

# EQUITY AND INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN ONTARIO HIGH SCHOOLS

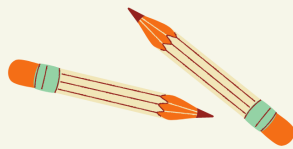


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## INTRODUCTION

This project 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, as well as where and why barriers to inclusive education arise.

When students do not see themselves reflected in their classroom and learning materials, they become disengaged and tend to be less successful in school. Providing diverse and inclusive lessons, textbooks, novels, and assignments promotes equality among students and makes them feel more accepted in their environment. Students who feel seen in their classrooms are more likely to succeed, and to continue their learning to higher education institutions.



## RESEARCH QUESTION

In Ontario's high school curriculums, diversity strategies, and individual initiatives, how is racial, cultural, and ethnic diversity represented, what barriers prevent inclusive education, and how can Ontario's education system improve?

## METHODOLOGY

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 paper seeks to answer the research question through melding literature and formal documents with individual experiences to explain and evaluate Ontario's equity strategies, their curriculum documents, teacher education programs, and school board policies, while identifying any barriers to inclusive education.

## POLICIES

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, published in 2009, 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, as well as implemented continuous review of inclusive education strategies.

Equity and Inclusive Education in Schools shares Ontario's renewed vision for equity and inclusive education to support students in achieving success in their schools. Their policies involve:

- regularly revising and adapting high school curriculums,
- integrating diversity, including of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis into curriculum examples and prompts,
- and allowing for students and staff to experience learning about diversity in history, culture, and peoples.

Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan, published in 2017, stipulates that students should be given the opportunity to experience other cultures through their interactions with one another in a safe and inclusive environment, and through learning about diversity within the curriculum in order to facilitate understanding and acceptance.

## CURRICULUM

Ontario's English curriculum states that learning materials in the class should be as diverse and inclusive as its students and Ontario's society. Students should be given diverse learning materials, recognize other cultures and histories, and learn to use critical consciousness to identify biases and stereotypes in the work.

The History curriculum emphasizes that materials should reflect the diversity of the classroom and society. History-based prompts and learning expectations give teachers the freedom to choose the history they teach.

The curriculum for the Law courses offered in Ontario includes a full unit on human rights and inclusivity in Canada and abroad, which it allows students to learn about their legal rights and the laws in place to protect them. Different types of legal perspectives such as the critical race theory, or different Indigenous legal theories are taught in law courses.

Equity Studies courses are those that teach students about different diverse groups in Canada and globally, to promote a culture of acceptance and understanding.

Some barriers to inclusive curriculum includes some teachers being concerned when asked to incorporate different cultural groups in their curriculum, or when asked to teach specifically black or Indigenous history courses, because they were not a member of those groups and therefore did not feel equipped to teach them. The issue of budget is another barrier, being that the budget teachers are given cannot keep up with the changing nature of diverse education.

## CRRP

Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy uses cultural competence which involves expanding to teach outside of the dominant classroom culture, checking for bias and stereotypes when teaching, and avoiding assumptions about cultural groups. Teachers are asked to think critically about dominant narratives in society, how they are applying this to their teaching, and to teach their students the same critical consciousness so they can engage meaningfully with social justice practices.

CRRP is taught using lectures, texts, and case-based learning focused on teaching knowledge and skills related to educational inclusivity, and engaging in critical reflection of themselves, and the teaching practices and systems in which they operate.

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, or that when they simplify cultures to be more inclusive, it can lead to teaching stereotypes. Other teachers say fear that introducing multiple cultural perspectives into the classroom can lead to opposing, harmful views between students.

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.

CRRP is important to the discussion of an inclusive curriculum because of the way it introduces cultural competence and critical consciousness into the classroom.

## INITIATIVES

Four school boards in Southern Ontario were analyzed and compared to four school boards in Northern Ontario. The Greater Toronto Area is home to the most diverse people in the province, where the Southern boards were selected from, in comparison to Northern areas of the province, which are understood to be more predominantly white. This is to understand whether or not there is a differentiation in diversity and inclusive education initiatives in more diverse areas versus less diverse areas.

Every school board selected and analyzed had policies and strategies in place for providing an inclusive education to students, and all drew upon Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, however, there are differences in North to South equity initiatives. The four Southern school boards have all created student-specific programs that identify an area or group of people in need of attention within the realm of diversity and inclusive education. Three of the four Northern school boards had not adopted individualized diversity strategies.

It is possible that there are not enough diverse students to support specialized programs in Northern school boards, or potentially that, being smaller than those in Southern Ontario, they do not have a budget to implement these programs. Nonetheless, it is important for school boards to be equitable in how they are implementing diverse and inclusive education to ensure every student sees themselves reflected in what they are learning.

## OUTCOMES

Every Ontario curriculum document that references Indigenous people uses the word "Aboriginal", which Indigenous people have expressed is an outdated and disrespectful term to use. Curriculum documents need to be updated to ensure an inclusive environment, as keeping an offensive word in curriculum documents may be perpetrating a harmful stereotypes and biases against Indigenous students and teachers.

Other barriers to inclusivity are identified lack of budget or hesitancy to teach diversity. The issue of budget could be remedied through the use of technology in the classroom, where students could access learning materials through any personal or school-issued electronic devices. Alternatively, if students do not have access to technology, teachers may be able to utilize learning materials already in their possession. Specific to the English program, school budgets cannot keep up buying new novels or textbooks to keep up with the evolving nature of inclusive education. The "critical consciousness" discussed in the English curriculum may be a solution to using outdated texts while learning to identify bias, stereotypes, and discrimination.

Applying Culturally Responsive and Relevant Pedagogy to teaching can be extremely positive for inclusive and diverse education, and can be undertaken through implementing professional development specifically focused on CRRP or diversity training. All pre-service teachers should be exposed to diversity training and CRRP in their time at teacher's college to ensure that they enter the classroom equipped to teach diverse students in an appropriate way.

These suggestions only touch the surface of inclusive education in Ontario. Further consultation with diverse students and teachers in the Ontario education system, as well as added support from the Ministry of Education, and expansion of teacher education programs are the next steps in the process of inclusivity.

**Further Reading:**  
(Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy 2009)  
(Ontario's Education Equity Action Plan 2017)  
(Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools 2014)  
(Ministry of Education, English 2007)  
(Ministry of Education, History, 2015)  
(Ministry of Education, Law, 2015)  
(Ministry of Education, Equity Studies, 2013)

