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Special Education Needs and Disabilities in Secondary Education (Canada)

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FULL ARTICLE

Research on special education, needs, and disabilities

Canada is at an important crossroads around lower and upper secondary school students with special education needs (SEN). Research indicates that significant progress has occurred in school inclusion but there are significant, ongoing challenges. Examples of Canadian research include:

- case studies focusing on students with SEN in diverse lower and upper secondary schools (Stegemann and Aucoin 2018)
- how new teachers come to understand inclusion (Specht 2016)
- how learning disabilities are identified and supported (Stegemann 2016)
- supporting students with SEN, such as those with autism spectrum disorder (Maich and Hall 2016)
- the use of assistive technology to support all students (Sider and Maich 2014)
- mental health supports in Canadian secondary schools (Kutcher, Bagnell, and Wei 2015)
- school leadership practices to support inclusion (Sider, Maich, and Morvan 2017).

Inclusion and equity are seen as important aspects of the social fabric in Canada but gaps in support for those with mental health concerns as well as for indigenous students point to a different reality. Limited specific research and a lacking federal vision for inclusive education means that those in indigenous, rural and/or northern communities, or others such as newcomers to Canada cannot always access services. Although research has led to significant changes in inclusive education policies and programs, impactful work needs to continue.

Programmes and policies

Canada is a geopolitically diverse country with broad northern and rural areas of low population density contrasted with large urban areas. Education is a jurisdictional responsibility in Canada underpinning a nationwide variety of programs and policies. Canadian lower and upper secondary

schools have related but often contrasting practices (compared to younger students) which are “ever-evolving” (Thompson and Timmons 2017: 63). Examples of this range from highly categorical models with specific exceptionalities (e.g., Newfoundland and Labrador; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador 2017) to service provision based on individual needs while eschewing categorization, such as Nunavut (Dworet and Maich 2007), to those with lengthy histories of inclusive practice (e.g., New Brunswick). There is diversity even within these broad fields. For example, in those provinces which do recognize categories of exceptionality, Ontario stipulates five categories of exceptionalities (intellectual, behavioral, physical, communicational, and multiple) while Alberta also recognizes five but with different categories (physical, behavioral, communicational, cognitive/intellectual, and academic). Intra-jurisdictional themes across the country include support within the regular classroom (rather than removal) in the Northwest Territories; outcomes (rather than numbers) in Nunavut; collaboration (not isolation) in British Columbia; needs (rather than labels) in Saskatchewan; inclusion (not segregation) in New Brunswick; and inclusion (with options) in Ontario (Maich, Hill, and Somma n.d.).

Regulations

As noted, education in Canada (including students with SEN) is determined by jurisdictional legislation, policy, practice, and funding across thirteen provinces and territories. As a result, regulations are found at provincial/territorial levels but include multiple informants of policy including international direction, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) and UNESCO’s Salamanca Statement for Framework for Action on Special Needs Education (1994). Provincial education departments (ministries) develop regulations and policies, such as Ontario’s Regulation 181/98, found in the provincial Education Act, which deals with the identification and placement of SEN. Such provincial regulations are then interpreted and implemented through the local policies and practices for schools organized by boards or districts.

Recent policy and funding priorities in some provinces in Canada (e.g., British Columbia, New Brunswick) has supported smaller class sizes, early interventions, and extra staff supports for students with SEN. For example, in Ontario: the development and expansion of upper secondary school supports (i.e., student success staff and postsecondary pathways/options) have benefited students with SEN (Robson et al. 2014); revisions of professional development courses focused on skill-building to supporting students with SEN have taken place; and the province has recently and extensively overhauled policies and procedures for supporting students with SEN (Ontario Ministry of Education 2017).

Resources

For lower and upper secondary students, focusing on success within streamed pathways, postsecondary transition planning, and skill-building goals for major transitions are elements of policies and practices translated into individual written plans. Students with SEN continue to be supported by educational-focused or interagency individualized plans representing the translation of policy into practice. These written plans represent a hybrid of legal and working documents and are typically built onto prescriptive templates with varied labels such as the Individualized Program Plan (Alberta Education n.d.) or Individual Education Plan (British Columbia Ministry of Education 2009). It is important to note that supports are often directed towards students identified as exceptional within

the school system (an additional layer to a clinical diagnosis), which can occur up until the end of upper secondary school (ages 18 to 21, jurisdiction dependent). Within these models, lower or upper secondary students may be provided with funded services such as specialized teaching, training, and/or technology.

To provide a distinctly Canadian perspective on special education in secondary schools, it is important to consider Canada's Indigenous population, those who originally inhabited the country. There are about 1.7 million Indigenous peoples in Canada of a total 2016 population of 36 million (Statistics Canada 2017). About 44 percent of Indigenous peoples in Canada who have registered or treaty status live on reserves while the balance lives off-reserve (Statistics Canada 2017). Students on-reserve attend schools under federal governmental direction, unusual within Canada's typical provincial/territorial responsibility for education (see Normore 2015). This arrangement is challenging with approximately 30 percent lower funding for these schools—including students with SEN (Porter 2016)—creating limited services for Indigenous students (e.g., educational assessments). High absentee rates, teacher recruitment, low literacy rates, and high drop-out rates further exacerbate the challenges faced by those students who have SEN (Normore 2015). On-reserve postsecondary options are often limited for Indigenous youth, making the transition to work, college, or university a challenge. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has tried to address some of the challenges faced by Indigenous children and their families. Many of its ninety-four recommendations are meant to address historical and current harms that Indigenous children have encountered through residential schools where children were removed from their families and placed in communities isolated from their families, such as: "We call upon the federal government to provide adequate funding to end the backlog of First Nations students seeking a post-secondary education" (TRC 2015). Efforts for education to serve as an opportunity for reconciliation through the development of new curriculum materials and teacher training are also highlighted in the TRC recommendations. The TRC did not specifically address students with special education needs but the above recommendations speak clearly to the need to address a dire situation.

Funding

Legislated public funding for students with SEN, including secondary students, began in 1982 with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (McBride 2013). Funding practices, like other services in special education, has little federal control—and a great deal of complexity. Special education funding is directed by provinces/territories and allocated specific to funding support services for exceptional students on the basis of population size or intensity of need (Dworet and Bennett 2002; Thompson and Timmons 2017). Funding may be used to provide specialized personnel such as paraprofessionals, specialized classroom settings focusing on life skills, or resource room support that students can access. According to Dworet and Bennett, "it is the Ministry or Department of Education that administers the Education Act ... [t]he head of the Ministry or Department is an elected member of the provincial/territorial parliament, appointed by the premier of that province or territory, and is known as the 'Minister of Education'" (2002: 22).

Teachers and teaching

Numerous resources have been developed to support lower and upper secondary teachers in their work with students with SEN (Stegemann and Aucoin 2018). Teachers across Canada receive or seek out in-service or professional training in specialized areas such as helping with mental health concerns, supporting students with specific learning disorders, and engaging parents and caregivers in the process. Teachers have expressed concerns about increasingly violent behaviors they perceive occurring in inclusive classrooms (ETFO 2017). This and increased expectations on teachers to support all students including those with significant exceptionalities and mental health concerns, will be future areas of concentration for professional learning for teachers.

A new area of focus has been on fostering the abilities of new teachers in inclusive education (Specht 2016). Researchers associated with the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education (Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education 1878–2018) are conducting longitudinal research examining the types of dispositions and strategies that new teachers bring to inclusive classrooms. As teachers confront increasingly complex behaviors, they will need increasingly complex knowledge, skills, and supports.

School personnel

In Canada, there is an increasing recognition that school-based leadership is a key contributor to teacher effectiveness in supporting inclusive classrooms (Sider, Maich, and Morvan 2017). Other school personnel in low-ratio support settings include paraprofessionals (e.g., educational assistants), healthcare professionals (e.g., nurses), and specialized teachers (e.g., guidance, resource), depending on academic, health (including mental health), behavior, and safety needs (Hutchinson 2016). School districts typically also have specialized supports such as speech and language pathologists, behavioral consultants, and psychologists.

Further reading and online resources

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Glossary terms

Inclusive education

The belief and practice that all students—including those with special education needs—belong and make valued contributions to classroom communities.

Indigenous

Officially, Canada uses the term Aboriginal although this term is generally not recognized by indigenous peoples for self-identification. "Aboriginal identity" refers to identification with the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. This includes those who are First Nations (North American Indian), Métis or Inuk (Inuit), Registered or Treaty Indians (that is, registered under the Indian Act of Canada), and/or membership in a First Nation or Indian band. Aboriginal peoples of Canada are defined in the Constitution Act, 1982, Section 35 (2) as including the Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada (Statistics Canada 2017).