

Setting the Context

As educators,¹ administrators, and system leaders, knowing how to effectively respond to students' diverse ability can be complicated. When disability or exceptionality are believed to be present, special education is often involved and responsible for identification, intervention and individualization as well as for organizing support. Special education plays a significant role in accessing specific services and access to resources, including technology, equipment, augmentative communication devices, ASL, deaf-blind and blind educational services that are a fundamental right for students (Snoddon, 2020a, 2020b; Snoddon & Murray, 2019). However, special education practices have been historically steeped in medicalized understandings of disability, which ultimately approach student learning from a deficit model (Connor, 2013; Mitchell, 2015). Also, there continues to be an overrepresentation of racialized and historically marginalized students involved in special education, both within special education identifications as well as placements in special education programming (Brown & Parekh, 2010; Parekh & Brown, 2019). As such, many advocacy and rights organizations have raised ongoing concerns that bias and racism may be influencing perceptions of and responses to students' perceived ability (Coalition for Alternatives to Streaming in Education, n.d.; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, see Pichette et al., 2020; Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2018).

This reflective practice guide provides an overview of critical considerations for special education and examines the role that bias and racism play in addressing student ability. In addition, this guide offers educators, administrators, and system leaders' strategies they can adopt to reduce the negative effects of bias and racism in decisions around special education. As part of this work, we challenge current, medicalized, and dichotomous notions of ability and/or disability and propose a cross-solidarity strategy for greater equity within public education.

How to Use This Guide

The purpose of this guide is to think about ability and disability through a socio-cultural lens and to examine how bias can influence pedagogical decisions and decisions made around special education. There are four major areas to the guide:

- First, the guide reviews the international empirical and theoretical literature on disability and ability-based discrimination.

¹ Please note that the term “educators” is inclusive of Ontario College of Teachers educators, Registered Early Childhood Educators, Educational Assistants, Child and Youth Workers, and school personnel involved in the education of a student.

- Second, critical considerations relating to special education and implications are discussed, supported by international research, Ontario provincial policy, and analyses of socio-demographic data.
- Third, the guide offers a review of critical reflective practice and offers targeted strategies for educators and system leaders addressing specific areas of education (e.g. the early years, inclusive Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) education, referrals and assessment) as well as examines specific evidence-based areas of discrimination (e.g. anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, gender and sexuality, and class).
- Lastly, the guide explores what systems can do to support educators and educational leaders as they work towards greater equity and justice for students involved in special education.

Each component can be accessed independently through the following map or the full guide can be reached here:

[Click here](#) for quick access to a shortened version of the critical reflective guide for educators.

[Click here](#) for quick access to a shortened version of the critical reflective guide for system leaders.

The full reflective practice guide is also available in French, [here](#).