

**Differentiating  
Instruction and Assessment  
for  
Diverse Learners:**

**A Review of Policy Directions  
Across Canada**

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## **Background for the Project**

For some time, Alberta Education and other Ministries and Departments of Education in Canada and elsewhere have been working toward making curriculum and instruction more accessible to more students.

Notions of designing competency-based instruction, learner-centred approaches, and universal design for learning have emerged in academic literature, the latter more recently in the early 1990's. (Hitchcock et al, 2002).

As Alberta Education moves forward in its work to ensure that all learners have access to curriculum and instruction, and that these are designed to ensure maximum accessibility, it was determined that a review of current practices in Canada would be in order.

This project was therefore undertaken with a view to determining key practices and directions in addressing the question of universal design in curriculum and assessment in the four Western Provinces, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Newfoundland. Although not contained in the original plan, the contractor included Nova Scotia because that province appeared to be sufficiently different from the other two in a number of respects.

The analysis was designed across four general areas of student need requiring attention to make Universal Design a reality. These are students with special needs, Aboriginal students, students requiring English as a Second Language/dialect, and those students sometimes described as being "at risk". It was determined that to the extent possible, analysis would include specifics with regard to these four groups. At that same time, it needs to be recognized that these groups are not mutually exclusive – for example an English Language learner might also have a disability, or some Aboriginal students might also be considered to be "at risk".

## **Methodology**

In consultation with staff in Alberta Education responsible for the project, it was determined that the contractor would conduct a series of telephone interviews and review key documents (both paper and electronic) and other references central to the project.

For purposes of the telephone interviews, the following questions were agreed-upon:

1. Who are students with diverse Needs in your jurisdiction? (i.e. how are they defined, identified, and served?)
2. How is the information you gather on students with diverse needs (for example, students with special education needs, students of Aboriginal heritage, students who require English as an Additional Language/dialect instruction and students described as being 'at risk') used to determine Ministry policy/guidelines?

3. What approach does your jurisdiction currently take in the development of curriculum (programs of study, authorized resources) in order to accommodate students with diverse needs?
  - 3a. Is the current work of your jurisdiction modeled/inspired by another model? Please elaborate.
4. What resources (human, materials, and processes) and instructional supports are in place for students with diverse needs and their teachers?
5. What is your plan for measuring the success of your efforts to improve access to curriculum and assessment?
  - What are the success indicators you use?
  - What data do you collect regarding these indicators?
  - How confident are you in the measures being used to determine student success?
6. What provincial assessments/examinations processes are being used at the high school (secondary) level?
  - Diploma exams
  - Competency exams
  - Course marks only
  - Exit portfolios
  - School leaving certificate... etc?
7. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked you as it relates to your jurisdiction's efforts to accommodate students with diverse needs in the school system?

It was recognized at the outset of discussions that any one person in a Department or Ministry of Education might not be able to answer all of the questions, and that to the extent possible, the contractor would attempt to interview more than one key individual.

In the course of the research, over 100 key documents were reviewed, and information obtained via telephone interview and electronic communications from 35 senior staff in Departments and Ministries across the country.

### **Limitations to Methodology**

The information gathered is only as complete as the combination of telephone interviews and identified print or electronic resources permits. It should be recognized that some respondents provided more detail than others and this is reflected in the analysis. It is therefore possible that projects, initiatives, or resources exist that were not identified to the researcher through interviews or through various search engines.

## Summary of Findings and Analysis

### 1. *Definitions, Identification and Services:*

#### **Definitions:**

In most cases, definitions were related to funding criteria. Often, these are expanded in resource documents intended to bring clarity to the instructional process.<sup>1</sup>

Details regarding the definitions of students with special needs varied considerably in that types of special need are organized differently in descriptors used for funding. Nevertheless, at a core level, the key elements are comparable, and are dependent on a combination of the type of special need and the severity of the condition.

Definitions of Aboriginal students are not always contained in Provincial documents. Virtually all jurisdictions, either implicitly or explicitly, rely on definitions consistent with Section 35 of the *Constitution Act (1982)*.

With regard to students who require English as a Second Language, criteria across the country tend to be highly consistent, and revolve around the extent to which the student has the linguistic skills to manage the curriculum, and their ability to function within their Canadian environment, both in school and outside of school. There is recognition that these students may be either foreign-born or Canadian-born. Some jurisdictions specifically state that students who speak a dialect other than standard English should also be considered as eligible for services.

There is less agreement about the definition of "at risk" if there is any definition or recognition at all. New Brunswick was the Province with the greatest specificity in its definition. Of those jurisdictions where "at risk" is either implied or specifically stated, socio-economic status and poverty tended to be the most often mentioned factors. Saskatchewan respondents cited a definition in a 2000 document. In other cases, the definitions were understood in broad terms although no specific definition was cited.

#### **Identification:**

Students with special needs are almost universally identified using initially a school-based resource team, followed by other specialists as needed to assess various components of the child's functioning. Implicit in the identification process is the expectation that the parents be involved and consent to any formal assessment, that a team of professionals and parent(s) together work on an individual plan for the students, and that the plan be monitored on a regular basis and updated as necessary.

The identification of Aboriginal students for some jurisdictions was somewhat more problematic than for other diverse groups. All of those jurisdictions interviewed relied on self-identification of Aboriginal students attending public schools. Several respondents mentioned the sensitivity in Aboriginal communities around identification and the need for Aboriginal communities to understand the reasons why such information might be helpful. Manitoba described a process they have undertaken to work with Aboriginal communities to improve the identification process so that they have better data on the needs of these students and are better positioned to respond to them.

English as a Second Language/Dialect students (some jurisdictions refer to them as English as an Additional Language (EAL) are almost universally identified through an assessment of their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English in relation to the demands of the curriculum. Several have produced standards or rubrics to assist teachers in determining the level of functioning across these areas of English Language Arts.

When identifying "at risk", provinces tended to rely heavily on Statistics Canada regarding SES factors such as income levels, percentage of single-parent households, etc. These data are applied to a school jurisdiction or a school, and do not refer to an individual child. One jurisdiction (British Columbia), mentioned that as a consequence of a recent Human Rights decision, attention was being paid to risk factors which arise as a result of societal responses to homosexual, bisexual or trans-gendered individuals, whether this is the students themselves or their parents/guardians.

### **Services Provided:**

Across the diversity spectrum, all jurisdictions described the responsibility for determining the services provided as resting at the school district/division level. These vary although there are generally guidelines or criteria for service that must be met in order to be eligible for supplemental funding across most areas of diversity.

For students with special needs, the elements for service delivery are very similar across jurisdictions and are laid out in program guidelines. Some provinces provide for regional support personnel, special schools (generally for the deaf) or co-operative agreements between school districts/divisions where a single district on its own is unable to provide specialists, particularly in low-enrolment or sparsely populated areas.

Typically, the Provinces provide some highly specialized services, such as the production of Braille books either directly, through arms-length units or through contracts with individual school districts/divisions or non-governmental agencies or organizations. The network of Provincial Resource Programs in British Columbia is somewhat unique, although elements of most of the services provided by them exist in many provinces.

In the area of technology, the SET-BC program is somewhat of a lighthouse program, and provinces such as New Brunswick, even though geographically separated by considerable distance, has made use of its services.

Within Departments and Ministries, resource personnel provide leadership and co-ordination in curriculum development and assessment. Staff in Aboriginal Education units have been particularly active in these areas in Western Canada.

Newfoundland is unique in the area of services for Aboriginal students because it does not have the same history of Federal/Provincial agreements and is only now developing these.

## **2. Data Collection:**

### **Student-level Data:**

A common movement across the country is toward the collection of student-level data. Alberta and British Columbia have the longest history with this type of data, in which each student is assigned a personal identification number. Saskatchewan and Ontario are at the beginning stages of the process. Nova Scotia, while ready to proceed has not yet been able to implement due to some technological compatibility issues.

Not all provinces include the same elements or indicators in their data sets and in some cases there have been separate data sets kept in different departments which are not yet linked in a common data set that will allow for analysis by sub-population.

British Columbia has one of the longest histories of producing analyses by sub-population. This has been used to good advantage in the area of Aboriginal Education to leverage targeted funds and to draw attention to the educational needs of Aboriginal students through its public reporting of the data.

In the case of jurisdictions that have a longer history of student-level systems, it is possible to draw trend lines in some detail for sub-groups as one measure of system improvement or decline.

### **Types of Data Collected:**

All jurisdictions, with some small variations, carry out some type of basic skills assessment on a periodic basis. Most commonly, these occur at grades 3, 5 and either 9 or 10. There are some variations in how this is done. For example, Saskatchewan uses a sampling procedure while others test all of the students at a particular grade level.

Most provinces have data about results on Provincial examinations, graduation rates, and early school leaving information in most jurisdictions. However, the ability to describe these in terms of sub-groups differs depending on whether or not data is at the student level.

In some instances, jurisdictions carry out periodic analyses of sub-populations where they do not have student-level data, but the process tends to be labour-intensive.

There were differences across jurisdictions in whether or not they have data about participation rates in various Provincial assessments. Again, this was most likely to be the case in jurisdictions with student-level data systems.

With regard to students with special needs, there tends to be basic data about the numbers of students in each of the categories used for funding purposes where the funding level is driven by the numbers of students reported. Generally, these are for students with more intensive special needs. In some jurisdictions, students with less intensive special needs are also reported in terms of numbers, while in others they are estimated based on prior or research-driven prevalence data in which case the numbers are derived based on total student enrolment.

Most often mentioned as a challenge was the question of how to collect data and monitor outcomes for students with special needs who have individual program plans. (IEP's or IPP's). Jurisdictions such as Manitoba, Nova Scotia and Ontario mentioned efforts at the school jurisdiction or provincial level to try to develop systems for this.

As noted earlier, Aboriginal data is based on self-identification and personnel interviewed were cautious about linking this information with other types of data because of the likelihood that it would not be representative. In other cases, where numbers based on self-identification approached the prevalence levels produced by Statistics Canada, the level of confidence for purposes of analysis was higher. The most comprehensive publicly-reported data linkages for Aboriginal students was found in British Columbia.

There were variations in the data collected for students of English as a Second Language/dialect. Some jurisdictions differentiate between those who are Canadian-born and those who are foreign born (for example, Alberta). Jurisdictions vary in the length of time that a student may be reported as ESL for funding purposes and this limitation impacts data analyses.

There was no jurisdiction that collected specific data on at-risk students, but those with a focus on this question made use of Statistics Canada SES data, often identifying specific schools or districts/divisions with a high frequency of vulnerable families and linking this for comparative purposes with achievement information from that school or district. These jurisdictions were then most likely to be compared with Provincial achievement data, and to receive special funding for various initiatives to support students, or to improve literacy or numeracy levels.

A number of jurisdictions, whether or not they have student-level data systems in place, require that school districts/divisions submit improvement plans, establish goals for improvement, and identify the ways in which they intend to measure goal attainment.

Two provinces (Alberta and Saskatchewan) also carry out periodic satisfaction surveys of students, parents and teachers. Neither at this stage has linked public reporting of satisfaction survey results to student-level data through personal identifiers for analysis of satisfaction within diversity groups.

### **3. Uses of Data:**

Likely the most surprising finding in the telephone surveys was the difficulty that Ministry and Departmental personnel in general had in describing how data is used for policy development and/or review.

The two most common uses of data described were for purposes of reporting to the public and for determining funding allocations to school districts/divisions.

Virtually every jurisdiction mentioned the importance of qualitative as well as quantitative data, and the importance of feedback from advisory groups and stakeholders in the process of policy development and refinement. Not infrequently, quantitative data was discussed with such groups to contextualize the data and to reconcile the quantitative results with qualitative information.

Some jurisdictions used data from both local and provincial sources in the review of improvement plans with school districts – as the basis for face-to-face discussions with key personnel at the district level.

Identifying correlates within the data set has not been a commonly used strategy. None of those interviewed described carrying out in-depth analysis, although correlations such as gender with other elements was sometimes examined in some diversity groups. If done at all, they were on a one-off basis such as in Ontario, where the Ministry contracted for a study to examine the factors that influence and predict academic success of ESL students, and to assist the Ministry with decisions related to curriculum development, resource allocation, and support provision. Such studies were not mentioned in other jurisdictions.

### **4. Approaches to Curriculum Development to Accommodate Diversity:**

There are a number of commonalities across jurisdictions in their approach to curriculum development to accommodate diversity and they will not be described in detail here. (See Appendix A for further detail). Most jurisdictions operate on a predictable cycle of curriculum development and revision. In most instances, a review of research literature is carried out early in the process. Generally, an early step is consultation, both within the Department/Ministry and externally with stakeholder groups regarding the need for and extent of revision.

There is a tension between setting a universal set of learning outcomes for each grade and subject and meeting the needs of a broad array of students with diverse needs and backgrounds. Every jurisdiction has a set of resource materials (either print, electronic, or both) designed to assist teachers in adapting the curriculum.

The challenges are different at the Elementary level than they are at Secondary, largely because secondary teacher training tends to be content-driven rather than pedagogically driven. While this was acknowledged, none of the responders described any systematic process for adjusting the training

program in collaboration with training institutions. This may be that the notion of academic freedom might stand in the way of meaningful reform to reflect the current needs of students. Quebec, in its written strategic plan, does address teacher training requirements to implement the new approach to curriculum but the extent to which training institutions are responding was not entirely clear.

For some time, Saskatchewan has used the concept of the "Adaptive Dimension" in conceptualizing curriculum which is universally accessible. The point of reference for the Adaptive Dimension is always the approved curriculum. Within this context, foundational objectives are not modified. The adaptive variables are adjusted so that the established curricular objectives can be achieved. This responsibility falls to the classroom teacher.

In Saskatchewan, there is a heavy cross-curricular emphasis in the area of English Language Arts.

Ontario has launched a new initiative known as the "Six Ways" strategy for Secondary schools. It gives students more ways to accumulate credits to graduate, and aims to improving the quality of a high school education. The 6 new programs to allow students to customize their high school experience around learning that is relevant to them. They include new Specialist High Skills Majors that let students bundle courses to prepare for specific careers. (At the time of interview, these were in in 27 boards). Students can also take advantage of dual credit programs, expanded co-operative education and Lighthouse projects that could include credit recovery and alternative education. (There is reportedly some resistance from the Teachers Federations to the dual credit system.)

The Quebec approach is unique in that the Province has set a direction in which there are five key areas of study as a focus for preschool and Kindergarten and the first six years of elementary school and the first three years in Secondary school, after which there is greater diversification. The most unique feature is that the elementary and secondary programs are arranged on a multi-year basis. For example, elementary school has three two-year cycles. In each cycle, new learning is introduced in the first year and consolidated in the second. Cross-curricular work is expected across content areas.

In the area of programs for ESL students, Manitoba has made a deliberate effort in to address the issue of war-affected children, and the need to support them emotionally as well as academically. Ontario has a well-developed series of ESL courses at the Secondary level which allows students to earn credits toward graduation while they are learning the language.

Aboriginal efforts in curriculum development have focussed on two fronts: First, to ensure that Aboriginal voices and culture are reflected across the curriculum, and second, to ensure that there are opportunities for learning Aboriginal languages. The Western Canadian Protocol has produced a common curriculum framework for Aboriginal Language and Culture programs.

Nova Scotia is unique in the sense that it has historically had a sizeable African-Nova Scotian population. In 1994 the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) produced a report which demonstrated the realities of the African Nova Scotian experience in an education system that is described as devoid of any effective policies essential and sympathetic to their needs. It created an awareness of the need for a re-visiting of curriculum, policies and services in recognition of this population in the schools of the province. The African Canadian Services Division was established in the Department of Education in 1996 to implement the Department's response to the BLAC Report on Education.

In British Columbia, a Universal Design for Learning Project (UDL) is just under way to provide schools with training, equipment, and resources to implement UDL-based learning practices. The Project is a partnership venture between seven school districts and SET-BC to provide a coordinated effort for UDL-focused information sharing, lesson development, and access to technology for BC school districts. The focus of the BC UDL Project 2007-2008 is Language Arts Instruction, grades 4 through 10.

#### **5. *Models for Curriculum Development from Elsewhere:***

The most frequently mentioned models for curriculum development were New Zealand and Finland, followed by Australia. They were seen by respondents as being competency-based and child-centred. The New Zealand approach to literacy development was also seen as especially useful.

Respondents also cited that they had identified resources or models in other provinces that they found useful in their own context. They subsequently adopted and adapted these and "made them their own".

Notions of individual program planning for students with special needs historically originated in the USA with the passage of Federal legislation there in the 1970's. However, these have become so engrained into the culture of special education since then that it is simply seen as a best practice, and none of the respondents perceived that it had been imported from anywhere.

There were two examples cited in interviews, in which jurisdictions systematically share work related to the development of curriculum and resource documents – the Western and Northern Canada Protocol and the Atlantic Provinces Consortium. These structures have allowed for the development of core curriculum and foundational documents which each jurisdiction then customizes to fit its own unique context. Several of those interviewed mentioned the benefits of this type of collaboration, not only because it saved duplication of effort, but also because it provided an opportunity to share experiences and expertise.

Several jurisdictions cite a review of research literature as part of their development processes. Although the citations are not necessarily found in the curriculum documents themselves, these review efforts serve as a way of identifying tried and emerging educational practice around the globe.

In the area of English as a Second Language, the work of Cummins (1979) was cited as a theoretical model by several respondents.

Aboriginal curriculum development work tended to draw heavily on the history, traditions and languages within the cultures of the various groups and to use elders as a source of knowledge about these.

School districts as well are a source of information, ideas, and projects related to curriculum development. Ontario identified a partnership with CODE (the Council of Directors of Education) in which about \$50M for an "Education for All" project that has been allocated.

## **6. Resources and Instructional Supports:**

### **Funding to School Districts/Divisions:**

Generally, funding formulae provide for different levels of support for students with special needs depending on severity of disability. Several operate schools for the deaf, and there are mechanisms in place to support students in specialized settings such as hospitals and containment facilities. Some combination of student count and enrolment-driven mechanisms is usual.

Funding to school districts to support the development of Aboriginal culture and language initiatives and to provide for English as a Second Language programs is the norm, although there are variations in amounts, in rules about whether or not the funds are targeted and how they may be used, and in the case of ESL, the number of years for which students are eligible.

### **Resource Materials:**

Every jurisdiction mentioned an array of resource materials, program guides and supporting documents designed to assist teachers in making curriculum adaptations. Several interviewees also mentioned their guidelines for the elimination of bias in the selection of learning resources to support the curriculum.

None of those interviewed identified specific criteria they might use for resource selection for greater accessibility, such as precisely defined constructs, simple, clear and intuitive materials and tests, maximum readability and comprehensibility, font sizes which are large enough, white space, serif fonts, clarity criteria in graphics, alignment of text material, etc.

### **Inter-Departmental Agreements:**

Although the notion of Community Schools is not unique, Saskatchewan has managed to bring together eight Government departments in its School<sup>Plus</sup> initiative with Education as the lead Department. It is one of the better examples of inter-departmental collaboration identified in the course of this project.

In British Columbia, there has been a recent agreement with the Attorney General to place settlement workers in school settings in communities where there are significant immigrant populations. This is seen as a benefit to ESL students who have recently arrived in Canada.

**Technology Support:**

Most provinces have some type of initiative to provide technology support for students with special needs. Of interest, the Nova Scotia department has a partnership with the Association for Community Living to address technology needs, while in British Columbia, in addition to providing technology hardware and software, the curriculumSET is a collection of resources that facilitate the sharing of customized technology-based content among educators working with students who use assistive technology. This searchable database enables educators to find, download, and customize activities, templates and public domain accessible books based on the ten areas of the curriculum as set out by the BC Ministry of Education. Ontario observes that the demands for technology are growing exponentially and that major infusions of funds are needed to keep pace.

## **7. Assessment and Examination Processes at the High School Level:**

### **Examinations:**

In general, the trend in several provinces has been to provide a set of competency exams in basic skill areas in the early High School years (grades 9 or 10)

In the case of Provincial examinations, there has been a trend to examine students in fewer subject areas. The weighting of the final mark is most often a combination of a teacher-assigned mark and an exam mark. Saskatchewan uses an "accredited teacher" designation whereby teachers who meet provincial criteria of training and experience have full responsibility for establishing the final mark and in those cases their students do not sit the Provincial exam.

The challenge of testing diverse students is one of validity. Bias against certain members of the population may occur if tests are not designed in ways that are familiar and accessible to all students (Popham, 2001). Across the jurisdictions interviewed, a number of respondents identified provisions for changes in format that do not change meaning (e.g. Braille or other tactile format, allowances for signing or the use of oral presentation, allowances for the use of assistive technology). No-one identified more basic ways in which assessments are designed for universal accessibility, (for example, considerations of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic level, exam content that may disadvantage certain groups of students, text format, clear visuals, concise and readable text, etc.) although a number listed a range of accommodations or referred to documents containing rules about accommodations.

### **Graduation Requirements:**

The essential debate regarding a high school diploma for students for diverse learners is whether it represents a standards-based passport to advanced education or the job market, or whether it is a reward for effort.

Requirements for graduation vary considerably across the country in terms of the number of credits and the composition of these. In some instances, there are community service requirements and/or career plans or portfolios for graduation eligibility.

### **Accommodations:**

Most jurisdictions identified an array of accommodations and conditions for exemption for students with diverse needs in sitting the Provincial exams. These generally include the preparation of alternate format exams for students with visual or hearing loss, the use of assistive technology, availability of scribes or additional time for exam completion.

The process followed to be eligible for accommodation varies, sometimes requiring application and documentation, and sometimes left to the discretion of district or the school personnel.

In British Columbia, an interviewee described the efforts in one school district to work with Aboriginal students to enhance their exam-taking skills and strategies. This was initiated when a teacher noticed that these students were leaving the exam room before their allotted time and not completing the exam.

### **Alternate Certification:**

Provincial representatives described various approaches to the question of a school leaving certificate.

In Manitoba, such a certificate is given out by school divisions but it does not have legal standing the Province. The Ontario School Certificate requires 14 credits or more – 7 optional and 7 compulsory. There is a certificate of accomplishment for anything below that. Reportedly there is not a huge take-up and province is trying to move to one provincial skills certificate (like a portfolio.) The Newfoundland approach is that a student who does not meet minimum graduation requirements, but who does meet the goals and objectives outlined in his/her ISSP, as determined by the ISSP team, is eligible for a School Achievement Certificate. In British Columbia, there is provision for a school-leaving certificate for students who have IEP's, while in Nova Scotia there is a single graduation diploma but the transcript reflects the type of program the student was taking, but there is no certificate for early school leavers.

## ***8. Plans for Measuring Success of Efforts to Improve Access***

There was not much detail obtained in response to this question. Of those jurisdiction that did contribute to this question, the most common items were the monitoring of:

- Participation rates in provincial assessments
- Drop-out rates
- Graduation rates
- Scores on Provincial examinations
- Results of skills assessments at various grade levels.

Some jurisdictions have greater capacity for measuring their success efforts than others for particular sub-populations of students, based on the data base which is in use in the Province.

New Brunswick is using the McKay report and monitoring the extent to which recommendations have been implemented as one measure of success.

In British Columbia, the number of successfully concluded local education agreements with Aboriginal communities is also identified as a success measure.

Ontario has set out targets for graduation and achievement test scores by the 2010/2011 school year. Measures of public confidence in the education system are also included in the measurement of success efforts.

**9. Additional Comments:**

Some respondents raised the question of whether teacher training facilities are able to keep pace with changes in curriculum and instruction, particularly as it relates to students with diverse needs and the reality of the diversity of today's classrooms. With regard to the training of school administrators, one Quebec respondent identified a concern that there is a major turnover in school principals and district administrators under way, leading to the identification of a major need for training of these administrators to address diversity.

Others saw the lack of recognition of specialist training ("at teacher is a teacher") mentality as being problematic in terms of the ability of school districts to assign the appropriately trained staff to specific roles within the service delivery system.

Another questioned whether large-scale assessments have too much weight in the determination of student success and whether these appropriately measure the stated learning outcomes of the curriculum.

Ontario identified that under current legislation programs and services are not subject to appeal and this is being examined.

An underlying theme in respondent's descriptions regarding the delivery of instruction is that there is heavy reliance on the belief that individual teachers, given some guidelines and examples, will adapt and modify the curriculum to suit the individual children in their classrooms. At the same time, there seems to be a general acknowledgement that training for most teachers has not necessarily ensured that they have the skills and knowledge to do so.

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