabilities or were born at risk in special education centers, preschools, and within nutrition and education centers overseen by the Ministry of Health in most large towns. Students with mild disabilities usually receive services in a general education classroom but sometimes receive support from a special education assistant. Students with significant disabilities usually receive services in segregated special education classrooms located in general public education schools or in special education centers (Ministerio de Educación Pública, 2010). At the high school level, special education students usually attend a vocational, rather than academic, high school. Students who attend academic high schools are eligible to receive services through modifications or through the support of teaching assistants. In rural areas, such as in

the province of Guanacaste, itinerant teachers are hired to travel intermittently to schools that have small numbers of students with special needs. Special education students may also receive support services from a physical therapist, language therapist, occupational therapist, psychologist, or orientation and mobility specialist, among others. Students older than 18 can enroll in centers for adults with disabilities, attend special courses offered by the National Learning Institute or the Helen Keller Institute, or attend institutions of higher education with curricular modifications or technical assistance (Meléndez, 2005).

The Ministry of Education embraced the Schools for All movement in the early 1990s, which was based on the principles of normalization, integration, and self-advocacy, and ratified during the 1992 World Conference on Special Education as part of the Salamanca Agreement (Marin Arias, 2000). Costa Rica passed further progressive legislation for individuals with disabilities in 1996 through the Equal Opportunity Law 7600 for Persons with Disabilities, which guaranteed equal rights for individuals with disabilities across all sectors of public life. Special education was redefined in this law as “the combination of assistance and services at the disposal of students with special education needs, whether they be temporary or permanent” (Sección VI, Artículo 27). The Equal Opportunity Law also strongly advised that students with disabilities be integrated into regular education classrooms that were “preferentially in the educational center closest to their home” (Capítulo I, Artículo 18). The Ministry of Public Education, together with the National Board on Rehabilitation and Special Education, implements the Equal Opportunity Law and Law 8661, a ratification of the International Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2007 (Asamblea Legislativa de Costa Rica, 2007).

Recent educational initiatives following the passing of this legislation have exponentially increased movement toward a more inclusive educational system. The National Resource Center for Inclusive Education was established in 2002 by the Ministry of Education with the mission of making inclusive education a reality in Costa Rica. The Center supports inclusive training and pedagogy for teachers and other personnel who educate students with disabilities. In 2007, the Universidad Estatal a Distancia established an inclusive education project in three primary education schools following the guidelines of the Index of Inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2000). This model has been subsequently replicated by the National Commission on Inclusive Education of the Ministry of Public Education in nine primary and secondary schools in the province of Heredia.

Special education is offered as a major in three of the five public universities and as a program at 12 private universities, which has increased both the quality and the quantity of professionals in the field (CONARE, 2011).

The Equal Opportunity Law (1996) stipulated that teachers who instruct students with disabilities should receive special training; however, requirements for teacher certification vary and inclusive pedagogy is not evenly addressed in all special education teacher training programs. Special education programs are less common in rural areas of the country and the shortage of trained special education professionals has remained an ongoing challenge for Costa Rica (Stough, 2002).

Special education in Costa Rica confronts many challenges shared by other developing countries: limited material resources, geographic isolation of segments of the population, and few teacher training programs. However, for over 70 years Costa Rica has supported undeniably progressive legislation that has established the rights of individuals with disabilities to be educated, to work, and to receive public health services. Costa Rica has also historically allocated over 20% of its national budget to education. Special education services are consequently widely available and integrated into the very fabric of the Costa Rican educational system.

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