

# Early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about the inclusion of children with Autism in Jamaica: An exploration study

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## ABSTRACT:

In view of the need for more cross-sectional studies in different socio-geographical contexts to investigate teachers' perceptions regarding inclusion, the present study sets to explore early childhood teachers' attitudes towards inclusion in a context where research on this topic is limited; Kingston, Jamaica. The target group consisted of nine (N=9) early childhood teachers working with children with Autism in an established pre-primary inclusive setting. Teachers' qualitative responses, elicited through semi-structured interviews, were analysed through Content Analysis. Results showed that teachers generally uphold positive beliefs towards inclusion. A key theme that emerged from the data is that in-service training and teaching experience positively influence practices and beliefs as well as differentiated instruction. This study makes theoretical and practical educational contributions. The research provides an understanding of inclusion in Jamaica and contributes to the limited body of literature available on Autism in the country. In practice, this study contributes to policy decision-making in the attempt of facilitating greater in-service training within early childhood institution in order to develop the skills of educators and facilitate greater inclusive principles.

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## INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (here-on-after referred to as ASD or Autism), a pervasive developmental disorder characterized by a number of impairments with communication, social interaction, and repetitive and stereotypic patterns of behaviour, interest, and activities, has been one of the most researched and examined developmental disorders throughout the years (Dodd, 2005). Increase recognition of the condition is associated with an increase in the number of autism cases reported worldwide, coupled with the challenges faced by those affected that those associated with affected. Children with autism are less likely to reach their developmental milestones and for those who do, they might be affected by episodes of regression where he or she may no longer be able to accomplish simple tasks they once were capable of doing.

Booth & Ainscow (2002) describe inclusion as the process of increasing the presence, participation, and achievement of all students in schools, with particular reference to those groups of students who are at risk of exclusion, marginalisation, and underachievement. Booth et al. (2003) added the values of equity in the overall definition of inclusion as offering support that is based on equity is essential to successful inclusion practices; fairness allows for the needs and interests of each learner to be made within the school environment. Successful inclusion demands an increased amount of physical & human resources and reliance on strategies and pedagogical procedures to secure learners' interest.

Proponents of the inclusion of children with autism have expressed that inclusion has helped to improve lives, children with autism have benefited from constant interactions with typically developing children and subsequently improved their reciprocal social communication in speech and social interaction (Majoko, 2016). Intervention during early childhood years is considered vital in promoting the chance of optimal development and wellbeing of children with autism (Macdonald et al., 2017). Inclusion is more than a way of practice; it is a way of belief and thinking. Inclusion speaks also to social acceptance, in thought, which allows empathy and equal opportunity to students regardless of differences (Pratt, 2019).

### **The role of attitudes towards the implementation of inclusion**

Attitudes are essentially thoughts or ideas that reflect feeling and influence behaviour related to a particular object. Attitude comprises of three major components: the cog-

nitive component speaks to knowledge or thought gained through training and experience, the affective component speaks to feelings that cause acceptance or rejection of a particular situation, thing, or person and lastly, the behavioural component speaks to ways of reacting or responding to disabilities (Triandis, 1971). Subsequently, to understand the attitude of individuals, research would need to focus on one or more of the components to gain an understanding. These components help to determine the attitude of an individual.

Early childhood teachers are critical to inclusion as positive teacher attitudes contribute to successful inclusion (Urton et al., 2014). Teacher perceptions are instrumental, as they have the power to positively or negatively influence inclusive practices (Schmidt & Vrhovink, 2015). Several factors (e.g., teacher or environmental related) can contribute to the formation of teacher attitude towards the inclusion of children with autism (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). As far as teacher-related factors are concerned, Hart & Whalon (2013) outlined that teachers are significant in fostering positive classroom environments that are conducive to the holistic development of students with varying learning needs and disabilities. Elliot (2008) in his work found an existing relationship between teacher attitude towards inclusion and their effectiveness. Avramidis et al., (2000) found that teachers who attended long-term professional skilled-based training courses showed more positive attitudes and confidence in meeting the needs of students with special educational needs.

Regarding the environmental-related factors, a successful inclusive educational programme is rooted in positive school culture and teacher attitude that embraces values and principles that are pro-inclusion. According to Schmidt & Vrhovnick (2015), inclusion is relative and varies from one social context to the next, and will differ considerably from the national and local context. Subsequently, the attitude of educators is dependent upon the environment in which inclusion is practised and the type of disabilities being dealt with. Samms-Vaughan (2014) explains that within lower and middle-income countries like Jamaica knowledge on Autism is limited. Reports indicated the need for improved provisions for children with autism between the ages of 3-6 years within Jamaica (Samms-Vaughan & Franklyn-Banton, 2008). Also, educators cautiously accept including a child with cognitive disabilities such as autism in a non-inclusive environment (Forlin, 1995). With reference to Jamaica, a comparison of statistics from the USA and Jamaica revealed that 70% of ASD cases were highlighted first in the school setting.

However, Samms-Vaughn & Frankyn-Banton (2008) reported that only 5.6% and 4.6% of children were referred as being potentially autistic by early childhood teachers; despite this fact, there were concerns from mothers. A delay in awareness is perhaps an indicator of the state of inclusive education with regard to autism in Jamaica.

### **Teachers' attitudes towards children with autism and towards inclusion**

The research available on the attitudes of teachers in Jamaica towards children with ASD is limited (e.g., Lightbody, 2013; Chin, 2014; Samms, 2017). To our knowledge, only one study examined the attitudes of early childhood educators towards children with ASD (Lightbody, 2013). Lightbody (2013) carried out a quantitative study on Jamaican early childhood educators' self-efficacy and attitudes towards children with autism. The study looked at variables such as 'teacher attitude', 'self-efficacy', 'teacher training' and 'years of teaching experience'. The sample included 47 teachers from 12 ECIs in Kingston, Jamaica. The findings revealed that there is no statistical significance between Jamaican ECEs' years of teaching experience, types of training, and knowledge of autism, and their self-efficacy and attitude towards children with autism. The hypothesis that years of teaching experience, type of training, and knowledge of autism have a significant impact on Jamaican ECEs' self-efficacy and attitude towards children with autism in their classroom, had no statistical evidence. Lightbody's study has highlighted different areas that require further investigation and examination of ASD in Jamaica. To gain an in-depth understanding of the attitude of ECE and the inclusion of children with autism, further qualitative research is necessary.

Chin (2014), in a qualitative study, investigated how the beliefs and self-perceptions of early childhood teachers (N=5) influence their classroom practice. The teachers, selected from different early childhood institutions, were trained with at least HEART Level II certification, were teaching 3-6 year old children, and had a minimum of three years of teaching experience. Results showed that teachers agreed that developmentally appropriate practices should be practised no matter the type of institution. It was also revealed that personal and professional factors impact how educators develop their developmentally appropriate practices for the classroom. Chin's study carried out at the general school setting provides the basis for investigating the attitude of early childhood educators within an established inclusive setting towards young children.

Samms (2017) later on, in a quantitative study, inves-

tigated inclusion in Jamaica primary schools in regards to teachers' self-efficacy, attitude, and concerns. The study focused on the inclusion training of teachers and how it affects planned behaviour. Primary school teachers (N=191), within public, private urban and rural schools within three parishes in Jamaica participated in the study. The study found that a negative school climate decreases the self-efficacy of teachers for inclusive practices. The research can be an indicator of what might be happening at the early childhood level, but it fails to understand the phenomenon of inclusion during the early childhood years. Samms (2017) work provided substantial information for Jamaica's context, but no study, to our knowledge, examines the attitudes of early childhood educators within the only established inclusive school in Jamaica towards children with ASD at the primary level.

### **Autism and Education in Jamaica**

Early childhood education in Jamaica is predominantly provided by community basic schools. "Over 80% of pre-schoolers enrolled, attend community-operated basic schools, just fewer than 20% attended Public Infant Departments and private centres" UNESCO (*Jamaica Early Childhood...*, 2006). Basic school programmes generally cater to the needs of children ages 2-6 years. Jamaica experienced many challenges with the quality of education at the early childhood level, mainly in the area of teacher qualification and the quality of early childhood programme offered. These difficulties resulted in the Ministry of Education endorsing at least one trained teacher to be assigned to each government-recognized basic school.

The Ministry of Education allowed for the integration of children with disabilities by admitting them into early-childhood education programmes. However, no evidence of funding to early childhood institutions, who opted to embrace the integration approach could be identified. This suggests that critical resources to meet the demand are not yet provided by the ministry. Additionally, there are few noted preparatory schools that are equipped to properly cater to the needs of students on the autism spectrum; these services are provided through special classes as opposed to inclusive classrooms. A search to find an inclusive school specifically in the Eastern section for the island resulted in one (1) non-governmental organization, offering education to typically developing children, children with disabilities; those on the autism spectrum, within a regular classroom setting.

The educational institution was established in 1986 with the objective of providing inclusive education for typically developing students and A-typical students who

were affected by disabilities and disorders, such as autism. The school staff consisted of early childhood teachers, clinical psychologists, behavioural, occupational, speech therapists, and language therapists. The institutions also rely on Frederick Froebel's theory which upholds the importance of play to facilitate learning as a guiding principle.

### **Purpose of the study**

The aim of the cross-sectional study was to examine pre-primary school teachers' views and attitudes within an established inclusive school in Jamaica. The study employed a qualitative approach with research questions formulated to explore pre-primary school teachers' beliefs and practices. It further examined how teachers had perceived their ability to handle an inclusive classroom with autistic children (2 to 6 years old). The study focused on the type of pedagogy used by teachers to support children with autism, and how prepared these teachers felt while offering support to these children in an inclusive environment.

The Jamaican studies (Lightbody, 2013; Chin, 2014; Samms, 2017) demonstrated teachers' attitudes and perceptions with reference to autism and inclusion in Jamaica but neither study has included teachers from an established inclusive setting. Yet, the need to examine the attitude of pre-primary school teachers within an established ECI in Jamaica towards young children with autism is important. All three studies provided information suitable for the construction of further research examining the attitude of educators within Jamaica's context towards ASD. In view of the need for more studies within an inclusive setting in Jamaica, the present study was designed to examine pre-primary teachers' attitudes and practices towards children with autism.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants (N=9) were early childhood teachers. Of the number of teachers who participated in the sample, two teachers were equipped with formal training in special education. All teachers were exposed to classroom teaching forming of students with varied special educational needs such as students with autism. The sample was drawn from an established pre-primary inclusive setting situated in Jamaica. The sampling strategy (purposive sampling) involved the gathering of information from a specific cohort of teachers, based on a subjective judgment, so that the information on the desired topic could

be achieved (Creswell, 2012; Marshall, 1996). The drop-out rate was low (25 %) yet the sample size remained large enough to explore teachers' attitudes towards the inclusion of children with autism.

### **Design**

To elicit early childhood teachers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices about the inclusion of children with autism into an established inclusive setting, a case study was employed in order to be more efficient in allowing a thorough investigation of the focus of enquiry, acknowledging also its advantage in facilitating the collection of volumes of data in a rich form (Frankel et al., 2015). The research aim was examined with questions falling under three categories:

1. Beliefs about inclusion and children with autism, e.g.  
Can you give me your personal beliefs about inclusive education at the early childhood level? / What do you believe is most important in order to good job in teaching young children with autism in an inclusive setting?
2. Teaching practices in an inclusive setting  
How would you describe your approach to teaching a classroom having students with autism? / How do you manage the behavior of children with autism in your classroom?
3. The influence of teaching experience on teachers' inclusive practices  
To what extent do you feel that your training has provided you with the knowledge and skills to carry out your role as a professional early childhood educator? / Would you say that your teaching strategies have changed over the years?

### **Measures & Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews were used due to the benefits it allowed the study by ensuring that conversations would stay on course and that all the information required would be successfully acquired (Fry et al., 2017). Data were gathered at the school. All Interviews took approximately six hours. Each interview (18 open-ended questions) was conducted on regular school days Monday – Friday, before and after regular classroom sessions and during the break periods, during times that were convenient to the interviewee and the researcher. The participants' responses were documented via note-taking and audio recording. Interview questions were piloted with two early childhood educators from the institution. Upon the completion of a pilot study, the interview manuscript was revised to capture additional questions such

as the number of children taught by each educator and their approach to handling the atypical behaviours of children with autism in an inclusive setting.

## RESULTS

### Preliminary analyses

Teachers' qualitative responses were analysed through Content Analysis. We began our analysis by first transcribing the recorded data and by then assigning a code label for each respondent in order to secure their anonymity. After that, we summarized the data and we

omitted the unrelated information. Table 1 presents information about the teachers' current position, years of experience, qualifications, past teaching experience, and current number of classroom children)

### Main analyses

Moving on to the main analyses, first, we coded the data in order to break down the information, compare and conceptualise the data. Thus, to describe the text, we used codes of five words, such as 'Teachers embracing Pro-inclusive beliefs', 'Students Centred approach to teaching', 'Teacher's love for children, etc. For achiev-

Table 1. Demographics (N=9)

Position	Years of experience	Qualifications	Past teaching experience	Current number of classroom children
Co-teacher	4 years	Teaching diploma in Special Education	Lead in Special Education at a kindergarten school	6-7 children with autism
Kindergarten teacher with the help of teaching assistant	4 years	Degree in Early Childhood Education	Kindergarten teacher	5 children (1 child with autism)
Teaching assistant	2 years	High School diploma	Special education teaching assistant	5 children (one child with autism and another cerebral palsy)
Kindergarten teacher with the help of teaching assistant	22 years	1. Diploma in Maternity and Childcare nursing 2. Certificate in CPR training	Teacher at the inclusive institution	11 children (4 children with mild autism)
Co-teacher	8	Diploma in Special Education Intervention	Teacher in inclusive settings in other Caribbean regions, and other Special Education and inclusive schools abroad.  Collaborated with an occupational and behavioural therapist	6 children with autism
Co-teacher	9 years	Degree in Early Childhood Education	Teacher at the inclusive institution	8-9 children (three children with mild cases of autism)
Caregiver	1 year in an inclusive setting  10 years working with children with special needs	HEART Certificate in early childhood education	Caregiver for children ages 0-3 years	10 children (2 children with autism)
Teacher	1 < (less than a year)	1. Diploma in Early Childhood Education 2. Bachelors degree in special education	Taught children up to the grade 3 level.	8-9 children (three children with mild cases of autism)
Teacher	45 years	Bachelors Degree in Early childhood Education	Teacher at the primary and preparatory level, in Africa and the Middle East	N/A Oversees approximately 7 small classes in inclusive school



ing validity and reliability, we used original codes; validity was achieved due to the reflected meaning of the codes, and reliability was achieved because a) there was no need for a specialized coder in the case of this study and b) inter-rater reliability (IRR) was 100% meaning that both authors reached the same level of agreement with regard to their judges. Also, the first author ensured that there was correspondence between the text and the codes and between the codes and the identified themes. Next, moving on from the descriptive to the inferential stage, with the use of axial coding, we made connections by putting back the data together in new ways and after that, core categories/themes were selected and related to other categories. Lastly, to ensure that the researcher's effects were minimized and that the re-

sults follow logically on each other, the second author checked the correspondence of the conclusions with the codes and the inferred categories. In response to the two categories under which the research questions fall under five major themes were identified: (1) Teachers embracing Pro-inclusive beliefs; (2) Love for children; (3) Differentiated instruction; (4) Understanding students' behavior; (5) Practical training in inclusive settings. Within each theme, one to four sub-themes emerged (see Table 2).

This section presents the findings that show the major themes which emerged from the qualitative data analysis regarding nine early childhood teachers' beliefs and practices about inclusion in Jamaica. The most representative answers are presented here.

Table 2. Summary of Major Themes and Sub-Themes

Research Questions under three categories	Major Themes Emerging	Sub-Themes Emerging
<p><b>Beliefs about inclusion and children with autism e.g.</b> Can you give me your personal beliefs about inclusive education at the early childhood level? / What do you believe is most important in order to good job in teaching young children with autism in an inclusive setting?</p> <p><b>Teaching practices in an inclusive setting</b> How would you describe your approach to teaching a classroom having students with autism? / How do you manage the behavior of children with autism in your classroom?</p> <p><b>Influence of teaching experience on teachers' inclusive practices</b> To what extent do you feel that your training has provided you with the knowledge and skills to carry out your role as a professional early childhood educator?</p>	Pro Inclusive Beliefs	Pro Inclusive beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate Peer Bonding</li> <li>• Promotes speech of autistic children</li> <li>• Promotes appropriate social interaction</li> <li>• Fosters tolerance for differences</li> </ul>
	Love For Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being patient, tolerant, caring, and fun-loving</li> <li>• Importance of ratio</li> <li>• Importance of disciple</li> </ul>
	Differentiated Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of child's disabilities and capabilities</li> <li>• Differentiated instruction</li> <li>• Planned lessons</li> <li>• Being open-minded</li> </ul>
	Understanding students' Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowing each child's trigger</li> <li>• In-house training helps</li> <li>• Teamwork spirit by sharing best practices</li> </ul>
	Practical training in inclusive settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching experience improves techniques</li> <li>• Teaching experience influences beliefs</li> </ul>
	Improving teaching strategies	

### Pro Inclusive Beliefs

Educators were asked to express their view on inclusion. The question asked was, "Can you give me your personal beliefs about inclusive education at the early childhood level?". For example,

**T1:** *Inclusiveness is like teaching a child how to speak it is important. It facilitates peer bonding. It often causes autism children to want to talk and behave better.*

**T2:** *...I think it's somewhat appropriate at the early childhood level, I think it's somewhat appropriate especially where ratio is taken into consideration, if it's a small ratio then I think it can work, whereas the class teacher as well as the assistance or shadows in the classroom they can play uhm, they can place emphasis or take in consideration the attitude of behavior of the children. But in terms of a big classroom where you have a lot of children it can be difficult and maybe that child will be at a disadvantage. The ratio is very important in inclusion. Very very important.*

**T3:** *I think it very nice it helps special children to learn more and...*

**T4:** *Children at the early childhood level tend to appreciate each other. They don't understand how to differentiate, even when they see a child with a disability they can see, they don't understand how to differentiate so they are loving just the same*

**T5:** *I think that working in inclusive settings we are trying to model the education strategies of developed countries. Yes! when children who are typical socialize often with typical children then they learn more stuff that they ought to learn.*

**T6:** *But my view on it is that it has its pros and its cons. And for me being here at McCam one of the pros is that (trust me) the children who are especially on the Autism spectrum if they are just developing language and you integrate them into that classroom with typical children who are talking, then you will find that their language comes out more. So that's one of the advantages it promotes language, speech. It gives the other children of seeing that everybody is different*

### Love for Children

One theme that was consistent with all participants was the teacher's "love for children". Teachers were asked to provide basic information about themselves. There was a common trend among the responses received; this gave rise to the theme of the teacher's "Love for Children". T1 discussed his educational background and explained that "I went to College to do Mathematics and Science. I, however, fell in love with Special Education..." T2 in her explanation expressed that "I love God, I love nature and I also love children." Other examples are shown below:

**T3:** *I am a co-teacher in special education here at [the institution]. I am very glad to have the opportunity to work with babies and I believe that they are much easier to mould and develop.*

**T4:** *I am a jovial person and love to work with children especially our A-typical children working with them and seeing the progress, and typical children, special and non-special.*

**T5:** *First of all, I love children and I believe in discipline no matter how young they are. I believe that children can adapt to any situation presented.*

**T6:** *I am an early childhood educator ... special educator. I prefer working with young children.*

### Differentiated Instruction

Another major theme that emerged from exploring the teachers' practices in an inclusive setting was differentiated instruction based on the question "How would you describe your approach to teaching a classroom having students with autism?"

**T1:** *My approach to teaching is being open-minded and learn to expect anything.*

**T2:** *My approach and what works is teaching according to their abilities. When I am writing my lesson plans. Realizing what the child needs to work at and work on, and create the lesson plan to fit their needs and what they are good at. I know what they need to accomplish but I know that they are good at this.*

**T3:** *I realize that children do better when they are comfortable...*

**T4:** *I do not have any specific approach, I try to make whatever I am doing Kinda fun, I play with them, I do a lot of playing. I don't have any specific things, there are times something pop-up in my head and I do that.*

**T5:** *My approach has to be very dynamic and high spirited. I try to teach children within the context, I will have to go beyond standard and principles and seize opportunities to teach children when it comes.*

**T6:** *My general approach is "student centred", when I am going into my classroom I take into consideration that it is all about the students so once I go in there will that approach and not about me so I used that I get the students to feel comfortable and not to shy away.*

**T7:** *In order to ensure that they are involved, you have to ensure that they are seeing what you are saying. You also have to ensure that you gain their attention and that they are hearing and understanding what you are saying.*

**T8:** *My approach is being constantly informed of the different way in which I can cater to these students. Doing a lot of reading. I am good at executing strategies and activities.*

### Teachers' strengths

Approaches to differentiated instruction was a common element that emerged from more than one question. In the following question, teachers draw their attention to planning and teaching: *What would you say are some of your strengths while teaching a varied classroom with children with autism?* The following responses surfaced:

**T1:** *I am good at coaching children. I believe one of my strength is patience and using technology both inside and outside of the classroom so that children can learn life skills.*

**T2:** *Patience, tolerance, creativity, cause sometimes children learn differently, they have different learning styles, so once you can identify different learning styles of each child in your class as well as those on the autism spectrum then you can teach them according to their learning styles...*

**T3:** *I am good at getting children involved in activities. Such as painting art and craft etc.*

**T4:** *My strengths? being able to communicate with each child. Once I am able to communicate with them, whichever way possible and get across certain things to them, then we can move forward. But communication is key for me, whether they can talk or not.*

**T5:** *Some of my strengths include being open-minded to inclusion, being dynamic, being able to work and capitalise on the strengths of children, patience and being tolerant of the fact that each child is different.*

**T6:** *uhm...my strength is differentiated instruction. I have good observational skills and that leads to me having good planning skills, I plan for my students, I used differentiated instructions and differentiated strategies.*

**T7:** *My strengths are dealing with the special children the drive and push in wanting to see them excel give you a push and child. So my strength is motivating thee, children.*

### Empathy - Understanding students' Behaviour

Within this sub-section, the approaches of educators are separated into two categories; educators with less than four 4 years of experience and educators with about four years of experience.

#### *Teachers with < 4 years experience*

**T2:** *Sometimes I will have to take them outside to calm them down. Sometimes I have to be firm, sometimes I have to call for help to calm them down especially if that child is known and other teachers experience the same level of difficulty with that child.*

**T3:** *It is very hard, it was a horrible experience. The mild form of autism is better with me, especially when the class size is small. I prefer younger children because you can shape them better and they are easier to mould.*

#### *Teachers with >= four years of experience*

**T1:** *I try to work with the parents to change the behaviour of my children with autism. I try to come up with clear way and strategies. In the event that the child is having a tantrum, I try to avoid the behaviour and let them see that such a behaviour will not give them what they want. Other behaviour that is strongly linked to the disorder I try to avoid because that is the role of the occupational therapist.*

**T3:** *..Discipline is something I believe in it doesn't matter the age group, it doesn't matter if the child is autistic or down syndrome, or whatever that child can understand appropriate behaviors, so we have to teach the child appropriate behaviours, if the child is throwing a tantrum I ignore and I let them throw their tantrum for as long as it takes. When they stop then I talk. Because when they throw a tantrum and you approach them it will continue. Eventually, they are going to calm down. When they calm down that is the time I approach them.*

**T4:** *It is important to first determine the reason for the behaviour. If it's a regular tantrum then the child will eventually calm down, if it's a matter of discipline then that child will have to be placed in a corner to calm down. For children with autism, it is important to find out what caused the meltdown and perhaps give them something sensory to calm them and prompt them to communicate.*

**T6:** *No, I have not really had any drastic outburst that I cannot control. I try to understand the reason for the behaviour. I don't force them, because it's usually a form of resistance. I try to offer something more pleasing to them. You have to find some way to communicate with them.*

### The influence of training and teaching experiences on teachers' inclusive practices and beliefs

A key theme that emerged from the data is that training and experience influence practices and beliefs. The following responses derived from two questions led to the conclusion that in-house practical training and teaching experience influence inclusive practices and beliefs, and teamwork spirit and collaboration result from time spent during training and teaching.

During the interviews, the teachers were asked to share the extent they feel that their training has provided them with the knowledge and skills to carry out their role as a professional early childhood educators:

**T1:** *I wouldn't say that my teaching techniques have changed because I have always been in special education and learning disabilities. I think my teaching technique has evolved. It will constantly evolve to suit the needs of students at specific points in time*

**T2:** *Yes, not much but yes. When I started I didn't really focus on their learning styles but now I really focus on what they are good at and what they need to become stronger.*



**T3:** Yes, I have learnt a lot since I have been at [here]. For example I did not know that certain kids' exist nor the different ways in which children are affected by learning disabilities. I have a better appreciation now since working with them.

**T4:** Yes, because I wasn't in teaching I was in child care, I was just put into a situation. I would search the internet about teaching children in this age group and what strategy is appropriate.

**T5:** Yes, I am open to different techniques that others try. I try to be open minded and as a principal you need to be open minded as well to see how others have dealt with it. Our meeting since a month helps to share ideas and information about child etc.

**T6:** Oh yes drastically, the didactic culture has been minimized. I have learnt that my environment can help to teach so much and offers so much knowledge to students. Teaching can be done differently and not by the book.

**T7:** Yes. Teaching techniques will change according to the students and the types of students that you get to teach.

**T8:** Yes, I have learnt a lot since I have been at [here]. For example I did not know that certain kids' exist nor the different ways in which children are affected by learning disabilities. I have a better appreciation now since working with them

**T9:** Yes. Since doing my degree I have a more open minded and display tolerance towards children. I now have the mindset that when a child might act up and act differently the child might have a disability that has not yet been diagnosed.

After the interviewees shared their thoughts regarding their training, they were asked to illustrate where their teaching strategies have changed over the years:

**T1:** Not really. The college just brushed on it but it wasn't sufficient. Coming [here] was an eye opener.

**T2:** Well I am not really a special Early Childhood educator. I wouldn't not say to a great extent because special education is different from early childhood education in some area. Those teachers would be more equipped and knowledgeable to dealing with children with special needs. At short hand we did courses that dealt with Special Educator but not in-depth. But the basic knowledge provided also help to work with young children such as the pedagogy and methodology

**T3:** I have had very little formal training, but the knowledge I gained from working at [here] has assisted me greatly in handling mostly children with cerebral palsy.

**T4:** Yes... over the years we have had a number of in house training. We can come in here [resource room] and get books, then we have meeting where we talk about each child

and so whatever information teachers give, will help us in dealing with children.

**T5:** My training consisted of an overload of information. Yes, my training has assisted me with my role as a professional educator. It has also helped me to just observe the behavior and pick upon traits that are associated with a certain learning disability. I have attended a number of workshops and have worked with occupational therapist etc.

**T6:** Yes... My training has helped. But it did not impact so much the special needs aspect of it. Both my [training institution] and [here] have helped in grooming me to work in an inclusive setting.

**T7:** Yes I believe that my training has helped me a lot in working as an early childhood educator.

**T8:** My early training is what a lot of colleges are now looking at. That play is very important and that children learn through play. My training from my formal studies has assisted as well.

**T9:** My training at [name of professional institution] played a very very important role in assisting me at the early childhood level. However I have never dealt with so much special needs students until came [here].

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The focus of the study was to examine the attitude, beliefs, and practices of early childhood educators in an established inclusive setting in Jamaica, towards young children with autism. The research aim was examined with questions falling under three categories; *Beliefs about inclusion and children with autism*, investigated with questions such as 'Can you give me your personal beliefs about inclusive education at the early childhood level?', *Teaching practices in an inclusive setting*, investigated with questions such as 'How would you describe your approach to teaching a classroom having students with autism?', and *The influence of teaching experience on teachers' inclusive practices*, 'To what extent do you feel that your training has provided you with the knowledge and skills to carry out your role as a professional early childhood educator?' / 'Would you say that your teaching strategies have changed over the years?'. Six major themes and one – four sub-themes within each theme have emerged from the interviews: (1) Teachers embracing Pro-inclusive beliefs; (2) Love for children; (3) Differentiated instruction; (4) Understanding students' behavior; (5) Practical training in inclusive settings.

When examining the findings of the study in relation to the beliefs of Early Childhood Educators toward young children with autism in an inclusive setting, a trend was

identified. Educators of the institution generally uphold positive beliefs toward inclusion. What is important is that a major aspect of educators' pro-inclusive beliefs is connected to their "love for children". The study revealed that educators within the institution are generally positive as it regards working with children and their - love for children is a basis that helps them to cope while working with autism children in an inclusive setting. Patience was considered essential when working in an inclusive setting with children with autism. Educators also believe that being down-to-earth, warm, welcoming, and caring are important when working in an inclusive environment, they believe this helps to foster responsiveness from students. Undoubtedly the positive school ethos does impact the behaviour of educators even though they might feel frustrated and overwhelmed from time to time.

The study also revealed that more positive thoughts towards inclusion are associated with educators who have spent a longer number of years within the institution. Younger educators with fewer years of experience within the institution, having limited exposure to special education and special needs children, display greater reluctance in their attitude towards the inclusion of children with autism. At the start of the interview sessions, it was noted that educators with fewer years within the institution displayed downward gestures and less enthused expression as it concerns their beliefs about the inclusion of children with autism in an inclusive setting. This might suggest that they feel occasionally overwhelmed with having to deal with young children with autism in general classroom settings. Closer examination of their expression highlight that younger educators would explicitly state that they are open to inclusion of children with autism acknowledging ratio is taken into consideration as well as the necessary resources an assistant is made available, such as teaching assistants, behavioural therapist, occupational therapists, etc. This level of reluctance displayed runs parallel to Forlin's (1995) study which found that educators would cautiously accept including a child with cognitive disabilities such as autism. Furthermore, most educators support inclusion because of the social benefits that inclusion brings to children with autism. All educators noted and expressed an improvement in speech and receptive language due to constant interaction and exposure of children with autism with their typically developing peers, educators, and specialists. This finding is similar to much-existing pieces of literature done internationally, specifically to that of Avramidis & Norcicks (2002).

With regard to the impact of training on pro-inclusive beliefs, the results revealed that formal training in

special education helps in shaping positive expressions and feelings among educators regarding the inclusion of children with autism in a regular classroom setting. This is in contrast to Lightbody's (2013) qualitative study which showed no statistical significance between Jamaican ECEs' years of teaching experience, types of training, knowledge of autism, and attitude towards children with autism. Regarding the impact of training in special education, results showed that this does not necessarily determine the effectiveness of an educator within the setting unless combined with teaching experience.

On the other hand, the findings reveal that pro-inclusive culture influences positive beliefs among educators. A constant display of empathy and appreciation for differences is recognized among educators and typically developing students. Horne (2008) in his work expressed that positive effects of inclusion are usually extended to all students especially in the area of social functioning. Samms (2017), on the contrary, noted results of research at the primary level in Jamaica, highlighting the impact of school culture whereby a negative school climate led to the decrease of self-efficacy of teachers for inclusive practices. The pro inclusive beliefs of early childhood educators are built upon the notion that resources, skills, and expertise of a process advanced adult and peer helps to highlight the importance and benefits of inclusive classroom environments to students found on the autism spectrum.

Teaching experience influences practices and beliefs. Outcomes showed that educators with longer time in the setting expressed greater confidence. Teaching at the institution would have been the first exposure to an inclusive setting and for some their first exposure to children with autism. Most educators expressed that their formal training helped with dealing with children at the early childhood level but was insufficient to assist with the demands of inclusion, more so, it was insufficient to deal with the inclusion of children with autism. Additionally, being exposed to differences and exceptionalities has helped to form pro-inclusive beliefs. It is evident that most teachers did not desire to work in an inclusive setting but by nature of being exposed to the situation, while gaining constant in-house training, and monthly in-house meetings focusing on improving the outcome of each child, they have developed an appreciation of how to operate in an inclusive setting. This is in line with Avramidis et al., (2000) who showed that professional development is related to positive attitudes towards inclusion.

As far as the practices of early childhood educators toward the inclusion of children with autism in an established inclusive setting are concerned, results showed that there

are standard procedures among educators as it concerns reinforcements and fostering acceptable behaviour among young students. Children with autism are expected to conform as much as possible to established standards of discipline. Differentiated instruction is a common feature of a classroom. Most educators embrace the belief that in order to reach each student in his/ her classroom the instructions must be differentiated and suit students' abilities.

With respect to how prepared early childhood educators feel in an established inclusive setting to handle the atypical behaviours of children with autism, the majority of teachers believe that their training helped with handling children at the early childhood level, however, they never felt prepared to deal with the eclectic features of children with autism in a regular classroom setting. Only one educator believed that formal training assisted with them feeling prepared in handling the atypical behaviours of children with autism in an inclusive setting. Exposure to continual in-house training helps to boost confidence in handling children with autism. Furthermore, teachers expressed that their confidence and self-efficacy is linked to how much they would have planned for their classroom lessons. As a result, teachers generally feel despondent when they would not have reached their desired goal within the classroom. Similarly, how early childhood educators in an established inclusive setting handle the behaviours of children with autism within an established inclusive setting influences practices and beliefs. Children with autism, in general, received the same level of discipline as typical children. Most educators in the settings expressed that it is important to understand the student so that you can effectively identify his/ her triggers and cater to the needs of these children. Younger educators feel overwhelmed by the atypical behaviour of children with autism within the setting and sometimes display levels of frustration. Older educators in the institution as it concerns years of experience are more assertive.

Overall, this study reveals that educators in an established inclusive setting in Jamaica uphold pro inclusive beliefs as it concerns the inclusion of young children with autism. Educators believe that children with autism are more progressive once they are exposed to an inclusive setting as it regards speech and receptive language. It was also found that experience in the settings has allowed educators greater confidence as it regards their daily duties. Educators with fewer years of experience in the setting, display and express greater levels of frustration and teacher burnout, these educators also learn from experience as it concerns how to manage a classroom with children with autism. Educators also express that their pro-inclusive beliefs about the inclusion of children with autism in a general classroom setting are

also dependent upon the severity of those affected as well as the ratio as it concerns classroom size. Though inclusion is a part of the culture of the school, there are instances where all students with autism cannot be included in regular settings and so they will have to be educated by themselves with additional facilities suited to their needs. However full inclusion is facilitated during the break for play.

It must be noted that there are a number of limitations that are inherent to this study. One limitation is linked to the nature of the methodology employed which is limited in the area of generalizations, but facilitates reliability of the information, as findings are reflective only of the target institution and cannot be used to describe the realities existing in typical early childhood institutions across Jamaica. Given the limited time constraint imposed upon the study, it is recommended that further case study research be conducted to allow an improved process of data collection. This will allow for a comparison of the practices of the target institution with other early childhood institutions on the island.

The results of the study have theoretical and practical educational implications at the early childhood level. Theoretically, the study has helped to fill major gaps in the literature in Jamaica. The contents of the study lay a critical foundation to further studies that might seek to understand and assess the quality of inclusion that exists in Jamaica at the early childhood level. The findings support, to some extent, international research findings as it regards factors that contribute to educators' attitudes. Additionally, the study unearths the importance of in-service training towards the formation of beliefs and behaviour of educators. In practice, as results show that formal training in Special Education is not as critical to educator's attitude as in-service training and a positive school culture towards inclusion, this study contributes to policy decision-making in the attempt of facilitating greater in-service training within early childhood institutions in an effort to develop the skills of educators and facilitate greater inclusive principles. Finally, it is recommended that as a part of the teacher training, Special Educators receive exposure to similar settings in order to boost their self-efficacy when working with children with autism along with typically developing students.

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