

Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario: How Diversity is Integrated in the Classroom through
the Curriculum: Research Report

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Abstract

This research paper explores the issue of diversity and inclusivity in high school-level English, History, Law, and Equity Studies curriculums in Ontario, policies that support inclusive education, and the practical implementation of diversity and inclusion in classrooms. The subjects of English, History, Law, and Equity Studies were identified as being areas where there are most opportunity to integrate learning about diversity, thus are explored within this study to understand where and how diversity is present in the curriculums. The study also investigates the policies for educational equity created by Ontario's Ministry of Education and other educational bodies, the incorporation of Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy in inclusive education, and the strategies undertaken by individual school boards. Barriers to inclusive education will be examined to understand where they arise and why. The outcome of this paper aims to explain why inclusive education is important, how it is currently present in Ontario, and how it may be improved upon.

Introduction

The implementation of equity and inclusion in Ontario's high schools is an important and valuable part of the learning experience for diverse children. Students who do not see themselves reflected in the materials they learn become disengaged with the educational process, and do not thrive in the learning environment.¹ Furthermore, lack of inclusion in education is linked to difficulty in securing employment, and social and economic instability.²

The path to equitable and inclusive education in Ontario has not been linear and continues to evolve and improve. The Education Act was enacted in 1990 in Ontario and set in place different rules and regulations for how schools and school boards should operate.³ In 1993, Ontario's government revised the Education Act and mandated a new initiative entitled "Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity",⁴ as the first step towards diversity in education. In 1995, there was a change in

¹ Program planning

² Campbell, C. (n.d.). Educational equity in Canada: The case of Ontario's strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students. *School Leadership & Management*, 41(4-5), 409-428.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1709165>

³ *Education Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.2

⁴ (Campbell, *Educational equity in Canada: The case of Ontario's strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students*)

government resulting in the removal the Ministry of Education’s Anti-racism, Equity, and Access division,⁵ ending work on antiracism and diversity implementation in Ontario schools for approximately 10 years. From 1995 to 2003, the government continued to implement policies that promoted accountability, standardization, and austerity, which negatively impacted already-disadvantaged students.⁶ Specifically, new practice of academic streaming placed minority students in less advanced streams on track for college or workplace positions.⁷ In 2003, a newly elected government committed to improving education by implementing province-wide strategies to promote diversity and inclusion.⁸ In the years since, documents including *Achieving Excellence* and *Ontario’s Education Equity Action Plan* have contributed to the push for a more equitable school system.

Though noticeable strides have been made within Ontario’s schools and school boards in terms of diverse education, improvements are always necessary to keep up with an ever-changing society. My paper aims to identify what initiatives are currently in place within the Ministry of Education, Ontario school boards, and curriculum documents, and to provide suggestions for any necessary improvements.

Research Question and Methodology

Throughout this paper, I will use multiple terms to describe a specific type of education in Ontario, such as “inclusive education”, “diverse education”, “equitable education”. These terms are all interchangeable, and effectively all describe a type of education wherein different racial, cultural, and ethnic groups are represented and respected.

This research paper originally aimed to answer the following question: How is racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity implemented into Ontario’s high school humanities curriculum, and where is there room for improvement?

However, throughout the research process, the question I hope to answer has become more thoroughly developed. My research now seeks to answer this question: In Ontario’s high school curriculums, diversity strategies, and individual initiatives, how is racial, cultural, and

⁵ (Campbell, *Educational equity in Canada: The case of Ontario’s strategies and actions to advance excellence and equity for students*)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

ethnic diversity represented, what barriers prevent inclusive education, and how can Ontario's education system improve?

The evolution of my research question occurred throughout the investigative process as I followed my step-by-step methodology. My premeditated research plan provided space for me to broaden my research as I carried it out, which created a more focused scope of inclusive education in Ontario. My research process used qualitative data collection in the form of investigating government documents, consulting news articles, professional papers, and education-based websites, as well as interviewing individuals who currently work in Ontario's education system. This approach eventually resulted in a focus leaning more towards the question of policies, initiatives, and barriers facing inclusive education in Ontario.

This paper seeks to answer the research question through melding literature and formal documents with individual experiences. Due to the fact that much of the policy leaves implementation to individual educators, records of their experiences are crucial to understanding how inclusion and diverse education operates on the ground. I will explain and evaluate Ontario's equity strategies, their curriculum documents, teacher education programs, and school board policies. Each section regarding these topics will discuss the involvement in inclusive education, the formal literature with which it is associated, and any underlying barriers that may be present. Finally, I will present the final outcomes of my research, and provide further work that can be done around equitable education.

Equity Strategies in Ontario

Since 2003, a variety of strategies, policies, and action plans dedicated to improving education in Ontario have been implemented. Many of them do not solely focus on equity in terms of diversity, rather expand to include equity for disabled people and the LGBTQ+ community. For the purposes of this paper, only the relevant sections of these documents that are about or can be applied to diversity will be discussed.

The Ontario Human Rights Commission's "OHRC submission regarding the Government consultation on the education system in Ontario" states that "all students have the right to an

education that allows them to meet their full potential and contribute to society”.⁹ This submission by the OHRC is meant to complement Ontario’s *Education Act*, to ensure that human rights are being recognized in Ontario’s school systems.¹⁰ The OHRC recognizes that in spite of their efforts and the suggestions made to ensure human rights in Ontario schools, many students do not benefit from the education system.¹¹ Equity strategies continue to be a vital component to the fight for a fully inclusive education.

Ontario’s *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, published in 2009, aims at implementing equity and inclusive education policies in every school. This document outlined that the Ministry of Education and its Inclusive Education Branch would support school boards in expanding their diversity education.¹² This included continuous review of Ontario curriculum documents to ensure that they were representative of the multicultural Canadian society.¹³ The *Strategy* also made it mandatory for every school board to have in place some sort of equity and inclusive education strategy, and to identify systemic barriers to inclusive education present within their schools.¹⁴

Teaching Human Rights in Ontario is a comprehensive guide to implementing practical human rights learning in Ontario created by the OHRC. This document was created in support of the Ministry of Education’s *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*.¹⁵ As part of the *Strategy*, educating students about human rights is now a requirement in Ontario schools.¹⁶ The goal for *Teaching Human Rights* is to assist Law, History, and Civics teachers as they teach human rights, and to help students become acquainted with the Ontario human rights system.¹⁷ Students use this document to learn about the concept of human rights, discrimination, and protection under the *Ontario Human Rights Code*. It provides activities to support positive learning outcomes in these areas, so that students may be able to identify experiences of discrimination

⁹ OHRC submission regarding the Government consultation on the education system in Ontario. (2018, December 14). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/ohrc-submission-regarding-government-consultation-education-system-ontario#Contents>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ministry of Education. (2009). (rep.). *Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (pp. 6–26). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-equity-inclusive-education-strategy-2009-en-2022-01-13.pdf>. (p.11)

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ontario Human Rights Commission. (2013). (rep.). *Teaching Human Rights in Ontario* (pp. 1–7). (p.1)

¹⁶ Ibid, p.1.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.2.

and inequality. The value of this document aims at practical education by providing activities that allow students to see themselves and their peers reflected in their learning materials. It is also effective in teaching students to identify instances of discrimination that may be perpetrated in their schools or their lives. For non-racialized students, it may be able to help them understand the experiences of their racialized peers.

Achieving Excellence, published in 2014, details goals for a new model of education in Ontario. Their goal of ensuring equity for all students involves moving away from “tolerance”, instead focusing on acceptance and respect for diverse students.¹⁸ The Ministry of Education, in this document, states that it hopes to make Ontario the most equitable education system in the world.¹⁹ The Plan of Action lays out steps including teaching more about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit (also known as FNMI) history and culture, providing support for FNMI students, and providing professional development for teachers and students in relation to equity studies.²⁰

Equity and Inclusive Education in Schools, also published in 2014, shares Ontario’s renewed vision for equity and inclusive education. This is the most comprehensive outline for equity and inclusive education in the province. It states, “everyone in our publicly funded education system – regardless of background or personal circumstances – must feel engaged and included”.²¹ This idea is consciously repeated in this, and many other equity strategies. The guidelines for equity and inclusive education build on this concept to support students in achieving success in their schools. The goals defined in this document are as followed:

1. The Ministry of Education, school boards, and schools will commit to ending discrimination in schools through identifying and eradicating barriers. All levels of the education system are required to play an active role in this step.²²
2. Implementing equity and inclusive education strategies in the classroom to engage students with their learning material. Students, teachers, and staff should feel comfortable and accepted in the school environment.²³

¹⁸ Queen's Printer for Ontario. (2014). (rep.). *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (pp.1–20). Retrieved from https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson/UserFiles/File/Policy_Monitor/ON_01_04_14_-_renewedVision.pdf. (p.8)

¹⁹ Ibid, p.8.

²⁰ Ibid, p.13.

²¹ Ministry of Education. (2014). (rep.). *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* (pp. 5–48). Retrieved from <https://files.ontario.ca/edu-equity-inclusive-education-guidelines-policy-2014-en-2022-01-13.pdf>. (p.6)

²² Ibid, p.7.

²³ Ibid, p.17-22.

3. Using predetermined measures of success to ensure accountability and transparency when implementing equity and inclusive education policies.²⁴

A component of these guidelines discusses inclusive curriculum, which is more pertinent to this paper. The guidelines are as follows:

1. The curriculum should be regularly revised and adapted to the changing of student needs.²⁵
2. Integration of diversity, including of First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples, should be part of the curriculum expectations, examples, and prompts.²⁶
3. Schools must allow for students and staff to experience learning about diversity in history, culture, and peoples.²⁷

This section also highlights different resources that school boards, schools, and individuals may use to promote diversity in classrooms, such as the Aboriginal Education Office's "Teacher's Toolkit", which explains how to integrate FNMI perspectives into their curricula.²⁸ Every school board in the province is equipped with the goals and guidelines set forth in this document, which should be used in their own equity and inclusive education policies. The continuation of this document discusses the guidelines that school boards may refer to in their own processes of developing policies. It also sets rules for these policies to ensure every student is seen and represented through the equity and inclusive education plans.

Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan, published in 2017, is a shorter document that builds on the strategies developed in *Achieving Excellence*. Their mission statement is described as, "... the province's roadmap to identifying and eliminating discriminatory practices, systemic barriers and bias from schools and classrooms to support the potential for all students to succeed".²⁹ This plan emphasizes the necessity for diversity in both the curriculum and the classroom. Racialized and non-racialized students should have the opportunity to experience other cultures through their interactions with one another in a safe and inclusive environment.³⁰ Additionally, the action plan states that students should be learning about diversity within the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ (*Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* 2014 p.24)

²⁶ Ibid, 24.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, p.26.

²⁹ Queen's Printer for Ontario, Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan 4–22 (2017). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from https://files.ontario.ca/edu-1_0/edu-Ontario-Education-Equity-Action-Plan-en-2021-08-04.pdf. (p.4).

³⁰ Ibid.

curriculum in order to facilitate understanding and acceptance to create an inclusive environment.³¹ The Education Equity Action Plan provides action items for boards, one of which says that curriculums should be continuously revised to ensure implementation of diversity.³² The department of the Ministry of Education who published the document, the Education Equity Secretariat, plans to support school boards in implementing diverse perspectives and learning into their curriculums.³³

These policies and guidelines have helped the development and transition to a more inclusive and equitable school system in Ontario. However, while the policies are meant to ensure that all students should be learning in an inclusive and equitable environment, the documents are not sufficient to ensure that the practical application of all the guidelines occurs. The disconnect between policy and practicality is an important issue that the education system continues to struggle with, despite the numerous resources available.

Curriculum in Ontario

Ontario's English, History, Law, and Equity Studies curriculums offer the best opportunities for the growth of equity and inclusive education. While subjects such as math and science are not easily adaptable, nor are required to adapt to inclusive education, courses in Humanities and Social Sciences can easily reflect diversity and inclusion in their curriculums. English, History, Law, and Equity Studies are the subjects that are most flexible to the inclusion of diversity, as well as the most relevant to diversity. Law and Equity Studies are not required courses in a high school education, however, every student in Ontario is required to take Grade 10 History, and Grades 9 to 12 English. Ensuring diversity is present in all of these curriculums is vital to teaching students about equity and inclusion.

In some strategies and action plans above, the creation of an inclusive curriculum was discussed, and guidelines were set in place. Curriculum documents have been reviewed and edited to be more inclusive, although there are still systemic issues present within. This section will discuss the components of curriculum documents that relate to equity and inclusive education, will highlight issues and discrepancies in the documents, and discuss barriers to

³¹ (Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan 2017 p.4)

³² Ibid, p.22.

³³ Ibid.

diverse education within the curriculum. This paper will be condensing the curriculum documents to the most relevant sections about inclusive education.

Ontario's English curriculum states that learning materials in the class should be as diverse and inclusive as the students, and as the province.³⁴ According to the Ministry of Education, "teachers routinely provide materials that reflect the diversity of Canadian and world cultures, including the cultures of Aboriginal peoples".³⁵ Students should be aware of and able to recognize historical, cultural, and political contexts of themselves and others.³⁶ The English curriculum has a section titled "Antidiscrimination Education", that details the most important aspects of inclusive education in English programs. This section states that students should be learning critical literacy skills to identify discrimination, understand biases, and learn about culture, identity, and power.³⁷ Students should be reading a variety of texts written by or about diverse peoples and cultures.³⁸

Like English, the History curriculum emphasizes that materials should reflect the community learning them.³⁹ In History courses, the curriculum provides generalized and open-ended prompts and learning expectations for teachers to use, guiding how they should be teaching students. As an example, the curriculum may say that students should know how societies develop, and will provide topics about different historical societies, but it will not specify what groups should be taught. This allows teachers to choose who and what they teach. This study has found that open-ended curriculums such as History put the responsibility for teaching diversity on the teachers, thereby creating a number of barriers to implementation that would not exist if inclusive materials were mandatory. There are many barriers that could prevent teachers from being inclusive with their curriculums, but if it is not mandatory, diversity will not necessarily be taught. Additionally, when diversity is incorporated into the curriculum, it is crucial that it is being taught in an appropriate and sensitive way. Much of history deals with instances of racism, discrimination, colonialism, and other topics that should be handled

³⁴ Ministry of Education. (2007) *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 and 10* [English]. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf#page=42> (p.14)

³⁵ Ibid, p.16.

³⁶ Ibid, p.33.

³⁷ Ministry of Education. (2007) *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 and 12*. [English]. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf#page=42> (p.33)

³⁸ Ibid, p.33.

³⁹ Ministry of Education. (2015) *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 and 12* [History]. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf#page=42> (p.54)

properly. Their importance to the curriculum is undeniable, however, in order to have an inclusive and equitable space, diverse materials must be taught in appropriate ways.

Law courses offered by the Ministry of Education are not mandatory for students, but for students who choose to enroll, can easily facilitate inclusivity and diversity in the classroom. There two strands of law offered in schools, Understanding Canadian Law and Canadian and International Law, which both have wide scopes and ability for introducing diversity and inclusivity into their curriculums. While much of the courses focus on legality including Business Law or Family Law, the curriculum for each course includes a full unit on human rights and inclusivity in Canada and abroad.⁴⁰ The learning expectations for both courses emphasize that students should learn to understand issues with human rights in Canada and Canadian laws created to prevent them, and international human rights concerns and preventative laws.⁴¹ The human rights unit is critical to bringing diversity into the picture in this course, as the topic of human rights is broad enough to include all cultures, races, and ethnicities. This unit is also particularly important to the discussion of equity and inclusion, as it allows students, particularly racialized students, to learn about their legal rights and the laws in place to protect them. Moreover, the courses require students to understand law from different types of legal perspectives such as the critical race theory, or different Indigenous legal theories.⁴² The integration of these legal perspectives allows students coming from different cultures to see themselves represented in the Law curriculum and helps other students to understand other legal perspectives present in Canada.

Equity Studies courses, like Law courses, are not mandatory in Ontario high schools. Some high schools do not run Equity Studies courses, creating discrepancies across the province. Equity Studies courses are those that teach students about different diverse groups in Canada and globally, to promote a culture of acceptance and understanding.⁴³ There is a heavy emphasis on the practice of social justice, so often human rights issues that affect minority groups in the world are discussed. These courses offer one of the only opportunities to enrol in a course entirely structured around the study of diverse peoples. The curriculum documents for Equity

⁴⁰ Ministry of Education. (2015) *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 11 and 12* [Law]. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf#page=42> (p.450, 478).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, p. 482.

⁴³ ⁴³ Ministry of Education. (2013) *The Ontario Curriculum Grades 9 to 12* [Equity Studies]. <https://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/curriculum/secondary/english910currb.pdf#page=42> (p.57)

Studies stress the idea that for an education system to be fully inclusive, students should be reflected in the curriculum, and their physical environments, so that they can properly engage in learning.⁴⁴ As diverse students and peoples are the focus of Equity studies curriculums, teachers must make a conscious effort to understand and properly represent marginalized groups, rather than focusing on stereotypical representations of people. The mission statement of Equity Studies courses says, "...the courses promote an understanding of and respect for diversity, and a critical awareness of the status quo and of continuing challenges to an inclusive, fair and just society".⁴⁵

Outside specific curriculum structures, there are two additional barriers educators face. One of the foremost barriers that teachers face when trying to implement a diverse curriculum is the question of whether they are capable of teaching about diverse peoples. In an interview with a Durham District School Board Head of Canadian and World Studies, the educator expressed that some teachers in their department were concerned when asked to incorporate different cultural groups in their curriculum, or when asked to teach specifically black or Indigenous history courses.⁴⁶ This teacher explained that people who are not part of these groups aren't necessarily comfortable with teaching about these groups, as they feel that educating about different cultural groups should be done by a member of them.⁴⁷ The majority of teachers and principals in Ontario are white, meaning that they do not have the lived experience of a racialized person, and find it harder to work with a diverse school.⁴⁸

Two other interview subjects, both Heads of English at their respective Greater Toronto schools, expressed the restraint of budgets on diverse education. Since inclusive education is an ever-evolving process, learning materials that were appropriate one year may not fit the curriculum the next. However, both educators explained that, in the English program, the budget they are given cannot keep up with the changing nature of diverse education.⁴⁹ While they may want to include more diverse novels or texts in their curriculums, the school simply may not have the money to buy new textbooks each year.⁵⁰ The teachers have to work with what they

⁴⁴ (Ministry of Education, 2013, p.43)

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.44.

⁴⁶ (Personal communication, July 28, 2022).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ (Tuters & Portelli, *Ontario school principals and diversity: Are they prepared to lead for equity?* 2017)

⁴⁹ (Personal communications, August 5, 2022, & August 11, 2022).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

have until they are given a new budget or attempt to incorporate online texts with diversity instead.

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy is a culmination of two bodies of Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, and Geneva Gay's Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. Both women argued in separate work that racialized students in the United States regularly failed in the US school system, because of systemic issues that denied the culture that students brought into the classroom.⁵¹ When these theories were applied to Canadian schools by Nicole West-Burns and Jeff Kugler, they combined the two pedagogies to create a new approach called Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy, also known as CRRP. CRRP calls for teachers to use the experiences and cultures of students to create equality within the classroom.⁵² An article by Sangeeta McAuley for the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario says of CRRP, "educators must explore how they look at, understand, interact with, and engage in meaningful curriculum tied to who is in the classrooms and the schools".⁵³

The practical application of CRRP in the classroom can appear in many ways. Using cultural competence in the classroom is a method of applying CRRP that allows students to learn both about their own cultures, but about the cultures of other groups.⁵⁴ Cultural competence involves expanding to teach outside of the dominant classroom culture, checking for bias and stereotypes when teaching, and avoiding assumptions about cultural groups.⁵⁵ CRRP moves away from the "one-size-fits-all" curriculum that was built on Eurocentric ideals of Canadian society.⁵⁶ When teachers use CRRP in their classrooms, children of all backgrounds should see

⁵¹ Hurley, S. (2019, September 18). Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/culturally-responsive/>.

⁵² Macauley, S. (2018). Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy in the Early Years: It's Never Too Early! Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://etfvoice.ca/feature/culturally-relevant-and-responsive-pedagogy-early-years-its-never-too-early>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Kugler, J., & West-Burns, N. (2010, Spring). The CUS Framework for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy. *Our Schools, our Selves*, 19, 215-223. <http://myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fmagazines%2Fcus-framework-culturally-responsive-relevant%2Fdocview%2F872776200%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14771>

themselves and their lives represented in their learning materials, and they should be exposed to cultures different from theirs.⁵⁷

The practice of social justice is a large component of CRRP, where teachers are asked to think critically about dominant narratives in society, and how they are applying this to their teaching.⁵⁸ CRRP asks educators to teach their students the same critical consciousness so they can engage meaningfully with social justice practices.⁵⁹ Administrators, teachers, and support staff, in the realm of CRRP, need to work on professional development that focuses on the needs of students.⁶⁰ Educators should consider work in equity and social justice as an ongoing practice that requires time and commitment.⁶¹ Teachers should be engaging in practices of unlearning the unconscious bias and stereotypes with which they grew up, and to re-evaluate the “classic” textbooks and lessons they use in education to ensure they are responsive to students.⁶² Educators should also be considering students in their classrooms that are historically underrepresented in their curriculums, to ensure that every individual in their classroom feels seen and valued.⁶³ Involving the cultures of students in the classrooms allows them to contribute more to the learning environment and engage meaningfully with their education.⁶⁴

CRRP is a practice that has been introduced into some teacher education programs in Canada in order to equip new teachers with the critical consciousness. These pedagogies are taught through content, using lectures, texts, and case-based learning focused on teaching knowledge and skills related to educational inclusivity, and process, where pre-service teachers engage in critical reflection of themselves, and the teaching practices and systems in which they operate.⁶⁵ However, there are issues that arise in teacher education programs that prevent this type of education. Some pre-service teachers recognize the challenge they face when trying to be inclusive in the classrooms as their own lack of knowledge about diversity,⁶⁶ or that when they

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ [CRECS uOttawa]. (2019, January, 8). *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy: The Foundation and Core Components* Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mySy5dC4lWs>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ (Kugler & West-Burns, *The CUS Framework for Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy*).

⁶¹ [Tedx Talks]. (2020, February, 12). *Building Critical Consciousness of Educational Equity*/Nicole West-Burns, *Ph.D./TEDxOshawaED* Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=evndCfQ92s4>

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ (Hurley, *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* 2019)

⁶⁵ DeLuca, C. (2012). Promoting inclusivity through and within teacher education programmes. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 38(5), 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02607476.2013.739792>

⁶⁶ Ibid.

simplify cultures to be more inclusive, it can lead to teaching stereotypes.⁶⁷ Other teachers fear that introducing multiple cultural perspectives into the classroom can lead to opposing, harmful views between students.⁶⁸ Teacher education programs recognize these issues and acknowledge that some pre-service teachers have their own internal prejudices leading to a refusal to learn about diversity.⁶⁹

In a study done at Concordia University College of Alberta's Elementary Education program, pre-service teachers were evaluated on their understandings of exclusion in the classroom.⁷⁰ Teacher's college introduces clashing ideologies where pre-service teachers may be exposed to values that do not align with their own.⁷¹ Educators hope to see improvement of inclusion by pre-service teachers, and for them to become aware of barriers to inclusion before entering the workforce.⁷² Nonetheless, different levels of exposure for pre-service teachers to inclusive education during their practicum placements can affect the way they view inclusive education outside of college.⁷³

Another barrier to the implementation of CRRP is the lack of uniformity across Ontario. Though some professional education programs do include the critical pedagogical lens, as well as offer courses or specialists dealing with equity and diversity, these are not present in every teacher training program.⁷⁴ In a statement made in the 2017 *International Journal of Educational Management*, Stephanie Tuters says, "culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice education remain largely add-on training for educators in Ontario unless they happen to end up in one of the few institutions that have programmes with a social justice focus".⁷⁵ Ontario's teacher education systems face a shortage in resources that prevent them from hiring trained professionals to implement and teach diversity programs.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ (DeLuca, *Promoting inclusivity through and within teacher education programmes* 2012)

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Joned, P. (2015). Bringing insider perspectives into inclusive teacher learning: Potentials and challenges for educational professionals . *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 15(1), 71–168. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12091> (p.71)

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, p.168.

⁷³ Ibid, p.160.

⁷⁴ Tuters, S., & Portelli, J. (2017). Ontario school principals and diversity: Are they prepared to lead for equity? *International Journal of Educational Management*, 31(5), 598–611. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-10-2016-0228>

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

CRRP is important to the discussion of an inclusive curriculum because of the way it introduces cultural competence and critical consciousness into the classroom. Its model of inclusion allows students to feel recognized and accepted in their education. Despite this, CRRP is not a mandatory component of teacher education programs or professional development. The basis for inclusive education in classrooms is readily available to all teachers, but due to barriers and restrictions, is not regularly practiced.

Ontario's Education System

The discussion of Ontario's equitable and diverse education policies is not relevant if it is not transferred to the different tiers of the education system. It is vital for inclusive education that these policies be used as school boards, schools, and teachers create their own plans for diverse education. This section will analyze four school boards in more diverse areas, compared to four school boards in less diverse areas, to compare whether inclusive education plans differ across the province, and why this may occur. As the Greater Toronto Area is home to the most diverse people in the province,⁷⁷ the four more diverse school boards were selected from the area, and the four less diverse boards were selected from more Northern areas of the province, which are understood to be more predominantly white.⁷⁸ This section should not be read as a criticism of any school boards, however, should draw attention to similarities and differences across the province.

Toronto District School Board's mission statement on equity states, "the TDSB will enable all students to see themselves, the diversity of others, and equitable, anti-oppressive learning practices reflected in the curriculum".⁷⁹ The TDSB has in place an Equity Policy to ensure that their schools are practicing diverse education. One of the components of the Equity Policy includes a mandate for curriculums to be diverse and inclusive.⁸⁰ The curriculum must balance multiple diverse perspectives to ensure every student is being represented.⁸¹

⁷⁷ Cole, M., Tulk, C., & Grzincic, N. (2017, November 8). *Toronto is now majority visible minority. what about your neighbourhood?* thestar.com. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2017/11/08/toronto-is-now-majority-visible-minority-what-about-your-neighbourhood.html?li_source=LI&li_medium=star_web_ymbii

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ *Equity & Inclusion*. Toronto District School Board. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Elementary-School/The-Classroom/Equity-Inclusion>

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, the TDSB strives to include Anti-Oppressive Education practices in their curriculums so students will learn tolerance and acceptance.⁸² Teachers must take part in workshops to learn diverse teaching practices, and all TDSB policies are assessed using the Equity Policy Assessment Tool to ensure equity, diversity, and inclusion are at the forefront of all equity policies.⁸³

York Region District School Board, a self-defined prominent leader in equity and inclusivity,⁸⁴ has a very comprehensive equity and inclusive education policy. YRDSB holds a yearly Equity Symposium to help educators learn to implement equitable and inclusive education, has a student-led Equity and Inclusivity Conferences with workshops promoting these practices in the classroom, and an Equity Steering Strategy to ensure schools and curriculums are inclusive for all students.⁸⁵ They also house an Equity and Inclusivity Advisory Committee that oversees the development and implementation of Equity and Inclusivity Strategies, as well as an Indigenous Education and Equity Strategy to amplify Indigenous voices and promote acceptance.⁸⁶ YRDSB has many additional policies and strategies aimed at creating an inclusive school environment for every student in their board.

Peel District School Board's policies include the Plan for Student Success, which includes various policies and agendas to draw on in relation to equity and inclusive education, and Policy 54, their board-wide goal for establishing culturally responsive classrooms and inclusive, representative curriculums.⁸⁷ The most comprehensive diversity policy is their Black Student Success Strategy. PDSB recognizes that black students do not have equal experiences in PDSB schools, so the Strategy works to identify curriculum materials that do not reflect black students, and to integrate the black Canadian experience and anti-black racism into the curriculum.⁸⁸

Durham District School Board currently has three policies for inclusive education. The Equity and Diversity Strategic Plan works with curriculum development for the integration of

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ (Toronto District School Board, *Equity & Inclusion*)

⁸⁴ *Equity and inclusive education*. York Region District School Board. (2022, June 15). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www2.yrdsb.ca/student-support/equity-and-inclusive-education>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *Equity and Inclusion*. PDSB. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.peelschools.org/about/inclusion/Pages/default.aspx>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

CRRP into classes, as well as the consultation of students in inclusive curriculum planning and programming.⁸⁹ Their Equity and Inclusive Education Policy applies to all members of the DDSB community to ensure all students are represented in their curriculums. DDSB's Compendium for Black Student Success, similarly to the PDSB policy, acknowledges that black students are more likely to feel disengaged in educational settings. They plan to implement an inclusive curriculum by integrating black history and performing an Equity Audit to ensure that curriculums are reflective of all students.⁹⁰

These four school boards chosen from the Greater Toronto Area all have fairly comprehensive plans for diverse education that follow a similar vein of the Ministry's policies but become more specific to their schools and students. The following four boards to be discussed are in Northern Ontario, which tends to be less diverse than Southern Ontario.

Algoma District School Board has an Equity and Inclusive Education Policy that is mainly based on Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. ADSB strives to create a learning environment where all students and staff feel included, students are represented in the curriculum, and staff provide opportunities for students to learn about diverse peoples.⁹¹ ADSB says on the topic of diverse education, "we are committed to providing learning and working environments and student learning opportunities that are reflective of the diverse identities found within our ADSB communities".⁹²

Keewatin-Patricia District School Board's Equity Action Plan also aligns closely with Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, specifically in the notion that all students should see themselves reflected in their learning.⁹³ They have put a focus on inclusivity towards Indigenous students, including working with Indigenous communities to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, and having specially designed Indigenous programs.⁹⁴ Their Policy 326 is their "students first" policy that involves curriculum development that

⁸⁹ *Equity & Inclusive Education*. DDSB. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.ddsb.ca/en/about-ddsb/equity-inclusive-education.aspx>

⁹⁰ (Durham District School Board, *Equity & Inclusive Education*)

⁹¹ *Equity & inclusivity*. – Community – Algoma District School Board. (n.d.). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from https://www.adsb.on.ca/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1086013&type=d&pREC_ID=1364736

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Keewatin-Patricia District School Board. (n.d.). (rep.). *Keewatin-Patricia District School Board Equity Action Plan*. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <http://www.kpdsb.on.ca/pages/view/equity-and-inclusive-education>.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

acknowledges student diversity and brings Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy into the classroom.⁹⁵

Superior-Greenstone District School Board's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy aims to have an equal learning environment for all students, and to protect them from discrimination based on race, ethnicity, culture, and more.⁹⁶ SGDSB works to incorporate the policies of equity and inclusive education outlined in Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education strategy, and to partner with diverse communities to meet the needs of all students in the board.⁹⁷ They plan to implement an inclusive curriculum that undergoes regular review to prevent discrimination and ensure inclusivity.⁹⁸

The District School Board of Ontario North East is committed to equity and inclusive education, which will be reflected in all board operations. They plan to implement an inclusive curriculum through the development and review of resources, delivery of instruction, and assessment and evaluation practices.⁹⁹ They want to establish the framework of the Equity and Inclusive Education Policy in their school board, to review existing policies of equity in education, and to provide respectful, inclusive, non-stereotypical, and unbiased learning materials for students.¹⁰⁰

Every school board selected to be analyzed in this paper has policies and strategies in place for providing an inclusive education to students, and they all draw upon Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy. However, there are noticeable differences between the policies created by schools in Southern versus Northern Ontario, primarily in the way Southern schools deviate from the Ontario Strategy. While every board follows the same outline, Toronto, Peel, Durham, and York have all created student-specific programs such as York's Equity Symposium, or Durham's Black Student Success Compendium. Though Keewatin-Patricia does extensive work with Indigenous communities, there may be a variety of reasons why other Northern school boards have not adopted specific strategies. It is possible that there are not

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Superior-Greenstone District School Board. (2009). (rep.). *Equity and Inclusive Education*. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://www.sgdsb.on.ca/upload/documents/536---mgmt-guide-equity-and-inclusive-education-dec-8-09.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ District School Board Ontario North East. (n.d.). (rep.). *Board Improvement Plan for Student Achievement and Well-Being*. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://22.files.edl.io/35bb/03/01/22/190106-bbe3e4c8-11aa-47c4-ad9f-a446d04f1595.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

enough diverse students to support these programs, or the financial burden of the creation of these policies. Much of the funding given to school boards in Ontario comes from student enrolment,¹⁰¹ so school boards with fewer students are designated less money. Furthermore, some of the school boards follow a student-first ideology, where the diversity in their curriculum is based on the diversity of students in classrooms. It is possible that in some Northern Ontario school boards that are more predominantly white, a student-first ideology could lead to inequality in what is being taught. Additionally, it cuts students off from learning about the lived experiences of many other groups that they do not see in their classrooms. Though there may be diverse students in every classroom, by only teaching for the students, school boards are preventing students from expanding their worldview and acceptance to groups of people beyond who they see in school.

Outcomes and Suggestions

After thorough investigation of many policies, strategies, curriculum documents, and school board plans, I have identified the positive aspects of Ontario's inclusive education systems, as well as the barriers faced in its implementation.

Ontario currently has many strategies in place for promoting inclusive education in the classroom. Documents like *Program Planning Ontario*, *Achieving Excellence*, the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, and *Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan* all either put programs in place for creating an inclusive curriculum, or are documents made to support its implementation. These documents are available to every school board, school, and teacher in Ontario, but one must question the uniformity of their use across the province. Every school board has an equity and inclusive action plan in place, but not every school adheres to ensuring their curriculums are diverse. A former student of a Southern Ontario school noted that they graduated as recently as 2020 and cannot recall an inclusive curriculum in their courses.¹⁰² The school was in a predominantly white area, meaning that the curriculum was reflective of most of the population; however, the student expressed that they did not feel they were exposed to non-white cultures and histories in their curriculum.¹⁰³ Instead, they opted to research diverse groups

¹⁰¹ *How Ontario's education system works: Publicly funded education*. People for Education. (2020, September 24). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://peopleforeducation.ca/public-education-in-ontario/>

¹⁰² (Personal communication, August 9, 2022).

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

in their self-driven projects whenever they had the chance.¹⁰⁴ This instance draws on a bigger issue present in Ontario. Putting the onus largely on teachers to teach diversity means that their personal prejudices, education, and situations have an excessive influence on the educational experience of students with respect to diversity and inclusion. While some diverse students may see themselves and their peers reflected in the classrooms, other students may never see themselves in what they are learning. These documents set out many guidelines that promote diversity and inclusion in the classroom and may be extremely effective in helping teachers to create diverse curriculums. However, if they are not used, or if teachers do not or cannot follow the mandate of an inclusive curriculum as set out in the *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, it causes inequality and disparities across the province.

Current curriculum documents have been adapted to be equitable and inclusive, however there are still some underlying issues which need to be addressed, primarily that every curriculum document used the word “Aboriginal” to refer to an Indigenous person. Many Indigenous Canadians have expressed that this term is outdated and disrespectful, instead asking people to use the term Indigenous or FNMI.¹⁰⁵ While the curriculum documents may pre-date the transition from Aboriginal to Indigenous, by keeping outdated terminology in their curriculum documents, they may be perpetrating a harmful environment for students and teachers. Moreover, the presence of out-dated language in the documents shows that they are not being prioritized, reviewed, and updated as frequently as they should. This may result in educators using language, concepts, or ideas that are no longer best practice, which inhibits the goal of inclusive education. The negative ramifications on those in the education system are far greater than the cost of updating the curriculum documents.

Other barriers to inclusivity, such as lack of budget or hesitancy to teach diversity are solvable. The lack of budget for Ontario’s school system was an issue brought up by multiple teachers, though we must take into consideration that they worked at schools in larger school boards, meaning they had a bigger budget than those in smaller Northern schools. Regardless, the advent of technology in the classroom may be a solution to this problem. For English classes, most books are available for purchase or borrowing online, meaning students could read on their

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ *Why we say "indigenous" instead of "Aboriginal"*. - Animikii Indigenous Technology. (2020, June 17). Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://animikii.com/news/why-we-say-indigenous-instead-of-aboriginal>

personal devices, or devices provided by the school. Teachers may also be able to print some diverse learning materials for their students to use. More importantly, educators may be able to change the way they present “outdated” books to their classes. One of the teachers interviewed noted that by the time their school could purchase all the diverse novels they required, the books were already outdated. Part of the English curriculum asks students to use their critical thinking skills to identify any bias, stereotypes, or discrimination present in their learning materials. This may allow teachers to “flip the script” to help students build their critical consciousness although the learning materials may be slightly outdated.

A potential solution may come in the form of implementing cultural arts curriculums. Educators across the Greater Toronto area have identified challenges to culturally responsive teaching that comes in the forms of anti-black racism, cultural appropriation, and institutional unpreparedness¹⁰⁶. Applying cultural arts into the curriculum would integrate learning about new cultures in diverse ways to make the learning experience fun and valuable. A cultural arts educator explains, “...cultural art educators centers the frames of reference of culturally and ethnically diverse students, so they can engage in relatable and new learning. We offer arts-based learning outcomes that promote cultural competency and tap into their critical consciousness”.¹⁰⁷ Potentially integrating full-time jobs for cultural arts educators into schools to apply this type of learning into the curriculum would provide culturally diverse and inclusive education for students across the province.

Applying Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy to teaching can be extremely positive for inclusive and diverse education if it is done in the correct way. A pilot program induction of CRRP at a school in the GTA proved to be successful in shifting the perceptions brought into the classroom by teachers to create a more accepting and inclusive space for students.¹⁰⁸ In a case study of Irma Coulson Public School in Milton, Ontario, the CRRP pilot program required the involvement of all staff who had to participate in monthly sessions with the CRRP team, monthly meetings with staff and school councils, and weekly grade-level meetings, which all involved working on themselves to dismantle their own beliefs from growing up in an

¹⁰⁶ Davidson, K. (2022, March 10). *Anti-black racism pervades cultural arts curricula in Ontario Schools, research finds*. YFile. Retrieved September 10, 2022, from <https://yfile.news.yorku.ca/2022/03/10/anti-black-racism-pervades-cultural-arts-curricula-in-ontario-schools-research-finds/>

¹⁰⁷ (Davidson, *Anti-black racism pervades cultural arts curricula in Ontario Schools, research finds* 2022)

¹⁰⁸ (Hurley, *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* 2019)

Ethnocentric school system.¹⁰⁹ Many teachers displayed discomfort in recognizing their own privilege but were pushed to perform internal work of overcoming their own biases.¹¹⁰ The success of the pilot program changed the way students and families interacted with staff, as all subjects and grade levels shifted to be responsive to the backgrounds of all students.¹¹¹ The extra time and support given to teachers to assist them in implementing culturally diverse curriculums was vital in this program. To see a shift in culturally responsive education across the province, school boards, as well as the Ministry of Education, may consider implementing professional development specifically focused on CRRP or diversity training. One teacher who was interviewed said they experienced some diversity-focused professional development training, but it is unclear if this is uniform across the province.¹¹² Additionally, the pilot program worked on a monthly and weekly basis to provide support in CRRP implementation and stipulated that these meetings were extra support outside of regular professional development sessions.¹¹³

Making diversity training and CRRP mandatory learning in teacher's college would make strides in ensuring that teachers enter the classroom equipped to teach diverse students. In a study done of Canadian teacher education programs, the researcher noted that every student interpreted inclusivity in different ways.¹¹⁴ The current system in Canada for diversity in teacher education programs involves singular diverse courses in which teachers may choose to enroll.¹¹⁵ Their research demonstrated that inclusive education needs to be cohesive and present across every teacher education program in Ontario. Inclusivity can be embedded into teacher education programs in two ways: coursework and fieldwork. In coursework, programs can take either an infusion approach that assumes diversity is in the curriculum allowing student teachers to link diversity and inclusion into the curriculum, a separated approach that incorporates diversity into only specific courses offered as electives, or a combined approach mixing some embedded diversity training with electives allowing students to specialize in certain topics.¹¹⁶ The fieldwork approach involves working in schools for practical learning experiences, taking alternative placements focusing on promoting inclusion that allowing inclusive learning outside of the

¹⁰⁹ (Hurley, *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* 2019)

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² (Personal communication, August 5, 2022).

¹¹³ (Hurley, *Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy* 2019)

¹¹⁴ (DeLuca, *Promoting inclusivity through and within teacher education programmes* 2012)

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

classroom.¹¹⁷ Programs that do not allow for the fieldwork approach may cause differentiation on views of inclusivity.¹¹⁸ The study concludes by stating that promoting inclusivity in teacher education programs is the best practice for bringing inclusivity into the classroom.¹¹⁹ It is important for all teachers, regardless of their backgrounds, to enter the workforce equipped to teach students of all diversities, and to be able to teach a myriad of different diversities, every if their students are not always reflective of them.

As a final suggestion, I would like to call to attention the Ontario Human Rights Commission's submission regarding the Government consultation on the education system in Ontario. The OHRC outlines ways that the Ministry of Education, along with all levels of the education system, can ensure a more equitable experience for Ontario students. Some of their initiatives relevant to inclusive curriculum include adopting a uniform, province-wide design to make the curriculum accessible to all students in Ontario.¹²⁰ This would involve teaching human rights learning in the curricula, with content on historical human rights violations in Canada and their prolonged impact, as well as teaching human rights from a tolerance and acceptance standpoint.¹²¹ The OHRC stipulates that teachers should be required to teach human rights using appropriate methods, and that they should be adequately trained to teach these topics.¹²² The curriculum materials should be reflective of Canada's diverse society, but specifically should teach Indigenous history and promote reconciliation with the First Nations, Metis, and Inuit people of Canada.¹²³ The OHRC guarantees that every person is equal under the school system, and thus provides these suggestions to keep that promise.¹²⁴

While this section may provide some possible suggestions to break barriers preventing inclusive education across Ontario, there is still much work to be done on the subject. Further consultation of students in the education system should be undertaken to consider the perspectives of diverse groups and their experiences within the education system. Discussion with teachers may be considered to understand how the government can best support them in

¹¹⁷ (DeLuca, *Promoting inclusivity through and within teacher education programmes* 2012).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *OHRC submission regarding the Government consultation on the education system in Ontario* 2018)

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

implementing inclusive curriculums, or to gain knowledge about the kinds of professional development is necessary to expand diversity education. Teacher education programs may expand their equity and inclusive education training as a mandatory component of the programs so that every incoming teacher is equipped with the tools to teach for and about diverse groups. Finally, though the Ministry of Education declined a request for a formal interview for this project, further consultation with this organization is required if more work is undertaken in the field of equity and inclusive education. The branches in the Ministry that provide support to schools and school boards in implementing inclusive education are crucial to securing budgets and support in professional development.

Concluding Statements

The implementation of inclusive education in Ontario's education system has not always been a linear process but is fundamental to teaching all students. It is important for students to see themselves reflected in their learning materials, so they feel as though they are welcome and accepted in their schools. Students will also see others who may not share the same features or background as them in their learning materials, which promotes tolerance and acceptance of other groups. Prejudice is a learned behaviour, and the advent of inclusive education in schools can only strengthen Ontario's multiculturalism and diverse population.

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