



# The Rise in Demand for Special Education in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on French-Language Schools

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Volume 16, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088951ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i1.6578>

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Publisher(s)

University of Windsor

ISSN

1492-1154 (print)

1911-8279 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Guenot, B. & Jaber, L. (2022). The Rise in Demand for Special Education in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on French-Language Schools. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 16(1), 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v16i1.6578>

Article abstract

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## **The Rise in Demand for Special Education in Ontario, Canada: A Focus on French-Language Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Over the past several decades, teachers have been increasingly challenged with a greater diversity of learning profiles within their classrooms. Historically, within Ontario, Canada, students who did not learn effectively through traditional methods were labelled and separated into alternate learning environments. Legislation and policy transformation have resulted in greater inclusion and stigma reduction. Changes to formal and informal identification processes have also increased the number of students accessing special education services. This conceptual paper examines the challenges arising from students' changing learning needs, with a specific focus on the French classroom. Issues related to the Individual Education Plan, the formal identification processes, and the inconsistency inherent to special education terminology and teachers' preparation concerning differentiated learning and resources in special education are explored. Further, employing Katz and colleagues' (Hymel & Katz, 2019; Katz, 2013; Katz & Sokal, 2016) three-block model of universal design for an inclusive classroom as a framework, a case study from a French-language secondary school in Ontario, Canada, is examined to determine systemic gaps that need to be addressed to achieve the goal of fully inclusive classrooms that promote successful learning experiences for all students.

## Introduction

In the following conceptual paper, we discuss the historical and current state of the Ontario special education system as it relates to French-language schools. Employing Katz and colleagues' (Hymel & Katz, 2019; Katz, 2013; Katz & Sokal, 2016) three-block model (TBM) of inclusive education as a theoretical framework, we present a discussion of the Ontario school system, the increase in and history of special education in Ontario, related issues in French-language schools, a case study following the strategic methodology of Noor (2008), the personal teaching experience of the first author, and finally implications and considerations for future research. The intent of this paper is to synthesize and shed light on the state of special education in Ontario, particularly in relation to the understudied and under-represented area of supports and services in French-language schools, and to spark discussion and provide implications for educators.

In the province of Ontario, there are four publicly funded school systems administered by district school boards and school authorities: English Public, English Catholic, French Public, and French Catholic (Ontario Association of School Districts International, 2020). In 2018–2019, there were over two million students registered in publicly funded schools across the province (Ontario Ministry of Education [MOE], 2020). The Ontario MOE emphasizes that students receive educational strategies that are *equitable* and *inclusive*, intending to reach every student (Ontario MOE, 2009). Special education is a cornerstone of creating an education system that is both equitable and inclusive; therefore, its programs and services play a crucial role in fostering a learning environment that provides every student with the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In the last 20 years, a substantial amount of research (e.g., Clandfield, 2014; National Center of Education Statistics, 2020; Powell, 2006; Weintraub, 2012) has indicated a growth in the population of students accessing special education services. The purpose of this review is to a) gain a better understanding of the nature of special education in Ontario, b) examine the challenges of supporting special education needs in an inclusive and equitable environment, and c) discuss ways to promote the success of exceptional students within the general classroom, particularly in the French school system in Ontario.

## Theoretical Framework

The work of Katz and colleagues (Hymel & Katz, 2019; Katz, 2013; Katz & Sokal, 2016) focuses on a model that seeks to promote a universal design for learning (UDL). Their three-block model (TBM) is an extended UDL approach that incorporates the core principles of access, participation, and success for all learners and moves beyond academics to include student mental health and well-being. The first block, in which teachers implement strategies that encourage students to engage and develop an awareness of their own learning profiles, caters to the social and emotional needs of students. The second block focuses on teachers' use of instructional practices that provide authentic learning opportunities where students may draw from their diverse backgrounds and skills to contribute to the learning environment. The final block considers the logistics when setting up an inclusive classroom through this model. Katz and colleagues argue that inclusive education policies, curricula, and special education funding need to be considered in order for a UDL approach to be successful. Used to guide this literature review, this critical framework illuminates what is needed for a truly inclusive environment that meets the needs of all students.

## **Methodology**

The following databases were used to search for peer-reviewed journal articles for this conceptual paper: ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCO, Sage Journals, Science Direct, Exceptionality Education, International, Google Scholar, National Center for Education Statistics, Taylor & Francis, JSTOR, and Western Libraries. The search terms used included all possible variations of the following: special education, history, core French, individual education plan, resources, diversity, inclusive education, inclusion, pre-service training, and universal design for learning. English and French primary and secondary sources were included if they were fully accessible online or to download. Only Canadian-based sources were included in this paper, given the geographical scope. Utilizing these sources, we sought to map the historical and present special education landscape in Ontario, with a particular focus on French-language schools. It should be noted that only data and literature addressing these issues before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic were included, as the impact of the pandemic on special education needs and services is beyond the scope of this paper. Following Noor (2008), we present a case study as a strategic methodology to investigate and understand a particular problem in depth: the real-life experience of a teacher in an Ontario French-language secondary school. Drawing on Katz and colleagues' TBM, we discuss how an expanded UDL simulates an environment that is accessible to all students. Finally, we reflect on different strategies used in the French-language secondary school classroom based on the TBM.

## **History of Special Education in Ontario**

Canadian policy currently ensures educational rights to every child. Historically, formal education was intended only for a select portion of the population (Andrews & Lupart, 2000). Children with disabilities were often excluded from school and placed in residential institutions, along with those who were impoverished, mentally ill, or orphaned (Winzer, 2008). Over the past 50 years, special education has made considerable strides in ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion in the school system (Ontario MOE, 2014).

The Royal Commission on Learning Report (The Royal Commission on Education in Ontario, 1950) represented the first significant change to special education. It provided a general overview of Ontario's education system, specifically teacher training, administration, finance, special education, and recommended expansion of special education programs to provide equitable learning opportunities. Through the 1960s and 1970s, educators began to rethink the segregation system of education based on categories of disability (Loreman, 2014) and implemented reform. Although school boards offered special education programs and services, they were not yet mandatory (Loreman, 2014). During the 1970s and 1980s, mainstreaming integration was common. However, delays in an application for services, high-cost services, and disagreements regarding identification and placement were barriers to inclusive education (Brown & Andrews, 2014).

The *Act to Amend, the Education Act* (S. O. 1986, c. 21) made great strides by requiring the provision of special education programs and services for students in need, regardless of disabilities, and the implementation of Early Identification Programs (Ontario MOE, 2006). The *1995 Report of the Royal Commission on Learning, For the Love of Learning*, demonstrated Ontario's commitment to improving special education. Key recommendations included (a) the integration of students with special needs into inclusive classrooms; (b) assisting students in need without the requirement of formal identification; (c) appropriate use of the term "learning

disabled”; and (d) acceleration for gifted students (Ontario MOE, 2013).

In 2001, the Ontario MOE released *Special Education: A Guide for Educators*, which contained information about special education funding, programs, services, legislation, and policies, replacing the *Special Education Information Handbook* (1984). Additional documents aimed at better-supporting students with special education needs and teachers followed, including the *Individual Education Plan: A Resource Guide* (2004); *Education for All* (2005); *Special Education Transformation Report* (2006); and more recently, *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* (2014).

### ***Individual education plan***

In Ontario today, students receive special education programs and services through an Individual Education Plan (IEP) (Demeris et al., 2007). The term refers to both the educational program a student will follow and the legal written document describing said program (Tremblay & Belley, 2017). The IEP is considered central to special education (Bateman & Linden, 1998; Mitchell et al., 2010; Tremblay & Belley, 2017). According to Ontario Regulation 181/98, subsections 6(2)-6(8), 7(4)-7(7) and section 8, the IEP must specify the educational goals for the student and the means by which the student’s progress will be followed (Ontario MOE, 2000).

### **Special Education on the Rise in Ontario**

The results of numerous studies have suggested that there is more diversity in classrooms than ever before (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Lawrence-Brown, 2004). In Ontario during the 2010–2011 academic year, there were 191,600 students formally identified as having exceptionalities and an additional 127,600 students who informally received special education services (Asperger’s Canada, n.d). In 2014–2015, there were more than 178,500 identified exceptional students and 162,000 additional students who received special education services (Ontario MOE, 2017a). This data suggests an increase of 21,300 students accessing special education services over five years. In the 2017–2018 school year, there were 355,364 students who received special education services, of which 171,938 were formally identified and 183,426 were not (Bennett et al., 2019). Taken together, from 2009–2010 to 2017–2018 there was a 20% overall increase in the number of students receiving services.

To better understand the increased demand for special education programs and services, we consider three factors: (a) level of education; (b) type of identification (unidentified versus identified pupil); and (c) type of classroom.

### ***Level of education***

The 2019 Education Annual Report on Ontario’s publicly funded schools included survey results from 1,244 schools in 70 of Ontario’s 72 school boards. According to the report, an average of 17% of elementary school students and 27% of secondary students received special education supports. However, in their 2013 report, only 17% of elementary students and 23% of secondary students received special education services (People for Education, 2019). Furthermore, in 2001, only 11% of elementary students and 14% of secondary students received special education assistance (People for Education, 2013). Historical data suggest the percentage of special education students has remained relatively consistent at the elementary level (Clandfield, 2014), while there has been growth in the percentage of special education students in secondary schools.

Clandfield that offered one possible explanation for these differences is that younger students are not identified, especially in the early elementary grades.

### ***Type of identification***

Students do not necessarily have to be formally identified as exceptional pupils to receive special education services (Ontario MOE, 2017a). In fact, in some school boards, few students are formally identified yet many receive special education support through an IEP (Demeris et al., 2007). Some scholars (e.g., Bennett, 2009; Demeris et al., 2007; Ontario MOE, 2014) have suggested that formally identified students are not the reason for the increase in students accessing special education services and supports. Clandfield (2014) argued that a growing number of students without formal identification have been accessing special education services through an IEP since 2000. In line with this, the number of students with an IEP has steadily increased since 2006, while the number of formally identified students has remained stable (People for Education, 2019). A review of publicly available online data shows that most school boards in Ontario only provide the number of identification placement and review committee (IPRC) referrals, reviews, and appeals conducted. One exception to this is the Halton District School Board, which also provides the number of students who have been formally identified and the number of non-identified students. Overall, the Halton District School Board Special Education Report (2018) indicates the same trend over the past few years. Although there was a decline in formally identified students, the number of non-identified students increased and contributed considerably to the overall number of students accessing special education services.

Special education funding allocation further suggests an increase in unidentified students. In the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario (2010) report, the majority of students receiving special education support were formally identified (68%) versus non-identified (32%). However, in the 2012–2013 school year, only 56% of funding went to formally identified students, and in the 2014–2015 school year, the funding for formally identified students further declined to 52% (Deani et al., 2019). During this time, the percentage of non-identified students receiving special education funding continued to rise. Further, based on the more recent 2019–2020 Special Education Guide, 17.6% percent of students in Ontario’s publicly funded school system received special education programs and/or services, with 9.1% not being formally identified.

### ***Type of Classroom***

Most provinces value inclusion as the model of choice for education (Bennett, 2009; Mazurek & Winzer, 2010; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013). The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada (2008) stated that inclusive education means all students belong and contribute to a class and a school, regardless of their diversity, such as a disability (Loreman, 2010). Inclusion also means that the classroom teacher is responsible for all students in their class, including those with exceptionalities (Bunch & Valeo, 2010). Therefore, it is not surprising that general classroom teachers will most likely continue to see an increase in students with special needs (Weintraub, 2012). In Ontario, the IPRC must first consider integrating a student with an exceptionality in an inclusive classroom before placing them in a special education classroom (Ontario MOE, 2007). We note that although some of the literature uses the term “general classroom” to denote non-special education classrooms, the term inclusive classroom is utilized throughout this paper.

Data from the Toronto District School Board supports the increasing presence of special education students in the inclusive classroom. From 2007 to 2012, the number of students with

exceptionalities (excluding Gifted) in special education classes declined with a corresponding increase in identified students in inclusive classrooms (Clandfield, 2014). Other school boards, such as the Durham District School Board (2019), the Greater Essex County District School Board (2019), and the Thames Valley District School Board (2019) share the belief that most students with special education needs can be supported in an inclusive classroom.

## **General Special Education Issues**

### ***Pre-service training***

The Ontario College of Teachers (n.d.) upholds that the Education Act defines a program of professional education as needing to include specific instruction regarding meeting the unique needs of individual students; however, it does not explicitly mandate special education courses. In contradiction to this assertion, some have argued that despite increasing numbers of students with special education needs in an inclusive classroom, little has changed in regards to teacher preparation in faculties of education (Weintraub, 2012). However, LeRoy and Simpson (1996) suggest that the more experience a teacher has with special education learning needs, the more confident they become. Various studies, including Avramidis et al. (2000), Cook (2002), Mullen (2001), Titone (2005), and McGhie-Richmond et al. (2013), have suggested that general classroom teachers feel their pre-service teacher training programs did not adequately prepare them to teach to the various needs of their students. Gregory (2015) also found that experienced teachers did not believe their teacher education programs adequately prepared them to teach students with exceptionalities or develop IEPs. As Sokal and Sharma (2014) reveal, one possible explanation for this could be that pre-service teachers are working with supervising teachers who have had little to no formal training in inclusive practices. In Titone's (2005) study, one participant stated, "Teachers don't understand how [the child's disability] affects the child as a whole. Behaviors may not only reflect a writing disability; they are also related to self-concept.... [T]hey say 'he's not trying' when they don't fully understand the disability, even though on an intellectual level they may understand" (p. 18). Further, various studies, including Delorey et al. (2020), highlight practice role models as essential to effective inclusion of students with special education needs. Practicum experiences can provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to witness and partake in the molding of successful inclusive practices.

Research by Sharma et al. (2015) and Specht et al. (2016) found that pre-service teachers with first-hand exposure to students with special needs better applied inclusive teaching in the classroom. As a next step, researchers have suggested a more inclusion-driven curriculum at the pre-service level as a way to effectively respond to the learning needs of today's diverse learners (Massouti, 2019). Specifically, pre-services teachers need to have the opportunity during their practicum to experience effective inclusive teaching practices (Tangen & Beutek, 2017).

### ***Inclusion and special education***

As Ontario strives for inclusive education in the general classroom, regardless of any one student's particular learning characteristics and needs, supports are critical. These resources may include access to an educational assistant (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013; Ontario MOE, 2017b), resource programs (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013), preferred seating, assistive technology, specific teaching strategies, and individualized assessment strategies.

The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2019) has argued for increased resources

and support for teachers to allow for the proper implementation of inclusive classrooms. Although many educators recognize the critical role that supports can play in helping students, there remains a significant lack of sufficient supports within the classroom (Avramidis et al., 2000; McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013). In a report prepared for the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario, Horizon Educational Consulting (2016) identified a lack of resources and noted that some schools did not provide the programs and services referred to in their special education policies. Furthermore, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (2018) listed the following barriers to students' education with disabilities: (a) long waiting lists for professional assessments; (b) large backlog in the processing of claims for special education funding; and (c) delays in the provision of special education programs and services.

In its annual survey of elementary and secondary schools in Ontario, People for Education (2017) reported that 61% of elementary schools and 50% of secondary schools lacked access to a psychologist. Furthermore, 47% of elementary schools and 36% of secondary schools indicated that child and youth worker services were not available. In concordance with these findings, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2019) stated a substantial need for increased provincial funding for educational assistants, psychologists, behavioural therapists, school support counsellors, child and youth workers, and speech-language pathologists. Further, researchers such as Avramidis et al. (2000) have also argued that successful implementation of special education supports in the inclusive classroom is equally as important as the supports themselves.

### ***Individual education plans***

The IEP has been identified as a 'problem area' in special education (e.g., Christle & Yell, 2010). Researchers have raised several concerns regarding the IEP, including its inability to serve multiple roles (Mitchell et al., 2010; Shaddock et al., 2009) and the extent to which the documents are individualized (Brigham et al., 2004; Stone, 1997). In fact, Mattatall (2011) described IEPs as largely inaccessible and lacking proper measurement of learning and progress. These learning plans have also been critiqued as vague and unfocused (Capizzi, 2008) or even artifacts (Rosas et al., 2009). In Liu's (2015) study of teacher perspectives and experiences regarding IEPs, problems were noted related to the time and workload increases resulting from creating and implementing IEPs. Furthermore, the teachers expressed feeling as though the IEP was, in some ways, unnecessary, as all students would benefit from the strategies.

### ***Testing, assessment, and diagnosis***

One of the steps of the identification process is completing a psycho-educational assessment by a psychologist. The particular measures used during these assessments vary by school boards (Clandfield, 2014). Despite the robust reliability and variability of these measures, some research (e.g., Cobb, 2013; Demazeux & Singy, 2015; Gregory, 2015; Watts, 2012) has suggested that the tests used could be another flaw in the identification of students, which may impact the quality of the IEP (Blackwell & Rossetti, 2014). Gregory (2015) stated that the two main concerns were that the tests were outdated and that they provided limited information that directly supported the development of an IEP. Furthermore, most teachers did not see the connection between test results and the IEPs.

Similarly, there is concern regarding the usage of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in the diagnosis of students (e.g., Clandfield, 2014; Frisby, 2020; Roy et al., 2019). Criticism of the DSM includes biases concerning class, gender, race, misdiagnosis,



overdiagnosis, and the adverse effects of labelling (Clandfield, 2014), making the reliance on the DSM to determine school services questionable (Frances, 2012). Researchers have claimed that the DSM is overused (Frances, 2012) and lacks vigour or validity (Demazeux, 2015; Pickersgill, 2014; Stein, 2014), and leads to mislabeling of ‘normal’ behaviour (Caplan, 2012; Ecks, 2016; Frances, 2012; Pickersgill, 2014; Watts, 2012). One possible way in which to address these concerns would be to triangulate the data during assessments by including greater involvement of educators and parents in the data collection and formulation process.

## Special Education in French-Language Schools

Canada is a bilingual country with two official languages (French and English), and its citizens may choose to pursue their education in either language. There are 12 French-language school boards and more than 450 French-language schools in Ontario (Ontario MOE, 2018) offering three types of French as a Second Language (FSL) programs: Core French, Extended French, and French Immersion. In 2018–2019, the most recent data available at the time of writing, there were 86,102 students registered in Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8, and 24,992 registered in Grades 9–12 in French-language schools (Ontario MOE, 2020). In a French-language school, students learn French as if it were their first language (L1), compared to students who attend a French immersion school or an extended French program, where students learn French as a second language (L2) (Lapkin et al., 2009).

### *French school boards in Southwestern Ontario*

Conseil scolaire Viamonde (CSV) is the only secular French-language school board in Southwestern Ontario, with schools from Windsor to Trenton, Niagara, and Algonquin. With more than 13,000 students, the school board consists of 15 secondary schools and 41 elementary schools (Association des Conseils Scolaires des Écoles Publiques de l'Ontario, 2016). Like every school board, every year, CSV releases a report called *Plan annuel de l'enfance en difficulté*, or the special education report. In CSV's annual special education report, the school board shares *le nombre d'élèves identifiés par anomalies*, which states the total number of students identified overall, as well as per exceptionality. In 2015–2016, 786 students were identified (CSV, 2016), which increased to 807 the following year (CSV, 2017). Although in 2017–2018, the number only rose to 808 (CSV, 2018), it then jumped to 949 in 2018–2019 (CSV, 2019) and again to 1,174 in 2019–2020 (CSV, 2020). These numbers suggest an increase in the number of IEPs and special education services provided at these schools.

Conseil scolaire Catholique Providence (CSCP) is one of the eight French Catholic school boards in Ontario. This board has more than 10,000 students at 23 elementary schools and seven French-language Catholic secondary schools in Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent, Sarnia-Lambton, and London-Middlesex-Elgin, among other regions (CBC Windsor News, 2019; CSCP, 2019a). According to the board's 2018–2019 report, 78.1% of students were part of the ‘regular’ school population while the other 21.9% were part of the special education population. Of the students accessing special education services, 9.7% were formally identified and 12.2% were not. Of the students who had an IEP, 44.1% were identified by a *comité d'identification, placement et de révision* (the French board equivalent of an IPRC), while 55.9% were not (CSCP, 2019b).

Before 2015, the CSCP school board provided only the number of *identified* students. At the time of writing, included in the report is data regarding the number of identified and unidentified students. Despite the inconsistency in the reported data, there appears to be an overall

steady rise in the number of students with IEPs over the last few years.

### **Case Study Example: Ontario, Canada, French-Language Secondary School**

As previously stated, not all schools necessarily follow the same process when developing an IEP for a student; however, schools within the CSCP school board follow a four-phase process based on a Response to Intervention approach, which is explained in their annual Special Education Report. In the first step, parents/guardians, teachers, and other education staff provide vital information to create a student profile. The teacher then utilizes differentiated instruction to support the student's learning. If these strategies are deemed insufficient, the special education resource team puts into place an adaptation plan in consultation with the parents/guardians and principal. Typically, the adaptation plan is in place for six weeks to determine which strategies helped the student succeed. For issues related to behaviour, an observation form, Formulaire B, is filled out (CSCP, 2019b).

In the next phase, what is known as the *comité interne* (internal committee) meets to discuss the data collected and interventions applied during the first phase. Typically, this committee consists of a member of the administration, the special education teacher, and the classroom teacher at the grade school level. In some secondary schools, the *comité interne* may also include the school-based special education Curriculum Leader (CL) or Assistant Curriculum Leader (ACL) (Toronto District School Board, 2019). The student and their parent(s)/guardian(s) may also participate in the meetings.

During this second phase, the resource teacher can conduct informal assessments to better understand the student's strengths and needs and determine appropriate interventions. The resource teacher can then offer indirect support (such as identifying teaching strategies) to the student's teachers. In some cases, the student can work one-on-one or within small groups with the resource teacher to help with the student's learning strategies. If curriculum modifications are necessary or different expectations are targeted, an IEP *must* be developed for the student. In such a case, the committee can then recommend additional assessments or consultations with a social worker or speech-language pathologist (CSCP, 2019b).

In the third phase, the *comité externe* (external committee) becomes involved. This team includes a) members of the *comité interne*; b) *l'enseignant responsable de la réussite des élèves (ERRÉ)*, translated as a student success teacher; c) a guidance counsellor; d) one or more members from the *équipe clinique* or professional support services team; and e) a special education advisor or *conseiller EED* (Ontario MOE, 2017c). The committee seeks support from outside the school (i.e., a school board or external professional) who recommends services, modifications, or revisions. The special education advisor will reach out to a school board psychologist who conducts the psycho-educational assessment shared with the parents and school (CSCP, 2019b). To give a sense of the waitlist time for a psychological assessment, in the 2019 Special Education Plan, the average wait time to see a psychologist was 16 months. This may seem high when compared to other school boards such as the Toronto District School board, which states that the majority of students are seen within six months, but at another school board in the same region, the wait can be up to two years.

During the fourth phase, the *comité d'identification, placement et de révision* or IPRC committee intervenes. This committee includes the superintendent or principal, the resource or special education teacher, the student success teacher (SST), the guidance counsellor, the classroom teacher in elementary schools, and any other people that the principal and parent think could contribute. The committee reviews the psychologist's recommendations, fills out the

necessary forms and decides the student's placement. The IPRC committee reviews the IEP every year (CSCP, 2019b). At the case example school, all IEPs (identified and unidentified) are reviewed twice per year (once a semester) by the SST, as well as the student's parents/guardians and teacher(s). Parents must be notified of and sign off on any changes made to the IEP. There is a window of approximately 30 days to make changes to the IEP before it is signed and placed into the student's *dossier scolaire de l'Ontario (DSO)* or Ontario Student Record (OSR) (CSCP, 2019b).

### ***Personal experience of a teacher in an Ontario CSCP secondary school***

During the first author's time teaching, there has been a substantial increase in IEPs. For example, in the Grade 10 Academic French class, the number of IEPs would suggest an increase in the need for special education support over the last five years. From 2015 to 2017, 0% of the class had an IEP. In 2017, the number of IEPs went to 15%, then to 20% in 2018–2019, and finally to 32% this past academic year (2019–2020). For the Grade 9 Academic French class, between 2015 and 2017, 0% of students had an IEP. However, in 2017–2018, 24% of students had an IEP, in 2018–2019, 20% had an IEP, and in 2019–2020, 15% had an IEP.

Although access to special education support has varied over the past five years, what has remained consistent over that time is that the most common exceptionality is *trouble d'apprentissage* or learning disability. Not only is this the most common exceptionality at the class and school levels, but throughout the entire school board (CSCP, 2019b). Interestingly, studies such as Clandfield (2014) have demonstrated this same trend. Within the CSCP, the most frequent accommodations for a student with a learning disability are a quiet space to work in, proximity to the teacher, more time to process information, reminders to pay attention, a reduced number of tasks, and technological assistance.

## **Special Education Challenges in the French Classroom**

### ***Access to resources***

Many obstacles make the provision of special education even more challenging. For one, there is a considerable delay in having students assessed by a psychologist. Specifically, in the CSCP school board, there are only two special education advisors and two school psychologists assigned to 15 schools, which has led to a long waitlist. Moreover, according to the CSCP annual special education reports, the wait time for assessment has increased. In the 2010–2011 academic school year, the wait time to see a psychologist was 12 months (CSCP, 2011); however, in the 2019 report, the wait time was 16 months (CSCP, 2019b). Students can obtain an assessment through a psychologist in the community; however, these assessments are costly to parents/guardians. As such, school board psychologists conduct the majority of psychological assessments within CSCP.

### ***Lack of training***

As discussed in the section "General Special Education Issues," the lack of pre-service training on inclusive/special education in the inclusive classroom is a challenge across the province. When the first author started their teaching career and began working with exceptional students, they felt unprepared. During the one year of their Bachelor of Education program, a

single, one-semester class that was three hours, once per week, was dedicated to special education. The course was called *Enfance en difficulté* or Special Education. In this course, the professor taught the history of special education, the legislation, the types of exceptionalities that existed, and the identification process. Although the course helped understanding of the theory of an IEP, it did not prepare pre-service teachers well for the daily implantation of students' IEPs in the classroom. It should be noted that since the first author attended their Bachelor of Education, the program in Ontario has moved to a two-year program, which may now offer more courses in special education depending on the university.

During the first author's Masters program, they completed a Special Education and Language acquisition class. The course was exciting and provided insight into many broader issues surrounding special education. The concepts were generalizable to the classroom and provided clarity regarding best teaching practices for exceptional students and differentiated instruction for all students.

Once in the school system, there was minimal special education training, although this may vary by school board. One training day was dedicated to special education through the *Programme d'insertion professionnelle du nouveau personnel enseignant (PIPNE)* or the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). The information provided was dated and not as helpful for today's classrooms. As a new teacher, the best support came from an experienced teacher mentor who was very knowledgeable about special education. Educators can also take additional qualification courses at their own expense, including but not limited to Special Education parts One, Two, and Three, Teaching Students with Multiple Needs, Inclusive Education, and Teaching Students with Behavioural Needs parts One, Two, and Three.

## **Implementing Katz's TBM in an Inclusive French Classroom**

The following section elucidates the utility of Katz and colleagues' TBM of universal design for learning in an inclusive classroom with a particular focus on the first two blocks within a French classroom. The third block is not discussed here, as it is concerned with higher-level/institutional considerations. The first block of TBM framework involves the social and emotional learning and well-being of students. Teachers are to develop communities within their classrooms that encourage self-worth and belonging with the goal of increasing student participation. It is important to utilize various strategies in the classroom to help students develop an awareness of their strengths and challenges, such as offering opportunities throughout the year for students to reflect on their individual learning preferences, strengths, and needs. One way to do so is by having students fill out a learning profile questionnaire at the start of the year that asks questions such as "What are your expectations for this class?"; "What helps you learn (e.g., step-by-step instructions, examples, mini-deadlines, visual aids etc.)?"; "Do you work better at a certain time of day?"; and "What types of assignments do you prefer: writing, oral communication or reading?" Not only does this encourage self-awareness, it allows students to set goals for their learning.

Further, it is essential to create opportunities for healthy discussions on sensitive topics, such as mental health, and to maintain an open-door policy. Students not only need to develop compassion for those around them struggling with mental health, but they may also benefit from increasing their awareness of their own mental health. For example, the teacher can start the class with a short anonymous writing response for students: "*How* do I feel right now and *why* do I think I feel this way?" Making an effort to recognize their interests is also part of this first block. One way to do this is by creating a class Spotify playlist where students can share titles of appropriate

songs they would like to hear, then using this to discuss the importance of being mindful that everyone has different tastes in music and to be respectful of their classmates' choice of songs. Connecting on a personal level with students about their interests encourages students' self-worth and belonging in the classroom and improves their overall wellbeing and sense of connection in the classroom.

In block 2, teachers are to utilize instructional practices that provide authentic learning opportunities and allow students to draw from their diverse backgrounds and skills. One way of doing so is through establishing cross-curricular connections, such as creating assignments in collaboration with teachers of other subjects that students have identified as enjoying. For example, one assignment called *la consigne* requires students to explain specific instructions of a do-it-yourself task while considering other concepts such as the correct verb tense. Students work on the written task aspect of the assignment in one class and the practical part in the other class. In the past, students have made tables, wooden beehives, and chairs. Cross-curricular projects highlight different skill sets and are an inclusive way for students to share and learn. Katz and Hymel (2019) also include the use of technology as inclusive instructional practices. Platforms such as Blooket, Plickers, and Nearpod are just a few tools that students seem to enjoy working with and that can help with instruction.

### **Directions for Future Research in Special Education**

Although many different special education areas require future research, the following discussion focuses on topics of particular relevance for educators. As noted by Julia O'Sullivan, former Dean of the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, what Ontario now needs most is greater and broader research to better inform policy development (University of Toronto News, 2014). Specifically, further research on improving learning opportunities for children with disabilities will help build better special education policies and procedures in Ontario.

Further studies are also needed related to the IEP, both in terms of the education program and document. Whether it be on the IEP as a product (Rotter, 2014), its elaboration and use (Tremblay & Belley, 2017), or its effectiveness (Shaddock et al., 2009), the literature suggests further studies are essential to fully understand the IEP. Furthermore, although inclusive education appears to be the model in Canada, additional research needs to be conducted that looks at inclusion through a special education lens. For example, studies that examine teacher preparation to support students from the special education population (Rosenberg & Walther-Thomas, 2014; Spooner et al., 2010), particularly in the inclusive classroom (Liu, 2015), are necessary. Studies should focus on practical teacher training to successfully educate teachers on inclusive values and implementation strategies (Braunsteiner & Mariano, 2018). This information would support pre-service and in-service teachers to better address and support students with special education needs within their classrooms. Educators and school boards may consider looking to boards that are successfully implementing social inclusion, diversity, and equity, such as the Avon-Maitland District School Board in Ontario.

A review of the literature reveals a significant amount of research relating to special education and French Immersion schools; however, the area of special education and French-language programs requires more study. In a study of English schools with core French programs, Arnett (2003) finds:

Little consideration has been offered to the educational experience of students with LD [learning disabilities] and other challenges in core French programs, despite evidence that

core French teachers are actively contemplating the best ways to meet these students' needs in the classroom and if they can successfully do so within their program. (p.174)

The need for further research on inclusion is particularly relevant in second or foreign language classrooms. As Arnett notes, in second language classrooms, the language “is both the process and the product of learning” (p.174), which requires adaptive strategies to teach in a manner that meets the needs of all students, including those with a learning disability. Further studies are also needed to determine the language (French or English) that is most suitable for delivering special education programs and services (Wise, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

The number of students accessing special education services continues to grow. Some of the main reasons for this rise include the challenges related to the IEP, inconsistency in special education terminology and attitudes, and a lack of understanding of special education and its resources. However, as the number of IEPs (specifically for non-identified students) increases, it is essential to reflect on what accommodations require the development of an IEP and what strategies should be considered best practice in supporting learning for all students. We all have different learning needs, and an inclusive classroom is a next step in fostering a learning environment that leads to all students' success. As inclusion becomes the model of choice for the Ontario and broader Canadian education system, further attention must be given to the practical implications for students and educators in the classroom.

As discussed in this paper, French-language schools face unique challenges in providing special education support and resources within an inclusive classroom due to few psychologists and lack of training and resources. Based on the literature and as evidenced in the case study, pre-service teachers need the opportunity to experience effective inclusive teaching practices being modelled during their practicum. Specifically, reflecting on Katz and colleagues TBM of universal design for learning (see Hymel & Katz, 2019; Katz & Sokal, 2016; Katz & Sudgen, 2013), pre-service teachers need training that prepares them to work with the different strengths, learning needs, and interests of their students. Working alongside peers that have experience in the realm of special education is what best guides their teaching strategies to better reflect the needs of the students in a diverse classroom. The first author was fortunate enough to have a mentor who spent one-on-one time aiding them to develop not only the skills and knowledge but also the beliefs for including children with special education needs in the inclusive classroom. The more time they spent engaging in meaningful discussions about inclusivity and special education, the more practical information they had that transferred into the classroom. We feel that this is the way forward for ensuring the overall success of not only students with special education needs but for all students within an inclusive classroom.

## **Author Bio**

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