Thinking Critically About Disability

There are many ways to think about disability. In schools, disability is often considered as an impairment. However, simply thinking about disability as an impairment often reduces disability to an individual experience (Barnes & Mercer, 2010; Barton, 2006; Oliver, 1990). The individual or medical model of disability, where disability is understood as a result of biological, cognitive, or mental health variability, achieves much the same end. The individual or medical model implies that disability means something is "wrong" within the individual and requires "fixing" through services, treatments, and rehabilitation (Brantlinger, 2006). In contrast, many disability advocates embrace a social understanding of disability whereby an individual with an impairment is "disabled" by the conditions they encounter in the everyday (e.g. inaccessible environments and processes, discriminatory attitudes, and so on). This framework is helpful when thinking about socially just practices as it prioritizes addressing and changing social and environmental conditions as opposed to changing the individual.[1]

There are also many cultural understandings of disability. For instance, in Ontario, Western medicine and psychology value particular developmental outcomes over others and have established developmental norms by which all children are measured. However, Indigenous communities have varying understandings of disability and difference that challenge bio-medical frameworks and approaches (Ineese-Nash et al., 2017). In particular, because of a cultural orientation towards collective welfare, difference is not often considered to be a disabling characteristic in itself (Senier, 2013). That is to say that many disabilities within some Indigenous cultures are regarded as holding spiritual significance rather than being a detriment to the individual or community (Lovern & Locust, 2013). In brief, it is the belief that all children are gifts to the community and all children have gifts in addition to and, at times, as a result of identified impairment and/or experience of disability.

Language can be an important way to share disability-related experiences and identities. Person-first language, such as people with disabilities, is typically adopted in international principles and rights legislation. The National Centre for Disability and Journalism (2021) recommends the use of person-first language the preferred identity of particular individuals or groups is unknown. However, many disability advocates and those active within the disability community have adopted identity-first language, as

[1] For more information on disability in a Canadian context, please refer to the following groups: Council of Canadians with Disabilities – http://www.ccdonline.ca/en/humanrights/; Dawn Canada – https://dawncanada.net/; and Disability Justice Network of Ontario – https://www.djno.ca/. https://www.endstreaming.org/

often employed in racial identity (Annamma & Morrison, 2018). Using identity-first language not only recognizes the cultural and experiential solidarity of disability identity, but also emphasizes how people are disabled through their environments – socially, politically, economically. Identity-first language draws attention to the systemic barriers that disable participation. As with all identities, it is our purview that people should be able to name their own experiences. Therefore, throughout this guide, we will adopt both person-first and identity-first language. It is important to note that recent changes recommended by the APStylebook (2021) and the NCDJ (2021) include avoiding the use of the terms "special needs" and "special education", particularly in relation to describing individuals, as many find these terms to be euphemistic, offensive and stigmatizing.

Ableism

Ableism is a form of discrimination that is grounded in the privileging of real or perceived ability. Ableism defines the parameters against which others are measured (Goodley, 2014). Ableism ascribes human value to ability and devalues the participation and contribution of those deemed unable or disabled. In school, ableism informs notions and/or perceptions of a student's ability, capacity, and skill, which can lead to discrimination (see Hall, 2019) as expressed through lower expectations, inaccessible learning environments and material, academic streaming, and a reduction of academic choice (Shifrer, 2013, 2016). According to the Law Commission of Ontario (2012), ableism:

> …may be defined as a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities. (para. 13)

Students can face a number of barriers in education as a result of ableist assumptions. The fact that our education system is not designed to seamlessly educate all students from the moment they enter school is evidence of this inherent ableism. Embedded within educational environments and pedagogical approaches are a variety of design choices, informed by assumptions about the capacities of the "average" student – assumptions that may not be true for many diverse students, including disabled students.

Disability as an Intersectional Experience

Schools and schooling practices can create disabling conditions for students (Barton, 2006; Campbell, 2009; Erevelles, 2014). Just as Crenshaw (1989) describes in her discussion of intersectionality, disability is not experienced in isolation from other socio-demographic experiences, such as the racialized, classed, and gendered experiences. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2014) describes intersectional discrimination in the following way:

> Discrimination may be unique or distinct when it occurs based on two or more *Code* grounds. Such discrimination is said to be "intersectional." The concept of intersectional discrimination recognizes that students' lives involve multiple interrelated identities, and that marginalization and exclusion based on *Code* grounds may exist because of how these identities intersect. (Sec. 7)

Bias related to racism, classism, xenophobia, language learning, and other forms of discrimination can influence how ability is perceived and understood (Annamma et al., 2013; Erevelles et al., 2019; Reid & Knight, 2006). For instance, white, South Asian, or East Asian students are more often perceived to have 'excellent' learning skills compared to Black students, despite having similar levels of achievement (Parekh et al., 2018). In the context of schools, students' identities intersect with how ability and disability are constructed and inform the perceptions, expectations, and attitudes of those around them. For instance, bias related to racial identity may lead to the perception that a racialized child's behaviour is disordered, or that low achievement from a child living in poverty is due to disability as opposed to a lack of access to resources (Artiles et al., 2010; Connor, 2017; Howard et al., 2009).

Intersectionality can also be used to better understand the disabling conditions that particular populations face. For example, for some Indigenous peoples, disability is an intersectional experience influenced by multiple cultural and contextual factors (Ineese-Nash, 2020). Similarly, for racialized students, students who have newly immigrated to Ontario or for students whose families are experiencing poverty, the experience of disability can be influenced by racism, xenophobia as well as economic barriers.

As disability is both relationally and socially produced, this work will draw on the framework of disability justice. Disability justice is oriented towards centring the lived realities, dreams, and desires of disabled peoples, particularly those who have faced marginalization by able-centric societal systems (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018). As a social movement rooted in justice and liberation of disabled communities, disability justice advocates recognize the intersectional experience of disability that may be impacted by multiple forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and colonization (Jampel, 2018). From this perspective, justice can be realized through the dismantling

of ableist systems that produce disablement while recognizing disability as a life experience that holds value in itself (Podlucká, 2020).

Critical Considerations in Special Education

Special education holds a long and important history within Ontario public education.[2] It is important to acknowledge that special education, much like the implementation of academic streaming, was intended as an equity strategy – a strategy committed to the support and education of disabled students. More recently, questions have been raised as to whether special education, as a system, might also be contributing to immediate and long-term barriers for students. Currently, special education functions as a primary source of funding and is also a procedural and social policy strategy for specific forms of educational services. Over the last many generations, special education in Ontario has expanded to include students who have not been formally identified with an exceptionality. The expansion of support was intended to meet the obligation to accommodate students in a timely way, based on a perceived need rather than dependent on a specific medical diagnosis, as required under Ontario's *Human Rights Code* and the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, as well as attempt to address backlogs in service resulting from lengthy identification processes in schools (Office of the Auditor General of Ontario, 2010). Despite the expansion of service and reach, the OHRC (2018) has stated that "'Disability' continues to be the most cited ground of discrimination under the *Human Rights Code* in human rights claims made to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario (HRTO), with significant systemic issues being raised in disability and education claims" (para. 3).

In reviewing the international literature and empirical evidence, identified systemic issues include the way special education assumes a deficit understanding of ability, allocating support and organizing students in relation to their identified "need," impairment, or exceptionality. Other systemic issues related to international special education systems include the process through which students are identified and labelled with categories of impairment as well as the practice of ability-grouping in special education programming (Mitchell, 2015). Identification processes have been long involved in controversy with questions around the validity of assessment material and what intelligence or ability means (Gould, 1996; Ladwig & MacPherson, 2017; Sloan, 2013); how identification categories are defined and understood (Christensen, 1996; Reid et al., 2020; Samuels, 2014); and questions about the role that identification and labels play in supporting students in the classroom (Berman & Connor, 2017). The

[2] If interested in learning more about the history of special education in Ontario, see Chupik and Wright (2006); Ellis (2019); Ellis and Axelrod (2016); Robinson et al. (2012); and Rubinoff (2017).

legitimacy of special education identifications and placements is further called into question when students' demographic and program data reveal evidence of disproportionate representation within special education categories and programming across students' identities, particularly in terms of Indigeneity, race, class, gender, ability, and sexual orientation.

As a practice, special education programming often advocates for ability-grouping (Danforth, et al. 2006; Ellis, 2013). Ability-grouping is the organization of students by categories of impairment or perceived ability into ability-based classes or programs. Extensive research has shown that ability-grouping, generally, can create barriers to students' access to academic opportunities and overall achievement (Hehir, et al., 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2012). This is particularly true for students organized into groups designated as having a "lower" ability (Archer et al., 2018). Research has shown that regardless of demonstrated ability, placement in an elementary special education program can, for many students, limit access to higher academic programming in high school (Parekh & Brown, 2019) and significantly limit students' access to post-secondary education[3] (Brown et al., 2020). Students report that being involved in special education can result in experiences of stigma and discrimination in school (Provincial Advocate for Children and Youth, 2016). Researchers and advocates (Canadian Research Center on Inclusive Education; Community Living Ontario; Inclusive Education Canada; Parents of Black Children) also argue that many students who are identified and placed in special education programs could be better supported and be successful in the general classroom, and they question whether special education placements can be a form of systemic exclusion (Ferri & Connor, 2005).

Who Are We Talking About?

As this guide points out, there are many ways to understand disability, but when thinking about disability through an equity and social justice lens, it is important to think about disability from a sociological perspective – one that does not require pathology to be "real" or experienced. Students who are traditionally understood as "having a disability" are not the only students who are disabled by schooling practices, particularly practices related to measures of ability, ability-grouping, and special education. For instance, in special education, there are students who are born with or acquire visible impairments, who may use mobility devices, and who may use augmentative communication strategies. There are students who have been formally identified

[3] Note that, in this context, post-secondary education refers to college or university education. From the limited research available, apprenticeships are predominantly an indirect post-secondary education destination (see Gallagher-Mackay, 2017).

through school as having various invisible impairments, with program or service decisions supported by psychoeducational assessments or medical experts. Similarly, there are students who access special education services and an Individual Education Plan (IEP), but who have not been formally identified through the school. There are students who access special education services yet who will not experience stigma or disablement, nor identify as disabled. There are also students who self-identify as disabled, but are not recognized or supported through special education. Lastly, there are students who arrive to school with no evidence of impairment, but are still perceived as "'disordered," or as requiring special education intervention. Each of these groups of students may have varying degrees of experience of disablement or disability and subsequently elect to identify as disabled or as someone with a disability. It may be interesting to note that, based on a study using Toronto District School Board (TDSB) data, only about a third of students identified through special education as having a "special education need" also self-identified as having a disability (Parekh & Brown, 2020).

Giftedness: Where Does It Fit?

In Ontario, giftedness is part of the special education system. Through special education, students can be referred, assessed, and identified as gifted. Once identified, students are entitled to an IEP, and, depending on the program options available within the school board, students may be offered a placement within a self-contained (full-time or part-time) gifted program. In terms of academic outcomes (e.g. credit accumulation, graduation, post-secondary education), students identified as gifted and/or placed within gifted programs typically fare well in education and, when they are tracked, fare similarly well across placements (Brown & Parekh, 2010). Empirical studies have shown varied results from the congregation and/or acceleration of students identified as gifted, with both positive and mixed outcomes (see Brulles et al., 2010; Steenbergen-Hu et al., 2016). However, there is extensive debate over whether grouping together students identified as gifted leads to higher academic achievement or whether the programming offered within gifted programs that is accompanied with high expectations for performance is the key (see McClure, 2007). Also, gifted education may not support all learners equally (see Redding & Grissom, 2021).

Working within a deficit framework of disability, giftedness is often positioned as a highly valued identification that can open doors to additional academic opportunities that are interesting and engaging and that promote a more privileged status. Giftedness is also largely determined based on psychometric tests (Gaztambide et al., 2013), which have a complicated history of racial and class discrimination and bias (Gould, 1996). Giftedness, as both identification and programming, has been challenged over its

disproportionately white, male, and wealthy demographic (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Mansfield, 2015; Parekh, et al, 2018). In fact, when comparing the demographic profiles of the highest achieving students compared to students identified as gifted, the result presents two very distinct groups. While students identified as gifted are more likely to identify as white and male, whose families have high-status professional positions, the highest achievers are more often female students who identified as South Asian, Southeast Asian, and East Asian (Parekh et al., 2018). As such, questions as to whether gifted programming advantages already advantaged students have been raised (Onstad, 2020). (See Table 1 and Figure 2 in "Explore the Data" for more information.)

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