

## **Special Educator Attitudes toward Children with Communication Disorders in the Caribbean**

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This paper examined the attitudes and perception of Communication Disorders in special educators in the Bahamas. An interview, observation field notes and a questionnaire comprised of open-ended responses and a rating scale captured the views, pedagogical knowledge and skills and perceptions of 17 special education teachers who educate children with special needs and communication disorders pre and post a simulated workshop. The findings revealed four emerging themes related to perceptions and previous personal experiences in which may affect their respective teaching approaches. Findings of the study also revealed that providing special educators with workshops and other professional development opportunities to learn and discuss difficulties children with special needs and communication disorders may experience, increased their teaching approaches, changed some perceptions and introduced new techniques that were later actively incorporated. The special educators of this study expressed a need for more resources to assist them in effectively educating all children with special needs and communication disorders. The special educators attributed limited resources such as professional development to their motivation or lack thereof to functionally engage and educate children with special needs and communication disorders.

*Keywords: Bahamas, attitudes, perception, skills, special needs, communication disorders, professional culture, qualitative*

## **Introduction**

Special education services addressing a child's communication disorders, their learning disabilities, adequate knowledge, and resources for the development of providing appropriate special education in the Bahamas are in the emerging stages and continues to be a challenge the country faces. In 2000, The Commonwealth of the Bahamas Census of Population and Housing (2000) reported that one thousand and fifty-five children from birth to nineteen years of age are experiencing some form of disability of which affects the body and/or mind. However, only three hundred and eighty six school aged individuals were reported to have a learning disability or communication disorder that was being addressed. That is less than 3% of the disabled population reported. Secondary to the overwhelming results of under serviced children experiencing a communication disorder or learning disability, the country of the Bahamas concluded that Special Education was an important and required initiative to address as part of their national agenda. Less than four years ago, the Bahamas Ministry of Education determined that educators of children with special needs were missing key components needed to be appropriate and functional educators. As a result, one of the objectives set forth in the national agenda was to develop workshops, trainings, assessments and evaluations for all special educators in order to increase and support the teaching-learning process of children with special education needs (Ministry of Education , 2010).

This pilot study is an initial approach to determining what factors of personal perceptions and attitudes of 17 special educators may have contributed to the limitations of the amount of reported children with communication disorders in relation the amount of children actually experiencing a communication disorder in their school setting. Using a simulated workshop approach, interviews, questionnaires and observations to produce and assess feelings of frustration, anxiety and tension similar to that of children with special needs and communication disorders in 17 special educators; the special educators' attitudes and perceptions were identified

and analyzed. The analysis of the interview responses, questionnaires and observation field notes pre and post the simulated workshop revealed that the 17 special educators had specific perceptions of what communication disorders were, attitudes and preferences of how children with disorders learned and/or should be taught, beliefs and practices the result of things they were taught, learned or heard about as they were growing up and requirements for effectively meeting the needs of special needs students. It is important to note however that secondary to these responses being based on just 17 special educators in one school setting, the findings should be considered exploratory and exposed to widespread verification of the outcomes.

### **Background**

Societal perceptions and attitudes are said to be directed by one's education and knowledge. When there is no appropriate exposure and education to disabilities, it is expected that the individual will have a narrow understanding of the difficulties the child with special needs may present (Esmail, Darry, Walter, & Knupp, 2010). One of the largest barriers to appropriate special education for children with disabilities including communication disorders, are societal misconceptions (Garvar & Schmelkin, 1989). As a result, teachers have been noted to have preconceived ideas of what is appropriate for students with disabilities and what their abilities are, leading to ineffective teaching techniques and exclusion of the child from academic activities (United Nations Youth, 2014). In the Caribbean, the capacity of an individual's disability produces different perceptions and approaches to teaching. An individual with only a physical disability may be better accepted and understood within their community and educational system than an individual with a mental/psychological or developmental disability (such as autism, intellectual disabilities, and/or downs syndrome) (Thomas, 2001). As a result, for over fifty years, children with developmental and learning disabilities have been marginalized and excluded altogether from basic educational opportunities such as special education services (Lavia, 2007). In some Caribbean countries, special

education exists within a "culture of silence". In the years preceding the 1960's, there existed no formal education system for children with developmental, learning, and physical disabilities at all in the Caribbean. Prior to the last few years in which awareness and acceptance has slowly increased, individuals within the Caribbean society, including educators, often viewed children with disabilities as a burden to their society, excluding them from educational activities and employment opportunities (Armstrong , Armstrong , Lynch , & Severin, 2005). This implies that most individuals from a Caribbean cultural group often carry over their beliefs, concepts, and practices to their professional lives (California Endowment, 2003). Some of these individuals view children with mental/psychological and/or developmental disabilities as "unruly, stubborn and lazy children who are not trying hard enough to prevent the behaviors and disability/disabilities they may present with" (Thomas, 2001). The combination of these perceptions, beliefs, limited intervention and limited appropriately trained special educators may be the result of a lack of awareness and sensitization to what a learning disability or communication disorder is. In addition, it may also result in a limitation in the special educator's knowledge of how to functionally address a learning disability and communication disorder, and why children with diagnosed learning disabilities and communication disorders present with secondary behaviors such as violence, tantrums, and attention deficit disorders. The implementation of the simulation workshop to be evaluated here is the result of attempting to explore possible causes of these limitations.

**Purpose**

This study is designed to provide some understanding of the attitudes of 17 special education teachers in the Bahamas who educate children with special needs and communication disorders. Further, the study aimed to explore the teaching practices and

perceptual culture of communication disorders in the classrooms of the 17 special educators, and to discuss recommendations of what topics and areas of knowledge should be addressed during teacher trainings, workshops and professional developments.

The study included 17 special educators identified as primary classroom teachers, teacher assistants' and one to one specialists, providing a variety of educators represented in the sample. These teachers were selected from a primary through vocation private school in Abaco, Bahamas. All the participants work with children diagnosed with varying special needs and communication disorders ranging from Autism, Downs Syndrome and Cerebral Palsy to learning disabilities such as dyslexia, specific language impairments, and attention deficits. Participants ranged in age from 18-56 years old with educational backgrounds of high school diploma only to some Master's level courses taken. Selection of participants involved ensuring all participants were in contact with at least one child classified as having a communication disorder secondary to comorbid conditions such as Autism, Downs Syndrome, Intellectual Disabilities etc., 80% of their work day. Participants were also required to be recognized as a naturalized citizen or a natural born citizen of the Bahamas during the time of the study. Citizenship status was verified via documentation of work permits or country approved identification. Participants for this study were not randomly selected. The sample population was selected secondary to purposeful sampling strategy, convenience sampling (Hardon, Hodgkin, & Fresle, 2004). Access and approval to the participants resulted in the use of convenience sampling secondary to an existing collaboration of the schools support of this study and the site being preapproved by the Government of the Bahamas. Convenience sample due to the Government of the Bahamas allowing the authors to conduct research in the country under a Non-Immigrant Visa. Additionally, all participants included in the study met the selection criteria and possessed certain attributes consistent with the purposes of this study, resulting in this form of purposeful sampling.

## **Methodology**

Due to resource and limited access to more educational settings, the study was conducted in one educational setting in Abaco, Bahamas with 17 special educators. Following the concept of Richard Lavoie's "How Difficult Can this Be? The F.A.T. City Workshop" project (Lavoie, 1989), and the extensive experience and knowledge of the researchers about communication disorders and special needs, 17 special educators (SE) were engaged in an 180 minute simulation workshop and administered an interview and questionnaire (before and after the workshop). The selection criteria for selecting these specific 17 special educators included the following.

Information of the proposed research study was disseminated to the school's principal with copy's of the study's materials and consent forms for all potential participants. The principal was then asked to recommend 15-20 SEs who spent 80% of their work day educating students with communication disorders and special needs. It was a requirement that the SEs that were selected would have to be willing to complete the workshop in its entirety, be observed while working in the classroom, openly and honestly discuss feelings and experiences of communication disorders and special needs, and answer all the questions presented on the questionnaire. The principal was able to identify 17 SEs who meet the criteria set forth.

The 17 selected SEs were informed that the study consisted of two phases, 1) the observation without intervention and initial interview-questionnaire phase and 2) the F.A.T. with Communication Disorders Simulation workshop and final questionnaire phase. The SEs were not informed of what the researcher would be observing to reduce the possibility of a Hawthorne effect or reactivity (Landsberger, 1958). In phase one, the researcher interviewed, provided with a questionnaire and observed each SE within their

respective classrooms to collect data on their teaching approaches, classroom techniques and knowledge and perception of communication disorders.

To begin with, each SE was randomly interviewed in a one to one setting within an empty classroom in the school. During the interviews, the researcher documented the participant's responses on an interview sheet as well as audio recorded via the Voice Record Pro app on the Apple iPad device. Each SE was asked the following 20 interview questions:

1. How long have you been working with children with communication and learning disorders?
2. What's your job role as a teaching assistant?
3. How did you get into this field?
4. Over the years what type of disorders have you been exposed to or worked with?
5. What type of resources do you use to assist you in educating the children?
6. In your own words describe what a learning disability is or looks like to you.
7. What do you think a communication disorder is?
8. Would you consider a child that can't say words and are unintelligible.... (Ex. They mean to say snake but they say take), would you consider that to be a communication disorder?
9. Here in this school what kind of goals do you have for the children you work with?  
I am going to tell you a scenario, and you tell me what you feel about it, if you agree or disagree or if you don't really have a take on it.
10. A) What is your opinion on a child who cannot talk or has a severe communication disorder?  
B) What do you feel has caused that for the child to have a communication disorder?
11. Agree or disagree, a communication disorder sometimes happens because the parent like the mom or the dad is paying for something that they did.
12. Do you believe that a child with a communication disorder will never be able to talk?
13. How do you feel about children with disabilities or communication disorders being in the classroom with typically developing children?
14. Do you feel that your activities or programs that you do with the kids are limited because they can't talk?
15. What are the biggest limitations to your teaching?
16. Do you think that the children you work with are less intelligent than typically developing children?
17. Agree or disagree a family with a child with a disability or communication disorder should home school them or keep them at home.

18. Okay, give me your outtake or opinion. How do you feel about a child with a communication disability or LD providing value to the society? Do you think they give value to the society or can a benefit later on in life?  
Do you believe your classroom is set up to provide your children with the most opportunities to be able to communicate? If not, what do you think can be done better to help the classroom?
19. When a child with a disability acts out negatively are they purposely being disruptive and should they be reprimanded?
20. What are some of the reasons they may be acting out?

The researcher prompted the SE to expand on any questions that were answered with one word or considered to be a limited response by asking them to “tell me more”. Some of the interview questions were derived from research discussing Caribbean society’s attitudes and myths about disabilities (Charlton, 2000). After the SE completed the interview, they were supplied with a questionnaire and asked to answer each question as honestly as possible.

On the following day after all interviews were completed, the researcher conducted observations without intervention. To ensure naturalistic observations, visits to each SE’s class was randomized. Using an observation checklist, the researcher observed the SEs teaching during two different lessons. The lesson observations each lasted for a maximum time of 60 minutes per SE. All sessions were audio taped and field notes were taken by the researcher and listed in the comments section of the checklist. The researcher later transcribed the interview and observation recordings and they were checked for accuracy. The lessons for the observations observed included: Language Arts, Math, Writing, Spelling, Circle Time, and Vocational Arts. The observation checklist was adapted from components of the Loudoun County Public Schools Classroom Observation Checklist (2009). Table 1 presents the educator approaches and skills checklist created for this study.



Table 1. Educator Approaches and Skills Checklist

Skills and Approaches	Comments
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Multi-modal approach (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile) <input type="checkbox"/> 2. Students seated with little distractions present (eliminate all unnecessary materials) <input type="checkbox"/> 3. Allows Student time to process data, respond, and complete a task. <input type="checkbox"/> 4. Allow time before changing from one activity to the next. <input type="checkbox"/> 5. Reduce the amount of work presented at one time (breaks assignments down). <input type="checkbox"/> 6. Modified expectations based on student's needs. <input type="checkbox"/> 7. Provides a model of what the end product/assignment looks like. <input type="checkbox"/> 8. Provides written and verbal directions with visuals to assist the child. <input type="checkbox"/> 9. Sequences steps to a task that has more than two steps. <input type="checkbox"/> 10. Explains the learning expectations of the lesson before beginning the lesson. <input type="checkbox"/> 11. The educator makes sure they have the student's attention before starting a task. <input type="checkbox"/> 12. Assignments and tasks are modified based on ability and need (limits the number of items presented). <input type="checkbox"/> 13. Provides a quiet setting for test taking. <input type="checkbox"/> 14. Divides large tests into small sections. <input type="checkbox"/> 15. Allows sufficient time as needed to complete class assignments or tests. <input type="checkbox"/> 16. Grade Spelling separately from Content on tests. <input type="checkbox"/> 19. Modifies rules that discriminate against those with special needs. <input type="checkbox"/> 20. System code developed to let students know when their behavior is not appropriate. <div style="padding-left: 100px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Effective      <input type="checkbox"/> Not Effective         </div> <input type="checkbox"/> 22. Provides a designated safe place for the student to use when exhibiting inappropriate behaviors. <input type="checkbox"/> 23. Code of conduct developed and reviewed with the students frequently and it is visible. <div style="padding-left: 100px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Code of conduct appropriate         </div> <input type="checkbox"/> 24. Provides a behavior Intervention Plan that is realistic and easily applied. <input type="checkbox"/> 25. Provides immediate feedback and reinforcements to the child as needed. <input type="checkbox"/> 26. Changes % of work required for passing.	

Table 2 presents the educator perceptions and attitudes questionnaire created and used for this study.

**Table 2. Educator Perceptions and Attitudes Questionnaire**

<p><b>Set One:</b> <i>In your own words, please describe and write each answer to the questions listed to the best of your ability.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is your job title?</li> <li>2. How long have you been working with children with communication and learning disabilities?</li> <li>3. What are the job roles and responsibilities associated with your title?</li> <li>4. How often during your work week do you interact with children with learning disabilities?</li> <li>5. During your work week, how often do you interact with children with severe communication skills/abilities?</li> <li>6. What types of disorders have you been exposed to during your career as an educator?</li> <li>7. What resources do you have to assist you in educating children with communication and learning disabilities?</li> <li>8. In your own words, describe what having a learning disability means and looks like to you:</li> <li>9. In your own words, describe what having a communication disorder means and looks like to you:</li> <li>10. What goals and educational lessons do you address when working with children with limited to severe communication and/or learning disabilities:</li> </ol>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Set Two</b></p> <p><i>For each statement, please rate the likeliness of the event occurring. Please choose only one option for each statement and one that best fits your opinion/view point.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Response</b></p> <p><b>Answers:</b> A) Strongly Agree B) Agree C) N/A D) Disagree E) Strongly Disagree</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A child who cannot talk or who has a severe communication disorder occurs because they are paying for something bad their parent or relative has done.</li> <li>2. A child who has a disability that affects their learning occurs because of evil spirits.</li> <li>3. A child with a communication disorder will never be able to talk.</li> <li>4. A child who can't talk probably have a mental disability.</li> <li>5. Children with communication disorders should not be in classrooms with typically "normal" developing children.</li> <li>6. Children with communication disorders will exhibit negative behaviors frequently.</li> <li>7. My communication opportunities and interaction with children who have communication and/or learning disabilities is very limited because they can't talk back.</li> <li>8. Children with communication and/or learning disabilities can become independent with their living and learning skills.</li> <li>9. All lessons and activities I teach in the class do not need to be modified to meet the specific needs of children with communication disabilities and/or learning disabilities.</li> <li>10. Children with communication disabilities/ learning disabilities are always provided with other modes to help them communicate (i.e. sign language, assistive devices, pictures)</li> <li>11. Children with communication disabilities should go to a doctor for help with their speech.</li> <li>12. Children with communication disabilities/learning disabilities are being punished for sins their parents or relatives have committed.</li> <li>13. Children with communication disabilities are likely to be less intelligent than children who can speak.</li> <li>14. Children with communication disabilities could learn to speak if they tried harder.</li> <li>15. The family should keep a child with special needs or communication disabilities at home</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Set Three</b></p> <p><b>Answer True or False to the following statements</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Children with communication disabilities should not be included in classrooms with typically developing "normal" children.</li> <li>2. Children with communication disabilities do not need to learn the same curriculum as typically developing "normal" children.</li> <li>3. Children with communication disabilities do not structured classes and planned lessons.</li> <li>4. Children with communication disabilities can become a burden to teachers and the school.</li> <li>5. Children with communication disabilities provide little value in society.</li> <li>6. Children with communication disabilities should be allowed sufficient time to express/communicate.</li> <li>7. The classroom lessons are set-up to provide the <del>child(ren)</del> with communication disabilities opportunities to communicate.</li> <li>8. Each child's goals and expectations in class are specific to their needs and abilities.</li> <li>9. Schools should accommodate all children regardless of physical, mental, or communication disabilities.</li> <li>10. Children with communication disabilities should not receive "special" treatment and should get the same treatment as typically developing "normal" children.</li> <li>11. When a child with communication disabilities acts out negatively, they are purposely being disruptive and should be reprimanded.</li> <li>12. Children with communication disabilities are better off being home-schooled.</li> <li>13. Children with communication disabilities are better off being placed in a facility for children with special needs.</li> <li>14. Children with communication and learning disabilities should be isolated from typically developing "normal" kids.</li> <li>15. Children with communication and learning disabilities should not be included into regular education classrooms because they will disrupt the "normal" kids learning experience.</li> <li>16. I chose to work with children with communication and learning disabilities.</li> <li>17. I have experience working with children with communication and learning disabilities.</li> <li>18. If I could choose my professional placement, I would choose to work with special needs children.</li> <li>19. I don't feel qualified to work with children with communication and learning disabilities.</li> <li>20. I am unsure of how to work with and address the needs of communication and learning disabilities.</li> <li>21. I am not always sure of what to work on or how to teach the children with communication and learning disabilities.</li> </ol>

During phase two of the study, SEs were required to attend one Saturday workshop that was 3 hours (9:45 AM – 12:45 PM) in duration with a thirty minute lunch break provided. All 17 SEs participated in the F.A.T. with Communication Disorders workshop in which 8 specific category areas were addressed. The researcher supplied each of the 17 SEs with a F.A.T. with Communication Disorders handbook and notified them that audio and video recording would occur for the duration of the 180 minute workshop. With the researcher acting as the facilitator of the workshop, all 17 SEs engaged in simulations related to the following eight categories:

1. **Frustration, Anxiety and Tension**– A scrambled text passage to demonstrate that what an educator perceives to be easy to read, may be difficult for the child to decode if and when there are language and cognition deficits present.
2. **Perception** – A black and white picture that when arranged and viewed from different angles may depict different animals and objects. This picture was used to demonstrate that perception is not solely based on the concrete image but also on the experience, exposure and perception of the person viewing it alone.
3. **Attention** – Demonstrated the Gestalt affect with a picture showing the participants that in some children, their brain may perceive and attend to whole objects and not individual parts therefore affecting the message they receive and recall no matter the channel of delivery (oral, visual, physical).
4. **Decoding & Encoding** – Two passages provided to the participants. One passage was presented in a foreign language to the participants and the other was filled with various non-sense words. The participants were asked to read the passages and then answer questions related to the passage demonstrating that when processing and comprehension factors are impaired, this may be how the child receives the information and affects their ability to communicate appropriately and/or academically succeed.

**5. Communication Disorders including turn taking skills, vocabulary development, non-verbal communication, higher order thinking skills and following directions** - There were various simulations included in this category all of which demonstrated some of the difficulties and frustration a child with varying communication disorders may go through on a daily basis within the educational setting.

After each simulation, the SEs were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and express their feelings towards the simulation. In addition, the researcher provided a summation and moral to the simulation, discussed what disorders and difficulties each simulation represented and provided tips and techniques the participant could utilize to assist students with special needs and communication disorders within the classroom. At the completion of Second Phase, the SEs were asked to complete the questionnaire again as honestly as possible.

### **Instruments**

The observation checklist was adapted from components of the Loudoun County Public Schools Classroom Observation Checklist (2009). The Loudoun County Public Schools Classroom Observation Checklist and checklists like it have been used for many years in the education sector to evaluate the quality of an educator's approach and delivery to teaching. The ultimate reason for observing an educator's implementation strategy is to determine whether there is disconnect between their approach and the intention of the lesson (Wragg, 1999). Observations have the ability to provide insight into a teacher's instructional methods and interaction with students of which may impact a child's ability to learn or the extent of what they learn (Essays, 2013).

The questionnaire items were derived from research discussing Caribbean society's attitudes and myths about disabilities (Charlton, 2000). Questions on the questionnaire included close and open ended questions, true/ false questions and a rating scale. The

questionnaire also provided the participant the opportunity to elaborate on questions of which their desired answer did not fit into the represented categories. The questionnaire contained 46 questions. Some questions were the same yet reworded to address the same information, by approaching it in a different way (supporting the validity of the questionnaire).

The F.A.T. with Communication Disorders Workshop was adapted from the “How Difficult Can This Be? F.A.T. City Workshop” created by Richard D. Lavoie (1990). Richard Lavoie’s workshop was designed to simulate the classroom experience through the experiences of a child with learning disabilities. The original workshop specifically addressed experiences related to emoting feelings of frustration, anxiety and tension in the participants. Like the workshop adapted for this study, the original workshop discussed strategies for effectively working with children with learning disabilities. The workshop adapted for this study was designed to explore the following areas: 1) Experiencing Frustration, Anxiety, and Tension, 2) Language Processing Disorders, 3) Emotional regulation, 4) Comprehension, 5) Visual Perception and the effect of visual perception on communication, 6) Oral Expression, 7) Auditory Capabilities, and 8) Fairness. In addition, the SEs each received a F.A.T with Communication Disorders Workshop Handbook. The Handbook included simulated activities for all eight of the areas listed above. Research materials also included an iPad device equipped with the Voice Record Pro app and a Sony handheld digital camera.

### **Analysis Procedure**

All the data obtained was collected through use of interviews, questionnaires, and the observation field notes. The responses to the questions presented on the questionnaire and interviews were audio-recorded and along with the observation field notes, transcribed. Once transcribed, each transcription was checked for accuracy and then coded for analyzing. The coding frame utilized to analyze data from these three sources were grounded in codes generated directly from the SE’s responses during the interviews and

questionnaire. A qualitative analysis of the codes developed generated several emerging themes that were grouped into three major categories: knowledge, attitudes, and skill set. From the interview questions, the researcher also isolated questions 6 and 7 and analyzed the responses for accurate, partially accurate, and inaccurate responses. These responses were coded for further analyzing as (2)-accurate, (1) – partially accurate and (0)-inaccurate.

### **Data analysis**

The data obtained was analyzed and coded utilizing a qualitative data analysis method of line by line open coding. Through the use of this coding procedure, the researcher was able to develop concepts/codes, define the concepts and create themes based on similarities of the defined concepts. During the line by line open coding process, the researcher analyzed each question response on the transcribed interviews seeking patterns in the data. Recognized recurring patterns and emerging themes in the data as it was being analyzed guided the researcher to consistently create categories and subcategories until the data was saturated. Once the data was saturated and all subcategories were identified, the researcher combined and classified them under emerging categories/themes. Themes that were identified as recurring were then documented, operationally defined, and categorized as either a primary theme or secondary theme. Primary themes were operationally defined based on their characteristics and the content of the statements included from the SEs responses during the interviews and questionnaires. Each secondary theme (subset) was categorized under a primary theme in which the characteristics of that secondary theme closely fit the definition of the primary theme. Each primary theme was finally identified as, 1- Attitudes, 2- Skill Set and 3- Knowledge.

Furthermore, the coded responses of Questions 6 and 7 from the interview were analyzed and categorized into two categories, (6) learning disability definition and (7) communication disorders definition. The researcher then compared the means of each accurate, partially accurate and inaccurate response for each category.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the questionnaire responses to questions 6 and 7 from the SEs reflected that there was limited to no knowledge of what a communication disorder and learning disability was. Question 6 – What is a learning disability, yielded one accurate (6%) response, and an even distribution of 8 partially accurate (47%) and 8 inaccurate responses (47%). From the results of question 7- what is a communication disorder, one SE accurately defined the question (10%), and the remaining 16 SEs were partially accurate (90%) in their definition of a communication disorder. No SEs provided an inaccurate response to this question. Overall, between the two categories, SEs were able to define communication disorders partially accurate (90%) more times than they were able to define learning disabilities (47%) accurate. The SEs' ability to accurately define these two questions may be secondary to their educational levels and prior knowledge of the terms. For example, four of the SEs identified that they had a high school education level with no prior training in special education, and seven of the SEs identified themselves as college graduates. Three of the seven college graduate SEs reported having prior training in either education or special education. The remaining SEs identified themselves as either having attended a technical school (1), or some college (5) yet no prior training in either special education or education.

Three significant themes/categories were identified through an open coding process. The three significant themes/categories that emerged from the data analysis are: 1) Knowledge, 2) Attitudes & Beliefs and 3) Skill Set. Further analysis of the open coding data presented four subsets, cultural beliefs, values, educational practices and cultural definitions. The first category, "Knowledge"

reflects the individual knowledge the SEs possessed in relation to working with children with special needs and communication disorders. The second category, “Attitudes and Beliefs” reflects the perceptions, belief and feelings the SEs internally possessed in relation to their views and opinions of what causes communication disorders and learning disabilities, how to address communication disorders and learning disabilities, and the causes of communication disorders and learning disabilities. The third category, “Skill Set” represents the skills and approaches the SEs implement within their respective classrooms when educating children with special needs and communication disorders. This includes the presentation of class lectures for students, how students are being graded and the expectations of how a student should perform academically.

The first theme to emerge from analysis of the interview and observation data was discussions of the SEs’ knowledge as it relates to communication disorders and learning disabilities.

*“A communication disorder is when a person cannot communicate what is going on around them and has that ability to really deal with what is going on around them.” (Participant 11, One to One specialist)*

*“A learning disability is somebody that is um, kind of low. Um, they have a hard time with lots of things like speech and like tactile stuff.” (Participant 9, Teacher)*

Although all of the SEs were verified to spend a minimum of 80% of their work day with children with communication disorders, none of them were able to accurately define or identify what a communication disorder was. Overall, 90% of the responses were partially correct and demonstrated a limitation to their knowledge about the topic. One SEs was able to provide an accurate response which may have been attributed to as she reports in addition to a college degree and training in special education, shadowing a speech-language pathologist within the year the study was conducted and being told the definition of the term at that time. They reported



providing responses based on estimations secondary to their current experience with the learning disabled/communication disorders population. Although for some, the current position as a special educator was their first exposure to many disorders.

*“We need more training and opportunities to go to continuing education classes so we can know this stuff.”  
(Participant 5, Teacher’s Aide)*

*“Over the years what type of disorders have you been exposed to or worked with? Some ADHD, um and I think  
Downs Syndrome” (Participant 2, Teacher)*

The SEs’ limited knowledge of communication disorders and learning disabilities may have also been impacted by their cultural beliefs. Although majority of the responses revealed they knew something about communication disorders and learning disabilities, the presence of beliefs and attitudes grounded in myths, and passed down through the culture continued to manifest in their responses. For example, when the researcher inquired of what causes a communication disorder, the responses included statements such as:

*“Most of it is hereditary like passed down from parents, something that the parent has done, also human nature ...  
we call it sin...Imperfection if you want to use that.” (Participant 7, Teacher)*

*” I grew up hearing people say that you would pay for what wrong you did or your children would pay.”  
(Participant 1, Teacher’s Aide)*

Even though, the SEs had some exposure to communication disorders and learning disabilities and over 50% of them possessed some college or a college degree, their responses were consistently presented with some level of beliefs or attitudes of myths. Although some of the SEs were reluctant to express their beliefs and attitudes, the emerging categories analyzed revealed multiple occurrences of responses infused with cultural beliefs.

Overall, the SEs felt as though they needed more information and training on learning disabilities and communication disorders.

Furthermore, analysis of the coded responses from the observations and interview data revealed a second category, attitudes and belief. Subsets from this category revealed the SEs' outlook on values as it relates to special needs and communication disorders, attitudes and opinions of children with special needs and communication disorders worth in society and perceptions and expectations of children with special needs and communication disorders.

*“Children with communication disorders can learn to speak if they try harder.” (Participant 3, Teacher)*

*“Yes my students can get a job, if it is like farming or something using their hands.” (Participant 4, Teacher)*

Furthermore, the data collected from the interview and observation transcripts reveal that majority of the SEs' attitudes and beliefs provided low expectations for the students they educate regardless of their position, education level and past experiences with the population. The transcribed responses suggest that the SEs' teaching approaches may be impacted by their exposure to knowledge and awareness, and the skills used when educating children special needs and communication disorders. Resulting in the final category, skill set. More specifically, the special educators' expressed a change in their understanding of what a communication and learning disorder is and how to educate this population after the implementation of the F.A.T with Communication Disorders workshop. In addition, all the SEs expressed a desire to have more and recognized their limitations or what they were lacking in terms of their educational approach/skills.

*“It made me really think. I mean I know I am guilty of doing some of the things you discussed... I know some of them {techniques} but I have forgotten...to be honest with you some of this stuff I have done and dropped because we can't keep up with it depending on how many kinds we have...we just don't stop and do those things but I know we need to do some of those things... we rely on basic simple things we can do quick. But I would like to {have} more*

*strategies to do that. So I would like to build that in more so that...I would like to do that, I would like to have more.” (Participant 15, Teacher)*

*“It helped a lot it’s good to see how students are when we are in their shoes to see what they are thinking. That what I thought I was doing to input was not helping, it really helped sometimes you don’t see what they are going through but by putting our self in they shoe you can understand and really sympathize.” (Participant 13, Teacher’s Aide)*

*“... we need more resources to help in the classroom.”(Participant 17, Teacher)*

Ultimately, the final theme reveals that the SEs are aware of their limitations and seeking opportunities to learn more and enhance their knowledge and skills to be able to better educate children with special needs and communication disorders.

However, the SEs expressed major concerns, predominantly in the area of skill set.

These concerns included:

1. The special educators feel unqualified to teach the students with special needs and communication disorders in their classrooms
2. There is a limited amount of resources available to effectively implement appropriate academic lessons and intervention to the students with special needs and communication disorders
3. Opportunities for professional development, training and workshops addressing special needs and communication disorders are scarce on the island
4. Access to professional development, training and workshops offered off-island is challenging secondary to limited funds resulting in inadequately prepared special educators

On the other hand, the SEs expressed positive feedback in reference to the F.A.T. with Communication Disorders workshop. They expressed satisfaction in the implementation of the workshop, empathy towards what children with special needs and communication disorders experience as a result of the workshop’s simulations and an increase in knowledge of what communication disorders and learning disabilities are and strategies to address these difficulties in students.

In conclusion, it may be safe to imply that the special educators made a paradigm shift in their knowledge, attitudes and skills after participation in the workshop despite the short period of time the simulation workshop was implemented. It is also fair to say that the special educators have demonstrated an adjustment in their educational approaches in a manner conducive to the needs of the students with special needs and communication disorders in comparison to the special education approaches used in the past in the Bahamas (Ministry of Education , 2010). This demonstrates a positive impact and shift in light of the current special education reform over the last few years (Armstrong , Armstrong , Lynch , & Severin, 2005).

Table 3. Observations and Interview Emerging Themes Sample

Themes	Examples
<b>1. Knowledge:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Cultural Definitions (How the participants define communication disorders)</b></li> <li>• <b>Cultural Theories (Religious, Traditions, Spiritual)</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "A communication disorder is when a person cannot communicate what is going on around them and has that ability to really deal with what is going on around them".</li> <li>• "What do you think causes a communication disorder?"</li> <li>• " Most of it is hereditary like passed down from parents, something that the parent has done, also human nature ... we call it sin...Imperfection if you want to use that."</li> </ul>
<b>2. Attitudes- Values, worldviews of SPED children, worth in society, stereotypes/expectations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•"Children with communication disorders can learn to speak if they try harder."</li> <li>•" Do you think your students will be able to get a job?"</li> <li>•"Yes, if it is like farming or something using their hands."</li> </ul>
<b>3. Skill Set – Educational Practices (service delivery, lessons taught, approaches including tone of voice, patience etc.)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•What type of educational lessons do you implement in your class?</li> <li>•" Reading and math with the more functional kids and like colors and shapes with the kids that take more time."</li> <li>•Do you believe your classroom is set up to provide your students with the most opportunities to be able to communicate?</li> <li>•"No, we need more resources to help in the classroom."</li> </ul>

## **Discussion**

This study explored the knowledge, attitudes and skill set of special educators who work with student with special needs with communication disorders. Three main themes manifested throughout the analysis and have been categorized as: 1) Knowledge 2) Attitudes and Beliefs and 3) Skill Set. The concerns, perceptions and knowledge that resulted from these categories were also discussed. The findings of this study assist in developing a preliminary explanation and decision on how to enhance awareness, knowledge and skills of special educators in the Bahamas.

The core concern of the special educators in relation to addressing this need is limited resources and lack of training and professional development opportunities. These findings are consistent with the Bahamas Ministry of Special Education 10 year plan (Ministry of Education , 2010), which discusses the objective to develop workshops, trainings, assessments and evaluations for all special educators in order to increase and support the teaching-learning process of children with special education needs. The findings of this study are also consistent with the Bahamas' Ministry of Education's determination that educators of children with special needs were missing key components needed to be appropriate and functional educators. These limitations have proved to be affecting not only approaches to appropriate education for children with special needs; but also towards increasing the skill set and knowledge of the special educator.

The 17 SEs who participated in this study discussed and/or demonstrated their recognition of the limitations they faced; and would like to seek and be offered opportunities to remove barriers to increased pedagogical knowledge. Access to these opportunities mean continued workshops and trainings that address strategies and current knowledge related to special education and communication disorders for these educators. In addition, this study reveals that limited resources and opportunities for professional development may

impact the attitudes and perceptions of special educators in the Bahamas. This study supports findings that historical trends in the process of educating individuals with special needs can influence the manner and content in which teachers were trained (Fisher, Sax, & Pumpian, 1999; Fisher, Sax, Rodifer, & Pumpian, 1999); therefore influencing that teacher's approach to educating, engaging and interacting with children with special needs and communication disorders.

Secondly, the analysis of the observations and interview responses pre and post the simulated workshop revealed that in over 70% of the participants, prior to the simulation workshop, demonstrated ingrained beliefs about children with disabilities secondary to their association of disabilities with acts of punishment, as a result of something an ancestor or parent has negatively done, and/or a sign that the disability was God's will of misfortune (Thomas, 2009). It can be deduced that in some instances, the presence of previously ingrained beliefs about disabilities may have unfavorably impacted educators' educational approaches or expectations for children with special needs and communication disorders in the Bahamas.

The implementation of the simulated F.A.T with Communication Disorders workshop led to an increase and change in the participants' approaches and perceptions to communication disorders. The results of this study demonstrate that when the participants' were totally immersed in situations similar to what their students with communication disorders experienced, they were able to later empathize and better comprehend the effects of the disability and how to address it. This finding demonstrates that Special Education teachers should be continuously acquiring knowledge through pre-service and inservice opportunities. This is necessary because special educators are expected to be able to implement collaborative problem solving skills, possess leadership skills, and demonstrate the ability to modify and enhance learning opportunities for their students. Not only is special education critical for all students with special needs and communication disorders, but, effective professional development for special educators is

necessary in order to improve and increase functional communication of these students. Ultimately, improvements in the inservice training preparation for future and current special educators in the Bahamas can lead to an increase and change in perceptions and educational innovations for children with special needs and communication disorders ( Fisher, Frey, & Thousand, 2003). To this effect, trainings should also include simulated workshops such as the one implemented in this research study as much as possible.

Overall, this study reveals that focusing on knowledge, awareness, and pedagogical skills is likely to produce a paradigm shift in enhancing the skill set, knowledge, and approach toward educating children with special needs and communication disorders in the Bahamas.

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