RESEARCH REPORTS ON SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS IN THE TDSB: A SUMMARY

Three Research Reports examine different aspects of Special Education Needs of TDSB Students:

- Special Education in the TDSB and Ontario: An Overview, 2011-13;
- The Intersection of Disability, Achievement, and Equity: A System Review of Special Education in the TDSB, an update of two earlier Research studies (Brown, 2008; Brown & Parekh, 2010);
- A Case for Inclusive Education.

THE MEDICALIZATION OF ABILITY – RECENT TRENDS

According to the Ministry of Education in Ontario, there are 12 medically based exceptionalities relating to intellectual, developmental, and emotional functioning for which students can be identified. However, many scholars and education advocates believe that using a medical or individual model to shape education-related praxis problematizes students and builds constructed divisions among the student population (Mitchell, 2010). Established trends throughout the United States and recently (2010) in the Toronto District School Board found that there is disproportionate representation of students in Special Education who are racialized or come from poverty. Minority students and students living in poverty were more likely to be identified and segregated from mainstream education than students from more privileged backgrounds (De Valenzuela et al., 2006; Skiba et al., 2006; Artiles et al., 2010; O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

EVOLUTION OF MODELS OF DISABILITY

Mitchell (2010) noted that the medical/individual model of disability is the most globally accepted approach to special education. However, there are alternative paradigms to consider. Historically seen as an individual deficit, disability is now being conceived as a result of social and environmental factors. One of the more important changes is the differentiation between impairment and disability. Impairment refers to the biological condition of the person while disability denotes the structural barriers that ‘disable’ full social, economic, and political participation (Shakespeare, 2006). This shift in perspective carries dramatic consequences in how impairment and disability are addressed within governing institutions. A shift to a social model of disability would require greater attention be paid in assessing and addressing barriers embedded in social policy, practice, and attitudinal perspectives as opposed to individual deficits.
PATTERNS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS IN THE TDSB - OVER TIME AND COMPARED TO OTHER BOARDS/ONTARIO

Over the past five years the proportion of students with Special Education Needs (SEN) has increased from 15.5% to 17.4% including Gifted, and 13.6% to 15.0% excluding Gifted. The fastest growing and largest category of students with SEN were students who only had an IEP without a formal identification of exceptionality. The second fastest growing group were students identified with a Gifted exceptionality. There has been a decline in the number of students with an exceptionality (excluding Gifted) in full-time Special Education classes\(^1\), and a comparative increase in the number of students in Regular classes.

Examination of EQAO information on students with SEN (excluding Gifted) from EQAO board results found that the TDSB has a similar proportion of students with SEN compared to the province, but there is a difference according to grade. The TDSB’s proportion of students with SEN is above the provincial rate in Grade 3, at the provincial rate in Grade 6, and below the provincial rate by Grade 10.

Comparison of Ministry figures on SEN (“Section J”) comparing the TDSB, the rest of the GTA, and Ontario outside the GTA find that the TDSB had only slightly higher rates of SEN than Ontario overall, but quite large differences in categories of SEN. The proportion of TDSB students in full-time Special Education classes is **seven times** that of students outside the GTA, with other GTA boards in-between. Excluding Gifted, the proportion of students with an exceptionality in full-time Special Education classes (fully self-contained or partially integrated) is **over twice** that of boards outside the GTA, while the proportion of students in Regular classes is **less than half** compared to boards outside the GTA. Quite noticeable differences are found with key exceptionalities, raising questions as to the consistency of the IPRC identification process across Ontario.

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT CHANGES OVER TIME AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS OF SEN

SEN status of the same students were examined in looking at one cohort of students from Grade 3 to Grade 10, and another from Grades 6 to 7 until students’ transition to post-secondary by 2011; this cohort of students also completed the TDSB’s 2006 Student Census containing detailed demographic information. As well, changes between 2010-11 and 2011-12 were examined.

Among the findings:

- Very few students had SEN status when they entered Grade 1. New IEPs were most frequently granted in the early years of elementary. Excluding students identified as Gifted, the vast majority of students with exceptionalities had an IEP in place prior to their formal identification. Once identified, students rarely lose their exceptionality status. However, IEP status is much more likely to disappear - but limited differences in long-term achievement were found.

\(^1\) Special Education classes are defined as those with 50% or more instruction time within an either fully self-contained or partially integrated Special Education setting. Participation in Regular classes is defined as students spending over 50% of their time within the Regular class.
between those who lost their IEP status and those who maintained it.

- Findings here confirmed earlier TDSB research (e.g., Brown & Parekh 2010) showing that the majority of students with a Gifted exceptionality and those without SEN, took courses in the Academic program of study in Grades 9 to 10 and continued directly from high school to university; but most students with SEN (excluding Gifted) did not take Academic courses and did not go to post-secondary.

- Excluding Gifted, two thirds of students with SEN were either those who only had an IEP, or those who had been formally identified with a Learning Disability (LD). There was little difference in achievement between those two groups. In terms of differences between Special Education placements, there was little difference in achievement between those who had an LD exceptionality in full-time ISP classes, and students who only had an IEP in partially-integrated HSP placements. The greatest difference was between students in segregated classes (that is, both ISP and HSP) and students in Regular classes. Students in Regular classes had higher proportions of students taking a majority of their classes in the Academic Program of Study, and continuing on to university and college.

- Noticeable socio-economic and gender differences were observed between SEN categories. Students with a Gifted exceptionality were more likely to come from backgrounds of greater privilege compared to students without SEN. In comparison, integrated students with SEN (excluding Gifted) faced greater socio-economic challenges than the overall TDSB population, and students placed in full time settings (fully self-contained or partially integrated) demonstrated the greatest socio-economic challenges. There was a wide variation by self-identified racial status: for example, 10% of East Asian students compared to 25% of Black students had been identified to have SEN. Likewise there are wide variations according to student language, with those speaking Arabic, English, Spanish and Somali having higher proportions of SEN. Female representation in all categories of SEN is below that of males.

**SUSPENSIONS**

Cumulative suspensions were explored in the 2006-11 Grade 9 cohort. Cumulative suspensions identify whether a student had been suspended at any time in his/her academic career (in this study, between September 2002 and the end of the study in October 2011). Slightly under a quarter or 22% of the cohort were suspended at least once. The majority who had been suspended, were suspended only once or twice over their time in the TDSB. There is a strong relationship between achievement and suspension. Students who did not apply to post-secondary had a suspension rate of 44%; students who confirmed an offer of admission to university had a suspension rate of 9%. The relationship of SEN to suspensions is also very strong:

- 13% of students with a Gifted exceptionality were suspended
- 20% of students without SEN were suspended
- 42% of students who only had an IEP, an LD and MID exceptionality were suspended; and
- 45% of students with other exceptionalities (including Behavioral) were suspended.

A COMBINED AT-RISK VARIABLE
Given the strong relationship of Special Education Needs to both low academic achievement (scoring below Levels 3-4 in the Grade 6 EQAO test) and cumulative suspensions, a variable was developed that would examine all three at-risk components in the 2006-11 cohort. In total, 51% of the cohort did not demonstrate any of the three at-risk features while 49% did. There is a 17% gender gap (40% of females and 57% of males had at least one at-risk characteristic), noticeable racial differences (from 29% of East Asian to 74% of Black students), and a wide range according to student language (31% of students speaking Chinese, 68% of those speaking Spanish, and 74% of those speaking Somali).

SYSTEMATIC EVIDENCE REVIEW
The TDSB’s Research department conducted a systematic evidence review of literature looking specifically for academic studies that address barriers to and successful initiatives supporting inclusion. The driving question behind the review was “What enables or disables inclusion of students with SEN in schools?” Thematic results indicated that three areas have been explored: 1) the role of teachers, 2) the outcomes of segregated vs. inclusive classroom placement, and 3) procedures involved in the identification of students.

Overall, results from the systematic evidence review support an inclusive model of education for students with SEN.

Outcomes resulted in positive economic security for included students with SEN. Also, results did not reveal any negative outcomes for students without SEN taught within inclusive environments. Teachers were generally supportive of inclusion and results demonstrated that with support, training and knowledge, teachers felt more confident in tackling the inclusive classroom. New approaches to identification could also support the move towards an inclusive model of education where greater numbers of students are accommodated in their home schools and classrooms. In light of the absence of positive outcomes reported for segregated programming, the results of this review should be considered in the development and evaluation of policy concerning placement and identification of students in the TDSB.

A CASE FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
To investigate the potential of adopting a more inclusive model of education, a literature review was conducted. The findings of the literature review reflect “favorably on adopting an inclusive education model. The inclusive education approach aligns well with international human rights principles to which Canada has both signed and ratified. Although there is a deficit of research documenting the transition process school boards have undertaken to move from a special education model to an inclusive education model, there are a number of reviews of empirical evidence that can be used to guide policy initiatives at the system, school, and classroom levels. Approaches to inclusion often address student need and are designed to support student goals, therefore direct strategies connected to specific identified exceptionalities or
classification of ability were not emphasized. Suggested evidence-based strategies impacting service delivery included: removing systems of categorization, reducing or eliminating congregated classrooms or ability grouping, moving from a direct service to indirect service delivery model, as well as implementing an Instructional Consultation Team or School-Based Student Services Teams. Highlighted evidence-based in-class strategies included co-teaching or collaborative teaching, group and supported planning, peer-tutoring, and shared responsibility for learning. A few exemplars of school boards in both Canada and the USA were explored in terms of strategies each board employs to promote inclusion. Finally, the review explored literature discussing the cost-effectiveness of inclusion and found that although costs associated with transitioning to an inclusive model were not found, overall, inclusive systems are less costly to implement and sustain than models that support students within a special education model” (Parekh, 2013, p. 17).


