



Teaching Special Education in Costa Rica

Using a Learning Strategy in an Inclusive Classroom

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Costa Rica has one of the most accessible and progressive public education systems in Latin America, and special education services have been available to students with disabilities since 1940. Approximately 70,000 students in the public education system receive some type of special education service. A little over one-fourth of these students receive services within special education classrooms or schools, while the remaining students receive educational services or modifications within the general education setting.

In the past decade, special education in Costa Rica has seen profound changes—from creating primarily segregated services to developing innovative service models that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. This article describes those changes and takes a look at current challenges in this small country.

Geographic and Demographic Perspectives

Costa Rica, located in Central America, is renowned for its tropical forests, lack

of a national army, and democratic stability in one of the most volatile and economically depressed regions in the world. This country also has one of the most accessible and progressive public education systems in Latin America, resulting in an estimated literacy rate of over 95% (United Nations, 2000), as well as the most highly regarded public university in Central America (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999; Lara, 1995). Special education has been part of the public education system since 1940, when a small school for students with mental retardation was established near the capital city of San José.

Education in Costa Rica

Educational services in Costa Rica are centralized, meaning that policies, stan-

dards, and curriculum are established by the Ministry of Public Education in San José and are the same throughout the country. Currently, the public school system serves more than 915,000 students, 23% of the national population, and employs approximately 44,300 teachers (Gólcher Beirtue, 2001). Attendance at the elementary level is 100%, but at the high school level the attendance rate lags significantly behind, at less than 56% of the high school-aged population. Kindergarten is widely available, and early childhood education programs that provide free meals are available in larger towns.

As in the United States, the school schedule reflects Costa Ricans' heritage as an agrarian society. The school year

Table 1. Number of Students Receiving Instructional Modifications in 2000

Type of Modification	Preschool	Elementary	High School	Total
Access only	816	6,965	1,239	9,020
Nonsignificant	2,668	45,979	10,901	59,548
Significant	315	2,597	181	3,093
Total students receiving modifications				71,661

Source: G. Monge Chavarria (2001). Ministry of Public Education, Department of Special Education.

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consists of 200 days that begin in February and continue through most of December, when the coffee harvest begins, but the schedule is heavily peppered with holidays and teacher conference days. Most schools begin their instructional day at 7 a.m. Classes at the elementary level end at 11:00 or 11:30, which allows time for students in rural areas to make sometimes long journeys on foot to and from their homes. High schools are usually located in larger towns, where transportation is more available, and classes continue until 3 or 4 p.m.

Students usually attend kindergarten, then 6 years of elementary school, followed by 5 years of high school: There is no middle school. At the elementary level, students study Spanish, mathematics, social studies, and science, as well as religion, art, and music, and, in most schools, computer skills and English. High school consists of 3 years of general studies, which is then followed by one of three types of emphases: academic, technical, or agricultural. Following graduation, students from academic high schools typically attend postsecondary educational programs and students from the other areas enter the work force.

Teachers are highly regarded in Costa Rica society; in rural towns, they are often the most educated people in the community. Children, especially at the elementary level, revere their teachers; and teachers play an important role in children's lives (DeRosier & Kupersmidt,



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1991). Teachers also serve an important cultural role in that they organize most of the public parades, plays, and musical performances in recognition of holidays and religious events. As a profession, teaching is poorly paid and highly feminized, although male teachers are more common at the secondary level.

Structure of Special Education

According to the national Director of Special Education (Monge Chavarría, 2001), approximately 7.9% of the students in the public education system receive some type of special education service. A little over one-fourth of these students receive services within special education classrooms or schools,

whereas the remaining students receive educational services or modifications within the general education setting.

There are currently 530 special education classrooms located in primary schools throughout the country and 69 classrooms at the high school level (Monge Chavarría, 2001). At the primary level, most of these classrooms are resource rooms that address the needs of students with mild learning disabilities. At the secondary level, classrooms primarily focus on prevocational skills and most of these students, if they continue their education, do so at vocational or agricultural high schools.

As in the United States, most students receiving special education services are labeled as having a mild disability, such as emotional disturbance, speech impairment, learning disability, or attention-deficit disorder. Approximately 10% of the students are catego-

Table 2. Educational Statistics on Costa Rica

Total number of students in public education	915,384
Students receiving special services	70,745
Estimated total number of people with disabilities	400,000
Number of advocacy and support agencies	114
Number of students that repeat first grade	9,157
Number of students that repeat grades at the secondary level	17,971
Literacy rate of adults over age 15	95%
Mean years of schooling	
Male	5.6
Female	5.8
Percentage of national budget spent on education	22.8%
Public school expenditure as % of gross national product	5.4%

Students who receive special services are classified as receiving modifications of one of three different types: access level services, nonsignificant modifications, and significant modifications.

alized under low-incidence categories, such as autism, mental retardation, auditory impairments, visual impairments, or multiple disabilities. Most students with low-incidence disabilities receive services within segregated special education classrooms or schools, whereas students with less severe disabilities usually receive educational modifications within the general education setting.

Students are not, however, differentially placed in special education settings according to their categorical diagnosis. For the past several years, the Ministry of Education has used *levels of modification* to determine educational service delivery. Students who receive special services are classified as receiving modifications of one of three different types: access level services, nonsignificant modifications, and significant modifications, as follows:

- *Access-level services* refer to modifications needed by the students to access the curriculum. These include environmental adaptations that students with motor or sensory impairments require to access instruction or to mobilize in the educational setting—for example, ramps, assistance bars, Braille, and sign language. Access-level services are considered forms of instructional compensation in that they do not affect the educational program's expectations of a student's academic performance.
- *Nonsignificant modifications* involve modification of didactic methods, but do not affect the level of academic placement expected of a student. Nonsignificant modifications usually

consist of modifications of didactic materials, instructional presentations, or particular lessons taught as part of the general curriculum.

- *Significant modifications* include changes to the structure and content of the curriculum. These changes may require changes in the objectives that are taught as part of the general educational program, as well as in changes in teaching methodology and in the evaluation of the objectives that are implemented. The use of significant modifications also clearly differentiates these students in terms of what is expected academically of these students (Ministry of Public Education, 1992).

Approximately 80% of the students in special education receive modifications that are access-level or nonsignificant in nature; and the classroom teacher is responsible for their design and implementation (Gólcher Beirtue, 2001). Significant modifications are developed by special education teachers or by regionally based Itinerant Teams that, together with campus-based teams and input from the classroom teacher, design appropriate instruction for students with severe disabilities. The system of using levels of modification reflects the philosophical principle of the Department of Special Education that "all students are different; the only common denominator is their diversity, and in this sense, a State that treats with equality its citizens, should also treat with equality its students" (Monge Chavarría, 2000, p. 7). By focusing on the identification of the modifications that will allow a student to access the curriculum, rather than defining the student's disability, this approach affirms that all children have the right to an equitable education.

Special Education Law in Costa Rica

Public special education services have been legislated in Costa Rica since 1957 when it was recognized that "special education consists of the use of appropriate pedagogical techniques and materials" (*Ley Fundamental de Educación*, Article 28, 1957). More recently, the Equal Opportunity Law (*Ley 7600 de*

Igualdad de Oportunidades para las Personas con Discapacidad, 1996) has legislated nondiscriminatory access to employment, health, construction, transportation, communication, recreation, arts, and sports, as well as to education, and enacted a wide-ranging revision of discriminatory language and regulations throughout the legal code.

Title II Article 17, of the Equal Opportunity Law specifies that educational centers must make the necessary adaptations and provide assistive services so that people with disabilities receive an appropriate education. These assistive services may include

- Specialized human resources.
- Curricular modifications.
- Evaluation.
- Methods.
- Didactic resources, such as Braille, audiotapes, Costa Rica sign language.
- Modifications to the environmental infrastructure.

Article 18 of the Law stresses that special education should be equal in quality to that received by students who receive general education services and take place during the same hours as general education services. Though it did not legislate the closing of special education schools, the Equal Opportunity Law mandated that students be placed in the least restrictive environment and that special educators facilitate the integration of children with disabilities into general education schools and classrooms.

Special Education Teacher Training in Costa Rica

There are currently four highly regarded public universities and more than 40 private universities of varying quality in Costa Rica that, together, enroll more than 70,000 students (Helmuth, 2000). Education is a popular major in universities, and special education teacher training programs can be easily found in universities in the Central Valley. Special education programs are less common, however, in rural areas of the country, where trained personnel are most needed and long-standing special education teacher shortages persist.

Both the Fundamental Law (1957) and the Equal Opportunity Law (1996)

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Table 3. Excerpts from the Equal Opportunity Law (1996) of Costa Rica

Title I, Article 1	It is declared in the public interest to integrate the development of the population with disabilities in conditions that are equal in quality, opportunity, rights, and as are those of the rest of the habitants.
Title II, Article 14	The State shall guarantee the opportunity to access education to individuals, regardless of their disability, from early stimulation up to higher education.
Title II, Article 17	Centers of education shall provide the necessary adaptations and procure the required assistive services so that the educational rights of individuals are assured.
Title II, Article 18	Persons with special educational needs should receive their education in the General Education System, with the required assistive services. Students that cannot have their needs satisfied in general education classrooms, shall receive appropriate services that guarantee their development and well-being, including those that are provided in special education schools. The education of persons with disabilities should be equal in quality, be provided during the same hours, preferentially in the educational setting closest to their home, and be based in the norms and expectations that guide the general educational system.

recognized the importance of teacher education and stipulated that teachers who instruct students with disabilities should receive special training. Until 1962, however, when the University of Costa Rica opened its first special education program in mental retardation, teachers who wished to receive a bachelor's degree in special education had to go to Europe, Chile, or the United States for training (Marín Arias, 2000). Other bachelor's programs in deafness, communication disorders, and learning disabilities were created in the 1970s, but the University of Costa Rica did not offer the first Master's degree until 1983 (Marín Arias; Ministry of Public Education, 1993).

Requirements for teacher certification vary, depending on the area of specialization; however, a bachelor's degree is not required to teach in Costa Rica, and most special educators obtain their certificate and a technical (*tecnico*) degree after 3 years, rather than pursuing a bachelor's degree. Many teacher-training programs for general educators include at least one course that focuses on the characteristics of children with disabilities, while special education pro-

grams usually include 2 years of specialized courses. Few special educators receive postgraduate degrees in special education, and those that do are quickly promoted into administrative positions rather than remaining in the classroom. Inservice training and workshops are common in school districts, but they rarely focus on special education issues or techniques.

Teaching Roles of Special Educators

Costa Rica attempts to provide a range of instructional programming for students with disabilities and special educators work in many different educational settings. The 23 special education schools in Costa Rica represent the most segregated educational setting and provide services to students with mental retardation, deafness, auditory impairments, visual impairments, or multiple disabilities (Monge Chavarría, 2001). Most students with significant modifications receive services either in special education schools or in self-contained classrooms. Special education schools, however, are now restricted by the Equal Opportunity Law to provide serv-

ices only to children with severe disabilities.

Special education classrooms are similarly restricted to students who require significant modifications. There are currently more than 600 special education classrooms throughout the country and these classrooms primarily serve students cross-categorically with moderate to severe disabilities (Monge Chavarría, 2001), most commonly, students with mental retardation or other types of cognitive impairments. The Ministry of Education, however, recognizes that students with auditory impairments or who are deaf may need services that necessitate a separate program and many students who are deaf also attend self-contained classrooms (Monge Chavarría, 2001).

Under the Equal Opportunities Law, students who require nonsignificant modifications are placed in general education settings (Marín Arias, 2000), and most special educators work in general education schools or classrooms. As occurs in other countries, consulting teachers typically assist general education teachers in making modifications and instructional materials for students with special education needs within the general education classroom. Consulting teachers were first used to integrate children with cerebral palsy into general education classrooms in the early 1980s (Marín Arias), but the widespread use of the consulting model with students with other types of disabilities is relatively new in Costa Rica. The Ministry of Education began to expand the use of consulting teachers in general education classrooms during the 1990s as part of the movement to make

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special education more inclusive (Stough, 2000). Some of these teachers also travel itinerantly in rural areas of the country. As of 1998, there were 50 itinerant consulting teachers in Costa Rica (Marín Arias, 2000).

Costa Rican special educators face a particular challenge when they consult with general educators, because many general education teachers are less willing to assist students with learning difficulties than they are those students who have a greater possibility of academic success (Rodríguez & Tollefson, 1987). In general, however, Costa Rican educators are highly collaborative and accept the presence of other professionals in their classrooms, thus creating opportunities for the consulting teacher to model appropriate instruction of students with learning difficulties.

Resource rooms are designed to provide pullout services to students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, or speech impairments at the elementary school level. Teachers in resource rooms typically provide enrichment and remedial instruction, particularly in the areas of mathematics and reading. Schools must have a student population of 400 or more, however, for the Ministry of Education to create a resource room. As a result, most resource classrooms have been established in the more densely populated Central Valley.

In 1985, the Ministry of Education recognized that students in the early grades of elementary school were being held back repeatedly, sometimes as many as three or four times in first grade. The priority of special education became to lower the number of children repeating grades and to develop servic-

es for students who were at risk for failure in elementary school settings (Stough & Aguirre-Roy, 1997). In response to this initiative, classes for students with learning disabilities were created by the Ministry of Education through the *recargo* (extra load) model. Teachers who were hired to work *recargo* held their regular classes in the morning and then received supplemental salary for instructing students with learning disabilities during additional hours in the afternoon.

This model was economically frugal in that it did not necessitate hiring new teachers, only a salary supplement for the hours that teachers worked. It also did not require that students be pulled from their general education classes because the instruction was added to, not as a replacement for, that provided in the regular classroom. *Recargo* teachers, however, were usually not university-trained teachers; rather, they received workshops and inservice training through the Ministry of Education. The model allowed for rapid expansion of the program, and by 1994 there were more than 600 *recargo* classrooms functioning across the country (Stough & Aguirre-Roy, 1997).

The development of special education programs at the high school level has lagged substantially behind those at the elementary school level; there are only 69 programs countrywide at the secondary level. Programming and modification are more challenging at the secondary level, in part because the Costa Rican secondary system is more complex, containing many different subjects, as well as three types of specialization that follow the first 3 years of high school. In addition, students with disabilities drop out at a higher rate than do their peers: Less than 20% of students who receive special education services at the elementary level go on to participate in secondary programs.

Current Challenges in Special Education

Current challenges in the field of special education in Costa Rica echo those in many other countries, particularly developing countries. Adequate and stable funding for educational programs is

essential. Until the mid-1970s, funding for education remained above 30% of the national budget but has decreased over the past two decades to hover barely above 20%. In addition, though university funding has remained constant, primary and secondary school budgets have diminished, even while the student population is increasing (Helmuth, 2000).

Decreased developmental aid from the United States and the devaluation of the Costa Rica currency (the *colon*) have sporadically caused depressions in the economy that particularly affect the lower class, which affects school attendance. Funkhouser (1999) has found that a large drop in high school attendance levels in Costa Rica accompanies declining economic conditions, and these conditions similarly affect students with disabilities and their families. Most students, when asked to give a reason for stopping their studies, identify either economic problems or the need to work as the reason (Molina Molina, 1992).

Despite the shortage of qualified special educators, these teachers earn no more than do general educators, nor are there subsidized training programs that would increase the numbers of teachers entering the field. Villareal (1989) found overwhelming agreement among teachers, teacher educators, and administrators that increasing teacher salaries was the primary action that would improve special education in Costa Rica. Teacher salaries, however, have not kept up with inflation over the past 15 years; and there has been considerable attrition in the number of experienced teachers who remain in the field. Thus, a chronic shortage of professionally trained and experienced special educators continues to be the primary difficulty in ensuring the appropriate education of students with disabilities in Costa Rica.

As noted previously, it is difficult to provide appropriate education services to a small segment of the population, such as students with disabilities, when that population is dispersed and geographically isolated (González-Vega & Céspedes, 1993; Stough, 1990; Stough & Aguirre-Roy, 1997). The majority of the Costa Rican population lives in the cen-

Under the Equal Opportunities Law, students who require nonsignificant modifications are placed in general education settings; and most special educators work in general education schools or classrooms.

ter of the country, which allows for specialized classrooms and trained teachers there, but the rural areas are proportionately more isolated. In addition, teachers with advanced training qualify for the more desirable teaching positions in urban areas, creating a drain of educated teachers into the more urbanized Central Valley, exacerbating the need for professionals in rural areas (Stough, 1990).

The field of special education in Costa Rica has undergone a substantial paradigmatic change from creating primarily segregated services to developing innovative service models that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities. Both general and special education teachers have an increasingly more optimistic view of the learning potential of students with disabilities. In addition, despite considerable economic limitations, the Ministry of Education has been able to significantly expand special education services over the last two decades, while attempting to distribute a limited pool of educators with special education expertise. An exciting new initiative is the development of the National Resource Center, which will focus on the inservice training and support of special educators, as well as train general educators to make instructional modifications and provide support for parents of students with disabilities. By continuing to make education a national priority, Costa Rica will similarly improve the education of students with disabilities, who are already part of an increasingly equitable public education system.

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The author greatly appreciates the assistance that she received from Gerardo Monge Chavarría, Director of the Special Education Department in Costa Rica, and from his staff in writing this article.

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TEACHING Exceptional Children, Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 34-39.

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