Critical Reflective Practice Guide - Shortened Leadership Guide

Biases such as racism, classism, and ableism continue to play a significant role in our education system (OHRC, 2018). As such, critical reflective practice can help educational leadership identify and dismantle classroom- and school-based barriers that disproportionately and negatively affect students believed to have an impairment impacting their learning [See Shortened Educator Guide on front page].

Often, system policy and practice are developed and implemented without intentional consultation with the families and communities most impacted. However, centring students, their families, and communities is essential. This work involves:

- Intentionally honouring students and their families, guardians, and, where they wish, community leaders/advocates within all decision-making processes related to special education. This requires educators to have relationships in these communities that are not solely with the families whose children are struggling.
- Acknowledging and ending practices that exclude families from participating in decision-making.
- Educating students and their families on the implications of special education placements and academic tracking so they can make informed decisions.
- Utilizing the expertise within communities to develop anti-bias approaches to special education and disability.
- Encouraging the advocacy of communities to support families as they navigate the various schooling and special education processes.
- Providing opportunities to educate students, their families, and communities on the various educational decision-making processes.
- Creating professional learning for educators to engage in self-reflection as they deepen their understanding of current data trends on the impact of special education decisions, particularly on racialized and marginalized students.

The Early Years

The early years are different from school age programming because they are part of a range of settings and systems, including social services, health, education, and community programs, and they serve children alongside their families. In the early years, families are served by many programs alongside their children. This is very different from family engagement or consultation for children of school age (K–12), where the program purpose is driven by curriculum and school-led goals.

Families experience many demands on their time and resources, including the work and courage it takes to engage in relationships with educators who may not hold the same cultural viewpoints. Educators can support families by ensuring that families are seen as decision-makers, while neither expecting nor demanding their participation.

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:

- *Ensure families have access to key information related to the early years*. Enhance educator capacity in both knowledge and practices related to the early years. In early entry presentations and materials, provide family/caregivers with the information they need to be able to participate in decision-making and support their children. Encourage questions from families as they learn about the system and what is available for their children. Ensure continuity in staffing, transportation, and other systems so that parents can build relationships with school personnel. Review and become familiar with what services/supports are available in your area, and which services and supports the family knows. Invite families to bring whomever they like to meetings, ensuring that they are aware of board policy around attendance. Recognize the early years' services and programs as partners in students' education and family support.

- *Acknowledge and respond to difference*. Children have the right to early intervention. Differences come from a diversity of physical, cognitive, emotional, and biological characteristics. These differences, however, are understood through various cultural lenses. Inclusive practice does not ignore difference or aim to achieve sameness. Acknowledge difference and respond by adjusting practice and approaches in the classroom.

Questions for reflection:
- What role do families currently play in decisions relating to their child's educational pathway?
- How can schools further engage and effectively build trust with guardians/families without adding additional demands on them?
- How can schools ensure that guardians/families are given sufficient information about academic trajectories and outcomes to be able to make truly informed decisions about their children's educational pathways?

Core Tenets of Inclusive Instruction Across K–12 Classrooms

There is a popular belief that "ability" is a singular and fixed quanlity within students that can be objectively measured (Ladwig & McPherson, 2017). This view, coupled with the historic overrepresentation in special education programming, and in turn, lower graduation rates, of students from Black, Indigenous, racialized, and lower-income communities, has reinforced harmful narratives of low student "ability" within marginalized populations. Students with disabilities and/or disabled students[1] are also often perceived by educators as though their impairments represent their whole selves rather than just one facet of their complex identity, a phenomenon known as "disability spread" (Sapon-Shevin, 2014). When educators reduce students' multiple identities into single labels, they tend to respond from a place of misconception and stereotype (Sapon-Shevin, 2014).

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[1] Person-first language, such as people with disabilities, is typically adopted in international principles and rights legislation. Identity-first language draws attention to the systemic barriers that disable participation. Throughout this guide, we adopt both person-first and identity-first language. See Full Guide for further discussion on language.

Biases result in lower expectations, the provision of poorer quality learning experiences, and the reduction of intellectual demands on learning tasks, all of which lead to diminished academic outcomes for marginalized students. Research on the relationship between modified curriculum, sustained academic gaps, and limited post-secondary access is beginning to emerge, suggesting that modifying curriculum, particularly in the early grades, can result in reduced access to both Academic-level programming in high school and post-secondary options (Brown et al., forthcoming).

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:
- *Focus school/system leadership on equity, anti-racism, and anti-oppression.* All leaders must understand the interplay between racism and ableism and how it manifests in schools and classrooms, resulting in the further marginalization of students. School and system leaders must create equitable and inclusive learning environments where all staff and students develop their critical consciousness and interrogate bias, racism, and oppression. It is important that this learning be integrated into the school improvement process, which is both measured and monitored.

- *Identify, address, and eliminate discriminatory systems, structures, and practices.* Critically examine micro- and macro-level policies and processes to identify potential areas in need of development. Leaders should ask critical questions about how different students are treated and organized in their schools, and how the system might be reinforcing societal inequities. Collecting identity-based data is a starting point to uncover or provide greater clarity about systemic discrimination, but schools can also gather student voice and qualitative information. It is important to study institutional structures, processes, and practices by monitoring how decisions are made locally and who is making them (Underwood, Smith, et al., 2019). If discriminatory patterns are identified, it is the responsibility of leadership to immediately take steps to eliminate them.

- *Prioritize accessibility and participation.* Ensure that schools are accessible to students and their families. Ensure that transportation is accessible and does not limit the amount of time students spend within the school. Ensure disabled children are equitably and respectfully involved in extracurricular events/activites. Solely celebrating students who demonstrate excellence in performance or achievement can exclude the contributions of others. Ensure school celebrations and events showcase a diversity of students' gifts.

- *Think through and engage system research.* Continue to develop and enhance equity competencies in school leadership and student voice through youth action research, making sure to seek out voices from historically marginalized and disproportionately represented students relating to disability and special education needs, race, ethnic origin, religious diversity, Indigenous identity, gender, sexual diversity, class, and other categories of diversity. Developing and

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measuring the impact of equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive learning environments must be central to all school- and board-level improvement efforts.

- *Develop school and system improvement plans alongside educational stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, community organizations, advocacy groups)* (see Shah, 2018). It is important to model inclusive and responsive practices in leadership roles. School and system leaders should actively seek out voices from students and parents from historically marginalized groups and community organizations that also work directly with families when creating improvement plans.

- *Measure success by student participation and engagement, in addition to achievement of curriculum expectations* (see Shah, 2018). Meaningful participation in curricular activities is often a valuable indicator of successful teaching and of having successfully supported students' skill development (Parekh & Underwood, 2015). School administrators should visit classrooms frequently to support educators, measure the effectiveness of classroom structures, and monitor levels of student participation. Also, ensure that students, as much as possible, participate in rich grade-level learning with peers, and that they are provided with adequate supports within the classroom.

- *Engage in critical reflection and ongoing professional learning related to disability*. Recent Canadian research has demonstrated that principals often work in isolation and lack significant professional learning related to disability (Sider et al., 2021). Engaging in critical reflection and ongoing professional learning can help build principals' efficacy and leadership capacity.[2]

- See *Equity and Human Rights in Special Education: Reflective Practice Guide [full]* *(link)* or *Shortened Educator Guide* for more on Universal Design and Differentiated Instruction *(link)*

Questions for reflection:
- What experiences have framed your skills, knowledge, and attitudes about inclusive education?
- What structures, policies and practices may be perpetuating societal inequities in your school/system? What qualitative and quantitative data do you need to access in order to learn more about your school/system community?
- How do you address system data with a critical lens that does not perpetuate deficit thinking about historically oppressed populations?

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[2] Several web-based case studies and case inquiry resources are provided by Lead to Include (https://www.leadtoinclude.org/resources) as well as through the Ontario College of Teachers (see https://www.oct.ca/-/media/PDF/Exploring%20Leadership%20Practices%20through%20Case%20Inquiry/ExplLdrshpPrctcsCseInqry_en__web.pdf)

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- How do you know if your staff are engaging in inclusive and culturally responsive classroom practices?
- What measures can be employed to check for progress in inclusive practice and secure accountability?
- Are the programs at your school accessible to and inclusive of disabled students? Are there admissions or entrance criteria that implicitly exclude students with disabilities?
- How often is disability considered in terms of mitigating circumstances around safe school practices?
- If there are special education programs within your school, where are they located? How have they been integrated into the school community?

Special Education Referral and Assessment

Students are entitled to early identification and intervention. As such, special education can organize services, technology, and resources critical to students' academic success. There is also a great deal that can be integrated into classroom practice (e.g. pedagogical strategies, accommodations) that does not require special education involvement. So when should educators bring students forward for further referrals and/or assessments through special education? The answer is that each situation is unique and will require unique consideration of contextual factors. One of the complicating issues with special education referrals is that the very difference perceived as impairment or exceptionality may be based on cultural, linguistic, class, or demographic experiences unfamiliar to those in the position of identifying difference. In particular, it is critical that the learning environment be assessed, not just the student.

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:
- *Clear communication around implications of student's involvement in special education.* Families need to understand what lies ahead for their child and what they can expect from their child's involvement in special education. System data should be made available to students and families. Families should be privy to the expected duration and purpose of their child's involvement in special education. Do families know what they will receive when they go through a formal IPRC meeting? Could those same aims be met working with the classroom teacher and school staff?

- *Consult with families.* What do families want out of their child's involvement with special education? Can those goals be met within the classroom?

- *Tracking student support and referrals to special education.* Track which students are offered accommodation and support within the classroom outside of special education and which students are referred to special education. This is important when it comes to understanding and working through bias.

Questions for reflection:

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- What are the demographics of students in special education or on an IEP? Why might student demographics be disproportionately distributed across special education programs or identification categories?
- How much do schools share with families about the special education process and outcomes before they become involved? Do they know the kinds of access to services and resources their child will receive? Are those adequate? Do they know how long their child will be in a particular program? What will they gain? What will they lose?
- Principals must sign off on students' IEPs, regardless of whether they were generated through an IPRC process or not, to say they have consulted with families, but what does that consultation look like? Are families happy with how the IEP was developed? Are they satisfied with the content, strategies, and goals? If not, what strategies do school and system leaders have in place to ensure that students' IEPs reflect the values and goals of the student and their family?
- How are referrals to special education being tracked around students' socio-demographic characteristics and outcomes?

Racism and Bias in Education

Many students with various racial identities experience racism in education. Historically, students who self-identify as Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or Mixed have tended to experience barriers along their academic trajectories (Brown & Parekh, 2010; Parekh, 2013). However, other racialized groups also experience racism, such as anti-Asian racism, that may not have direct effects on academic achievement specifically. In addition to racism, students may also experience barriers in school based on their gender or sexual identity as well as their families' economic position. When examining data related to special education and racial disproportionality, two groups of students are consistently more likely to be overrepresented within the special education system: Indigenous and Black students.

Colonialism and Indigeneity

Indigenous and disabled experiences of schooling in Canada have been fraught with harmful, and at times lethal, practices (Ineese-Nash, 2020). There is a need to integrate Indigenous perspectives in classroom settings as a way to dispel stereotypical framings of Indigenous peoples, support reconciliation, and foster spaces where Indigenous children's unique methods of engagement are not pathologized.

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:
- *Adopt Indigenous-led practices and ensure there is Indigenous community involvement in key educational decisions involving Indigenous children*. Understand that Indigenous families' histories may include trauma produced through their own experiences of education; therefore, relationship-building and trust are critical. Adopt an expanded view of family that includes extended family as part of the support for children. Encourage families to bring a trusted

community member with them to meetings. Ensure there is representation from the Indigenous community and/or formalized partnerships with Indigenous service agencies to participate in IPRC decisions and interventions related to Indigenous children. As recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, "Enabl[e] parents to fully participate in the education of their children" (TRC, 2015, Education Reform, Call to Action 10, vi, p. 150), and "Develop and implement Kindergarten to Grade Twelve curriculum and learning resources on Aboriginal peoples in Canadian history, and the history and legacy of residential schools" (Education for Reconciliation, Call to Action 63, i, p. 238).

Questions for reflection:
- As Indigenous children with disabilities are often doubly marginalized through the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, how can we envision targeted approaches to serving the needs of this population?
- How can Indigenous parents/families and community leaders engage in self-determination, self-governance, and be meaningfully involved in envisioning more appropriate, relevant, and responsive pedagogical approaches, and ensure that their input is incorporated into education policy, program, and funding decisions?
- Examine and respond to available data, both qualitative (e.g. educator observation, parent concern) and quantitative (e.g. student census, identity-based data, test scores, suspension/expulsion data) that may show gaps or disproportionalities. What does the data show in your school/district?

Anti-Black Racism and Schooling

Anti-Black racism manifests through educational policies, pedagogy, and practices and is often rendered invisible when coupled with the intersections of ability. Canadian and international research consistently show that students who self-identify as Black are one of the racialized groups most likely to be negatively impacted through special education practices and processes (Erevelles, et al., 2006; Parekh & Brown, 2019). Moreover, Black students are more likely to be perceived as demonstrating problematic behaviour in school, be subject to excessive suspensions and expulsions, and experience the "school-to-prison pipeline" (Erevelles, 2014; Skiba et al., 2014, 2016). Anti-Black racism can result in the overrepresentation of Black students in special education programs; the disproportionate implementation of IEPs in the early years; academic streaming in secondary school; and the disproportionate use of institutionalized processes/policies such as school-based team meetings and IPRCs.

Guidance/strategies for school system leaders:
- *Commit to greater representation and advocacy within educational decisions as well as within the school.* For example, ensure someone who is knowledgeable in special education, with a relationship to the child and their community, is part of identification, placement, and program decisions. Review assessment, placement, and admissions practices and consider how they create barriers for or exclude Black students and their families. Support, train, and create

opportunities for staff, educators, and trustees to engage in anti-racist work and its relationship to decision-making processes.

Question for reflection:
- What strategies do system leaders currently employ to promote engagement, advocacy, and relationships with Black families and communities? Where might these strategies be falling short? What opportunities are schools currently offering Black students and their families?
- Examine and respond to available data, both qualitative (e.g. educator observation, parent concern) and quantitative (e.g. student census, identity-based data, test scores, suspension/expulsion data), that may show gaps or disproportionalities. What does the data show in your school/district?
- Who is deciding which opportunities are valued and made available? What are ways to ensure there is community direction and feedback in terms of what is offered at school?

Gender and Sexuality

Studies conducted in Canada and internationally have shown that male-identifying students and students who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ are overrepresented within special education categories and placements (Brown & Parekh, 2013; Yau, et al., 2015). In terms of gender, research shows that female students are more likely to be perceived as having excellent learning skills compared to their male peers (Parekh et al., 2018). Research results raise questions around gendered expectations related to behaviour and performance as well as how students may be socialized differently by gendered expectations in terms of their relationship to school/academic work. Research also shows differences in experiences of bullying and harassment across gender and sexual identities (Yau et al., 2014). Students who self-identify as LGBTQ2S+ have long reported a greater sense of exclusion in school (Parekh, 2014). Exclusion may be related to the heteronormativity embedded within the culture of a school, a lack of engagement through curriculum, and the continued stigma around teaching gender and sexuality issues.

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:
- *Ensure there are equitable opportunities for student leadership across gender identities*. Offer students equitable guidance around pathways regardless of gender identity. Support clubs that create safe, motivating, and supportive spaces for students who identify as male, female, or non-binary. Support students' leadership in creating Gay–Straight or Queer–Straight Alliances.

Questions for reflection:
- How does gender preference emerge through language? How do curricular areas become gendered?
- How often do sexist, gender-biased, homophobic, and transphobic incidents occur in your school? How do you intervene? What are the consequences?

- How does heteronormativity manifest in your language and in your expectations of and relationships with students?

Class

Economic privilege has had a historic relationship to higher academic achievement and opportunities, while poverty is often associated with low school performance and overrepresentation within special education identifications and placements (Mansfield, 2015; Reid & Knight, 2006). Access to resources plays an important role in perceived ability, as noted by the significant relationship between high wealth and identification of giftedness in students (Parekh et al., 2017).Literature has shown that poverty can lead to the misidentification of disability (Howard et al., 2009) and that students in low income homes are more likely to be represented in special education categories and programs indicative of low capacity (Artiles et al., 2010; Brown, 2010). Furthermore, as a result of historical and systemic racism, there continues to be a relationship between race and opportunities for economic security (Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, 2019). Therefore, it is imperative that when measuring and responding to student ability, educators take into account that students may have inequitable access to resources.

Guidance/strategies for school and system leaders:
- *Identify and strategize ways to mitigate economic demands on students and families in relation to their academic pathways, and strategize ways to ensure equitable access to in-school events and opportunities*. Learn about the costs that can hinder students' pathways (e.g. application fees, tutoring supports) and strategize ways to support access. Ensure that families who contribute financially to the school have an equal voice in school decisions as families who do not. Intentionally disrupt patterns that enable families with more social and economic capital to have more influence in decisions. Recognize that access to specialized programming and greater opportunities in education are often related to social class.

Questions for reflection:
- Identify and examine how your school asks for funds from families. What are the processes in place when families cannot pay? For instance, is economic circumstance a condition upon which children are excluded from school events? What types of labour are families asked to perform in order to demonstrate the need for economic exemption?
- What role does fundraising play in your school? How might that contribute to an inequality of access to resources within the school?[3]

Synthesis prepared by Luke Reid. For the full guide and references: Please refer to Parekh, G., Cameron, D., Gaymes San Vicente, A., Gordon, A., Ineese-Nash, N.,

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[3] For more on challenging the inequities inherent to school fundraising, see Winton (2018).

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James, C. E., Murray, K., Reid, L., To, J., & Underwood, K. (2022). *Equity and Human Rights in Special Education: Reflective Practice Guide.* Toronto: York University